



# OUT OF CONTROL

ASR PUBLICATIONS

# Out of Control

ASR PUBLICATIONS

Copyright © 2022 ASR Publications

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or used in any manner without the prior written permission of the copyright owner, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Published by ASR Publications.

ISBN: 978-1-7396533-0-9

[www.asr313.com](http://www.asr313.com)

Contact ASR Publications: [asr313publications@gmail.com](mailto:asr313publications@gmail.com)

Dedicated to every avid reader out there who seeks inspiration from the journey of those who were steadfast in the face of all challenges and hardships.

*“So, surely with hardship comes ease.”*

– 94:5



# Contents

1	Trouble at Sea	14
2	At the Beach	19
3	Awake	24
4	Forgotten	28
5	Journey	36
6	Home	39
7	Akbar Uncle	42
8	Outcast	53
9	In the forest	56
10	Alpha 43	61
11	Jafar	70
12	Nighttime ventures	78
13	Exposed	86
14	The Truth	89
15	One Week	96

16 A Stroll in the Woods	100
17 Prisoner	105
18 The Search Goes On	110
19 Ali	113
20 A Meeting	122
21 Training Day 1	134
22 Lentils and Grain	139
23 The End of Training Day 1	146
24 An Old Friend	150
25 Training Day 2	154
26 Wrestling Practice	161
27 Nightmares	163
28 Training Day 3	165
29 The Shed	170
30 A Secret Meeting	175
31 Intense Training Week	179
32 The C-gun	189
33 Status Report	197
34 A Discussion	201
35 Day 2 of Intense Training Week	203
36 Second Attempt	207

37 Allies?	211
38 Warehouse Raid	215
39 A Glass of Water	219
40 Mission Report	223
41 Happy Birthday!	226
42 Deterioration	229
43 Two Days Later	233
44 A Radio Call	235
45 A Breath of Fresh Air	238
46 In the Wild	240
47 Lone Wolf and Hurt Cub	244
48 Reflections	256
49 More Nightmares	259
50 One Last Try	261
51 A Prayer	267
52 Preparation	270
53 The First Trip	275
54 Waiting	281
55 Before the Meeting	287
56 The Meeting	289
57 The Revolution	296



58 Hunted	300
59 Dominance	305
60 The Fight of a Lifetime	309
61 Taking the Offensive	313
62 Putting the Pieces Together	323
63 Mission Report	327
64 Waking Up	332
65 The Hunters	336
66 The Serpent has Healed	341
67 Returning to Base	345
68 Teaching	348
69 Setting Off	359
70 Bloodshed	361
71 The Leadership Committee	371
72 Heartbreak	373
73 Patrol Problems	377
74 Family Issues	381
75 Mourning	385
76 A Secret Meeting	390
77 Revenge	393
78 A Midnight Stroll	397

79 The Prisoner	405
80 Practice	412
81 The Emergency Meeting	416
82 Revelation	419
83 Ambushed	423
84 Confusion	426
85 Caught	429
86 Suspicions	433
87 Alpha 16	437
88 Training	441
89 Sneaky	446
90 Worries and Concerns	450
91 The Frozen River	453
92 A Bad Feeling	457
93 Investigations	459
94 An Important Meeting	463
95 A New Discovery	466
96 Preparations	468
97 Operation Grey Cloud	470
98 War	472
99 The First Wave	476

100 Back Up	479
101 A Rematch	482
102 Sick Day	486
103 Reflections	489
104 Wounds	491
105 A Little Birdie Told Me	493
106 Conflicts	496
107 Interrogations	500
108 New Information	505
109 Betrayal	507
110 Taken	510
111 Mystery	512
112 Battle of Words	517
113 Revelations	522
114 A Report	525
115 A New Problem	528
116 Accusations	533
117 A Confession	537
118 Prison Visits	539
119 A Mother's Prayer	542
120 The Trial	545

121 Exile	549
122 In the Woods Once More	552
123 The Traitor	556
124 Planning the Final Battle	561
125 A Shocking Truth	564
126 Reza	567
127 Infiltration	572
128 Entering the Fortress	576
129 Solving a Riddle	580
130 Mother?	584
131 The Final Strike	587
132 Hostage	589
133 The Control Room	593
134 Taking Over	595
135 The Mainframe	597
136 One Last Time	600
137 Rising from the Ashes	608
138 A Hospital Visit	611
139 Reunion	617

# Prologue

Darkness swallowed the desolate landscape like a plague, devouring every ray of light. Rain cascaded from the sky like bullets as droplets struck the ground. The wind could be heard screeching; a menacing whistling scream. It echoed through the hollow carcasses of buildings that littered the land. The once strong walls had tumbled into a plain of scattered debris as far as the eye could see. Time had worn away the warmth of the old stone homes where many a family had once stayed, leaving shells hollow for one to imagine what had been. The tall structures of former inns and halls had been reduced to rickety, teetering spines of weathered stone tearing into the somber dark sky.

As the waning hours of the night set in, a murder of crows could be seen dotting the building tops. They perched at the peak of the precarious structures; black, beady eyes watching and waiting. There was no food, not even a morsel of bread in the barren city. The smell of death hung heavy in the air, radiating from the dusty streets and oozing from the empty homes. Like a beacon, it called to them and so they sat unperturbed. Death would visit these bleak and mottled lands frequently. And where death went, they followed.

A hushed rustling had them swerving their feathery heads to a side road. Tucked amongst the crumbled houses, one could just make out the frames of two hunched figures. Cloaked in the darkness of the night, they skulked silently along the gravelly alleys and slipped between the shadows. Stopping occasionally to peer into an empty home or rummage through a pile of debris, they never wavered away from the nebulous corners of the silhouettes

that hid them from the deviously twinkling stars.

At a painstakingly slow pace, they made their way between the houses until one of the figures slid down to the floor to search through the side of what would have probably been a wealthy merchant's house. One of them began to ferret through the pile of stone and wood with quick and nimble fingers while his companion continued to gaze anxiously around them.

"Hurry up Hamza!" she whispered, her voice barely discernable from the wind's shriek. Her eyes swiveled from one road to the next. In her hands, a small pistol was gripped so tightly that her knuckles were turning white.

The boy gave an irritated huff as he stood up, his eyes blinking in the small dust cloud he had just kicked up. "I'm trying Zainab Api,"<sup>1</sup> he replied. Seeing her scolding eyes, he lowered his voice. "Asif Uncle said he had put it near the old mosque."

Hamza watched his sister's forehead crease into a worried frown. Her eyes were swinging across their surroundings, fingering the gun in her hand. "I don't like it Hamza. Why here? Why so far from town?"

Glancing around, he moved closer and muttered, "You know why. There was a raid near town. He said he can't get to it, so we might as well use it."

Zainab looked down and shook her head in disbelief.

"There are no free lunches in the world Hamza, especially not in these times. What if he was lying to us? There might not be anything here!"

The wind whistled past ruffling their clothes. Hamza ran a hand through his tousled hair. Fidgeting with the buckle of the bag hanging at his side, he asked, "But what if there is? Zainab Api, we barely have enough food for another day, and that's when we're practically starving ourselves!"

"Better starving than dead."

Her voice was carried away with the gale but the words hung heavy in the air.

Hamza looked down, clearly conflicted. His sister was right. If

---

<sup>1</sup>Title for elder sister in Urdu language.

they lingered for too long, they risked detection. But with their supplies dwindling, they were sitting on the cusp of starvation. Feelings of emptiness and the craving for a bit more pushed him to look further.

“Five more minutes?” he pleaded; his eyes wide and yearning. Zainab’s hard gaze melted and she wiped the sweat from the hand holding the pistol on the end of her tunic.

“Five minutes,” she replied. Hamza smiled and the two moved swiftly to another alley.

The minutes began to tick by as they moved through the rubble. To Zainab, each second stretched long and hard. Her eyes tired as she tried to watch every corner. The dark shadows taunted her, and the occasional crow almost costed her one of the few precious bullets at her disposal.

They moved fast but made little progress. Each pile turned up only dust. Soon, even Hamza grew restless. They were approaching the end of their search. Zainab stood on guard once more, leaning against one of the sturdier walls. Her gaze had drifted to one of the seated crows on a ruined spire when she felt a shift in the air. Alarm filled her mind and she felt as though someone was watching her.

“Hamza!” she whispered. Her eyes did not leave the line of buildings in front of her. “Something’s wrong. We have to go now!”

Hamza stood up sharply and froze as Zainab held a finger to her lips, muttering angrily,

“Don’t move so suddenly! You’ll give us aw-”

She froze; the colour draining from her face. There, in the darkness across the road, stood a large form. It was huge. It looked almost as though the world would crumble before it. The figure was masked from head to toe in black, almost perfectly blending with his surroundings. All she could see was his eyes. His cold venomous eyes. They spoke of cruelty and bloodlust. In his arm, he held something large; perhaps a gun.

Unknowingly, her hand gripped Hamza’s very tightly. Hamza gave her hand a tight squeeze. They both knew what this meant.

“Hamza,” she whispered in a barely audible tone. “Run.”

He didn't respond.

"Hamza," she repeated quietly, keeping her eyes on the figure ahead. "Run."

There was no response. Zainab turned to face her brother. He was still looking ahead. Slowly the figure began moving forward.

"Hamza!" she growled. "Move!"

Hamza still wasn't responding. It was now that Zainab realised something was wrong. Hamza was not moving at all. In fact, he almost looked dead. But he was still breathing. She heard a hiss from the front.

Her eyes darted back to the figure. He had stopped advancing. And for the first time, Zainab noticed that the thing he was holding was not a firearm. There was a slight whisper. In a flash, Zainab raised her gun.

"Stop Alpha!" she hissed. "Or I'll blow your brains out!"

The Alpha did not move. But the wind carried a sly chuckle from his direction. He finally spoke,

"I have no doubt about it, little girl!" he murmured with a touch of sarcasm. "But can you shoot your brother?"

Zainab raised a brow. All of a sudden, a massive force knocked her sideways. The gun slipped from her hand, landing in one of the puddles. Zainab felt her feet skid as she fell in the water. Wiping the mud out of her eyes, she whirled to see her attacker. She felt a shock grip her heart. It was Hamza!

"Hamza?" she gaped in shock. "What are you doing!"

Hamza ignored what she said and lunged forward. Zainab ducked and rolled over just in time. She turned to see the Alpha. He was standing there, a sly smile on his lips. She also noticed the Alpha was holding a small device in his hand, similar to a gun. But it wasn't. Zainab gasped as she was knocked to the ground for the second time. Her brother stood overshadowing her. Zainab looked him in the eye.

"Hamza," she begged. "Stop!"

The Alpha raised his hand. Hamza froze for a few seconds before backing away slowly. It was now that the Alpha advanced forward. Zainab narrowed her eyes, wiping the mud in an attempt to see him more clearly. The Alpha was no fictional character as



rumours depicted him and his kind to be. He was a man. At least seven feet tall. He was wide. In fact, Zainab could not see past him when he was standing this close.

The Alpha let out a small sigh.

“I’m disappointed, my girl,” he whispered. “I hoped you would understand better than others. I mean after what happened to your parents. . .”

He let the howling of the wind finish his sentence. Zainab felt her heart skip a beat. Her parents. She had never known them. The Alphas had taken them from her. She and Hamza had been raised on the street. Under the roofs of wrecked abandoned homes, small trees, and more. Hamza had been her only companion through this journey. Home had always been wherever he was.

No. Zainab had to stop thinking about this. It was too painful. Even if she would never again have the taste of her mother’s love, or feel the warmth of her father’s embrace in this world; they would always be with her in the hereafter.

Zainab noticed the Alpha was still holding the strange device in his hand. With his other hand, he removed a small syringe from his pocket and pressed it into Hamza’s shoulder.

“What are you doing!” Zainab exclaimed breathlessly.

Immediately, Hamza went still and fell over. Zainab lunged forward to catch him. He was unconscious. Zainab turned to face the Alpha.

“What have you done to him?” she snarled.

The Alpha laughed silently.

“Don’t worry about him. He’s just sedated. I am about to do far worse to you.”

Slowly, the Alpha pointed the device towards her. Zainab felt a surge of pain in her heart. At that moment, she began to relive all painful moments of her life. One by one, she witnessed the death of her parents and friends. Then she went through all those nights of hunger and thirst. Her whole life was being replayed before her. But there was something different. She couldn’t explain why or how, but it felt like there was some presence in her mind that wasn’t her own. Then abruptly, everything disappeared and Zainab awoke with a start.

The Alpha was still there. The unique device was still in his hand. As he lowered the device, an evil smile formed on his face.

“I’m afraid you are going to have to die,” he remarked casually.

It was the last thing Zainab heard him say. For he whipped out a gun and pulled its trigger twice. Two bullets. One in the throat and one in the forehead. Zainab collapsed in a pile of blood on the rain soaked ground. The Alpha reached over for Hamza’s body.

With an effortless tug, he lifted the young boy off the ground and hauled him over a shoulder. Silently, he carried him away in the darkness, unaffected by the atrocities he had just committed. But of course, it did not make a difference to him. This was his everyday routine. Only yesterday, he had killed three boys far younger than her. This was his life. And he had embraced it.

The Alpha turned right, where his large bullet proof vehicle lay waiting. This wasn’t personal. Just work. He did what he had to do. That’s all there was to it.

# 1

## Trouble at Sea

“Incoming!”

Abbas ducked, pushing Haider down as a missile whizzed over the motor boat just missing them. It fizzled in the water ahead.

“Brace yourselves boys!” Murtaza called out from the steering wheel.

Abbas pulled his brother closer. Haider was shaking uncontrollably.

“It’s going to be alright” Abbas whispered, hoping Haider wouldn’t feel the pounding heart in his chest.

Another missile whizzed past them exploding in the water. Abbas and Haider were tossed violently as a burst of waves flooded the boat, drowning the yells of Murtaza to his sons.

“Duck!” he shouted, as the two tried to regain their balance.

Abbas dropped to the floor again pulling Haider with him. Their pursuers were firing relentlessly. Both rear view mirrors shattered as a bullet flew past Murtaza’s ear.

“Be careful, Baba!” Abbas yelled.

“Ya Allah, help me. . .” Murtaza whispered and glanced behind him, looking at his sons.

His gaze then shifted to the attackers behind them. Abbas turned as well. Through the darkness, he could see three blurry sets of headlights. Three boats were in pursuit. Two were trying to surround the boat on each side to prevent evasive maneuvers so that the third boat could get a clear shot.

“Abbas, take the wheel!” Murtaza shouted as another bullet whizzed by his ear. “Snipers,” Murtaza muttered under his breath.

Abbas scrambled to the front of the boat, pushing Haider under one of the benches. He tried to both keep his head down, and see what his father was doing. Abbas turned the steering wheel, grunting as he pushed against it. The water was now half-way to his knees. It took all his effort to stop himself from slipping. He heard a familiar sharp snap as Murtaza loaded his rifle. His father must have reached the same conclusion and was trying to break their attack. There wasn't much time. Murtaza rolled to the left of the boat taking cover behind the storage boxes. Though that wouldn't provide much protection from a missile, it was better than nothing. Abbas steered the boat to the right, trying to throw off the two boats that were making their way on either side.

“Ya Allah...” Murtaza whispered and pressed the trigger. A moment later, a loud explosion on the left told Abbas that one pursuer was taken care of. Abbas glanced behind him again as Murtaza rolled to the other side. The boat on this side was closer. They had seen Murtaza destroy their comrades. They were prepared. Before Murtaza could fire, they unleashed a storm of bullets. Abbas swerved sharply. Murtaza was thrown violently against the side of the ship; the gun slipping from his grip.

“No!” Abbas yelled as the rifle dropped into the waters below.

For a moment, Abbas met his father's eyes as recognition dawned on them both. They had just lost their only chance of survival. Abbas felt his heart sink. He could feel the boat's motor sputtering. The engine had been hit. They were losing fuel.

Murtaza picked something shiny from his pocket and whispered, “I'm sorry. I tried. I won't be able to come back for you.” When he looked up again, there was a new resolve in his eyes. Murtaza crawled to front at the wheel and took it from Abbas. Haider followed close behind.

“Wear your life vests now!” he instructed.

Abbas and Haider hesitated.

“Now!” Murtaza repeated.

Abbas grabbed his life vest and pushed it over his drenched

shirt. Haider did the same.

“When I give the signal, jump,” Murtaza ordered.

“But-“ Abbas started.

“No. Listen to me,” Murtaza interrupted. His voice softened for a moment. “I love you both. Take care of each other, no matter what.”

Abbas felt his throat thicken.

“What about you?” he whispered.

Murtaza took a deep breath and looked intently at Abbas. “Don’t look back. I’ll be right behind you.”

Abbas and Haider nodded.

“Baba-” A loud explosion interrupted him.

“It’s time to go,” Murtaza whispered.

The softness on his face was replaced with strong determination.

“On my signal.”

Murtaza grabbed the wheel and turned it violently, the boat screeching under the stress. “Now!”

Abbas grabbed Haider’s hand and jumped. The salty sea water slapped him hard as he plunged into the darkness. He could feel his brother’s hand slipping.

Desperately, he tried to grab harder, but the water reduced traction. A moment later, he couldn’t feel his brother’s hand anymore. Only the cold sea water. Abbas turned to face the direction where he had last felt his brother but could not see anything in the darkness.

‘I have to break the surface,’ he thought.

At that moment, a massive blurry orange glow appeared above the water. Without warning, he was shoved sideways like a toy in a bathtub. He felt a ringing in his ears and his leg was stinging painfully. As he desperately attempted to kick upwards, he noticed the orange glow was becoming more defined. The life vest was pushing him upwards.

“Ah!” Abbas flinched. The salt water was burning his injury. Within seconds, he broke the surface. Ignoring the pain in his leg, he scrutinized the orange glow. It was their boat. Broken, splintered wood of storage boxes and twisted metal drifted towards

him. The boat was burning viciously. Abbas looked around for his father. Where was Murtaza? He should have surfaced by now.

“Baba!” he cried.

But his calls were drowned by the sound of the attacker boat engines. The two boats were already leaving. They weren’t checking for survivors. After a few minutes, they disappeared in the darkness. Their objective had been achieved.

“Baba!” Abbas called once more.

No response. His father wasn’t there. Abbas stared at the burning flames as the bitter truth dawned upon him. Murtaza had sacrificed himself for his sons. Sons. Haider! Where was Haider?

Abbas glanced around with unease. He could not see Haider anywhere.

“Haider!” he screamed. “Haider!”

Desperately, Abbas began swimming towards a piece of debris. Ignoring the stinging pain in his leg and the ringing in his ears, he continued. The last words of his father echoed in his mind.

“I love you both. Take care of each other, no matter what.”

Kick. Tread. Kick. Tread. He repeated the movements. As Abbas neared something, he realised it wasn’t Haider. Just a piece of wood from a large storage box that had drifted away. He hauled himself aboard the wooden piece. The pain in his leg was almost unbearable now. But he couldn’t give up. He scrutinized his surroundings. Haider had to be somewhere. A decently large piece of debris caught his eye. Could it be Haider? It was too big of a risk. As it was, Abbas knew he didn’t have much strength left in him.

“Ya Allah,” he cried. “Help me. I can’t go back in the water. My leg burns and I can’t find Haider”

His thoughts were interrupted by a loud explosion, the force of which threw him back. He could feel the heat as the flames illuminated the area.

“Haider!” Abbas shrieked.

His brother was there in the water, near another small piece of debris. Unconscious.

“Not dead,” he repeated, wanting to believe it more than ever.

A new drive overcame Abbas. Roaring, he leapt in the water. The pain was unimaginable, but now, he was ready to face it.

“Ya Allah!” he shouted as he kicked harder, drifting towards his brother. Tread. Kick. Push. Push. He swam furiously. The pain in his leg had spread to his body. It burned up his spine to his head as his other injuries succumbed to the salty water. His vision began to blur. He wouldn’t last much longer. Reaching out, he grabbed hold of his brother.

For a moment he just stayed there. Embracing his brother. The pain in his leg didn’t matter. He had found Haider. They were together now. Abruptly, Abbas felt a sinking in his heart. Was Haider alive? Had he been too late? He needed to know. He extended his shivering blood stained hand over his brother’s nose, whispering silent prayers in his heart. Air. He could feel a small air current. Was Abbas imagining this? Instantly, he clambered his hand over Haider’s wrist, feeling for his pulse. Yes. It was there! Haider was alive!

“Thank you, Allah!” he cried.

Abbas wrapped his arms around Haider and began swimming back to the piece of wood. The salty water savagely ate away at his leg.

“Ya Allah,” he whispered. “Ya Allah.”

Kick. Tread. Kick. Tread. Slowly, he made his way back. He could feel his consciousness slipping away.

“Come on!” he thought. “I must keep fighting. For Haider!”

He kicked harder, wrestling a losing battle with the pain until his head finally bumped against the piece of wood. A deep sigh escaped him as he hauled himself and Haider aboard; careful to keep his leg away from the water. The deep gash in his leg was still bleeding. He gripped Haider in his arms. Giving his brother a tight hug, the pain somehow became irrelevant. They had each other now. Abbas tried to keep his eyes open but felt them droop. His hand lagged to the ground and he collapsed on the wood; unconscious. His arms remained wrapped around the only thing that mattered in this world for him.

## 2

# At the Beach

It was dawn. The sun finally began to rise. The sky was still a dim blue while the few trees that could be seen; whispered in the light breeze. No noise was to be heard aside from the rustling of leaves. Walls of houses were demolished and doors were ripped out of their hinges. It was as though someone had withdrawn all form of life from this land. The once filled neighbourhoods were nothing more than carcasses on the debris covered land.

A small boy could be seen making his way out of one of the houses. He had short black hair and dark brown eyes. He was wearing a rough set of jeans and a thick woolen sweater. Slung on his shoulder, was a small backpack filled with broken gadgets, highly absorbent sponges, dish washing tablets and other such essential supplies.

Years ago, one would have considered the contents of his bag as trash. But in these times, these things were almost equivalent to gold. People would kill for these items. Deals were done with promises of such items. Gangsters fought for these possessions. That was why the child held his bag like a long lost treasure. He also needed to keep his guard up. Not many places had good supplies anymore. And this bag made him a high value target.

So, focused on his bag, he didn't immediately notice when his foot knocked an old rusty pipe. With a loud *clank*, the pipe went clattering across the room. Instantly, he dropped to the floor and wriggled behind a wrecked coffee table. He felt a small shoulder



brush against his. He whirled around and found himself face to face with his older sister who held a disapproving glance.

“Sorry Maryam Api! I tripped over one of the pipes,” the boy whispered.

“Accidents happen Jafar but remember, we have to be very careful. We don’t want anyone to see us,” Maryam cautioned.

Jafar shivered softly and nodded in acknowledgement. Maryam silently unzipped her bag and from it, withdrew a powerful double barrel pistol. It was already loaded and Maryam knew very well how to use it. Stealthily, she made her way to the door and scampered out. Jafar knew what she was doing. She was scouting the area to make sure it was safe. Akbar Uncle had explained them the protocol almost a million times. Whenever any danger is suspected, Jafar should take cover while Maryam would make sure it was safe. Jafar didn’t understand why. He was twelve years old. Maryam Api was only four to five years older. And yet, she was allowed to carry a firearm. Jafar glanced in disapproval at the microscopic Swiss army knife Akbar Uncle had given him.

‘Helped me in more than one tricky situation,’ his uncle would say.

And while Jafar did occasionally feel disappointed, experience had taught him to trust Akbar Uncle. Never had there been a time that Akbar Uncle was proven wrong. Besides, after his parents were killed, Akbar Uncle raised him like a son. Akbar Uncle was the one who taught him everything he knew. He was the one who cleaned his cuts and he was the one who told him bedtime stories.

A hand brushed against his shoulder. Jafar whirled with a start. It was Maryam. She had returned.

“I checked,” Maryam whispered. “There’s no one there.”

Jafar sighed in relief. He grabbed his backpack and slung it over his shoulder again. The two made their way out of the wrecked house and stealthily embarked for their next stop. The beach.

Even though it had been a good trip and the supplies retrieved were plentiful, Jafar knew the beach was always a good place to check.

‘Many strange things can be found at the beach,’ Akbar Uncle

would say.

Jafar always liked going there for two reasons. One was that he was working on a sandcastle project and he would usually collect sand from the beach. The other reason was that often, strange things would wash up at the beach. Equipment, materials and sometimes even ammunition. It was always good to check the beach.

After exiting the neighbourhood, they strolled for a few minutes along a thin stone road through a small forest.

It was a winding path leading into the depths of the forest. The lush green trees beared down over them. Invisible eyes watched them from the shadows that flickered by. They could hear the low buzzing of the forest wildlife scurrying for cover as they stumbled along the worn road, invisible to all but the eyes that swept over them almost daily. Soon, Jafar could hear the familiar noise of the sea waves crashing against the sand.

They made their way through a narrow passage in the trees. Nobody could see it unless they knew it was there. Jafar and Maryam had used it dozens of times ever since Maryam had accidentally slipped down its muddy trail.

It didn't take them long before the beach came in sight. Jafar had missed this place. He always loved to see the birds at the beach, pecking away at plants. As the foliage approached the sea, the tall lush green trees shrunk to tall wavy patches of grass stranded between the crumbling dirt that melted into the sand. Dusty puffs kicked up by a zephyr swayed across the glittering grains of sand.

The atmosphere may have been serene but Maryam couldn't help feel goosebumps on her arms as she watched Jafar dart between grassy patches with speed and stealth that spoke of years of practice. The grass didn't offer much cover, only large enough to conceal a child; if their tell-tale footprints didn't reveal their location.

Jafar pulled out his small, hand sized pouch and greedily stuffed sand into it. Maryam smiled at his enthusiasm. Amongst all of their challenges, Jafar was determined to finish his sand castle. She called him silently,

“Go check the coast for supplies, I’ll keep watch.”

Jafar turned to see where she was pointing. The same place. A relatively large pile of bushes.

“Now go,” she whispered.

Jafar sprinted away and began searching like a badger. Maryam watched as he lifted different objects and discarded them or tossed them in his plastic grocery store bag. At one point, he lifted one of the objects excitedly and waved it in the air.

‘A pair of binoculars,’ she thought. It wasn’t everyday that something like that was found.

Jafar placed the binoculars in his bag and scampered on. All of a sudden, he froze. Maryam withdrew her double barrel pistol. *Click.* She was ready. Jafar wasn’t moving. He was gazing at the shoreline. Abruptly, he took off in the direction of the water. Maryam watched; confused. As he went deeper in the water, he reached out as though he was trying to pull something. Maryam was about to go and help him when she remembered Akbar Uncle’s instructions.

‘If you search the beach, only one of you should check the coast. The other must be hiding as a look out.’

The words echoed in her mind. Akbar Uncle’s rules had kept them safe until now. Whatever Jafar was pulling, he would have to do it alone. She watched as Jafar kept pulling with all his might. He was dragging something out of the water. It was clearly bigger than him. With one final lunge, he tugged it out.

Maryam felt her heart skip a beat. It was a person!

‘An Alpha,’ she thought.

Petrified, she charged there as fast as a bullet. If the Alphas would try to take Jafar, she wasn’t going to let them go without a fight. The sand crumbled beneath her worn out shoes as she scrambled through the sand. Her gun was already ready to shoot. As she neared, she raised her gun to fire a warning shot.

“No!” Jafar shrieked. “It’s only two boys.”

But times had taught Maryam to be precautionary.

“Move,” she ordered. Jafar reluctantly moved out of the way. Maryam advanced with her gun towards the two boys. They were both unconscious. One boy was clearly bigger than the other,

around her age; while the smaller one seemed to be a year or so older than Jafar. The older boy had his arms wrapped around the younger one in a death grip. His face was pale. His leg had a deep gash that had only recently started clotting. Maryam felt a pang of sympathy in her heart. These weren't Alphas. Just two poor boys. She turned to Jafar,

"Are they-"

"They're both alive," Jafar answered. "The older one is holding really hard on to the younger one. Maybe they're brothers?"

Maryam didn't know the answer. But then it dawned on her. They were in the open. Anyone walking into the beach would see them. That included Alphas. They were extremely vulnerable.

"We have to go," she said quietly.

"I know," Jafar replied. "But we can't just leave them."

Maryam thought for a moment. On one hand, these were dangerous times. The longer they were at the beach, the more risk they were in. And even though Akbar Uncle had taught her to be safe, he had always taught her to do the right thing. Jafar was right. They could not just leave these boys to die.

"Get them to the bushes where I was hiding," she ordered. "I'll see if I can find something that'll help them."

Jafar nodded and began dragging the two boys away.

# 3

## Awake

Water. That was the first thing Abbas heard. He could hear the sound of water, swishing back and forth. In a strange way, it was almost soothing the pain he felt. A ringing noise echoed throughout his head. With a bit of effort, he brushed away the sand in his eyes so that he could see. Sand. He must be on some kind of beach.

Abbas opened his eyes and got up slowly. Beside him, his brother Haider was stirring a bit.

‘He’ll probably wake up soon,’ he thought.

Abbas groaned as he pushed himself to stand. His leg was almost healed but not using it for so long had numbed it. He attempted to balance, placing majority of his weight on his other leg. Abbas drove his foot in the ground, using its resistance to push himself upwards. He could already feel life returning to his leg and it got easier. At last, he found himself standing. Now, he could observe his surroundings a little better.

They were indeed on a beach. A long stretch of foliage and bushes camouflaged the brothers, almost making them invisible to their surroundings. Aside from that, he noticed that a worn out cloth was tied around his leg where his injury had been. He felt his stomach gurgle.

‘Allah knows how long it’s been since we last ate,’ he thought.

Anxiously, he looked around and noticed some berries glinting in the bush. Hungrily, he reached out for the berries when a

whisper caught his attention.

“Api, they’re awake!”

It was a boy’s voice. A relatively young one.

Abbas looked around and noticed a rock. Picking it up, he called out, “Who’s there?”

A few seconds passed. Abbas felt his hand clasp the rock harder. He knew someone was there. There was a small creak, and a boy emerged from the bush. He looked several years younger than Abbas. He had short black hair, as though multiple black rain droplets had fallen over his head. He had a backpack, but most importantly, he wasn’t armed.

Guiltily, Abbas lowered the rock. Even injured, this child was not a threat to him. At that moment, a girl around his age emerged from the bush. She was holding a gun. Abbas’s eyes widened in surprise and he began to take a step back but tripped over. With a loud thud, he landed on the ground. The boy stifled a laugh. Abbas looked up at them both warily. The boy seemed okay but the girl seemed untrustworthy.

“Who are you?” he questioned staring at her gun.

The boy began, “Salamunalaikum, I’m Jafar and this is Maryam Api -”

“Who are you?” the girl interrupted. “What were you doing in the water?”

Abbas gazed away for a brief moment deciding what to say. He didn’t like it when someone else controlled the conversation, trying to force answers out of him. Especially a suspicious individual like her.

“Walaikumsalam. Thanks for helping us,” he replied at last.

The girl stared him down for a minute before lowering the gun. Casually, she motioned for her brother to sit down before doing so herself. There was a brief silence. Then the girl finally spoke.

“I’m Maryam and this is my brother Jafar.”

Abbas nodded his head respectfully and replied, “My name is Abbas, and this is my younger brother Haider.”

Haider snored in the corner as though in acknowledgement.

“We found you in the water,” Maryam continued. “What were you doing there?”

Abbas sat down and contemplated. Slowly, he began delving in his memory, withdrawing from his surroundings. The sound of the beach waves faded away. In its place, he could hear bullets and explosions. The day turned to night. He was in the water. His leg started burning once more. Words echoed in his mind, "I love you both. Take care of each other, no matter what."

It was a man's voice. It seemed so caring and genuine that for a moment, the pain faded away. And then it disappeared. A giant orange glow blinded him and he could hear a voice,

"Abbas!"

Someone needed him. He didn't know who but they were in trouble. Water splashed his face, and he awoke with a start.

He was perspiring heavily. Jafar was wiping his face with a wet cloth. What had just happened? Maryam and Jafar both sighed in relief as he got back up on his feet.

"Are you okay," Jafar whispered. "You just closed your eyes and started wriggling and sweating. I thought it was some kind of seizure."

"Murtaza," he said abruptly.

"Murtaza?" Maryam repeated; confused. "What do you mean?"

Abbas did not answer. He merely sat puzzled on the sand. The name Murtaza seemed familiar, but who was he?

Thankfully, Maryam didn't ask him any more questions. But he could tell it was still bothering her.

"I remember explosions," he said abruptly. Both Maryam and Jafar stopped what they were doing and gave him curious glances. "I remember bullets and night. It was at night. And—" Abbas paused.

He didn't know how to explain the reassuring voice.

"My leg was burning with pain," he finished.

Maryam looked at Abbas intently before asking another question, "Was it the Alphas?"

Abbas raised a brow, "What do you mean?"

Maryam repeated her question, "Were the Alphas chasing you?"

Abbas thought she was joking. Even though it seemed like a weird moment to joke. He let out a small laugh. Maryam looked

at him in confusion. Abbas realized she wasn't joking.

"What do you mean by Alphas?" he questioned. "What are Alphas?"

Maryam narrowed her eyes. "There's no need to be sarcastic," she answered defensively.

Abbas felt confused for a moment. What was she talking about? He decided to try again.

"I am not being sarcastic!" he exclaimed. "I have never heard of Alphas before. Who are they?"

"You don't know who Alphas are?" Jafar laughed. "As in crazy assassins that kidnap anyone they see and take them to a giant iron fortress?"

"I have never heard of them," Abbas replied honestly although he couldn't help feel a little insecure. Whatever Alphas were, it seemed like the whole world knew. From the corner of his eye, he noticed Maryam was fiddling with her thumbs nervously.

"What is the matter with you?" Abbas addressed her.

She looked up at him, meeting his gaze. For a moment, Abbas felt as though he could see concern in her eyes.

"Well?" he repeated.

Maryam looked down once more and whispered softly, "Abbas, what is the last thing you remember?"



# 4

## Forgotten

“I am not having amnesia!” Abbas shouted for what felt like the hundredth time.

For the past hour, Maryam and Jafar had very adamantly, yet politely; been insisting the opposite. Yes, he did not remember his parents nor any thing before the sea explosions and bullets. Nor who Murtaza was. Abbas stopped for a second. He didn’t want to think down this trail any longer.

“I know it is strange Abbas Bhai.<sup>1</sup> It can be really scary,” Jafar whispered. “But based on what you’re telling us, you don’t remember anything about yourself. All you know is your name, explosions and bullets. You also remember Haider. Your brother. But that’s it. You don’t remember anything else. You don’t remember your mother or father. You don’t even know about the Alphas. You don’t remember anything at all. That is amnesia.”

Abbas frowned. They were talking to him in a strange way. As though he was a crazy person. He didn’t like that. Abbas knew he was perfectly sane and that he was not having amnesia. He couldn’t have. But Jafar’s arguments were still making him uncomfortable. He didn’t remember anything before the bullets.

“The explosion may have triggered this,” Maryam added. “Or something might have happened on your way to the coast. After all, we don’t know how long you were drifting for.”

---

<sup>1</sup>Title for elder brother in Urdu language.

A new thought overtook Abbas. How long had he been drifting hopelessly in the water? How long had he been holding on to his brother in the stormy waves? Abbas contemplated on the matter.

“It couldn’t have been more than a day or two,” he concluded. “My wounds haven’t fully healed yet.”

Jafar grunted in agreement.

“Tell me about these Alphas; whatever they are.” Abbas was desperate to change the subject. “I am responsible for Haider and my own safety, so if there is danger, I should know.”

Haider snored once more in agreement. He had been in a deep sleep since Abbas had woken up. Abbas would have been worried but Jafar said his vitals were fine. Abbas decided to let him rest.

Jafar looked nervously at Maryam.

“The thing is,” Jafar began slowly. “These are dangerous times.”

Abbas sat upright. He could feel a slight strain on his leg.

“Alphas are bad people. We don’t know how many of them are there, but people believe there are at least fifty of them,” Maryam continued.

“Imagine someone who is as strong and skilled as an army commando, and as smart as a PhD; armed with the most advanced technology and weapons known. They capture everyone they find with their field teams.”

“What happens to the people they capture?” Abbas inquired.

It was a few moments before Maryam answered.

“They are tested,” Maryam shivered. “How? We do not know. All we know is that based on the results of these tests, either the person captured is killed, or –” she paused.

“Or...” Abbas urged, his curiosity overwhelming the pain of his injuries.

“They are taken,” Jafar finished. “Taken back to the base. That’s why everyone is so afraid of them. Very few are ever able to escape.”

Abbas was in deep thought. So that was the reason for Maryam’s harsh response to his laugh. These Alphas certainly did not seem like a laughing matter.

Jafar sighed and continued, “Their base is an iron fortress in

the centre of the island. Nobody goes near there. Anyone who does, is never seen again. The walls are so high that nothing can be seen from outside. People have thrown fire, acid and more but nothing had any effect. And they got taken.”

“So now people are hiding, huh?” Abbas questioned. “They have given up on trying to stop them and merely hide?”

“It’s easier said than done!” Maryam retorted. “The Alphas are so awful that they leave the bodies of their victims on the streets. Or what’s left of them. And Alpha 43-”

Maryam stopped speaking as though she had said something forbidden.

“What happened?” Abbas asked.

Maryam took a deep breath. She looked away for a moment, turning towards Jafar. Jafar met her gaze and for a few moments they were both silent, as if they had been drawn into a trance. Abbas rolled his eyes in frustration. Why did they keep going silent? Before he could ask, Maryam, as though she had read his mind; turned to answer him.

“Sorry,” she sighed. “It’s just that Alphas have killed so many people. We, as a community, have lost so much blood to them.” But even though all Alphas are awful, some Alphas are more well renowned than others. Now-”

“Wait,” Abbas interrupted. “Do people know the Alphas by name or something?”

“I’m getting there,” Maryam sighed. “See, the thing is that each Alpha has a number. A unique identifier. No two Alphas have the same number. That is how we tell the Alphas apart. Now, as I was saying before, some Alphas are more cruel than others. One such Alpha is Alpha 43. He is the worst. Nobody has ever escaped his wrath. Nobody has seen him and lived to tell the tale. Many things are said about him. Some say he isn’t human, but a reincarnation of the devil. Others think he is a magician. But the truth is, that we know nothing about him. Except for the fact that he is known for using knives in his kills. He isn’t fond of guns.”

A cold burst of wind flooded the bushes, sending a chill up Abbas’s spine. It almost felt like they were telling him a scary

camp fire story.

“Pray to Allah that he never finds you. That’s what is said about Alpha 43,” Maryam finished.

Abbas shivered. He finally understood the reason for Maryam and Jafar’s fear. These Alphas had plagued the lives of so many people, killing families and orphaning children. How could this happen? How come nothing has been done to stop them? The thoughts made Abbas so uncomfortable that he decided to stand up. By now, the numbness in his leg had mostly disappeared, Alhamdulillah.<sup>2</sup> He could see Haider stirring in the corner. Haider would wake up soon.

“We have to get going,” Jafar said abruptly.

Abbas whirled to face the two siblings who were wrapping up their stuff. “But why?” Abbas murmured.

He had been enjoying their company. Jafar was the one to answer.

“Our uncle will be worried sick if we don’t get back on time,” he said.

Maryam nodded. “We are sorry, but Akbar Uncle is very strict about this,” she added.

Of course. They had someone to go back to. Akbar Uncle was their family. He had no one to go to. A small hole opened in Abbas’s heart. Painfully, Abbas tried to ignore it, but he knew that it would never go away.

“Well then,” he sighed. “Thank you both for your help. Inshallah,<sup>3</sup> Allah will reward you in this world and the hereafter. My brother and I can never repay you for this.”

Both nodded respectfully and got up to leave. Just then, Jafar exclaimed,

“Wait! I have to give you something.” He pulled out a small aqeeq ring<sup>4</sup> from his pocket.

“This is yours,” Jafar explained. “It fell from your hand while I was dragging you here.”

---

<sup>2</sup>‘Praise be to God.’

<sup>3</sup>‘God willing’

<sup>4</sup>A type of stone.

Abbas took the ring and held it in his hand. For a moment, he merely stared at it. It was silvery grey in colour while the stone was pomegranate red. Something was engraved on the silver lining. Abbas strained his eyes to read it. It was a verse of Quran.

“I have chosen you, so listen to what is revealed.”<sup>5</sup>

Instantly, Abbas felt the world disappear. He was back in the water. But his leg wasn't burning. He heard a whizzing noise shoot right past his head and disappear in the water. A voice shouted,

“Brace yourselves boys!”

Abbas was in a boat in the sea. Haider was beside him. In front was their father. Murtaza! That was his father's name! But then there was an orange explosion and everything faded away. Abbas gasped. Something was covering his face. Abbas struggled to push away what was covering him. It was a blanket. A thick warm blanket. He shoved aside with his tiny arms. Tiny arms? But before he could think about that, a pair of hands lifted him off the ground; holding him. Somehow, the soft grip felt comforting. Abbas noticed the right hand was wearing a similar ring. He turned to see the face of this person. It was a woman. She was smiling and holding him as though nothing else mattered in the world. Her kind eyes filled his heart with warmth. His tiny legs swayed as he tried to give her a hug. She laughed and placed him back in his crib. Crib? Where was he? Where had Maryam, Jafar and Haider gone?

A wave of water dissolved everything. Abbas woke up for the second time in the bushes; his face sweating. Maryam and Jafar were looking at him; very concerned.

“Are you okay?” Jafar asked curiously.

Abbas didn't reply. The woman was stuck in his head, harder than the salty water on his wound.

“Ami,” he whispered without thinking.

“Ami?” Maryam repeated; confused. “What do you mean? Did you remember something?”

“No!” Abbas retorted, a little harsher than he had intended.

---

<sup>5</sup>Surah Taha, Ayah 14

Jafar nodded and turned away but Maryam did not stop watching him. She clearly did not believe him. But no matter what she said, Abbas didn't care. He couldn't share everything with them. He still didn't know them. And while Jafar had partially earned his trust, he wasn't sure about Maryam.

"Uh, Abbas..." he heard Jafar call out.

"Yes, what is it?" Abbas just managed to find the words.

"I said your brother has a red mark on his arm," Jafar replied. "I would like to take a look. Is that okay?"

Abbas turned to Haider. There was a very large red mark on his arm.

"Are you some kind of doctor?"

"In a sense. You could call me a healer, Alhamdulillah," Jafar chuckled. "With God's help, I was able to heal your leg."

Abbas nodded. "Then, I guess it's fine."

Jafar leapt to Haider's side. Unzipping his bag, he removed several home made tiny instruments and began examining Haider. While that was happening, Abbas decided to shift his position in the conversation. It was Maryam's turn to be defensive. Turning towards her, he asked casually,

"How did you get that firearm?"

Maryam almost tripped. The firearm was still on the ground. She raised an eyebrow,

"Why? It's not uncommon to have a firearm nowadays with Alphas everywhere."

Abbas wasn't going to let her get away that easily.

"It's because," he began. "That is an automatic, double barrel pistol. Not something you would find in your local gun store. Typically, it is used by high ranking bodyguards or the army."

Maryam smiled and casually placed the gun in her bag, out of his sight. Zipping it closed, she turned to face him.

"That's true. But let me ask you this. How do you know so much about firearms? A local firearm seller couldn't describe it that quickly or adeptly."

Abbas forced a smile.

"My only reason for asking is that I was hoping to obtain one myself." He decided to make a wild guess. "Maybe you could ask

Akbar Uncle if he has any more.”

The smile faded from Maryam. Bullseye! So it was from Akbar Uncle. Whoever he was.

“You ask too many questions,” she finally responded.

“I want answers,” Abbas replied calmly. He felt his heart skip a beat. Maryam was drifting towards her bag. Her bag that had the double barrel pistol. She was probably feeling unsafe. And Abbas had no weapons. Casually, he sat down.

“But everything thing must come at the right time,” he added as calmly as he could.

“Api, Abbas Bhai, please see this,” Jafar interrupted. “We are in a situation. Haider’s wound is getting infected.”

Abbas immediately turned to Haider. Infection was bad news. Abbas was about to say something, but Jafar already started speaking again.

“We can control it, but the disinfectant is back home. We need to bring him home.”

Abbas was about to agree but Maryam reacted first.

“What?” she exclaimed. “Jafar, can I speak to you privately for a moment.”

She grabbed Jafar and pulled him several meters away from Abbas. Both began whispering intently. Abbas could catch a few statements from their conversation.

“Are you insane!” Maryam scolded. “Akbar Uncle would be furious!”

Abbas almost growled. This girl was being unreasonable. It’s not like he was an Alpha. Was he? He couldn’t be an Alpha. But he did know about firearms. Abbas stopped. He was pretty sure he was not an Alpha.

“But we can’t just leave him,” Jafar argued “If we don’t disinfect the wound, the infection will spread and we will need to amputate the arm.”

Abbas felt his anger subside. He really liked Jafar.

“Why don’t we go home and ask Akbar Uncle,” Maryam reasoned. “He can bring the disinfectant.”

‘Akbar Uncle, Akbar Uncle, Akbar Uncle,’ Abbas thought. Who is he? All of Maryam’s answers to everything seemed to be

Akbar Uncle.

“It may be too late by then,” Jafar whispered.

‘If only Maryam could understand that,’ he added silently in his head. But then it dawned on him. Maryam was only being protective of her family and home. The same way he was being protective of Haider. He felt his anger fade away.

Maryam turned briefly to Haider who was beginning to wake up.

“Api please,” Jafar whispered.

Maryam stared for a few seconds at Haider.

“Fine,” she answered. “But Akbar Uncle is going to be furious.” Jafar turned to Abbas.

“We want to bring your brother to our home to disinfect and treat his wound. Once we have done that, he should be fine, Inshallah.”

Abbas nodded in acknowledgement. At that moment, Haider groaned and began to get up. Abbas’s heart leapt. Before Haider could say anything, he leapt down and gave Haider the biggest hug in the world. Tears poured from his eyes.

“Abbas Bhai,” Haider moaned weakly. “Where are we?”

“Nice of you to finally wake up,” Abbas smiled reassuringly. “Listen well. We have to go somewhere. You have an injury that needs some treatment.”

“Okay,” Haider sighed, still too dazed to fully process everything. “But who are they?” he asked pointing towards Maryam and Jafar.

“They helped us,” Abbas answered. “Now let’s get going. I’ll explain everything on the way.”



# 5

## Journey

“So Alphas are the bad guys,” Haider asked. “Is that correct?”

“Yes,” Jafar grunted. “I’m glad you finally figured it out.”

Haider shrugged.

“I mean if I saw an Alpha, I would defeat him easily,” he joked.

Abbas sighed. Haider was still making jokes. He clearly couldn’t remember anything either. He didn’t remember any explosions or guns. He did not remember their father, Murtaza; or their mother. Their mother. Abbas could still remember her face. It was imprinted vividly in his mind. Who was she? His thoughts were interrupted as they reached the stream. Haider had started asking questions again.

“Your brother is certainly full of words!” Maryam whispered as they crossed past another broken house.

Abbas stopped and turned to face her.

She broke into a sheepish smile. Or pretended to. He couldn’t tell.

“Honestly, he reminds me of my own brother,” she added quickly.

“It’s the price we pay for being older siblings,” he chuckled; unable to ignore the gun in her hand.

While Maryam was being polite and all, Abbas knew very clearly that she didn’t trust him. She had kept Jafar on her right side with Haider since the time they left the beach. Abbas was very strictly on her left side. Even though she never said it; he

knew. Her gun was ready to shoot, as though she was expecting Abbas to jump at Jafar and try to hurt him. Obviously, he had no such intention. The only problem was that he had no weapons. So for now, he had to be very careful. Even though his anger had returned, he needed to look casual.

It had been about an hour since they left the beach. They had crossed through the forest as well as multiple demolished neighbourhoods. Seeing the ruins helped Abbas visualize the threat of the Alphas. He could imagine them barging into homes, abducting people and laying waste to the lands.

For the last few minutes, they had been strolling along a river edge. Both sides were covered by giant reeds preventing anyone from seeing them. Abbas decided to observe the river. He noticed something very peculiar. There were very few fish.

“Shouldn’t there be more fish in the river?” he asked.

“There should be,” she sighed; her grip tightening on her gun. Abbas rolled his eyes and decided to keep to himself. For the next few minutes, he merely stared at the river surface. The water was slightly discoloured; probably polluted. That might’ve been why all the fish disappeared. A small tree came in sight.

“That’s our cue,” Jafar whispered. “From here, we wade through to the giant hay fields.”

Abbas flashed a concerned glance at Jafar. Haider’s arm was not to be exposed to water yet and Abbas’s leg hadn’t fully healed either. Jafar nodded, as though he had heard Abbas’s concerns.

“Don’t worry! The water in this river is freshwater and it’s only knee deep.”

Abbas felt the temporary panic drift away. Slowly, Jafar slipped into the water. It was only knee deep. Well, Jafar’s definition of knee deep. Since Abbas was significantly taller, the water was well below his knees. Abbas slowly helped Haider down into the river. The current was not very strong, just enough to blow a leaf downstream. It was cold though. Very cold. Abbas waded through the water along side the others. His hand tightened around Haider’s and then it happened.

Everything disappeared. Abbas could feel his desperation as he grabbed hold of the wheel. Explosions were taking place in

the background. In the corner of his eye, he could see Murtaza loading a firearm. It's click sounded so familiar. He heard the rifle fire, splintering one of the boats to pieces. Murtaza had got one. But then the rifle was gone. And they were off the boat in the cold salt water that burned his leg. Violently, Abbas shook as he saw the debris of the boat. Their boat. Their father was gone. Gone to the afterlife; forever. The flames faded and Abbas jerked awake, shaking uncontrollably. Drops of sweat trickled down his forehead. Haider, Jafar and Maryam were watching him with a mix of concern and relief. Abbas felt Haider hug him tightly.

They were on the other side of the river. Abbas pushed himself back up to his feet. Jafar was going to say something but Abbas already knew what he was going to say.

"I'm fine," Abbas said. This was the third time it had happened. These seizure-like events. But now Abbas remembered more. He remembered a boat chase. He remembered his valiant father fighting back. He remembered jumping off the boat. And he remembered Murtaza. For a moment, he felt a strange peace, as if the hole in his heart had started to close.

## 6

# Home

Another hour had gone by. By now, they had left the stream far behind them, crossed through a giant hayfield; which according to Jafar was to mask their scent from dogs and they had walked across an incomplete mud road. Now Abbas could see a giant withered oak tree.

“We’re almost there,” Jafar sighed. “Just ten more minutes now.”

Jafar turned and continued to lead them down the winding path.

Abbas wiped the sweat beading up on his brow. He felt like the forest stretched forever in front of them.

Jafar was happily leading their group; humming a tune which Abbas didn’t recognize, bouncing a little in his steps. The patchy backpack slung over his shoulder jostled a little as he merrily moved forward.

In front of Abbas, Haider was essentially dragging his feet. His face was flushed red and he had long given up hiding his panting breaths. He clutched his torn blood-stained sleeve, trying to hold it steady; grimacing at the pain pulsating from the cut.

Abbas too found himself reaching his threshold and he couldn’t help but notice the ease with which Jafar walked.

‘They must do this often,’ he thought to himself. A click from behind him drew his eye to the wary figure at the rear. Maryam was still watching Abbas suspiciously; her pistol glinting cruelly

in the sun.

‘You think she’d understand by now,’ he muttered under his breath.

True to Jafar’s statement, a few moments later their tall tree surroundings had shrunk to a grassy plain. The flimsy reeds reached his waist and rippled in the gentle breeze. In the distance, he could see a stone bungalow; the brown stone blending into the surrounding. Tucked amidst the dense jungle, the house was bordered by a tall overhanging cliff sheltering it from above.

‘Woah,’ Abbas thought. ‘They really didn’t want this place to be found. No one could reach here even by accident.’

After hours of being drowned by trees, Abbas felt strangely liberated and thanked Allah for the smooth plain land which was merciful under his sore feet in comparison to the forest floor.

Trudging through the sea of plants, they hiked to the side of the brick wall and crouched amongst the shrubbery.

Maryam moved to the front.

“Hide here,” she whispered. “We’ll introduce you, then bring you around.”

Gesturing to Abbas, the two stood up and made their way to the front of the house.

Haider sank to his knees and released a deep sigh of relief. Abbas joined him on the ground. Holding a finger to his lips, he gestured to Haider to stay quiet. Turning to the thick bush, he wheedled his fingers into the leaves, ignoring the slight pricks on his fingers and pried it apart, getting a clear view of the front yard.

He could see Maryam and Jafar approach a young woman who was plucking vegetables from the garden. She wore a loose pair of pants and a long top that came till her knees. On her head, was a tightly wrapped scarf. Around her waist was a leather belt that held a few tools and slung across her back was a lethal-looking rifle.

Abbas scowled, ‘What is with this family and guns?’ He shook his head in bewilderment.

When the two kids came into view, the woman’s hand went instinctively to her gun. But seeing who it was, she rushed forward

and embraced them in a motherly hug.

Abbas strained his ears to hear what they were saying but they were too far away. He felt his pulse quicken as the woman's face changed from calm to concern. Abbas was now doubting if it was really a good idea to come with these two to their home. After all, they hadn't mentioned anyone apart from 'Akbar Uncle'.

'What if she doesn't want us here?' he thought to himself. She looked kind but Abbas didn't want to take any chances. If times really were as dangerous as Maryam and Jafar had described, then perhaps they would not get a friendly reception. No. They should leave while they have the chance.

He turned to address his brother; his eyes not leaving the scene.

"Haider, get up, we've got to move."

No response came. He looked up and was surprised to see that Haider wasn't there! Abbas didn't have long to panic when a strong set of arms wrenched him off the grass, and twisted a hand behind his back. Abbas struggled and lashed out, flinging his elbow at the attacker. The attacker grunted. The elbow had struck him. But the hold got tighter before a rough voice whispered in his here.

"I wouldn't do that again if I were you." Feeling a little pressure on his twisted limb, Abbas stilled instantly. He was stuck. Like a fly in a spider's web. Like prey in a Python's coils. He felt himself being pushed forward until he was brought into the front yard. Beside him, he saw Haider struggling in the firm hold of someone else.

He heard a gasp and looked forward. Maryam's and Jafar's eyes were wide in fear; the colour draining from their faces, and they shared a worried glance. The woman with them readied her rifle. Maryam took a step back, lowering the gun from the woman's grasp.

"What have I caught here?" Abbas's attacker growled as he dropped Abbas to the ground; his arm still firmly holding Abbas's shoulder.

Jafar swallowed nervously before taking a step forward.

"Akbar Uncle" he began. "We can explain."

# 7

## Akbar Uncle

“How could you be so foolish!” Abbas heard Akbar yell.

Even though they were sitting in a separate room, their conversation could be heard quite clearly. They had been discussing for quite some time now. ‘Akbar Uncle’ had not been thrilled to see them. He had immediately called for a family meeting. Everyone was there, except one. The young man who had apprehended Haider was standing guard on the two boys. He seemed quite strong and was clearly older than Abbas. At least ten years older by Abbas’s estimate.

‘Ugh,’ Abbas groaned as he tried to pull the handcuff holding him and Haider together. Another brilliant idea of ‘Akbar Uncle’. Akbar had made sure they were properly cuffed and guarded. Even though Maryam and Jafar had helped them, they were being treated like prisoners! He was about to ask if the cuffs could be removed, but he already knew the answer.

‘Akbar Uncles’s orders,’ he reminded himself, rolling his eyes. No one would question that.

Tired of waiting, Abbas decided to scrutinize the guard. He was tall and broad, reminding Abbas of a brick wall. He had a black beard, and his eyes had a softness in them. Also, unlike others, he hadn’t pointed a large shotgun at them even once. And while that was certainly a strangely pleasant gesture, Abbas had come to value this in the last few hours. The guard was quite different to the others. He didn’t carry the same aggressive

behaviour everyone else did. He made Abbas feel safe. And there was something else. Something about him made Abbas feel he might be able to squeeze some information out of him.

“Who are you?” Abbas asked as innocently as he could.

The man merely shrugged and said,

“Ali”

Abbas smiled to himself. This man didn't seem particularly cautious. If he played his cards right, he could dig some details.

“Who is she?” Abbas asked casually.

Ali turned to Abbas once more,

“Which one, Maryam or Zahra?”

Zahra! That was the name of the other woman. Abbas noticed Ali was fiddling nervously with his fingers, as though wondering if he had said too much. Abbas decided to take a wild guess.

“How long have you and Zahra Api been married?”

Ali froze for a moment. Turning to face Abbas his original softness faded away. “What does it matter to you?” he hissed. But Ali's eyes were giving him away. Abbas had guessed correctly. Ali was Zahra's husband.

“You ask too many questions, but yes, you are right. Zahra is my wife. We have only been married for a little over a year now.”

“I shouldn't be saying this much.”

Abbas smiled laying out his final bait,

“It's alright. It's nice to have family. All I have is my younger brother, Haider. I don't even remember my parents.”

Now Haider was quiet. Abbas noticed that Ali was shifting uncomfortably, as if he was unsure of what to say. And there was something else. What was it? Abbas stared intently at Ali. Was he imagining it, or was Ali's hand shaking a little?

He paused as if waiting for Abbas to change the subject. But Abbas didn't. Abbas's curiosity had now made him notice that Ali was carrying a hint of sadness. So he patiently waited through the few awkward moments of silence.

“I never knew my family” Ali sighed at last. “They died when I was little. The people who took me in and raised me were killed by an Alpha.”

A treacherous tear slipped down his cheek.



Abbas felt his heart soften.

“Do you know which one did it?” he whispered calmly.

Ali’s eyes closed for a moment. His entire softness disappearing; replaced by anger. And pain. His fists were clenched. Abbas thought he resembled a wounded wolf.

“It was him,” Ali growled painfully. “Alpha 43. He took everything from me! I remember when those kind people hid me. They didn’t want Alpha 43 to find me.” He paused once more.

Tears were pouring down his face.

“When he got them,” Ali swallowed, “He used his accursed knife. I watched them all die. The man and women who treated me like their own. Their children who treated me like a younger brother. I lost everything that day. I was only thirteen. I lived on the streets from then on. Hunting my own food; providing for myself. I always thought my life would end hopelessly. But then Akbar Uncle found me. He raised me like his own. Got me married to his niece. And I found a family once more.”

Abbas’s mouth widened in shock, A tear trickled down his cheek. Akbar had not just raised Ali; he had healed him. That showed something about Akbar. His respect was not unwarranted. But Abbas had also learnt something else. Zahra, Maryam and Jafar were siblings. Akbar was their uncle. Ali was Zahra’s husband. And there was another thought. Alpha 43. He seemed so awful. How many lives had he ruined like Ali’s? How could he kill them with so much cruelty? Abbas felt sorry for Ali. He had never meant to make Ali relive the horrors of his past.

Beside him, Haider’s eyes were watered as well.

“Ali Bhai, we are so sorry for your loss,” Haider consoled.

Abbas turned towards Haider in surprise. He seemed genuinely moved by Ali’s story.

The door opened. Ali wiped away his tears and stood up abruptly. Abbas and Haider turned to see who had entered. It was Zahra. Silently, she strolled inside the small room. Behind her was Jafar and Maryam. Both seemed slightly down.

‘Akbar Uncle probably scolded them,’ he thought.

Maryam looked up for a moment with a slight glare in her eyes; as though she was blaming Abbas for their scolding. Abbas

rolled his eyes once more.

“I have to tell you something” he heard Zahra whisper.

Abbas and Haider turned to face her.

“We have decided to let you stay for the night,” she announced. “You are our guests.”

“Is this how you treat guests?” Abbas replied sharply, gesturing to the cuffs.

Zahra turned to face him. She broke into a smile.

“You have quite a sharp tongue. But to answer your question – no. It’s just that nowadays we have to be cautious.”

Abbas nodded in acknowledgement. Somehow she seemed to resonate strength and softness at the same time.

“Now, once we uncuff you,” Zahra paused. “Jafar will take you to his room. You boys will be staying there for the night. Jafar will disinfect your wounds. We will be having dinner soon, Inshallah; and I will call you both when its ready.”

Abbas nodded calmly, unable to ignore Haider’s energetic nods. Zahra didn’t either. She laughed and gestured to Ali. Slowly, he withdrew a small key and stepped towards Abbas and Haider. He was going to uncuff them. Abbas and Haider adjusted their position while Ali placed the key and click. It was off. For the first time since they had arrived, Abbas and Haider could finally stretch their arms freely. And it was then that Abbas noticed it. Akbar wasn’t there. It seemed that he had other pressing matters. But Abbas was too tired to think about that. Slowly, he followed Jafar across the house, passing along several rooms on the way.

‘This is a nice place to stay,’ he thought to himself.

Haider seemed to think the same as he was unable to withhold his excitement. He kept asking questions and bobbing around like a duck in a pond. Finally, they reached the end of the hallway. There was a sign marked, ‘Jaja’, on the door.

“Jaja?” Abbas repeated, just managing to control his laughter.

Jafar went red with embarrassment and quickly removed the sign. Holding it behind his back, he casually laughed.

“It’s just an old nickname.”

With that, they entered the room. It was well sized. Two small mattresses lay in the corner and a small table beside it. On

it was a picture. There was a man and a woman smiling.

“Who are they?” Haider asked.

Jafar froze for a moment. “My parents” he said quietly.

Abbas wanted to ask more but knew better. This was clearly something that Jafar didn’t want to talk about. His eyes scanned the room for a possible distraction. A huge blob of sand in the corner of the room caught his attention. It was surrounded by colouring pencils and paint brushes neatly piled together.

“So you’re an artist!” he laughed.

Abbas watched his face melt into joy.

“Finally!” he exclaimed. “Somebody noticed! I’ll be right back!”

Swiftly, he bounded out of the room leaving Abbas and Haider confused. A moment later he returned with Maryam and the disinfectant in his hand.

“Maryam Api!” Jafar bubbled. “Remember when you said it wasn’t looking right!”

Maryam shrugged, apparently confused about the relevance of his statement.

“Abbas Bhai thought it looks like real art!” Jafar finished.

“Well, did he now?” she smiled slyly. “Then why doesn’t he tell us what you’re making.”

Abbas was completely caught off guard. Jafar turned to him expectantly. Abbas gazed hard at the blob of sand. It didn’t seem to look like anything. Just a big pile of sand. He looked around the sand for any hints. There was a small scoop and other such detailed instruments; paper cut out flags and a crude drawing of what looked like a castle.

“A castle” he concluded.

Jafar jumped in glee and the sly smile on Maryam’s face faded away. She had not expected that. She muttered an excuse and left the room. Abbas laughed. He heard a loud thud. Haider had collapsed on one of the mattresses. Jafar removed a small wad of cotton and soaked it in the disinfectant. Abbas watched as Jafar slowly rubbed the disinfectant over Haider’s wound.

“Ah,” Haider groaned.

It didn't take Jafar long to disinfect the wound. Just five minutes or so.

'Hours of walking for this!' Abbas thought to himself. His bones were aching from the lengthy walks of the day and his arms had gotten stiff from the cuffs.

"Abbas Bhai," Jafar called.

Abbas turned to Jafar who placed a small brown packet with two bottles on the table.

"This is some disinfectant for your injuries," he explained, pointing to one bottle. "You will need to apply once at night on his arm again before sleeping. Also, how is your leg doing?"

Abbas looked down. It felt fine. Even though his muscles were aching, the journey hadn't given him any trouble on his leg so it had probably healed.

"I brought you a medicine for your leg," Jafar added, gesturing to the other bottle. "You need to apply it only once before sleeping."

Abbas looked up at him. Was he imagining it? Or was there something different about Jafar. It was a similar feeling he got from Maryam. But for the first time, he saw it in Jafar. Dishonesty. It felt as though Jafar was not being entirely truthful. But Abbas knew better than to confront him.

"I'll apply it when I apply Haider's disinfectant before sleep," he replied hoping his tone wasn't suspicious.

Jafar showed no signs of being suspicious. He merely nodded and left; shutting the door behind him. Abbas lay down on the second mattress. There was a small bulge in his pocket which pricked him. He got up and took the item out of his pocket. It was an aqeeq ring! How could he have forgotten! He still did not remember much about his parents. He glanced over at Haider. He was snoring loudly. Abbas didn't know why he hadn't told Haider about Murtaza. The fact that their father was dead. He didn't know why.

'I have to be strong for both of us,' he reminded himself. 'He doesn't need to know, yet.'

Carefully, Abbas placed the ring in his pocket once more and collapsed on the second mattress. He felt his fatigue returning.

His eyes drooped. *Wham!*

Something heavy landed on his stomach. Abbas opened his eyes painfully. It was Haider.

“Got you!” he laughed.

Abbas smiled and began chasing him around the room until they both collapsed in a giggling pile. Abbas grabbed his brother and gave him a big hug. Haider gave a tighter one. Somehow amongst all the sea of confusion, only one thing gave Abbas comfort. Hugging Haider. Haider was all he was left with in this world. They heard a knock on the door. Both sat upright immediately. Abbas went for the door and opened it. Maryam stood there.

“Zahra Api sent me,” she told. “Dinner is almost ready.”

Abbas nodded and called for Haider. With Maryam, the boys marched away to the kitchen.

Abbas and Haider smelt the food well before they passed under the archway leading into the kitchen. It was reasonable size with a gas stove and some wooden cabinets lining the walls. On the wooden counter there was a large sink and a few jars. The floor was tiled with grey slabs, crisscrossing across the ground. It was surprisingly clean.

In the middle of the kitchen there was a large wooden table with eight matching chairs. Zahra was sitting beside Ali; chatting away rapidly in low whispers. From a second doorway, Jafar entered.

Jafar gave them a friendly smile and a small wave, which they returned. He yanked a chair beside Ali and plopped down. He reached for a steaming bowl of small samosa snacks, only to have his hand smacked away by Zahra. Pouting comically, he nursed his hand. Abbas caught Haider’s eye and they both stifled a laugh as they saw Ali slip him a samosa under the table.

Maryam just shook her head and sat beside Zahra; folding her arms on the table.

Abbas and Haider shuffled awkwardly at the entrance. They could practically taste the aromas that wafted around them.

“Come and have a seat, you two.” Zahra offered.

Abbas and Haider shared a look before approaching the table.

Haider slid into the seat beside Jafar, and Abbas sat beside him. Respectfully, they waited to eat along with everyone else. Meanwhile, Abbas got a good look at the layout of the table. On his left was fresh naan bread, beside a steaming dish of rice. On his right, warm pots of various curries bubbled in earthen dishes. He heard a small whisper on his left,

“That’s how we treat our guests.”

He turned to see Zahra leaning back into her seat, her eyes on him. Abbas looked down sheepishly. Clearly, she had not forgotten his earlier remarks.

“Sorry,” he whispered.

She nodded back respectfully.

Awkwardly, Abbas turned his attention back to the table.

‘This seems like a very lavish meal,’ Abbas thought quietly. ‘I wouldn’t have expected anyone to be able to have this kind of food in these times.’

But Abbas wasn’t willing to think about anything now except the warm naan bread before him. And while he admired it, a loud voice echoed throughout the house.

“Zahra, where are the socks that got washed yesterday?” Akbar’s voice called from the hallway.

Jafar rolled his eyes. He pushed away and ran off, returning moments later; followed by Akbar, who was tucking a pair of woolen socks in his pocket.

“Honestly Akbar Uncle, I’ll personally never understand your obsession with socks,” Jafar quipped as he slid back into his seat.

Akbar ruffled the boy’s hair affectionately. He gave Abbas and Haider a slightly hard look, as though he was reading their minds. Abbas felt it would be easier to simply turn away. But something forced him to keep staring Akbar in the eye. Clearly, Akbar did not like them being here one bit. And there was something else. The gaze felt oddly familiar. It was like staring a leopard in the eye. And Abbas felt like he should turn away. His heart beat was quickening as the tense moment stretched. ‘Akbar Uncle’ was definitely an intimidating person. It was only after a few tense moments that Akbar broke away and slid on the last seat between Maryam and Abbas, at the head of the table.

“Akbar Uncle, please stop scaring the guests,” Zahra laughed. He smiled and raised his hands, “Bismillah.”<sup>1</sup>

Once he had taken his first helping, everyone else began to fill their plates.

Abbas reached out for the naan bread tray. He grabbed one of the warm crispy naans and passed the tray to Zahra.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

She took the tray from him and removed a naan. As she did so, she gave him a warm motherly smile and passed the bread tray on. Jafar passed him another dish and Abbas graciously accepted. His strength was returning. He could feel it. The weakness was fading away. Haider was no better. He was gobbling away at the rice and curry. Abbas felt slightly amused at Haider’s enthusiasm. Greedily, he reached out for the last samosa before awkwardly withdrawing his hand. Zahra hadn’t eaten any yet. Seeing his disappointment, she grinned and passed the samosa to him.

“I’m not eating it. Don’t worry. Besides, a young man needs his fair share of nutrition.”

Abbas brushed Haider’s hair casually as he happily accepted the ‘gift’. Once dinner was over, everyone cleared up the table. Abbas helped since he felt obliged and he made sure Haider did as well. Afterwards, when it was time for prayer, they prayed together.

Once they finished their prayers, Abbas and Haider plodded exhaustingly to their room.

‘Jaja’s room,’ Abbas corrected himself.

After entering the room, Abbas applied the disinfectant on Haider’s arm. He then grasped a cotton swab and dipped it in the medicine for his leg. He untied the cloth around his leg and was about to apply the medicine when he stopped. Jafar’s face was vividly imprinted in his memory. Somehow, despite the hospitality, he couldn’t help but feel suspicious. Besides, his leg wasn’t showing any signs of infection. Rather, it was healing quite nicely. Abbas glanced over to make sure Haider wasn’t looking. His younger brother was too busy with his chores. Casually, he

---

<sup>1</sup>In the name of Allah.’

tossed the swab into the bin. This just didn't feel right to him.

Satisfied, he joined Haider in his chores. At last when all chores were done, he settled down on the second mattress. Haider fell asleep almost instantly but Abbas wasn't able to. He kept pondering about the ring and his parents. Even though he had tried multiple failed attempts before, he tried to recall his memory once more. Time flew by. At least an hour. That was when it happened.

The room door creaked open. Abbas closed his eyes pretending to sleep. Something was scuttling over to his bed. He clenched his fist. The attacker wasn't going without a fight. He felt his heart pounding as a small set of hands enclosed his ankle.

'Jafar!' he thought.

So Jafar was up to something. He was about to confront him, but thought better of it. He needed to know what Jafar was up to and the only way to find out was to play along. He tried to breathe calmly, hoping Jafar wouldn't notice. He felt the cloth tied around his leg loosen.

'Ah!', he had to stop himself from flinching. No noise could be made. He could feel Jafar's sweaty hands. The cool air of the fan tormented his warm feet.

'Jafar will have to answer for this,' he thought angrily. After a few moments, Jafar left. Abbas didn't understand. It was then that he heard it. A hoarse voice outside.

"Did you do it?" it whispered.

Even though Abbas had not heard this voice much, he could instantly recognize it. Akbar. Akbar had put Jafar up to something. But what? And what did his ankle have to do with this? Questions flooded Abbas's mind. But he stopped them. He needed to hear the conversation.

"Yes. The medicine took care of him."

Jafar's voice was clear as anything.

"I checked him. He doesn't have it. I told you before, he's fine."

He heard Akbar sigh,

"Even then. You shouldn't have brought them. You could have been seen. And either way, I'll still keep an eye on him."



The voices faded away and Abbas was left very confused. What were they doing? Why did they only check him? What was the medicine meant to do to him? What was Jafar looking for? Where did his ankle come in all of this? He recalled Jafar's statement,

*'I told you before, he's fine.'*

Jafar seemed to trust him. Besides, Jafar was only twelve. He couldn't imagine a twelve year old giving someone a dangerous substance, especially Jafar. Abbas felt his eyes droop. It was getting late and tomorrow they were leaving. He closed his eyes. There was one thought echoing in his mind.

Akbar Uncle did not trust him. Not a bit. He was starting to see where Maryam's hostility came from.

## 8

# Outcast

*“Hurry up!” Murtaza whispered. “We don’t have much time!”*

*Abbas reluctantly trudged aboard the small motor boat. Haider joined him. Swiftly, Murtaza climbed aboard. The engine roared to life and the boat was speeding away.*

*“How could we leave her?” Abbas cried.*

*Murtaza almost veered off course.*

*“We didn’t,” he retorted. “I told you that I would come back for her.”*

*With that, they sped away. Abbas couldn’t help notice lights in the darkness behind them. It was a pursuer. No, three pursuers.*

A wave washed over him and he awoke trembling. Abbas was sweating heavily. He was in Jafar’s room. His leg still untied from the previous night. Overshadowing him was Akbar.

“What time is it?” Abbas groaned lazily.

“Time to leave,” Akbar said.

Abbas pushed himself upright. It wasn’t even fajr time! But he knew they would have to get going. He pushed Haider to wake up. Haider moaned and pulled the blanket tighter over himself. Abbas sighed and gave a good tug. The blanket slithered away.

“Okay okay,” Haider murmured. “I’m going.”

Akbar nodded.

“Meet me outside in ten minutes,” he ordered and left.

It didn't take them long to get ready. Once they were, Abbas led Haider out. Slowly, they crossed each door. At one door he heard a creak. Abbas paused for a moment and turned to face the door it came from. There was no further noise and Haider was nudging him from behind to keep moving, Abbas ignored the sound and kept walking until he was finally outside. Akbar was waiting for them.

"Salamunalaikum," he greeted for what seemed the first time.

"Walaikumsalam," Abbas replied respectfully.

"Walaikumsalam," Haider copied.

Akbar pointed to a small backpack he was holding.

"It's for you," he explained. "I have packed some things for your travel."

Abbas unzipped the bag to take a brief look. Inside, he could see two turbahs,<sup>1</sup> a compass, a watch, a water bottle, a small knife, a lighter, some medical supplies and a blanket. This was all going to be very useful.

"Thank you," he whispered.

For a moment he thought he saw Akbar's gaze soften. Or maybe he was imagining it? Akbar withdrew a small map. Abbas watched intently as he pointed to a place on it.

"There is a small group of five to six young men who live by this old burnt neighbourhood near the fresh lake. They are looking for new members," Akbar instructed. "Just keep your head low and don't say or do anything to annoy them. Ask for Muhammad and tell him that Akbar Bhai sent you." Abbas engraved every word in his memory.

"The supplies I've provided you with should be sufficient to last you two days. That is enough time to reach their hideout," Akbar paused.

He glanced back at the shed. For a moment there was silence, before he advanced towards it. Abbas couldn't help but wonder, even though Akbar had been very helpful; why were they leaving so early? They could have left in the afternoon. He glanced over at Haider, who was merely fiddling with his hands. He had eaten so

---

<sup>1</sup>Soil or clay tablet used for prayer.

much yesterday, especially samosas. Samosas! Of course! Akbar was afraid of Zahra and the others warming up to them. He didn't want anyone insisting they stay. Abbas knew that already Zahra, Ali and Jafar were happy to have them. Only Maryam and Akbar weren't. That was why Akbar wanted them to leave very quietly.

Akbar returned. In one arm, he held a small fishing net and in the other; a small revolver. Swiftly, he handed the net to Haider and the revolver to Abbas.

"You can catch your breakfast from the fresh water lake," he smiled.

Abbas forced himself to smile as well. He turned towards Haider, who was too busy staring in awe at the revolver Abbas held.

"It's an old model," Akbar began. "Six bullet cartridge. I've already loaded it for you. Maryam said you knew firearms well so I trust you can reload it?"

Abbas looked up to match Akbar's gaze.

"Yes," he whispered. "I know how to use this."

The hardness returned in Akbar's eyes for a moment or was it suspicion? Abbas couldn't tell. With a final nod, Abbas embarked with Haider in the direction of the lake. While he dragged his legs lazily in the grass, his hand was on the revolver. Akbar was still standing there. Even though they had only been there a short while, he felt as though he was leaving a part of himself behind. But Abbas knew there was more to this place than meets the eye. He didn't even know if he would ever unravel the mysteries and questions plaguing him.

Abbas recalled Akbar's statement from last night,

*"And either way, I'll still keep an eye on him."*

They had to go now. Silently, he whispered a prayer in his heart. Soon they entered the dense forest, letting the warm bungalow disappear behind them.

## 9

# In the forest

“Drat!” Abbas growled as another salmon evaded his net. This must have been the twentieth time. Abbas frustratingly strolled back to camp. Haider was there stoking fire with a small branch. He looked up at Abbas expectantly, but Abbas merely shook his head in disappointment. Slowly, he collapsed down beside Haider, near the warm fire.

“I’m sure you’ll get it right eventually,” Haider whispered reassuringly.

But Abbas could sense the despair in his tone and the gurgling of his stomach.

It had been more than two hours since they had left the bungalow. They had followed Akbar’s instructions and reached the lake. Abbas had decided to stock up on food but had miserably failed in doing so. There was also another issue. Haider. Even though Haider didn’t say it, Abbas knew he was getting tired.

Slowly, he rested his head on Haider’s shoulder; his hand still firmly gripped on the revolver. *Crack*. His eyes shot awake. He felt Haider freeze. There was a noise from behind them. Abbas instantly whirled, the revolver in his hand ready to fire.

“Who’s there?” he called out in a bold voice.

He heard a squeal, followed by pattering of feet and a little boy came wriggling through the bushes.

“Jafar!” Abbas exclaimed. “What are you doing here?”

Jafar didn’t respond immediately. He dusted himself clean and

then reached back in the bushes for something. Abbas watched as Jafar carefully lifted a backpack from the dense foliage.

“Oh, I hope the samosas are okay,” he muttered.

“Samosas?” Abbas repeated confused.

Jafar stood upright and smiled,

“Well of course, I wasn’t going to let you starve, now was I?”

Abbas felt as though the world around him shattered. What was Jafar doing? How could he be so foolish? Akbar would be furious!

“Does anyone know you’re here?” Abbas asked.

Jafar’s face gave him away instantly.

‘Perfect!’ Abbas thought sarcastically. ‘Just perfect!’

“You left without saying goodbye!” Jafar answered accusingly.

Abbas was about to scold Jafar, but the little boy’s face curled into the most adorable sad expression Abbas had ever seen. It melted Abbas’s heart.

“We’re friends, aren’t we? Jafar whispered.

Abbas was going to reply when he felt a strange change in the air. Abbas froze. He felt as though he was being watched.

“Of course we are!” Haider answered. “But Abbas Bhai is right, you shouldn’t be here. Your uncle would be worried sick if he found out. Aren’t there Alphas everywhere? Abbas Bhai, back me up.”

But Abbas wasn’t listening. His attention was on the bushes. Something else was there. Someone. He raised his revolver.

“You don’t want to do that,” he heard a familiar voice from the bush. Someone emerged from the bush. Abbas felt as though his eyes would fall out. He rubbed them just to be sure he was seeing correctly. Maryam was standing there; armed with her double barrel pistol. Abbas didn’t know what to say. He merely stared at Maryam expecting a response.

“Well,” Maryam sighed. “I couldn’t let him go alone now, could I? He was devastated when you left earlier.”

“How did you find us?” Abbas inquired calmly.

Maryam paused before answering.

“I saw you leave.”

Abbas recalled the creak he had heard earlier when they were leaving. He heard an excited gasp and turned to see that Jafar and Haider had set the food from Jafar's backpack. A picnic sheet was laid on the grass. On top of that, there were samosas and sandwiches. Abbas felt his stomach gurgle. He certainly was hungry. And surely if Maryam was here, it couldn't be that bad. Jafar and Maryam often left the house for supplies. He sat down at the edge of the sheet next to Haider. Maryam joined them as well. They said 'Bismillah' and were about to eat when Abbas heard Jafar gasp. The colour from his face had faded. He was merely staring at a particular place. Abbas turned to see where he was looking.

A veiled man was approaching them from the burnt neighbourhood. Instantly, Abbas raised his revolver; ready to shoot. From the corner of his eye, he expected Maryam to do the same. But she wasn't. Like Jafar, she was glued to the sheet; her face pale. Abbas didn't understand, until he heard a loud crack from behind him. He whirled to find himself staring down the barrel of Zahra's rifle. Upon seeing him though, she lowered it.

It was then that it dawned on Abbas. He knew who the veiled man was. Akbar. Akbar must have realised that Maryam and Jafar were gone. He already knew the route Abbas was meant to take. It was only a matter of putting two and two together. Abbas gulped. Even though Akbar's face was covered, Abbas could see the ferocious storm in his eyes. This wasn't going to end well.

Even Zahra who was normally nice and friendly, was furious. Abbas noted that she was examining Maryam and Jafar for any injuries.

"Are you two alright?" she questioned.

Neither responded. Their faces were pointed to the ground in shame. Abbas felt bad. They were in trouble because of him and Haider.

At last Akbar reached the picnic. Glancing over the food and the five of them in a cold manner, he growled,

"Having fun, are we? Enjoying a picnic. Leaving Akbar Uncle with a heart attack."

Even Abbas didn't want to look Akbar in the eyes.

“What if the Alphas got you?” Akbar continued. “What if you got hurt? Honestly Maryam, Jafar is still a child. I expected more sense from you.”

Abbas watched Maryam. Her lip quivered and Abbas thought he saw a tear. He couldn't help but feel sorry for her.

“We have to go,” Akbar snapped. “We will finish this discussion when we get home.”

Abbas didn't understand why Akbar had ended so abruptly. Zahra nodded and brought Maryam and Jafar to their feet. They began following Akbar, who was leading them through the burnt neighbourhood. Abbas and Haider didn't move.

“Well,” he heard Zahra order. “Come on!”

Abbas felt relief fill his heart. He grabbed Haider and scrambled after them only to be stopped.

“You're not coming with us!” Akbar hissed.

Abbas opened his mouth to argue but Zahra already did, “We can't just leave them!”

Abbas turned surprisingly towards her.

“Yes we can,” Akbar growled.

“They are only children,” she pleaded.

“We don't have time to argue!” he whispered.

Abbas looked from one adult to the other. What was with the rush? Abbas needed to know

“What's the urgency?” Abbas questioned.

For a moment, there was silence. Akbar flashed a worried glance at Zahra. She nodded back.

“He should know,” Zahra murmured.

Akbar sighed for a moment before advancing towards Abbas. Leaning right beside his ear, he whispered,

“Alpha 43 was seen nearby.”

Everything seemed to freeze at that moment. The wind, sun, even time. It felt as though the pleasant warmth of the day had been drowned in an eerie coldness which enveloped Abbas's heart. He could feel his pulse quicken. Unconsciously, he gripped the revolver harder. They were in a serious situation. If Alpha 43 was seen here, it meant they had to get out of here as fast as possible.



“We have to go!” Abbas repeated.

Akbar nodded, urging everyone to follow him.

“Just until we are out of danger,” he grunted. “Then we go our separate ways.”

Swiftly, the group made their way through the rubble of the burnt neighbourhood. Abbas was going to ask why but knew better. Akbar was probably taking another route. As the group advanced past each house, Abbas could feel a bead of sweat trickle down his cheek.

It wasn't long before he could see the tall trees. They were almost out of the area. Abbas could hear Akbar sigh in relief. Soon, they would be safe. Soon, they would be out of danger. It was then that it happened. A loud roar echoed throughout the neighbourhood. Abbas froze. What was that? Nobody had mentioned any wild animals. Instinctively, he withdrew his revolver. He glanced at Akbar. Akbar was frozen and poised with two large firearms in his hands. His eyes were scanning the area like a leopard for its prey. The only trouble was that the neighbourhood echoed the roar; making it impossible to pinpoint the source.

“They know we're here,” Akbar hissed. “He knows we're here.”

Abbas was about to say something when he heard a growl, “Well, well, well, what do we have here?”

Abbas sprung around. His eyes focused on the source. This time he knew where it was coming from. He held his revolver high. On a tall pile of debris, there was a man. He was huge, at least as big as Akbar. His eyes were cold and venomous like a snake, as though all life had been withdrawn from them. His lips were curled in a bloodthirsty smile. There was a glinting object in his hand. A knife. A knife larger and sharper than any dagger he had ever seen. Abbas felt fear grip his heart. It was Alpha 43. He had found them.

# 10

## Alpha 43

“Run!” Akbar shouted.

His voice was drowned in a storm of darts fired by Alpha 43’s soldiers. Abbas jumped behind a piece of debris. *Boom!* He peeked. Akbar was firing back, charging at Alpha 43.

‘He’s mental!’ Abbas thought.

He heard a groan. Abbas turned to see what it was. Jafar was curled on the ground; a black dart embedded in his thigh. Someone had to get him out of there. He saw Maryam and Haider hiding behind another piece of rubble. Maryam was firing back with her pistol. Zahra was nowhere to be seen. *Wham!* He heard a groan behind him. He whirled around to see one of the attackers unconscious in a pool of blood. Zahra was overshadowing him with a rifle in her hand.

“Where’s Jafar?” She whispered breathlessly.

Abbas pointed to the poor child. Now there were more darts embedded in his leg. Without thinking, Abbas leapt over the debris ignoring Zahra’s screams and grabbed Jafar. Darts whizzed over his head. *Boom!* Zahra was providing him with cover. He hauled Jafar behind the debris, sweating heavily.

“Are you insane?” she growled. “Brave, but foolish!”

Sweating heavily, Abbas murmured,

“What now?”

Zahra turned to Maryam and signalled something to her. Maryam nodded back and disappeared with Haider in the rubble. Zahra

then withdrew a red flare gun from her pocket and shot it up. The flare whizzed upwards and exploded forming colourful sparks. Hastily, she put it back in her pocket.

“She’ll meet us in the forest,” Zahra explained. “Now, come on.” Abbas handed his revolver to Zahra and hauled a moaning Jafar over his shoulders.

“Wait for my signal” she commanded. “Now!”

Zahra began sprinting away from the darts. Abbas, holding Jafar tightly, sprinted after her. The darts had changed direction and were now focused on them. Abbas jumped up and down as he ran, trying to make himself a harder target. Two assailants appeared out of nowhere. They raised their weapons, but Zahra was faster. In a flash, she hurled a sharp knife at one of them and brought her rifle crashing down on the other’s head. They both collapsed in a pool of blood.

“Come on!” Zahra urged as she reloaded her gun.

Abbas followed. He heard a shriek. Zahra was on the ground. A black dart had penetrated her leg. Two more darts struck her and she fell unconscious. Abbas stared in horror.

He could see Alpha 43 wrestling Akbar on the ground. Both furious as lions. Alpha 43 growled in fury as he knocked a gun out of Akbar’s hand. Swiftly, he drove his fist into Akbar’s chest. Akbar staggered backwards from the powerful blow. Alpha 43 laughed mockingly,

“Stand down. I don’t have time for this.”

The assassin lunged forward. Akbar barged ahead intercepting him. With a flying tackle, Akbar brought his opponent crashing to the ground. Alpha 43 flung his knife out, grazing Akbar’s ankle. For a moment, Akbar’s leg sleeve split slightly, exposing a strange scar on his ankle. Akbar instantly dropped his hand over the scar. But Abbas had gotten a good look at it. It wasn’t a normal scar. It almost looked like a-

*Wham!* The Alpha launched a powerful kick to Akbar sending him to the ground; but in a flash, Akbar was back on his feet. The Alpha’s eyes widened in surprise but he quickly regained his composure. He lunged forward once more, his knives bared out like claws; but Akbar sidestepped him and delivered a crushing

elbow to the Alpha's face. Alpha 43 went cascading into the rubble. Abbas thought the fight was over but he was wrong; for the Alpha flipped back up to his feet only seconds later.

"You're a strong one," he hissed wiping the blood off his nose. "I'll enjoy carving you to pieces."

At that moment, Alpha 43 glanced at Abbas. He froze, staring him deeply in the eye. Abruptly, he threw something small at Akbar. Akbar leapt behind a burnt car. A moment later, a loud explosion filled the area with smoke. Abbas narrowed his eyes struggling to see through the smoke. There was something black. It was getting bigger. Something was moving towards Abbas fast. Was it Akbar? But Akbar wasn't wearing black. He then noticed a small glint. Abbas felt paralysed. Alpha 43 was charging at him.

'Run!' Abbas screamed in his head.

Petrified, Abbas dropped Jafar beside Zahra and sprinted away as fast as his legs could carry him. Why was Alpha 43 chasing him? He heard a growl behind him.

"You can run but you can't hide, child!"

He didn't need any further incentive. His speed quickened as fast as his heartbeat. Yes. Alpha 43 was chasing him. He could hear the deep breathing of Alpha 43. His footsteps were getting closer! Abbas looked around with desperation. Alpha 43 didn't seem to be getting exhausted at all. Abbas knew he would reach his stamina limits soon. Seeing a wrecked home, he darted towards it. He heard a scoff behind him,

"You cannot escape me child!"

Abbas rammed the broken door down and leapt into the first room on the right. Swiftly, he pushed the door shut. Grabbing some nearby wooden debris, he pushed it in front of the door.

"Done yet?"

Abbas spun in horror. Sitting casually in the corner was Alpha 43! Abbas screamed.

"Silence Abbas," he smiled menacingly. "I am not here to kill you."

Abbas felt his heart skip many beats. How did Alpha 43 know his name?

“How do you know my name?” Abbas muttered breathlessly. Alpha 43 laughed.

“Boy, I know more about you than you do.”

Abbas felt his heart rattle with fear, but he wouldn't let Alpha 43 see it.

In as calm of a tone as he could manage, he asked,

“How do you know my name?”

The Alpha narrowed his eyes.

“Don't stall, kid!” he smiled venomously.

Abbas could see a sharp broken pipe in the corner of the room. That was his only chance. He began his game,

“You are *the* Alpha 43,” he murmured with pretend admiration. “I have to say I imagined you just the tiniest bit taller.”

The assassin lowered his weapon and stepped forward. He broke into a smile.

“It's amazing to see that you are bold enough to taunt me at this time,” the assassin smirked. “Most would already be dead at the mere sight of me.”

Simultaneously, he withdrew a small object from the back of his holster. Abbas narrowed his eyes suspiciously. It was a small rectangular device with a handle in one corner. Alpha 43 was gripping it tightly with three fingers. The front had three small holes. Honestly, it looked like some kind of futuristic space gun.

“Say goodnight boy,” Alpha 43 hissed.

Abbas lunged forward at the metal pipe. Before Alpha 43 could react, he drove the pipe's sharp pointed edge straight into Alpha 43's shoulder.

“Argh!” Alpha 43 shrieked. “Stupid child!”

Abbas staggered back letting go of the pipe. Alpha 43 stumbled to the ground, groaning in pain; blood gushing between his fingers as he clutched his wound.

Abbas drew deep breaths, his feet glued to the ground. He knew he ought to leave but for some strange reason, he couldn't move. It had all been so sudden. The Alpha wriggled in pain. Then abruptly, he looked up and locked eyes with Abbas. His face broke into a venomous smile.

“Just like your father, Murtaza,” the assassin laughed. “Always futile resistance.”

Abbas was confused. How did the Alpha know Murtaza? He stared at the Alpha intently.

Alpha 43 pushed himself off the ground. His gasping and groaning had stopped. Too suddenly. Alpha 43 carefully pulled the metal pipe out of his shoulder. Its edge was covered in blood.

“Impossible!” Abbas whispered in horror. “Th-That is impossible.” Alpha 43 laughed. He laughed so loud Abbas felt the world could hear him.

“Did you honestly think that poke,” Alpha 43 paused. “That poke could hurt me?”

Abbas stared in disbelief. Aside from the blood, the Alpha showed no signs of pain.

Alpha 43 leapt forward. Abbas ducked and rolled between his legs. Without looking back, he scrambled out through the window sill and climbed the wall. Abbas could hear creaking below him. The Alpha was still in pursuit.

‘He’s too strong!’ Abbas thought. ‘How do I escape him?’

He suddenly felt a surge of pain in his leg. Looking down, he could see a knife embedded in his thigh. Alpha 43’s knife had struck him deep. Abbas flinched. He could feel numbness in his body. Time was running out. With all his strength, he lashed out his foot.

“Ya Allah!” he growled. A grunt and a loud thud. Wait. He hadn’t kicked that hard. He looked down to see Akbar right below him. Alpha 43 was on the ground. The assassin appeared to be in pain this time. Abbas saw the assassin raise his hand. The same device he had seen earlier was there. There was a strange noise as the device turned red.

“No” Akbar growled and moved in front of Abbas.

Abbas’s eyes widened in horror, half expecting the noise of a bullet ripping through Akbar’s flesh. But it never came. Nothing happened. Alpha 43 was standing with the space gun in his hand. Akbar stood before him perfectly fine; no blood or wounds visible. It was then that Abbas noticed it. Akbar’s hand was shaking lightly. Alpha 43’s eyes widened in surprise.

“How-”

Abbas flung a brick at the Alpha. Casually, Alpha 43 sidestepped as the brick shattered on the ground. The assassin raised his hand to toss his knife, when a loud bullet came whizzing through the air; striking where the Alpha had been just moments earlier. Alpha 43 suddenly dropped to the ground and rolled away behind a piece of debris. Someone was firing at the assailant from a distance. Abbas turned to see who it was, and relief flooded his heart. Ali was confidently walking towards the debris with a large shotgun in his hand. Pure hatred and fury could be seen on his face. He felt a force lift him off the wall. Akbar. Akbar was carrying him down. Abbas was shocked. How strong was Akbar?

When his feet finally touched the ground, he felt a surge of pain in his leg once more. Akbar looked down on the wound before pulling out the knife. Abbas felt his wound warm as blood oozed out of it. He could feel his eyes droop.

“How did yo-” everything went black.

*There was something again covering his nose.*

*“Allah help me,” he cried. The darkness faded away and a sudden burst of light opened his eyes. A man and woman overshadowed him. Abbas gasped as he recognized them. His parents! The woman lovingly lifted him from his crib and held him in the air. Abbas swayed his little arms back and forth. Murtaza took him from the woman’s soft hands. Stroking his hair, Murtaza whispered something softly.*

*“Our lovely son, Abbas. Mashallah.”<sup>1</sup>*

*Abbas felt his fear fade away. He extended his tiny arms towards his father, wanting a hug.*

Then everything disappeared. Abbas woke with a heavy head. Sweat was pouring down his forehead. He was in the bungalow. Everyone was around him, watching him with concern. His leg was heavily bandaged.

“Alhamdulillah,” he heard Haider sigh in relief.

He tried to push himself up, but felt a light force push him down.

---

<sup>1</sup>‘What God has willed.’

“Rest,” Jafar ordered.

Abbas looked up.

“What happened?”

“Ali saw my flare,” Zahra explained. “He rescued us and then went to help you.”

Abbas groaned. His leg was aching from the wound.

“You took a bad hit,” Jafar remarked. “Even if the wound heals, you will most definitely carry a scar.”

Abbas shrugged.

“First battle scar, I guess”

Slowly, he pushed himself up ignoring Jafar’s warning. Even though they were back in the bungalow safe and sound, he could sense a strange uneasiness in the air.

“What about Alpha 43?” he sighed.

Maryam was the one who replied.

“You fainted. Alpha 43 tried to stick around, but he had some injury on his shoulder that bled too much; so he had to flee.”

There was a moment of silence.

“We got away, Alhamdulillah. That’s all that matters,” he heard someone answer. He turned surprisedly to see Akbar in the corner of the room. Abbas hadn’t noticed him until now. The man was looking very seriously at Abbas.

“Now that you’re awake Abbas,” he continued. “I’d like to have a word with you.”

Everyone got up to leave one by one. First Jafar. Followed by Haider, Maryam, Zahra and finally Ali. Akbar closed the door. Abbas nervously sat upright. Akbar sat down on the other mattress, locking eyes with Abbas. Abbas could feel his pulse quicken. It felt as though Akbar’s penetrating gaze burnt through him.

“What is it that you want to speak about?” Abbas asked.

Akbar spent several minutes before responding, “Why did Alpha 43 chase you in the attack?”

Abbas simply shrugged. He really had no idea.

“Maybe he thought I was an easier target,” Abbas answered casually. Akbar glared at him.

“Not likely. Alphas never run from a fight.”



Abbas was unsure of what to say. He recalled what Alpha 43 had said to Akbar during the fight.

*"You're a strong one. I'll enjoy carving you to pieces."*

Abbas thought deeply. Alpha 43's actions did seem strange now that he thought about it.

"What are you trying to say?" Abbas frowned.

Akbar finally blinked as though he did not anticipate Abbas going offensive. His face broke into a slight frown,

"I'm saying that you were Alpha 43's target. I am certain of it. And I want to know why."

Abbas was not prepared for a direct confrontation. He felt shock overpower him. He was Alpha 43's target? How could that be? No. It didn't make sense. But now that Abbas thought about it, Alpha 43 had known his name. He recalled all the strange things Alpha 43 had said,

*"Boy, I know more about you than you do."*

Alpha 43 also knew Murtaza. It was as though he had been after Abbas. Could this have anything to do with Murtaza and the boat chase? What if Alpha 43 had been chasing them? What if he and Haider had survived Alpha 43 once and the assassin had returned for revenge?

"Why are you his target?" Akbar repeated impatiently, interrupting Abbas's chain of thought.

Abbas was getting annoyed now. How was he supposed to know?

"I don't know," Abbas replied.

*Wham!* Akbar slammed his hand on the table sending a shiver up Abbas's spine. He wanted an answer. An answer Abbas couldn't give. Akbar growled. Abbas could not look him in the eye now. He turned to the floor. A glinting object caught his eye.

'My aqeeq ring,' he thought. 'I must have dropped it.'

He reached out for the small item and lifted it in his hand. Upon touching it, he felt safe for a moment. Safe from Akbar's burning gaze. He felt protected. The aqeeq ring reminded him of Murtaza's courage. He turned to face Akbar with a new founded strength. Akbar, however, wasn't staring at him anymore. He was gazing intently at the aqeeq ring. All of his anger had gone

and had been replaced by what seemed like confusion.

“Wh-where d-did you get that?” he stammered.

Abbas shrugged,

“I’ve had it since I washed up on shore, why?”

Akbar ignored his question. His eyes were glued to the ring.

A minute passed by. Akbar finally said something,

“Do you know anyone by the name of Murtaza?”

Now it was Abbas’s turn to be confused. How did Akbar know Murtaza? What was the relevance of the ring to all of this? Questions flooded his mind. But first he needed to answer Akbar.

“No,” he lied, hoping his delayed reaction hadn’t given him away. “Why?”

Akbar stared intently at Abbas.

“I think you do know someone named Murtaza,” he whispered.

“I was only asking because-” he paused.

Abbas looked at him expectantly.

“Because I knew someone by that name,” he finished. “Anyway, you are free to stay here if you like.”

Abbas gaped at Akbar. What did Akbar mean? Why the sudden change of behaviour? What did Akbar know about Murtaza? Did he know Abbas’s mother? Abbas stared intently at Akbar. The initial harshness from his eyes had faded away completely. Abbas shivered.

“So Haider and I can stay, here? As in like, live here?”

Akbar nodded calmly. And then he did it. He smiled at Abbas and slowly extended his hand, ruffling Abbas’s hair.

“Consider yourselves part of the family,” Akbar beamed.

Akbar got up and left the room, leaving a shocked Abbas alone with his thoughts. So many questions were plaguing him. Who was his mother? Why was Murtaza trying to flee with his sons? Why did Alpha 43 chase him? How did Alpha 43 know his name? What was the connection between Alpha 43 and Murtaza? Why was he Alpha 43’s target? Why did Akbar change so quickly? Where did the aqeeq ring fit in all of this? Why had Jafar checked his ankle? Abbas needed answers. Answers he would have to find himself.

# 11

## Jafar

It was seven in the morning. The sun was shining, illuminating the sky with its bright light. Abbas was standing in a patch of dirt, focused on the rock in front of him. A small backpack lay on top. His target. He replayed the movement in his head. The flying tackle. That is what Akbar had used against Alpha 43. Abbas eyeballed the rock.

“Your going down Alpha,” he growled.

And then he was up. He sprinted at the target. He could feel the adrenaline as he leapt and tried to twist his body the way Akbar did. *Wham!* Abbas got up, his head spinning. He felt like someone had thrown him off a mountain.

‘I need to sit down,’ he muttered breathlessly.

Collapsing beside the rock, he waited for his mind to regain orientation. As it did so, Abbas felt a mild degree of frustration. It was yet again another victory for rock and backpack. It would have been easier if Akbar would just teach Abbas the technique. But for the last two weeks, Akbar had maintained the same response,

*‘You don’t need to know. Just know how to run and I’ll handle the rest.’*

I’ll handle the rest. Indeed Akbar could handle the rest. Somehow Akbar had survived a fight that nobody else ever had. Akbar had battled the legendary Alpha 43 and lived to tell the tale. Something felt very odd about this. Abbas recalled Maryam’s

description of Alphas.

*‘Imagine someone who is as strong and skilled as an army commando and as smart as a PhD, armed with the most advanced technology and weapons known. They capture everyone they find with their field teams.’*

Abbas did not understand how someone ordinary like Akbar could survive such an encounter. Survive was an understatement. Akbar had matched Alpha 43’s strength. His movements were so precise, they almost felt rehearsed. His reflexes were too quick. Somehow, this bothered Abbas. He needed to know more about ‘Akbar Uncle.’ But how could he?

Zahra seemed like the perfect source, but she was too smart. Abbas would not be able to find the information he was looking for from her. Ali on the other hand was definitely not the best at hiding things, but he certainly wouldn’t say anything about Akbar Uncle. Abbas did not even consider Maryam. He knew what her response would be. That left one person. Jafar. Jafar was the perfect target. Abbas was getting along quite well with him. They had wrestled many times in the last two weeks. Abbas had taught him some fun games and helped him with the sacred ‘sand castle project.’

But if Abbas was going to do this, he would need to speak to Jafar alone. Jafar could easily evade Abbas in the presence of someone else and Abbas did not want to give Akbar any hint of what he was doing. Also, Jafar was more likely to break if Abbas confronted him alone. Added to that, Abbas needed to find out what Jafar had been checking his ankle for.

Abbas knew that he needed to be very careful with timing. When should he approach Jafar? Perhaps before breakfast. No, it was too risky. But Jafar would be gone in the afternoon to collect supplies. A new thought occurred to Abbas. Everyone would be in the kitchen at breakfast. Including Akbar. It seemed like a good opportunity to speak with Jafar alone. ‘Before breakfast then,’ he decided.

Abbas looked at his watch. He didn’t have much time before breakfast. Swiftly, he got up to his feet and brisk jogged home. Home. In a strange way, despite all the strange things that had

happened, Abbas felt a connection with this place. In a way it was home. It was only a few minutes before the house came in sight. Breathing softly, he pressed down the handle and entered inside.

It was definitely cooler inside. Abbas took off his shoes and placed them inside the shelf.

“Where were you?” a voice called.

Abbas whirled around in surprise. He found himself staring eye to eye with Akbar. For a moment, he didn’t respond.

“Well, where were you?” Akbar repeated casually.

Abbas thought carefully before replying.

“I was exercising,” he murmured at last.

Akbar raised a brow.

“You aren’t sweating,” he deduced.

‘Drat!’ Abbas thought. He needed another excuse.

“That’s because,” Abbas paused. “I did some meditation after exercise.”

Akbar gave him a curious glance. Abbas felt that he might start sweating soon, but Akbar merely chuckled before strolling away.

“You are a strange boy,” he heard Akbar laugh as he left.

Abbas let out a deep sigh. He needed to find Jafar. He made his way towards Jafar’s room. After he and Haider had moved into the house, Jafar got his old room back and Akbar had a new room prepared for them. As he crossed the hallway, he passed by Ali, Maryam and Zahra. Zahra turned towards him.

“Come down for breakfast,” she said.

“In a minute Zahra Api!” Abbas responded.

She smiled and followed the others to the kitchen.

Abbas sprinted away to Jafar’s room. As he reached the door, he noticed Jafar hopping into the hallway.

“I need to talk to you in private,” Abbas blurted out.

Jafar raised a brow curiously. He nodded in acknowledgement and lead Abbas into his room.

“Well?” Jafar questioned. “What is it?”

Abbas took a deep breath. This was it. He was about to begin when he heard a call, “Abbas! Jafar! Breakfast is ready!”

It was Zahra. Jafar turned to Abbas.

“We have to go!”

Abbas lunged forward, blocking Jafar’s way. Jafar turned, perplexed.

“Abbas Bhai, can’t it wait until after breakfast? I’m really hungry!” Abbas could hear the padding of Zahra’s footsteps. He didn’t have much time.

“It’s just-” he began.

Zahra entered the room. Abbas stopped speaking. Zahra flashed him a curious glance. Abbas was at a loss of words. He was about to mutter some excuse when Zahra marched over to Jafar and led him away.

“You need breakfast,” she pretended to scold him as she left. “You too Abbas!”

He could hear Jafar’s giggling as she led Jafar away.

“Drat!” he thought. “So close! I guess I’ll have to try again later.”

He headed over to the breakfast table. Everyone was already seated. Fried eggs and toast were served with orange juice. Nobody had started eating yet. Awkwardly, Abbas pulled out the last chair and sat down. Akbar raised his hands,

“Bismillah.”

Abbas reached out for the toast tray. After taking two, he passed the tray to Haider. On his left, Ali passed him the egg tray. Abbas took two eggs and began eating. As he did so, he pondered about when he could confront Jafar next. He knew Jafar would be leaving after breakfast with Maryam to scavenge for supplies. Perhaps he could opt to go with Jafar instead? No. Akbar would probably want to put his skills to use elsewhere. Still, there was no harm in trying.

“How about I go with Jafar to get supplies today?” he asked, trying to sound as casual as possible.

Maryam flashed him a curious glance. Abbas ignored her and looked expectantly at Akbar. Akbar was busy staring at his plate as though he was thinking it over. At last he turned to Abbas and answered casually, “Why would you want to do that?”

Abbas stared Akbar in the eye. Was he suspicious? Or was

he genuinely asking? Abbas was willing to take his chances.

“Just felt like going out and about,” Abbas replied casually. Akbar smiled.

“Of course. A young man like yourself should get out to stretch his legs.”

Abbas felt his hopes rising. Had his plan worked?

“You can help Ali with the wood cutting today,” Akbar finished.

Abbas felt his hopes vanish. While he normally wouldn't mind helping Ali, today was not the day. But he couldn't refuse. Smiling, he turned to Ali and laughed,

“Sure. I would love to give him a hand.”

Ali grinned,

“We'll head out in half hour. Don't worry! I'll give you plenty of work to soothe your energy.”

If Abbas had any trace of hope left now, it was gone. He knew that Ali's work lasted the entire day. There was no way he would be able to talk to Jafar today. Unless. . .

Abbas had the perfect idea that would solve his problem. Though, it would be difficult to pull off. And it might make Akbar suspicious. But he had no choice. He needed to talk to Jafar today. Why today? Abbas wasn't sure. All he knew was that if he didn't talk to Jafar, his curiosity would be the end of him. But first, breakfast. Silently, Abbas continued to devour his meal for the next twenty minutes.

When breakfast was over, Abbas helped everyone lift the plates. The table was cleared in one minute and everyone got ready for work. Maryam and Jafar were getting ready for their next trip. Abbas watched as Maryam packed her double barrel pistol. When she saw him, she smiled and waved it in the air sending a chill up Abbas's spine. He still wasn't fond of that gun.

Nodding respectfully, he departed towards his room. He found Haider getting ready to trim the bushes. Lately, Haider had developed a new passion for gardening.

“I need a favour,” Abbas murmured.

Haider paused and turned around, a sly smile on his face.

“What kind of favour?” he asked with fake innocence. Abbas rolled his eyes.

“I need you to go with Ali today for wood cutting,” he answered. Haider shook his head.

“I have to trim the bushes,” he shrugged with fake helplessness. “Unless you could provide me something in exchange for my service.”

Abbas stared at him intently. He withdrew a small revolver from his pocket. It was the same one Akbar had gifted him before leaving.

“I will let you hold this for one minute,” he whispered. “But you mustn’t tell anyone.”

Haider’s eyes lit up. Greedily, he reached out for the revolver, but Abbas swiftly held it out of reach.

“First you will give me what I want,” Abbas smirked. “Then I will fulfill my end of the deal.”

Haider looked down intently for a minute or so before finally nodding. Abbas thanked him and left. The plan was in effect. As he reached the hallway, he looked forward and back. There was no one there. *Wham!* Abbas slammed his hand on the wall and then quickly lay down on the floor. Holding his knee in pretend pain, he squealed.

He heard a voice behind him.

“Abbas! What happened?”

He turned to see Zahra and Ali approaching speedily. Abbas merely pointed at his knee before closing his eyes, groaning in pain. He needed to make this act as real as possible.

“Get Jafar please,” Ali said. “I’ll help him to his room.” He paused and turned to Abbas. “I’m sorry Abbas but I don’t think you can go wood cutting today.”

Abbas lowered his eyes in fake disappointment.

“But once you’re better, you can always go again,” Zahra added quickly.

With that, she left to bring Jafar while Ali carried Abbas back to Abbas and Haider’s room. Haider helped him set Abbas on the bed. Abbas moaned. He had to maintain the act.

A moment later Zahra arrived with Maryam and a concerned Jafar. Turning to see Abbas’s leg, Jafar leapt forward and got to work. Several minutes went by. Jafar checked his vitals and tried to force him to perform certain movements. Abbas had to fake



the pain and resistance to Jafar's tests.

Abbas pretended to groan with frustration. The game was set. Now he just needed everyone but Jafar to leave.

"Could I get a glass of water please?" he moaned. "I'm feeling really thirsty."

Zahra nodded kindly and turned to Maryam.

"Bring Abbas a glass of water, please," she requested Maryam.

Maryam flashed Abbas an icy glance before getting up to bring the glass of water.

Now he was only left with Ali and Zahra. He coughed. That was the cue for Haider.

Instantly Haider towards Ali. Ali turned with surprise.

"If Abbas Bhai can't go," Haider stated. "Ali Uncle, perhaps I can go with you for wood cutting."

Ali froze for a moment, probably at the shock of being called an uncle. He replied,

"It's hard. Wood blocks can be heavy"

Abbas felt his heart skip a beat. He needed them to leave. It was all up to his brother. Haider smirked,

"Okay, but did I tell you that I am super duper strong!"

Ali chuckled and Zahra grinned. Both were finding him amusing.

"Let me show you both what I lifted today," he announced as he began to lead them out of the room. Zahra and Ali laughed and followed. Abbas felt his fears disappear. 'Haider must really want to hold the revolver,' he thought.

Abbas sighed. He was finally alone with Jafar. But how should he ask? He decided to go with the direct approach.

"I need to ask you something," Abbas whispered.

Jafar looked up, a bit confused. With a quick nod, he replied, "Sure."

Abbas thought for a moment. Where should he start? The firearms. No. Jafar could easily say he didn't know. Perhaps he should discuss the fight. That sounded like a good plan. But then a new idea struck Abbas. An idea stronger than any other. What had Jafar been looking for the night he checked Abbas's ankle? That would be his starting point.

"The other night-" Abbas began.

Akbar entered the room. Abbas froze. How could he be so foolish? He had literally not accounted for the most important person amongst them all. How was he supposed to ask Jafar now?

# 12

## Nighttime ventures

The moon was glinting suspiciously in the night. The stars were dim. Storm clouds dominated the sky. The cold wind swayed the wet grass back and forth. It had been raining for some time now.

Abbas glanced at his watch. It read 11pm. It was time to leave. After Akbar had jeopardized his previous attempt, Abbas had been unable to find another chance to talk to Jafar. Everytime he found Jafar alone, Akbar would appear out of nowhere and break the conversation. Abbas almost felt as though Akbar was suspicious. That was why he decided to go at night. It was the only way to reach Jafar without having to deal with anyone else.

Abbas lifted his feet off the mattress and placed them on the wooden floor. Then carefully, he shifted his body weight to the floor until he was completely off the bed. Like a spider, he tiptoed to the door and pushed the handle.

There was a small creak and Abbas found himself in the hallway. Swiftly, he treaded across the wooden floor, careful not to make any sounds. After a few minutes, he finally saw Jafar's door. The 'Jaja' sign was hanging from it. He lifted his hand to knock. Abbas stopped. If he knocked, he might wake everyone up. No, he would have to go in without knocking. He pressed the door handle and quickly limped inside. Abbas closed the door. A bead of sweat trickled down his cheek as he advanced to the bed. He extended his hand. This was it. This was the moment he had

been waiting for. He gave a small tug, yanking the blanket off Jafar.

Abbas froze. Fear and shock gripped his heart. For a moment, he felt as though his heart had stopped. His arms went numb as he found himself staring into the eyes of Akbar!

But it wasn't possible. How could Akbar know? He must have been suspicious after all. Abbas had played right into his hands. Akbar pushed himself upright.

His lips broke into a smile.

"What are you up to Abbas?" he asked. "Why are you after Jafar?"

Abbas did not know what to say. The entire mission was over.

"I was just going to ask him for a painkiller for my leg," Abbas muttered, hoping his fear wasn't visible.

Akbar raised a brow.

"If you wanted medicine for your leg, you could have just asked me," he replied.

Abbas nodded. He needed to get out of here.

"Could you please give me one?" he asked as innocently as he could.

Akbar locked eyes with Abbas, his gaze burning through Abbas's eyes. Abbas felt a bead of sweat trickle down his cheek. He was praying that Akbar had not seen it.

'Ya Allah,' Abbas prayed silently in his heart. 'Get me out of this mess!'

Several minutes went by. Finally, Akbar nodded,

"Head back to your room. I'll give you a pain killer."

Abbas turned to leave. He didn't want to stay here a moment more than he needed to. Just as he reached the door, he heard Akbar call out,

"Abbas. A piece of advice."

Abbas stopped and forced himself to turn to face Akbar.

"It's not a good idea to roam the hallways at night," Akbar completed.

Abbas nodded and 'limped' back the entire way. He was so afraid that if he didn't, Akbar would pop out from any random place to confront him. At long last, his room came. It was a

welcome sight. Abbas felt as though he had seen an oasis in the desert. He hobbled inside. Taking a deep breath, he closed the door. Abbas wiped the sweat from his forehead as he lay back in bed. Haider, oblivious as ever, was snoring loudly beside him. A moment later, Akbar entered the room with a small white pill in one hand and a glass of water in the other. Abbas almost jumped in alarm, just managing to refrain from doing so.

Akbar placed the pill and glass of water on the table next to Abbas.

“Sweet dreams,” he whispered and headed out.

Abbas felt his pulse finally calm down. Thoughts plagued his mind. How did Akbar fool Abbas so smoothly? Abbas knew for sure now. Akbar wasn't suspicious. Akbar was certain. He knew that Abbas was up to something. And he knew that whatever it was, it was related to Jafar. That was why he had taken so many precautions tonight. That was why he hid Jafar. But a thought struck Abbas. Why do all of this? There was only one explanation. Akbar was hiding something. He had a skeleton in the closet. And the key to this closet was Jafar.

Abbas yawned. It would probably be a good idea to try again tomorrow. But Akbar was going to be alert. Abbas was sure Akbar would do everything in his power to protect his secret; whatever it was. It was going to be essentially impossible to get to Jafar alone. But what choice did Abbas have? It wasn't like he could just stroll back out now? Could he? No. It was a foolish idea. Or was it? No. It was too risky. But then again, was it? Akbar had just confronted Abbas. He probably wasn't expecting Abbas to return. Abbas recalled the 'advice' Akbar had given him,

*“It's not a good idea to roam the hallways at night’.*

That was Akbar's way of intimidating him. It was a warning. Stay away. Don't pry into the matter. There was a very high chance that Akbar had relaxed his guard now. He probably thought he had chased Abbas off for now. Also given that it was night, he would probably expect Abbas to fall asleep. Now that Abbas thought about it, there was no better opportunity. Even though he knew it was risky, he made up his mind. He would give

it one final shot.

Abbas took a deep breath. If he was going to do this, he would have to do it right. Akbar had planned this confrontation very carefully. Abbas would have to do no less. In order to uncover the truth, every detail would have to be laid out. This was going to be Abbas's final move on the chess board. If he failed, there was no going back. It would be checkmate.

First, he would have to wait. In order to carry out this plan he would need to let Akbar think that Abbas had gone to sleep. Abbas knew Akbar was cautious. No doubt he must have taken precautions. Perhaps he was watching Abbas's room door. Abbas knew that even Akbar would have to go to sleep at some point. Abbas glanced at his watch. It was 11:23 pm. Abbas thought hard. He would go in two hours. Akbar would most certainly have slept by then. That took care of the waiting. Now how would he get there...

There was only one route. The hallway. Both Abbas and Akbar knew this very well. Most likely, if Akbar had prepared some kind of silent alarm, Abbas would need to be careful. If he tripped the alarm, he wouldn't have much time to speak to Jafar. But at the same time, the longer he took in the hallways, the more likely he was to get caught. That was why he would need to be swift, but light on his feet.

There was only one question left to answer. Where was Jafar? Abbas thought the deepest on this one. This was the most critical part. Even if Abbas pulled everything off flawlessly, it would mean nothing without this. Akbar was sleeping in Jafar's room. Naturally, that left only one possibility. Akbar's room. Abbas gulped. The key was, as expected, in the hyena's den.

Abbas looked at his watch. Already half an hour had passed. Now it was time to initiate the plan. He adjusted himself in a sleeping position. Time passed. Abbas refrained from looking at his watch. 'A watched pot never boils,' he reminded himself.

He needed to be patient. It was taking every iota of strength to keep his eyes from drooping. He waited very quietly. He could hear the wind blowing through the cracks of the bunglow. It almost sounded like whistling. Abbas could hear the grass swaying

outside. It was pacifying. Soothing. He could feel himself running through- No! Abbas forced his eyes back open. He glanced at his watch. It read 1:37 am. It was past the designated time! Abbas sprung off the bed. His limbs were numb. He began to swing his arms back and forth lightly, and also tried warming up his legs. He would need to be nimble for this plan to work. A numb body wouldn't cut it. After five minutes, he could finally feel his strength return. It was time.

Abbas advanced to the door. He was about to open it, when another problem occurred. If he got caught, he would need an excuse. But what could he say? How could he explain rushing to Akbar's room. He heard a loud peck. Startled, he whirled around. A bird sat at the window curiously pecking at it. Abbas walked up to the window scaring it off. Of course! Abbas could very conveniently say that he heard some strange noise outside. He was supposedly worried and had rushed to tell Akbar. It was perfect. Now it was time.

Abbas pressed down the handle and pushed. The door didn't open. Surprised, he pressed it again. After a few unsuccessful attempts it dawned on him. Akbar had locked him in. If Abbas had any doubt about the existence of the secret, it was gone now.

Abbas studied the lock. It was a simple traditional one. Not exceptionally hard to break. Speedily, his eyes scanned the room until he caught sight of it. A paperclip lay on the desk. As fast as possible, he grasped and unwound it. It took a minute, but soon he was able to morph it into a simple skeleton key. Abbas pushed the 'skeleton key' inside the lock. With a swift turn, he heard a click. It worked! The door was unlocked. Abbas pushed the door open. There was no sign of Akbar. Like a panther, he sped through the hall.

He could feel his heart pounding in his chest as he crept through the halls. It was begging him. Turn around. Come back. It's not safe. But Abbas pushed the feelings aside. There was no turning back now. Finally, he saw Akbar's room.

Slowly, he approached the door. He was expecting Akbar to appear at any time. He reached out and grabbed hold of the rusty handle. Abbas felt a bead of sweat trickle down his cheek. This

was it. Behind this door was Jafar. Taking a deep breath, he pushed the handle and stepped inside.

It was a relatively smaller room. Smaller than Abbas had imagined. A small desk was in the left corner. On it, was a pile of neatly organised books. On the right was a bed. Abbas felt his heart skip a beat. There was someone sleeping inside. Most likely Jafar. But Abbas wasn't willing to chance it.

"Akbar Uncle," he whispered.

There was no reply. Abbas advanced towards the bed. Placing his hand on the blanket, he tugged it off. What he saw underneath was a most welcome sight. Jafar. Jafar was curled up on the mattress in his pajamas.

Abbas reached for Jafar and shook him slightly. Jafar's eyes opened. Upon seeing Abbas, his eyes widened in surprise. Abbas shot a hand over his mouth.

"Be quiet!" Abbas whispered. "I need to talk to you about something. It's important."

Slowly, he lowered his hand. He did not want to scare the poor child.

Jafar stared confused at him. For a moment, Abbas recalled the bird pecking the window earlier.

"What do you need to talk about?" he asked trying to mask his annoyance at being disturbed.

Abbas sighed.

"Listen well, Jafar," he started. "Do you remember the first night we stayed here?"

Jafar shrugged casually but Abbas could see a slight discomfort in his eyes now.

"What about it?" Jafar replied.

"You gave me medicine for my leg," Abbas continued. "I never took it."

The colour drained from Jafar's face.

"W-w-what, w-w-why?" he stammered.

"I was awake when you and Akbar Uncle 'visited' me," Abbas chose his words carefully. "I heard your entire conversation."

Jafar began shaking uncontrollably.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he answered.



“I will only ask once,” Abbas growled. “What were you looking for? Why did you check my ankle?”

Jafar’s eyes began to water. Abbas realised he had to change his stance. “Listen Jafar,” he said kindly. “I trust you a lot. You know that, right?”

Jafar nodded, wiping away his tears. It was working.

“I think of you as a little brother,” Abbas smiled.

Jafar bowed his head respectfully. Abbas played his final card. “Don’t you feel the same way?” he asked, forcing a degree of pain in his tone.

“Of course I do!” Jafar retorted. “But Akbar Uncle wanted to be sure-” he paused and frowned slightly.

Abbas smiled.

“You have confessed, Jafar. Now tell me the full truth. What was the medicine meant to do? Why were you checking my ankle? I want to know everything.”

Jafar sighed. A few minutes passed before he finally responded.

“The medicine was going to heal your leg.”

Abbas watched him intently.

Jafar continued.

“It did however have a side effect. It made the patient drowsy.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes,

“It would make your job easier.”

Jafar shrugged.

“I was following Akbar Uncle’s orders. See, the issue is that we needed to know if you were an Alpha or not.”

Abbas’s ears pricked. He was listening carefully until now, but this was not what he expected.

“How would you do that?” Abbas asked.

Jafar looked Abbas in the eye.

“Remember when Maryam Api told you that every Alpha has a unique number? Well, that’s not all they have. On the ankle of every Alpha, there is a scar in the shape of that number. I was just checking you for that. But Akbar Uncle said I shouldn’t mention this. . . .”

Abbas wasn’t listening anymore. It all finally made sense. The pieces fit together. The mystery had been solved. Indeed

Akbar did have a dark secret. A very dark one. Finally, he understood the reason for everything. A harsh realisation struck Abbas. He was unsafe here. He needed to escape. Haider. Haider was alone. Abbas had to grab Haider and flee. Who knows how many members of the house were in on it? Abbas stormed out of the room, leaving a shocked and surprised Jafar behind.

“Where are you going?”

Abbas ignored him. He had to get out of here. He rushed to the end of the hall. He could see his room door. Soon they would be safe. The door swung open and the last person Abbas ever wanted to see, stepped out. Akbar.

Akbar turned surprisedly to face Abbas.

“How did yo-” he began.

“You’re an Alpha!” Abbas screamed.

# 13

## Exposed

There was silence. Abbas watched as Akbar's expression transformed. Initially, he had looked confused; probably wondering how Abbas had gotten the door open. But then when Abbas had blurted it out, his expression became one of pure horror. It was as though Akbar had been stabbed in the chest and for the first time, Abbas saw Akbar vulnerable.

"What are you talking about?" Akbar growled. Abbas glared at him. Akbar had been completely caught off guard. Checkmate.

"All the pieces fit together perfectly," Abbas snarled. "I figured it out."

Akbar didn't respond. He merely gazed at Abbas. There was hurt in his eyes. As though he felt betrayed. Abbas could hear footsteps. Their yelling must have woken the entire house. From behind him, he noticed Maryam, Jafar and Haider. They all looked sleepy. Abbas couldn't help notice that Maryam was holding her pistol while Jafar had a small blade or a swiss army knife. It didn't matter. All that mattered was that he had busted Akbar. From the other end of the hallway, he saw Zahra and Ali approaching with concern in their eyes.

"What's going on Abbas?" Zahra questioned. "Why are you yelling in the hallway?"

Abbas took a deep breath. He decided everyone here had the right to know. He looked at each of them in the eyes.

"As hard as it is to say, you all have a right to know," Abbas

began; he struggled to keep his hand from trembling. “Akbar Uncle is an Alpha.”

Silence. He heard Maryam gasp behind him. Jafar began trembling nervously. Zahra’s eyes watered and Ali was still. Horror was written all over his face. He was as pale as a corpse.

“Preposterous!” Akbar retorted. “This boy has gone crazy!”

Abbas turned to face Maryam. He wasn’t afraid anymore of what Akbar would do to him.

“Remember when I first woke up on the beach,” Abbas asked her. “I noticed your gun was very sophisticated. Too sophisticated. Well, I was right! The gun you use Maryam, it’s not sold and cannot be found. In fact, none of the guns this family uses, are sold anywhere. They are all army weapons. You told me Maryam, that the weapons the Alphas use are most advanced. Then explain me how Zahra has a J-47 rifle.” Maryam glared at him.

“You fool!” she hissed. “Akbar Uncle got them from a friend.”

Abbas frowned. This was not leading anywhere.

“Thank you for showing some common sense Maryam,” Akbar glared at Abbas.

Abbas turned furiously on Akbar. He wasn’t going to let Akbar get away that easily.

“Are you seriously telling me,” Abbas roared. “None of you find it strange that Akbar Uncle fought the legendary Alpha 43 and was able to survive?”

He turned to Ali.

“Don’t’ you remember how Akbar Uncle carried me off the broken house?” Abbas insisted.

Ali narrowed his eyes.

“That is true,” he answered. “But Akbar Uncle has done many hard jobs like woodcutting. He’s strong.”

Akbar smiled in triumph.

“But I do agree with one thing,” Ali added. “He should have lost to Alpha 43.”

The smile faded from Akbar’s face.

“Don’t be ridiculous Ali,” Zahra snapped at him. “Don’t you know Akbar Uncle was an avid martial artist many years ago?”

Ali nodded hesitantly.

Abbas locked eyes with Zahra. Was she in on it? She certainly couldn't have been that foolish. Alpha 43 was much more skilled than any normal martial artist. Akbar could only survive if he himself was an Alpha.

"And didn't Alpha 43 stop fighting Akbar Uncle and run after you? Who knows if he had been fighting any longer, Akbar Uncle would probably have lost," Jafar added quietly.

Abbas bit his lip. That was something he hadn't considered. Abbas thought carefully for a few seconds.

"Well then, I guess there is only one way to resolve this," Abbas stated. "Akbar Uncle, please take off your woolen socks."

The triumph on Akbar's face faded entirely. His eyes narrowed.

"I am not going to do that," Akbar laughed casually. "It's too cold for my old feet."

Abbas smiled. This was his chance.

"You all know Alphas have a scar on their ankle in the shape of a number," Abbas reminded. "Ask Akbar Uncle to remove his sock. If he's not an Alpha, he shouldn't be worried."

Akbar began to mutter an excuse,

"This is ridiculous. I am going back to sleep."

He turned but Ali gripped his arm softly. His eyes glistened. He stared Akbar deeply in the eye.

"I have always seen you as a father," Ali sighed. "That will never change no matter what. I know that you have a heart of gold. But this is important. If you are an Alpha, we all have the right to know."

Tears trickled down Akbar's cheek. He appeared as though the entire world had crashed on him. Ali lunged forward giving him a hug. Akbar broke down completely; his face was drenched in tears.

With a trembling hand, he extended his arm down to his ankle. Akbar gave a small tug before he pulled off the thick sock. Gasps filled the hallway. Abbas felt an arrow pierce his heart.

"That's not possible!" Abbas exclaimed.

Sure enough on Akbar's ankle, there was a small scar. But it was shaped like a 43.

# 14

## The Truth

It was now 2am. Abbas was in the living room, sitting on a wooden chair. On his left, he could see Zahra and Maryam seated on a sofa. They were both quiet. Zahra had tears in her eyes. Maryam on the other hand, was simply emotionless. The shock of her loving Akbar Uncle being an Alpha had immobilized her. Abbas felt sorry for her. On his right, Ali and Haider were seated. Abbas noted the quiet tears rolling down Ali's cheek. Haider was no different. He had really taken a liking to Akbar Uncle. Jafar was sitting on the floor leaning on Ali's knee; his face was buried in his hands.

Akbar stepped inside the room with a small patched brown bag. Remorsefully, he sat down on the couch in front of everyone. There was a strange look of defeat in his eyes. For the first time, Abbas saw him without any socks. His scar, exposed to the entire world. Abbas stared intently at the scar. He still didn't understand how it could be in the shape of a 43. Akbar was not Alpha 43. Abbas knew that. He had seen Akbar fight Alpha 43. But now everything would be made clear.

Akbar sighed.

"I owe you all an explanation," he said at last.

Everyone lifted their gaze to watch Akbar.

"Honestly, I don't know where to start," Akbar whispered.

"Are you Alpha 43?" Abbas heard Maryam whisper.

Akbar turned to face her.

“Yes, I was,” Akbar swallowed at last.

Tears drenched Maryam’s face. It was almost as though she was expecting him to say no. Feeling betrayed, Maryam turned away from Akbar.

“Please, hear what I have to say,” he murmured. “Hear what I have to say so you understand. I don’t want you to draw your own conclusions.”

Everybody looked at Akbar, waiting for him to speak his next words.

“I was Alpha 43,” Akbar confessed. “But that was a long time ago. In fact, I stopped twelve years ago.”

“I left them,” Akbar continued. “After I left, they found a replacement. He killed Ali’s family.”

Ali lowered his eyes for a moment. This was particularly hard for him. He was clearly struggling to keep himself in control. Abbas pondered for a moment. Whatever Akbar had said, kind of made sense. Even though it was bizarre. Akbar was Alpha 43 until he left them, presumably having repented. After doing so, the new Alpha inherited the reputation of Akbar and expanded on it. Abbas couldn’t help notice Zahra on his left. Despite the tears, she was strangely calm. Too calm. Abbas decided to confirm his doubts.

“You knew,” he addressed Zahra. “Didn’t you?”

Zahra turned surprisedly to Abbas. Her eyes were showing confusion. Everyone was staring at her and for the first time, the discomfort had shifted towards Zahra.

“Yes,” she said at last. “I knew.”

Abbas saw a hint of betrayal streaming in Ali’s eyes. But he quickly regained his composure. Maryam, however, was staring at Zahra in disbelief.

“A-Api,” she stammered. “You knew?”

Zahra nodded slowly.

“Why wouldn’t you tell us?” Maryam pleaded. “How could you hide this from us?”

She buried her face in her hands. Abbas couldn’t help notice that Jafar was silent. His face was remorseful but not surprised. Somehow, he must have known as well. That meant the only

people who didn't know were Ali and Maryam.

Akbar motioned for silence.

"Zahra has kept this painful secret with me for the last twelve years. Yet this was all she knew. I have held the majority of this secret by myself."

Abbas looked carefully at Zahra and Akbar. He didn't know whether Akbar was telling the truth or if he was just trying to pacify Maryam. He decided not to pry into this matter any further. Right now, what Akbar had to say was much more important.

"It all started a long long time ago," Akbar began. "I believe it must have been more than thirty years ago. I was just a young man then. My father was a scientist."

He paused to let his words sink in.

Abbas paid close attention. He didn't want to miss a single detail.

"He was a brilliant mind with extraordinary intellect; a true genius," Akbar continued. "He made many discoveries. Baba<sup>1</sup> was someone who lived for science. His specialty was neurology. Baba was always contemplating on the link between the brain and spirituality. I remember that he would be engaged in research on this subject. Baba had a theory. If spiritual defects allowed a person to become a slave of their desires; then if someone could learn how to manipulate those desires, they could take control of that person."

A small bird fluttered outside. Akbar stopped, briefly glancing at the window. Wiping a tear off his cheek, he resumed,

"The world rejected his ideas. They called him crazy. But Baba proved them wrong. He invented a device. A device which confirmed his theory. There was a way to control the desires of a person. This device could do it. He called it the C-gun. That's short for control gun. Basically, the C-gun scans a person for spiritual deficiencies such as anger, jealousy and even laziness. Then using those spiritual problems, it takes control of the person."

Akbar extended his hand over the brown bag and emptied its

---

<sup>1</sup>Title for father.



contents on the table. There were three items. A small black, Bluetooth-like device, a small knife with a 43 embedded in it, and finally a small gun like object. Abbas widened his eyes in surprise. That was the same futuristic space gun Alpha 43 had tried to use on him and Akbar.

“Yes,” Akbar answered as though he had read Abbas’s mind. “That device Alpha 43 tried to use on us was a C-gun.”

Abbas recalled the surprise on Alpha 43’s face when he had used the device on Akbar. He must have been expecting Akbar to obey him entirely, but Akbar was strong enough to resist. Only his hand was shaking. Abbas couldn’t help feel partial amazement. Akbar was definitely a strong person.

“What happens then?” Maryam questioned, interrupting his thoughts. “What happens if a C-gun is used on someone?”

Akbar gazed at her darkly.

“Then the person is out of control. They are at the mercy of the gun. Unfortunately, since materialistic desires are never ending and lead people to do wrong things, the C-gun can only get victims to do wrong things. Baba only realised this after finishing it. He tried so hard to change the monster he had created. But alas, he was unsuccessful.”

Akbar swallowed. He was beginning to regain his composure.

“When Baba realised the device was unstoppable, he decided to hide it from the world. In the wrong hands, it would cause devastation. However his efforts were in vain. A rich business tycoon by the name of Jumeira had-”

Akbar stopped.

“What about her?” Abbas pushed.

Akbar took a deep breath.

“Jumeira sells weapons. She discovered the existence of the controller chip and stole it from my father. When she got hold of it, she tried weaponizing it but was unsuccessful; and remains so until this very day.”

“I don’t understand,” Ali interrupted. “What do you mean by weaponize?” Akbar nodded.

“The issue is that the chip requires a certain level of spiritual deficiencies,” he answered. “Someone who is spiritually pure cannot

be controlled. Jumeira has made it her personal mission to create an optimum C-gun, though I doubt that is even possible. The last I knew of, they had reached a minimum of thirty-seven percent on the control-scale. Zero percent means there is no defect. One hundred percent means a person is extremely sinful. That brings us to the criteria. The criteria is merely if someone can be controlled or not. If they cannot be controlled, the Alphas kill them. That is why generally the Alphas kill children. Children are more innocent than adults most of the times. However, if the victim can be controlled, they get taken to the iron fortress.”

Abbas watched Akbar in amazement. How had he kept so many things secret for so long?

“The iron fortress is where they work on the chip, trying to bring down the minimum to zero percent. This has been leading to pollution on our island,” Akbar added.

Abbas recalled how few fish there were in the river when he had first come to the bungalow.

“What happens to people who get taken?” Abbas asked, suspecting he already knew the answer.

“They are turned into Alphas,” Akbar sighed. “Test subjects are forced to undergo intense physical training as well as academic learning. They are mentored by an Alpha. Starting off with the name Delta something, something being the number code of the Alpha. They compete to progress to the next rank Gamma and finally Beta. Once the Alpha feels they are ready, the Beta becomes an Alpha. Then this Bluetooth-like device, which we called a C-chip, is implanted in them. The C-chip is a small device which does the same thing as the C-gun. The difference is that it only works on the subject who carries it. And they are then dispatched with teams to hunt people down.”

There was a strange silence in the room as everyone listened carefully to what Akbar was saying.

“So are Alphas good people?” Abbas asked. “Merely forced to do the bidding of their C-chip?”

“No,” Akbar answered. “You must understand this concept carefully. As Alphas gradually get more exposed to the C-chip and C-gun, their hearts become corroded. For example, when an

Alpha starts duty, they are initially controlled by their spiritual weaknesses. But as time progresses, those spiritual weaknesses get fiercer and stronger. Eventually, they get so strong that an Alpha does not need to wear a C-chip at all. One such scenario, from what I know, is Alpha 43. He never wore a C-chip.”

Abbas could not believe what he was hearing.

“So that means Alpha 43-”

“Yes,” Akbar interrupted. “He is never under the control of the C-chip. He is so dark and corroded that whatever the controller chip would try to make him do, he already does from his own free will.”

Everyone went silent. It was as though the outside chill had crept inside, freezing everyone on the spot. Abbas glanced over at his watch. It read 2:33am.

“That is the truth,” Akbar sighed.

Abbas felt his mind whirl. This was too much to process. He looked around. Everyone looked exhausted and drained. Abbas glanced over the table. Reaching over, he grasped hold of the knife. There was something familiar about it. He lifted it in his hand. Nobody took any notice. He twirled it in his hand. He started feeling dizzy.

*He could hear a strange creaking over his head.*

*Abbas heard someone whispering in his ear,*

*“Abbas, stay close to your mother. She’ll keep you all safe.”*

*Abbas turned his tiny head to see who it was? Tiny head? What was going on? Murtaza stroked his hair.*

*“Do you understand?”*

*Abbas nodded, unsure of what his father was talking about. He crept beside his mother. In her hand was a baby.*

*‘Haider!’ Abbas thought.*

*There was also an elderly man. He had horn-rimmed glasses and patches of hair on his circular head.*

*“We have to go,” the old man warned. “He will not leave us until we are dead.”*

*Murtaza withdrew a small knife from his pocket.*

*“Don’t worry,” he whispered. “I’m not going to kill him.”*

*With that, the door bursted open. A large figure entered through. Murtaza leapt, roaring at the figure. His force caused the attacker to collapse on the ground as the two wrestled ferociously. The attacker lunged forward with a knife, a 43 embedded on its hilt. Murtaza sidestepped and swung his elbow. The force brought the attacker to the ground. Abbas peeked to see it better. He always loved to see Murtaza fight.*

*Murtaza ducked from another attack and grabbed hold of the attacker's mask. Wrenching it off, he leapt back to avoid another strike. Abbas felt his tiny jaw drop to the ground. It was Akbar. The attacker was Akbar. A wave crashed over his mind and everything disappeared once more.*

Abbas awoke with a start. He was in the living room. Everyone was standing over him, concerned. In his hand, clenched, was the knife. Abbas noticed his knuckles had turned white. He loosened his sweaty grip and made an attempt to sit up.

"Are you okay?" Zahra asked him.

There was a moment of silence before Abbas sighed,

"Yes Api."

Slowly, he got to his feet and excused himself from the meeting. His mind was in a whirl. Questions had returned to his mind. What was this memory? Abbas had felt really young in it. Perhaps it was five years ago? No, he was younger than that. Maybe ten years ago? Or twelve! Twelve years ago, when Akbar stopped being an Alpha. So Murtaza had fought Akbar twelve years ago. They definitely knew each other then. This was a new development. Abbas would have to think carefully about this one.

# 15

## One Week

“Ya Allah,” Abbas groaned as he lifted another bag of wood on his back. With a little force, he pushed it aboard the pile of logs. Abbas rubbed his eyes. The shed was quite dusty. A bead of sweat trickled down his cheek. Glancing on his right, he observed Haider laying flat against the shed.

“You could give me a hand,” Abbas muttered breathlessly. “Didn’t you say you were super strong?”

Haider merely peeked at him. Perhaps he thought he could fake sleep his way out of work. But Abbas wouldn’t let him do that. Abbas reached out for his bottle from the corner and pryed its plastic lid off. Ever so lightly, he crept over to Haider. This would teach him a lesson. With a light tilt, he emptied the water all over Haider.

Haider jumped up awake like a cat that had been thrown in a river. Shivering heavily, he muttered through clattering teeth,

“Why’d you do that?”

Abbas didn’t even bother to respond. He just turned and got back to work. Haider shrugged and joined him. At that moment he heard a voice,

“You boys hungry?”

Abbas turned to see Zahra holding a tray. The tray had a pitcher filled with orange juice and there were two plastic mugs as well. Abbas wiped another bead of sweat before beckoning for her to approach. Zahra poured a glass for each of them. As she

did so, Abbas motioned for Haider to walk away for a moment. Haider merely lowered his head and walked off. Zahra took no notice though, she was too busy staring at the floor.

Abbas took a deep breath.

“How is everyone?”

Zahra took a moment before raising her head. She locked eyes with him.

“They’re not doing so great,” she sighed at last.

Abbas looked down. He couldn’t help feel partially responsible for the atmosphere that had plagued the house. Ever since he had exposed Akbar’s secret, everyone had changed so much. Akbar generally stayed cooped up in his room, not even showing up for meals. Ali was always outdoors in the woods. He would leave early in the morning before anyone would wake up and would return late in the night. At the door, he would leave his day’s work of wood and Abbas would place it in the shed with Haider every morning, just like this one.

“Is Maryam still angry at Jafar?” Abbas asked.

Zahra took a deep breath.

“Ever since Jafar blurted out that he knew, she still hasn’t forgiven him.”

Abbas lifted his head once more. As he had suspected, Jafar had known about Akbar being Alpha 43.

“How did he know?” Abbas questioned.

Zahra sat down on the grass. Abbas did the same.

“Once Akbar Uncle came back with a leg injury while scouting, probably an Alpha,” Zahra whispered. “When Jafar was treating it, he saw the scar and told me, but I had already known. So I made him promise not to tell anyone. I guess, however. the past catches up with everyone eventually and we are no exception.”

“At least nobody is upset with you,” Abbas tried to reassure. “You could probably fix Maryam and Jafar’s disagreements.”

Zahra looked Abbas deep in the eye.

“What makes you think that?” she muttered.

Abbas understood what she meant. Ali must have been angry that she had hidden this from him. It also explained why he was outside the house all the time. After all, wasn’t he the one who

convinced Akbar to confess?

“And to think,” Zahra added quietly. “I was going to give a news to the entire house today that would send Ali flying out of his shoes. Akbar Uncle would be celebrating. But now with Ali so angry with me, I don’t know when to share it.”

Abbas refilled his orange juice glass.

“What is the news?” Abbas inquired. “If it can fix the atmosphere of the house, then why not just share it?”

Zahra got up. Abbas couldn’t help notice she was looking a little dizzy.

“Are you okay?” Abbas asked.

“Yes,” Zahra replied. “I would love to tell you Abbas but I want Ali to be the first one to know. Unfortunately, he keeps disappearing. If you see him, could you please let me know.”

Abbas nodded in acknowledgement. With that, Zahra left and Abbas got back to work. As he worked, he contemplated on all of the questions that had somehow worked their way back to him. He still didn’t know who his mother was. And the relevance of the ring which lay in his pocket was as deep a mystery as ever. What was the ring’s importance? Why did Abbas have so many memory seizures when he held it? Why had Akbar changed his behaviour and allowed them to stay when he saw it? Also, how did Alpha 43 know about Abbas and Murtaza? What was the boat chase all about? What had happened twelve years ago between Murtaza and Akbar? Abbas had stopped pursuing answers ever since his last adventure but he still couldn’t forget all of these things. He knew that one day he would have to find the answers. Wait. No. Not now. Not for some time. The last time Abbas tried to do things, he caused pain to the people who had taken him and Haider in. In their respect, Abbas decided he would not pursue these questions until he had helped repair the damage he had caused. He would do everything he could to fix things.

Abbas heard a noise from a distance. Instantly, he whirled in the direction of the noise, armed with his revolver, ready to fight. It was only Maryam and Jafar returning from their morning search for supplies. Abbas felt his grip loosen and casually waved to them. Jafar nodded respectfully and turned to Maryam who

ignored him. She nodded as well before entering the house. Jafar strolled over to Abbas and Haider.

“How are things?” Abbas whispered.

Jafar didn’t respond. He just bent his head in disappointment.

“I’m sorry,” Abbas confessed. “I never meant for things to happen this way.”

Jafar sighed.

“It’s okay, you don’t need to apologise. You weren’t wrong to be afraid. It is actually my fault. I was the one who told you.”

Abbas placed his hand on the kid’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry. I am going to fix this.”

Jafar raised a brow. Abbas lowered his head to match Jafar’s height.

“How about for starters, me and Haider take the next supply search trip?”

Jafar’s eyes lit up.

“You would do that?”

Abbas nodded.

“You can relax for today and work on your sand castle project.”

Jafar smiled and bounded off towards the house.



# 16

## A Stroll in the Woods

“How far are we going?” Haider asked innocently.

Abbas shook his head. They had only just left the bungalow and entered the forest and Haider was already waiting to get back home.

“We’ll search the demolished neighbourhoods. After that, we’ll head back.” He replied.

According to the crude map Jafar had drawn him, that meant that they would have to cross through the forest, stroll along the mud road, journey through the hay field, wade through the river. The river where Abbas had remembered something the first time they had journeyed to the bungalow. No. Abbas wasn’t going to think about his memory or his past. Today, he was going to do things for others. Others who needed his help.

Abbas adjusted the strap of Jafar’s bag, making it larger for Abbas’s size as the bungalow disappeared behind them. He felt the gravity pulling him down hill. Abbas balanced himself carefully as he crossed through the dense foliage. Behind him, Haider was doing the same.

“Imagine!” Haider exclaimed. “Maryam Api and jafar do this everyday!” Abbas nodded and continued forth. As they reached the bottom of the hill, Abbas paused. He inhaled his surroundings. He could smell the fresh scent of pinecones. He could hear the active forest life. Birds were chirping merrily. Abbas felt peace for a moment.

The quranic verses from surah Qaf echoed in his mind,

*“As for the earth, We spread it out and placed upon it firm mountains, and produced in it every type of pleasant plant. all as an insight and a reminder to every servant who turns to Allah.”*

Abbas opened his eyes and looked around. He could see foot prints. Foot prints? Probably Ali’s but no harm in checking. He bent down and examined the footprints closely. They were big. Abbas knew Ali was a big person. But Alphas were also big.

“Haider,” Abbas whispered. “Let’s check this out.”

Haider narrowed his eyes.

“Aren’t we meant to bring supplies?”

Abbas rolled his eyes.

“Akbar Uncle said safety always comes first. We need to check this out. They’re probably Ali Bhai’s, but they could also belong to someone else.”

Abbas didn’t need to say any more. He readied his revolver. Swiftly, he and Haider set off in the direction of the prints. Abbas noticed the prints were well spaced out. Judging by the length of the strides, he estimated that the person was about as tall as Ali Bhai. But still, Abbas wasn’t going to take any chances.

He knew how dangerous it was if someone discovered the location of the bungalow. And while it was definitely difficult to do so, it certainly wasn’t impossible.

“How much longer are we going to follow?” Haider whispered.

Abbas narrowed his eyes.

“Until we find Ali Bhai. If we don’t find him, it means the prints belong to someone else. In which case, we must warn Akbar Uncle right away.”

Haider nodded and continued. It was only after about what seemed like a minute that Abbas noticed the foot prints abruptly changed direction. The distance between the prints was much larger as though the person was running, or fleeing. Abbas began to feel a little concerned. If this was Ali, why would he abruptly start running away from the bungalow? He strengthened his grip on the gun and moved faster. He could see the prints randomly changing direction every few minutes and the strides were still big. Haider whispered,

“It’s almost like he-”

“Was trying to shake someone off his trail.” Abbas finished. This wasn’t good. If someone was chasing Ali Bhai, who was quite big himself, it meant he could be in serious danger. Abbas motioned for Haider to move faster. They kept following the foot prints. It wasn’t long before Abbas and Haider reached the end of the forest. The prints continued but the distance between them had decreased.

‘Ali Bhai must’ve slowed down,’ Abbas thought to himself.

As he finally reached the last tree, Abbas felt his heart stop. There was blood. A good amount of it. Abbas noticed the trees here were chipped as though bullets had struck them. Bullets. This wasn’t good.

“Uh Abbas Bhai...” Abbas heard Haider call.

He turned to face Haider who was holding an axe in his hands. It was Ali’s axe! Abbas could tell. It even had his name carved at the edge of the handle under the blade. It too was covered in blood.

“I found this embedded in a tree,” Haider added.

Abbas closed his eyes trying not to imagine the worst. But he knew it was true. Ali had been taken. He felt a strange sadness grip his heart. Ali Bhai was a good man. Now they were going to turn him into an assassin. They would torture him and force him to be controlled by the C-gun. Then, they would implant a c-chip in him.

Haider must have read his thoughts for he dropped the axe on the floor and began crying. How awful this was! Abbas lowered his hand over his brother’s head and stroked it lightly.

“He can’t be gone!” Haider sobbed.

Abbas felt a tear trickle down his cheek. He hugged his brother tightly. Ali must have been seen by an Alpha. He must have led the Alpha away from the bungalow to protect everyone there. The Alpha probably caught up with him and captured him. Abbas could imagine things very clearly. The foot prints clearly indicated a struggle. Abbas cried as he watched the large footprints trail ahead. Wait. What? If Ali was captured, how come his foot prints were still leading ahead?

“Wait Haider,” Abbas whispered. “Ali Bhai’s prints are still moving forward. I think he might have escaped!”

Haider’s eyes lit up.

“If he did, he must be hurt. We have to find him!”

Abbas nodded. Quickly, he got to his feet. They would find Ali and bring him home. But while finding Ali, what if they found an Alpha? Abbas thought carefully. Perhaps they ought to go back and warn Akbar. Abbas looked up at the sky. The clouds were getting dark. Soon it would be raining. And that would mean the footprints would fade away. Abbas realised that if they lost the foot prints they would lose Ali. They couldn’t go back for Akbar. They were on their own for this one.

Abbas motioned for Haider to follow. Together, they bounded off in the direction of the prints. Abbas followed them very carefully; his revolver was ready. As they entered into the open plains, Abbas noticed a trail of blood on the grass. He also noticed the prints getting less coordinated. Perhaps Ali was tiring out by now. Maybe he was struggling between running and walking.

Abbas followed the trail of blood stained grass. He was determined to bring Ali back no matter what. As he strolled across the field down hill, a thought occurred to him. What news did Zahra have for everyone? According to her, it would fix the atmosphere entirely but she wanted Ali to know first. Abbas understood if she wanted to tell her family before him but what news was she willing to tell Ali before Akbar.

Abbas paused. He had a strange feeling of being watched. Casually, he looked over his shoulder and swayed his hand as though he was brushing away a mosquito. He tightened his other hand on Haider’s shoulder. Haider paused briefly before following his lead. The brothers were quite well tuned.

“I feel like we are being watched,” he mouthed.

Haider nodded. Abbas noticed a river about fifty metres ahead. Beyond that was a burnt neighbourhood. He knew they stood a better chance there than in the open fields. Casually, he slapped Haider on the back. Haider, understood the code and began sprinting towards the river. Abbas playfully chased him. They kept the act going until they reached the edge of the river.

Abbas pushed Haider inside. He leapt in right after Haider. At that moment, Abbas could've sworn he saw someone out of the corner of his eye. He plunged into the ice cold water. When he pushed his head through, it was dark.

*Wait. Where had all the light disappeared? Haider wasn't there. Abbas felt a powerful force drag him through the water. Abbas would have resisted, but somehow, the grip felt reassuring. The force pulled him all the way until they reached the shore. Abbas looked up. In front of him was a large, well built man. Abbas placed his hand on the shoulder of the man. The man turned to face Abbas. Abbas recognized him instantly. Murtaza! For the first time Abbas noticed Haider beside him.*

*"I know you're upset," Murtaza whispered calmly. He reached out and hugged Abbas tightly. At that moment, Abbas felt as though all his problems would disappear.*

*"But we can't go back for her," Murtaza added. "I'll go back for her once I get you two to safety. Now there is something very important I need you to keep safe, Abbas."*

*Abbas nodded. He already suspected he knew what it was. Murtaza dug his hand in his pocket before removing a ring. Abbas froze. It was the same ring! The ring he had found in his pocket.*

*"You must protect this at all cost," Murtaza whispered.*

*Abbas nodded and placed the ring in his pocket.*

*"Now come. We have to get to the boat."*

*Swiftly, they began rushing to the boat.*

Then everything faded away and Abbas awoke with a start. Beads of sweat poured down his cheek. He took a deep breath only to realise that his mouth was gagged! Abbas looked around. He was in a room. A room filled with broken furniture. Mostly broken. The chair Abbas was tied to was intact. Abbas noticed his revolver lay in front, on the floor.

A thought struck him. Where was Haider? He looked around desperately for his brother. What had happened? How had they ended up here. Abbas remembered diving in the river very clearly. A loud voice erupted behind him,

*"Well, well, well, you finally woke up."*

# 17

## Prisoner

Abbas tried to face the ominous voice but the chair kept him from doing so. Who was this? Was it an Alpha? Abbas didn't understand what was going on.

“Who are you?” Abbas asked boldly.

He heard snigger behind him.

“Let me tell you who I am!” the voice growled. “I am your worst nightmare!”

Abbas raised a brow. The voice sounded strangely fake. As though the person was desperately trying to sound intimidating. That meant this person wasn't an Alpha. Alphas never had to try to be intimidating. But if that was the case then who was this person? Why was he acting so childishly?

“Hey dude! I'm talkin' to you!” the voice growled.

Abbas was certain now that it wasn't an Alpha. In fact he was pretty sure this wasn't even a grown-up man. For the first time, Abbas noticed the ropes holding him weren't even tied very well. Added to the fact that his revolver had carelessly been placed in front of him, just a little out of reach. Whoever this person was, they were definitely a youth, probably around Abbas's age.

“Hey!” the voice growled. “I am talking to you!”

Abbas knew what he had to do. The attacker had seen him have a memory seizure once. Abruptly, he began shaking his head mildly. He could hear confused gasps from behind as he dropped his head, pretending to be unconscious. He heard a gasp followed

by the pattering of feet. Abbas counted the number of patters.

“three...four...five,” he calculated as the attacker’s fingers fumbled over his neck.

“He must be trying to find a pulse, but can’t even do that correctly!” Abbas thought to himself. He waited carefully. In order to untie the knots without being seen, Abbas needed the attacker to be in front of him where the ropes wouldn’t be visible.

As expected, the attacker came plodding in front of Abbas. Abbas opened his eyes ever so slightly to get a look. Indeed his estimate was correct. The attacker was a youth around Abbas’s age but a little taller than Abbas. Probably he was one or two years older. This was good news. It meant Abbas could take him on.

Abbas couldn’t help notice that the youth was wearing torn clothes. But they were torn uniformly. The tears on his right side were at the same areas on his left. That meant the youth probably tore them himself. He had black marks under his eyes. But they didn’t look natural. They looked as though he had painted them himself. Abbas smiled. This youth was trying to be something he wasn’t. Slowly, he pulled the last rope loose. A moment later his hands were free. It was now time for action.

“Ya Allah!” Abbas shouted as he leapt forward, knocking the youth back. The petrified youth was completely caught off guard as they tumbled over to the corner. The youth flailed a fist at Abbas. Abbas sidestepped it and elbowed him hard in the stomach. His opponent collapsed on the floor, breathlessly. Abbas threw a final punch to the youth’s face, knocking him to the ground, sideways. He quickly retreated and grabbed his revolver and aimed the firearm, ready to fire.

“NOOOO!” the youth squealed. “Please don’t shoot me!”

Abbas raised a brow.

“Not so tough now, are we?” he hissed, trying to mimic Akbar’s voice.

The youth squealed in fright and raised his arms. Abbas smiled inside. Akbar’s technique was definitely effective.

“I will only ask once,” Abbas growled. “Where is my comrade?”

Abbas purposely did not give away the fact that Haider was

his brother. He didn't want to give the youth an advantage.

The youth, in the meanwhile, was staring petrified at the gun. He didn't seem to be very good at handling this.

"I'll hand you the other guy. Just don't shoot!" he almost sobbed.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Was this youth tricking him? No, he was too foolish to be tricking him. Abbas would still be cautious. He motioned for his attacker to lead the way. The boy turned and began strolling towards the door.

Abbas followed. Right as they reached the door, the youth spun around; kicking the gun out of Abbas's hand. Abbas leapt back, surprised.

"No one beats Salman," the youth hissed.

Salman. That was his name. Not that Abbas cared.

Salman leapt forward. Abbas ducked. Salman flew over his head and crashed on the floor ahead. Abbas swung his leg out, striking Salman's nose. Salman covered his face and Abbas could see he was bleeding. But Salman had made his choice. Abbas knew he needed to teach Salman a lesson. Salman had to know he couldn't try any tricks. Abbas barged forward, ramming him into the wall. He then drove his fist into Salman's stomach sending the boy flying back. Salman landed on the ground with a thud. A large purple bruise was on his face now. Abbas felt bad but forced himself to smirk as he retrieved his revolver.

"Argh!" Salman snarled.

Abbas locked eyes with Salman. Mimicking Akbar's style once more, he growled,

"I wouldn't do that again if I were you."

He paused, letting his words sink in.

"Or I'll have to really show you what it means to disobey us."

Us. He chose his words very carefully, hoping Salman would believe him. Salman merely shrugged but Abbas could tell he was shaken by the threat. Slowly, Salman lead Abbas out of the room into a thin narrow hallway. Abbas tightened his hold over the revolver. He didn't want to be caught off guard again. He continued to follow Salman across the hallway until they reached a door midway. The door was rusted and half decayed. Salman



pushed it lightly and stepped inside. Abbas entered a moment later.

Inside, Haider sat. His eyes wide open in surprise and his mouth gagged just like Abbas had been.

“Cut my comrade loose!” Abbas ordered, subtly hoping Haider got his message.

Salman advanced towards Haider and quickly began to undo the knots. As he did so, he murmured,

“Are you boys part of some kind of gang?”

Abbas stared at him for a moment.

“Yes,” he lied.

Salman raised his head, his eyes revealing his interest.

“Are you guys looking for new recruits?”

Abbas shook his head. He didn’t like this kid.

“No we aren’t.”

A thought occurred to Abbas.

“But we might be willing to make an exception.”

Salman almost leapt as he removed the gag and last rope, freeing Haider.

“Wh-What would you want?” he stammered.

Abbas locked eyes with him.

“A member of our group is missing and we are looking for him.”

Salman narrowed his eyes before squealing abruptly.

“I saw a big husky fellow cross by here!” he exclaimed.

Abbas didn’t respond. He merely raised a brow.

“Did you? Our fellow was certainly husky. And we are in need of him. The boss said to bring him back, no matter what.”

Salman’s jaw dropped in awe.

“If I brought him to you, would you welcome me into your gang?”

Abbas realised the situation was getting tricky. They were running out of time. They had just an hour before it would be too dark to get back and they needed to find Ali. Even if they were able to do that, what would he do with Salman after that? How could he get rid of this kid?

“There is no reason to get your hopes up.” Abbas added. “I am the one with the gun here.”

Salman glared at Abbas.

“But you-”

“Come on!” Abbas ordered ushering Salman out of the room. Abbas and Haider followed close behind. As they moved, Abbas began to feel a little better. They would soon find Ali, Zahra would give him the news and everything would be back to normal. Then Abbas would be able to return to the unanswered questions plaguing his life.

## The Search Goes On

“So, tell me more about the gang,” Salman asked excitedly as they crossed by another burnt house.

Abbas shook his head in disapproval. Why was Salman treating this like a joke? Why was he so desperate to know more? If Abbas really did belong to a group of gangsters then what would’ve happened. Would this youth just join a group of criminals? Without any regard for his faith? This young lad here was as old as Abbas. He knew perfectly well what gangs did. Why was he so interested?

Life was only so long. Why did he want to throw it away in something useless. Abbas recalled the famous quote of Imam Hussain (a.s),

“Your soul is worth paradise, do not sell it cheaper.”

What was wrong with Salman? What drove his heart in this direction?

“Why are you so eager to join a gang?” Abbas questioned.

Salman looked down for a moment before responding.

“You are strange for a gang member. I thought gangs are always looking to recruit.”

Abbas sighed.

“We want our man and we need to find him fast, Haider scolded. “Now keep going.”

Abbas rolled his eyes. He kept his guard up. Something about Salman made him uneasy. Was he lying to them? Was he trying to buy time? Abbas couldn’t tell. Whatever the case was, Abbas

was going to be careful.

“How much longer?” he inquired, forcing a degree of harshness in his tone.

Salman stopped moving for a moment and looked around. Abbas pressed the gun in his back, lightly,

“Why have we stopped?”

Salman began brisk walking once more.

“I estimate from the land marks, about a minute.”

Abbas nodded and followed him. From the corner of his eye, he made sure Haider was near. At long last they arrived at the end of what was the street junction. Salman gestured for them to copy him. He dropped down on his knees and crawled over to a burnt vehicle. Abbas and Haider did the same. They maintained the same pace as they reached the burnt vehicle.

“There,” Salman pointed.

Abbas looked at where he was pointing. Multiple men dressed in black and armed to the teeth could be seen. The men were huddling close together as though they were trying to push something. Or someone. Abbas struggled to see who the men were trying to force to move. One of the men fell backwards abruptly and Abbas could see the victim clearly. Even though it was far, he knew that face well. Ali. Ali Bhai was being kidnapped.

“Your friend has given Alpha 39’s team a run for their money!” Salman remarked. “I saw him running for the last two hours. He was fighting them all.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Ali’s praise could be done later. Right now they had to get him out of there. Abbas studied the surroundings. The four roads were leading to the center of the junction. That was where they were hiding. About ten meters ahead on one of the roads, they were struggling to push him in.

A thought struck Abbas. Where was Alpha 39? He certainly wasn’t with Ali. Perhaps he was patrolling. Abbas felt his heart stop. There was a small red laser aiming on Salman’s arm. It must belong to Alpha 39. He had seen them. In a moment, they were about to be annihilated. Abbas took a deep breath. While panic seized his heart, he forced himself to think clearly. What would Akbar do?

Abbas knew if he said anything, he would get shot. His only strength was that Alpha 39 did not know that Abbas had seen the laser. Abbas also had a revolver. He guessed that the Alpha was using a sniper. Probably darts instead of bullets because Alphas had to check their victims. Snipers only fired one dart at a time. If Alpha 39 used a sniper, he could only take out one of the three immediately. Most likely it meant that he probably had another weapon to fire immediately after. Abbas's window was that short interval. He steadied his grip on the revolver.

"Guys," he whispered, continuously looking ahead. "Run in opposite directions on my signal. I don't want any arguments. You guys will have to save our friend. I'll handle Alpha 39."

Salman looked up immediately. His eyes widened in shock.

"What are yo-?"

"Get down!" Abbas cried as he knocked Salman over. A dart came flying in a second later. It rebounded against the car. Abbas fired several shots in response. From the corner of his eye he could see Haider and Salman running as instructed. There were cries of alarm. Abbas ignored them. He needed to focus on his own target now.

# 19

## Ali

BOOM! Abbas rolled over; the dart just missed him. Alpha 39 wasn't pulling any punches. Abbas fired once more. Behind him there were all kinds of shouts and noises. Abbas prayed silently. "Ya Allah, Help me!"

Another dart came flying through. Abbas ducked once more and pressed his trigger. The bullet whizzed away. At that moment, panic struck Abbas. He was out of ammunition. It was all over. No! He couldn't give in that easily. Even when Murtaza faced the hardest of challenges, he didn't lose hope. Abbas dodged another dart. Quickly, he jumped behind a piece of rubble. He needed a strategy. An Akbar styled strategy. Abbas evaluated the situation. The Alpha was bigger and stronger than him. But on the intellectual side, they were even. Abbas needed to ambush him and either catch him off guard or use his strengths against him. But for that, he needed to know where the Assassin was hiding. That had to come first.

At that moment, Abbas put the empty revolver in his pocket and marched out in the open space. Arms wide, he shouted as loud as he could in a taunting tone,

"Am I that scary for you, little Alpha?"

Immediately Abbas heard a heart wrenching growl and from behind a pile of boulders, Alpha 39 emerged. He was massive in size, just like Akbar. Like Alpha 43, he carried the strange feeling of death around him and his eyes spoke of bloodlust. In one hand

he was holding a C-gun and in the other, a high caliber pistol.

“I’ll show you what fear is, squirt!” the Alpha spat. Immediately he charged at Abbas. Abbas turned around hundred and eighty degrees and began sprinting as fast as he could, away from Alpha 39. This time he knew Akbar wasn’t going to be there to save him. Abbas leapt between rocks and boulders, desperately trying to maintain a lead.

His mind was racing even faster. what was he going to do now? It’s not like he could outrun him forever. From his last run, Abbas had painfully learnt that you could not outrun an Alpha. Abbas would need to confront him. It would have to be sudden. So sudden that Alpha 39 wouldn’t see it coming. Abbas looked ahead for a possibility of escape. There was a small burnt house at the edge of the neighbourhood. Abbas could stop behind the corner and ambush the Alpha.

“Tired yet kid!” he heard his attacker shout out.

Alpha 39 wasn’t that far behind. Abbas was almost there. Ten meters. . . . seven metres. . . three metres. . . There! Abbas jumped behind the corner. He noticed several small iron screws lying loose on the ground. Abbas grabbed one in each hand. He could hear the Alpha’s footsteps. Alpha 39 would be there in a few seconds. Taking a deep breath he counted, three. . . two. . . one. . . Now!

“Ya Allah!” Abbas cried as he jumped forward, knocking Alpha 39 completely off balance. As they reached the ground, Abbas drove the ironscrews he was holding into the Alpha.

“Argh,” the Alpha grunted. But Abbas knew he wasn’t hurt. Alpha 39 slapped Abbas. He fell sideways. Alpha leapt forward to finish the job but Abbas moved out of the way just in time. Abbas sprung in the air, desperately trying to flying tackle Alpha 39. Alpha turned in a flash, causing Abbas to miss. With a thud, he crashed on the ground.

“Ow,” Abbas groaned.

Abbas felt the wind knocked out of him. The Alpha picked Abbas up and flung him toward the wall. Abbas felt any trace of air left in his lungs disappear. He was struggling to breathe. It was over. There was no way he could win this fight. Alpha 39 was much stronger and faster. Abbas felt his back aching. His

vision faltering from the collisions. He could see the blur of the Alpha approaching him cautiously.

Abbas closed his eyes.

“Ya Allah” he whispered. “Help me!”

As the Alpha neared, Abbas began to realise just how big the Alpha was. He was like Goliath! Wait. Goliath? That was it! Abbas knew what he needed to do. Slowly, he reached out for a pebble. As the Alpha approached confidently, Abbas flung the pebble with as much force as he could.

With a small crack it struck the Alpha on his forehead knocking him back. The gun slipped from Alpha 39’s hand and Abbas knew that he had scored a good blow. As the Alpha groaned, Abbas lunged forward and grabbed hold of the Alpha’s high caliber pistol. Click. It was ready to fire. The dazed Alpha had quickly recovered but not fast enough. Abbas had tricked him. Abbas had disarmed him and evened the playing field.

“Hands up!” Abbas shouted as loudly as he could.

Alpha 39 watched him carefully. At that moment he broke into a venomous smile.

“You ever used one of those?” the Alpha smirked.

Abbas felt his heart pounding heavily and sweat pouring down his cheek. Alpha was making him nervous.

“Of course I have.” Abbas responded at last hoping his answer didn’t sound weak.

Alpha shrugged casually,

“Really?”

Abbas tried to hide the tension building up inside. With as much strength as he could, he replied coolly,

“There is always a first time for everything.”

Abbas couldn’t help feel unsafe in Alpha’s presence. There was something devilish about him. As if he could read his mind, Alpha murmured,

“You’re just a kid. You’re not going to shoot me.”

Abbas felt his hand shake.

The Alpha sneered and continued,

“You don’t have it in you.”



Abbas forced his hand to stay still but inevitably felt his cheeks saturated with sweat.

Alpha took a step forward. Nervously, Abbas held the fire arm. Why couldn't he pull the trigger?

"Don't take another step!" he growled.

Alpha 39 shrugged and did so again. And again. Abbas felt the gun shaking uncontrollably and abruptly found himself walking backwards.

"Give me the gun, kid!" Alpha 39 hissed. "You can't kill me!"

Abbas was about to respond when he heard a loud voice boom from behind.

"That's why he has us!"

Abbas turned alongside the Alpha to see where the voice came from. There, standing before him, was a most welcome sight. Akbar stood tall and proud like a lion. Haider and an injured Ali were on his sides. Abbas felt his pulse relax. He was safe. The Alpha lost his swagger for the first time and looked genuinely worried.

"You!" he growled. "You betrayed us!"

Akbar casually walked up to Alpha 39. He was finally looking like Akbar again.

"Abbas, Haider," Akbar whispered softly. "Turn around."

Haider did so but Abbas found himself glued to the spot. He didn't turn. Akbar watched Abbas carefully for a second. He shrugged. Abruptly, Akbar whipped out a knife and drove it straight into Alpha 39's chest. Alpha's eyes widened in horror as blood oozed out from his chest. Almost immediately he dropped to the ground, dead. His eyes still open. Abbas now wished that he had turned. While he had seen death before, it somehow felt very strange to see Akbar killing someone. And the knife made it all the more gruesome.

Akbar advanced towards Abbas and took him in a tight embrace.

"When I found Ali's axe, I realised what you two were going to do. I rushed immediately as fast as I could."

Abbas felt tears trickle down his cheek,

"I'm sorry, but I didn't think there was enough time."

"You were right to think that!" Akbar retorted. "Because of

you, I was able to get here in time. But I dare say, you handled yourself quite well.”

Abbas shrugged. His eyes were still locked onto Alpha 39’s body.

“Don’t worry about him,” Akbar whispered. “He was a murderer who is now going to answer for all of the crimes he committed against innocent people.”

Abbas nodded and with great effort, turned away.

“I couldn’t press the trigger,” Abbas muttered. “Alpha 39 knew that.”

Akbar smiled and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Abbas. You’re only eighteen. I wouldn’t expect you to be able to kill without hesitation. The fact that you captured an Alpha is already big enough. Nobody, not even me, has been able to capture an Alpha.”

Abbas gave Akbar a tight hug.

“Woah,” Akbar grunted. “Don’t break my ribs yet.”

Abbas let go and turned to face Haider. A sudden thought occurred to him.

“Where did Salman go?”

Haider smirked,

“The foolish coward fled the moment that dart came flying in.”

Abbas couldn’t help laugh.

“Who is Salman?” he heard Akbar question.

“Don’t worry!” Haider began. “We’ll tell you on the way home.”

And they did. For the next hour, Abbas and Haider explained everything that took place since they had left. Akbar and Ali asked plenty of questions along the way, and while Ali seemed to digest the story relatively quickly, Akbar took his fair share of time to wrap his head around it.

“So, let me get this straight,” Akbar repeated as the bungalow finally came in sight. “Salman kidnapped you both, then you fooled him into thinking you were gang members, so he wouldn’t think of pulling any tricks and you excited him into leading you to Ali.”

“It was all Abbas Bhai, honestly.” Haider chuckled.

Abbas smiled as they entered into the forest,

“It was both of us.”

Akbar gave Abbas a warm smile and pat on the shoulder. Abbas felt his chest fill with delight. He didn't know why he felt so childish right now but it didn't matter.

They made their way down the forest path at a good pace but Abbas could clearly tell it was very taxing on Ali. The young man kept his head high and steps strong but occasionally he would draw in a sharp breath, a hand pressing his side.

‘He probably has broken ribs,’ Abbas thought with a grimace.

There was also a nasty bruise climbing from his chin to his cheekbone that was beginning to turn mottled red. His bare skin was littered with small scratches from his earlier scuffle. How he was still walking was a mystery to Abbas and he could feel a bubble of awe and self-respect grow in his mind for the man in front of him.

Speaking of Zahra, he could see her approaching from further down their path with a little party of her own. In her hands was an automatic rifle and on both sides, she was flanked by her younger siblings. Even at this distance, Abbas could see her composure teeter between determination and worry, before sliding to relief when she caught sight of them.

Zahra quickened her pace leaving her two compatriots struggling to catch up before breaking into a full run towards Ali.

He caught her taking a step back to steady himself with a hushed grunt of discomfort. Zahra was too distracted to notice his wounds. Ali smiled and hugged her. Her soft tears gave way to hiccupping sobs.

When she finally raised her head, she looked at him and whispered in a raspy voice cracking with emotion, “I thought they had taken you. . . I thought they had. . .”

She could barely continue further when she began to cry again. Ali wiped her tears and smiled. “I'm not going anywhere, Inshallah. Besides, I don't think the Angel of Death could have taken me without your permission, now could he?”

Abbas stifled a laugh at Zahra's unamused frown and in the

periphery of his vision, he could see Haider and Jafar struggling to do the same. Maryam and Akbar were sharing a knowing smile.

“Don’t joke like that” she retorted angrily. Her posture was rigid, her fists clenched at her side. “I have already lost my parents to these beasts and. . .”

That instantly sobered everyone’s mood. Abbas watched in surprise as Zahra’s strength suddenly seemed to give way. Ali quickly grasped her falling form as Akbar hurried to her other side and held one of her arms to support her. Her breathing was rapid and shallow. “I remember them Ali. I remember every detail. How they spoke, how they laughed, how they lived. How they gave up everything for us. How alone we were, how alone we felt. I remember how scared I was knowing I would have to raise Maryam and Jafar, knowing I would have to be the mother they would need. I can’t do it again Ali!”

She paused for a second to catch her breath and continued, “I can’t do it again Ali! I need you! . . . .We need you” she whispered at the end.

Ali’s face had long lost any trace of levity as he exchanged a worried glance with Akbar.

Looking down and tightening her grip on his sleeves, Zahra took a deep breath. “Ali, You’re going to be a father, Inshallah.”

Abbas felt his jaw drop. She had spoken so softly that Abbas was sure he had imagined it, but Ali’s reaction convinced him otherwise.

“Wha—What? Really?” he sputtered, his face clouded in confusion.

Abbas felt his lips involuntarily pull into a grin as he watched Ali scramble to comprehend what she had just revealed.

As understanding dawned on the little group, Maryam was the first to respond with an uncharacteristically girlish squeal. Her hands clasped over her mouth, as she bounced from foot to foot in excitement before flying to Zahra. She grabbed her sister in a hug that looked strong enough to snap bones. Zahra smiled and hugged her little sister.

Jafar looked lost, shocked between Maryam’s reaction and the strange news before him, before he too broke into a smile and ran

to give his sister a hug. Haider had a huge smile and congratulated her, Abbas chiming in to do so as well.

She smiled somewhat graciously amidst her swollen eyes and reddened cheeks and thanked them.

Zahra swiveled around nervously; her gaze resting on Akbar and Ali. Akbar was smiling and let out a booming laugh before enveloping her in a gentle hug. When they pulled apart, everyone was surprised to see his eyes brimming with tears. Placing a hand on her head, Akbar said,

“You will be an amazing mother. Your parents would be so proud of you, Inshallah.”

Zahra smiled and hugged him once more. Like everyone else, Abbas felt his eyes fall on the one person who had yet to respond.

Ali had sunk to a crouched position on the ground, his head in his hands.

“Ali?” Zahra asked tentatively.

He looked up at her. “I’m going to be a father?” he asked in a disbelieving tone.

The next moment, he was springing up, laughing in a booming voice that echoed through the woods. He spun around jubilantly before turning to Zahra again. “I’m going to be a father?” This time his tone was barely containing his excitement.

Abbas watched Zahra nod happily. “Inshallah,” she replied. Ali laughed loudly again, his head tilted back, his guffaws scaring a flock of birds in the nearby tree line.

“Ali!” Akbar chided “Do you want the whole forest to hear?”

“Let the world hear!” Ali exclaimed. He grabbed Jafar who had the misfortune of standing nearby and gripped him in a tight hug. Jafar yelped in surprise as Ali tossed him higher than Abbas thought possible, before catching the bewildered boy.

He then ran to Akbar and enveloped the man in a tight hug. Akbar smiled, “May Allah bless you both.”

Abbas stood beside Haider on the sidelines, a swelling emptiness gripping his heart. He could almost feel the tendrils of familial warmth that enveloped the happy people before him. As if to somewhat compensate, he wrapped an arm around Haider’s shoulders and offered the boy a small smile. Haider returned it, though he

did a worse job at keeping his expression devoid of what they felt.

Determined to not sour the joyous occasion, they went up to Ali and congratulated.

Abbas and Haider were following the little caravan back to the house. Zahra and Maryam were at the front, discussing something. Behind them were Jafar and Ali.

Abbas and Haider followed and trailing behind the group was Akbar.

As the house came into view and their leading companions disappeared behind its walls, a voice at the back of the group called him. He looked up to see Akbar who had paused in front of the house. He turned to Haider, "You may go inside."

Haider huffed and headed towards the door. Abbas turned and went back to Akbar.

Akbar's face was serious with a trace of a smile. "You were very brave today."

Abbas looked down and absent-mindedly kicked at a rock, struggling to cauterize the childish warm flow of glee at the praise.

"I changed my mind. After the courage you showed today, I feel that maybe, just maybe, it could be different." Akbar explained.

Abbas leaned forward eagerly.

"For perhaps the first time in many years, I feel hope." Akbar whispered. "Hope that one day, I could go for a walk with my nieces and nephews without worrying for our lives. That Ali and Zahra don't have to go looking for supplies with guns in their hands. That we could live in peace. So, I have made my decision. I will train you Abbas. I will teach you, Maryam, Jafar and Haider everything I know. Including how to fight the C-gun. We start in a week Inshallah. Be sure to inform your brother."

With a nod, Akbar strode past him and entered the house. Abbas smiled. Finally! At long last he might actually have a chance against the Alphas. Maybe Akbar might even teach him the flying tackle! Abbas felt excitement flow through his every limb. Balmy sunlight smiled on him, and he grinned enthusiastically. It didn't matter what was happening beyond the front yard, because for now, everything felt perfect.

## A Meeting

Faisal staggered sideways collapsing on the ground. His opponent overshadowed him, a look of disapproval on his face.

“How many times Delta 43,” his opponent growled. “How many times must I tell you to keep your hands up when you fight!”

Faisal wiped the sweat off his forehead. He was tired of his mentor’s endless spews of anger.

“I am trying!” he hissed.”

Alpha 43 turned to face the other two students.

“Your batchmates have been performing much better than you!” he snarled. “And do you know why?”

Faisal pushed himself to stand upright. Breathlessly, he locked eyes with Alpha 43. Faisal had never been taught to lower his head.

“Because you think your father’s wealth will buy your way through my training curriculum,” Alpha 43 scoffed. “Well, as I’ve said before, you are sadly mistaken. I will not tolerate your incompetency” Alpha 43 snarled. “If you keep this up, I won’t advance you to the next rank.”

Faisal rolled his eyes. He didn’t understand why his father had put him through all of this. Why was he getting taught the martial arts skills needed to make him an Alpha?

Alpha 43 turned to face Faisal.

“Get going Delta 43. The tournament is only three days from

now and I might just send you up against a Beta to teach you a lesson.”

Faisal rolled his eyes once more. Alpha 43 would never send him up against a Beta. He wasn't that foolish.

“He knows how powerful my father is,” Faisal thought silently to himself.

Sarcastically, he pushed himself to stand on his feet. Alpha 43 shook his head lightly.

“Get out of here Delta 43,” he muttered.

Mockingly, Faisal raised a hand in salute and walked away, leaving Alpha 43 behind him. Alpha 43 continued to watch Faisal until he had disappeared into the resting quarters.

A loud clapping sounded behind him. Alpha 43 whirled around. There was no one there. Slowly, he unsheathed his knife and moved forward towards the shadowed corner of the training room. He heard a click. Alpha 43 narrowed his eyes suspiciously,

“I know you're there,” he hissed. “Reveal yourself.”

There was a few moments of silence. Alpha 43 tightened his hold over the hilt of the knife.

“Is the mighty Alpha 43 afraid of the dark?” a voice called out.

Alpha 43 felt his hand stiffen. He knew who it was. And for a moment, he wanted to barge in and gut the intruder to death. Sheathing his knife, he replied coolly,

“I'm more afraid of incompetent people.”

There was a laugh as Alpha 31 stepped into the light. He was tall. Even taller than Alpha 43 and was significantly broad. But Alpha 43 was broader. Alpha 31 was dressed fully in black. In his hand was his signature pistol, the 1636 revolver. It was the latest model. Alpha 43 knew how much Alpha 31 loved guns. One could say, he never used anything else. But there was something else. Alpha 31 was the one person Alpha 43 hated more than anyone in the iron fortress. They were rivals so naturally, it was uncommon for Alpha 31 to show up here.

“Why are you here?” Alpha 43 sneered.

Alpha 31 smirked. At last he responded.

“I must say Alpha, your students really are behind.”



Alpha 43 felt a trace of anger inside but easily controlled it.

“Why are you here?” he repeated in the same manner.

Alpha 31 locked eyes with Alpha 43.

“Do you know Beta 31 is already advancing to her final part of training,” Alpha 31 added, ignoring the question. “She is almost ready to be an Alpha. I believe she will be Alpha 71. Truly, it is amazing. I was just wondering when your next student would be ready?”

Alpha 43 replied in a taunting manner,

“Let’s hope Beta 31 can catch more people than her mentor did.”

Alpha 31’s eyes narrowed, his smirk unwavering. Alpha 43 broke into a diplomatic smile. It was no secret that Alpha 31 never brought back survivors. Everyone he ever captured had failed the scanner. Or so he claimed. While most people believed this, Alpha 43 suspected something else. Perhaps Alpha 31 didn’t like taking prisoners. He liked killing them more. That was more likely. Alpha 31 laughed sarcastically.

“Thank you for the kind wishes. I too hope that one day, Beta 43 will be able to create his own reputation rather than inherit someone else’s.”

The smile from Alpha 43 faded away. He knew what Alpha 31 was prying at. Akbar. The former Alpha 43. The one person who Alpha 43 arguably hated just as much as Alpha 31. If only Alpha 31 felt the same way. Back when they were Betas, Alpha 31 had been mentored by Akbar. Akbar had made him an Alpha. It was no secret that Alpha 31 felt differently about Akbar’s treachery. He simply ignored it. He didn’t like bringing it up.

“You started speaking a lot more since your teacher left,” Alpha 43 hissed.

Alpha 31 shrugged his shoulders.

“Teacher to me, traitor to you.”

Alpha 43 rolled his eyes. Arguing with Alpha 31 was almost impossible. Alpha 31 was a king of words. He could argue his way through anything. And while he seemed to respect Akbar, Alpha 43 knew Alpha 31 would kill Akbar without hesitation. That is what Alphas do, after all. They kill and don’t let emotions get in

their way.

“Why are you here?” Alpha 43 repeated. “I won’t ask again.”

Alpha 31 turned to face the door. It was a few moments before he finally answered.

“She wants to see us.”

Alpha 43 narrowed his eyes suspiciously. Why did the boss want to see them? What had happened that she was calling him and Alpha 31? Alpha 43 recalled the orders he had received a few days ago.

*“I want all Alphas training their students around the clock. Minimal breaks. Every Alpha must provide a beta within the next three days.”*

That was why he had been emphasizing so hard on the performance of his students. He needed to send up a potential Alpha. Deep down, Alpha 43 suspected he knew why. This had only happened twice in his entire life. It was very uncommon. Virtually impossible. Another Alpha must have defected.

“Let’s go then,” he muttered silently.

Alpha 31 nodded and the two set off. They exited the training arena entering into the lengthy hallway. Alpha 43 began strolling alongside Alpha 31, ignoring the strange and curious glances the others flashed at them.

“I think they’re surprised that you finally cut your hair,” Alpha 43 whispered.

Alpha 31 leaned in. Silently, he murmured back,

“Actually they heard about your failures in the last mission.”

Alpha 43 stopped his eyes from widening in surprise. He wasn’t going to give Alpha 31 that.

“What kind of rumours have you fallen victim to this time?” Alpha 43 laughed.

Alpha 31 stopped Alpha 43. Looking him in the eye he said, loud enough for everyone in the hallway to hear,

“It is said that a teenage boy escaped your mighty clutches and actually managed to inflict the fatal injury that eats away at your shoulder.”

Alpha 43 glared at Alpha 31. He wanted to reply but was at a loss of words. He turned towards the door at the end of the hall

which was now in proximity. He held his arm out for the door to scan. Alpha 31 did the same.

“Access granted,” a robotic voice murmured.

The door opened and both Alphas stepped through. They were now in a much more isolated hallway. This one was strictly private. Only Alphas were allowed here. Even Faisal wasn't allowed in here. They walked down this hallway. As they did so, Alpha 31 asked,

“Why do you use knives Alpha 43? They're so slow and inefficient.”

Alpha 43 rolled his eyes as they reached the end of the hallway.

“Those inefficient knives helped me remain at the top of the points chart,” he murmured.

Alpha 31 narrowed his eyes.

“You might want to consider switching to guns if you find yourself face to face with a teenage boy,” he mocked.

Alpha 43 turned once more towards the door.

A robotic voice murmured,

“What is the password?”

Both Alphas were silent. Careful not to make a single noise. It was a ten second wait period. Any noise meant the door locking down entirely. Alpha 43 counted silently in his head,

“three...two...one”

The door swung open, revealing a flight of stairs. The Alphas silently treaded downwards. As they did so, Alpha 43 began pondering over the meeting once more. What did the boss want to speak about? Which Alpha had defected? Which soldier was so despicable that he would leave them and join the common folk.

They reached the end of the stairs. A small elevator was before them. Both Alphas entered inside. As soon as they did, the powerful doors slammed shut.

“Which floor?” a robotic voice asked.

“Take us to the queen bee!” Alpha 31 answered.

Alpha 43 waited patiently as the elevator carried them upwards. A few minutes passed before they finally reached the top. The metal doors slid open and the Alphas entered into the final hallway. Alpha 43 had his eyes locked on a picture frame at the end of the

hall. As they strolled through, both were careful to avoid the trap areas that had been placed to catch perpetrators. The locations of these traps were only known to Alphas. They finally reached the end of the hallway. Alpha 43 reached out and removed the frame from the wall, revealing a small red button. Alpha 31 placed his hand firmly over the button.

Alpha 43 began counting in his head,  
“five...four...three...two...one”

Instantly, both Alphas dropped to the ground as a storm of darts came flying from all directions. And then it was over. The Alphas pushed themselves to their feet as the wall gave way revealing a small corridor. This was the final test. Only an Alpha had the reflexes to dodge the darts. This ensured that only Alphas could enter. They made their way inside the corridor. Seconds later, the wall moved back in place. Alpha 43 advanced forward. Taking a deep breath, he pressed the handle, entering inside the room that lay hidden behind it. From the corner of his eye, he saw Alpha 31 sticking close behind.

Alpha 43 turned his attention to the room he had entered. Even though he had entered this room so many times, it always felt strange being here. The fancy gold plated tables and lamps, expensive fabric-made curtains and large oak wood shelves filled with millions of documents. In front, seated behind the large golden desk was a woman. She was significantly old, however her hair was not gray in the slightest. She had long well-trimmed nails. Her face brimmed with academic brilliance of her past. She was wearing a white three piece suit.

Both Alphas bowed their heads respectfully.

“I trust you both know why you’re here,” the woman murmured.

Alpha 43 lifted his gaze to match Jumeira’s. For a few moments everything was silent before someone finally spoke.

“Who did it?” Alpha 31 whispered. “Who defected?”

The woman stared intently at Alpha 31.

“Nobody did,” she replied. “But something has happened.”

Alpha 43 felt his mind enter a whirl. What had happened? If nobody had defected, why had Jumeira called her two most competent Alphas to a meeting? Why had she been so eager for

the betas to enter their final stage of training? No. Something big must have happened. Perhaps even bigger than an Alpha defecting.

Jumeira turned to face Alpha 43.

“It seems you two have reached the same conclusion.”

She paused. “But there is one thing neither of you have considered.”

Jumeira raised her hands and clapped twice. Immediately a blue holographic screen appeared. Alpha 43 stared intently at the screen. There was a picture. A picture of a house wall. On the wall there was a large fist painted in red, presumably signifying blood. Words were etched underneath it. Alpha 43 narrowed his eyes. Slowly, he read the words.

‘We can fight back!’

What was this about? It certainly wasn’t the first time a rebellion had taken place. For sure this couldn’t be the only thing bothering Jumeira. Alpha 43 turned to Jumeira,

“What is so dangerous about this? We’ve seen plenty of things like this before.”

Jumeira watched him coldly.

“Zoom in closer Alpha. Zoom in closer to the words.”

Alpha 43 zoomed in closer. There was something beside the words. Perhaps a piece of debris. No. It was too well-shaped. It almost looked like- “A person,” Alpha 31 thought out loud. “There is a person.”

Alpha 43 still didn’t see what was panicking Jumeira so much. Yes, it was a big picture but they had seen plenty of these before. Why was Jumeira making such a big deal out of it. But wait. Alpha 43 knew Jumeira wasn’t a fool. There was something important here.

“Who is this person?” he asked.

Jumeira narrowed her eyes.

“Alpha 39” she hissed.

Alpha 43 felt his hand go numb for a moment. His eyes widened in surprise.

“That’s not possible,” he retorted. “Nobody has ever managed to kill an Alpha.”

Jumeira spoke without wasting a moment.

“That is why I called you both. Alpha 39 has been assassinated.”

Alpha 43 struggled to regain his composure. He knew Alpha 39 personally. They had served in countless missions together.

“Who did this?” he spat.

Jumeira locked eyes with Alpha 43.

“When I brought him in for examination,” she whispered. “He only had one injury. A knife injury. A knife injury right above his heart.”

Alpha 43 felt his eyes narrow in fury.

“Do you think,” Alpha 31 began. “That he has resurfaced?”

Alpha 43 felt his fist tightening.

“Yes,” Jumeira replied emotionlessly. “I think he is back after all these years.”

Alpha 43 felt his anger pounding furiously like a lion.

“There is no way he is back,” he growled.

Jumeria raised a brow.

“Let’s face the facts Alpha 43!” she scoffed. “Only two Alphas have been known to use just knives in history. One of them stands before me. That leaves us with the other one. It’s even where he used to do it. Right above the heart. I remember what he used to say. ‘If you stab the heart they die too quickly, so stab above it.’ ”

Alpha 43 turned to face Alpha 31. He could see the same fury on Alpha 31’s face.

“If he did this,” Alpha 31 spat. “I won’t kill him with a gun. I’ll use a knife to gut him open.”

Alpha 43 turned to face Jumeira.

“Why?” he asked. “Why after all these years has Akbar returned? There has to be a reason. Where has he been hiding these last 12 years?”

“That’s irrelevant,” Jumeira scowled. “What matters is that we cannot let this get out before the presentation. If it does, we will lose everything.”

Alpha 43 didn’t care about the presentation though. His mind was frozen. Akbar was back. His old nemesis. Akbar, the only one who had ever defeated him was back. Although nobody knew

this. Alpha 43 had made sure that nobody found out. If Akbar was back, it meant that Alpha 43 would have to face his past once more. He would have to finish what they started 12 years ago.

“Hence,” Jumeira interrupted. “I have made some important decisions.”

Alpha 43 felt his ears prick.

“First of all,” she began. “Beta 31, having made the highest score so far, will become the new Alpha 39.”

Alpha 43 avoided Alpha 31’s gaze. This was the last thing he needed. Alpha 31 bowed his head respectfully.

“The winner of the next tournament will be made Alpha 71 as already planned,” Jumeira continued. “And I have decided to deploy Alpha 31 to ‘handle’ Akbar, given Alpha 43’s recent injury.”

Alpha 43 had to stop himself from stabbing Alpha 31 there and then. His hand was shaking as he barely managed to restrain his anger. What was the meaning of this? Wasn’t he the best Alpha for the job? Wasn’t he the one who knew Akbar best?

“Why him?” Alpha 43 managed to muster. “Why?”

Jumeira turned to face Alpha 43 once more.

“Are you questioning my decision, Alpha?” she hissed.

Alpha 43 felt his anger burning him like a wild fire. Alpha 31! Alpha 31! Of all the Alphas! No! This couldn’t be a coincidence. Everyone knew Alpha 43 was the strongest of all Alphas! How could she do this!? Slowly, he shook his head and turned away.

Jumeira turned to Alpha 31.

“For the next six months, you will have operational command of the Alphas. Find him and terminate him. Should you fail, I will personally punish you myself. So get the job done. I don’t want to see that good for nothing fool here again!”

Alpha 31 bowed his head respectfully once more, causing Alpha 43 to roll his eyes.

“Of course Maam. You won’t see or hear from Akbar again once I am through with him.”

With that, Jumeira dismissed Alpha 31 from the room leaving her alone with Alpha 43. Alpha 43 forced his hand to unclench as she turned to face him.

“I have been informed of something Alpha. Something that hasn’t pleased me,” she paused.

Alpha 43 kept his gaze unwavering.

“I am not pleased with Faisal’s recent performance,” she continued. “And I’ve received word that you have not been teaching him to the best of your ability.”

Alpha 43 felt his fist tighten once more.

“Faisal is a spoilt brat!” he hissed. “He doesn’t train prop-”

Jumeira motioned for silence. Alpha 43 forced his voice down. He needed to pick his enemies wisely.

“Alpha,” she murmured. “Do I need to remind you how essential Faisal’s father is for this project?”

Alpha 43 stared hard at the ground. He knew how important it was that Faisal’s father was satisfied with them.

Jumeira stood up for the first time.

“I don’t expect you to turn Faisal into an Alpha!” she hissed. “I know how spoilt he is! But now, from this moment forth, you are to fix your attitude with Faisal! Tolerate him just long enough. Don’t you understand? With each day, we are getting closer to creating a C-gun with zero percent minimum. The dream will finally be achieved. However, we will only be able to do this as long as Faisal’s father is supporting us.”

Alpha 43 raised his head to face Jumeira. He knew she had an ulterior motive for bringing up Faisal. Especially when she had just assigned Alpha 31 the most important duty. Jumeira was trying to instigate either his anger or competitive spirit, or both, in order to use him for some task. Experience had taught Alpha 43 that Jumeira was a snake who never did things without purpose.

“Of course,” he bowed his head respectfully, forcing a degree of grudge and anger in his voice. “I will see to it that his highness is tended to properly.” Alpha 43 added sarcasm on the last line to enhance the effect.

Jumeira frowned before dismissing him. Alpha 43 turned and left, leaving Jumeira alone in her office. Jumeira watched him leave. She couldn’t help smile. How she loved to instigate the negative competition. She didn’t have a shadow of doubt that



Alpha 43 was the best candidate for this mission. His rivalry with Alpha 31 would make him stronger. She knew that his anger would be key in all of this. He wasn't going to take these six months nicely. And Jumeira knew the moment they would be over, Alpha 43 would be roaring after Akbar. Assuming Alpha 31 failed, which he probably will. Jumeira knew because Akbar was her prodigy and he was the best Alpha ever trained. She was almost certain that if Akbar had killed Alpha 39, he was capable of killing Alpha 31.

She clapped her hands,

“Computer, pull out the top five Alphas by score.”

There was a beep and a blue holographic screen appeared before her. Jumeira studied the names carefully. The list was as follows,

Alpha 43 - status: missing - score : 99.46%  
Alpha 43 - status: in service - score: 98.32%  
Alpha 16 - status: in holding - score: 98.27%  
Alpha 31 - Status: in service - score: 98.24%  
Alpha 39 - Status: Deceased - score: 97.21%"

“Computer, why are there two Alpha 43s on the chart?” Jumeira questioned.

“Maam, you requested from all archives. That is why Alphas that are no longer in service appear here as well.” A robotic voice explained.

“The first Alpha 43, with a score of 99.46 percent is the former Alpha 43, while the second one at 98.32 percent is the current Alpha 43.”

Alas. Akbar had the highest score. Even after all his treachery, she knew that he was always the best Alpha. Jumeira sighed,

“He was a highly useful asset. If only he had used his potential to the maximum.”

The computer beeped. Jumeira looked away at the window. There was a time she would await his arrival. Now she had sent an assassin after him. There was no way out left for Akbar. For the survival of the project, Akbar had to die.

# 21

## Training Day 1

“Don’t choke!” Zahra cautioned as Abbas slurped down his remaining breakfast.

He could barely contain his excitement. Today was the day! He had been waiting all week for this. And at last, his training was going to start! Abbas gulped as he swallowed the last morsel.

“Thanks Zahra Api!” he blurted as he left. “See you in a few hours, Inshallah.”

Without another word, he bounded towards the door and flung it open. Swiftly, he stepped through and scampered towards the field where Akbar and Haider stood waiting.

Abbas felt excitement course through his veins. What would they be doing today? What amazing techniques would Akbar teach them? Abbas had no clue. For once, his mind was failing him, overpowered by a new emotion. Joy. Pure joy. Something which Abbas had not felt in a while. He was almost unsure of what to do with it.

“What are we doing today?” he bubbled.

Akbar turned to face him. There was a strange smile on his face.

“We are just waiting on Maryam and Jafar,” he explained.

His face broke into a smirk,

“But I can assure you we won’t be flying tackling rocks.” Abbas felt himself redden with embarrassment. How could Akbar have known? It wasn’t possible. Abbas had always been careful to

make sure nobody saw him. But Akbar always seemed to know and see everything.

“Alright,” Akbar began, snapping Abbas out of his thoughts. “Maryam and Jafar have arrived so we can get started.”

Abbas turned to his left. Maryam and Jafar stood there as excited as he was. Abbas knew this was probably their first time as well. He couldn’t help but smile. It was nice to see Maryam and Jafar on good terms again.

“Bismillah hir rahman nir raheem,” Akbar called out. “It is time to begin the training.”

Abbas felt his heart pounding with enthusiasm.

“In this training program,” Akbar continued. “I hope to make you strong enough to defeat the C-gun.”

He paused.

“But getting to the level of encountering the C-gun has its prerequisites. You will need to be physically and mentally strong. That is why we will start with this and judge your progress.”

Akbar stopped to withdraw a small yellow copy from his pocket.

“I will be using this copy to monitor your progress,” he explained. “You will have to carry out the challenges I give you and you will be awarded points. Based on your cumulative score, you will be ranked on a leader board. There will be prizes.”

He watched them warily,

“A piece of advice. These challenges are dynamic. They are not typical. To solve them, you will have to work not only hard but also intelligently. Only then can you succeed. Now each day has a particular topic. I will be giving you the topic at the start of the day, and you will then engage in the challenges.”

From the corner of his eye Abbas could see the others fiddling with excitement as well. This was going to be a good competition.

“The topic for today,” Akbar murmured. “Is actions and their consequences. Good luck!”

Abbas pondered. Actions and their consequences? What does that mean?

“Your first challenge is,” Akbar smiled once more; everyone was watching expectantly. “Give me twenty five laps! As fast as possible!”

Abbas hesitated for a moment. Had he misheard? Twenty five full laps! He looked around at the others. They looked just as hesitant. Abbas turned to address Akbar,

“Twenty five?”

Akbar nodded, not a trace of doubt in his eyes. He stared at all of them intently.

“Well,” he exclaimed. “Get going!”

Abbas was the first to move. A moment later, Jafar was right behind him alongside Haider. Maryam didn’t move. She appeared to be frozen on the spot. For a moment longer she stared at Akbar before joining the others.

Twenty five laps around the large bungalow was no joke. It took almost half an hour to do it. By the end, Abbas was panting. He felt his head draining and his body aching. His legs wanted to fall off. Abbas struggled to keep himself together. From the corner of his eye, he observed how everyone else was.

Haider was red as a tomato, gasping like an old car engine. He looked like he was on the verge of collapse. Maryam and Jafar, on the other hand, were a little bit better off, probably because of their scouting routine everyday. They were still panting but not the way Abbas and Haider were.

As the four children finally reconvened at the starting point, the sound of Akbar’s clapping could be heard.

“Well done,” he laughed. “You all look like you were run over by a tractor!”

After a few seconds, Akbar said the most unexpected thing, “Abbas,” he smiled. “Fight me.”

Abbas was certain his hearing had failed him. There was no way Akbar had just said that.

“Y-you want me t-to fight you?” Abbas stammered.

Akbar smiled once more.

“Abbas, I don’t want to repeat myself again. Fight me.”

Abbas hesitantly entered into a fighting stance. He raised his trembling hands as his heart thundered loudly. He knew very well how skilled Akbar was. Abbas pushed these thoughts out of his mind.

Akbar stood nice and calm as though nothing was about to happen.

Abbas lunged forward, attempting the flying tackle technique once more but in a flash, Akbar was gone and Abbas felt the hard ground crash into his face.

Akbar chuckled but sobered up soon .

Abbas was caught off guard, both physically and emotionally, as Akbar lifted him off the ground, holding him tightly with one arm in a powerful neck lock.

Abbas felt helpless.

Akbar released his hold, causing him to fall face flat in the mud once more.

“Ow! why are you doing this to me. This is not fair” Abbas moaned.

“Abbas, you are getting punished for what you said before the laps,” Akbar explained as the fight got concluded. “Let this be the first lesson for you. When you asked me to confirm twenty five laps rather than moving immediately, you caused a doubt in the minds of Haider and Jafar. This doubt caused them to move slower at the start. The four of you could have been done earlier had you immediately started running. Now realise that as the eldest member of this group, you were in a leadership position. The team takes its inspiration from its leader. It’s a position of responsibility and a leader must be fully aware of it.”

Abbas felt his mind enter a whirl. On one note he understood what Akbar was trying to say but why did he need a beating for it? Akbar could have just told him.

As if on cue, Akbar added with a smile,

“You won’t forget it now.”

Abbas felt a minor frustration build up. Was he meant to take a beating for every lesson? With a gulp, Abbas got to his feet, wiping the mud off his face. Abbas flashed a glance towards Haider, who was clearly struggling to stop himself from laughing. Jafar and Maryam were no better. Filled with embarrassment, he turned his gaze from their laughing faces. Their taunts was the last thing he needed now.

“Now,” Akbar continued, breaking his thoughts. “Everyone,

follow me.”

They began strolling away. This time Abbas did not repeat his earlier mistake. He immediately set off after Akbar, alongside Haider, Jafar and Maryam.

As he did so, one thought dominated his mind. He was not going to make a mistake like that again. Or else, by the end of this training, he'd be covered in bruises.

## 22

# Lentils and Grain

It was now twelve o'clock in the afternoon. But for Abbas, it felt longer. For the last four hours, Akbar had been relentless with their physical training. He had forced them to do all kinds of difficult exercises to improve their flexibility and strength. In addition, they all did self-defense training, practicing their techniques against Akbar. Abbas was surprised to discover how many details he skipped while fighting. Details that could benefit his opponent.

After some time, Abbas found himself in the shed, seated at a table along side everyone else. In front of everyone, lay three clay bowls. One of them, the largest one, was filled with a mixture of chickpeas and red lentils. The others were empty. Abbas eyed them warily, partially suspecting he knew what the next task would be.

“Ahem,” Akbar began. “Bismillah hir rahman nir raheem.”

Abbas felt a small surge of adrenaline as he looked from left to right. Jafar had already rolled up his sleeves. His ant-like hands ready to work. Haider was eyeing the bowls with contempt, while Maryam was staring intently at the bowls, determined to win this.

Abbas realised they must have all come to the same conclusion.

“Today,” Akbar continued. “For your final task, you must sort the chickpeas and red lentils into two remaining bowls.”

Abbas nodded, registering each word.

“When you finish,” Akbar paused, a small edge in his tone. “You may be allowed to leave. But until then, you will keep



working. Please note that you are not allowed to talk to each other during the task. Just keep going. Alright?”

Abbas rolled up his sleeves, waiting for Akbar to start the competition.

“three....two....one.... GO!”

Instantly, Abbas grabbed hold of the third bowl and began removing any red lentil from the top of the pile, placing it in one of the bowls. But the task was easier said than done, and almost immediately, Abbas realised that this was going to take time. A long time!

There was a small groan in the corner, probably from Haider. He was not accustomed to doing this kind of work. Abbas heard a small creak from the shed door. Daring to look up for just a moment, he realised Akbar had left them. Abbas turned to see the others. Both Jafar and Maryam were working away at the bowl. A little faster than Abbas would have preferred.

Silently, Abbas got back to his own work. He could feel beads of sweat trickling down his cheek as the day went on. Was it just him or was it getting very hot inside? Abbas didn't know. He could also hear an occasional bang of frustration from Jafar's side of the table or a hiss from Maryam. Everyone was finding the job troublesome.

And even though Abbas had been working for what felt like hours, he wasn't done even half of the bowl. Abbas felt his stomach rumble. He hadn't eaten for a while. There was a small chuckle from Haider as he realised everyone else had heard his stomach too.

“What's the matter Abbas Bhai?” Haider smirked. “Didn't have a good breakfast?”

Abbas smiled.

“Nah, it's the lentils and chickpeas. They keep reminding me of food!”

There was a small murmur of agreement from Jafar and Maryam's corners.

As they progressed on, Abbas began to feel bored. This was not the training he had in mind. Also, he didn't see the point of the lentils and chickpeas. How would this help him against the

C-gun or the Alphas? But after the four hour exercise session, part of Abbas wasn't complaining. There was a small squeal of excitement, causing Abbas to look up for a moment. Maryam was done half of her bowl. Silently, she eyeballed Abbas.

"How far are you?" she teased.

Abbas smiled,

"I wanted to give you a head start."

Maryam laughed, "How very kind of you!"

Abbas narrowed his eyes and got back to work. Now winning this had just become personal. He realised that even if the lentil sorting skill wouldn't help against Alphas, it would save him from ultimate humiliation.

With a new drive, he forced his hands to move faster. He was going to win this. It was then that it happened.

Abruptly, the door of the shed swung open. Everyone had lifted their heads at the sudden burst of sunlight. Abbas narrowed his eyes to focus better. Outside, stood Akbar. With a smile he called out,

"First person who leaves the shed, gets to end the day. They won't have to finish."

Before Akbar could finish his statement, Haider leapt out of the room like a cat. Akbar smiled and gave Haider a pat on the back.

"You can get going Haider," he congratulated. "Your training for today is over."

Haider stood awkwardly at the entrance of the shed.

Abbas watched incredulously as he muttered,

"Khuda Hafiz guys!" and scrambled off.

"What?" Maryam howled. "How come he gets to quit?" Akbar stepped inside the shed, ignoring her question. He took Haider's bowls and mixed the lentils nicely once more.

Abbas narrowed his eyes, unable to understand what was going on. How come Haider was allowed to quit early? Why was Akbar mixing his lentils once more?

Abbas watched Akbar suspiciously, causing Akbar to laugh.

"My children," Akbar explained. "Whenever a member of your team quits, the burden he carried, is inevitably pushed onto

his teammates. Like this.”

With a smile, Akbar quickly poured a portion of Haider’s pile into Abbas’s.

“What!” Abbas exclaimed. “That’s not fair!”

Abbas stared in dismay at the pile which was now almost back to how it was initially. Before he could argue, Akbar poured a portion of Haider’s pile into Jafar’s bowl.

“But Akbar Uncle,” Jafar whined. “I was almost done a fourth!”

Akbar shrugged helplessly as though he had no influence over the situation. Finally, he turned to Maryam who was on the verge of tears.

“Akbar Uncle please,” she begged. “Don’t do this!”

There was a sigh from Akbar.

“My girl, you must realise that Akbar Uncle can see past your fake tears.”

Maryam opened her mouth to argue but nothing came out as Akbar emptied out the remaining bowl into her container. Maryam just wiped away the tears and begrudgingly got to work.

There was another creak as Akbar left the shed once more. The moment he left, Maryam lost it.

“Why that insolent treacherous good for nothing-”

“Hey!” Abbas interrupted. “I know he sorta backstabbed us but he is still my brother.”

Maryam turned to him with a glance of utmost fury.

“He sorta back stabbed us?” she questioned with sarcasm. “You mean he left the first chance he got!”

Abbas looked down. There really was no way of justifying Haider’s actions. In addition, there was something else bothering him too. So far, everything in this activity had seemed pointless. Until now.

“Hey Maryam!” Abbas exclaimed. “Jafar, you too! I just realised something.”

Both siblings lifted their heads, acknowledging Abbas.

“Do you remember the topic Akbar Uncle had mentioned for today?”

There was a few seconds of silence before Jafar responded.

“You mean, actions and their consequences?”

“Yes,” Abbas answered. “Now let me ask you this, how relevant is the lentil-chickpea sorting to that?”

Maryam’s eyes lit up as though she finally understood.

“Of course!” she exclaimed. “Abbas, you are a genius!”

Jafar still didn’t seem to understand, for he mumbled,

“Maryam Api, Abbas Bhai, what are you talking about?”

Maryam turned excitedly to Jafar,

“Don’t you understand?” she answered. “The point of this isn’t to sort lentils! It is to understand the consequences of our actions! Inevitably, Haider leaving caused all of us to face additional difficulty. Which means we should try to finish as soon as possible because Akbar Uncle will come back later! To collect one of us again!”

Abbas nodded.

“So like, are you saying I could end early!” Jafar asked ecstatically.

Maryam sobered for a moment as though she hadn’t thought of that. Abbas could almost swear she had only been thinking about her ticket to ending early, but she dare not say that in front of Jafar.

Jafar didn’t seem to realise it for he excitedly got back to work.

Abbas also resumed his work more determined than ever. He knew that even if he didn’t finish, the least he could do is finish before any additional workload is added.

Swiftly, he began to sort the chickpeas and red lentils, driven by a new urge. An urge which was strangely powerful. He knew that Akbar would return eventually to collect one of them and even if he wasn’t the first one out, he could at least finish by then. But deep down, another thought was occurring in his mind. Who would leave? He knew that he and Maryam were closest to the door. Most likely one of them would be able to escape. Poor Jafar! He was looking exhausted and his progress was getting slower. Somehow, the hope that he could escape was overpowering any urge to work harder. How could Jafar not see that Abbas or Maryam were much more likely to escape?

‘He must be so absorbed in the idea of escaping, it is now

clouding his judgment,' Abbas thought.

As he watched Jafar day dream in the corner, Abbas made a resolution. Should Akbar return, he would let Jafar have a shot at leaving first. He was younger and didn't need to be here if he could leave.

Silently, Abbas resumed his work. As the time passed, he made some good progress and surprisingly so, managed to actually cross not only the half mark, but also the three quarter mark. Even though his fingers ached from the continuous labour, Abbas pushed on. He wanted to be done more then ever. But then it happened.

The door flew open and Akbar's familiar voice could be heard.

"First person who leaves the sh-" He didn't finish. For Maryam had instantly bounded towards the entrance. Just as she was about to exit the shed, there was a small groan from the corner of the shed.

Jafar was now in tears. He had lost all composure and hopelessness was clearly visible on his face. He hadn't imagined that this could happen. But Abbas was more surprised by what followed.

Maryam backed away from the exit, her hesitation was clearly visible.

"Go Jafar," she whispered. "You can go."

Jafar didn't believe it, for he asked again,

"For real Api? Like, I can go?"

Maryam nodded, with a smile.

"Yes," she muttered. "Go. Quickly now, before I change my mind."

Jafar's eyes lit up and he rushed up to his sister giving her a big hug.

"Thank you so much!" he murmured between tears.

Maryam ruffled his hair and with that, Jafar plodded out of the shed, leaving Abbas and Maryam. There was a few minutes of awkward silence. Abbas knew he should say something but he was taken aback.

He paused his work.

"Maryam," he whispered. "That was a very brave thing to do."

Maryam did not respond immediately. But Abbas saw that she had stopped working. There was silence until she finally replied,

“Wouldn’t you have done the same for Haider?”

Abbas was speechless.

Maryam resumed work again.

“You know,” Maryam began. “When I first met you, I didn’t trust you at all.”

Abbas chuckled.

“I noticed. You kept waving that creepy pistol at me.”

Maryam laughed as well.

“Yeah, I will admit. I enjoyed that. But to be honest, that has changed.”

Abbas listened carefully as he continued sorting the lentils.

“I saw what you did for Jafar when Alpha 43 attacked. I never got to thank you for that.”

“You saved him,” Maryam continued. “And that was when I realised you were trustworthy, Abbas.” she paused.

“Jafar never knew his parents. Ami and Baba were killed when he was just a baby.”

Abbas felt a strange sadness descend in the room.

“I’m sorry,” he muttered.

Maryam nodded her head respectfully before continuing.

“He looks up to you Abbas. Every moment that your not there, he talks about you.”

Abbas looked at her with surprise. Jafar looked up to him? Why him? What was so special about him?

As if Maryam had read his mind, she added,

“He looks up to you because he never saw you afraid, even when the Alphas attacked. You stood your ground against Alpha 39. He admires your courage.”

Abbas paused for a moment before responding, “I know the pain of losing dear ones and I would do anything to save others from it.”

## 23

# The End of Training Day

## 1

“Agh,” Abbas groaned as he placed another chickpea in the bowl.

It had been quite some time since Jafar had left, and now the time was starting to demotivate both of them. The only positive thing was that at least Akbar hadn’t distributed Jafar’s bundle amongst Abbas and Maryam so they were resuming from where they had left off. Abbas knew there weren’t too many left. At most, a handful. But his fingers were on the verge of being destroyed. His arms ached from even the slightest motion and lack of food and water was throwing him off balance.

Maryam was no better. She was on the verge of collapse. Abbas could see her hands were moving even slower than his and felt a sense of pity. She didn’t have to be in this position. But her love for Jafar put her in this situation. And even though Abbas knew she was tired, he knew she had no regrets.

The door swung open, and for a moment both Abbas and Maryam looked surprised. It had seemed like forever since the last time they saw it open. Akbar’s voice came flying through,

“First person who leaves the shed, gets to end the day. They won’t have to finish the sorting. They can walk straight out.”

Abbas eyeballed the door longingly and so did Maryam. Neither of them moved. Abbas glanced at Maryam.

“Go,” he whispered. “I’m almost done anyway.”

Maryam looked down.

“No,” she sighed. “I don’t think I will. You leave.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes.

“I amn’t leaving.”

Maryam shrugged her shoulders.

“Neither am I,” she casually remarked.

Abbas felt a hint of frustration. Why was she making this difficult? Why didn’t she just go? It was already hard enough for Abbas to offer her.

“Well?” Akbar called out. “Anyone coming?”

Abbas looked down for a moment.

“I’m not going,” Abbas murmured.

Maryam looked down as well.

“In that case,” she sighed. “I guess there is only one thing left to do then.”

Turning to the door, she shouted,

“Neither of us want to leave Akbar Uncle! It’s okay! We’ll finish the sorting and come.”

“Well, well, well.”

Abbas looked up towards the entrance. Akbar stood there with a grin on his face.

“Akbar Uncle,” Abbas repeated. “Maryam spoke for both of us. Neither of us want to leave until the job is completed.”

“The job,” Akbar announced, “is completed.”

Abbas felt like his eyes would fall out of their sockets.

“W-What d-do you mean?” Maryam stammered.

Akbar smiled,

“It means you two are finished. You don’t have to continue the sorting. Your task is done.”

Abbas stared in amazement as Akbar beckoned for them to follow him.

Abbas nodded and hesitantly, he and Maryam began following Akbar. As they exited the shed, Abbas had to hold his hand in front of his eyes. The light was too much.

“What time is it?” Maryam asked.

Akbar looked at his watch.

It was 3pm.



Abbas's eyes widened in surprise.

"Wait. We were in there for three hours?" he exclaimed.

"Yes," Akbar smiled. "Every hour I came to offer one of you a way out."

Abbas felt his mind get jumbled once more. He wasn't understanding the purpose for such an exercise. As they reached the house entrance, Abbas and Maryam caught sight of Ali, Zahra, Haider and Jafar, sitting comfortably at the dining table.

At the sight of Haider, Abbas narrowed his eyes, causing Haider to break into a sheepish smile.

"We are about to have lunch in a moment but first I would like to show you the scores and comment on the final activity."

He removed the small yellow copy from his pocket, and held it so that everyone could see the scores for today.

As Abbas read the scores, he had to stop himself from falling off the chair.

The scores were,

*Abbas - 9 points*

*Maryam - 8 points*

*Jafar - 3 points*

*Haider - 2 points*

"What!" Haider exclaimed. "How come I get only two points?"

"And why did I get only three points!" Jafar complained. "What did I do wrong?"

Akbar waved his hand for silence.

"The way scoring works is that you can achieve a score of at most ten points in one day. Most of the points are awarded for the final activity."

Akbar paused to swipe a fly that was buzzing at his face.

"The point of the last activity was to simulate an actual team work experience in life."

Abbas had no idea what Akbar meant.

"See, the thing is," Akbar continued. "You were all given a difficult task. And whenever I came to the shed, I presented an opportunity for one of you to escape. One of you to selfishly leave your team and ignore the impacts caused by your leaving."

Haider and Jafar sunk in their chair.

“The point of the sorting game was to realise that you should not leave the team in times of difficulty, even if you have a way out. And the two competitors who brilliantly displayed this were Abbas and Maryam. Both of them let Jafar leave even though they had a chance themselves. And when they got the chance again, neither left. They were conscious of their actions and the consequences of those actions.”

Akbar took a deep breath,

“And they have both made me very proud today.”

Ali began clapping his hands, followed by Zahra and Akbar.

“Great job to the both of you!” Zahra congratulated.

“Yeah,” Ali added. “Brilliant performance.”

Abbas turned away in embarrassment. This was a lot of praise from a lot of grown ups. He was not use to it and clearly he wasn't the only one. From the corner of his eye, he saw Maryam was looking self-conscious too.

Akbar smiled. “As a consequence of what they both did, Haider and Jafar are responsible for cleaning the entire table after lunch and Haider will also mow the grass outside. Both tasks should be done by tonight.”

Haider tried to open his mouth but said nothing after catching Abbas's icy stare. Jafar didn't seem to mind his punishment. He was holding Maryam's hand, pressing it lightly.

Abbas looked up at Akbar. He looked satisfied. Abbas felt strangely satisfied as well. He couldn't help but notice, he was at the top of the points table.

## 24

# An Old Friend

It was midnight. The sun had now disappeared, leaving the land at the mercy of the moon's dull light. The wind was blowing so hard it could be heard through the heavy rain. The debris and wreckages of houses lay scattered like breadcrumbs upon the dirt covered land. If one was to strain their ears, they would hear a small whistle like noise. They would probably assume this was the wind or perhaps a poor bird, lost in a rainstorm. But they would be wrong.

The whistle was a code. A code delivered by a figure hunched in black by one of the destroyed houses. He stood tall, upright, and alert. After all, these were dangerous times. And this man knew very well how wanted he was. That was why he carried a large powerful pistol, capable of ripping a bear to shreds.

The figure crouched nice and low waiting for the response. Two whistles. That was all he needed to hear. If two whistles were heard, it meant everything was safe. Otherwise, one whistle meant abort. Abort the meeting.

So far, the man had never heard one whistle in response, but being cautious in nature, he was very particular to always be prepared. He even memorised the route he needed to take in order to escape.

There was a small crack. The man stiffened, one hand gripping his pistol and the other holding a knife concealed under his thick brown coat. Was there any danger?

A few moments of silence. And then a whistle! No, two whistles. The figure felt his grip on the knife relax but still kept his pistol in hand.

“Reza!” he whispered. “You there?”

There was a moment of silence before a tall broad man dressed in black emerged from the shadows.

“Yes!” the new comer whispered back. “I’m here! Salamunalaikum sir!”

The man smiled,

“Walaikumaslam Reza. How are you doing?”

Reza paused to wipe rain off of his face before replying.

“Good sir! It’s just that nowadays things have gotten complicated with Alpha 39 and all.”

The other man felt his heart skip a beat.

“What about Alpha 39?” he inquired.

Reza sighed.

“Ever since he died, security has been ramped up about two hundred percent. Someone graffitied activist messages all over a wall and put his body beside it. That has been causing some trouble. Alphas have been reporting sites of groups, not individuals. It’s making Jumeira sweat a little.”

“I imagine,” The figure answered.

“Also,” Reza added on. “It’s getting increasingly difficult to operate any hidden activities. So I probably won’t be able to meet you any time soon. In that case, Bahadir will be transmitting my messages to you.”

The figure nodded in acknowledgement. He knew Bahadir. Just like Reza, he was a loyal and good man. But now the figure had to ask the question that had been bothering him all this time.

“Have they investigated Alpha 39’s death?” the figure asked; there was an edge of concern in his voice.

“Yes,” Reza replied. “They know it was you, Akbar.”

Akbar felt a bit concerned. It wasn’t good news that they had figured it out.

“What did they do about it?” Akbar was curious.

Reza smiled for a moment.

“They tasked Alpha 31 after you.”

Akbar raised a brow. A smile formed on his lips.

“You’re joking, aren’t you?”

“No sir!” Reza answered, with a hint of laughter. “Alpha 31 has been sent after you. When he fails, I think she is going to send Alpha 43.”

Akbar felt a chill but pushed it aside.

“Hmmm...” he contemplated out loud. “She is trying to send Alpha 43 after me. She wants me dead and of all the Alphas, the only option she has, is Alpha 43.”

Reza nodded.

“I understand,” Reza began. “This is difficult for you. Especially, given your past with Alpha 43. But Sir, you need to know; you are not the only target of Alpha 43.”

Akbar wiped the accumulating rain off his face, paying close attention to what Reza had to say.

“Who else is a target?” Akbar whispered.

Reza took a deep breath.

“Murtaza’s boys.”

Akbar narrowed his eyes.

“So it’s true then.” He swallowed. “Murtaza is really gone.”

Reza lowered his head.

“Unfortunately. And now they want the boys.”

“Why though?” Akbar questioned. “What interest do they have in Abbas and Haider?”

Reza shook his head.

“I know that they found out that the boys are alive and they need them back to know how much they know. Aside from that, the older one, Abbas;” Reza paused. “Abbas has humiliated Alpha 43. The shoulder injury has ruined his reputation. Everyone has found out.”

“So,” Akbar concluded, rubbing his cold hands together. “Alpha 43 has a personal issue with the boy. Well, don’t worry about that. I’ve already started his training. I’m sure he will land far. He has already demonstrated amazing potential. Do you know he was the one who captured Alpha 39?”

Reza’s eyes widened in surprise.

“But I thought-”

“I delivered the finishing blow,” Akbar interrupted. “But he was the one who disarmed him and held him at gunpoint.”

Reza’s eyes widened in amazement. “He is a very special boy then.”

Akbar nodded in agreement.

“What I don’t understand,” he inquired. “Is that why they need both boys?”

“Honestly,” Reza shrugged. “I don’t know. All I know is that they are still actively hunting them both.”

Reza turned to his watch.

“I have to get going now,” Reza whispered.

Akbar nodded once more.

“Thank you old friend, you have always been so helpful. Fiamanallah Reza.”

Reza bowed his head respectfully.

“Fiamanallah!”

With that, Reza disappeared into the rain, leaving Akbar alone with his thoughts.

Akbar turned and began heading home. As he did, he thought about all the essential things he had just been informed of. They knew Alpha 39 was killed by him and were sending Alpha 43 to catch him. It would only be a matter of time before they would come again face to face. And this time, they would have to settle their unfinished business from twelve years ago.

## Training Day 2

“Just five more minutes, please!” Abbas yawned lazily, placing his head on the pillow in a desperate attempt to drown out the calls of Ali and Zahra.

“Abbas!” he could hear Ali call. “Come on! Get out of bed!” Abbas groaned and placed his head under the blanket.

“I don’t wanna get up,” he mumbled sleepily.

The door flew open, showering the room with cold air.

“Who’s there?” Abbas yawned drowsily.

There was a small grunt and the next moment, Abbas felt the blanket get yanked off with immense force. A burst of cold air ate away at his vulnerable body.

“Yikes!” Abbas shot up, finding himself face to face with a satisfied Ali.

“W-what d-did you do that for?” Abbas shivered. “I was g-getting up.”

Ali grinned.

“After half an hour of calling, I thought I should give you a hand.”

Abbas shrugged. He knew he should have been up earlier but training from yesterday had caused his body to ache. His fingers had grown sore from sorting lentils and his legs were exhausted from having stood for so long.

“Be down in five minutes,” Ali interrupted his thoughts. “Everyone is already there.”

Abbas forced his eyes fully open, nodding in acknowledgement. He looked down at his watch. His eyes widened in surprise.

“Wait,” he called as Ali reached the door.

Ali paused and turned around, partially curious.

“Aren’t we going to start after breakfast like last time?” Abbas inquired.

For a moment Ali didn’t say anything. Abbas narrowed his eyes wondering if he had said anything wrong until Ali responded in a mildly surprised manner,

“Are you too young to do the hard work before breakfast?”

Abbas felt himself turn red with embarrassment. Ali smiled once before leaving. As he exited, Abbas heard him call out, “Don’t forget to be down in five minutes.”

“Sure thing,” Abbas muttered under his breath.

Slowly, he forced himself to stand away from his warm bed. It was painful, but after three of the five generously granted minutes, Abbas found himself away from his bed; eyes were wide awake.

He changed from his pajamas into his track suit pants and shirt. With a sigh, Abbas left the room, using the final minute granted to make his way outside.

As he reached outdoors, his eyes adjusting to the light, he noticed that as Ali had told him, Maryam, Jafar and Haider were already there.

‘I have to try to make it here earlier,’ Abbas thought to himself.

He lined up with the others. A new feeling of readiness filled his heart. Like yesterday, he was determined to score highest today as well.

There was a creak and Abbas turned to see Akbar stepping outside the house. Behind him, Ali and Zahra followed.

“Asalamualaikum!” Akbar called out as he arrived.

“Walaikum asalam,” everyone answered in unison.

Abbas stretched his arm, getting ready for the intense competition. As he did so, he couldn’t help notice that Akbar was looking tired. As though he had been up all night.

‘He’s probably just had a bad night,’ Abbas reasoned to himself.

Ali and Zahra assumed positions beside Akbar.



“Today,” Akbar began. “We will be doing a series of tasks and activities. The aim of these activities is simple. If you complete them, you will earn points. But not for yourself. For today, any point earned by Abbas will be awarded to Maryam.”

Abbas was certain he had misheard. His eyes bulged from his sockets as he turned to face Maryam.

She too appeared surprised but there was another emotion on her face. It was as though she was thinking, ‘Haha! Got you!’

Abbas felt his anger quietly murmuring in his mind but he ignored it.

“And any point earned by Maryam,” Akbar continued. “Goes to Haider!”

Now it was Maryam’s turn. Abbas turned to face her. She was looking even more surprised than he was. It was as though everything had frozen for her. Haider on the other hand, looked like his birthday had come early.

‘It must be a dream for him,’ Abbas thought quietly. ‘Having to rely on someone else to work.’

Akbar smiled.

“And in addition, any point that Jafar earns will go to Abbas, and any point Haider earns will go to Jafar.”

Abbas turned to see Jafar and Haider. Jafar appeared to be depressed beyond compare. Relying on someone like Haider to get points must truly be a nightmare.

Akbar clapped his hands loudly, drawing Abbas’s attention once more.

“Finally,” Akbar murmured suspiciously. “In case you remember, I told all of you yesterday that the winner would get a prize for having the highest score at the end of the training program. Well, I have decided what that prize will be.”

Abbas strained his ears excitedly. He couldn’t understand why he was getting so childishly excited. From the corner of his eye, he saw the others were no better.

“Abbas!” Akbar called out. “Should you win the training program, I will teach you the flying tackle technique.”

It felt like the grass had stopped rustling. The flying tackle! Did Akbar really promise to teach him the flying tackle? Abbas

had tried so desperately to learn it, and to think, Akbar had just laid out a clear path for him.

Unable to control himself, Abbas squealed in excitement causing everyone else to grin or laugh. But their turns were to come.

Abbas watched as each person melted before something Akbar promised. They all wanted something very badly and somehow Akbar knew exactly what it was. For Maryam, Akbar promised her a rifle; her very first, that is if she won. For Jafar, Akbar vowed to grant him carving tools to aid him in his 'sacred' sand castle project. And finally, for Haider; his first firearm. Abbas suppressed a laugh as Haider bounced up and down. He had really wanted a firearm and had always been eyeing Abbas's.

"The topic for today," Akbar informed, breaking Abbas's thoughts, "is working for the welfare of others."

Abbas's eyes widened as he finally understood why Akbar had made such a strange points earning system. The idea was simple. The harder you work, the more others benefit. But, unlike yesterday's training lesson, this didn't actually feel like a very important lesson. But Abbas didn't care about that. For him, all that mattered was that now, he had obtained a clear path to learning the flying tackle.

"For your first challenge," Akbar instructed. "Give me twenty five laps!"

This time Abbas started running straight away. He wasn't going to make the same mistake as last time.

For a moment, as he sprinted, he caught Akbar's eye. Akbar chuckled and turned to Zahra and Ali, murmuring something.

'Probably telling them what happened yesterday,' Abbas sighed to himself.

This time, the twenty five laps didn't take as long, and everyone was done in around twenty minutes. But despite that, by the end of it, everyone was just as tired as they were the day before. Abbas found himself panting and his body was complaining about the exertions it was undergoing; begging him to stop. Abbas ignored it and pushed it aside. On his left, Haider was a new shade of red, almost like an apple this time. Maryam and Jafar were both tired but they still looked a little better off.

“Alright,” Akbar instructed. “I want you all to follow me!”

He turned and marched off towards the forest. Abbas, wiping away a bead of sweat, set off after him. As he did, he felt his stomach gurgle.

“Abbas,” Akbar grinned, as they reached a tall tree. “Are you feeling hungry?”

Abbas shook his head.

“Nope. I’m just a little excited.”

Akbar laughed before turning to the tree.

“Each of you will try to climb this tree and I will record how high you went. First up, Haider!”

Abbas turned to face Haider, who was looking partially nervous. Abbas couldn’t blame him. Haider had never been a good climber.

Lazily, Haider approached the tree. With a quick motion, he grasped the log and wrapped his legs around it, trying to haul himself upwards. Surprisingly so, he managed to move a few centimetres, before slipping towards the floor in a dazed pile.

“Uh!” Jafar groaned. “What am I going to do now?”

Abbas turned to face Jafar and Maryam. Jafar appeared remorseful but Maryam wasn’t. Rather, she looked angry. And Abbas narrowed his eyes at her accusing glance.

“What do you want me to do?” he whispered. “Haider is an awful climber!”

Maryam didn’t respond but her eyes betrayed what she was feeling. Abbas felt like she was about to do something he wouldn’t like.

“Maryam next,” Akbar announced.

Maryam nipped over to the tree and in a flash grabbed hold of it. She pushed herself up and Abbas could tell instantly that like him, she was an experienced climber. But then something happened which confused him. Maryam let go of the branch and landed on her feet.

Abbas narrowed her eyes. Why did she do that? Of course! Her points were going to Haider, so she would obviously do everything to punish him for his laziness. But this wasn’t laziness! Haider was genuinely a bad climber! Abbas knew that. He was a much better swimmer. Why couldn’t Maryam get that? No. Abbas

was going to punish Maryam for this.

‘My points go to her,’ Abbas thought silently. ‘I’ll show her what happens when someone messes with my brother.’

As Maryam strolled away with a satisfied grin, Akbar beckoned Abbas to try the climb. Abbas reached out for the tree and grunted before letting go.

Turning to Akbar, he explained,

“I can’t pull myself up.”

Akbar’s eyes widened in surprise and then abruptly narrowed. His face broke into a strange smile,

“I see. Well then Abbas, you can return to the group.”

As Abbas turned to walk back, he felt slightly guilty. But he pushed it aside. Maryam should have listened to his reasoning.

Abbas avoided her shocked gaze, as well as Jafar’s perplexed face, but from the corner of his eye, he could see her whispering something. Abbas didn’t bother to listen. He knew exactly what she was saying. And as Jafar approached the tree, it didn’t surprise him that Jafar had ‘slipped’ almost immediately.

“Well,” Akbar remarked as Jafar joined the group. “I must say I am quite disappointed in all of you.”

Abbas opened his mouth to refute but Akbar waved it aside.

“Do you know why I made you all climb this tree?” he asked. Abbas turned to look at the others. Like him, they were all clueless.

“Because I wanted you all to understand something,” Akbar continued. “You only get as much in this world as you are willing to give to others, and so in reality, nobody’s points are going to anyone else. You all keep the points that you earned from the climb. ”

Abbas’s eyes widened in surprise as groans erupted from all around him. That was what Akbar was trying to teach them! He must have planned out the order of the tree climbing very particularly, anticipating what was going to happen. Abbas lowered his gaze, feeling partially ashamed. He had never expected himself to do something so low. He looked up at Akbar.

“Akbar Uncle, I-”

“How do you expect to be able to fight the Alphas?” Akbar

interrupted. “When you so easily managed to fight amongst yourselves?”

Abbas lowered his head once more. Deep down, he knew he could have ended the issue by trying to explain Maryam before he deliberately let go of the branch. But there was something that was bothering him.

“Akbar Uncle-”

“I am not going to answer any questions,” Akbar snapped. “Until you all realise how wrong of a thing you have all done. For now, your training for today is over.”

And with that, Akbar turned and walked away, leaving Abbas at the mercy of his guilty conscience.

## Wrestling Practice

“But why?” Abbas questioned as Ali pinned him once more. “Why did Akbar Uncle get so upset that he won’t speak or listen to me?”

Ali shook his head.

“You all made a mistake. That’s true. But now, you are all not handling this in the correct way.”

He let go of Abbas, allowing Abbas to get back up again. Abbas shook his head, wiping away the mud from his face.

It had been four hours since Akbar had scolded them and now, Abbas was feeling worse than ever. He didn’t understand why his heart hurt. Somehow, Akbar being angry at him made him feel like he was a complete failure.

“Abbas,” Ali smiled. “I know you did what you thought was right. But I assure you, Akbar Uncle wouldn’t be angry unless he had a reason.”

Abbas looked up at Ali, locking eyes with him.

“Why is he angry at me?” he muttered breathlessly. “I didn’t do anything wrong. I defended my brother against Maryam. In fact, it is actually her fault. She is the one who started everything. She didn’t even hear me out.”

Ali shrugged his shoulders.

“I wasn’t there. I can’t comment. But if I were you, I would think and revise the situation in my head. I would think about where could I have possibly gone wrong.”

“Akbar Uncle is being unfair! he-”

“Abbas!” Ali interrupted. “Be careful my boy. In anger, one can sometimes say things that they neither feel, nor mean.”

Abbas forced his remaining sentence down his throat. He looked towards the ground. He looked back up to see that Ali was smiling. But not at him. He was looking past Abbas.

Abbas whirled around to see Zahra approaching.

‘Oh Allah!’ Abbas thought to himself. ‘She is coming to scold me about what happened. She too is probably upset about what happened. Especially about Maryam and Jafar.’

Abbas readied himself for Zahra’s hurl of insults as she finally reached them but they never came. Rather she stood there with a smile on her face.

“How are you doing?” she asked.

Abbas did not look at her as he answered.

“Not too good,” he murmured.

Zahra looked down.

“So I’ve heard,” she sighed. “You know when I was little I remember how Akbar Uncle used to scold us.”

Abbas looked up now, matching Zahra’s gaze.

“Abbas, Akbar Uncle is not unreasonable. If he is angry at you, it is for a reason. You have to figure out what is it he is angry about. And once you do, he will forgive you.”

Abbas felt his throat thicken.

“You really think so?”

Zahra nodded reassuringly.

“I know what happened. I know each of you made a mistake. Each and every one of you. Remember this Abbas. Remember what I have just told you. Remember this, and you will find your answer.”

And with that, she turned and strolled away. Abbas stared as she left. That was it? How could she leave him now? So many hints, and yet Abbas felt even more confused than before. Behind him, he heard Ali’s voice,

“Yeah, she has always been confusing. Don’t bother understanding. Even till today, I still wonder if there will ever be a time when I fully understand what Zahra said.”

# Nightmares

It was dark. The moon glimmered lightly in the night. The cold wind roared, pressing against the walls of the iron fortress.

This night was no different than any other night. Alpha 43 closed his eyes, trying to catch a few hours of sleep before morning would come. But alas, sleep had evaded him for many days now and whenever it did come, it brought with it horrors that Alpha would be better off without.

“Argh,” he groaned as he turned over, trying to relax his injured shoulder.

It had not fully recovered since that annoying child had driven the pole through it, and Alpha 43 knew that it would be a while before he recovered completely.

It was a little after midnight. Alpha 43 was rolling over in his bed, his muscles tensed. beads of perspiration poured down his hair line as he struggled against his blankets. Voices echoed in his mind,

*“You don’t have to do this!”*

The Alpha unconsciously rolled over the bed, crashing on the floor. The sudden pain surged through his body and he awoke with a start. It happened again. The same nightmare.

Alpha 43 sighed. How many more nights would this happen? How many more times would he have to deal with this? How many more years would his memories plague him?

Alpha 43 pushed himself off the ground, ignoring the pain in



his arm. He stood up and walked over to the corner of his room where an old punchbag slung from the roof.

He began striking the bag, in excellent speed and agility, dodging it as it swung back towards him. He varied the speed and power of his punch, as his mentor had taught him many years ago. The bag crumbled back and forth, begging for mercy as Alpha 43 began performing his combinations and drills.

As he continued, he felt the voices ring harder in his head.

*"It doesn't have to be this way!"*

"Argh," the Alpha growled throwing his punch a little harder than he intended. The bag burst open but instead of sand, blood oozed out! Blood which began flooding the room! Alpha 43 whirled around, bounding away towards the door. He grasped the handle but it was locked!

He growled as he struck the door repeatedly but it wouldn't give way. The blood was now waist height. The Alpha felt panic in his heart. What was going on?

Swiftly, he whirled around towards the ventilation shaft in a final desperate attempt to escape but froze. Horror gripped his heart tightly. There was a man standing on the other side of the room. He was exactly like Alpha 43 remembered him.

"H-how?" Alpha 43 gaped in shock.

The man didn't reply. He merely raised his hand and from it, a large bolt of electricity emerged, striking Alpha 43 square in the chest.

"Aghhhhhhh!" He screamed as he felt the current rip away at his body.

Alpha 43 woke with a start, perspiring heavily. He swerved his head around but no one was there. No blood. There was nothing.

"Another nightmare," He growled to himself.

The Alpha noticed that his hand held tightly around his knife. He loosened his grip, trying to relax himself but the nightmare remained glued inside his head. This was all Akbar's fault. Akbar did this. And this would only be cleansed with Akbar's blood.

## Training Day 3

*“I am here to help you Abbas. Akbar Uncle is not unreasonable. If he is angry at you, then it is for a reason. You have to figure out what is it he is angry about. And once you do, he will forgive you.”*

Zahra made it sound so easy.

‘As if’, Abbas thought to himself as he got ready for the next day of training.

In the last twelve hours, Abbas had gone over the incident almost a million times and he had been unable to find anything wrong with what he did. Maryam was the one who had struck first. Abbas had tried to reason with her but she wouldn’t listen. So why was Akbar punishing him and Haider? What had they done to deserve such treatment?

‘Nothing,’ Abbas concluded. ‘Nothing at all.’

He was certain about his innocence. Wait. That might be it! Maybe he was being punished alongside everyone else because of Maryam’s mistake. Akbar was trying to teach them team spirit!

‘If one goes down, we all go down,’ Abbas reminded himself.

Ecstatically, he bounded away, crossing the halls, ignoring Haider’s calls for training. He was determined to get to Akbar’s room before anything. After only a few seconds, Akbar’s room came in sight.

“Akbar Uncle!” Abbas called out. “Akbar Uncle!”

The door did not open and for a moment Abbas thought Akbar

wasn't there until he heard a voice call out,

"You may enter."

Abbas grasped hold of the handle and with a deep sigh, stepped inside.

Upon entering, he felt an uncanny wave of familiarity breeze over him. The last time he had been in this room, he had learned the truth about Akbar being an Alpha. Now, he was here to fix Maryam's error.

'I wonder when I can enter this room without having to deal with trouble,' Abbas thought to himself as he found himself face to face with Akbar.

Akbar wore a neutral expression and his gaze burned through Abbas. He looked as though the only thing he was focused on was Abbas.

Abbas swallowed down his nervousness and forced a confident smile. Very soon Akbar would be happy.

"What do you want?" Akbar murmured.

Abbas stared him in the eye intently.

"I know what I did wrong," he whispered.

Akbar raised a brow.

"Do you now?" he replied; a hint of sarcasm was obvious in his voice. Was he taunting Abbas?

Abbas smiled, the way Akbar did when he was in control of the situation.

"Yes," Abbas paused. "Maryam made a mistake. And because we were a team, we are all being punished as a group."

Abbas wiped a small bead of sweat from his hair as he waited for Akbar's answer. Surely, Akbar would forgive him now?

Abbas watched as Akbar sighed.

"Abbas," he hissed. "You couldn't have been more wrong."

Abbas felt his confidence drain down his throat. What was Akbar talking about? What had Abbas done wrong?

Zahra's words echoed in his mind,

*"I am here to help you Abbas. Akbar Uncle is not unreasonable. If he is angry at you, then it is for a reason. You have to figure out what is it that he is angry about. And once you do, he will forgive you."*

With a sigh of disappointment, Abbas turned to leave when something caught his attention. In the corner, there was a board upon which something was written. Abbas's eyes widened in surprise as he realised they were the scores. The scores were,

*Maryam - 10 points*

*Abbas - 9 points*

*Jafar - 5 points*

*Haider - 4 points*

What! How was Maryam ahead of him? Abbas felt his anger rising but he forced it down. He knew that this was on purpose. Akbar may have even planned for him to have seen this. But Abbas wouldn't play into whatever game Akbar was playing.

Abruptly, he turned around and left the room, muttering some excuse about being late for training.

Abbas stormed through the hallway. His fury wrestling every ounce of his body, demanding to be let loose, and Abbas only just managed to reign it in control.

At last, Abbas reached outside where Maryam, Jafar, Zahra, Ali and Haider; all stood. Abbas noticed that Haider was kicking nervously at his feet while Maryam and Jafar frowned at him. Zahra was also looking at Haider with a frown of disapproval. Ali, on the other hand, was looking down at his feet, as if wondering which was larger.

Abbas however, was only staring at one person. Maryam. Maryam who had beaten him in the points chart. Maryam who had caused this entire problem. How was it fair that Maryam started it, and in a way gets rewarded for it?

Slowly Abbas strolled over to where Haider was, standing tall and proud. His fury had begun to dictate his decisions.

Abbas stared intently at Maryam who met his gaze with just as much furor. But she didn't know the level to which Abbas was going to punish her for this. First she messed with Haider. Then she created a rift between him and Akbar. And to add insult to injury, she was now at the highest position in the points chart! No. That was enough. Now it was time for payback.

“Ahem,” Zahra coughed. “Abbas.”

Abbas turned to face her for a moment.

“I was just saying,” Zahra began. “That today Akbar Uncle won’t be joining us.”

Abbas rolled his eyes.

“But he has insisted that we all continue training,” Zahra continued. “So he has allowed Ali and myself, to decide today’s topic and award all of you points.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes. This felt significantly suspicious. Akbar wasn’t the kind of person who liked relying on others for his tasks.

“The topic for today,” Zahra smiled, a mysterious twinkle in her eye, “is realising your mistakes!”

Abbas felt his anger burst through him. What was Zahra doing? Why was she constantly saying such strange things?

“All of you were at fault regarding yesterday’s incident,” Zahra stated, ignoring Abbas’s angry look. “You all have a simple challenge. The earlier you figure out your mistakes together, the more points you get.”

Abbas looked down at his feet.

“You will be discussing with each other in the shed,” Zahra smirked. “Now off you go!”

Everyone began moving. Everyone except Abbas. Zahra turned to face Abbas.

“Abbas,” she said, as if to convey her meaning.

Abbas looked up to match her penetrating gaze.

“I don’t want to go,” he frowned.

Zahra looked at him in disapproval.

“Now, now, Abbas, what did I do wrong that you keep showing me angry faces?” Abbas was about to respond but his voice failed him. Zahra had done nothing to deserve this. But why was she forcing him to do this? Still, she didn’t deserve this.

“Sorry,” Abbas muttered.

Zahra smiled. It wasn’t an ordinary smile. It was a warm smile that filled him with a strange form of peace. Slowly, Abbas felt his anger fade away and a strange vulnerability opened in his heart.

“Abbas. Just talk to Maryam and Jafar. Hear what they have to say. I understand what you’re angry about. I am also very protective of my siblings.” She paused. “It can be very hurtful when you feel that someone you love is wronged. I understand that Abbas but, I will still advise you. If you really want to understand what had gone wrong, go to the shed, and talk to everyone else. And I mean everyone.”

## The Shed

Abbas sighed as his watch displayed the end of another minute of silence. He looked around. Haider was kicking at his feet nervously, while Jafar was deeply preoccupied with his hands. Maryam on the other hand, was staring accusingly at Abbas and Haider, as though they were both completely at fault.

Abbas rolled his eyes. It had been a full fourteen minutes since Zahra had locked them up in the shed and no one had said anything until now. It was already getting awkward and Abbas was beginning to wonder if coming here was the right thing to do.

He didn't know why he had listened to Zahra. Something about the way she spoke with him, the way she treated him, just made him feel safe. It made him feel like he could be at ease over his issues. Perhaps he thought of her as a combination of a big sister and the mother he couldn't remember. But in either case, Abbas could not deny Zahra had some form of influence over him.

And yet here he was, stuck with Maryam, the arrogant; Jafar, the confused; and Haider, the lazy. Abbas knew that eventually, someone would have to say something. He was inclined to be that person. But what should he say? Zahra's words echoed in his mind,

*"It can be very hurtful, when you feel like someone you love is wronged."*

Hmmm. Perhaps Abbas could try explaining Maryam his side of the story and ask for hers. He would do it respectfully so that

she would be okay with talking.

He opened his mouth to say something, But Maryam beat him to it.

“Are you going to apologise?” she taunted.

Abbas was taken aback. How dare she? It wasn't even his fault, and she was expecting an apology.

“No,” Abbas replied, only just managing to control his temper.

Maryam raised a brow dramatically.

“Then what were you going to do?”

Abbas rolled his eyes.

“Maryam. I get it,” Abbas began. “I understand why you did what you did but-”

“No you don't,” Maryam interrupted. “or you-”

“I understand,” Abbas cut her off. “I get why you're angry but if you-”

“No you don't!” Maryam growled. “I can't believe this Abbas. I can't believe that you honestly can't see through this!”

Abbas gripped the chair, his knuckles turning white.

“Maryam,” he warned. “Please hear me out.”

Maryam turned away and looked at the window.

“Apologise Abbas or else I am not going to speak to you! In fact both you and Haider have to apologise.”

Abbas slammed his hand on the table.

“What is with you?” he growled. “What is your problem with me and my brother? Why can't you just leave us alone? Why do you always have to be so obstinate!”

Maryam stood up.

“Why can't you see plainly in front of your own eyes? Why can't you see that he-”

She paused pointing to Haider.

“He-”

“Leave Haider out of this Maryam!” Abbas spat. “Your problem is with me, not him. He slipped by accident!”

“Did he?” Maryam questioned.

“Of course he did!” Abbas growled defensively. “Tell her Haider! Haider?”



Abbas turned to look at Haider who was busy staring at his toes.

“Haider,” Abbas said softly, earning him a sarcastic growl from Maryam. “Look up, you didn’t do anything wrong.”

A few moments of silence passed before Haider finally replied. Looking up at Jafar and Maryam, he whispered,

“I’m sorry.”

Abbas gaped in shock.

“Haider why-”

“I slipped on purpose!” Haider confessed with tears in his eyes. “I thought that if I could lower Jafar’s score, then I could reach a higher position.”

Abbas stared in horror. It all made sense now. Everything Zahra had told him.

*“I am here to help you Abbas. Akbar Uncle is not unreasonable. If he is angry at you, then it is for a reason. You have to figure out what is it he is angry about. And once you do, he will forgive you.”*

She had told him so many times. Ask. Ask everyone what happened. Find out if things truly were the way they seemed.

Abbas turned to face Maryam. She wore a satisfied grin. He turned away from her. He didn’t look at Jafar either. He only stared at Haider. His younger brother. The only person in this world he would give anything for. Haider opened his mouth to say something,

“Abbas Bhai I-”

Abbas raised his hand for silence. Swiftly, he turned towards the shed door.

“Zahra Api!” he called out.

There was a moment of silence before Zahra’s familiar voice came through.

“Yes Abbas.”

Abbas took a deep breath.

“I have realised my mistake. This time I know for sure.”

There was a moment of silence before Abbas finally got a response.

“Are you sure Abbas?” she asked.

Abbas stared at the door intently. For a few seconds his answer swarmed his mind.

“Yes,” he replied at last. “I made judgement without properly investigating the situation. I trusted-” Abbas paused.

“I trusted someone, without inquiring about the situation entirely and delivered justice without finding the complete truth.”

The door swung open, and Abbas found himself face to face with Akbar! Abbas’s eyes widened in surprise, but before he could say anything, Akbar began speaking.

“Remember Abbas,” he cautioned. “Justice is a very powerful tool that must be used very cautiously. If not, it could lead to disastrous consequences.”

Abbas nodded in acknowledgement, embracing his mistake. He realised now that he had let his protectiveness of Haider and his anger cloud his judgement.

“You may exit the shed,” Akbar instructed.

Abbas nodded once more and began to leave but at that moment he stopped. Turning to face Maryam, he remarked,

“You know Maryam, in all fairness, you never tried to explain me the situation.”

Maryam opened her mouth to retort but was silenced by one of Zahra’s icy stares.

“That’s correct,” Akbar added. “Maryam, you knew quite well that Abbas wasn’t unreasonable. You should have ideally consulted him before acting so rashly. I have no doubt that Abbas would have supported you.”

Maryam was about to reply but her voice must have failed her, for she looked down partially ashamed.

“I just-” she paused. “I just got so angry at Haider. I guess that I didn’t think about the consequences of my actions.”

She broke into a grin.

“I never wanted to upset you Abbas,” she apologised. “And for that I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry too,” he managed to reply.

And with that everyone started leaving. It felt like everything was back to normal, until Jafar’s voice abruptly screeched through the entire shed.

“Why was I punished then?” he inquired.

Akbar smiled.

“Jafar.” He began. “I know the situation was difficult by the time your turn came but still, you never tried to fix the situation. Rather, you added fuel to the fire and sided with your sister instead of trying to act fairly.”

Jafar’s eyes widened, almost as if they were about to explode before he bounded away, leaving a trail of dust behind him.

Maryam and Haider both followed. Abbas was about to leave but Akbar moved in front, blocking his way.

“We need to talk,” he whispered.

Abbas turned to Zahra with concern in his eyes. Zahra’s face was kind and reassuring and Abbas would have felt better; if she hadn’t only a moment later, left the shed. Abbas gulped nervously. Akbar and his conversations always felt very dangerous.

Akbar pulled out two chairs, and sat down on one of them. He beckoned Abbas to join him.

Abbas sat down, his eyes unwavering.

“Layla,” Akbar stated. “Does the name feel familiar?”

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Layla. Layla. Layla. It did feel familiar. It felt like it was etched in his brain, out of his reach. And Abbas tried to reach out. But all he ended up reaching was a cloth. An old cloth. But there was something warm about it. It was really soft. And Abbas felt a strange obsessive love enter his heart as he held the garment. A new strength in his body, one that could vanquish a fortress, one that could destroy armies. A force that would stay alive forever in time. And then Abbas knew. He knew who Layla was. He had always known, deep down inside. Layla was his mother.

## A Secret Meeting

It was night. Stars twinkled in the dark, as a large figure made its way through the rubble of some homes. Slowly, yet expertly, it crossed through the boulders and wreckage until it arrived at the end of the neighbourhood.

The figure turned to face a small house which had already caved in. Swiftly, it made its way around the debris to the back yard. There wasn't much. Just a garden and a shed. But the figure suspected that there was more than just that. It made its way towards the shed careful not to make a noise.

There was a small clatter and the figure stiffened but quickly relaxed his guard. He knew that there would be others here. He had come to meet them. And even though in the fraction of a second that he had looked up, he was able to determine the location of both individuals who were watching him. He didn't react. He needed the two to feel confident, otherwise they would run off like many who had done so before.

There was a small tiptoe behind him and the figure felt an expected yet sudden hand clasp over his throat. The figure did not react even though he knew multiple counter moves and comfortably let his attacker get hold of him.

"Akbar," a voice sounded from behind. "Why are you here?" Akbar smiled at the rehearsed security question.

"I'm here to make soup, Naqi."

Naqi loosened his grip, allowing Akbar to face him. Akbar

scrutinised the young man. In the darkness, he was wearing a mask. He was slightly short and well- built. His eyes showed concern.

“Salamun Alaikum,” Akbar whispered.

There was a moment before Naqi sighed,

“Walaikumsalam. What did you want to speak about? ”

Akbar did not respond immediately. He was aware that there was another shooter about ten meters ahead, behind one of the trucks; probably a back up for Naqi. Akbar liked that. It showed that Naqi was a cautious man. But still, in case something happened, he would have to be careful.

He tilted his head to one side and scratched his beard. After that, he began speaking. Naqi listened intently, unaware of the code Akbar had just sent.

“I wanted to ask you something,” Akbar began.

Naqi nodded his head.

“What do you think,” Akbar continued. “about the circumstances we are in today?”

Naqi looked down.

“It’s awful,” he answered at last.

Akbar noticed Naqi’s grip on his firearm was still tense.

“Would you,” Akbar inquired. “given the chance, end this?”

Naqi nodded in acknowledgement.

“I would, but I don’t see how it ever will?”

Akbar smiled reassuringly.

“It can end one day Naqi,” he whispered. “One day, we can be free. We won’t have to hide anymore.”

Naqi lowered his head with tears in his eyes.

“I appreciate the sentiments, but we have to be practical here. I mean-”

“Alpha 39 is dead,” Akbar interrupted.

Naqi’s surprise was vividly imprinted on his face. His eyes widened before narrowing,

“Now, now, I didn’t come here to joke.”

Akbar shook his head. This man was very cautious. Maybe a little too much. Slowly, from his pocket, he withdrew something.

It was a picture. A picture of Alpha 39's body. The writing in the picture clearly defined,

*'We can fight back!'*

Naqi's eyes widened in confusion.

"H-H-How?" he stammered.

Akbar handed the photo to Naqi.

"Keep it," Akbar murmured, ignoring Naqi's question. "Use it to motivate others. Don't you see Naqi, Alphas are not invincible. They are ordinary men and women like us. We can beat them."

Naqi shook his head in disbelief.

"I-" he paused. "I don't understand. What do you want?"

Akbar stared Naqi intently in the eye.

"I want us to rise up. Because it's about time. It's about time that we stand up against the injustice. Don't you think so as well?"

Naqi shook his head.

"No. This is preposterous. We would lose without a doubt."

Akbar sharpened his gaze. Now he needed some harshness.

"How much longer are we going to live in the wrecks? How much longer our women and children are going to be killed or taken? No Naqi. I have only come to tell you one thing. The revolution has begun. I have already found individuals who are willing to do this. And even if they didn't, I would fight alone if I must. Until my last breath. Because my master Hussain (a.s) taught me to be a free man. Be martyred. But never live under tyranny."

Naqi was silent.

"I really want to help you," he murmured. "But how do I know if I can trust you?"

Akbar looked down.

"You have a rifle aimed at my neck, and you're talking about trust?"

Naqi's eyes widened in shock.

"How did yo-

"I am also a cautious person," Akbar remarked.

With that, Akbar raised his hand and a large form emerged from the debris. Very carefully, it came down before it reached

Akbar and Naqi.

“This is Ali,” Akbar introduced. “He was watching my back.”

Naqi narrowed his eyes.

“I need some time to decide. You cannot expect me to make a decision immediately.”

Akbar softened his gaze.

“A week from now, there is a meeting. Many people will be there to discuss the logistics of a revolution. It’ll take place at the old hay fields. If you want, you can come there. Otherwise if you don’t, I will understand. But Naqi,” Akbar paused. “I hope you do. This is our only chance. Think about it. How much longer can you and I hide for?”

Naqi nodded and left, swiftly. Akbar could see the anxiety in his walk as he and Ali turned to leave. There was silence as he strolled away.

“Why did you tell him about the meeting Akbar Uncle?” Ali questioned.

Akbar sighed.

“The young man is already convinced. He just needs a little push in the right direction. And in addition, he is afraid.”

Ali wiped a fly from his face.

“He didn’t seem that scared?” Ali replied.

Akbar turned to Ali.

“Didn’t you see his face when I mentioned that I knew about the person with the rifle? He was frightened, but not for himself. He must have some special connection with that person. Perhaps family.”

Ali resumed his walk.

“Do you think he will come?”

Akbar glanced at Ali. For a few moments there was silence.

“He will. Once he realises that we are trustworthy, he will.”

Ali watched confused.

“And how will you earn his trust?”

Akbar smirked.

“Honestly Ali, are you going to ask me a question at every step or will you let my plan unfold itself as it is meant to be?”

# 31

## Intense Training Week

“I told you I’m fine, Alhamdulillah!” Abbas groaned as he pushed himself up.

Zahra sighed,

“If you say so, then I guess you can join us today.”

And with that she left. Abbas grunted as he got to his feet. Ever since his conversation with Akbar, he had developed a weakness in his body. He was having difficulty sleeping, eating and in fact pretty much doing anything. And while Zahra tried her best to help him, she failed to realise what his real cure was.

Akbar. Abbas hadn’t seen him around lately and this was tormenting him more than anything. He needed to speak with Akbar. He still didn’t know how Akbar had known the name of his mother? But this didn’t feel coincidental. Abbas knew that Akbar had also known Murtaza. They had fought twelve years ago.

‘Slow down,’ Abbas chided himself. ‘Let’s lay out what I know in front of me.’

Twelve years ago, Murtaza and Akbar fought. Akbar had stopped being an Alpha twelve years ago so it was definitely connected to the fight. Not to mention that Akbar knew his mother’s name. In addition, Abbas was entrusted with an aqeeq ring by his father. But the importance of this aqeeq ring was something that Abbas didn’t know. All he knew was that when Akbar Uncle saw the aqeeq ring, he allowed Abbas and Haider to



stay. And Akbar had asked about Murtaza then, so that made the ring a potential connection between them. But then where did Alpha 43 fit in all of this? How did he know Abbas's name? How did he know Murtaza's name? It didn't feel coincidental.

'If only I could work out the answer to all these questions,' Abbas thought to himself.

However, another thought had been bothering Abbas lately. Even though he knew very well that one day the answers will have to be found but, for now, Abbas had a bigger priority. He needed to work on his training. Staying alive was more important. Not to mention that the last time Abbas tried to find answers, he ended up causing a lot of pain to everyone. No. Abbas would find his answers but he would find them the right way at the right time. When Akbar will come back, he will talk to him. He will ask how Akbar knew his mother's name and Akbar will tell him. Akbar will tell him about his parents.

"Abbas!" Zahra's voice echoed in the hallways. "I'd appreciate it if you came today, please!"

Abbas warbled to the exit and swiftly headed outdoors. On the way, he noticed as expected, that Akbar and Ali were nowhere to be seen.

'They must be with the others or have already left,' Abbas thought to himself as he reached the front door.

He pushed down the handle and stepped outside where he was greeted by a cool breeze. Jafar, Zahra, Maryam and Haider were all there, doing one thing or another. Haider was rubbing two rocks together, probably trying to create fire. Jafar was watching him in agitation, as if waiting to explain him how it was done. Maryam was busy watching a slug wind itself around a twig in her hand. A smile curled on her lips as she placed the twig in the grass. Zahra was watching them all intently; her hand on her stomach.

It was then that Abbas realised that Akbar and Ali were missing. Where could they be? Maybe a morning search for supplies? It felt a little odd to Abbas. In all the time he had been here, he had never seen Akbar and Ali both leave for collecting supplies. In fact, Ali usually went wood cutting.

“Asalamualaikum,” Zahra greeted.

“Walaikum asalam,” everyone replied.

Zahra brought her hands together.

“I have some important announcements,” she began. “For the next week, I will be managing your training.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Where was Ali? Why wasn't he managing the training?

“Akbar Uncle has some important issues to handle,” she continued. “So he had to go. He will be back next week, Inshallah.”

Abbas felt his curiosity prick at him like a thorny bush. Why and where was Akbar going for such a lengthy period of time? It didn't feel right. And for the first time, Abbas was feeling unsafe. Somehow, absence of Akbar made him feel unprotected.

‘You are perfectly safe,’ Abbas reminded himself. ‘Nobody has ever found this place.’

With a deep breath, he turned his attention to what Zahra had to say.

“Ali,” she added. “Is with Akbar Uncle right now but he will be visiting from time to time.”

From the corner of his eye, Abbas noticed that Jafar and Haider appeared calm, but Maryam was slightly uneasy. Perhaps she, like Abbas, was not satisfied with Zahra's explanation.

Abbas was going to pry Zahra for more details but decided against it. Whatever it was, it was Akbar's personal matter. It wasn't Abbas's issue. He needed to be patient.

“Now then,” Zahra murmured. “Today, we are going to start some other critical aspects of your training. Until now, we have been training for emotional and physical strength and possible situations you may encounter. But now in addition to the daily physical and emotional training, we will also have a self-defense training session.”

Abbas watched Haider's eyes light up in excitement.

“We will also begin your C-gun resistance training,” Zahra added.

Abbas was almost certain he had misheard Zahra. What? Why? First Akbar and Ali leave. Next, they have C-gun resistance training.

“Why do we need to start C-gun training?” Abbas inquired. Zahra turned to face him.

“Because we are running a bit tight on time, and Akbar Uncle wants you all ready before-”

She stopped.

“Before the end of the week.”

Abbas stared in confusion.

“How are we suppose to finish training in a week?” Maryam questioned. “We have only been training for a couple of weeks.”

Haider nodded in agreement.

Zahra gave them a look of disapproval.

“Do remember that all of you have reached a significant level of fitness. There are some areas where improvements could be made, such as stamina, but in terms of strength and agility, you guys are quite good enough already.”

Jafar shook his head in disagreement.

“One week is not enough time,” he muttered.

Zahra wiped a fly away from her face.

“Let me tell you something. If we work for the next seven days, focused and concentrated, I’m sure we can have you all trained. I will work on your skills, such as climbing, self defense, swimming, hunting etc. Through these skills, you will develop more speed, agility, strength and stamina. Trust me guys. We can do this, Inshallah.”

Abbas’ eyes met Maryam’s. She looked skeptical about what Zahra was saying as well.

“We will be working around the clock,” Zahra added. “No free mornings or evenings anymore.”

Abbas sighed. It felt like he was in a big bad dream or something. He didn’t believe it. And deep down, he expected he would wake up. But he didn’t. He didn’t as they began with the regular laps around the house. Then they were taught for several hours about essential blocks and strikes from karate, as well as defensive positions and stances. Abbas learned the limits to which his joints could go and even though they begged him to stop, he couldn’t.

Abbas was made to do hand to hand sparring with Haider,

which drained his energy, even though he won each time. He was made to race Maryam in climbing, which he generally found himself to be better in and learnt ways to maximise the speed at which he swam.

It was about four in the evening when they were sent on a hike. Normally, it would have taken them an hour, but because of Haider's sloppiness, it ended up taking almost three hours.

The were then given half an hour break to eat their food and rest. But that was not nearly enough time for Abbas's aching joints. Abbas felt sore all over and he was absolutely certain he wouldn't be able to go on. The others weren't much better either. Haider had collapsed quite early on, unable to keep up with the duration of exercise.

Jafar was no different. He certainly had better stamina but his strength failed to carry him through tasks.

Abbas had to suppress a laugh as they both wobbled around, whining and complaining.

Abbas also noted that Maryam was exhausted. Even though her stamina had supported her the longest, her strength had failed her much earlier than Haider and she was just as eager as everyone else to quit.

"I am very proud of all of you for pulling through," Zahra congratulated. "Because we are almost done for today. All we are left with is the emotional training session and your C-gun resistance training."

There was a unanimous groan as everyone tried to get to their feet. Abbas watched as Zahra removed something from her pocket. She held it out for everyone to see. It was a ring. With a large red gemstone. Abbas thought it looked very nice. He liked how it shined, reflecting the light.

"The topic for this session is intelligence," Zahra smiled. Abbas narrowed his eyes as he stretched his arms.

"The ring I hold," Zahra continued. "It is hidden somewhere in the house. This includes both inside the house and within ten metres of grass outside of the house. Your task is simple. Find it." She paused placing the ring in her pocket.

"Find it and bring it to me and you will be done for the day."

Abbas's eyes widened in surprise. There was no way they could manage such a task, especially after how exhausted they all were. How was Zahra expecting them to do this? Deep down inside, Abbas began to wish that Akbar returned as soon as possible.

"To aid you," Zahra added. "There is a riddle."

She removed four chits of paper from her pocket and handed one to each of them.

Abbas read the chit immediately.

*"In the garden there are many things. Blue, black, brown, grey and green, loads of green, even yellow. But you seek red. So seek away! The answer must lie somewhere. Find the red ring that looks like the one in my hand. Now go!"*

Abbas raised a brow. This riddle was of no help. And the others seemed to agree. He heard Maryam ask,

"What is this riddle meant to do? Confuse us?"

Zahra laughed. "I understand if you find it a little confusing but I assure you, the riddle is helpful. More helpful than anything you have."

Abbas rolled his eyes. Zahra was behaving like Akbar again with the whole mystically confusing yet philosophical answers.

"Ready," Zahra murmured. "Go! And don't forget today's topic!"

Immediately Abbas whirled to face the other three.

"Alright," Jafar began. "How do we do this?"

Abbas looked down at the sheet, hoping that if he read it enough times, the sheet would give him the answer. But he knew that was not the case.

"I don't understand the riddle," Maryam murmured.

Haider nodded.

"We can either try solving the riddle, or brute force our way through the problem."

Abbas smiled. Ever since Haider had apologised to him for his mistake, he had made a consistent effort to work on his laziness. Abbas could tell he was trying to be more involved in the training and there was a definite progress too which made Abbas very happy.

“Maybe we are meant to search intelligently?” Haider questioned. Maryam and Jafar nodded.

“There are two places we need to search,” Maryam whispered. “Indoors and outdoors. So perhaps, we should have a team for indoors and a team for outdoors.”

Abbas nodded.

“Everyone should still keep trying to solve the riddle alongside as it may help in narrowing our search.”

Next, without wasting a moment, they began searching. Abbas and Haider searched out doors, while Maryam and Jafar searched indoors. They had decided that after every ten minutes they would meet up to consult one another.

Time ticked on and even though Abbas was optimistic, after an hour of frantic searching, he became more and more suspicious of the problem. He began to question if they could really find the ring? Abbas didn't think so. Perhaps they needed the riddle, as in without it, they would not be able to find the ring.

Slowly Abbas ran his eyes over the perplexing words once more.

*“In the garden there are many things. Blue, black, brown, grey and green, loads of green, even yellow. But you seek red. So seek away! The answer must lie somewhere. Find the red ring that looks like the one in my hand. Now go!”*

‘This doesn't make sense!’ Abbas thought to himself.

Abbas recalled what Zahra had said, hoping to get a hint.

*“I understand if you find it a little confusing but I assure you, the riddle is helpful. More helpful than anything you have.”*

That wasn't helpful to Abbas. Wait. What about the other thing she had said.

*“Go! And don't forget today's topic!”*

Abbas knew that Zahra, like Akbar, was a game player. So he needed to look at the problem as though Akbar had given it.

‘Come on,’ Abbas contemplated. ‘What do I know?’

He knew that there was a ring. He needed to find it and the only way was to solve the riddle. It was an impossible task, like the lentil sorting. Wait. The lentil sorting. That was it! Abbas widened his eyes as he realised that he was approaching

the problem incorrectly. Finding the ring was not the challenge, but rather solving the problem intelligently was. They were not meant to brute force their way through the solution.

‘Okay,’ Abbas reflected. ‘Let’s go one line at a time.’

*In the garden there are many things.*

What could this line mean? Perhaps it meant that the ring was outdoors?

*Blue, black, brown, grey and green, loads of green, even yellow.*

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Was it a coincidence that red was not mentioned in the list of colours? No. it couldn’t have been. This must have been placed on purpose for them to find. Abbas felt his pulse quicken. He was making progress. He moved on to the next line.

*But you seek red. So seek away! The answer must lie somewhere.*

What was the riddle saying here. Maybe it meant that there was no red in the garden so perhaps it was inside? Or maybe there was no ring at all? No. The riddle said,

*The answer must lie somewhere.*

That clearly meant that the ring was somewhere. But what about indoors. Maybe the last line could help narrow down the search.

*Find the red ring that looks like the one in my hand. Now go!*

Abbas stared intently at the last line. It didn’t really tell him much. And Zahra had made it sound like the riddle would tell him the exact coordinates of the ring or something. Indoors was still a large area.

‘No,’ Abbas thought to himself. ‘You aren’t thinking correctly. There has to be something missing.’

Abbas looked up for a moment to see Zahra. She was standing inside at the doorway of the house; a smile was on her face. Abbas narrowed his eyes as she matched his gaze.

“Find the red...” Abbas let the words trail off. His eyes widened in surprise.

‘Of course!’ he realised. ‘How could he miss it?’

Swiftly, Abbas charged towards the entrance where Zahra stood.

“I have solved the riddle!” he exclaimed as he ran. “I know where the ring is!”

Within a few seconds of reaching the front door, he heard the pattering of Maryam and Jafar as they appeared only moments later behind Zahra; confusion and hope vividly seen on their faces.

“Well Abbas,” Zahra asked. “What have you worked out?”

Abbas wiped a fleck of mud from his face. With deep breath, he began speaking.

“The ring is not in the garden. It is in the house.”

Maryam and Jafar glanced at each other before looking back; some of the hope was fading away.

“Don’t worry guys,” Abbas added. “I know exactly where the ring is.”

Zahra nodded and beckoned for him to continue. But before he could say anything, Haider’s loud voice echoed,

“I can’t handle the suspense! Where is the ring Abbas Bhai?”

Abbas confidently turned to face Haider.

“Why, we have known all along Haider. The ring is in Zahra Api’s pocket!”

There was a murmur of surprise from everyone. Maryam narrowed her eyes and Abbas could tell that the gears in her mind were running. Jafar tilted his head, clearly not understanding. Haider merely looked up at the sky, as if the answer would come from there. Zahra smiled. Slowly, she withdrew the ring she had shown them earlier from her pocket.

“Congratulations Abbas,” she replied. “You solved the challenge!”

Everyone exploded into joy and glee and another few minutes passed before silence finally overcame them once more.

“How did you work it out?” Jafar inquired.

The others nodded.

“I began to suspect that our approach was incorrect after one hour had passed and it occurred to me that perhaps the ring could only be found with the riddle. This was an intelligence challenge after all.”

He paused to wipe a fly away.

“I began going over the lines one by one. The first significant deduction I made was that amongst all the colours, red was not



mentioned. And upon reflecting on the first line, I theorised the ring was indoors.”

There was a murmur of agreement from the others.

“But that wasn’t enough. Indoors was still a large space. The ring could be anywhere. The last line sort of gave it away then, not to mention, Zahra api was standing inside.”

Abbas took a deep breath as he finished his lengthy explanation.

“That is brilliant!” Jafar exclaimed. “I would never have thought of that.”

Maryam nodded.

“Yes,” Zahra murmured. “That was brilliant. And I expect you all must be tired now.”

Haider groaned in agreement.

“Well,” she replied, glancing down at her watch. “Take an hour off. At 9:45 we will meet up in the living room for your final training component of the day. C-gun resistance training.”

Abbas nodded and exhaustedly forced his feet to carry him to his bedroom. While he was very anxious to start his C-gun resistance training, he had his priorities set. It was time to take a nice nap.

## 32

# The C-gun

It was 9:43 in the night. Abbas watched the clock in contempt as it turned to 9:44, marking the end of yet another sacred minute. There was only one minute left in the break before training resumed. And Abbas wasn't sure he was willing to get back up just yet.

He was exhausted beyond compare. His bones ached and his joints cracked. It felt as though he was buried under the ground. Every movement weighed heavily down upon him. His head was spinning.

'Oh,' he groaned. 'I never thought Zahra Api had a drill sergeant in her. She almost makes Akbar Uncle seem merciful.'

Abbas watched in despair as the hand of the clock moved to 9:45. Instantly, Zahra's voice came flowing through the halls.

"Alright! Break is over! Everyone in the living room ASAP!" Abbas staggered as he pushed his aching limbs to stand.

'Only a little longer,' he consoled himself. 'Then we're done.'

Abbas headed to the living room. As he reached there, he could hear the familiar moaning of Jafar, Haider and Maryam.

It took a few minutes for everyone to get to the living room and find a suitable seat.

Zahra who was already there, stared at them all in disapproval.

"You are all four minutes late!" she scolded.

"But anyways," Zahra continued. "It is time for your first exposure to the C-gun."

Abbas's tired eyes shot awake. The C-gun. The thing which

had caused so much trouble. And now, they were really going to face it.

Zahra withdrew the C-gun from her pocket. Abbas narrowed his eyes. The C-gun looked a lot like Alpha 43's, only older. Much older.

"First up, Jafar," she motioned in his direction.

Jafar pushed himself to his feet and stepped forth reluctantly, like a squirrel that was about to walk into a trap. His eyes were widened with a mixture of curiosity and fear.

"A piece of advice," Zahra stated. "You will be facing your biggest weakness. The C-gun is very formidable. Any spiritual defect will attack you more aggressively than ever. So try to keep your spiritual problems in control."

Jafar nodded.

Zahra raised the C-gun. She was about to activate it when her eyes widened for a moment,

"Oh yes, I almost forgot."

Swiftly, she headed over to the wall and removed a pink vase. She brought it over to where Jafar was standing.

"I will try to make you break the vase," she whispered. "You will have to try to resist."

Jafar raised a brow.

"I would never break a vase," he stated in a matter of fact tone.

Zahra smiled.

"Of course. But this time it will be different. I will only use it for 10 seconds. The C-gun leaves negligible effects under that period of time."

She raised the C-gun aiming it at Jafar's chest. There was a moment of silence as Zahra pressed the trigger.

For a moment, Jafar didn't react, and Abbas suspected that the C-gun wasn't on, but then abruptly he began swinging his arms around and stomping his feet.

Zahra narrowed her eyes, watching him intently.

Jafar raised his right fist and held it in the air, above the vase. If he brought it down, the vase would break.

"Come on Jafar," Abbas heard Maryam whisper.

Jafar brought his fist crashing down but then his other hand lashed out at his right fist pushing it away from the vase.

“Yes,” Zahra murmured. “He’s resisting it.”

Jafar began to growl as his legs gave way, and he fell upon the floor, wriggling like a caterpillar, until he got up abruptly; he was sweating heavily.

“Ami!” Jafar cried.

Abbas looked down. It didn’t take much to figure out what Jafar was seeing. From the corner of his eye, he could see Maryam’s eyes watered. Then Zahra let go of the trigger, and Jafar collapsed on the floor. His legs gave way and he looked dazed.

“Jafar!” Abbas called out but he did not respond. And then his eyes shot open and he jumped up with complete horror on his face.

“W-w-what?” he stammered.

Zahra moved forward, grabbing hold of Jafar.

“Are you okay?” she murmured lovingly.

Jafar’s petrified eyes began to water.

“I-I am,” he mustered at last. “I just need to rest.”

Zahra nodded and with Abbas’s help, moved him to the couch. Jafar sighed as he rested his head against the pillows.

“It was awful in there,” he yawned before drifting asleep.

Fear entered Abbas’s mind. What was this device? How had it done so much damage to Jafar?

“He will be alright,” Zahra whispered as if she could read Abbas’s mind. “The effects are only temporary.”

Abbas sighed. Jafar looked worse than dead. And he was beginning to wonder if it was too late to back out.

“Next up is Haider,” Zahra whispered. “Good luck!”

Haider gulped turning to Abbas. Their eyes met for a moment as both brothers experienced a strange emotion. As if one of them was about to die.

“I don’t want to go,” Haider swallowed, unable to take his eyes off the C-gun.

Zahra turned to Abbas for a moment; she had a worried look in her eyes. Abbas turned to Haider.

“It’s going to be alright,” he whispered, trying to strengthen his tone. “Jafar isn’t as strong as you are.”

Abbas purposely continued staring at Haider, ignoring Maryam’s annoyed glance.

“W-what if I-” Haider paused. “What if I see something awful? What if I get scared?”

Abbas looked down for a moment.

“Haider,” he whispered. “You are named after one of the bravest individuals in the history of Islam. You do not need to be worried.”

Haider nodded, wiping his tears away. He turned to address Zahra.

“I’m ready.” That was all he said. And as Haider positioned himself where Jafar had been only moments earlier, Abbas found his heart pounding with worry.

Zahra raised the C-gun, and pressed the trigger. Abbas couldn’t keep his eyes open. He looked away, eyes shut, so that he wouldn’t have to bear seeing Haider tortured.

A moment of silence. Followed by a squeal. And then gasps from around Abbas. Abbas kept his eyes closed.

‘Allah knows what Haider is going through right now!’ he thought to himself.

“Uh Abbas,” Maryam whispered, interrupting his thoughts. “You have to see this.”

Abbas shook his head.

“I can’t bear seeing Haider in this state,” he cried.

There was a groan.

“Abbas!” Maryam hissed. “Your brother is fine!”

Abbas’s eyes widened in surprise and he couldn’t help glance at Haider before suppressing a laugh.

Haider lay on the floor, arms stretched out as if he was on a beach. His legs were waddling back and forth, as if he was kicking them in sand.

“S...Sun...Sun cream...” Haider murmured.

Abbas couldn’t hold any longer and laughed. He would never let Haider forget this.

Abruptly Haider turned to the vase. A smile curled on his lips.

“Sun cream!” he exclaimed and quickly rolled over to where the the vase was.

Grasping hold of it, Haider began moving the vase back and forth over his arms as if he were applying sun cream.

A smile curled on Zahra’s lips.

“Good to know Haider’s number one weakness,” she remarked.

Abbas chuckled as he watched Haider raise the vase as if he was about to throw it.

Haider was frowning.

“Sun cream bottle empty!” he growled.

Abbas watched as Haider was about to throw the vase but hesitated.

“Abbas Bhai,” he muttered. “Abbas Bhai will be angry.”

Maryam giggled.

“Abbas! Look at your brother!”

Abbas joined in the laugh as he saw Haider place the vase on the floor before collapsing unconscious.

Abbas lunged forward.

“Haider! Are you okay?”

Haider awoke with a start.

“W-where is the su-” he paused; a cheeky grin formed on his face. “How much of that did you hear?”

Abbas dropped to his knees and began mimicking Haider’s gorilla-like movements. Maryam fell to the floor laughing and Zahra also laughed.

“Sun cream!” Abbas growled. “Sun creaaaaam!”

Haider reddened with embarrassment as he rolled away from the vase. As he did so, he looked up to Zahra,

“Did I pass?”

Zahra smiled.

“You and Jafar both.”

Haider began applauding at his own self as he sat down next to Jafar on the couch.

“Maryam,” Zahra instructed. “You’re next.”

Maryam took a deep breath.

“Here goes,” she muttered under her breath as she stood behind the vase.

Zahra raised the gun. For a moment everything was silent. Then Maryam stiffened. Her eyebrows rose as her lips formed into a conceited smile. And then she spoke the last words Abbas would ever expect her to say.

“Well Abbas, aren’t you tired of losing to me yet?”

Abbas rolled his eyes. This was Maryam’s weakness? Abbas gulped. Maryam was definitely competitive. All of a sudden she started crying. She was talking to the vase,

“I will beat everyone in the competition. Abbas you are challenging me way more than I would like.”

She started wiping her tears, still talking to the vase,

“I will beat you fair and square. I want to please Akbar Uncle and I want to make Zahra Api proud of me. Because I know that if they are happy with me then Ammi and Baba will be proud of me too. So mind it Abbas! I am winning the next challenge, for sure.”

She was sitting frozen on the ground and never went close to the vase. Zahra looked at her with tear-filled eyes as she muttered,

“I am already very proud of you, my dear, and I am sure Ammi and Baba are too.”

But Maryam was unable to hear anything she said as she had already fallen on the ground, unconscious.

“Are you okay?” Zahra asked Maryam as she gave her a hug.

Maryam opened her eyes and was a bit surprised at Zahra’s warmth. Nevertheless, she welcomed it before heading back to her position.

Abbas shivered as he moved forward. He was the last of the group. And he wanted to make an impression.

Zahra smiled, ushering him forward.

Abbas moved to the designated position, and Zahra placed the vase before him.

“Bismillah,” Zahra whispered as she pressed the trigger. Abbas closed his eyes, unsure of what to expect. As far as he was concerned, he had no weakness. Slowly, he watched as everyone faded away, and Akbar appeared before him.

“I’m very disappointed in you!”

Abbas was about to reply but then he remembered. This was fake.

A smile formed on his lips.

“I am very disappointed in you too!” he scolded. Suppressing a laugh, he added on, “You haven’t eaten your breakfast yet!”

Akbar hissed before disappearing, and Abbas awoke with a start in the living room, panting. The vase lay untouched before him, and Zahra, Maryam, Jafar and Haider all stood around him.

There was a moment of silence, before Abbas laughed,

“That was easy!”

Haider rushed forward giving him a hug. Maryam and Jafar stood around him as well.

“Great job, Abbas! You really are the best!”

Abbas was unable to suppress a chuckle. He had literally beaten the controller easily.

All of a sudden the front door swung open. Abbas whirled to face the door. It was raining outside and lightning had started to strike. But Abbas felt his heart go cold. And it wasn’t because of the weather. In the shadow of the doorway, stood a figure. Abbas’s eyes widened in horror.

“B-Baba,” he stammered. “Is that you?”

Abbas narrowed his eyes as another figure joined Murtaza’s side. It was a woman. Around Murtaza’s age. Abbas recognised her immediately. It was Layla!

“Ami!” Abbas gasped, rushing forward to hug his mother. Her eyes widened in surprise.

“Abbas!” Layla cried as she opened her arms, taking Abbas into her embrace.

Abbas’s eyes watered as he felt her warmth. He could feel her love pierce through his heart and nothing in the world mattered to him anymore. Not the Alphas, not his training, nothing at all. In his mother’s arms, he felt this strange sense of fulfillment. It was as though his heart had finally stopped feeling the pain that had plagued him for many months now.

“Don’t I get a hug,” Murtaza smiled and Abbas extended his only free arm to bring his father in on the hug.



For a moment, Abbas felt like nothing in the world mattered anymore. He had found them. And now, nothing could part them. But then they began to fade away.

“Wait,” Abbas cried as he struggled to keep hold of them.

Layla kissed him on his forehead.

“We love you Abbas! And you know where to find us.”

“Nooooo!!!!!!” he cried as they faded away entirely. “Don’t leave me!!!!!!”

Everything went dark and Abbas awoke with a start. Beads of sweat poured down his cheek as he looked from left to right. He was in the living room. Zahra, Maryam, Jafar and Haider all overshadowed him with concerned glances.

“W-what happened?” Abbas groaned.

Nobody replied. They just stared at him. Slowly, Abbas tried to push himself off the ground, only to see the vase shattered into tiny pieces, right in front of him. And that was the last thing Abbas saw before he passed out just a second later; exhausted by his first encounter with the C-gun.

## 33

# Status Report

It was midnight. The moon glanced over the rocky landscape. The wind was blowing lightly, creating a small whistling tune in the air.

Akbar sighed as he placed another piece of wood in the fire. It had been a while since he had camped in these caves. And the comfort of the bungalow had put him a little out of practice.

Akbar glanced towards the sky, reflecting on the recent events. Deep down, he still could not believe everything that had happened.

From Murtaza's passing away, to the death of Alpha 39, and now a revolution. And to think this all began with an 18 year old boy. Abbas. A riddle which Akbar was determined to solve.

The potential this boy held was honestly, in Akbar's opinion; amazing. The way he had discovered that Akbar was an Alpha, how he had rescued Ali and how he had survived after Murtaza's death. Akbar found it intriguing how this child could make such critical decisions in the moment.

He had many admirable traits for his age and Akbar was certain that with the right mentoring, this boy could land very high in life.

It was unfortunate that Murtaza had passed away. Murtaza would have made an excellent mentor. But then again, Murtaza had already mentored Abbas a great deal. Akbar smiled as he thought about how similar they were.

They had the same eyes, the same attitude and the same

extreme curiosity which often got them in trouble.

Akbar looked down for a moment, a strange longing in his heart. It was unexplainable. Nor did Akbar prefer to pry at it. But deep down, he knew what it was. A question. One which he had never been able to answer. Whenever he looked at Abbas, he remembered Murtaza. Whenever he looked at Maryam, Zahra and Jafar, he saw their parents; Qasim and Khadija.

People were never truly dead as long as their children carried their memories forward. But for Akbar, life had deprived him of that. Although Akbar realised, he had raised Maryam, Zahra and Jafar. He had cleaned Jafar's cuts and stayed up with Maryam when she had stomach aches at night. He had taught Zahra how to bake cakes, and had always given her thumbs up when she served him a burnt mass as a cake.

No. Akbar had lived a good life. Even if he didn't have children of his own, at least he knew what it was like to love someone and care for them more than anything in the world. He knew what it was like to risk his life, charging towards Alpha 43, if it meant the survival of his loved ones.

"Qasim," Akbar sighed. "I hope I raised your children the way you wanted them to be."

He stopped. There was a small beeping coming from his bag.

'The hand radio,' he thought as he unzipped his bag and pulled it out.

It was a small device. Sort of like a walkie talkie. And it was very old. So old, that its technology could not be tracked by Alphas.

"Lone wolf to den," Akbar whispered. "I repeat, lone wolf to den, do you copy?"

There was a crack before Zahra's voice came through,

"Den to lone wolf, we copy."

"You called," Akbar stated. "What is the problem?"

There was a few seconds of silence before Zahra answered.

"It was about today's training."

Akbar brought the device closer to his ear.

"Well?" Akbar pushed. "What about it? Did they buy the excuse?"

“No,” Zahra answered. “At least not Maryam and Abbas. I could tell by how they were looking at me.”

Akbar sighed. Fooling Abbas was always an arduous task.

He paused for a moment. The fire was dimming a bit. He reached out for another piece of wood and added it to the fire. It roared to life.

“Akbar Uncle. Why are we keeping this matter a secret from them? Shouldn’t we just tell them?”

Akbar narrowed his eyes.

“We could. But I want them to finish their training first.”

There was a crack as Zahra’s reply came through the device,

“Yes. I see what you mean. Jafar and Haider were able to resist the C-gun, although just barely.”

Akbar felt a sense of relief.

“That’s good then. It won’t be too hard for those two to get better. Now tell me Zahra, what is bothering you?”

He could feel it since the first moment he had heard her speak that something was wrong. After so many years he knew her voice well enough.

“Akbar Uncle,” he heard her sigh. “Multiple things are bothering me.”

Akbar nodded, realising afterwards that she could not see his nod.

“Tell me,” Akbar urged. “Let’s talk it out.”

Zahra began.

“Abbas and Maryam failed the C-gun test. At least Maryam resisted a little. Abbas didn’t even do that. He fell completely at the C-gun’s mercy.”

Akbar looked down.

“I understand,” he whispered. “Why this may bother you. It is a little weird, especially for someone like Abbas. But do recall that sometimes people have a hard time with their first exposure to the C-gun.”

“I know,” Zahra replied. “But I didn’t expect him to get controlled this easily.”

Akbar shook his head.

“If the same thing happens tomorrow then let me know. I’ll see if I can do something about it. Maybe I’ll send Ali back.”

Akbar added the last part on purpose. He had suspected what Zahra’s issue was. Her real issue. Aside from Abbas. And her slight gasp confirmed his doubts.

“My lovely niece, Zahra,” Akbar whispered. “The source of my strength, Zahra. I will not let anything happen to Ali.”

She began crying on the other side.

“It’s just,” she whispered, “I don’t want to have to raise Hurr without him.”

Akbar’s eyes widened as a smile curled on his face.

“Have you decided a name?”

There was a pause from the other side, followed by a crack.

“If it’s a boy,” Zahra sniffled. “Otherwise Ali and I thought of calling her Khadija, you know; after Ami. We decided a while back. I wanted to ask you but you left before I could.”

Akbar smiled.

“I couldn’t have picked a better name, Zahra. If it is Hurr , then he will be a free man. Free to live his life with his family one day. We will see his brave father and even braver mother alongside him together, Inshallah! And if it is Khadija, then we will see her live a life of happiness. Without fearing for her loved ones. Inshallah, both her parents will be there to see their children prosper!”

The sadness in Zahra’s voice had completely disappeared now.

“I feel much better Akbar Uncle,” she whispered. “Thank you.”

Akbar murmured back,

“Don’t thank me Zahra. Your uncle would sacrifice everything he has, just for your smile.”

## 34

# A Discussion

“I still think it’s a bad idea,” Ruqayya frowned. “Why should we trust Akbar?”

Naqi looked away from his younger sister, unable to find a good enough response. Ever since his meeting with Akbar, Naqi had been greatly unsure of what to do.

There were two choices. Accept Akbar’s offer or reject it. Accepting the offer meant joining a ‘revolution’ against the Alphas. Which in a way was suicidal, because the Alphas had never lost a fight before. But then being martyred in a noble cause wasn’t something to be afraid of and Naqi wasn’t afraid of dying. But he was scared for his sister.

Ruqayya was certainly brave but she definitely could not look out for herself. And Naqi had been entrusted with her by his father on the death bed. He recalled his father’s last wish.

*‘Take care of your sister. Protect her.’*

Naqi would never agree if Ruqayya was in danger. But then again, this man named Akbar had a valid point. How much longer could they really hide for? It wasn’t like they could evade the Alphas forever. Naqi decided to put forth this question.

“Ruqayya, how much longer do you think we can evade the Alphas for?”

Ruqayya looked away.

“The Alphas took everyone,” Naqi added. “Ami, Baba, our aunts and uncles, cousins, everyone! There is only us left. And

now we have a chance to fight back!”

Ruqayya looked up, matching Naqi’s gaze with intensity.

“And what will I do, if I lose you? Naqi Bhai, you are all I have left in this world.”

Naqi forced a smile.

“My dear sister, our creator gives and takes from us. He tests us in this world. But once we make it through these tests, there is always a much better life for us on the other side.”

Ruqayya frowned. She didn’t seem to be convinced.

“Look,” Naqi sighed. “I have thought a lot and I think I should join them. For this cause is so important. Their vision of a better future. For you, me and all the others like us. Ruqayya, I must go, and I need you to understand that.”

“But how can you trust Akbar?” she retorted. “What if it is all a trick to get us? What if when you get there, they shoot you in the forehead. No brother. I won’t let you leave! Not unless you take me with you.”

Naqi’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Ruqayya, there is no way you are coming!”

Ruqayya narrowed her eyes.

“I will go with you wherever you are so that you don’t gamble your life away.”

Naqi looked down. There really was never a way to win in an argument with Ruqayya.

“Fine,” he muttered begrudgingly. “Let me think a bit more on this.”

With that, the two siblings ended the argument and began preparing to sleep. What they didn’t realise was that someone had been listening to their entire conversation. In the abandoned hotel room, where they stayed, a small black device planted just outside the room earlier today, had been transmitting the entire conversation to another man across the city.

The man they had spoken to the night before. Akbar.

A smile formed on Akbar’s lips.

“If it’s trust that you’re worried about Naqi, then worry no more. For in the days to come, the cause based on truth, justice and sincerity will earn your trust soon, Inshallah.”

# 35

## Day 2 of Intense Training Week

Zahra sighed as she watched the score board.

*Abbas - 194 points*

*Maryam - 189 points*

*Haider - 167 points*

*Jafar - 153 points*

She still could not understand how someone as remarkable as Abbas could have slipped so easily into the C-gun's influence. It didn't make any sense. Even though it was Abbas's first time, there was something strange about it. Abbas had no clear problem as such. And it worried Zahra, that should Abbas get captured, God forbid; he would be completely hopeless against the Alphas.

'That won't happen,' Zahra thought to herself; a new form of determination was filling her heart. 'I'm going to focus on his training. I'm going to help him overcome any issue he might have.'

And so Zahra headed outside to conduct the morning session. As she strolled, she pondered over how Abbas had reacted towards the C-gun. What had he said? Her memory felt a little muddled as she replayed the events of last night in her mind.

*I am very disappointed in you too! You haven't eaten your breakfast yet!*

That didn't make any sense to Zahra. It could literally mean



anything, so Zahra ignored it. No need to speculate over something she couldn't understand. What Zahra needed was something concrete.

*That was easy!*

Again, that meant nothing to Zahra.

*B-Baba? Is that you?*

Zahra narrowed her eyes. This meant something. Abbas had mentioned to her that his father had passed away. Perhaps he was grieving over his father. Perhaps, the C-gun used this to defeat him.

*Ami!*

So he was also seeing his mother. That meant it wasn't just about his father. It was about both of his parents. Abbas had been extending his arms out in the air, presumably hugging his parents and he had been crying which indicated that there was something about his parents that was bothering him.

*Wait! Noooooo!!!!!! Don't leave me!!!!*

This made Zahra especially confused. There were so many possibilities of what this could have meant. Perhaps, Abbas saw his parents leaving him and he didn't want them to go?

She entered the living room with firm determination of resolving this issue.

Abbas was the only one there. He was looking tired from yesterday. A pang of sympathy hit Zahra's heart. She hated putting him and the others under this pressure. Zahra narrowed her eyes and pushed her sympathy aside. The world was not going to show them mercy and as their mentor, it was her job to prepare them for the world.

As she neared Abbas, she thought about how she should open the conversation.

"Salamunalaikum," she greeted.

"Walaikum asalam," he muttered in response.

Zahra narrowed her eyes. He wasn't looking very happy. Probably due to the C-gun yesterday.

"It doesn't always work for everyone in the first go," she murmured.

Abbas looked up, his eyes widening in surprise. Zahra smiled.

Catching him off guard with a direct approach made him more vulnerable to her advice. But she had to be careful. Abbas was a very intelligent person.

“I know,” the boy sighed. “But I’m really just feeling sleepy nowadays.”

‘Of course you are,’ Zahra repeated sarcastically in her mind.

“Abbas,” she smiled. “I understand if you felt bad about the C-gun. But I want you to know that this is normal.”

Abbas nodded his head respectfully.

“Good to know, I guess,” he shrugged casually.

So he wasn’t willing to talk about it. Well, Zahra wasn’t exactly going to let him go now, would she?

“Abbas,” she sighed. “Don’t bottle things in. If pressure builds up too much, it becomes suffocating. Trust your friends and family. Talk to me about what happened. Tell me what you saw during the C-gun test.”

Abbas stiffened and his eyes widened. He looked as though an internal struggle was taking place.

He looked down.

“I saw my parents.”

Zahra felt a pang of sympathy in her heart once more.

“They were happy to see me,” Abbas continued. “Overjoyed in fact.”

Zahra narrowed her eyes. There was something strange about Abbas as he narrated the incidents. He looked as though his mind was in another world. His eyes had a lost gaze in them. His lips curved into a childish smile. Zahra felt slightly worried.

“They hugged me,” Abbas finished.

“Why did you ask them not to leave you?” Zahra inquired.

The smile vanished from Abbas’s face and a small frown formed on his face. But he quickly regained his composure.

“I-” Abbas paused. “When they were fading away, I got a bit scared, I guess. That’s all.”

Zahra narrowed her eyes. That did certainly add up to everything she had concluded until now. So maybe her conjecture was correct. Maybe Abbas just missed his parents.

“Abbas,” Zahra began. “I understand that you miss your parents. I really do. You see, my father’s name was Qasim. My mother’s name was Khadija. My father and Akbar Uncle were brothers. But when I was fourteen, Alphas killed my parents. Akbar Uncle lost his brother; my father. I lost my mother. I had to raise Maryam and Jafar. I had to be strong for both of them.”

Abbas’s eyes began to water. Zahra realised that it was working. He was opening up to her now.

“I miss them everyday,” she added. “And it feels like if you could just have that one thing. If you could just have them, then everything would be perfect.”

Abbas was on the verge of tears now.

“But the problem is,” Zahra whispered. “The visions you had in the C-gun. They were all fake. Those people-” Zahra paused. “They aren’t real Abbas. They are only figments of your imagination.”

“I know,” Abbas swallowed as the tears trickled down his cheeks. “But they felt so close. I- I-I just wish they were with me.”

Zahra’s eyes began to water.

“I know what you feel Abbas. I get it. But if you move past this today then I guarantee, you will break through the C-gun.”

Abbas looked away for a second. He began to wipe away his tears hurriedly. Zahra glanced to where he was looking. The entrance of the house. Haider was approaching.

Swiftly Zahra wiped away her tears. She was feeling alot better. And from the way Abbas looked, she felt hopeful that her words may have had an effect.

‘Without a doubt, he should beat the C-gun now, Inshallah.’ she thought to herself.

## 36

# Second Attempt

It was evening. Abbas sat in the living room with the others. He watched as Zahra set up a cardboard box. Abbas looked away guiltily.

'I broke the vase, that's why she's doing this,' he thought to himself.

But today would be different. Today, Abbas would defeat the C-gun. Ever since his conversation with Zahra, he was feeling a lot better. Throughout the day, Abbas had performed consistently better in numerous activities. He had defeated Haider in hand to hand combat, finished his sprint laps in record time. And in the swimming, although he lost to Haider, he had defeated Jafar for the first time. Abbas had also won the grip strength competition which forced them to hang off of a tree for as long as they could.

And now, they were about to go up against the C-gun. And this time, Abbas was determined to defeat it. One by one, he watched each person go up against the device.

Jafar, like last time, was the first one to try.

This time, he was able to resist better. Haider on the other hand, was a different story. Initially he was quiet, and then abruptly, he started jumping around the place like a monkey. Then he just collapsed on the couch in a giggling pile. Abbas made a mental note to double check on his brother's sanity later.

Next was Maryam. She didn't completely fall in the trap this time. For at one point, she moved away from the box, staying in

the corner of the room with a cheeky grin, until her time finished.

Now it was Abbas's turn. Abbas gulped nervously as he approached the cardboard box. What would he see this time? Would he see his parents? Or maybe the device wouldn't take that approach again. Abbas didn't know.

'They aren't real,' Abbas repeated to himself. 'They aren't real'. He closed his eyes as Zahra activated the C-gun. Everything went silent. Abbas opened his eyes hesitantly, half expecting to see his parents. But they weren't there. In fact nothing was. Abbas found himself in complete darkness. The only source of light being a candle, a few centimetres away, in front of him.

"Hello Abbas," he heard a strange voice whisper.

Abbas whirled with a start in the direction of the voice, but he couldn't see anything. Well, in all fairness, even if there was something there, Abbas wouldn't see it.

"B-baba?" Abbas whispered.

There was a small hiss as two large yellow eyes appeared before him.

Abbas felt panic grip his heart. What was that thing? It's eyes were huge. No. This was fake. Just like everything C-gun showed.

"Am I fake?" a voice whispered as the yellow eyes moved closer. Abbas clenched his fist. Whatever this thing was, it could read his thoughts.

"Yes," he heard the same voice. "I can read your thoughts."

Abbas gulped as the source of the voice came into the candle's light. It was a snake! A gigantic snake! It's head was about the size of Abbas and its body tapered like a long curtain into the darkness. It's piercing yellow eyes stared Abbas in the eye and its scales glistened as if they were wet. It's voice was strangely dead and alive at the same time. Abbas couldn't explain it but it felt strangely alive. Except for the fact that it was fake.

"I'm sorry," the snake smiled venomously, revealing its large poisonous fangs. "Were you expecting your parents?"

Abbas forced himself to look the snake in the eye. With a casual grin, he remarked,

"I certainly didn't anticipate a hideous snake!"

The snake began wheezing, which Abbas realised was actually laughter.

“My boy,” the snake sighed. “I am not fake.”

Abbas rolled his eyes. How many times the snake was going to try this?

“I am very real,” the snake continued.

Abbas sat down casually.

The snake narrowed its eyes.

“The C-gun communicates with the subject,” the snake began. “It changes the subject’s thinking process. But how does it do that?” it paused. “It does that by communicating with the person’s desires, fears and flaws.”

Abbas smirked.

“I certainly have no desire to meet a giant snake; nor do I fear a giant snake, and meeting a giant snake is not a flaw-”

“But you do wish for your parents!” the snake interrupted. “You miss them so much everyday. But that is not your weakness.”

Abbas’s eyes widened in surprise. The snake sighed.

“Abbas,” it whispered. “I am part of you. I am a combination of your desires, fears and flaws. That is my existence. That is why I know you as well as you know yourself. Because I am, in a way, a darker form of you.”

Abbas shook his head,

“You are being absolutely preposterous,” he murmured. “My only weakness is that I miss my parents, and that was resolved with Zahra Api’s help.”

The snake looked down; its fangs were visible.

“You have many weaknesses,” it smiled. “I honestly don’t know which one to pick.”

Abbas scowled.

“Feels like you don’t really know me, to be honest?”

The snake began wheezing once more.

‘Laughing,’ Abbas corrected himself.

“One of your biggest fears,” it murmured, “is that you will never remember your parents.”

Abbas’s eyes widened in surprise. How could it have known?

The snake’s scaly lips curved into a sly smile.

“Another fear, is losing Haider.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes.

“Stop,” he muttered under his breath.

The snake however kept going, clearly enjoying itself.

“You’re afraid that you will never be good enough to defeat the C-gun. That you will never be strong enough. Which honestly, you are correct about. I mean you weren’t even able to pull the trigger against a cold blooded murderer like Alpha 39.”

Abbas looked away. It was taking every iota of self control to not hit the snake.

“But,” the snake sighed in pretended agony. “It wasn’t with your desires or fears that I control you. Abbas. You have a very big flaw in your iman<sup>1</sup>. One that no matter how hard you try, will keep bringing you down. It will crush you on the inside. And as the days progress-”

“Stop!” Abbas growled.

“As the days progress,” the snake persisted. “You will realise that I am truthful. There is nothing you can do about it. This flaw embeds so deep within you like a parasite-”

“Stop!” Abbas roared before lunging forward at the snake. In a flash, the reptile dodged and slithered away, just missing his fist. Abbas looked around anxiously. He couldn’t see it anywhere but he could hear it.

“Not to mention your anger issues,” it whispered. “Remember what I told you Abbas. You can never win against me!”

And with that, a wave washed over Abbas, wiping everything away and Abbas awoke with a start; his fists clenched. The cardboard box before him was battered.

Everyone was watching him, in confusion and shock. Zahra in particular. She appeared to be genuinely perplexed. Abbas wiped away the sweat on his forehead.

“I-” he gasped. “I-”

Everything went black as Abbas slumped down on the ground, unconscious.

---

<sup>1</sup>Faith

# 37

## Allies?

It was evening. Akbar glanced at his watch. The time was 9:47 pm.

‘Naqi should be here soon,’ he thought to himself.

For the last ten minutes or so, Akbar had been waiting by the river. He knew that around this time, Naqi always crossed by here on his way back from gathering supplies.

Recruiting people for a revolution was quite an arduous task. One which Akbar was more than ready to work hard for. The problem was that everyone had their own issues. Naqi was brave, but cautious. He wasn’t going to make a risky move. Although Akbar was sure that Naqi was a sincere person who once convinced, would prove to be an invaluable asset for the cause. That was why Akbar was trying to earn his trust. He had to find a way to convince him. At the back of his mind, Akbar knew that in every situation, man fulfills his responsibility and Allah (swt) rewards him for his efforts.

He prayed to Allah (swt) for the success of the upcoming meeting. He was sitting behind a big bush which could easily deceive a passer-by. Anyone walking along the side of the river would be visible to Akbar well in advance.

Akbar was really hoping that Naqi showed up. That, in his view, was the most unpredictable part of the process. Once Naqi arrived, there would be a greater chance to convince him.

It might have been a bit too much investment of energy for two



people, but Akbar was convinced that they were worth it. Naqi, remarkably so, wasn't afraid of what would happen to him. He was willing to give it a shot. And Akbar knew that with the right push, Naqi would join him. And if Naqi joined the revolution, so would Ruqayya.

She had also seemed like a brilliant mind who could be very beneficial for the cause.

Akbar smiled as he recalled how many people had already joined the revolution. There was Kadhim who had only just agreed yesterday. And then the youth named Yasir. He was a little dim witted but passionate. And passion was what the revolution needed.

Akbar stiffened for a moment. Down below, he was almost certain that he had heard some twig breaking.

Akbar watched as Naqi stealthily emerged from the foliage down below. His eyes darted from left to right, and in his arm was a large revolver. Akbar narrowed his eyes. Naqi was armed.

Akbar waited for Naqi to reach the edge of the river. Being cautious was part of his personality. And a lot of times it had saved him from potential dangers. Today was no different. Akbar sensed danger. He signalled to Ali who was a little far from where Akbar was.

The quiet felt like the one before the storm. As Naqi came closer, someone leapt out from the bushes, ramming Naqi. Without any delay, in a flash of a second, Akbar jumped out from his hideout and charged on the attacker.

The attacker was not expecting Akbar. He was probably here because he was following Naqi and thought that the isolated river bank would be the best place to attack.

Akbar heard a gasp as he reached the bottom of the hill. Akbar's charging on the attacker gave Naqi some time to get his nerves sorted. He took a few seconds to understand what was happening.

Was Akbar or his men attacking him? Was Ruqayya correct in her suspicions about Akbar? Is Akbar part of enemy's forces? Is this encounter going to conclude someone's life?

Naqi's head was filling with conflicting and worrisome thoughts,

but the next moment was enough to clarify many suspicions.

The attacker threw a sharp knife towards Naqi who was not as attentive as he should have been. By the time he realised that a knife was coming towards him, it looked like it was too late,

Naqi was ready to meet his fate.

“Ya Allah! Please keep my sister safe.”

Pleased with his last words, Naqi was about to close his eyes when something strange happened. Akbar, in a flash of a second, threw himself in front of Naqi.

Naqi realised immediately what Akbar was trying to do.

“No!” Naqi growled as he tried to push Akbar away but Akbar stood his ground. Naqi’s push, however, caused him a bit of imbalance and the sharp knife pierced the side of his shoulder instead of his heart.

Akbar felt a sharp pain as blood started oozing out.

Suddenly, Ali and a few others came from behind the bush. The attacker got very nervous. He did not anticipate so many people were going to be here. In a flash of a second, he vanished in the woods. Akbar understood that he was probably a junior-ranked soldier of Jumeira’s army. An Alpha would have never left his ground.

“Akbar?” Naqi exclaimed. “W-Wh- are you okay?”

Akbar groaned as he smiled.

“Yeah. I think so,” he muttered.

Naqi began looking for any significant injuries.

“Don’t worry Akbar,” he murmured. “I think you’ll be fine, Inshallah.”

Akbar pushed himself to sit so that he could look Naqi in the eye.

“Inshallah,” Akbar responded.

“Why did you do that?” Naqi asked who was still clearly shocked. Akbar barely knew him. Why would he risk his life for a stranger?

Akbar replied gracefully,

“Young man, causes thrive on the passion of sincere and committed youth. Each and every one of you can be an invaluable asset to the cause. My life means nothing. I can sacrifice it a million

times. The dream of having a free and peaceful future is far bigger than people like me. The forces of evil are strengthening by every passing day. Alphas are becoming unbeatable monsters. People are dying of hunger and hiding in slums, putting their lives in danger trying to find a piece of bread. Is this how it is going to be? No! We must do something and to start, I have dedicated my life to the cause of ending injustice and cruelty. Even if I die trying to make it happen, I will be in peace knowing that I tried until my last breath.”

Akbar’s voice became hoarse as he was overwhelmed. Not only Naqi, but Ali and others had their eyes filled with tears too. Akbar did not need his consent anymore. He looked up for a second and whispered in his heart,

“Ya Allah. You are very kind and merciful. Shukr, Alhamdullilah”

## Warehouse Raid

It was pitch black. The moon's white light was drowned away by the dark clouds creeping over the sky. While normally one would have expected it to rain, it was dry. Drier than the savannah plains.

Alpha 31 ducked behind the barrel, his infamous 1636 revolver in hand. He leaned into his communicator,

“All teams, report positions.”

There was silence and then multiple voices came through.

“Team A ready.”

“Team B ready.”

“Team C ready.”

Alpha 31 nodded as he glanced back to his men.

“Everyone ready,” he whispered.

They all nodded back in acknowledgement, one by one. Alpha 31 paused as he glanced over Beta 31. She had been exceptional in her training and Alpha 31 was proud to have been her mentor. This would be his last mission with her. After which, she would be made into the new Alpha 39. He smiled as he recalled the look on Alpha 43's face when Jumeira had picked Beta 31 over Beta 43. Alpha 31 pushed aside his thoughts. He needed to focus now. For as he had told all the soldiers earlier, they weren't here for games. Rather, they were here to nab the most dangerous man on this island-Akbar.

“All teams move in,” Alpha 31 ordered and in a flash, he began advancing forward.

Silently, like a panther, he made his way towards the warehouse. If his predictions were correct, then Akbar was hiding here. And it was more than essential that Akbar is terminated.

As they reached the entrance of the warehouse, Beta 31 advanced ahead of Alpha 31, to place the explosives on the door. Alpha 31 watched her place each one and wire them to the remote detonator.

‘She will make a fine Alpha,’ he thought to himself.

And with that, they began retreating, just outside the range of the explosives. Alpha 31 watched as Beta 31 lifted her hand, signalling that she was about to press the trigger.

‘Three,’ the Alpha counted. ‘Two...one.’

BOOM! The entry of the warehouse exploded in flames as bullets rained all over. They ricocheted off the walls destroying the old worn out boxes and other contents of the warehouse. Everything was reduced to ashes as the Alpha confidently stepped inside.

“Akbar!” he shouted. “I’m giving you to the count of three! Surrender!”

There was no response. Alpha 31 narrowed his eyes.

“Akbar!” he growled. “This is your last chance. Don’t be a fool!”

There was still no reply.

“Argh!” Alpha 31 hissed. “Fine! Move in!”

Stealthily, all the teams began entering the warehouse. Every window, door and any other potential exit was being swarmed with armed soldiers.

Swiftly, Alpha 31 led a sweep through each floor. From bottom to top, the soldiers searched; a slight fear spreading through them. They were all well aware of how dangerous their target was.

Some began sweating as they reached the final floor. Alpha 31 narrowed his eyes.

“This is it,” he murmured to the others. “Akbar must be on this floor.”

The other men nodded hesitantly. Unsure of what awaited

them. They knew that even if they were able to catch Akbar, some of them would certainly lose their lives.

“Ready men,” Alpha 31 whispered. “Three...two...one...charge!”

Alpha 31 lashed his foot out at the door. Instantly, it slumped to the ground as everyone barged in roaring.

The sound of bullets filled the air. Dust clouded everyone’s vision and the commands of Alpha 31 were drowned away in the gunfire.

Finally, after a few minutes had passed and gun shells covered the floor, the group regained order.

“What was that?” Alpha 31 growled. “When did I teach you to be this disorganised?”

The soldiers looked down, careful not to show any fear. The Alphas were very sensitive about their soldiers showing fear and nobody wanted to end up being seen afraid by an Alpha. Only a few weeks ago, Alpha 43 had whipped one of the guards in public for a similar crime.

“Sorry sir,” Beta 31 whispered. “Will not happen again!”

Alpha 31 narrowed his eyes.

“See to it!”

It was then that the Alpha noticed it. There was no blood in the room.

“Where is Akbar?” he thought out loud. “He should have been here.”

One of the soldiers gulped nervously.

“Sir,” the soldier began. “I don’t think Akbar is here.”

Alpha 31 turned around to face the soldier, a calm expression on his face.

“Not here you say,” the Alpha repeated softly.

The soldier nodded nervously.

“Not here you say,” the Alpha repeated once more.

The soldier nodded once more, this time more confidently.

Beta 31 looked away. How could the soldier be this tactless?

“What do you mean not here?” the Alpha roared, grabbing hold of the soldier’s collar. “Are you saying that I made a mistake?”

The soldier swallowed nervously.

“No sir!”

Alpha 31 hissed.

“Get back in line soldier! And never speak out like that again!”

The soldier nodded, struggling to control his fear.

“Yes sir!” he muttered.

The Alpha sighed. He turned towards the exit.

“We’re going!” he called out. “Not a word of this operation to anyone! Especially Alpha 43!”

## 39

# A Glass of Water

Abbas yawned as he shifted uncomfortably, trying to catch a few winks of sleep. It had been several hours since his second failed attempt with the C-gun and even though he had only been there for ten seconds, the experience was enough to shake him for a life time.

What was that snake? How had it known Abbas so well? Abbas had felt so vulnerable when the snake laid out his fears one by one.

Abbas was certainly afraid that he would never remember his parents. It haunted him all the time. And when Akbar told him his mother's name, it made him hopeful for the first time that maybe, just maybe, he might know who they were.

'If only Akbar Uncle would return from whatever errand he was on,' Abbas thought to himself. 'Then I could ask him about my parents.'

And then the snake mentioned about losing Haider. Abbas had almost experienced this once on the night of the boat chase. Why were they chased in the first place, he had no idea. All he knew was that he was a target of Alpha 43. Ali shivered at his name. And even when he encountered Alpha 39, Abbas hadn't felt the same way. There was just something different about Alpha 43.

Abbas sighed. The snake had also laid out his third big fear. He was afraid of not being strong enough. He was worried that



one day, he might encounter an Alpha and they might capture him without a fight using the C-gun. He never wanted to stay in this mindset of fear.

Even though these things had bothered Abbas, none had bothered him as much as the final thing the snake had said.

*It wasn't with your desires or fears that I controlled you. Abbas. You have a very big flaw in your iman. One that no matter how hard you try, will keep bringing you down. It will crush you on the inside...*

That was as far as the snake had gotten. For Abbas had attacked it after that. But the fact remained. What flaw did Abbas have? What issue lay in his heart? What plagued his soul, such that the C-gun would always defeat him?

Abbas glanced at his watch. It was 12:43 am. He yawned, his throat feeling dry.

'Maybe I should get some water,' he thought to himself.

Quietly, he pushed himself to his feet so as to not awaken Haider. Reaching over, into the side table, he withdrew his old revolver. Even in the bungalow, Abbas never took chances.

He moved into the hallway. Operation 'glass of water' was in effect. As he strolled through the hall, he heard a small creak.

Abbas stiffened. What was going on? Was there a thief? Did someone discover the location of the bungalow or worse, was it the Alphas? Abbas withdrew his already loaded revolver. If there was an intruder, they weren't going home without a fight.

Abbas froze. Right in front, a dark shadow had appeared. It was huge!

'You picked the wrong day Alpha!' he growled in his head. Abbas was about to advance forward when he heard Zahra squeal, "ALI!"

There was a small laugh from ahead as the lights of the room illuminated the front door. Indeed, it was Ali. He had entered into the house, wearing a thick black jacket and gloves. Abbas watched as Ali dropped his gloves casually on the couch, one slipping over the edge and falling to the ground.

Abbas sighed in relief as he watched the two take a seat on the couch. He was about to go out and greet Ali, when Ali said

something that made him stop in his tracks, and remain hiding in the darkness of the hallway.

“The revolution has been going as planned, Alhamdulillah.”

REVOLUTION! What was going on?! What was Ali talking about? Was that a code statement? No! That couldn't be correct. But then that meant...

It all dawned on Abbas. Akbar and Ali's sudden departure. The abrupt decision to speed up training. It all made sense now! Akbar was planning a revolution! He was going to rebel against the Alphas!

‘But why now?’ Abbas thought quietly.

He began to recall the words Akbar had told him on the day Alpha 39 had died.

*For perhaps the first time in many years, I felt hope. Hope that one day, I could go for a walk with my nieces and nephews without worrying for our lives. That Ali and Zahra don't have to go looking for supplies with guns in their hands. That we could live in peace. Which is why I have made my decision. I will train you Abbas. I will teach you, Maryam, Jafar and Haider everything I know. Including how to fight the C-gun.*

Of course! Alpha 39's death was the reason! It had only just happened and Akbar probably wanted to use it as a motivating force for people.

“Akbar Uncle has been doing good Alhamdulillah,” Ali continued. “He sent me back to deal with the issues here.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes. What issues was Ali referring to? Perhaps he should leave, since, this may be a private conversation between Zahra and Ali. But before he could leave, Zahra said something that made him freeze.

“I don't know what to do about Abbas,” she sighed. “He just isn't able to resist at all. This isn't normal. Even the average person is able to put up a little resistance.”

Ali glanced down for a moment, and Abbas watched nervously as Zahra narrated the incidents of the past two days to Ali.

“Hmmm...” Ali murmured at last. “There is only one possibility left. Abbas has some other problem in his life which we are unaware of.”

There was a nod of agreement from Zahra.

“He has a tendency to get emotional if I push him too hard,” she whispered. “Do you want me to try again? Maybe I could find out if he is hiding something.”

‘Emotional!’ Abbas thought angrily. ‘I trusted you like a sister and you call me emotional!’

Zahra and Ali were talking about Abbas as if he was an open book.

“Don’t worry,” Ali answered. “If there is some issue, then we will work it out tomorrow inshallah.

And with that Abbas turned around and headed back to his room. There was nothing more left for him to hear now.

As Abbas headed back, he was unsure of how to feel. On one note, he was annoyed that Zahra called him emotional. On another note, he felt a strange anger over what Zahra had said.

*I don't know what to do about Abbas. He just isn't able to resist at all. This isn't normal. Even the average person is able to put up a little resistance.*

Why wouldn’t she tell him if he was behind? To keep him encouraged? No. Abbas needed to control his anger. He needed to stay in a clear state of mind.

‘Lay everything out, nice and clear,’ he cautioned to himself.

Akbar was doing a revolution. Abbas would certainly analyse that later on but with regard to his training, Ali had probably returned to help Zahra with his training.

Abbas narrowed his eyes as he lay down in bed. He adjusted himself into a position of sleep. Whatever happened, he was more than determined to fix his predicament. Abbas would not surrender that easily to the C-gun. And with only five days left, he was determined to nail it.

‘How hard could it be?’ Abbas asked himself.

## Mission Report

“Well Alpha 31,” Jumeira frowned as he entered her office. “I made you incharge of a project two months ago and you haven’t given me anything concrete as yet.”

Alpha 31 narrowed his eyes as he assumed his position before her desk.

“The men I was given were weak. They can’t even conduct proper strike missions without getting muddled up.”

Jumeira’s lips curved into an ugly smile. How she loved manipulating the Alphas, instigating them into negative conflicts. Because even Alphas were, deep down on the inside; humans. And Jumeira loved how easy it was to ‘play’ with their minds.

“A poor workman blames his tools Alpha,” she remarked casually.

Alpha 31 looked down. Jumeira sighed. She was too good at this. Like a spider, she could weave any fly into her web. She could control anyone; or at least she believed so.

“I understand ma’am,” he muttered begrudgingly.

“By the way,” she sighed. “How is the search for those boys? What were their names, Amr and Hassan?”

Alpha 31 stiffened for a moment.

“Abbas and Haider.”

Jumeira narrowed her eyes. She suspected that the Alpha hadn’t found them yet but she wanted him to justify it.

“You haven’t started looking for them yet,” she scowled. “Have you?”

The Alpha frowned. Jumeira knew that he didn't appreciate constantly being grilled over operations.

"I have started," Alpha 31 stated. "No leads have turned up as yet."

Jumeira raised a brow.

"You know Alpha 31," she began. "For the fourth highest Alpha in my program, I expected better from you. Perhaps Alpha 43 was correct. Maybe I should have given this job to a more experienced Alpha like him."

Jumeira sighed with forced disinterest. She had added the last part very deliberately. For one thing she had learnt in all her years was that anger clouds judgement. It causes one to make the simplest of errors and overlook the most obvious of details. In essence, anger is a liability. Unless its someone else's, in which case it is an asset.

Alpha 31 growled as expected.

"You gave me six months to track the most skilled man I have ever known! In addition, you tell me to search for two random boys! Then you gave me the most inexperienced men! How do you expect to apprehend Akbar? With such sloppy men, he is miles ahead of us and will continue to be so. While I have to explain them every move, he is busy planning twenty counter moves in advance."

Alpha 31 realised in a second that he was going way above his pay grade. He did not have the option to talk to Jumeira in this tone. In the very next moment, he modified his tone.

"Ma'am, all I request is that either you give me a more efficient team or let me choose the team myself. After all, we are hunting the biggest game; Akbar."

Jumeira eyed the Alpha warily, slightly taken aback, though her face didn't show it.

"What do you suggest?" she muttered.

Alpha 31's lips formed into a slight smile of relief. He was able to save himself.

"For Step 1, I think we should send in the Alphas. They should increase the number of patrols. Flush Akbar out of hiding. We should use some Alphas as bait. Make them patrol openly now.

Akbar will soon start attacking them, when he realises that they are open and we can then plan a trap. Maybe have the open patrols followed by another patrol or something like that.”

Jumeira thought carefully. This was certainly a good plan which might actually work. To catch a lion, using gazelles as bait. But then that might mean the death of an Alpha, or Alphas. But then again, Akbar’s death was of paramount importance. It only made sense. Besides, Alpha 31 was correct about the men who accompanied him on the warehouse raid. They were no match to the task. Akbar’s mere reputation was enough to make them sweat.

“Your plan has been approved. Please put it in effect immediately,” she answered at last.

Alpha 31 raised a brow.

“No. Not immediately,” he smirked.

Jumeira’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Why not Alpha? Didn’t you just suggest this plan?”

Alpha 31’s lips curved into a venomous smile.

“Of course. But first, we have to set the chessboard.”

# Happy Birthday!

“Everybody wake up!” Zahra’s voice came echoing through the halls. “Today is a very special day!”

Abbas yawned lazily as he rolled over in his sleep.

“I . . . . don’t . . . . want . . . . to . . . . . wake . . . . . up,” he grumbled. “Bed is warm.”

A huge force collided into his stomach and Abbas awoke with a start; arms ready, only to find a giggling Haider on his lap.

“That never gets old!” Haider laughed as Abbas rose to chase him.

In a flash, Haider bounded out of the room, Abbas right behind him. But just as Abbas exited the room, he found himself face to face with an overjoyed Jafar.

“Today is my sister’s birthday!” he bubbled. “Maryam Api is turning 18 today, Alhamdulillah!”

It was then that Abbas noticed the party decorations that had been spread like jam, all over the house. There were pink ribbons, pink flowers, and pink pretty much everything!

Abbas raised a brow.

On the left side, the decorations were beautifully designed and expertly crafted. While on the other side, the decorations were crudely drawn, mostly paper cut outs.

“Okay okay!” Jafar squeaked. “Guess which ones were made by me and which ones were made by Zahra Api?”

Abbas lowered his head. Someone would have to tell this kid

eventually that he was an awful artist. But Abbas knew deep down that he could never bring himself to say that, especially not today. Perhaps he could have a little fun?

Abbas looked over to the decorations on his left. These were the ones that were beautifully made.

“These ones on the left, they were made by you; no doubt?”

Jafar chuckled. He rolled on the floor laughing. Abbas gave him a curious glance. He didn’t say something that funny.

“Are you okay?” he inquired.

Jafar stopped laughing and looked up to him, his eyes bursting with joy.

“I didn’t make any of them” Jafar grinned. “The ones on the left side were made by Zahra Api and the right side ones were made by Ali Bhai!”

Abbas widened his eyes in surprise as it dawned on him.

“You tricked me!” he pretended to scold.

Jafar smirked and scampered off in the same direction as Haider. A moment later, Abbas bounded after him. Even though Abbas had pursued Haider many times, he had never pursued someone as small and nimble as Jafar. Jafar’s ability to worm his way through the furniture made it virtually impossible to catch him.

“Give it up Abbas Bhai,” came Haider’s voice from the kitchen. “I have already tried it million times. It cannot be done!”

Abbas looked up towards the kitchen for a moment. He could see Zahra laying a gigantic cake, covered in pink icing. Beside her, Haider was eyeballing the cup cake tray.

‘Maryam must really like pink,’ he thought to himself.

As Abbas began advancing towards the kitchen, something caught his attention. There was a glove on the floor near the edge of the couch. Abbas recognised it instantly. It was Ali’s glove; the one that had fallen the night before.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Now he knew that he hadn’t been dreaming. Akbar was really going to start a revolution. He was going to fight against the Alphas. There was going to be a lot of blood shed and casualties on both sides. And what had Jafar mentioned earlier?



*The left side ones were made by Zahra Api, and the right side ones were made by Ali Bhai!*

So Ali was here as well. He was here to fix Abbas's performance against the C-gun. Abbas felt a minor annoyance prick him like a thorn. Zahra had called him emotional.

'Well, I won't say anything to her anymore,' he decided.

As Abbas watched the glove, an uncanny anger began dawning upon him. Not the kind of anger where one would want to break something or yell at someone. No. This was a different kind of anger, more of hurt than anger. He couldn't explain why it was happening. All he knew was that he wasn't happy. He wasn't happy when he heard how Zahra had spoken about him. He wasn't happy that he had lost his parents. He wasn't happy that Akbar wouldn't tell him about his parents. And for a moment, it felt like the whole world including Allah (swt) were against him. He still couldn't remember his parents. He still couldn't defeat the C-gun. And now, a revolution was being done because of his actions.

Abbas scowled. What was going on? Then a voice began ringing in his head,

*It wasn't with your desires or fears that I controlled you. Abbas. You have a very big flaw in your iman. One that no matter how hard you try, will keep bringing you down. It will crush you on the inside...*

"Argh!" Abbas growled as he looked over at the window. Why was all of this happening to him?

## 42

# Deterioration

Zahra sighed as she watched Abbas slip from the tree and fall to the floor.

“Argh!” he groaned and in a flash, jumped to his feet attempting the climb once more.

Nervously, she eyed Ali. In the last few hours Abbas had been repeatedly displaying bursts of anger. Bursts which didn't make sense.

The strangest thing however, was that even when Zahra tried talking to him, he refused to speak with her. In fact, he was almost treating her like a stranger. And that was a new experience for Zahra. As Akbar had warned her earlier, Abbas was unpredictable. He was making it quite a challenge to facilitate him.

Zahra was quite unsure of what to do. His failure to defeat the C-gun was causing a deterioration in his performance. So much so that he had lost multiple activities today. He had even lost the first place which he had maintained for so long. Zahra glanced at the scoreboard.

*Maryam - 227 points*

*Abbas - 211 points*

*Haider - 199 points*

*Jafar - 184 points*

What should she do? Zahra had no idea. She knew that Abbas was a composed and mature person. But then why was he looking

so troubled and frustrated. Even during Maryam's birthday party in the morning, he had been very quiet. She saw Abbas slip from the tree, yet again.

"Alright enough!" she called out.

Everyone turned to face her, including Abbas.

"Let's move on to the sparring tournament."

They headed over to the ring. Zahra had very consciously picked this activity, because she knew Abbas was a skilled fighter. She was hoping that perhaps he would be satisfied with winning some fights. Not to mention venting out some anger might help.

For his first fight, Zahra paired him with Haider. Within just ten seconds, Abbas destroyed his brother in the ring, pinning him twice. Zahra narrowed her eyes. Abbas had not used any wrong techniques which could indicate emotional instability. That meant he was still in a stable mind. Meaning that his behaviour was intentional.

A hint of irritation filled Zahra. Abbas needed a lesson. A little humbling. He must be getting arrogant from being number one all the time. A smile formed on Zahra's lips.

'Maybe Ali can communicate my ideas better,' she thought to herself.

"Alright!" she shouted. "Your next opponent is Ali."

Abbas narrowed his eyes and deepened his stance as Ali entered into the ring. Zahra smirked. Abbas had no idea who he was about to go up against.

She watched as Ali stepped in the ring confidently. With a smile, he turned to Zahra and chuckled,

"May I?"

Zahra nodded and with a smile, she whispered,

"Yes you may."

Abbas coughed awkwardly, clearly unaware of what was about to happen. In a flash, Ali lunged forward. Abbas only just managed to lift his hands to block but the force knocked him off of his feet and he landed with a thump on his back.

"Agh," Abbas groaned.

Ali turned to Zahra and grinned.

"That was easier than expected!"

There was an angry yowl as Abbas got back to his feet. His eyes were cold yet furious. So much so that if Zahra had a camera, she might have taken a photo of them for her gallery.

“Argh!” Abbas shouted as he lunged forward, trying what seemed to be the flying tackle.

Zahra shook her head in disappointment. How many times was Abbas going to try the flying tackle? It never worked for him so why was he doing it now?

Ali realised the same thing, for he caught Abbas mid air; giving him a bear hug.

“How di-” Abbas’s words trailed away as Ali crushed him under his large form. Then Ali released Abbas, allowing him to fall with a thump on the floor once more.

“Dead twice,” Ali chuckled turning to Zahra for approval.

Zahra smiled back.

Abbas rolled his eyes and got up once more.

“One more time, Ali Bhai,” he hissed.

Ali turned to face him.

“We can go as many times as you like but as long as you fight in anger, you will never win.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes suspiciously, glaring at Ali, but Ali didn’t turn. Instead, Zahra watched as the two lunged at each other in air, crashing on the ground. They went tumbling along the grass until Abbas emerged on top. Grabbing hold of Ali’s throat, he laughed,

“You’re dead!”

Zahra was about to intervene, but she saw Ali smirk,

“Have you had your fun?”

Abbas appeared confused, realising only too late that Ali’s hands were clasped around his legs. In a flash, Ali got to his feet, holding Abbas by his legs.

“Let go of me!” Abbas grunted.

Ali looked towards Zahra in mild surprise.

“If that is what you want.”

Zahra closed her eyes as Abbas landed with a thud on the ground.

“Had enough?” Ali murmured.

Abbas didn't respond. He just sat there, almost in tears.

Zahra felt a pang of sympathy but pushed it aside. Abbas needed some tough love right now. He had no reason to be acting like a moron.

Zahra had begun to suspect that he was arrogant. That was the only explanation. And if that was the case, she would humble him.

## 43

# Two Days Later

“What are we doing wrong?” Zahra sighed in despair. “We have literally tried everything!”

Ali didn’t respond. Like her, he was just as perplexed. In the last two days, Abbas’s performance had only gone downhill. During the C-gun training, he was fully under the control of the device. His other activities like climbing and swimming were going bad as well. Not to mention his behaviour. Abbas had become more withdrawn and depressed, and he spent every free moment on his own. Of course Zahra had forbid him from leaving the house. If he encounter an Alpha, he would not stand a chance. But Abbas didn’t seem to get this, for he kept on insisting and arguing with her.

“We haven’t fixed the issue,” Ali sighed. “We have only made it worse.”

Zahra looked down. She didn’t like thinking she was unsuccessful. But Ali was correct.

“What do we do?” Zahra inquired. “I mean the first revolution meeting is in two days. And Abbas is nowhere near ready to be presented.”

Ali didn’t answer though. He was staring at the floor, his eyes transfixed. Zahra could tell that he was thinking about something.

“There is something wrong with Abbas,” Ali began. “Something is bothering him since the day we first met him. It is only manifesting now.”

“But what?” Zahra was clearly confused. “I have literally scanned him from head to toe! There was nothing more than what we already know.”

Ali sighed.

“Maybe we aren’t the right people for this job, Zahra. Maybe we need someone else. Someone whose wit is greater than both mine and yours. Someone who has never lost a mental challenge before. Someone who has healed himself, and is the only one who can fully resist the C-gun.”

Zahra gave his hand a tight squeeze.

“Do you think,” she whispered. “Do you really think he can fix this?”

Ali nodded.

“Without a doubt.”

## A Radio Call

“Agh,” Akbar groaned as he forced his eyes open. The unique ringing noise of his radio bit away at his ears.

“Alright, alright,” Akbar grunted as he reached out for the hand radio.

Sleepily, he whispered,

“Lone wolf here.”

There was a crack followed by a moment of silence. Then Zahra’s voice came through.

“This is den.”

Akbar narrowed his eyes. Zahra sounded upset.

“Zahra,” Akbar whispered. All of a sudden, he was fully alert. “How’s your day been going?” He started with security questions.

If she wasn’t under any kind of duress then she was meant to say,

“Good. I have had the chance to rest.”

Otherwise she would reply.

“Totally awful. I burnt breakfast.”

Akbar waited anxiously for her reply.

“Good. I have had the chance to rest,” she murmured at last.

Akbar sighed in relief.

“Alright,” he whispered. “What is the issue, my girl?”

Akbar heard her take a deep breath before answering. He listened carefully as she related the incidents of the last five days.



His eyes widened more and more in surprise as he listened to everything Zahra had to say.

“We don’t know what to do!” she finished at last.

Akbar took a deep breath.

“So basically, everything is all over the place, huh?” he asked.

Akbar yawned as she muttered,

“Yes.”

Akbar smiled.

“My dear, Zahra. My heart and soul Zahra. I understand why you did what you did, but I must say, humiliating Abbas in front of everyone was not the best way to go.”

He paused.

“Zahra. You need to realise. Abbas is a young man who has a lot of self respect. He is transitioning into becoming a man. Breaking him in such a manner must be devastating for his emotional state. Even if you wanted to teach him a lesson, the way you chose was not appropriate.”

He continued in a cool but convincing tone.

“Abbas isn’t arrogant. I don’t know why he is behaving the way he is, nor do I say that he is justified. I also don’t know why he failed the C-gun test repetitively. All I know is that Abbas is a very smart and intelligent boy. And for such people, weaknesses are much more complicated and disturbing.”

“That’s what I was saying!” Ali added abruptly.

Akbar had to force himself from laughing as Zahra and Ali began arguing.

‘Like an old married couple,’ he thought to himself.

A few minutes passed before Akbar finally interrupted the argument.

“I am coming back Zahra. Tonight. Prepare the shed for me. No one will know that I am back.”

Zahra responded in acknowledgement.

Akbar looked up towards the sky.

“I amn’t going to leave Murtaza’s son, when he is in his hour of difficulty,” he murmured to himself. “Zahra, I need to know. Did Abbas ever ask you anything? Did he ever want something from you?”

There was a minute of silence before Zahra's reply came.

"Yes. He has asked me to leave the house before. But I refused, because I was-

"It was the right decision," Akbar interrupted. "But in order to make things work out, I am going to need you to listen to me very carefully. We are going to help Abbas."

Akbar took a deep breath.

"This is how it is going to work..."

## A Breath of Fresh Air

“Everyone,” Zahra called. “I need to make an important announcement! Please report to the living room in the next five minutes.”

Abbas groaned. He pushed himself out of bed, and threw a coat on. His head was dizzy.

“What do you think she’s going to say?” Haider asked excitedly. “Maybe she-”

“Probably,” Abbas interrupted. “She is calling us to train. Like she does every day.”

Haider frowned.

“Ah, you’re probably right.”

And with that the brothers headed to the living room. As they went, the two noticed Maryam and Jafar walking ahead of them.

‘Guess we all reach at the same time today,’ he grunted to himself.

It was about a minute later that everyone arrived, ready to start the training. Abbas looked around. Jafar was busy fiddling with his thumbs while Haider was busy scraping the floor with his foot. Maryam was staring at the ground and upon Abbas seeing her, she glanced up; matching his gaze.

Abbas looked away. He didn’t feel like speaking to anyone today.

“Well,” Zahra remarked as she entered the room. “You guys all look exhausted.”

There was a murmur of agreement from the others.

“That is why,” Zahra smiled. “We are giving you a day off.”

Abbas’s eyes widened in surprise. He was suspicious. Why Zahra would give a day off? What has happened?

“I just need one favour from all of you,” she muttered.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Was this initiation of another plan? Another scheme Zahra had concocted? Or maybe she just needed them to do something. Abbas had an eruption of ideas from every corner of his brain.

“If you guys could just bring the wood that Ali cut today, from the old river path, then I’d really appreciate it.”

Abbas raised a brow.

“Why didn’t Ali Bhai bring it?” he asked.

Zahra shrugged.

“He hurt his leg Abbas. It’s honestly a miracle that he got back.”

The negative emotions in Abbas’ head were clearly taking over. He felt a pinch of frustration. This didn’t feel coincidental. And yet he didn’t see anything wrong with what Zahra had suggested. Everyone was coming, right? So it couldn’t-Wait. Could everyone be coming to alleviate his suspicions?

‘Stop!’ he scolded himself. ‘There is nothing suspicious about what she has asked. Let’s just get it done.’

He nodded.

“We’ll have it done.”

Zahra blinked.

“Thanks Abbas, I really appreciate it.”

Haider, Maryam and Jafar also agreed to it. And with that, they began preparing to leave.

## In the Wild

“It’s nice to be out and about after such a long time,” Haider gurgled as they strolled through the woods.

A small bee buzzed past them as Jafar answered,  
“Yes, except the bugs. They drive me mental.”

There was a murmur of agreement from the others. As Jafar and Haider strolled on ahead, Abbas casually slowed down. He wanted them to go ahead. While he had been getting ready, it had occurred to him that this was the perfect opportunity to go out for a walk to clear his mind.

Abbas took a deep breath, inhaling the sweet smell of pine cones. It certainly felt better to be roaming in the open free space. Away from Zahra. Away from Ali. Away from that bungalow. Abbas took a deep sigh as he saw Jafar, Maryam and Haider walk ahead.

He knew what he was doing was unsafe but right now, he needed some personal space. He turned and bounded off in the direction of the trees. As he did so, the burden on his shoulders began feeling lighter. As if he was free now. Free to go wherever he wanted.

“Where are you going?” he heard a voice from behind.

Abbas stiffened. His fist clenched. How could he have overlooked the one person who might have foreseen this move? He turned around to face Maryam.

She looked confused.

"I'm..." Abbas began. "I am...going for a walk."

Maryam narrowed her eyes.

"I don't believe you."

Abbas glared at her. Why did she always have to do this? Why couldn't she just accept what he told her?

"Maryam," he whispered. "Go"

She stared at him intently.

"I pity you, you know," she sighed, catching him off guard. "You just keep running away from God knows what. But whatever it is you are trying to run from, your misery has made you incapable of seeing how much you're upsetting those who care for you."

Abbas narrowed his eyes.

"Nobody seems to respect my personal space," he hissed. "I don't want to talk to anyone."

She smiled.

"Well then, don't let me keep you. Feel free."

And with that, Abbas watched in surprise as she turned around and left. As she walked away she called to him,

"I'll cover for you. Be back in an hour."

Abbas nodded hesitantly. Did she just listen to what he said? As in the very first go?

'Maybe she is just celebrating her birthday,' he told himself as he turned around and left. He had one hour and he was determined to use it.

Akbar grinned as he watched Maryam leave.

He smiled as he noticed Abbas head off in the other direction. "Now to figure out what is wrong with you, my boy? Why are you so troubled? What is eating at you mercilessly? Why does the C-gun control you with such ease?"

Akbar began treading after Abbas, careful to maintain a distance. The boy was very careful. His gun was in his hand and occasionally, he turned around, probably to check if Maryam was following him.

Akbar however, was adept at following without being seen. This had been an integral part of his training as an Alpha and while he was taking immense precautions, Akbar knew how essential it was that Abbas didn't see him. He needed to see Abbas in isolation as he had explained Zahra over the radio. In isolation,

people tend to open up freely and this was the only way for him to see what Abbas was really going through.

For the next half an hour, Akbar followed Abbas, observing his every movement. Every rock he kicked, every tree he hung from, every animal he stopped to look at. Akbar was making a mental note of everything.

He paused as Abbas watched a small frog for a few minutes, before leaving.

Eventually, Abbas stopped by a river. Its water was moving slowly with the cool breeze.

Akbar narrowed his eyes as Abbas sat next to the pond. For a few moments there was silence as Abbas seemingly stared at the water. Then abruptly he looked up and Akbar got a good look at Abbas's face. It was covered in tears.

'So he's come here to cry,' Akbar pondered.

Abbas's lip quivered as he looked up to the sky. He said something but Akbar was too far away to hear. That didn't matter though because Abbas repeated it much louder, loud enough for him to hear.

"What am I doing wrong!" he growled. "What is my ever so parasitic flaw!"

In a flash, he grabbed a small pebble and hurled it across the water. It skipped away, pattering against the river's surface.

Abbas collapsed on his knees.

"I thought Allah," he mumbled. "I thought Allah (swt) helped his servants. I thought that if you stood with haqq <sup>1</sup>, you would win."

Angrily, he lashed out at a rock.

"But it seems like God has deserted me!" he grunted. "My parents are dead!"

Akbar widened his eyes in surprise. Abbas growled once more.

"Where is the justice of Allah(swt)?" he cried. "Where is it? Why doesn't He help me? Why do I lose so many times? Why am I unable to defeat the C-gun. How come I am most easily controlled?"

---

<sup>1</sup>Right, truth

Abruptly, he kicked one of the rocks.

“Why does this keep happening to me? I have to protect Haider from his own foolishness. And Akbar Uncle! Akbar Uncle knows who I am, but he’s so selfish that he won’t share it with me.”

Akbar narrowed his eyes. He hadn’t hidden the details from Abbas. He had his reasons for not approaching Abbas.

“I don’t even know who I am!” Abbas whimpered as he wiped away another tear. “How is that just, Allah(swt)?”

Akbar’s eyes lit up. He knew now what Abbas’s problem was. It was such a critical problem that tapered into the fundamentals of his faith. So much so that no matter how many good things Abbas had in him, they meant nothing. The C-gun would have no difficulty beating him.

“Enough crying,” Akbar whispered to himself. “It’s time to set this boy right.”

With a deep breath, he stood up and made his way out of the bushes towards the river. As he reached there, he saw Abbas whirl; the expression of shock vivid on his face. And he saw it for the first time. Abbas was vulnerable. Without any defenses.

“W-Wha-” Abbas stammered, but Akbar motioned for him to stay silent.

With a small nod, he murmured,

“I think it’s time we talk.”



## Lone Wolf and Hurt Cub

Abbas wiped a tear from his eyes.

“I don’t understand,” he murmured. “I don’t understand what is going on.”

Akbar smiled. Placing a hand over Abbas’s shoulder, he took Abbas in his embrace.

“Ask away my boy. Ask anything you wish; for today, I will answer everything you ask.”

Abbas sighed. Where should he begin? How was Akbar Uncle here? No. That wasn’t important now. The revolution? No. That was not the dominant thing in his mind right now. Abbas should ask about his parents.

Letting go of Akbar, he sat down next to the river edge.

“Did you know my parents?” Abbas whispered, as if it was a cursed question.

Akbar nodded as he sat down next to Abbas.

“I did,” he answered, sending a strange spark in Abbas’s heart. “Your mother’s name was Layla. Your father’s name was Murtaza.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes, determined to hear everything Akbar knew.

“Murtaza and I were childhood friends,” Akbar smiled. “We essentially thought of each other as brothers.”

Abbas’s eyes widened in surprise. He withdrew the aqeeq ring from his pocket.

“What does this have to do with everything?” Abbas asked.

“After Alpha 43’s attack, why did you let me stay when you saw it?”

A nostalgic smile formed on Akbar’s face. He sighed, glancing up to the sky.

“When we were children, Murtaza was always afraid that when we grew old, life may set us apart. Maybe we wouldn’t recognise each other.”

Abbas stifled a laugh.

“We got two similar aqeeq rings made,” Akbar murmured. “So if life pulled us apart for a while, the rings would unite us.”

Abbas felt a strange breeze pass over him, as Akbar withdrew the other aqeeq ring from his pocket, identical to the one in Abbas’ hand.

“There are three scratches on the band,” Akbar smiled. “That was our identifying mark.”

Abbas glanced down curiously at his father’s aqeeq ring first, and then Akbar’s. There were indeed three scratches on each band.

Abbas’s eyes widened in surprise.

“So you really were friends!” Abbas exclaimed.

Akbar nodded kindly.

“It was more than that,” he whispered. “We thought of each other as brothers.”

Abbas smiled, his chest filling up with satisfaction. He was finally learning the truth about his parents.

“And my mother?” he added hesitantly.

Akbar sighed.

“Layla was a remarkable scientist. I knew her long before she married Murtaza. In fact, I was the one who got them married.”

Abbas looked down for a moment. Here he was, piecing his identity together. It was such a strange and unique experience. Learning about oneself from someone else.

“Why wouldn’t you tell me this before?” Abbas asked. “Didn’t you know how desperate I was?”

Akbar smiled.

“Murtaza and I had not seen each other in twelve years,” he began. “Even though I knew he had children, I never knew that

those children were you and Haider. And when you first came to us, you said that you had amnesia. In all honesty, I didn't believe you."

Abbas's eyes widened slightly as he listened carefully, not losing focus for even a moment.

"After Alpha 43's attack," Akbar continued. "I was convinced that you were his target. I decided that I needed to know more about you but you wouldn't tell me anything." Abbas smiled, realising how uncooperative he was at the time.

"But then you saw the aqeeq ring," Abbas guessed. "And you knew I had some connection with your friend Murtaza."

Akbar nodded.

"What that connection could be, was not immediately obvious to me, but it didn't take me long to figure it out."

Abbas narrowed his eyes.

"That still doesn't explain why you didn't tell me," Abbas repeated. "Once you knew I was Murtaza's son, why wouldn't you tell me?"

Akbar matched Abbas's gaze once more.

"You're forgetting, I didn't believe that you genuinely had amnesia. I thought you were hiding your true identity to protect yourself and your younger brother. I could not approach you as a random stranger, claiming I knew your parents. I was worried that in fear, you might try to leave. Just like you did the night you discovered I was an Alpha. The only way was to wait until you came to me yourself."

Abbas's eyes widened as he finally understood.

"You realised the truth of the matter when I confided in Zahra Api," Abbas murmured.

Akbar sighed.

"Yes. I must say I was quite surprised when she told me," he explained.

Abbas looked down, tears were filling his eyes. Slowly, he leaned in, giving Akbar the hardest hug he could manage. Akbar wrapped his arms around Abbas, and for a moment, nothing was said. But a lot passed between them.

"Abbas," Akbar murmured. "My dear boy, Abbas."

Abbas felt tears trickle down his cheek and he broke down entirely.

Akbar gave him a tighter hug.

“My boy, don’t cry,” Akbar whispered. “It breaks my heart to see you or any of the others cry. Don’t do that.”

Abbas struggled to wipe away his tears. He was done keeping secrets! He was done hiding things! He wanted Akbar to know everything.

“I remember my father’s death,” he sobbed.

Akbar stiffened slightly.

“Tell me,” he swallowed. “I want to know.”

Abbas related the incident to Akbar; every detail, every moment. Akbar for the most part kept a normal expression but his eyes betrayed him. Abbas could see the grief in the former Alpha’s eyes.

“Verily we belong to Allah and verily to him do we return,” Akbar sighed. “Abbas, in this world there are tests made for all of us.”

Abbas let go curiously, looking Akbar in the eye.

“We all must face difficulty in this world,” Akbar explained. “The loss of your parents is one such example. But there are more. Many many more.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Where was Akbar going with this?

“Look to where I point,” Akbar whispered.

Abbas glanced in the pointed direction. Quite a walk away, on the other side of the river; was a small building burnt quite savagely.

“What is that?” Abbas inquired.

Akbar glanced at Abbas, not answering immediately.

“An orphanage,” he answered at last.

Abbas felt a pang of sympathy in his heart for the children who had lived there. Like him, they lost something that could never be compensated.

“Abbas,” Akbar began. “Many years ago, this orphanage was burnt down by a thief who was being chased by police. Perhaps the thief thought it would make a good distraction. Either way, many orphans perished in the fire.”

Abbas closed his eyes trying to visualise the situation but his mind was so exhausted that he only heard the swishing of the river.

“Who was at fault?” Akbar asked abruptly, catching Abbas off guard. “Who was responsible for the deaths of those orphans?”

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Wasn't it obvious?

“The thief, of course,” Abbas answered. “Didn't he burn the orphanage.” Akbar nodded.

“Okay, then let me ask you this,” he whispered. “Could Allah(swt) have prevented the incident?”

Abbas looked down. He didn't know why Akbar was asking him these weird questions.

“Yes,” he muttered at last.

Akbar placed a hand on Abbas's shoulder.

“In that case, are you saying that Allah(swt) let the orphans die?”

Abbas's eyes widened in surprise.

“No,” he replied.

Akbar smiled.

“But if Allah(swt) could have prevented the orphans from dying,” Akbar insinuated. “And He didn't, then doesn't that make him partially responsible?”

Abbas looked up to match Akbar's gaze.

“I don't know,” he shifted uncomfortably, unsure of what Akbar's point was.

“Abbas,” Akbar whispered. “I want you to speak. I want you to be open with me, my boy. If you think that Allah(swt) was at fault, then tell me. I want to hear what you genuinely feel.”

And then it came. Abbas didn't know what part of him was saying this but when the words came out, they sounded strangely evil,

“Yes, God is at fault. Of course, God is at fault! If God could have prevented it but he didn't, then he is at fault! Not doing something when you can makes you guilty.”

Akbar smiled and Abbas felt for the first time that their entire discussion had been aimed at addressing this.

“This,” Akbar sighed. “Is why you have consistently lost to the C-gun.” Abbas narrowed his eyes. What did Akbar mean?

“You do not understand one of the five pillars of Islam, Adalat. Adalat meaning Justice.”

Abbas raised a brow. The words of the snake echoed in his mind.

*It wasn't with your desires or fears that I controlled you. Abbas. You have a very big flaw in your iman. One that no matter how hard you try, will keep bringing you down. It will crush you on the inside...*

Could a pillar of his faith being weak be the reason? Maybe that is what the snake meant? But then, how could he fix it?

“I don't see what the issue is,” Abbas sighed. “Your argument makes complete sense to me. Allah(swt) could have saved the orphans but He didn't. Allah could have saved my parents but he didn't. He left them all to their doom.”

Akbar grinned.

“First of all, I want you to know that I am very proud of you that you decided to express what you were thinking. Now we can work it out better and try to get some satisfying answers,” Akbar began. “There are several critical points that we need to understand.”

Akbar paused to wipe a fly away from his face.

“The first point is that Allah (swt) has granted human beings 'free will', until the day of judgement,” Akbar stated. “If He was to intervene in every action, then we don't really have free will, do we?”

Abbas narrowed his eyes skeptically.

“If you aren't able to digest that,” Akbar added. “Then consider the following example. Suppose there is a company. This company represents our world, so it would be very big, with many departments. Imagine Allah(swt) to be the boss of this company with humans being the employees. Now every month the boss gives list of tasks to the employees. At the end of every month, accountability is done. Based on the performance log of all employees, rewards and penalties are earned. The boundaries are set by the boss in the charter of policies but within those

boundaries, all employees make choices and put in effort to perform better than others. That is how they grow and at the end of each term, those who deserve a promotion, get a higher designation in the company. If the boss interferes at every level, in every choice that each employee makes, then how would he justify the process of accountability and rewards. All of that would be purposeless. Would it be fair then?"

Abbas took a deep breath.

"No," he answered. "No it wouldn't. But Akbar Uncle, what about the orphans? The free will of the thief led to their death? How is that just?"

Akbar sighed.

"There are two important points here," Akbar answered. "The first is that wrong actions have consequences. I forgot to mention the part of the story of the thief. Did you know that there were two government security guards for the orphanage who were meant to look after it?" Abbas's eyes widened in surprise.

"How did the thief torch the building then?" he asked.

Akbar eyed Abbas warily.

"The two security guards had left a few minutes before the thief had arrived," Akbar replied. "Hoping to get an early day off without telling anyone about it..."

Abbas looked down.

"So," Abbas murmured. "The consequence of security guards' and the thief's actions led to the deaths of so many orphans."

Akbar nodded.

"Yes, and now for the second point. Abbas," Akbar took a deep breath. "One of the biggest problems with us is that we assume that good can only come to us in this world. We forget that there is a hereafter. Despite everything wrong that happened to those orphans, they are now in heaven; with their parents forevermore in peace and happiness. While both the thief and the security guards will be punished greatly for what they did."

Akbar paused to catch his breath leaving Abbas at a loss of words. It all made so much sense.

"My parents are gone," Abbas whispered, loud enough for Akbar to hear. "But that is just a test in this world. Their killers

will be punished by Allah. And if I work hard to do the right things in this world, then in the next world, I will be reunited with them, Inshallah.”

Akbar smiled.

“Now you’re back, my boy,” he smiled.

Then abruptly Akbar’s eyes watered for a moment. He turned around and whispered.

“We all have loss in this world, Abbas. All of us.”

Abbas gave Akbar a hug.

“I know,” Abbas murmured. “Zahra Api told me about Qasim Uncle.”

Akbar’s eyes widened in surprise, before narrowing.

“There is still something you want to ask me, isn’t it? That is why you brought up my brother.”

Abbas looked down childishly.

“I had a memory seizure on the night I learnt you were an Alpha,” Abbas began. “In it, I remembered a physical fight between you and my father.”

Akbar stiffened. He took a deep breath.

“What do you want to know, Abbas?”

Abbas stared him in the eye.

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.”

Akbar nodded but Abbas could see a strange pain in his eyes.

“You fought my father twelve years ago,” Abbas continued. “And you said that you stopped being an Alpha twelve years ago.”

Akbar looked down.

“What happened twelve years ago Akbar Uncle?” Abbas finished.

Akbar sighed as he looked up, to match Abbas’s gaze.

“If I answer this question,” he replied slowly. “You must promise me that you will never tell anyone about this. This is strictly between you and me. Not even Zahra and Ali know the full truth.”

Abbas’s eyes widened in surprise. What had happened? As far as Abbas was concerned, Zahra pretty much knew everything related to Akbar. So what was this event of which she had no knowledge?



“Where should I begin...” Akbar muttered to himself. “Perhaps with...”

Abbas wiped a fly out of his face.

“I had two younger brothers,” Akbar began.

Abbas narrowed his eyes, careful to pay full attention to every word.

“One was named Qasim,” Akbar paused and Abbas noticed Akbar’s fist was clenched. “The other was Asghar. Asghar was the youngest of the three of us.”

Akbar paused, taking a deep breath.

“What happened?” Abbas asked.

Akbar sighed.

“Jumeira tried to turn all three of us into Alphas,” he answered. “Of course, she never told us this. But my brother Qasim was smart enough to figure things out. With his wife Khadija, he fled early on. Asghar and I did not understand as we were young and foolish. And our training continued. Eventually, Asghar left the island for some training abroad. I continued my training on this island. But by the time I worked her scheme out, they had already implanted a c-chip in my body and I became Alpha 43.”

Akbar’s eyes watered as he narrated.

“Now you must understand Abbas,” Akbar whispered. “That many tried to flee Jumeira. From Alphas in training to the technicians; anyone who figured out the plot was attempting escapes. One such example was my father, Sohail.”

Abbas’s eyes widened in surprise. He didn’t know much about Akbar’s father, Sohail. Except that he was the scientist who invented the C-gun.

“My father took refuge in someone’s house,” Akbar explained. “Someone who had already freed themselves from the C-chip. Someone whom he knew he could trust. An old friend of mine. My best friend since childhood. Your father, Murtaza.”

Abbas felt his heart skip a beat.

“What!” he exclaimed, as he recalled that there had been an elderly man.

Akbar nodded.

“As a result,” he added. “Jumeira; cruel as ever, sent me to kill my father. I went there under the influence of the c-chip.”

Abbas now understood the memory he had.

“That was the fight I saw ensue between you and my father.”

Akbar nodded.

“I almost killed my father,” he sighed. “But Murtaza managed to help free me from the trance of the C-chip; not giving up on me even though I could have killed him.”

Abbas felt pride swell in his chest. His father was that brave. To even fight an Alpha.

“What happened then?” Abbas murmured.

Akbar looked down.

“I decided to flee,” Akbar whispered. “My father did as well but, somewhere on the way we got split up, and I never saw him again.” Abbas looked down.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered as Akbar’s eyes watered.

Akbar sighed.

“Don’t be. It’s okay.”

With another deep breath, he continued.

“I was worried when I lost my father. And in that time, I decided to flee to my brother Qasim’s house. You see, Murtaza had already known where Qasim was staying. The two had been in contact, helping each other.”

A tear trickled down Akbar’s cheek.

“I thought I would be safe with Qasim,” Akbar paused once more to wipe away the tears. “I thought that nothing bad could happen. But Jumeira figured out that I had fled. For she brought Asghar, who was a beta at the time; back from his training abroad and sent him after me.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes.

“You don’t need to continue this,” Abbas whispered. “You-”

“No,” Akbar overspoke him. “I will finish this.”

Abbas nodded.

“One morning, I woke up to voices,” Akbar resumed. “Angry voices. It confused me. It sounded like Qasim and Khadija were arguing but then, I heard tyres outside. The next thing I knew, the roof caved in above me, burying me in debris.”

Akbar's fist clenched even tighter.

"I got worried for Qasim," Akbar mentioned, having a ghostly look in his eye. "Not just him. He had three children; Zahra, Maryam and Jafar. And at that time, Jafar was only an infant. I tried to break out of the debris with all my strength but just as I was about to break free, I heard shouting once more. But this time it was different. This time, the voices were clearer and I recognised Qasim and Asghar arguing."

Akbar's fist unclenched and his knees gave way. Abbas moved forward to help him but Akbar waved him away.

"When I got out of the debris," Akbar cried. "I heard gunshots. I rushed towards the source praying that my worst fears would not come true but they did. Qasim lay dead on the ground, Asghar stood over him with a gun in his hand."

Abbas felt the horror build up in his throat.

"Asghar killed Qasim!" he exclaimed.

"Yes," Akbar frowned. "We argued and then I lunged forward. We fought fiercely until I emerged victorious. I had Asghar unconscious and was about to deliver a finishing blow but—"

Akbar stopped; the ghostly look in his eyes was fading.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. What was going on?

"But I wasn't able to," Akbar added.

Abbas didn't bother prying for more information. He knew very clearly that Akbar was lying. But Akbar had a right to privacy. If he didn't want Abbas to know something then Abbas would not bother him about it.

"What happened then?" Abbas inquired, trying to push Akbar to finish the story.

Akbar pushed himself to stand.

"I grabbed Qasim's children and fled," he finished.

"And Asghar?" Abbas muttered. "What about him? Where did he go?"

Akbar took a deep breath.

"Asghar got promoted from beta to Alpha. Jumeira has a very wry sense of humour. She granted him the 'honour' of carrying on the name and mantle which I had built over years. The name which spread fear in everyone's hearts."

Abbas widened his eyes in horror.

“No!” he gasped. “That can’t be!”

Akbar matched Abbas’s gaze,

“Yes Abbas, it’s true,” he sighed. “Alpha 43, is my younger brother Asghar. They are one and the same person.”

## Reflections

“Alpha 43 is your younger brother?” Abbas exclaimed in horror.

Akbar nodded slightly.

“It is one of the hardest test for me to endure,” he murmured. “Everytime I find one of his mangled victims.”

Abbas looked down. It was so much information for him to absorb. How many things had he learnt in the last two hours?

He had found out his parents’ identity, he had discovered the importance of the ring as well as finally solved the mystery of Akbar. But something else filled his heart. It was strange. One might call it sympathy. Sympathy for all the things Akbar had to endure.

How had Akbar held all of this in his heart? His father disappearing, His brother dying. His other brother being the killer and him becoming Alpha 43. It was too much for Abbas to imagine. It was too much for any person to endure.

He leaned forward, giving Akbar a hug.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

Akbar did not respond immediately.

He just stood up, a faraway look in his eyes.

Abbas took a deep breath.

“We all have tests in this world,” Abbas sighed. “But one thing we often forget is that we aren’t facing them alone.”

Akbar looked up to Abbas, matching his gaze.

“We have each other,” Abbas continued. “We have Zahra Api, Ali Bhai, Haider, Jafar and Maryam.”

Akbar smiled.

“Yes,” he replied. “And inshallah, we will see a day when all of these things will be behind us.”

Abbas nodded.

“I know about the revolution,” he confessed.

If Akbar was surprised, he certainly didn’t show it.

“I suspected you did,” Akbar murmured. “When you didn’t ask where I had gone.”

Abbas looked down childishly.

“The first meeting is tomorrow, right?” he asked.

Akbar nodded.

“Yes, it will be tomorrow near the old hay fields. At night time.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Wasn’t that too vulnerable a place? The field’s grass could cover someone as tall as Jafar and maybe someone as tall as haider if he crouched, but certainly not an entire revolutionary meeting. But then again, Akbar would know that, wouldn’t he? Akbar probably knew something Abbas didn’t.

“Do you have a plan on how to have the meeting with so many people?” Abbas inquired. “Because we both know the old hay fields aren’t suitable.”

Akbar nodded.

“Yes. What you say is true. But many years ago, an irrigation system was installed in the fields. For the pipes, an area underneath the fields was created. It is there that we will have the meeting, Inshallah.”

Abbas’s eyes widened.

“So the Alphas will not be able to see us,” Abbas derived. “Nor hear us.”

Akbar nodded.

“Exactly!” he paused.

“We have been here for quite a while Abbas,” he murmured. “It is almost time for lunch. What do you say we head back and have some food and then we’ll see if you’re in better shape to battle the C-gun.”

Abbas had been listening calmly right up to the last line.

“What?” he exclaimed. “How do you expect me-”

“You are ready Abbas!” Akbar overspoke. “You can beat it now.”

Abbas looked away.

“It says things that bother me,” he whispered. “Even the fact that my alter ego is a snake creeps me out a bit.”

Akbar’s eyes widened in surprise before he burst out laughing.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. What was so funny?

“Abbas,” Akbar chuckled. “Everything you see, hear, taste, smell and feel within the C-gun is fake. If you were scared of being a sock, the C-gun would have come to you in form of a sock rather than a snake.”

Abbas couldn’t help grin as he heard this.

“I’ll give it another shot,” he answered; determination was filling his heart.

“Good,” Akbar replied. “Then let’s head home because I’m starving!”

## More Nightmares

*“You don’t have to do this!”*

*“Yes I do Qasim! Now, tell me where is he!”*

*“Asghar! I know you are better than this!”*

*“Stop protecting him! Where is Akbar?”*

*“Even if I knew, I wouldn’t tell you!”*

*“Stop protecting him Qasim! I know he is here! Akbar! Come out and face me like a man!”*

*BOOM! BOOM! Blood oozed out from Qasim’s body filling the room! Alpha 43 looked left and right trying to find escape as a giant bolt of electricity struck his heart!*

*“ARGH!” his screams filled the air.*

Alpha 43 awoke with a start, perspiring heavily.

“W-what?” he stammered glancing, around.

There was no blood. No Qasim. No lightning.

Alpha 43 sighed. How many times was he going to have the same nightmare? How many times was he going to relive his brother’s death? And in addition, he kept dreaming of a giant bolt of electricity. One which struck his chest. Why did that keep happening? It wasn’t related to Qasim’s death in any way.

Alpha 43 pushed these thoughts aside. They didn’t matter. After all, he had more pressing matters to attend to.

Akbar was back. After twelve years he had returned for some unknown reason.

‘Where has he been hiding all this time?’ Alpha 43 thought



to himself.

It all seemed so uncanny to the Alpha. First Akbar disappears. Then, after twelve years he returns abruptly, killing Alpha 39. It didn't add up to Alpha 43. It didn't feel like Akbar's style to make such a rash move.

But Akbar did. And whatever the reason was, it didn't matter to the Alpha. For in a few months, he would be the one hunting Akbar.

Alpha 43 had no doubt that Alpha 31 would fail to catch Akbar. Akbar was more skilled than Alpha 31 any way. After all, Akbar was the only one who had defeated Alpha 43.

Alpha 43 clenched his fist. His only defeat had been his first fight in the field. With Akbar. And he had lost. To the extent that he would have died.

## One Last Try

“Are you sure about this?” Akbar asked.

Abbas’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Why, didn’t you say that I should give it another shot?” he exclaimed, glaring at the C-gun.

Akbar grinned.

“Calm down,” he chuckled. “I am only teasing you.”

Abbas took a deep breath. From the corner of his eye, he could see everyone else giving him encouraging cheers.

“You got this!” Ali encouraged.

“Yes, just focus and I’m sure you’ll be good, Inshallah,” Zahra advised.

“We believe in you Abbas!” Maryam smiled. Haider and Jafar nodding in acknowledgement.

Abbas eyed the C-gun warily. Somehow, from his talk with Akbar three hours ago, he found himself standing before the C-gun; in what was going to be his last try before the revolution meeting.

“Let’s do this,” Abbas whispered.

Akbar nodded and pressed the trigger.

Abbas wanted to close his eyes but, forced them to stay open as his heart pounded within his chest. Slowly he watched as the area around him transformed into a lush rain forest.

“Hello Abbas,” a voice sounded from behind.

Abbas did not turn this time to face it. It was fake. Just an illusion made to deceive him.

“How many times must I tell you that I am not fake!” the voice sounded angrier this time.

Abbas tried to control any emotions that he felt. He didn’t want the snake to provoke him in any way.

“Ah,” he heard from behind. “You think that you have found the flaw embedded within you.”

There was a moment of silence before the voice continued.

“Well, let me tell you that you haven’t.”

Abbas pushed away any worry that may have entered his heart. The snake was not his master. It could not and would not dictate his emotional state any more.

There was a loud crack from behind and Abbas saw a giant blur pass from above his head which temporarily blocked the sun. It landed with a booming noise before him.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. It was a giant spider! No. It wasn’t! It was a fake giant spider. Abbas regained his original look of composure.

“You are wasting my time,” the spider buzzed. “I could just devour you here and now.”

Abbas didn’t even roll his eyes. He could not give the spider a reaction.

The spider narrowed its many eyes. Glancing over to his left, it smirked,

“Look Abbas!”

Abbas didn’t. He didn’t turn or look.

“Fine,” the spider grinned. “The ants can have you.”

Abbas struggled to remain still. Slowly, he peeked to his left. There was a giant colony of ants! They were crawling right up to him. There was also a swarm of bees approaching him from the other side.

“They are not real,” Abbas repeated to himself silently. “They are not real.”

It took every iota of self-control as the ants began climbing onto his shoes and working up there way past his knees to his

stomach. And past his stomach to his neck. The bees buzzed around Abbas's head.

Abbas closed his eyes. His heart pounded as he felt the tiny ants work their way up.

'They are only a figment of my imagination,' Abbas repeated. 'None of this is truly happening.'

It was then that Abbas realised it. None of this was truly happening. Akbar's words echoed in his mind.

*Everything you see, hear, taste, smell and feel within the C-gun is fake. If you were scared of being a sock, the C-gun would have come to you in form of a sock rather than a snake.*

An idea struck Abbas. He wasn't sure if it would work, but he had nothing to lose from trying. Very slowly, he concentrated his mind on Akbar, thinking how intimidating Akbar could be. There was a small sputter.

Abbas opened his eyes and had to stop himself from laughing. Instead of ants, tiny Akbars were climbing their way up his body and instead of bees, tiny Akbar's were buzzing around him, flapping their arms like wings.

Another idea struck Abbas. Very slowly, he closed his eyes and began imagining a pink sock. There was a sputter once more and when Abbas opened his eyes, he laughed as he saw that the tiny Akbars had now been replaced by tiny pink socks, wriggling their way up his body. Around his head; pink socks were gliding.

"I guess you can't control me anymore. I'm no longer out of control."

He closed his eyes and focused on getting out. He wanted to break free of these chains.

Everyone was watching him incredulously.

"You did it!" Zahra smiled.

"We all knew you could!" Maryam added.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. He had seen the C-gun pull a trick like this the first time he had been exposed to it.

He closed his eyes, trying to imagine them all to be giant socks but there was no sputter. Only the confused voices of the others.

"Uh Abbas," came Ali's voice. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," Jafar added on. "Why have you shut your eyes?"

Abbas opened his eyes, realising that everyone was eyeballing him with confusion.

“Oh,” Abbas laughed, realising he was out of the device now. “I just didn’t know if the C-gun was tricking me or not.”

Haider smiled, giving him a tight hug. Ali joined in on the hug, lifting them both off the ground.

“Whoa,” Abbas exclaimed.

Ali merely chuckled before placing them down once more. Abbas turned to face Akbar.

“How did I do?” he asked.

Akbar narrowed his eyes.

“You did excellent,” he answered, causing Abbas to grin childishly. “You actually did something that I was never able to do.”

An awkward silence descended over the group. What was Akbar talking about?

“You actually,” Akbar started to explain. “You actually managed to break completely from the C-gun. Without any side effects.”

Abbas’s eyes widened in surprise.

“You were in there for nine minutes,” Akbar smiled. “Nine full minutes. And in the end you broke free. Even when I break free, my hand or leg vibrate a little.”

Abbas recalled how Akbar’s hand had been shaking at the fight with Alpha 43.

“I am very proud of you Abbas,” he finished. “You have truly beaten the C-gun today.”

Abbas coughed nervously as he absorbed the information. Nine minutes! Nine minutes he had been fighting the C-gun, and had won!

“And now for the scores,” Akbar murmured as he pulled a notebook from his pocket.

Abbas closed his eyes. He already knew who had won. Maryam. Maryam had crossed him, outperforming him by a massive margin.

“In fourth place,” Akbar began suspensefully, “with 221 points, is Jafar!”

Abbas clapped his hands together. He was amazed at how Jafar had performed so well, despite his age. Alongside him, everyone else clapped their hands together as well. Jafar nodded

his head respectfully even though a hint of disappointment was visible on his face. He hadn't won, which meant that he wouldn't get the carving tools Akbar had promised should he win.

"In third place," Akbar grinned, "with 236 points, is Haider!"

Everyone clapped once more as Haider bowed his head respectfully.

Abbas knew that Haider might have been a bit disappointed at losing but that didn't matter for Abbas. He was proud of his brother for working on his flaws with effort. Even though Haider had lost, Abbas had already decided that he would teach Haider how to use his revolver as a reward.

"Now for the last two," Akbar paused.

Maryam glanced at Abbas excitedly. Abbas smiled back as Akbar began announcing the winner.

"In first place, with 261 points, is Abbas!"

Rather than applause there was silence.

Abbas's jaw dropped. He was certain that he had misheard. There was no way he could have won.

From his side, he saw Zahra and Ali clapping. Maryam started clapping about a moment later, no sign of usual anger on her face.

"How?" Abbas asked Akbar.

Akbar smiled.

"Nine minutes in the controller has to account to something," he answered.

Everyone began applauding Abbas.

"You were a worthy opponent," he heard Maryam whisper.

Abbas turned to face her. She had been a strong competition.

"Thanks," Abbas whispered back. "You were a worthy opponent too."

Maryam beamed as she turned to face Akbar who was calling for attention.

"As a final lesson of your training," Akbar smiled. "I have decided to teach you one final thing."

There was silence as everyone listened curiously to what Akbar had to say.

"In life," Akbar continued. "When you do everything you can, you automatically become winners. That is why, even though

Abbas has the highest score, all of you will be rewarded as if you won. You are all winners.”

Abbas’s eyes widened in surprise.

“So, in that case,” Jafar coughed. “Will I get...” he awkwardly let his sentence trail off.

Akbar glanced at him.

“Yes,” Akbar nodded. “You have earned your carving tools. As has Haider earned his first firearm, Maryam her rifle, and Abbas his flying tackle.”

Haider squealed in excitement, causing everyone to laugh. Abbas stroked his hair casually as they turned to head inside the house.

Jafar was chatting away non-stop like a robot with Maryam and Haider. Ali and Zahra were moving ahead of them discussing something Abbas couldn’t hear.

Abbas strolled behind all of them, his head in a whirl. He had been exposed to the C-gun for nine minutes and he had managed to free himself.

‘I will perform two rak’at salat for shukrana<sup>1</sup> after maghrib and isha Inshallah,’ he thought to himself.

He turned to face Akbar who was strolling right behind him. Akbar stopped, giving him a curious glance.

“Akbar Uncle,” Abbas began. “I want to make an effort from now on to strengthen my connection with Allah (swt). Could you please wake me up tomorrow for salaah ul layl, if I amn’t already awake?”

Akbar narrowed his eyes before forming a warm smile.

“Of course,” he answered. “We can do it together if you like.”

Abbas nodded.

“I would like that.”

And with that, they strolled inside, a new force driving through them.

---

<sup>1</sup>Prayer of thanks.

# 51

## A Prayer

“Abbas!” he heard someone whisper. “Wake up!”

Abbas turned over lazily.

“I . . . don’t . . . want . . . to . . . wake . . . up,” he grumbled.

He felt a coldness touch his face and trickle down his cheek.

It slowly seeped into his eye lids as it dawned on Abbas.

“Aye!” he exclaimed, wiping the water from his eyes.

He turned to see a satisfied Akbar.

“Oh Akbar Uncle, that is cruelty!” Abbas moaned in a victimized tone.

Akbar shrugged his shoulders.

“Didn’t you want to pray salaah ul layl,” he reminded.

Abbas groaned. He remembered the promise he had made yesterday. But he was so sleepy. His eyes were drooping. It would be so easy to sleep. But then another thought occurred to Abbas. If Akbar had offered to teach him the flying tackle, he would have risen without hesitation. He was not going to lose the opportunity to prostrate before Allah (swt).

Slowly, he pushed himself to stand. He felt the pain in his legs and lethargy of his arms begging him to return to his blanket. And even though it was difficult, Abbas tried to ignore them.

“Mashallah,” Akbar whispered as Abbas finally got to his feet. “Let’s go.” Abbas nodded in acknowledgement.

After performing ablution, they both headed towards the living room, where Akbar had set up two prayer mats in advance. They



each assumed one prayer mat for themselves.

“Bismillah hir rahman nir raheem,” Akbar whispered.

“Bismillah hir rahman nir raheem,” Abbas repeated.

Akbar turned to face Abbas.

“Do you know how to do salaah ul layl?”

Abbas shook his head.

“It is a special prayer made up of eleven rakaats,” Akbar explained. “It has a very special importance in Islam. It has many benefits. Holy Prophet(pbuh) has mentioned twenty four such benefits. For example, it drives Shaitan away. It protects one from enemies. It also intercedes with the angel of death.”

Abbas’s eyes widened in surprise. He did not know that there were so many benefits of praying this salaah.

“Let’s get started now,” Akbar stated.

And with that, he stood up and began reciting the prayer. Abbas followed his lead, trying to learn every part.

As the prayer progressed, Abbas found his heart pour out into the words. It was as though he felt a support in his heart. A support so powerful that he could do anything. Abbas even felt like he could fight an Alpha and win. And this feeling dominated not just his body, but his entire existence.

Eventually they finished the prayer, and when they did; Abbas felt very light.

He whirled to face Akbar.

“What was that?” he gasped exasperated.

Akbar smiled.

“That Abbas, was faith. True faith. True belief in your heart.”

Abbas glanced down for a moment.

“It felt so powerful,” he choked. “I-I -” Abbas struggled to finish his sentence. He had never felt a connection like that in any of his prayers before.

Akbar smiled.

“This connection is why you are able to defeat the C-gun. It’s the change that has now become a part of your soul.”

Akbar looked at Abbas intently.

Abbas felt a strange feeling fill his heart, and a tear trickled down his cheek.

He leaned forward, giving Akbar a big hug. Akbar wrapped his arms around Abbas.

“A sincere salaah is the ascension of a believer.”

Akbar continued,

“With time, this connection gets stronger, if you invest in it.”

Abbas let go of Akbar and the two got up to continue their morning.

“There is a lot of work to do,” Akbar explained. “Since today is the first revolution meeting, we have to do some preparation in advance. Like for one, we have to scout the area and make sure it is going to be okay for the meeting. Another one is to work out some logistics.”

He paused for a few seconds,

“This is it Abbas. If we play our cards right, we might have our first shot at being free.”

## Preparation

“Alright Maryam,” Akbar ordered. “Call out the names one by one now.”

Maryam nodded.

“First name,” she began. “Is Yasir.”

There was silence before Akbar declared,

“He’s loyal but is too gullible. More suited for a soldier role.”

Abbas nodded. Ever since fajr, they had been making preparations only sitting just now for the most important task. Job allocation. Everyone was aware that these things would be finalised at the meeting but Akbar had insisted on preparing in advance. And hence, here they were, discussing the possible roles for each member.

“Next name,” Maryam continued. “Is Jawad.”

Everyone looked at Akbar and Ali for they were the ones who had given the invitations. They had met each person.

“He seemed a little dodgy,” Ali stated. “I don’t know.”

Abbas turned to face Akbar, curious to see what he had to say on the matter.

“This man once,” Akbar began with a hint of irritation in his eyes. “He once took bribes.”

Abbas’s eyes widened in surprise. Others gasped. Maryam glared at the name as if it would disappear if she did.

“How could you invite someone like that to the meeting?” she questioned.

“I only learnt of this after inviting him,” he answered. “And in addition, he claims that he repented.”

“But that doesn’t mean he did!” Zahra objected. “How do we know if we can trust this man?”

Akbar narrowed his eyes.

“We will be taking full precautions,” he whispered. “What’s done is done. And if he said he repented, we can give him a chance. But we will keep a close eye on him.”

Zahra sighed.

“If he is still who he was,” she answered. “Then we may lose everything, including our lives. That is why-”

“That is why,” Akbar interrupted. “We can place him in a position where no information would reach him. A place where he cannot do us any harm.”

Everyone raised a brow, unsure of what Akbar meant.

“I mean to say,” Akbar explained. “Put him in the patrol department. Let him stay in the sight of his patrol squad members. Throughout the day he would be out and about, patrolling. That is the least risky way to go.”

There was a murmur of agreement.

“Alright,” Maryam sighed. “Next name is Akbar Uncle.”

“Leadership,” Abbas muttered, without thinking.

Everyone turned to face him before nodding in agreement.

“We will need a committee,” Akbar explained. “In a committee, different groups will have representatives. The leadership is stronger when multiple individuals work in synchrony as a strong team and serve the cause.”

They all nodded in agreement. Time passed as they progressed through the names.

Kadhim, a man roughly the same age as Akbar was placed in the soldiers’ department.

“I think he is brave,” Akbar had mentioned.

After a while, they came upon the name, Farheen. She was an elderly woman about Akbar’s age. In fact, a little bit older. Abbas had been impressed to find that she had opened an orphanage where she looked after children who had lost their families to the Alphas.

“Definitely in the provisions section,” Zahra had proposed. “Logistics of food, making sure quantities are enough etc.”

Then there was a boy named Isa. He was about Abbas’s age. He had been raised by Farheen in her orphanage, and so he had tremendous respect for her. It was in fact, through him that Akbar had found out about Farheen.

“Soldier department,” Ali asserted.

Everyone else agreed.

They advanced down the list, sorting more and more individuals. Abbas, Maryam, Ali and Haider had all been put in the soldier department. Jafar had been placed in the medical department. And finally, Zahra had been placed in leadership.

“Last names on the list,” Maryam whispered. “Naqi and Ruqayya.”

“Naqi seems like a fair choice for leadership,” Abbas began. “Perhaps we should put him there.”

There was a moment of silence.

“The only issue is,” Ali answered. “Naqi cares for his sister Ruqayya, more than anything else.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes.

“Yes,” Akbar added. “I would be concerned to have Naqi in such an important position.”

Abbas looked down.

“But,” Akbar added. “I do value Abbas’s opinion. So, we will put him in leadership and perhaps, we can give his sister a role that allows her to be at the base so Naqi can keep an eye on her.”

“Wait,” Maryam sighed. “Shouldn’t we give Ruqayya a role more suited to her rather than give her a role more suited to Naqi.”

“We don’t have a choice,” Akbar answered. He spoke after a short pause. “Perhaps we should give Ruqayya a position in the medical department.”

There was a murmur of agreement.

Abbas glanced over at Haider and Jafar who were sitting quietly in the corner. Akbar had allowed them to listen to the meeting for the purpose of experience, only if they stayed silent the entire time. Hence, both were on their best behaviour.

“Okay then,” Abbas concluded. “What’s next?”

Akbar looked down at his watch.

"It's 8 am now," he sighed. "I think we should have breakfast first. Then we can prepare ourselves for the journey to the old hay fields."

Everyone nodded in agreement.

"Since everyone is leaving," Zahra added. "We should probably prepare the house as well and maybe add some defenses."

Akbar glanced at her for a moment and Abbas knew what he was thinking. She was pregnant and the journey would be harsh for her. But it seemed like Akbar didn't want to bring up that point.

"Zahra," he sighed.

Zahra's eyes narrowed for a moment before widening in surprise.

"No Akbar Uncle, please," she answered. "I am coming as well. I want to be there with all of you."

Akbar sighed.

"I don't agree with this," he muttered.

Zahra's eyes watered.

"Akbar Uncle," she pleaded. "I don't want to be left behind."

"Fine," Akbar answered begrudgingly at last. "You can come. But everything will happen the way I say for it to happen."

Zahra wiped away her tears, nodding in agreement.

"Okay," Akbar continued. "This is how everything is going to work."

Abbas cleared his mind to focus on what was about to be said.

"There will be three trips," Akbar explained. "The first trip will be made by Abbas and myself. We will go to visit the venue and make sure everything is okay."

Abbas stared Akbar in the eye before nodding in the affirmative.

"Next," Akbar added, "I will return back on my own, while Abbas will stay at the venue with a hand radio so he can contact us should the need arise."

Abbas nodded.

"Next," he mentioned. "Once I return back home, I will take everyone with me. Is that clear to everyone?"

They all nodded in affirmation.

“Good,” Akbar smiled. “Then let’s get started with the name of Allah (swt). May He grant us success in this great battle of survival and integrity, Inshallah.”

The room echoed with passionate ‘Ameens’ as everyone started to exit.

## The First Trip

“Alright,” Akbar sighed. “It’s time now.” There was a sense of seriousness in his tone.

Abbas looked down. It had been about an hour since they had all sat down to discuss the minor details, and now, it was time to leave for the first trip.

“Be down in ten minutes,” Akbar instructed.

Abbas nodded and bounded off to his room. Haider was there. In his hand, was a small black pistol.

Abbas smiled. Haider had still not been able to detach himself from Akbar’s little ‘present’.

“I am going now,” Abbas explained as he reached over for the side table. From it, he withdrew the revolver. Abbas smiled. He had kept this firearm safe and had continued to use it even though Akbar had offered him a better one.

“I think I’ll call you Zulfi,” Abbas smirked to the revolver.

Haider raised a brow, a cheeky smile forming on his face.

“Zulfi?” he chuckled.

Abbas grinned.

“Yes Zulfi. It is short for Zulfiqar.”

Haider’s eyes widened before narrowing in a satisfied smile.

“In that case, I need a good name for my gun as well,” he whispered.

Abbas ruffled his brother’s hair.



“I’m sure you’ll find a good one,” he smiled. “Now, take care while I am gone.”

With that, Abbas placed the revolver in his belt holster and pulled out a sharp knife. Swiftly, he sheathed it and tied it to his left leg.

‘Just in case of emergency,’ he thought to himself.

Abbas had gotten in enough fights to understand that one should always carry a weapon of melee combat. Since guns often ran out of bullets or a person could get disarmed. Having an extra weapon could be helpful, even when it came to things like cutting something etc.

Abbas took a deep breath as he glanced at Haider. There was a strange look in his younger brother’s eyes. One which anyone would have misunderstood. Anyone except for Abbas.

“Abbas Bhai I-” Haider paused, his eyes starting to water.

Abbas rushed forward, taking his brother in his arms.

“It’ll be alright Haider,” Abbas sighed. “We will come back soon, Inshallah.”

Haider’s grip on Abbas tightened and Abbas understood the feeling. This was the first time the brothers were going to be apart and neither of them were sure about how to handle it.

“I can’t lose you Abbas Bhai,” Haider sniffed. “Just remember that.”

Abbas nodded, his teary eyes gazed affectionately at his little brother.

“I’ll only be gone a short while,” he murmured. “Inshallah, we will be reunited soon.”

Haider nodded and with a heavy heart, Abbas let go of his brother and turned to leave. As he headed towards the front door, he saw Maryam and Jafar.

“Take care, Abbas,” Maryam whispered.

“Yeah,” Jafar added. “We’ll be meeting you soon inshallah.”

Abbas nodded respectfully to both of them.

“Inshallah,” he paused, glancing at Jafar for a moment.

“Jafar,” he whispered. “Could you please check on Haider for me. He is a little upset that I am leaving.”

Jafar nodded.

Abbas thanked him and turned to leave. As he left, a strange feeling entered his heart. Leaving Haider behind was surprisingly painful and it felt like Abbas had left a part of himself within the house.

A voice sounded to his right,

“Abbas! Perfect timing.”

Abbas turned to see Akbar approaching him, a J-47 rifle in one hand and a bag in the other.

“Akbar Uncle,” Abbas greeted. “Do you want me to carry the bag?”

Akbar shook his head.

“You don’t want to carry this bag, Abbas,” he replied.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. What was in the bag?

As if Akbar could read his mind, he unzipped the bag, exposing the contents before Abbas.

Abbas’s eyes widened in horror.

“Why in Allah’s name would we need a bomb?” he exclaimed.

Akbar’s lips curved into a smile.

“In case Alphas outnumber us,” he explained. “A bomb is a good diversion.”

Abbas would have replied but the bomb had taken his complete attention. “How does it turn on?” Abbas asked.

Akbar glanced at Abbas and then at the bomb before answering,

“It has a big red button. Press it and throw it in five seconds.

For once you do, it’ll incinerate everything within a five metre radius. Very lethal but short ranged.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes.

“Do you think that we will encounter any trouble on the way?” he questioned.

Akbar zipped the bag shut, slinging it over his shoulder.

“I don’t know,” he answered. “That is why we’re preparing for all possible situations.”

The two revised their bags one final time before bidding farewell to everyone. Akbar had given Ali and Zahra instructions for when he was gone and Abbas gave one last hug to Haider before leaving.

As they departed, the painful sensation returned in his heart but Abbas drove it aside; for now was not a time of pain but rather

a time of courage and bravery. The first revolutionary meeting was today and Abbas couldn't wait.

It all seemed so strange. For many months now, Abbas had been taught to flee from the sight of another person. And now he and Akbar were on their way to prepare a gathering. A gathering that would have many people.

"Inshallah Allah (swt) will help us," Abbas said.

Akbar nodded.

"Inshallah."

As the day progressed, Abbas felt beads of perspiration accumulate on his forehead. The heat was quite intense that day. They crossed through the forest and reached the oak tree from where a long mud road continued as far as Abbas could see.

"We just have to continue down this road to reach the old hay field," Akbar explained.

They were about to move when abruptly a strange noise filled the air. Abbas stiffened. Unlike the other noises in the background, this noise wasn't natural. It was almost like-

"An engine," Akbar exclaimed. "Get down!"

In a flash, Abbas lunged behind into the water of the stream, lying flat; since the water was only knee deep. He struggled to hold his breath as the coldness of the stream grasped hold of him, drenching his entire body. His vision became blurry. Beside him, he saw Akbar laying down flat.

Despite the fact that they were underwater, Abbas could still hear the noise as several large black vans came driving alongside the edge of the stream. All of a sudden, everything went quiet.

'They must have stopped,' Abbas thought to himself.

He whispered a silent prayer in his heart and lowered his hand to grab hold of the knife tied to his leg. If he was going down, he wouldn't go without a fight. His other hand held the revolver as Abbas angled himself to fight without exposing his position.

All of a sudden, there was a loud sputtering above the water.

'The vehicle engines,' Abbas realised. 'They must be leaving now.'

Silently, he waited until the noise of the vans faded away. Slowly, Abbas began to push himself up but felt a sudden force

hold him down.

Abbas turned in the water to face Akbar! Abbas narrowed his eyes. Why wasn't Akbar letting Abbas get out of the water now. He couldn't hold his breath much longer. He gave Akbar a sharp glare.

Akbar narrowed his eyes and pointed to somewhere along the coast. Abbas turned to see what it was and had to stop himself from screaming.

The Alpha hadn't left. He was still there, holding a massive firearm. Abbas began to pray in his heart. He could not hold his breath any longer.

For another few seconds, Alpha remained where he was before finally leaving. Abbas began to feel dizzy as the sound of the motors echoed along the area before fading away.

Akbar pushed Abbas up immediately and Abbas gasped as the much welcome air greeted his lungs. He forced his eyes open as Akbar hauled him outside of the water onto the warm grass.

For a moment, neither spoke. Both were regaining their breath. "What was that?" he wheezed.

Akbar did not respond immediately.

"I don't know who that was," he coughed. "All I know is that this is a classic Alpha trick. Make sound with some of the vehicles as if they have left, so the person in hiding thinks that the Alphas are gone. And then trap them with the remaining men."

Abbas's eyes widened in surprise. This was such a sly trick. He had almost been victim to it himself. How ingenious were the Alphas? No wonder they had terrorised these lands.

"Let's go," Akbar instructed. "Our clothes will dry on the way."

Abbas nodded. And with that, they set off once more. After some time, Abbas could see the yellow glint of the old hay fields. It was getting bigger and bigger.

They finally reached the edge of the old hay fields. It was big and the grass was also tall, coming up to Abbas's waist. Meaning that if Abbas was to duck then nobody would see him.

Akbar advanced forward into the field, crouching slightly. Abbas was right behind him. As he was moving forward, he couldn't help

notice a large chain of buildings neighbouring the fields.

“The farmers used those buildings back in the day,” Akbar explained as if he had read Abbas’s mind.

Abbas nodded as they finally reached the center of the field.

“This is it,” Akbar smiled.

“Where is the entrance?” Abbas questioned. “I don’t see it.”

Akbar chuckled.

“That was kind of the point.”

He reached down and began digging lightly at one particular place in the ground. Abbas watched as a small blue rope appeared from underneath the dirt. Akbar grabbed hold of it and with a small tug, pulled on it.

Abbas watched in awe as the ground below him gave way, and he slipped into an abyss, landing a second later on a soft surface with a bump.

Abbas shook his head as he tried adjusting to his surroundings but it was completely dark.

“Akbar Uncle,” he whispered in a slightly loud tone. “I can’t see anything.”

“Don’t worry,” came Akbar’s voice in the darkness. “I am turning on the lights.”

There was a small click and a dim light flooded the area. Abbas narrowed his eyes. They were in some kind of underground area stretching as far as the eye could see.

“Woah!” Abbas exclaimed. “This place is amazing!”

Akbar nodded.

“Except for the entrance,” Abbas added.

Akbar grinned.

“There are actually two entrances,” he explained. “The first one is the trap door which you used and the other is the sliding one, which I used. It also has a small staircase next to the slide.”

Abbas looked to where Akbar stood. A large hole was in the ‘wall’ beside him. That was entrance through the slide and the staircase.

“Now,” Akbar sighed. “It’s almost lunch time. I will sit around for about twenty minutes for lunch before leaving for the second trip, Inshallah.”

## Waiting

Abbas sighed as he glanced at his watch. It had been quite some time since Akbar had left, and he was bored beyond compare.

But Abbas knew that this boredom would soon be over. Tonight, people would be gathering. They would be gathering for a very noble cause. To fight back, to rebel, to defy the Alphas and their rule. And the strangest part was that this cause was inspired by him.

Abbas sighed as he recalled all the events of the past few months. The events which had changed him so much. Abbas had grown. He had grown over this period from a boy into a man. From a cub, he was now a wolf. From a foal, he was now a stallion.

He glanced down at the blade tied to his leg, and the firearm in his right hand. He carried weapons now. Weapons that he knew how to use, skillfully. He had used them in combat before.

Deep down, he wondered if his parents were proud of him. Did they envision their son to be like this? Or maybe they wanted a different kind of son. Abbas would never know. His parents were no longer with him. God had chosen to reunite them in the afterlife.

That was why Abbas shared a special bond with his brother, Haider. Haider was the only family that Abbas had left in this world.

As he was thinking, he observed a small glint on the floor.

Abbas pushed these thoughts away and concentrated on what the glint was. Initially it was unclear, but then Abbas's lips curved into a smile. It was an ant. A poor little ant trying to lift a small breadcrumb from Abbas's lunch earlier. Abbas watched as the ant tried pushing the relatively huge breadcrumb, but it didn't budge.

He smirked as the ant began moving its antennae in what seemed like frustration. And then, from beneath Abbas's shoe, another tiny ant came crawling. Abbas watched for almost ten minutes as the second ant made its way to the first.

'That is commitment,' Abbas thought to himself. 'Those ants must really want the breadcrumb.'

He laughed as he watched the ants try to haul the weight of the crumb between the two of them. He observed as they pushed the crumb onto the back of one of the ants.

'Come on,' Abbas cheered on. 'You can do this.'

Then abruptly, the ant carrying the crumb moved a little fast, causing the crumb to fall back. Abbas chuckled as the ants turned to face one another, both vibrating their antennae in frustration. As they kept doing so, Abbas noticed from the corner of his eye that a small beetle was making its way to the breadcrumb.

'This is going to be good,' Abbas grinned to himself. 'I wish I had a camera to record this.' He could not use his phone camera as the phone battery needed to be preserved.

The beetle skittered all the way up to the breadcrumb. And rubbing its legs together in what seemed to be glee, pushed the breadcrumb away.

The ants didn't notice initially but after a minute, they turned and saw the sly beetle pushing the breadcrumb away. Despair seemed to have afflicted them for they both stopped vibrating their antennae. And then abruptly, one of them turned towards Abbas and crawled right up to his shoe expectantly.

"What?" Abbas exclaimed. "You want another crumb?"

Abbas laughed as he searched his pocket for any trace of crumbs. There was a small muffin in his pocket. He broke off a crumb and placed it in front of the ant. The ant began clicking excitedly as it hauled the crumb over its back. A moment later,

it began wriggling away.

The other ant looked up for a moment, noticing that his buddy had received such a brilliant gift.

Abbas smiled.

“One for you too,” he whispered as he broke off another crumb from the muffin.

The ant grabbed hold of the crumb, and like his comrade, headed off.

“You’re welcome,” Abbas grinned as they left.

He got up and strolled over to the slide hole. With the gun in his hand, he observed it, and an idea struck him. Not an Abbas-style idea. A Haider-style idea.

‘I bet I could climb it,’ Abbas challenged himself.

He backed away from the front. Crouching low, he whispered, “This is it, you are at the end of the line.”

Abbas eyed the entry.

“Ya Allah!” he cried, bounding away to the entrance. In a flash, he entered the edge of the slide. Very quickly he made his way about three metres and the light was visible, but just as Abbas was about to reach the exit, his feet faltered and gravity dragged him back down the slide to the starting point.

“Argh,” Abbas growled. “Not enough momentum!”

He got to his feet and backed away from the slide hole. This time Abbas stood several meters farther away. Swiftly, he bounded towards the entrance, forcing his legs to move faster.

“Ya Allah,” he shouted once more.

Entering the tunnel, he forced his way up but found his momentum fail him once more. The slide carried him back down to the starting place once more.

“Thank God, Haider didn’t see this,” he chuckled. “Alright, last chance.”

This time Abbas moved up slowly. He made an effort to focus on placing his arms and legs in a specific way, so that he could push himself inch by inch. A few minutes went by. And for the first time, it actually seemed to be working. He was actually making progress. And then it happened. From above the tunnel, Abbas heard voices.



For a moment he stiffened, withdrawing his firearm. Someone was near the tunnel. Someone was approaching. And from the sound of it, they weren't alone. Abbas tightened his grip on the firearm. If he let go of his position, he would slip down the slide, and the person would hear him. He wasn't sure for how much longer he could stay in this position.

All of a sudden, A blur appeared before Abbas and then a massive force knocked him down the slide.

"Argh," Abbas groaned as he got to his feet.

He felt like a bull had rammed him off a mountain. Dazed, he glanced forward. As his eyes came into focus, he felt a surge of panic in his heart.

Right before him, there was a man! He seemed to be a little shorter than Abbas. For a moment, he too was dazed.

Abbas was about to attack when another idea struck his mind. Perhaps this man had been invited to the meeting. But Abbas needed to be sure. With his gun raised, he called out,

"Salamunalaikum, who are you?"

The man got up and for a moment, he didn't respond. Abbas narrowed his eyes, tightening his grip on the gun. Who was this man? Why wasn't he answering? Should Abbas pull the trigger?

Abbas stared intently. He didn't seem evil. But then again Abbas knew better than to trust appearances.

The man narrowed his eyes.

"Where's Akbar?" he questioned.

Abbas was about to answer but the man lunged forward, knocking the gun out of his hand. In a flash, Abbas felt a force heave him off of the ground and hurl him across the room. With a thud, he crashed into the wall.

"Argh," Abbas growled, leaping back to his feet.

His opponent lunged forward once more but this time Abbas barged ahead, meeting him mid air. For a moment they stayed there, wrestling on brute strength, until Abbas's opponent abruptly let go; causing Abbas to slip forward. His opponent grabbed hold of him, preparing to throw him once more, but this time Abbas was ready and he drove his knee into the man's stomach.

With a grunt the man let go, staggering backwards. Abbas

narrowed his eyes. His opponent leapt forward once more and Abbas jumped back, just evading the attack. Abbas then paused. He watched as the man jumped ahead, flailing a fist. Abbas caught the fist and twisted it into a lock. The man squealed for a moment before driving his fist into Abbas's stomach.

Now Abbas staggered back, breathlessly. This man was strong. Abbas decided to beat him on the basis of speed rather than strength,

Abbas stopped, allowing the man to leap forward again. Like a leopard, he side stepped his opponent and rammed his entire body into the man's side. The man's eyes widened in surprise as he slipped, rolling over to the other side.

Abbas watched him intently, withdrawing his knife.

"Who are you?" he asked once more.

The man did not reply immediately. He only groaned as he got to his feet.

"I don't want to use this!" Abbas growled, gesturing to his knife.

The man did not reply but his lips formed into a simple smile.

"You are a good fighter," he wheezed. "But you don't pay attention to your surroundings."

Abbas's eyes widened but before he could do anything, he felt a small pressure on his head. A pressure he was all too familiar with. A gun.

Abbas frowned. This man was not alone. He had come with a comrade who was aiming a gun at his head.

"Nice and slow," he heard a woman's voice come from behind. "Drop the knife and raise your hands."

Slowly, Abbas did so, placing the knife just a little within reach.

The man smiled.

"Thank you Ruqayya," he whispered as he advanced forward to collect Abbas's knife.

Just as he extended his hand, Abbas did it. He leapt at the man, grabbing hold of his neck.

The woman was about to shoot, but Abbas whirled, bringing the man as a hostage before him.

“Drop the gun!” Abbas shouted. “Drop it, or I’ll snap his neck in two.”

The woman narrowed her eyes.

“Do you even know how to snap a neck in two?” she hissed.

Abbas growled maintaining eye contact. He wanted her to know that he could do it.

“Don’t do it Ruqayya!” he whispered.

She scowled.

“Where is Akbar Bhai?”

Abbas narrowed his eyes.

“I can’t say anything until I know who you are,” he explained.

There was a moment of silence before Naqi wheezed,

“We know about the meeting! My name is Naqi, and this is my younger sister Ruqayya. We have-”

“Been invited to join the revolution,” came a loud voice. Abbas whirled towards the slide hole. A sigh of relief passed through him.

“Akbar Uncle!” Abbas exclaimed. “Thank Allah, you’re finally here!”

## Before the Meeting

“Oops,” Naqi murmured. “I almost killed that youth!”

Abbas’s eyes narrowed. That was a total misrepresentation of what had happened. Abbas had won. Fair and square. Naqi could not claim credit for that.

“That certainly wasn’t how it seemed,” Maryam smirked unexpectedly. Naqi looked down awkwardly, scratching his beard.

It had taken about ten minutes for Akbar to clarify the confusion. As it turned out, Abbas’s guess was correct. The man and woman were here for the revolution.

The man’s name was Naqi while the woman’s name was Ruqayya. She was Naqi’s younger sister. Abbas remembered these two well. Akbar had placed Naqi in leadership and Ruqayya in the medical department.

“Whatever the case is,” Akbar finished. “We need to start preparing the area. People are going to start pouring in and I anticipate that for this meeting, we will probably have at least thirty people.”

Abbas nodded, as he checked his firearm.

As per instructions, all of them started taking care of various tasks. The good thing was that Naqi and Ruqayya also offered to help which was welcomed by them.

Abbas, Naqi and Ali headed out to take a round to make sure everything was okay. They were also suppose to help the guests find the concealed entrance of the venue.

On the other hand, Mariam, Zahra and Ruqqaya had the guest list to verify that only the ones who are invited are getting the entry.

## The Meeting

In the meeting hall, it was an interesting sight. There were about forty people. Of different age groups. Abbas was intrigued. He had never seen so many people in one place. Instinctively, he felt for the firearm in his pocket. Its reassuring bulge pushed him forward.

There was an eerie vibe in the gathering. Everyone looked cautious with the suspicion of this being a possible trap. Some stood close by the exits, probably so that they could run if need be.

Others had taken up positions with their groups at the edges of the room, probably hoping to be in a better position to defend themselves.

The ones who were deprived of the luxury of an edge or exit kept eyeing everyone, some even held their guns in hand.

Abbas felt pity in his heart. These people like him, had been tormented by the Alphas. They had all lost something or someone to the Alphas and now they had gathered for what must have been the first time in decades; hoping to make a difference.

Abbas narrowed his eyes as he recognised someone. Naqi. The man whom he had wrestled with and defeated earlier that day. Standing at the edge with him, was his sister Ruqayya. In her hand, she was holding a firearm. An old fashioned revolver, similar to Abbas's but of an even earlier model.

Abbas smiled as he realised that they were standing in a way

that they could keep an eye on the entire room.

‘Perhaps I should say hi,’ he thought.

He made his way towards them. In only a matter of a few seconds, Naqi’s eyes landed on Abbas and he straightened up as Abbas finally reached him.

“Salamun alaikum,” Abbas greeted.

There was a moment of silence before Ruqayya answered,  
“Walaikum asalam.”

Abbas thought about what to say. Maybe he should ask them how they felt about the revolution? No. Abbas wanted to make friendships. Even if they had held guns to each other before.

“How are you two doing?”

Naqi sighed. Lowering his hand over his chest, he muttered,  
“I have a bruise from our last fight. I must say that you fought well for your age. Who taught you?”

Abbas forced a smile. He didn’t want to give up any information about himself. And he certainly did not want to give any unnecessary attention to Akbar’s skills.

“Alhamdullillah,” Abbas answered. “My teachers were bruises and my mentors were defeats. I learn from my mistakes.”

Naqi raised a brow.

“At least you are humble,” he murmured.

“After the Alphas killed my parents,” Abbas whispered. “I had amnesia. I can’t remember anything of my past.”

Both of them showed no reaction, but their eyes betrayed them and Abbas noticed that inevitably, Ruqayya’s grip on the gun loosened a little.

“We’re sorry for your loss,” Naqi spoke at last. “When Ruqayya and I were children, we lost our parents as well.”

There was a moment of silence.

“I’m sorry,” Abbas whispered. “And it is because of this that the revolution means so much to me. I really hope we can all rise up together, Inshallah.”

“Ameen,” Ruqayya murmured.

And with that, Abbas bid farewell, looking for someone else to get familiar with. Even as he left, he noticed from the corner of his

eye that Ruqayya and Naqi had started speaking with someone next to them.

Abbas knew this was good. Getting people to loosen up and talk with one another would help with the stress in the room. Because once this movement began, whether these people liked it or not; they had to work as a team. And for them to be an effective team, they needed to trust one another. One of the easiest ways of that happening would be communicating with each other.

After Naqi and Ruqayya, Abbas scanned the hall. A young man, around Abbas's age, caught his attention. He was standing next to an elderly woman. The young man stood in such a manner as if to shield the elderly woman. He was being protective of her.

Abbas strolled up to them. Unlike Naqi, the young man did not see Abbas coming until he was right next to him.

"Salamunalaikum," Abbas greeted with a kind smile.

The young man muttered something that sounded like a reply. He locked eyes with Abbas,

"Who are you?" he questioned.

Abbas smiled.

"My name is Abbas," he answered.

The young man eyed him suspiciously.

"Isa," he answered in an I-am-not-in-the-mood-to talk manner.

"That's my name."

Abbas observed Isa. He was roughly the same height as Abbas, but Abbas was better built. Isa had a small scar on his forehead. He was wearing a hand-me-down coat.

"Salamunalaikum Auntie," Abbas spoke, looking past Isa.

The elderly woman turned to face him with a curious glance.

"Walaikum asalam," she answered.

Abbas realised that these two would be a bit harder than Naqi and Ruqayya. For it seemed as though they had decided in advance to keep distance from everyone. Abbas thought carefully. He needed to find a way to connect with the young man.

"Do you use firearms?" Abbas asked.

Isa glanced up for a moment. Abbas thought he saw a spark in Isa's eyes. He felt a little hope as Isa's lips curved into a slight smile.



“I have no need for weapons like guns,” he smirked.

He lifted the left side of his coat to expose a large dagger. Abbas’s eyes widened in surprise.

“It’s name is Malak-ul-Maut,” Isa grinned, unsheathing it.

Abbas felt slightly amused as he pulled out his own revolver.

“This is Zulfi,” Abbas introduced. “It’s short for Zulfiqar.”

Isa chuckled.

“I thought I was the only one who named my weapons,” he explained. “By the way, what kind of knife have you got on your leg?”

Abbas’s eyes widened in surprise, but he regained his composure.

He withdrew his knife and handed it to Isa.

Abbas watched carefully as Isa turned the blade over in his hand. After a minute, he glanced back at Abbas.

“This is a neat knife,” he commented. “But it looks unused.”

Abbas grinned guiltily.

“I usually keep it as back up.”

Isa shook his head in disapproval.

“You are a gun person then,” he sighed with pretended disappointment.

“I prefer carrying another kind of back up weapon.”

He lifted the other side of his coat to expose a large chain.

Abbas watched it incredulously.

“Why would you use a chain?” he exclaimed.

Isa withdrew it and handed it over to Abbas. The moment Abbas lifted it, the first thing he felt was its weight. Despite its slimness, the chain was very heavy and roughly a metre in length. This chain, if wielded by the right fighter, could cause some serious damage.

He handed the chain back.

“I see what you mean,” Abbas remarked. “This chain looks lethal. But how well can you use it?”

Isa looked at the elderly woman.

“This is Farheen Auntie,” he introduced. “She taught me everything I know.” Abbas’s eyes widened in recognition. He knew this woman. From the list of people on Akbar’s list. Farheen had opened an orphanage for children who had lost their parents. Isa was most likely one of the orphans at the orphanage.

Abbas realised that she had been observing their conversation and now he had found a way to get her talking.

“Wait,” Abbas smirked. “I am pretty sure that Farheen Auntie cannot wield a chain.”

Farheen raised a brow before narrowing her eyes. In a flash, Abbas saw Farheen’s hand move like a blur. He heard a small crack.

“What happened?” Abbas asked as he glanced at the two of them. Farheen’s lips curved into a satisfied smile. Abbas raised a brow. It was then that he noticed it. On the floor, there were two knives embedded deep in the ground; one on either side of his foot. Abbas gulped.

“Did you just aim for my foot?” he gasped. She shook her head.

He tried to walk forward but tripped. His laces were firmly embedded in the ground by Farheen’s two knives. Isa pulled the two blades out of the ground and handed them back to Farheen. She grinned as she held them out for Abbas.

“Wow! I am very impressed, Farheen Auntie. You must teach me sometime,” Abbas exclaimed. “How you threw a knife like that!”

Farheen narrowed her eyes and Abbas felt as though she was scrutinising him. He did his best to keep a normal, innocent face. A few tense seconds passed before she finally smiled,

“You are just as wild as my boy, Isa.”

Abbas grinned and placed a hand on Isa’s shoulder.

“It made me very happy to meet the two of you. I would love to think of you as a friend.”

Isa turned nervously to Farheen who gave him a slight nod. A smile lit up on his face and he replied to Abbas,

“Then from this day onward, let us be friends.”

They shook hands with each other. After a little while, Abbas bid them farewell. He had taken a liking to Isa and he was even more impressed with Farheen. Her knife throwing skills were impeccable. Almost like an Alpha’s.

‘She doesn’t belong in the logistics department,’ Abbas thought to himself. ‘She should be in the soldier department.’

Abbas made a mental note to bring this up with Akbar afterwards. Abbas advanced forward, through the crowd, which was now starting to converse a little more. He spotted Ali and Zahra standing in one of the corners, conversing with what appeared to be another couple. And on the other side, he witnessed Jafar showing off his swiss army knife to some other children his age. Haider was with him. Abbas waved gently towards him, but he didn't notice so Abbas advanced onward. In another area, he spotted Maryam chatting away with some of the other women.

'They must all be trying to do what I'm doing.' Abbas thought.

While Abbas walked, he spotted two people in the corner talking silently. Maybe he should go to them next. Abbas moved forward and one of the individuals turned to face him.

Abbas froze as he recognised the individual.

"Salman!" he exclaimed.

Salman. The boy who in a way, aided them in rescuing Ali several months ago. Salman still seemed to remember though, for his eyes widened in recognition and he rushed forward to greet Abbas. After exchanging greetings, Salman smirked.

"Some gang, you got?"

Abbas smiled sheepishly as Salman's comrade strolled up beside him.

"This is my father, Khalid," Salman introduced, rubbing his hands together as if to warm them.

Abbas nodded to Khalid and shook his hand.

"My son has told me a lot about you," Khalid remarked. "I was very impressed with how you managed to trick him."

Abbas looked down, feeling slightly awkward. He would rather not discuss how he had made a complete fool out of Salman. For that reason, he answered,

"I guess it was just at the moment."

Khalid smiled in a strange manner. And it was even weirder for Abbas since he was taller than Khalid.

"Oh it wasn't just in the moment," Khalid chuckled. "I told my son afterwards that he should take you as an example in his life."

If the situation wasn't already awkward, it was now; and

Abbas noticed Salman stiffening a little. There must have been some kind of rift between the two.

Abbas was about to answer, when a loud voice sounded from behind.

“Assalumuallaikum everyone!”

Abbas whirled, knowing that voice only too well.

Akbar stood tall and proud with a determined look in his eyes. The handmade podium made it easy to see him even afar. Everyone had gone silent as he began his speech, listening carefully to what he had to say.

“Bismillah hir rahman nir raheem. My name is Akbar. Many of you already know who I am.”

Akbar paused for a moment, taking a deep breath. Abbas felt his heart pounding in his chest. This was it. This was what they had been working so hard for. This was the first meeting of what could be, the revolution.

# The Revolution

“You all know why you’re here,” Akbar began. “For many years now, we as people, have been oppressed.”

There was a murmur of agreement from the audience.

“We have all lost something or someone to those accursed tyrants,” Akbar continued. “We have all been forced to hide under wreckage and live like vermin. For what? For a life of fear? Well, I say that enough is enough!”

Everyone nodded.

“I say!” Akbar shouted. “Enough is enough! I am tired of fearing and being oppressed. The time has come brothers and sisters! The time has come to rise now! To fight back!”

The room filled with applause as Akbar took a deep breath.

Abbas studied Akbar’s delivery. The way he was doing his voice modulation, the hand gestures; everything. It was amazing! He was extremely motivating and convincing, to the extent that Abbas was in the mood to go to the iron fortress and smash it down to the ground with his own bare hands.

“For only if we join hands,” Akbar smiled. “Can we hope to gain victory over the Alphas?”

Abbas didn’t know what had happened next but perhaps at the mention of the Alphas, people seemed to remember how strong their opposition was. Someone yelled from amongst the crowd,

“Do you want us to die Akbar?”

Another voice sounded,

“Yeah! What you are saying is suicide! Nobody has defeated the AI-” the voice trailed off.

Akbar sighed, causing Abbas to feel slightly angry. Lifting his hands, he shouted,

“He calls you to fight for your freedom!”

An ominous silence spread in the crowd as someone called out, “Be quiet, youth! You do not have experience to speak on such matters.”

Abbas hissed, his hand hovering over his knife. One moment was all he needed to slit this man’s throat. But before he could say anything, a voice sounded,

“If you will not listen to a youth, then listen to an elder!”

Abbas whirled around, surprised to see Farheen standing tall with a look of fury in her eyes.

“I am an elder over all of you and I too believe,” she growled; “That enough is enough! It is time we fight! Even if we lose!”

She paused, a tear forming in her eye.

“Most of you don’t know me but my name is Farheen,” she began. “I opened an orphanage that has cared for seven children over the last 16 years; the oldest of whom you see beside me.”

She raised her hand, gesturing to Isa, who held a lion-like expression.

“These children,” Farheen went on. “Have never known their mother’s love or felt their father’s embrace. And even though I have loved and raised all of them like my own, they will always have this hole in their heart.”

Abbas watched in awe. Forget being a soldier, she should be part of the leadership committee! The crowd seemed moved.

“Ask yourself!” Another voice sounded. Abbas turned in surprise to see a large and husky fellow. “Would you want your children to be born as orphans in this world; raised with such a painful hole in their hearts? Or rather have them born free?”

There was silence. And then a voice familiar to Abbas filled the area. “I myself will soon be a father Inshallah,” Ali shouted. “And when my child is born, I pray that one day that child will be able to wake up in the morning, walk out in the streets, without having to fear for his life or that of his loved ones.”

There was a roar of agreement as people clapped their hands together.

“Yes,” came Akbar’s voice. “As sister Farheen, brother Kadhim and brother Ali said. We have a chance to be free and we must take it. Spread the word. Bring more people. Let’s unite our arms as brothers and sisters, and fight! Fight until we achieve our goal, Inshallah”

There was a loud applause resembling the thundering of horse shoes.

Abbas felt his heart fill with joy. The crowd was motivated. It seemed like the revolution was actually going to happen.

“It isn’t going to work!” came the same voice as earlier.

Abbas narrowed his eyes, attempting to trace the source. It didn’t take him long, for a moment later the person revealed himself. He was a relatively tall man, with brown hair. Abbas noticed that he stood nearby the slides.

“I, Jawad,” the man hissed. “Believe that you are all fools!”

And with that, he scrambled up the slide, leaving them all behind. An awkward silence descended over the group, but Akbar quickly took control of the situation.

“There will always be those who quit without even trying!” he sighed. “But there are also those who are ready to fight; no matter how hard and gain victory!”

Abbas, to rile up the crowd, shouted,

“Hayhat minna al-dhilla!”<sup>1</sup>

A loud roar arose from the crowd,

“Hayhat minna al-dhilla!”

Akbar glanced at Abbas and for a moment the two locked eyes. Akbar broke into a smile. Abbas felt happy at heart. Happy that there were so many strong individuals here like Farheen and Kadhim alongside Akbar. But just as everything seemed to be going fine, there was a loud scream as Jawad came tumbling down the slide.

Abbas growled, whipping out his firearm but Jawad took no notice. He glanced up at the crowd shouting,

---

<sup>1</sup>Meaning: ‘Humiliation is far from us.’

“I knew you would get us all killed! I knew it!”

Everyone stared perplexed, completely unprepared for what Jawad shouted next,

“The Alphas! They have found us!”



# Hunted

It is always fascinating to see how one moment the situation is fine and then the next, it spirals out of control. And for Abbas, he was really experiencing this first hand. For in the last minute since Jawad came tumbling back down the slide, a panic had afflicted the entire group.

Fear was visible on everyone's faces as they all withdrew their weapons. Now everyone backed away from the exits as if they were cursed. Nobody said anything.

"What did you do!" Jawad screeched.

Abbas noticed several individuals glancing between Akbar and Jawad nervously. Akbar frowned.

"Jawad!" he hissed. "Keep your voice down. Tell me what you saw."

Jawad looked him in the eye, accusingly.

"I saw them," he whispered as if it was a bad dream. "There are multiple Alphas!"

Several gasps arose from the crowd.

"They have a bunch of men with them," Jawad continued. "And there are even dogs!"

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Dogs meant that the Alphas would eventually find them. Which meant that they needed an escape plan as fast as possible. But there were only two possible exits, and both were very prominent. So how were they supposed to leave without getting caught?

Abbas contemplated over the matter as the group began showing signs of unrest. His mind was running like a speed train. People were in no way ready to fight the Alphas. Well, for the most part at least. People like Farheen and Isa seemed like they would be ready. But that was not nearly enough strength.

Abbas watched as Akbar tried to calm the crowd but his attempts were in vain. For a moment, Akbar moved forward and Abbas for some reason, remembered Murtaza. For a split second, his mind flipped back to when their father, Murtaza; led the Alphas away-

Of course! That was it! The Alphas couldn't know exactly where they were, otherwise they would have entered already. Which meant that they were searching. But if they were to see someone, they might go after him. Abbas realised that his plan had high chances of success, although it did massively risk him getting killed. But a new urge had overtaken Abbas. He couldn't explain what it was that had overpowered him to this level, but whatever it was, he had decided now.

Abbas strolled over to Akbar who was preoccupied with trouble-making people.

A thought occurred to Abbas. With an already frightened crowd, Akbar leaving, would definitely cause a stampede. Akbar could not leave. Abbas swallowed nervously. In that case, if Abbas related his plan, he was certain that Akbar would refuse. Akbar would never allow Abbas to go. But Abbas knew it was the only way. And Abbas had made up his mind. He was going to give it a shot.

"We aren't going to make it," a couple whimpered nearby; and Abbas saw Farheen silence them.

"If we stay quiet and keep our heads in check, we can find a way out of this," she tried to explain.

Abbas nodded.

At that moment, Abbas realised a flaw in his plan. A flaw, that undid any of the brilliant planning he might have been about to do. Where was he going to leave from? Both entries were plainly in sight. There was no way he could leave without being spotted.

Abbas sighed in disappointment. He would not be able to

carry out the plan.

‘In that case, let me find Haider,’ he thought to himself. ‘I need to know where he is.’

Abbas made his way through the nervous crowd. The tension in the air was very real and Abbas could feel the burning hot gazes of people around him as he moved forward. But he ignored them as he had more important things to focus on.

His eyes darted through the crowd and initially he became slightly concerned when he could not see his brother. With so many people of different ages here, he was unable to pinpoint Haider.

Abbas moved forward looking away as he crossed Salman and Khalid. Something felt a little weird about the two and Abbas would rather not meet the both of them now.

At last he spotted Haider, beside Zahra and Ali. All three were concerned but Zahra and Ali were looking worse. Zahra had a hand on her stomach; the fear vividly imprinted on her face, and Abbas wanted more than ever to do something now.

An idea struck Abbas. Where had Zahra and Ali entered from? They certainly hadn’t come from the slide or trapdoor entrances. Ali had asked him to go forward while he went to bring Zahra to the hall. Was there another way in? Was there a third path that Akbar never mentioned? If so, Abbas could potentially carry out his plan.

Abbas moved towards Ali and Zahra.

“Ali Bhai,” he whispered.

Ali turned to face him with a curious look.

“Where did you and Zahra enter from?” he asked.

Ali’s head tilted slightly.

“Why do you want to know?” he asked, confused.

Abbas realised he would need to choose his next words carefully. Otherwise the entire plan would fail.

“I am only asking,” Abbas began. “Because if there is a third entrance, someone should stand guard.”

Ali sighed in agreement.

“In that case, someone should come with you.”

Abbas nodded.

“Don’t worry,” Abbas assured. “I know exactly who I am going to bring with me.”

There was a moment of silence before Ali answered,

“If you head down the tunnel away from the slide, there is a hole in the wall. This hole leads to a staircase that will take you up.”

Abbas thanked him and headed off.

As everyone was too busy being frightened, they did not take notice of Abbas sneaking away. They didn’t even see him take Akbar’s bag that contained the bomb they had brought. And anyone who normally would have taken notice was too busy trying to manage the panicking crowd.

Abbas made his way to the edge of the tunnel. As Ali had described, there was a hole in the wall there. Glancing back, he didn’t see anyone looking at him.

Quickly, Abbas scrambled into the hole finding a large staircase before him. Taking a deep breath, he sighed,

“Ya Allah! Help me! Here I go.”

“Oh no you don’t!” A voice sounded behind him.

Abbas whirled around with gun in hand. Surprise filled his eyes as he recognised the person.

“Maryam!” Abbas exclaimed. “What are you doing here?”

Maryam gave him a look of disapproval.

“I should be asking you that question!” she hissed. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Abbas scowled.

“Don’t get involved Maryam! Just let me do what I have to do!”

Maryam laughed sarcastically.

“Oh, let you do what you have to do!” she repeated. “You mean let you commit suicide!”

Abbas rolled his eyes.

“Don’t worry! I have a plan!”

She glared at him.

Abbas realised this wasn’t getting anywhere. He needed to change his approach.

“Look,” Abbas sighed. “I understand what you are telling me, Maryam; but someone has to do this. Someone has to go out there and give others the courage to go out there as well.”

Maryam looked down.

“You are part of our family now, Abbas,” she explained. “If you get hurt, all of us will feel the pain.”

Abbas glanced towards the exit.

“I am doing this to help everyone,” he responded. “I am doing this because Zahra Api is sitting defenseless. I can’t keep running, Maryam. I want to fight back.” There was a strange calm in his voice. He uttered the words in an unshakeable but promising tone,

“Maryam, Quran says ‘For those who believe, Allah suffices’. Pray that he gives me strength to do my part.”

Maryam’s eyes watered, and she gave him a teary smile.

“Yes, Inshallah.” she answered. But the next moment, she said in a shaky voice, “But Abbas, what if you die there?”

Abbas sighed. “If I die,” he paused. “Then I want to die facing my enemy like my master Hussain (a.s.). I don’t want to die like a coward; hiding all the time.”

Maryam looked away for a moment.

“Just don’t die Abbas,” she murmured.

Abbas nodded.

“As long as there are people who pray for me in this world, I amn’t going anywhere, Inshallah.”

And with that, Abbas headed up the stair case; a new drive filling his heart. There were times when he would have fled at the first site of an Alpha or covered away in the shadows. But now, for the first time in his life, he was taking the fight to them.

# Dominance

“Keep searching!” came a hoarse voice. “They have to be here somewhere!”

There were calls of ‘Yes sir!’ in different areas of the field.

Abbas narrowed his eyes as he crouched down even more. He estimated that he had heard ‘yes sir’ at least thirty times from different directions.

Abbas breathed silently as he crawled forward through the field. In spite of all the dangers, he was determined. Today, he was going to fight back.

Abbas placed his revolver in his pocket, and unsheathed his knife. He would need stealth.

Swiftly, he moved like a panther to the nearest rustle. As Abbas neared, he noticed a soldier searching the area; a bit too close to the entry slide.

‘Goodbye,’ Abbas thought to himself as he closed in on the soldier until he was literally right behind the soldier.

In a flash, he drove his blade into the man’s throat, clapping his hand over the man’s mouth simultaneously. With no resistance, he fell into Abbas’s arms. Abbas let him drop to the ground and dragged his body under a bush. Then he rushed ahead; careful that none of the soldiers should notice him. He wiped his knife off of a nearby blade of grass.

Behind an old tree, he noticed another soldier. He began to move forward but felt a hand grab his shoulder. Abbas whirled

around, throwing his arm out but his knife hit nothing but air.

Abbas's eyes widened in surprise as he found himself face to face with Isa!

"What are you doing here?" Abbas whispered.

Isa rolled his eyes.

"I saw you leave and I wasn't going to let you go alone. Friends always stick together," he answered. "Don't even try dissuading me, because I already killed three soldiers on my way here."

Abbas noticed Isa's dagger was blood-soaked. On one note, he had planned to go alone. But deep down, it felt reassuring to have someone to watch his back.

"Okay," Abbas answered. "Let's do this."

Isa nodded and with that, they moved forward very carefully. Abbas knew that four were already dead. He wanted another four dead before they made the big move.

"I have a big move planned," Abbas explained quietly. "But for that I need to get to the vehicles."

Isa nodded once more and together they crept towards the edge of the field.

At one point, a rustle caught Abbas's eye. He tightened his grip on the blade. The two advanced forward and from the corner of his eye, Abbas noticed Isa lift his dagger.

Abbas shook his head and in a flash; leapt forward, driving his blade into the soldier's neck who gave a small squeal before collapsing in a pool of blood.

He turned to face Isa who gave him a look of approval.

"You wouldn't make a bad knife guy," he remarked. "But the score is still 3-2 to me."

Abbas smirked. Even in such a difficult situation, Isa was making jokes. It reminded him of Haider. But Abbas pushed these thoughts out of his mind. He needed to focus.

They advanced closer. Abbas realised that they were almost there when another rustle caught his attention. He raised his blade but Isa stopped him.

"This one's mine," he whispered.

Abbas nodded and let Isa advance forward. Next, Abbas heard a small groan as another soldier fell. But that soldier wasn't alone.

There had been another soldier right behind him. This soldier raised his gun but Abbas hurled his knife at the soldier; striking his chest. The soldier dropped his gun and staggered back, but he wasn't dead. Abbas withdrew his gun but hesitated. The noise would expose them.

The soldier got to his feet but there was a grey blur as Isa's chain struck the soldier on his forehead. Abbas watched as the soldier slumped down on the ground, unconscious.

Isa leaned over the body and with a small yet satisfied tug, pulled out the knife, handing it back to Abbas.

"Thanks," Isa whispered.

Abbas smiled.

"No problem. But one thing," he stated quietly. "If we live through this, you have to teach me how to use that thing."

Isa grinned and they advanced; eventually reaching the edge of the field several meters away from the Alpha's vehicles.

"What's our move?" Isa questioned.

Abbas pulled the bag off of his shoulder and unzipped it carefully, exposing its contents to Isa. Isa's eyes widened in surprise.

"That's a bomb," he whispered intently. "Do you plan on detonating the vehicles?"

Abbas nodded.

"Some of the men are sitting in the vehicles," he explained. "If we blow the vehicles, those guys will be out of the way and the others will turn back to see what happened. We can then lead them away. Away from the hay fields."

Isa looked down for a moment.

"But that's suicide," he murmured before his lips curved into a smile. "You already know that."

Abbas nodded.

"I wasn't lying when I said I wanted to fight back," he answered. "And if we are going to die, I believe we should take a few of them with us."

Isa sighed.

"And here I always thought I would live to have grandchildren," he paused and sighed; pretending to be disappointed.



Abbas smiled.

“Whatever it takes brother,” he whispered. “The revolution must live on.”

Isa shook his head.

“I amn’t going to give my life for no reason,” Abbas paused to wipe a fly away. “But if the need arises, I will not fear doing so.”

Isa smiled.

“Then let’s do this brother,” he whispered.

## The Fight of a Lifetime

Abbas crouched low as he eyeballed the large van. A few metres away, on his left side, was Isa. Isa, the brave youth who was willing to complete this dangerous mission with Abbas.

They had killed seven soldiers to get here. Seven soldiers who served the Alphas. Seven soldiers who had helped them torment people of this land. And now, they were about to do a very dangerous move.

They were about to detonate the vehicles using the bomb that he and Akbar had brought. And once they did that, the Alphas and remaining soldiers would leave their search for the people and follow them.

Abbas knew the risks well. This could potentially be his last fight. But that wasn't what was on his mind. The only thing on his mind was the connection he had experienced in his salaah ul layl earlier today. This was the revolution. People were fighting for their freedom. And sometimes people died. That's what made this so sacred.

"Bismillah," he sighed, about to move in when something caught his attention.

Abbas had to stop the horror building up in his throat. A man had just exited the vehicle. He was huge. And his face was covered with a black mask, probably bullet proof. The man radiated power and his arms were rough like an axe. His glare was like that of a serpent.

Abbas swallowed nervously, glancing over at Isa who matched his gaze. They didn't know who this man was but that was irrelevant. For this man was wearing the uniform of the Alphas.

Abbas sighed. The plan had just become a whole lot more complicated. An Alpha being by the vehicles made it near impossible to attack. Near impossible.

Abbas signalled to Isa to get ready. They were about to attack. Three...Two...One...Now!

Abbas lunged forward with his knife, shooting it out. The Alpha's eyes widened in surprise but his reflex was faster as he leaned back catching Abbas's knife mid air.

Abbas gulped.

"There you are!" the Alpha smirked. "All soldiers to-"

There was a sudden blur as Isa's chain came swinging from the bushes striking the Alpha on the shoulder.

"Argh," the Alpha growled, turning to face him.

Abbas used the opportunity to ram his head into Alpha's head which sort of worked because while the Alpha certainly let go, his head felt like it was made of brick cement.

Abbas and Alpha staggered backwards in opposite directions as Isa lunged forward, swinging his chain at the Alpha once more. The Alpha instinctively ducked, evading the first but Isa swung again; this time striking him and the Alpha flew back, crashing into the van.

"Abbas now!" Isa hissed.

Slightly dazed, Abbas grabbed hold of the bomb and pushed it next to the engine of the van.

"Run Isa!" he shouted as the cries of alarm from the soldiers came from the fields.

Abbas flipped the red switch and ran as fast as he could in the opposite direction towards the buildings. Right ahead of him was Isa. He felt his heart pounding, since the bomb was meant to detonate within five seconds.

There was an earth shattering boom and Abbas glanced back for just a moment to see the vans going up in flames one by one; the air got filled with the smoke and surprised shouts of the soldiers.

‘Time to leave!’ Abbas thought as he sped away the soldiers right on his tail.

He could feel his heart pounding as Isa knocked down the first door.

“Come on!” Isa shouted as he scrambled inside; Abbas ran right behind him and slammed the door behind them. It was a simple room, with a large flight of stairs leading up.

The two youths sped up the stairs leaving a pile of dust behind them. Just as they rounded the corner, reaching the second stair case, the door swung open.

‘They’re right on our tails,’ Abbas realised as they made their way up the second flight of stairs. Within moments, they were on the second floor, And Abbas heard the pattering of footsteps on the stair case.

“We need a place to hide!” Isa exclaimed.

Abbas’s eyes darted around the room searching for a place. There was nothing much on the floor except a table and some chairs. This must have been some kind of dining room, since the table was covered in a white dining sheet that was stained with the effects of time.

“Under here,” Abbas whispered.

The two slipped under the table with the white sheet covering them, just as the soldiers reached the second floor. Abbas felt beads of perspiration on his forehead. If the soldiers found them, they wouldn’t last long.

“They must be on the third floor,” came the Alpha’s voice.

Abbas recognised it. It was the Alpha they had fought just a few seconds ago and his tone was ferocious.

There was a pattering of feet and Abbas glanced at Isa for a moment who was busy eyeballing the fungus under the table.

“We should move,” Abbas whispered.

Isa nodded, peaking from under the cloth.

“No one is here,” he explained. “We should get moving. Maybe pick them off one at a time.”

Abbas agreed and with that, the two lifted the cloth and began speeding away to the staircase. Just as they reached and took a few steps, they heard an ominous chuckle.

Abbas whipped out his gun and knife observing that Isa had also pulled out his weapons.

There was silence and then footsteps, and Abbas watched in horror as two soldiers came running up from behind.

“Over here,” came a voice.

Abbas glanced at Isa who shot him a nervous look; Akbar’s words were ringing in his head.

*This is a classic Alpha trick. Sound some of the vehicles and make them leave so the person is hiding thinks that Alphas have left. And then trap them with the remaining men.*

“Going somewhere?” the Alpha smirked.

Abbas gave him a cold look.

“Give it up boys,” the Alpha chuckled. “Play time is over.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes. He wasn’t going to go down without a fight. Then it happened. A loud cry of,

“Allahu Akbar,” filled the halls as someone came from behind the Alpha, throwing him off the stair case. Abbas whirled around, ramming the back of his gun on the soldier behind him. The soldier staggered back before Abbas slit his throat.

Glancing at Isa, Abbas saw the other soldier on the ground Isa’s chain stained with a tinge of red.

“What were you two thinking?” came a voice from in front of them. Abbas turned in surprise; his eyes not believing what they were seeing.

“Naqi Bhai!” Abbas exclaimed.

Naqi stood there, a hint of anger on his face.

“You two could have been killed or-”

“Naqi Bhai!” Abbas interrupted breathlessly. “Really sorry to interrupt but there are still other soldiers and Alphas here.”

Naqi frowned.

“We will finish this discussion later,” he whispered. “First, let’s deal with those guys.”

## Taking the Offensive

Abbas sighed as he raised his gun providing cover for his comrades. Swiftly, Naqi advanced to the next staircase, with Isa right behind him, securing the fifth floor. A smile formed on his face. He had really believed that nobody had noticed him leave. But he had been wrong. Both Naqi and Isa had seen him. And now they were aiding him in his mission. To fight back.

In the last three minutes, they had been in a constant firefight with the soldiers who had headed up earlier. And even though it was difficult, Abbas noted that there was less resistance with each floor of the building. They had just taken the fifth floor and the soldiers were on the sixth and final floor. All that separated them was a staircase.

They had already killed numerous soldiers. And as they had gone higher, they found the bodies of more and more victims.

“Surrender!” Naqi shouted as Abbas made his way up to the fifth floor to join Naqi and Isa. “One Alpha is dead! Any other Alphas up there need to be smart about this.”

There was silence and for a moment Abbas wondered if there were any soldiers left. But then the strangest thing happened. There was a chuckle, as the Alpha spoke sarcastically,

“How about I ask you to surrender.”

Abbas raised a brow. What was this young Alpha talking about? How could he make such a demand? Didn't they have him cornered on the top floor?

“The men you found dead on the previous floors,” the Alpha laughed. “Most of them are alive and well.”

Abbas’s eyes widened in horror as he realised his mistake. They had been tricked. If the men on the previous floors were alive then that meant they were sandwiched on the fifth floor. The Alpha and his men were above, and the soldiers below.

Abbas glanced over to Isa and Naqi. They seemed to have drawn the same conclusion as well, as they both looked worried.

“What do we do?” Isa whispered. “There is no way we can escape!”

Abbas frowned.

“We will battle it out and never surrender,” he muttered under his breath.

Naqi nodded.

“Isa and I can defend the stairs going to the sixth floor,” he instructed. “Abbas, you can defend the stair case going to the fourth floor, just to save us from being attacked from the rear.”

Everyone nodded and with that the fight started. Bullets were rained upon them from below and above before they could get into position. Abbas leapt back, rolling over behind a desk. It wasn’t much cover but it was better than nothing. He began firing at the men who were attacking from below.

From the corner of his eye, he could see Isa wrestling with two soldiers; his chain wrapped around one’s neck and his dagger dug deep in the other. Naqi in the meanwhile was fighting the Alpha.

In a flash, there was a thundering noise followed by a strange whistling noise. Abbas ducked and rolled over as a missile incinerated the place he had been only moments earlier.

There was a patter of feet as three soldiers came running up the stair case from below. Abbas fired twice, shooting one soldier in the neck and one in the head. No body armour could be worn there so they were definitely dead.

His gun clicked and Abbas’s eyes widened in horror as he realised his gun was out of bullets. The third soldier raised his gun but Abbas whipped out his knife, driving it into the soldier’s neck. The soldier staggered backwards before slumping down in a pool of blood; Abbas’s knife still stuck in his neck.

Abbas was about to move forward to retrieve it when a massive force heaved him off his feet. Before he could react, it threw him down the stair case. Abbas tumbled down wrapping his arms around his head to protect it.

“Argh,” he groaned, throwing his hand at the railing in an attempt to stop.

There was a surge of pain in his hand as he grabbed hold of the railing and with a yowl he got to his feet.

The Alpha stood at the top of the stair case. A smirk on his face and Abbas knew immediately who had pushed him.

Beside the Alpha, Naqi lay on the ground, groaning. Abbas narrowed his eyes. Isa stood behind the Alpha, several dead soldiers were on the floor around him.

“You are outnumbered Alpha!” Isa shouted.

The Alpha grinned, turning to face Abbas’s friend.

“Give me your best shot!” he smiled venomously.

Before Abbas could warn him, Isa lunged forward, swinging out his dagger. In a flash, the Alpha ducked; dodging the blow. Instantly, he shot his hand to the side of Isa’s head and Isa slumped down, unconscious.

Abbas’s eyes widened in horror.

“Isa!” he shouted. “Isa!”

The Alpha turned to face Abbas.

“And then there was one,” he whispered.

Abbas narrowed his eyes.

“What have you done to Isa?” he growled.

The Alpha smiled.

“I only struck his cranial nerves. They are really sensitive to force. Hit too hard and the person might,” he dropped his hand making a ‘splat’ noise, as if to convey his meaning.

“But don’t worry about him,” the young Alpha hissed. “I am about to do much worse to you!”

The Alpha leapt forward, drawing two blades simultaneously.

Abbas growled and leapt back, ignoring the pain in his bruised legs. Alpha grinned.

Abbas lunged forward, knocking the Alpha to the ground. The two wrestled on the stairs for a few seconds before tumbling down



towards the floor below. For a moment, they were separated by the stairs. Abbas, who reached the floor first; leapt back, planting his feet in a fighting stance. He knew he could not beat the Alpha. There was no way he could win! But Abbas didn't have a choice.

The Alpha leapt forward, drawing a gun as he did. Abbas kicked the gun out of the Alpha's hand but simultaneously, Alpha knocked him down to the ground.

Abbas rolled over just evading a follow up strike. This time, he let the Alpha strike first, dodging and ducking his way through techniques before managing to drive his elbow into the Alpha's stomach. The Alpha grinned.

"You are quite annoying," he murmured. "But it doesn't matter!"

The fight resumed and with time, Abbas's defense began getting weaker. He had taken several blows in the last minute and the Alpha was showing no signs of tiring out.

'I need to fight him on a platform where we are on equal footing,' Abbas thought to himself as he evaded a massive kick. 'I need to outsmart him.' His mind was working faster than his limbs.

Abbas grabbed hold of the stool and threw it with as much power as his bruised arms could manage. Immediately, he lunged forward. The Alpha mockingly knocked the stool down but did not see Abbas coming fast enough and Abbas shot his fist at the Alpha, striking his face.

The Alpha staggered back in surprise and growled.

As expected, he began frowning and shouted a battle cry. Lunging forward, he attempted to strike Abbas but Abbas merely moved back, evading it.

"Tsk tsk," he sighed. "Too slow."

The Alpha growled once more and leapt forward attempting what seemed to be the flying tackle. Abbas had experienced enough defeats to know what the move was.

In a flash, he lunged forward, striking the Alpha's face with his elbow while the Alpha was mid-air. The Alpha fell sideways with a thud. Abbas's joints were aching and they begged for him to stop but he knew that he had to keep going.

The Alpha shot out a fist in anger but it was too wide and Abbas found his opportunity. As the fist approached. Abbas caught hold of his forearm, and brought his elbow crashing down on it.

The Alpha squealed in pain as the unmistakable sound of a CRACK filled the room.

Abbas whipped his leg out at his opponent. The Alpha toppled backwards landing on the ground with a thud.

Abbas raised his fist to deliver a finishing blow.

“Stop!”

Abbas looked up and the colour drained from his face.

“It’s not possible!” Abbas exclaimed.

There, standing before him broken and battered, was the Alpha Naqi had thrown over the stairs. In his hand, was a firearm.

“Step away from him,” the Alpha hissed. “No tricks!”

If Abbas had any hope of winning, it was gone now. There were two Alphas. One was armed and Abbas could not even try to disarm him. Even if he did, it probably wouldn’t work.

Abbas growled causing the armed Alpha to smile. Slowly, he backed away from the injured young Alpha, his eyes falling upon a gun on the floor. Abbas had knocked that out of the injured Alpha’s arm earlier. If only he could grab hold of it, then he might just have a chance. A small one but there was still a ray of hope.

But it was too far. Unless Abbas jumped. But the Alpha would shoot him before he would act. Abbas looked down. This was it. He was going to be killed now.

“Any last words?” Alpha grinned as he aimed the gun at Abbas’s forehead.

Abbas merely frowned, preparing himself for death.

It was then that it happened.

There was a boom followed by another. Followed by another and another. Abbas ducked as he realised that someone was shooting at them. But not him. For the only ones getting hit were the Alphas and within a few seconds, both had taken at least five bullets in their bodies. They were both on the ground, groaning like caterpillars.

Abbas reached out for the gun, but heard an all too familiar voice call out,

“You don’t want to do that.”

Abbas grinned.

“Maryam! What are you doing here?” he exclaimed as she stepped out from the shadows, her signature double barrel pistol was in her hand.

Abbas couldn’t help smiling. “Abbas! I hope you are okay?” There was a mix of concern and relief in Maryam’s voice. Abbas was very pleased to see Maryam as he realised that he had escaped death by a few seconds. His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a groan.

“Ah!” Abbas recalled. “We still have two Alphas to deal with.”

Maryam watched him warily as he strolled over, picking up his gun.

“Let’s send these two to hell first,” Abbas murmured.

He stepped up close to the Alpha who’s arm he had broken.

Maryam lifted her gun towards the other.

“Don’t worry,” Abbas whispered to his captive. “One day with the help of Allah (swt), I will send your beloved Alpha 43 to you as well!”

There were two loud booms as both Alpha’s slumped down dead. Maryam turned to Abbas with a nervous look.

“What do we do now?” she murmured, before a groan sounded from behind them. Abbas whirled to see Naqi and Isa approaching. They were both exhausted and bruised like him.

“Abbas,” Isa groaned. “Are you okay?”

Abbas nodded.

“You tell me brother,” he asked. “How are you feeling?”

Isa looked down with a lost look in his eyes. Abbas glanced at Maryam and Naqi, slightly concerned.

“I’m a bit dizzy,” he mumbled. “Might need some help walking.”

Naqi nodded.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be right by your side.”

Naqi then turned to Abbas.

“It was an honour fighting by your side,” he declared. “I see now that Akbar Uncle is trustworthy and it will be my honour to

fight in this revolution.”

Abbas bowed his head respectfully.

“The honour was all mine. It was a pleasure to fight alongside my believing brothers and sister.”

Naqi reached into his pocket, withdrawing a knife and gun. Abbas’s knife and gun.

“I believe these are yours,” he sighed exhaustingly.

Abbas thanked him and accepted the weapons. In all honesty, he felt incomplete without them.

Abbas turned to grab hold of the Alphas.

“Let’s take these killers back and show people that we can fight back!”

Abbas leaned down, grabbing both bodies by their collars and began dragging them away.

Behind him Naqi aided Isa in walking, while Maryam watched their rear. Since she was the only person in the group who wasn’t exhausted, Abbas was hoping to rely a bit on her help which she was more than ready to offer.

They made their way down the building. From the fifth floor, to the fourth. From the fourth floor to the third. And from the third floor to the second and finally the first. As Abbas reached the first floor, he felt a burning headache.

He glanced back at everyone else. Aside from Maryam, they both looked drained beyond compare; particularly Isa.

‘That cranial nerve strike must really be effective,’ he thought to himself.

For a moment, Abbas glanced back and abruptly everything seemed to go dim. Abbas slipped forward just managing to regain his footing.

“Abbas!” Maryam whispered. “You need to rest!”

Abbas glanced at her.

“I know,” he muttered. “But I need to bring these bodies back to the revolution meeting.”

Maryam glanced at him with concern.

“Don’t worry,” she whispered. “I got your back!”

Abbas nodded and was about to carry on, when a woman came sprinting around the corner. Her eyes widened in surprise.

Abbas felt his heart skip a beat. She was an Alpha! He was about to withdraw his knife when Maryam said,

“I got her.”

Before Abbas could warn her, she charged at the Alpha, ramming her with so much force that they went tumbling out of the window!

“Maryam!” Abbas exclaimed.

In a flash, they sped as fast as they could towards the ground floor.

Abbas felt his heart pounding. This was all his fault! He had made the decision to face the Alphas. What if something happened to Maryam? What if she had gotten hurt? Or worse—Abbas stopped. He couldn’t bear to think that. As he reached the exit of the building, he struck the door open, ignoring the pain that tormented his body.

He began searching the edge of the building, but heard a groan.

“Maryam!” Abbas exclaimed rushing forth.

She lay on the ground, partially dazed.

You’re going to be alright!” Abbas assured her.

Maryam sighed as she got back on her feet.

“Where is that Alpha?” he asked.

Maryam looked down for a moment, before replying.

“I must have given her a good scare,” she answered. “She ran just as we hit the ground. I landed on her, so she took the brunt of the hit. But her armour protected her from fatal injuries, that is probably why she was able to flee.”

Abbas was listening, however, he was finding it weird that the Alpha had fled. From his own experience and whatever he had heard about Alphas so far, he was sure that Alphas never ran away.

“She must have run because we were bringing the bodies of two Alphas,” he concluded.

Maryam nodded, as Isa and Naqi approached, each haphazardly dragging one of the Alpha’s bodies.

Abbas took hold of the bodies, so that Naqi could aid Isa. Maryam, just like before, stood behind the group, to cover them for any untoward situation.

Eventually, they entered the fields, arriving at the tunnel of the third entrance.

“We’re good,” Maryam whispered. “I didn’t see anyone following.”

There was a unanimous sigh of relief from the group as Abbas dragged the bodies down the tunnel; the others right behind him.

Just as he reached the bottom of the stairs, he heard a click. Abbas froze and everyone behind him stopped too. There was a moment of silence before Abbas heard,

“Abbas!”

Ali came rushing forward.

“You told me that you would guard the tunnel but you disappeared.”

Abbas sighed.

“I will explain everything. Just tell me what the situation is.”

Ali looked down.

“It is a complete fiasco. People are panicking and everyone thinks that Alphas are about to attack.”

Abbas frowned.

“I can resolve this,” he muttered.

Stepping past Ali, he dragged the bodies forward. As he stepped into the familiar room, he could hear the voices of different people.

“The Alphas are going to slaughter us now!”

“We can still try fighting them!”

“We would never win. We might as well just surrender!”

“So that they can kill us?”

“Either way, they will find us all eventually!”

They were all so busy arguing that they didn’t notice Abbas in the room.

Abbas moved forward, flinging the bodies towards the crowd.

A sudden silence descended over everyone and for the first time, everyone turned to face Abbas.

“This,” Abbas shouted. “This is what remains of the Alphas outside.”

There were gasps from different areas of the room as Naqi, Maryam and Isa joined Abbas from behind.

“These two individuals,” Abbas continued with a tone of harshness. “Are the reason why all of you have been shaking with fear.”

Abbas noticed people watching him in a strange way.

“These three brave individuals and I left the base and with the help of Allah(swt), finished them; Alhamdullillah,” Abbas gestured to Maryam, Naqi and Isa. “We slayed all of their soldiers and detonated their vehicles.”

People began backing away from the bodies as if they were cursed.

Abbas stepped forward ignoring the pain in his body. Reaching down, he grabbed hold of the Alpha whose arm he had broken.

“This Alpha is roughly the same age as I am!” Abbas shouted. “Don’t you see? The Alphas are not immortals! They are humans! They eat like us! They sleep like us! They can die just like us!”

“If an inexperienced youth like myself with three partners,” he growled, “could slay two Alphas and more than thirty soldiers, imagine what would happen if we all joined hands! Instead of fighting with each other, if we supported one another! Instead of hiding in fear, we fought back with courage! I say, we can win this!”

Abbas dropped the body on the floor.

“And we might finally be able to live normal lives. Free lives. This is our chance! We must fight back!”

There was a moment of silence, and from somewhere, a roar erupted in the background,

“Baynaz zilati wa zilla!”

“Wa hayhat mina zilla!” the crowds shouted.

“Hayhat mina zilla!”

“Hayhat mina zilla!”

Abbas moved over to the corner of the room. He had done his job. Akbar and the others could take it from here. He sat down against the wall, ignoring the glances of the others. His throbbing headache was worse than anything going on right now.

He rested his head against the wall, closing his eyes. Within seconds, he found himself slipping into a heavy sleep.

## 62

# Putting the Pieces Together

“What happened?” Alpha 43 frowned, his legendary knife’s edge touching the edge of the man’s eye.

“I-I can’t say,” the soldier coughed.

Alpha 43 pressed the blade a little closer.

“Madam said!” the soldier whimpered. “Madam said that she would provide the details herself!”

The Alpha’s lips curved into a venomous smile.

“I am asking you what happened,” he hissed. “Two Alphas and their squads did not return. Why? And I will not ask again. What happened?”

The soldier glanced between the knife and the Alpha. Taking a deep sigh, he answered reluctantly,

“The reason why they are not back,” he whispered. “Is because they are all dead.”

Alpha 43 had been prepared for many possibilities but what he heard was not one of them. His eyes widened in surprise and his grip on the soldier loosened. One of those Alphas had been his student.

“We went to the fields as planned,” the soldier continued. “But while we were searching, the vehicles exploded and everything went in chaos. We weren’t able to figure out what happened. But by the time we got in formation, we found the bodies of the



soldiers and Alphas. And madam told us to retreat. She seemed injured.”

Alpha 43’s eyes narrowed. This wasn’t good news. Two more Alphas being dead would reinforce the idea that the Alphas were not invincible. This would weaken their image, not only in the eyes of the soldiers, but in the eyes of the people outside as well. But there was something else bothering Alpha 43.

Who had managed to pull this off? Who had been able to kill thirty soldiers, as well as two Alphas? It must have been Akbar. Alpha 43 was sure about that. But even Akbar would not try to fight two Alphas on his own. On his own...

The Alpha narrowed his eyes. Maybe it was a group which attacked and if they were led by Akbar, they may have been able to succeed in wiping out the group.

Alpha 43 let the soldier go, sheathing his blade. It was time to pay a visit to Alpha 39. Or rather, the new Alpha 39. Alpha 43 remembered how the former Alpha 39 had been killed by Akbar several months ago.

He had been very infuriated since that Alpha 39 had served with him on many missions. Now Beta 31, Alpha 31’s top student carried that mantle. It had irritated Alpha 43 a lot to see it happen.

He had always been conscious to conceal how he felt and never showed any form of weakness. He never got married, never made friends with anyone and never attached himself to things like money and power.

Alpha 43 was well aware that any weakness he possessed could be used against him. He was certain that Jumeira knew he was most qualified to hunt Akbar. After all, hadn’t he been the only one to have ever tracked Akbar down twelve years ago.

Alpha 43 closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He did not like remembering the events which took place twelve years ago. When he had killed his brother, Qasim. The only member of his family whom he had never hated. The only person who arguably had been a weakness. But he had destroyed that weakness himself. He had destroyed that remaining humanity himself when he shed his brother’s blood. From that day, he had embraced the monster

he had become. Asghar was dead. Now, there was only Alpha 43.

“Sir!”

Alpha 43 whirled around to see a short man in spectacles approaching him.

“What is it?”

The short man glanced at Alpha 43’s hand with concern and fear in his eyes. Alpha 43 looked down and his eyes widened in surprise. His hand was enclosed on his knife’s edge and without realising it, he was bleeding.

“Argh,” Alpha 43 groaned. “Bring me a medical box.”

The short man nodded before running off. He returned shortly, and within a moment, Alpha 43 had bandaged his wound.

The Alpha groaned as he turned to face the exit. His shoulder had still not recovered completely from the metal pole injury several months ago. And the medical staff had made it clear. Any exertions could lead to his arm being damaged for a longer period of time. Already due to infection, his healing period had been prolonged by a few months. And Alpha 43 did not want to wait any longer. His injury had caused him enough frustration. And he was more than eager to get back in the field, kill Akbar, humiliate Alpha 31 and butcher Abbas.

Abbas. The meddlesome child who had brought this all upon him. He would regret ever crossing paths with Alpha 43. He would die the most painful death as a punishment.

Swiftly, the Alpha set off, careful to keep his arm at a safe angle as the doctors had told him.

As he crossed through the halls, he ignored the curious glances of different staff around him. Technicians, soldiers and others would once watch him with awe. Now that awe had been partially swapped out with mockery.

Rumours were that the Alpha was losing his ‘talent’. That perhaps it was time he retired.

Alpha 43 clenched his fist, sending a surge of pain in his shoulder.

“Argh,” he winced silently, quickly bringing his hand back to normal position to ease the pain.

Abbas would pay a very dear price for this.

The Alpha continued on, eventually reaching the training quarters of the new Alpha 39.

With a sigh, he entered.

Inside, stood Alpha 39. She had her back turned toward the entrance and was conversing with someone in the corner. As the Alpha neared, she turned around; her eyes wide with concern.

Alpha 43 narrowed his eyes. The person conversing with Alpha 39 was a young lady. But not just any young lady. Jannat was a member of the communications department of his arch rival, Alpha 31. It was not normal for her to be here and Alpha 43 did not find this a coincidence.

Alpha 31 must have sent Jannat to find out the details of the mission last night but didn't want to draw much attention to the issue.

Alpha 43's eyes lit up for a moment. This was a golden opportunity to strike at Alpha 31. Since operational command of the Alphas was given to him, this mission's failure was Alpha 31's failure.

A smile formed on his lips.

"Come with me Alpha 39," he ordered.

"You must justify your miserable failures to the Queen Bee."

Alpha 39 looked down and spoke in a low voice.

"But I already gave my report to Alpha 31," she answered.

Alpha 43 shook his head in disapproval.

"When missions end like this, they must be handled by the Queen Bee herself. Now come on!"

# Mission Report

“What happened?” Jumeira demanded. Her eyes were throwing flames.

Alpha 43 met her gaze with a satisfied smile.

“Alpha 39 is here to answer.”

Salma froze. She was in a difficult situation. Her mentor, Alpha 31, had already received her formal report, in which she had modified most of the details of the mission. But she was feeling very scared to go through this accountability session as she was afraid of being caught telling lies. Failing a mission was already a big enough crime. Her mind was in mayhem.

“What happened Alpha 39?” Jumeira questioned.

Salma took a deep breath.

“Maam, I have already submitted the report to Alpha 31.”

Jumeira’s voice fely like a whip.

“That is not the answer to my question.”

The next moment, she said in a barely audible voice as cold as ice, “Tell Alpha 31 to see me.”

With that, she motioned for both of them to leave.

“I happened to chance upon some special information.” Alpha 43 said. He could not miss out on the opportunity to put Alpha 31 in his place.

Salma felt her heart skip a beat. What was he going to say?

“Two Alphas perished in the mission,” Alpha 43 continued. “As well as thirty soldiers. But Alpha 39 decided it was better to

withhold this from you.”

Salma was shocked. She thought she had covered all ends. How did Alpha 43 learn about what happened? Without a doubt, someone must have told him. Probably one of her soldiers had squealed. Even though Salma had clearly instructed them not to speak. Salma made a note to find and punish that soldier later on; that is if she survived this trial.

“Is this true, Alpha 39?” Jumeira whispered, although Salma could hear intense anger in her tone.

In all honesty, Salma wasn't sure what to say. If she accepted the accusation, she would be convicting herself. But if she denied, Alpha 43 would present some form of proof. He obviously wouldn't have said anything without it. And then Salma would be punished for denying as well.

She was trapped in a dead end. And Salma knew that there was no way she could escape without being punished. And if that was the case, she would rather just convict herself and hope for mercy.

She glanced at Alpha 43. He would pay dearly for this. Salma would make sure of it. Alpha 43 would regret crossing paths with her.

Taking a deep breath, she began speaking.

“Ma'am, I-”

“Stop!”

A loud voice sounded from behind them. Salma whirled around in confusion. Someone was approaching them.

Her eyes widened in surprise as she recognised the individual. Her heart was filled with relief and for the first time since she had entered the room, Salma felt hope.

The one approaching them, was none other than her mentor, Alpha 31. Salma glanced at him graciously as he strolled up to them.

“Alpha 31,” she heard Jumeira hiss. “What is the meaning of this?”

Alpha 31 met her gaze.

“What are you here for?” she growled.

Alpha 31 turned to face Alpha 43.

“How dare you bring an Alpha under my command here, to justify her actions,” he hissed. “You have neither the authority nor the clearance to do that!”

Alpha 43’s lips curved into a smile.

“You are correct,” he answered calmly. “I should have brought you as well, since you were commanding this failed operation. Why don’t you ask her what happened? How did two Alphas die while she survived? ”

He turned to Jumeira.

“Did Alpha 31 ask Alpha 39 all these questions. If yes, then he should explain.”

Salma felt the horror return in her heart. What Alpha 43 was insinuating would lead to a much worse punishment than anything she could have ever imagined. But what she could never have imagined was Alpha 31’s next statement.

“I don’t need to ask her,” he growled in response to Alpha 43. “Because I was there!”

Salma glanced in confusion at her mentor. He was lying to Jumeira about an actual mission! What would happen if she found out? It would be unimaginable.

“When I realised the operation was not going as planned,” Alpha 31 continued. “I left with a squad personally to provide backup. By the time I got there, Alpha 39 had received a serious injury after being pushed out of a building window. I managed to slay her attackers, and we came back to the iron fortress.”

Salma struggled to control the stress that was afflicting her. What Alpha 31 had narrated was completely different from what had happened. If Jumeira investigated this at all, there was no doubt she would figure it out.

Salma eyed Jumeira cautiously. What verdict would she give? What decision would she make? But Alpha 31 was in control of the situation now.

“The two Alphas were already dead. The two Alphas being there together should have been sufficient for their survival and success of the mission. In fact, one of them was mentored by our great Alpha 43.”

He paused for a few seconds so that Jumeira could convey a

look of disappointment towards Alpha 43, and he succeeded in achieving that. He continued further, "I am running an extensive inquiry to get the answers of some very important questions like, what actually happened there? How did the two Alphas fail on a combined mission? Who dared to attack the Alphas? Is the enemy getting inside help? And last but not least, do we need to improve our training program for the Alphas as there was a clearly a lack on that front."

There was silence for a few seconds. Alpha 31 looked very calm as he knew he had gotten himself and his team member out of trouble.

Jumeira was quiet for a few moments. Then she said, "I want you here as soon as possible with all the answers."

Alpha 31 nodded, and turned to face Alpha 43,

"Next time, please come to me first if you have any questions about any of my missions. Then you can ask me directly as I have been given operational command of the Alphas." Sarcasm oozed out of every word he spoke.

Jumeira sighed.

"You may leave Alpha 31. So can you Alpha 39," she paused. "I must have a word with Alpha 43."

Salma felt relief flood her heart. As well as disbelief. She could not believe that she had been acquitted so easily. She had been freed of all charges. It took a lot of self control to not look at Alpha 43.

'He must be fuming,' she thought to herself.

Swiftly, she headed away from Jumeira and Alpha 43 towards the exit.

With her mentor, she began strolling back to her quarters. As they went, she couldn't help notice that there was something different about Alpha 31. He was sweating. Probably after twisting so many facts about the incident.

"Sir, I-"

Alpha 31 motioned for silence.

"You should have never gone there," he chided as they reached Salma's quarters. "Alpha 43 is a very dangerous person to deal with and remember that you are only meant to report to me."

Salma narrowed her eyes.

“If Jannat made a friendly visit,” Alpha 31 added. “You don’t need to be worried about it.”

Salma couldn’t understand. Jannat had been there on Alpha 31’s behalf to find out what had actually happened. So why was her mentor speaking as though someone was listening in on their conversation?

“Alpha 43 was not targeting you,” he muttered. “He was targeting me.”

Salma nodded.

“I figured as much,” she answered. “But it’s a good thing that you were there to clarify the situation.”

Alpha 31 glanced down for a moment.

“While I have operational command of the Alphas,” he sighed. “I will not allow anyone, even Alpha 43, to challenge my authority.”

And with that, they bid farewell. Salma headed into her living quarters, unaware that Jumeira was watching her very intently on a screen.

“Well Alpha 43,” she muttered. “What do you have to say about that?”

Alpha 43 looked down. His plan had failed entirely.

“I guess there is nothing more to say,” he hissed.

Jumeira nodded.

“You have to be a good team player for the success of the project. Stepping into other Alpha’s territories is not going to be productive. I want you to be very careful and make sure that you don’t cross the lines next time.”

There was a warning in her tone that Alpha 43 heard clearly.

Without another word, he nodded and left. He was certain that Alpha 31 had been lying. But Alpha 31 had not taken the bait. And that meant that he would have to wait. He would have to wait until the opportunity presented itself again.



## 64

# Waking Up

“Argh,” Abbas groaned, as he pushed his eyes open. “Who is making all that noise?”

He slowly forced himself upright. Instantly, pain surged through his body.

“Argh,” Abbas winced, returning back to his flat position.

“He’s awake!” Abbas heard Jafar’s voice. There was a pattering of feet and within the next few minutes, Abbas found Jafar, Maryam and Haider; all overshadowing him.

“Are you okay Abbas Bhai?” Haider asked; concern was visible in his eyes.

Abbas didn’t have much energy left so he just gave Haider a thumbs up. Haider grinned.

“Alhamdullillah,” he sighed.

Abbas tried once more to push himself up, but this time he was forced down by Jafar.

“You need to take it easy,” Jafar explained. “You had a bad fight.” Abbas groaned and lay down.

Abbas froze. Only now, did he notice a small black spider weaving its way down, directly to his eye. It was only a few centimetres away.

Abbas felt himself shudder, and as if the spider could sense his helplessness, it began weaving faster.

“Jafar,” Abbas whispered. “Handle this please!”

Jafar’s eyes narrowed before widening in surprise. In a flash,

he began searching the room for a tissue or slipper to remove the spider

Haider looked at the spider and nodded.

Abbas felt Haider's hand strike his face. Hard.

"Ow!" Abbas cried.

He could hear Haider's voice ringing in his ears.

"I think I got it!"

"Haider!" Abbas chided. "Don't you ever hit me again."

Haider's eyes widened in surprise.

"It was an accident!" he explained. "I wasn't aiming for you Abbas Bhai."

Haider sighed, taking Abbas's hand in his own, and began pressing it lightly.

"I am so glad to see that you are fine, Alhamdulillah," he told Abbas. "I got very worried when I couldn't find you during the meeting."

Abbas looked away guiltily.

"There was no way you would stay if I told you where I was going," he answered.

Haider nodded.

"I know, it's just," he paused. "After Ami and Baba's death, I don't want to lose you as well."

Abbas whirled to face Haider, his eyes wide with surprise.

"H-how did you..?" Abbas was too surprised to finish his sentence.

Haider glanced away, his eyes watering.

"You talk in your sleep sometimes," he murmured. "And one night, I heard you talking about Ami and Baba."

Abbas opened his arms, holding his little brother.

"How long have you known?" he asked.

Haider shrugged.

"Not long," he explained. "The night before you left for the revolution meeting with Akbar Uncle."

Abbas narrowed his eyes. That was why Haider had been so down that morning.

"I said this before," Abbas whispered. "I am'n't going anywhere, Inshallah."

Haider nodded giving Abbas a tight squeeze.

“Ay,” Abbas howled causing Haider to jump back. “No, it’s okay. I just have some bruises from yesterdays fight.”

Haider narrowed his eyes.

“Yesterday?” he repeated.

Abbas nodded.

“Abbas Bhai,” Haider revealed. “You have been asleep for two days now!”

Abbas widened his eyes in surprise. Two days? As in two full days? “What about the revolution?” Abbas questioned. “Wait, what has happened in the last two days?”

Haider sat down once more.

“I’ll tell you everything that happened after you collapsed,” he began. “Akbar Uncle got everyone to pledge allegiance to the revolution. The revolution has begun Abbas Bhai.”

Abbas felt peace enter his heart. Alhamdulillah, they had done it. They had motivated people to stand up for their faith, beliefs and rights. Even if it did take three dead Alphas, thirty dead soldiers and an armada of bruises.

“We are still looking for suitable headquarters,” Haider continued. “But people have gotten in motion.”

Abbas struggled to grasp Haider’s meaning.

“Haider,” Abbas scolded. “Slow down. Tell me what happened word for word, bit by bit.”

Haider took a deep breath as if he was preparing the air needed for all his speaking in one go. It started making Abbas wonder how much did Haider have to say?

“As I mentioned before, everyone decided to join the revolution,” Haider recapped. “After that, the meeting concluded with duas for the success of the cause. Then everyone headed back. Akbar Uncle and Ali Bhai took turns carrying you back home.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes.

“Where is Akbar Uncle and Ali Bhai?”

Haider shook his head in disapproval.

“I’m getting there,” he scolded.

Abbas smiled and let Haider continue.

“Earlier in the previous meeting, a second meeting was scheduled somewhere in the mountains; around two hours away from here,”

Haider explained. "Akbar Uncle, Ali Bhai and Zahra Api are all attending that meeting right now."

Abbas felt a small ache in his head but pushed it aside. Akbar, Ali and Zahra were at the second meeting. Probably to discuss logistics like who should have what position etc.

Abbas recalled the list they had made earlier, before the revolution meeting. Akbar would probably present that at the meeting. He started wondering who would go where. Would people accept the list? Or maybe they would have their own opinions. His mind was muddling with various thoughts.

"After your examination, Akbar Uncle decided to let you rest it out." Abbas pushed himself to his feet, ignoring his bruised and aching joints.

"People are really respecting you Abbas Bhai," Haider grinned. "Everyone thinks of you like a hero!"

Abbas looked down.

"What do you mean?"

Haider smiled.

"You brought back two Alphas, threw them in the middle of the meeting, and in the most awesome manner, gave a heroic speech," he bubbled.

Abbas waved it away.

"It wasn't me. Just Allah (swt) who helped us all," he answered.

Haider shook his head.

"Farheen Auntie was asking how old you were," he chuckled.

Abbas raised a brow.

"What is so strange about that?"

Haider gave him a goofy smile.

"Farheen Auntie used to be a matchmaker!" he laughed.

In a flash, Abbas whipped a pillow at Haider who had only just managed to evade it. Before Abbas could throw anything else, he darted out of the room leaving Abbas alone.

Abbas would have gone after him, but he was too exhausted. Besides, he was too preoccupied with what he had just learnt.

The revolution had begun. Hope filled his heart and Abbas smiled. The time to fight back had finally arrived.

65

## The Hunters

“You in there Wolf-hunter?” sounded the receiver.

Abbas nodded.

“Yes Bear-hunter, I’m in position,” he whispered. “No signs of anyone just yet.”

The voice came cracking through the receiver,

“Roger that Wolf-hunter. Stay in position. The other hunters are approaching from the south. You can rendezvous with them. She has to be here somewhere.”

“Roger that,” Abbas answered, placing down the receiver.

A cool breeze brushed by his ears. Abbas sighed. It had been six months since Akbar had declared the revolution, and now they were in full swing. Everyone had been assigned roles and more and more people joined them with each passing day.

A flicker caught Abbas’s attention and he turned, aiming his powerful sniper in the direction of the flicker; counting in his head.

One flicker, followed after seventeen seconds by another meant friend. Otherwise Abbas was meant to interpret it as foe.

‘Thirteen, fourteen,’ he counted in his head. ‘fifteen, sixteen, seventeen,’

There was another flicker. Abbas sighed in relief, relaxing his grip on the sniper as two figures came from behind the debris.

Abbas eyed the surrounding area carefully as they made their way across to where he was. He needed to ensure they were protected. There was a killer in the area. And while before,

Abbas would have run; but now he wouldn't. For from hunted, he had now become the hunter.

Abbas narrowed his eyes as his fellow hunters reached his position.

"Well Wolf-hunter," Maryam whispered. "Did you see anything?"

Abbas shook his head.

"Haven't seen a thing, Leopard-hunter. Bear-hunter told me to maintain my position."

Ever since they had become hunters, they had each been granted a code name by Akbar. Abbas was Wolf-hunter. Maryam was Leopard-hunter. Isa's code name was Falcon-hunter and finally their leader Naqi, was Bear-hunter. Akbar had insisted that they only use code names outside in order to protect their identities.

"Well then, let's take cover and wait," Isa whispered.

Abbas and Maryam nodded and together, the three hid behind the rocks.

Abbas remembered how anxious he had been to know what his role would be. And even when he found out, he didn't understand what it meant. The scene was crystal clear in his memory. He remembered when Akbar had come into the living room, saying

'Congratulations, you are a hunter!'

He was a bit disappointed, thinking he was going to hunt for food and supplies. But as he learned soon enough, it was arguably, one of the most important jobs.

Hunters were like Anti-Alphas. They were selected and trained by the leadership committee to fight the Alphas and eliminate them. One of the things that made them even more special was that there were only four of them in the entire revolution.

It was so because these four held a special status in the eyes of the people. They were the ones who had brought back the bodies of two Alphas six months ago, filling people's hearts with courage.

The receiver began cracking, and a voice came,

"I see her. I repeat, I see her."

Abbas narrowed his eyes, leaning in to pay attention.

"She is headed down the road towards the mines. Maintain positions. I repeat, maintain positions. Wait for the mines to

handle the first few vehicles. Then engage. We will take her out, Inshallah.”

Abbas took a deep breath.

“We copy,” he whispered into the receiver.

Today, the hunters were after Alpha 27. From asking around, it had not taken them long to calculate her kill count. That was why they had taken extra precautions for this mission. Unlike the previous Alphas they had assassinated, she was known for having more soldiers and took more precautions. After all, Alpha 27 was one of the strongest and most cunning Alphas. But it didn't matter for Abbas. He was determined to make her the hunters' seventh kill.

He peeked past the rocks. He could see Alpha 27's convoy. Abbas narrowed his eyes.

‘They must be increasing security now,’ he thought to himself as the convoy neared them. ‘Good. Alphas are starting to get scared.’

He turned to face Maryam and Isa, who both nodded in acknowledgment. They knew the mines would wipe out all the soldiers who were on bikes outside the vehicles but for the ones inside the vehicles, there had to be a plan B.

Abbas watched as the convoy approached the mines.

‘Any moment now,’ he thought. ‘Ya Allah! Help us.’

Abbas closed his eyes as the convoy arrived at the mines. The loud noise of explosions filled the air as flames erupted in the sky. There were sounds of panic. Abbas opened his eyes. It was time to hunt.

From his pocket, he drew out a grenade. Ripping out the pin, he hurled it at some soldiers who were struggling to come in formation. They were incinerated almost instantly. Abbas raised his gun, unleashing a storm of bullets on the injured soldiers below.

He was backed by Maryam and Isa. From another area, Naqi was firing, providing them with cover and good distraction.

About five of the soldiers had noticed them however, and changed direction, charging at them. There was a grey blur as Isa's chain struck the leading one and he slumped down, unconscious.

Abbas leapt forward, successfully flying tackling two of his opponents to the ground; just like Akbar had taught him.

The soldiers groaned as Abbas brought his sniper crashing down on one, and his revolver on the other.

Maryam rammed the side of her rifle into one soldier and he fell down instantly with a squeal before she shot a powerful kick to the other, sending him staggering backwards.

Isa lunged forward with a dagger, killing the soldier with a single decisive blow.

“Well, that wasn’t too bad,” he managed a smile as the soldier fell to the ground.

There was an earth splitting screech as the door to one of the vans broke open and a woman came staggering out.

“Alpha 27!” Abbas growled as the three hunters encircled her.

She was already bleeding profusely. Despite that, the hunters knew better than to misjudge her. The only Alpha they could feel relaxed about was a dead Alpha.

“I will end all of you!” she roared.

Abbas grinned.

In a flash, Isa’s chain came flying at her. The Alpha ducked and swung one of her arms. Isa leapt out of the way as three glinting objects embedded themselves in the ground he had been at only moments earlier.

Maryam lunged forward as the Alpha withdrew a firearm, knocking Alpha 27 to the ground.

In a flash, Maryam whipped out a knife driving it in the Alpha’s neck before getting up. Alpha 27 coughed once before slumping down entirely in a pool of blood.

Abbas smiled as Maryam got to her feet.

“That makes us even Abbas,” she chuckled. “Two kills each.”

Abbas sighed. Maryam’s competitive spirit always appeared from time to time.

They all laughed before a voice shouted from behind,

“Good job everyone!”

Abbas turned to face it. The voice was Naqi’s. In the time they had joked, he had already reached them.

“Let’s get going,” he whispered.



Everyone nodded in acknowledgement. They all started moving towards their hideout. Everyone, except for Abbas.

“There is something I need to do,” he muttered.

Naqi eyed him carefully.

“Do it,” he ordered. “But quickly.”

In a flash, Abbas sprinted over to the body of Alpha 27. Grabbing hold of it he dragged it to a nearby wall and whipped out his knife. He knew this was unnecessary, but sometimes, you had to start striking fear in the hearts of your enemies.

After a few minutes, he leapt back to join the others. With every success, the proportion of hope in their hearts was increasing. They were all very aware of how risky and arduous their journey was but they kept on believing in their Creator for the help and support. As the Quran says, “For those who believe, Allah (swt) suffices.”

## The Serpent has Healed

“You have finally recovered from your wound,” the doctor whispered as he took off the bandage from Alpha 43’s hand.

Alpha 43 barely winced as he wore his shirt once more. He had been waiting for this moment for many months now and it had finally arrived. He watched himself in the mirror.

“I’m back,” Alpha 43 chuckled. “Alpha 43 has returned.”

The doctor nodded in agreement but Alpha 43 had already gotten up to leave for his training quarters.

With him being absent from the field for the last few months, so much had happened. But he had been planning and making strategies. Alpha 43 was determined to rebuild his reputation and that of the Alphas’ invincibility. He made a mental list of the ones to be punished. A list of guilty people whom he would slay; one by one.

The first on that list was Akbar, his older brother. The perfect son. The perfect Alpha. The perfect everything.

The second on the list was Abbas. That meddlesome young man who had inflicted upon him such a humiliating wound, that he had been forced to bear the brunt of it for so many months.

And finally on the list was Alpha 31. The one who had capitalised on this opportunity and rose through the ranks.

But now the assassin had returned and he would take back his turf carefully. For a warrior who acts with rashness is always doomed to fail.

Alpha 43 entered his training quarters, ignoring the guards as usual. He wanted to make everything seem normal. Nothing should change.

At long last, he reached the room door. Beside it, two guards were posted; each wearing a rifle. Both avoided his gaze as he entered, and with a clank, he shut the door.

Alpha 43 removed his shoes and socks and laid down on the bed. With a small tug, he brought the blanket over his body, pretending as though he was going to sleep. Alpha 43 was aware of Jumeira's surveillance system and right now, he needed some privacy.

Careful not to lift the blanket covers too much, Alpha 43 withdrew a small device resembling a car key. There was a small red button on the side. He pressed it and sat upright.

For the next ten minutes, it was clear. He could safely do whatever he wanted without being seen on the camera. During this time, all hidden cameras were showing him asleep. There were audio transmitters as well but Alpha 43 could conveniently stay silent.

He withdrew the device. In essence, this device was a typing version of a 'walkie talkie.' The keyboard was programmed to be silent, when typing. That was what allowed him to communicate conveniently.

Alpha 43 typed the first message, careful not to make any noise.

*How goes your day junior?*

There was a few moments of silence before a response came.

*I asked first junior!*

Alpha 43 sighed in relief. This was their security question, for Alpha 43 could not risk anyone finding out. If Jumeira learnt that Alpha 43 was running his own communication channel, she would not be too thrilled about it. But enough of that. He needed to be informed and had to know what had happened. And when he found a delta who would be willing to serve as his spy in exchange for his tutelage, it was a perfect opportunity.

*What happened in the meeting?*

Alpha 43 watched carefully as the answer to his question came.

*A great deal. Alpha 27 is dead.*

Alpha 43 had to stop himself from reacting. His eyes widened in surprise. This was not good news. She was not an easy Alpha to bring down. Alpha 27 was also given extra troops. She was the seventh Alpha to die in the last six months, not to mention the original Alpha 39's death; which made a total of eight dead Alphas.

Eight dead Alphas. Reports were coming in of Betas, Gammas and deltas being more relaxed with instructors. In some cases, they were not taking their mentors seriously anymore. In other cases, people were making jokes with Alphas.

That was not right. The initial unbreakable and invincible image that they held was crumbling away and Alpha 43 knew this had to be fixed.

His prolonged injury had caused more harm to his image than his body. If he wanted to rise to his former glory and establish stability and hierarchy within the ranks once more, he would have to start gaining victories. Striking at the revolutionary force was the most important. He knew that only he could defeat the revolution, and even more; he knew that only he could defeat Akbar.

Alpha 43 glanced down once more as another followup message came.

*There is something you need to see. I am sending it to you now.*

A moment later, there was a small flash and an image appeared on screen. Alpha 43 narrowed his eyes as he tried to discern the image.

There, in the picture was Alpha 27's body, leaning against a wall. There was a metal pole driven into the wall, with a message carved beside it,

*'You're next, 43!'*

Alpha 43's lips curved into a venomous smile. So Abbas was the one who had done this. Abbas was the one who had been killing the Alphas. Of course, it wasn't just him. He couldn't have become skilled enough to defeat an Alpha that quickly. He must have a group of strong fighters with him.

But that didn't matter. Alpha 43 was willing to accept the challenge. In fact, he saw a clear goal in front of him. Well defined. It would earn him instant respect and glory. For the first time in ages, Alpha 43 felt excitement ignite within him. He was looking forward to this mission.

## Returning to Base

“I radioed in,” Naqi mentioned. “They are ready for us, Inshallah.”

Everyone nodded and Abbas felt a strange eeriness in his heart. It always happened whenever they entered the base. Even now it was strange when he glanced back at how many events took place in the last year. From the boat chase, to the bungalow, and now a revolution.

The group embarked across the grasslands towards the new headquarters. Abbas smiled as he remembered the first time he had come to the bungalow. How tired had he been! He had found the distance massive. But now that distance was nothing compared to what Abbas had been trained for.

“I miss the bungalow,” Maryam whispered to Abbas.

Abbas nodded. It had been painful when Akbar Uncle had made them leave the comfort of their home for the rough hay beds of the barns but deep down Abbas knew that was the right thing to do. Still, it didn’t stop him from missing it. The only person who really went there was Akbar; occasionally, to bring supplies.

It didn’t take them long to reach the headquarters. Just under an hour. And given that the four hunters went through a four-month long intense self-defense and physical training course by Akbar, they were more than use to travelling such distances on foot.

As they finally arrived within sight of the large wooden wall,

roughly five metres in height; Naqi lifted his right arm, waving it four times. The others followed his lead. It was a security measure.

They proceeded towards the wooden gates, where Salman and Ali stood guard.

“Salamunalaikum hunters,” Ali greeted. “How did it go?”

Everyone answered his greeting before Isa mentioned,

“You should know that the hunters have made their seventh kill. Alpha 27 has kicked the bucket, Alhamdulillah!”

Ali grinned.

“Mashallah! That’s great to hear!”

Salman nodded and with that, they stepped inside. Abbas took a deep breath, bracing himself for all the stares and awkward encounters they were about to have.

With a creak the gates opened before them, and the hunters stepped in. Instantly, Abbas felt the awkward attention on him and his comrades. Every time they strolled by, people would stop talking and either watched them as they went or start whispering about them as if they can’t hear. Abbas could catch snippets of many conversations.

“That one is Abbas. . . .I heard they can run faster than cheetahs. . . .”

Abbas ignored them and kept walking. He wasn’t used to this much attention nor did he like it. It was almost like people considered them role models.

“Argh,” he heard a groan.

Abbas turned to see Kadhim, placing his hands on his ears, standing outside the barn.

“Most probably little Hurr had a tantrum once more.”

He smiled as his theory was confirmed. Khalid and Jafar came towards them.

“I’ve tried everything,” Khalid mourned in despair. “But he just won’t keep quiet.”

Abbas felt a pang of sympathy. Even though Khalid was a brilliant doctor, he was not able to help. Just like lots of newborns, Hurr was having tummy-ache issues and non-stop crying was his way of communicating his misery to the world around him.

Even Jafar; Khalid's medical assistant, was completely unsuccessful in this regard.

"Maryam," Abbas groaned. "Please control your nephew! Before he alerts the entire world of our location."

Maryam gave him an icy stare as she walked off and Abbas heard her mutter something under her breath,

"Control my nephew! As if he's some kind of animal or something!"

Abbas and Isa watched in awe as Maryam expertly lifted Hurr from his wooden cradle and held him in her arms.

"There we go!" she mumbled in a funny voice. "Who's the most adorable baby in the world!"

Hur's face morphed from a depressed attention seeker to the happiest little fuzzball in the world.

"He is the cutest thing I have ever seen!" Isa sighed.

Abbas nodded. Somehow this little baby had the power to enchant all adults within his vicinity.



# Teaching

“Faster!” Abbas chided, as the students attempted the kick yet again.

It had been several hours since their arrival and now the hunters were conducting their evening classes. The group of trainees had been divided into multiple groups.

Abbas’s group contained roughly eight students, amongst whom the only person he knew was Salman. They had been revising and practicing kicks.

“When you kick,” Abbas explained. “Draw power from your hips. That will give you the swing needed to strike effectively.”

The students attempted the kick once more; but most of them were unsuccessful. Abbas easily controlled the minor frustration building up within him. Even though they had been doing this for the last two days, he was willing to accept that students differ in their learning pace. And as their mentor, he would facilitate them.

There was a loud clapping noise as Naqi called for attention.

“We will have two tournaments now,” he explained. “One for women, and one for men.”

There was a murmur of excitement from the students.

“On one side,” Naqi continued. “Sister Maryam and Sister Ruqayya will judge the women’s competition. On the other side, Brother Isa, Brother Abbas and I will judge the men’s tournament.”

Abbas nodded and within the next few minutes, the hunters

sorted the students into groups. It didn't take long, and the plan was simple. After every round, the ones who lost will be eliminated.

"Begin," Naqi ordered.

The first two males stepped forward. Abbas recognised one of them. His name was Yasir. He was a year older than Abbas and was Isa's student. His heart was in the right place and was nice and kind. To the extent that Abbas often found him gullible.

Yasir's opponent was larger than him and Yasir had clearly noticed that. The fight started with both of them entering into fight stances. Yasir moved forward, opening the fight with a pre-rehearsed drill of punches but he didn't do them properly and so, his opponent blocked them with ease. His opponent then jumped forward, performing kicking combinations and he gained one point.

Abbas noticed Isa frown. The other student was Naqi's, so in way; Naqi and Isa's teaching skills were being compared as well.

Abbas leaned close to Isa and whispered,

"Don't worry, Yasir's only lost a point."

Isa shook his head.

"It's not that," he whispered back. "I feel that Yasir had multiple opportunities to score points."

Abbas nodded. He had noticed it as well.

The fight continued, and within the next few minutes, Yasir lost two more points to his opponent. That made the score three-nil. Abbas realised what Yasir's issue was. He was weak in defense and his opponent decided to take advantage of that. With only five minutes left, he watched as Yasir's opponent scored another point, making the score four-nil. Isa turned away in disapproval and Yasir happened to glance towards Isa at that very second.

Abbas felt an awkward tension as Yasir's eyes widened in surprise before narrowing.

"I'll make you proud, teacher!" he growled and leapt forward.

Abbas watched in surprise as a new spirit of yasir manifested itself before him. He had taken a completely aggressive approach in the fight now and was overwhelming his opponent with his

attacks. To Isa's surprise, by the final ten seconds, Yasir evened the score to four all. Panting, he leapt forward once more, knocking his opponent to the ground. The time finished and Naqi raised a hand, marking the end of the fight.

"The winner is Yasir!" he announced.

"I won teacher," Yasir grinned as he walked up to Isa. "Did you see? I won!"

Isa smiled, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"Mashallah," he congratulated. "You did a great job."

"This is a learning experience," Naqi whispered to Isa with a smile. "Never lose faith in someone, even if the circumstances are not the most favourable."

Abbas nodded.

"Yasir showed all of us what it means to be a true sportsman," he added quietly.

The next match began. This time, Abbas focused harder, for Salman was next. Salman was his student and while he had potential, he often got distracted and lose focus. Abbas was praying that Salman would stay focused. He glanced over to the other man. Well, not really a man. Salman's opponent was younger and shorter.

"Fight!" Naqi ordered.

Before anybody could say or do anything, Salman leapt into a kung fu stance.

"I will destroy you," he roared, or what Abbas thought was meant to be a roar.

The short boy simply bowed before moving into a defensive stance. Salman leapt forward, lifting his leg to perform a kick, and in a flash, the little guy whipped out a leg, striking his stomach. Salman collapsed on the floor like a pile of burnt soup.

"Ow," Salman bawled. "I thought the power was meant to be turned low."

The kid relaxed for a moment.

"That wasn't that har-"

"Sneak attack!" Salman shouted, lunging like a cat at the boy. The boy, caught off guard, fell to Salman's weight.

Abbas shook his head in disapproval. That felt low and dishonourable.

But then again, Salman wasn't always a fair fighter. Abbas recalled that Salman had used a similar tactic to disarm Abbas many months ago. Abbas had beaten him up as a result.

The fight resumed once more. The kid who was furious at having lost a point, unleashed fury upon Salman. He attacked Salman like a wolf attacks a lamb. And Salman became more scared than a lamb. Within the next minute, the kid had turned the score from one-nil to Salman into nine-one to the kid.

Abbas shook his head in disbelief, glancing at Isa.

"And you were complaining about Yasir?" he chuckled.

Isa grinned.

"With this guy, Abbas," Naqi muttered silently. "You will have your work cut out for you."

Abbas sighed.

"It takes skill to lose a match twelve-one to a kid," Isa added quietly.

Abbas's eyes widened in surprise. The score had now reached twelve-one. He glanced at Isa.

"What are you talking about?" he smiled. "This is one of Salman's good days!"

The three hunters had to suppress a grin. The fight went on and as expected, it finished in favour of the kid.

Abbas would never have believed the scores. How does someone lose seventeen points in nine minutes?

The tournament proceeded on. More and more players were eliminated until eventually it came down to four semi finalists.

The little kid who had crushed Salman was one of them. And then Yasir and Jawad; the man who had caused trouble amongst the revolutionaries and who was now under Ruqayya's strict watch in the patrol squad. And finally, there was one of Abbas's own students. A short guy named Dawud.

On Naqi's instruction, the first semi final commenced between the little kid and Yasir. Abbas would have normally paid attention but he was curious to see if the women's tournament was going as well as this one.

Glancing back, he was surprised to see that the women were already done. The winner, as expected, was a member of the

patrol squad; Falak. Falak was Maryam's best friend and favourite student. She was grinning as Maryam and Ruqayya gave her feedback.

Abbas turned his attention back to Yasir, who was on the verge of claiming victory.

The little kid had probably, in Abbas's opinion; assumed that all people fight like Salman. And so he had weakened his defense and focused on offense but that was a mistake. Yasir was a much more aggressive fighter. He had already claimed five points and hence by the end of the fight, it was a clear win for Yasir.

"Brilliant Yasir," Isa exclaimed. "You are in for the final!"

Naqi chuckled.

Leaning over to Abbas, he whispered,

"Now he's super happy with Yasir!"

Abbas shrugged. There was a smile on his face. Yasir had made an admirable comeback since his first fight. And it was no wonder that Isa was so happy.

The next fight ended with a decisive victory of seven-three to Jawad.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. He was praying for Yasir to win. The fight started and Abbas watched as Jawad and Yasir leapt at each other. Initially, Yasir scored three points, making it seem as though he would win. But then Jawad made a comeback, making it even by scoring 3 points.

Everyone watched intently as the match entered the final few minutes.

Yasir leapt forward, arms extended, but Jawad was faster. He managed to dodge the attack and drive a fist into Yasir's chest, scoring a fourth point. Isa sighed. Only two minutes were left. There was no way that Yasir could gain two points in such little time. Yasir leapt forward desperately, using every technique he knew. Jawad, with a satisfied grin, kept trying to waste time.

Yasir glanced at the timer. His eyes narrowed and he ran forward, grabbing hold of Jawad.

"Ya Allah!" he shouted throwing Jawad across the grass.

Jawad landed with a thud and before he could recover, Yasir dealt him four punches in quick succession, just before the time

ended.

“Yes!” Isa exclaimed. “That was brilliant!”

Isa rushed forward to congratulate Yasir, as did everyone else. This was an amazing! Yasir had managed to not just get two points but five! Finishing his match with a score of 8-4! It was incredible.

Naqi raised his hands for everyone to take a seat.

“I would like to mention,” Naqi began. “That I am very proud of how all of you fought.”

‘Except Salman,’ Abbas thought to himself.

“You have all demonstrated immense talent,” Naqi continued. “And we hope you all learnt a lot from this experience. Now just to finish things, I would like to demonstrate to all of you what a real combat situation may seem like. I will demonstrate this by sparring Abbas.”

Abbas whirled to face Naqi, his eyes widening in surprise.

“Are you sure about this?” Abbas asked.

Naqi grinned.

“It doesn’t matter who wins or loses. I just want to show them what advanced combat is like.”

Abbas nodded with a smile. The last time he fought Naqi had been before the revolution meeting, and they were strangers then. Naqi was strong and he was skilled at using his strength to defeat his opponent.

Naqi’s downfall had been his lack of formal training. But now that Akbar had trained Naqi as well, it meant that Abbas would not be able to win the same way as before. And Abbas was unsure if he could defeat Naqi. But winning or losing didn’t matter right now. He understood Naqi’s intentions. Naqi was trying to inspire the young trainees and at the same time give them an opportunity to see how intense real combat could be. As Alphas were the most probable opponents each of them could face, their mindset, strength and fighting techniques, all had to be at the highest levels. They were all very serious about their training as they understood that once they face an Alpha, its either kill or be killed.

They both stood in front of each other, prepared to fight.

“Fight!” Isa shouted.

Immediately both hunters got into their fighting stances. Abbas watched Naqi carefully and Naqi did the same. There was silence for a moment. And then it happened. The most intense and shocking brawl everyone had ever seen.

Naqi lunged forward trying to grab hold of Abbas. But Abbas dodged Naqi’s attack and shot a powerful kick which Naqi deflected. Abbas took the offensive this time, shooting forward with a punch, which Naqi caught, and then he hurled Abbas across the grass. Before Abbas would have landed with a thud, but now, he was more experienced. Rotating his body, he landed gracefully causing a murmur of ‘wows’ from the audience.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Naqi had gotten much better since their last encounter.

Naqi leapt forward, bringing Abbas crashing to the ground.

“Argh,” Abbas groaned as Naqi scored his first point.

Before he could react, Naqi lifted Abbas off the ground, hurling him in the opposite direction. This time Abbas landed with a thud and Naqi scored his second point.

Breathlessly, Abbas rolled away just before Naqi’s powerful leg came crashing down.

He flipped back up to his feet but was knocked down by Naqi.

Abbas frowned. Naqi had scored his third point. Naqi lifted his fist bringing it down but Abbas rolled out of the way, faster this time and Naqi missed. Naqi lunged forward striking a powerful punch to his chest, scoring his fourth point. Of course, the fight was about showing moves so Naqi did not use his full power. Had he done that, Abbas would have felt severe pain.

Abbas staggered backwards in surprise.

‘I am getting crushed here,’ he thought to himself.

Breathlessly, he tried to clear his mind. He was taught that once the mind accepts defeat, there is no chance of winning. He did not intend to lose this fight; not at all.

Abbas watched Naqi intently. He was grinning. But clearly, his guard was still up as he was fully aware of his opponent’s potential. Abbas thought carefully. Naqi was bigger and stronger. But Abbas was smaller. Hence, he was more maneuverable and

faster.

These two skills countered each other but stamina was an even playing field. Abbas's eyes lit up. If he could focus on wasting Naqi's energies then maybe Naqi would not be as formidable. He would have to pray he could outlast Naqi.

Naqi shot his fist forward and Abbas caught it mid way, tolerating the shock. But rather than attempting a counter move, he let go causing Naqi's eyes to widen in surprise.

Abbas smirked as Naqi advanced forward. With a growl, his opponent swung out a fist and Abbas rolled in between his legs; evading him, earning a burst of laughter as Naqi turned in confusion.

Abbas smiled but didn't let anyone distract him this time.

But Naqi must have figured out what Abbas was trying to do, for he stopped attacking and retreated just like Abbas. Everyone watched in confusion as Abbas and Naqi eyed each other warily.

After half a minute passed with no attacks, Abbas realised he would have to change his strategy. And with just one and a half minutes left to get five points, only one strategy came to Abbas.

Slowly, Abbas crouched down, earning murmurs of surprise. By doing so, he would seem vulnerable for an attack. But in reality, he was now in the perfect position to make a powerful jump. A jump he would need for what was about to happen.

Naqi took the bait and leapt forward attempting to catch Abbas off guard. Abbas sprung forward, catching Naqi off guard. Extending his knee, he struck Naqi in the stomach.

Naqi staggered back surprised as Abbas had scored his first point. The crowd began to cheer and applaud but Abbas ignored it. He needed to focus.

Before his opponent could recover, he lunged forward, driving a fist into Naqi's chest, scoring his second point. Overwhelmed, Naqi retreated. Abbas realised only one minute was left. But now things were different.

He had scored the last two points. Hence he had a mental advantage.

Naqi leapt forward. Abbas scrambled back, allowing Naqi to land on the ground. Rather than retreating further back, he



abruptly pushed forward knocking Naqi to the ground, scoring his third point. Abbas launched three follow up punches. Naqi missed the first one but blocked the other two. The damage was done though and Abbas, with thirty seconds left, had finally evened the score.

There was a roar of applause as people started cheering. But louder than everyone else was Ruqayya, who was applauding for her brother.

Naqi pounced on Abbas and the two went rolling over one another. Abbas felt Naqi grab hold of him. He narrowed his eyes. Naqi was about to throw him. But he wasn't going to get thrown this time. He had a risky plan.

Naqi held him like a fish, holding him in an iron grip. Abbas did not resist. He would need his strength. There was only twelve seconds left, and Abbas realised that Naqi was waiting for the timer to reach close to the end time so that Abbas wouldn't have time to strike back.

Abbas sighed. At the seven second mark Naqi hurled him through the air but this time, Abbas held on to his opponent. Using the momentum from Naqi's throw; he swung Naqi, causing Naqi to go flying through the air and crash on the ground. With that, Abbas scored his fifth and winning point.

Everyone roared in applause for both hunters. People were congratulating them and Abbas fell to his knees, sweating.

"Mashallah Naqi Bhai," he spoke breathlessly. "Allah swt has given immense strength in your arms."

Naqi looked up with a grin on his face. Patting Abbas on the back, he congratulated him.

"You did a brilliant job, Mashallah," Naqi remarked. "I can truly see potential in you, Abbas, that is greater than anything."

At that moment, Abbas stiffened a bit as Ruqayya approached. In all fairness, even now, Abbas hadn't been able to get to know her.

As she neared, Abbas saw her give Naqi a big hug.

"Nice job Abbas," She smiled, and then turned to face her brother.

"With how exhausted you are," she chuckled. "Do you still

want to come with me on patrol?”

Naqi shook his head.

“After fighting Abbas,” he sighed. “I am too tired to patrol.”

The crowd began to disperse.

“Alhamdulillah! It was amazing to lock horns in a friendly fight with such a worthy opponent. He glanced back at Naqi, who in that time had conceded to Ruqayya’s perseverance. He was going on patrol with her.

Abbas bid farewell and headed back to his sleeping quarters. He wanted to get some rest.

“Abbas!” he heard a voice call.

Abbas turned in surprise to see Akbar and Haider approaching.

“Akbar Uncle, you called,” he answered, as they reached him.

Abbas couldn’t help notice that Haider was quiet. Abnormally quiet.

“I heard something that isn’t pleasing me Abbas,” Akbar spoke with pretended sternness. “Haider says that you’ve been hanging out with friends so much that you don’t spend any time with him anymore.”

Abbas turned to Haider in surprise who looked away in an annoyed manner.

“Didn’t we wrestle for twenty minutes yesterday?” Abbas reminded.

Haider looked up at Abbas and Abbas felt a strange embarrassment descend upon him.

“Is twenty minutes all you can spare for your brother?” he asked.

Abbas suppressed a grin. Was Haider jealous? Maybe of Isa.

“Well, in that case,” Abbas offered. “Why don’t we visit Hurr and Zahra api? We can also play a game if you like.”

Haider nodded excitedly. Abbas grinned looking up at Akbar.

“I guess it’s time to go,” Abbas grinned. “Farewell Akbar Uncle!”

Akbar nodded before setting off. Abbas led Haider in the opposite direction, towards Zahra and Hurr.

“Seriously Haider,” Abbas chuckled. “You tattle taled to Akbar Uncle?”

Haider gave a cheeky smile and glanced down. “Would you listen any other way?” he answered quietly.

Abbas laughed, leading his brother away. On route, he noticed Naqi and Ruqayya were getting ready to leave for the patrol.

“Fiamanallah,” he called out.

Naqi turned his way.

“Fiamanallah,” he answered. “And Abbas!”

Abbas stopped and glanced at Naqi.

“One day we will have a rematch, Inshallah,” Naqi grinned.

Abbas chuckled.

“Inshallah,” he replied with a smile.

And with that, Abbas headed off with his younger brother to make him happy. After all, everyone knows that even if there’s a revolution, you can never neglect your family.

## Setting Off

*Everything is ready. Your team has been alerted. They are only waiting for you.*

Alpha 43 eyed the message carefully. It was time. Time to strike hard, and give a blow the revolution would never forget. But in order for this to work, he needed to escape.

Already he had used three of the ten precious minutes granted to him by his special contraption. Rushing over to his shelf, Alpha 43 swung open the cabinet and lifted all of the books out. Immediately, he heard a ‘click’ noise.

Swiftly, he extended his hand, removing one of the panels of the shelf. There, behind everything, was a pistol. Alpha 43 narrowed his eyes. This pistol was called Bloodshot. It was the first pistol Alpha 43 had ever wielded. And it was the same pistol with which Alpha 43 had killed his older brother, Qasim.

With a trembling hand, Alpha 43 grabbed it. Normally, he would never resort to a gun, especially this one. But this time, he had to make an exception. He needed this weapon. For now, he was going to shed another brother’s blood.

Alpha 43 removed the ammunition cartridge. A small haze of dust, accumulated over the years, filled the area around him. The Alpha looked away for a moment, waiting for it to clear before loading a new ammunition cartridge.

Alpha 43 reunited with his squadron, ready to leave for the mission. In his hand, was his firearm. The very firearm with

which he had taken so many lives. And that moment, Alpha 43 was leaving base, to shed blood once more.

## Bloodshed

“Come on Haider!” Zahra encouraged as Abbas and Haider arm wrestled.

“Zahra Api!” Abbas answered with pretended surprise as he began overpowering Haider. “I thought you were on my side!”

Zahra grinned.

“I am always on Haider’s side!” she chuckled as she held Hurr lovingly in her arms.

Abbas smiled. Ever since Hurr had been born, both Zahra and Ali had been struggling to perform their duties. He was keeping them occupied almost all the time. It was for this reason that the leadership committee had agreed to give them both guard duties. So that they could both be at base at all times.

Abbas sighed as he used his brute force to secure yet another victory against a breathless Haider.

Haider looked Abbas in the eye.

“I will keep trying until I win, Inshallah!” he said with determination.

Abbas smiled.

“Abbas,” a familiar voice sounded from outside. “Are you in there?”

Abbas sighed as he realised who it was. He knew he had to respond.

“Hold up Salman,” he called out. “I’ll be out in a minute.”

He came out of the room to see Salman.

Salman sighed. He spoke in a low voice.

“Are you annoyed with me for losing in the tournament?”

Abbas glanced down.

“Is this why you called me, Salman?” he asked.

Salman looked away and for the first time Abbas felt there was something strange about Salman. He wasn't being his normal goofy self. Rather, he was serious.

“I wanted to talk,” he sighed. “Can we go for a walk, please?”

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Salman was not his usual self today. Maybe he was having a bad day. Maybe the crushing defeat had upset him and he was hoping to find some solace in his mentor.

“Alright,” Abbas murmured. “Let's go.”

And with that they headed off. Abbas watched as they reached the gate. His hand instinctively drifted over his firearm in his pocket.

“You didn't say we would leave base,” Abbas chided.

Salman did not respond immediately. He just continued strolling. Abbas glanced at him curiously. He was in deep thought. Maybe he wanted to speak privately about something? Still, Abbas wouldn't do anything risky.

‘We'll stay within a ten minutes distance of base,’ he thought to himself.

The two approached the gates. They swung open as Ali and Yasir let them through.

“Don't be gone too long!” Ali called out as they departed into the forest.

Abbas raised a thumbs up in acknowledgement as they strolled along the grasslands into the foliage. As they did, Abbas felt his instincts kick in. His ears were sensitive to the noises around him. His eyes were sharp and alert to see everything. The smells wavering through bushes did not evade his nostrils.

They walked on and on until eventually Salman stopped. Sitting down on the grass, he glanced over at Abbas, gesturing for him to sit as well.

Abbas sat down opposite to him, so that they could keep watch on the entire area.

“I wanted to talk to you,” Salman began. “I need someone to hear me out.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes.

“I feel like I always mess everything up,” Salman began. “No matter how hard I try to do things, they never work out.”

Abbas had to stop himself from rolling his eyes. If Salman did not realise that his lack of focus and seriousness always led to his downfall, then he was definitely not aware of his realities. Abbas decided not to interfere and continued to listen.

“My father always tells me I am n’t a good son,” he added. “And sometimes I feel that he’s right. I mean, that kid crushed me in the fight today.”

Abbas glanced down, twiddling his thumbs.

“Why do you think everything goes wrong for me?” he looked at Abbas with a hint of desperation.

Abbas stared him in the eye for a moment, a bit unsure of how to answer without offending Salman.

“See the thing is,” Abbas began. “You sometimes behave strangely, Salman.”

Salman glanced at him curiously, wiping away the tears in his eyes.

“You sometimes,” Abbas paused, thinking about how to put across his point. “In all honesty, you sometimes remind me of Haider.”

Salman raised a brow.

“See Haider,” Abbas continued. “Haider always acts impulsively, without much thought about the consequences of his actions. He is driven by the spur of the moment. That is why he is always distracted easily. He never focuses. He never thinks through and plan. As a result, what happens is sometimes he gets what he wants, but a lot of times, the outcome is disappointing for him.”

Abbas intentionally did not mention that none of these things were actually in Haider.

“Nobody seems to mind Haider,” Salman answered defensively. Abbas sighed.

“That’s because Haider is only fourteen. He is a kid. But if he was as old as you, then people would mind him too.”

Salman looked away.

“You think I act like a fool,” he concluded.



Abbas responded instantly. "I did not say that. All I am trying to say is that giving a bit of thought before you act can render you in a better position, my friend; and give you a sense of self-validation which all of us need for our confidence and composure. Let me explain."

"Take today's fight," he started. "You never focused on your opponent for even one second. In fact, you never fought as Salman. All you did was copy some fancy martial arts positions which you probably saw in movies. That was it. You never actually tried to win. You never used anything I told or taught you."

Salman nodded. For a moment, a guilty smile formed on his lips.

"You sound just like my father," he grinned.

Abbas nodded.

"Khalid Uncle loves you. He only wants you to be better than who you are now. He wants you to be the best," he explained. "And cherish this love. My father is dead, Salman. I have no one to be bothered about me like that."

Abbas paused as his eyes watered, ignoring the shocked look from Salman.

"It's been more than a year since he was killed by Alphas."

Salman reached out and patted Abbas's shoulder.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I never knew."

Abbas wiped away his tears. He didn't want to show any vulnerabilities in front of Salman.

"Let's get go-"

There was a loud boom which shook the entire area. Abbas's eyes widened as he whipped out his gun. Salman pulled out a small knife and stood beside him; both poised in defense.

There was a crack followed by a small whizzing noise.

"Get down!" Abbas growled as he dragged Salman to the ground, ready for the missile; but it never came.

Looking up, Abbas saw the source of the whizzing was a small red dot in the sky which instantly exploded into millions of red dots.

"A distress flare!" Abbas exclaimed. "Come on!"

Salman paused.

“What about back up?” he asked.

Abbas hissed.

“They must have seen the flare!” he snarled. “Now come on!”

In a flash he began sprinting off, only to realise that Salman wasn't following.

“I said come on!” Abbas chided.

Salman shook his head.

“We should go to base,” he replied.

Abbas felt rage.

“I don't have time to argue,” he scolded.

And with that, Abbas stormed off in direction of the noise. In one hand, he held his revolver Zulfi, and in the other; he held his knife. He felt his heart skip a beat as another flare came up in the sky.

How could Salman behave so foolishly? Of course the headquarters would have seen the flare; it wasn't possible that they didn't. Besides, someone clearly needed help.

Abbas pushed himself to move faster as a third flare came rocketing into the sky before disappearing. By now, he could even hear the noise of bullets. And missiles. There were calls for help. Cries of “Ya Allah!”

Abbas knew something was seriously wrong. He could tell as the noises began fading away. He paused as the loud noises of motors filled the area and then they disappeared.

“Why did everything go quiet?” he felt panic in his heart.

Abbas pushed himself to move even faster as he reached the edge of the forest. He ducked down, careful of any sound or movement.

Step by step, he advanced slowly with gun in hand. Abbas wiped away a bead of perspiration before entering the forest.

Normally, it would have smelled serene and peaceful but today, there was a strange odour in the air. And as Abbas entered deeper in the forest, his eyes caught sight of it.

“No,” Abbas gasped as he spotted the source.

Before him lay the ruined corpses of many individuals. Some were burnt. Others were torn. They were scattered across the ground. The sour stench of blood filled the area.

Abbas had to stop himself from throwing up.

‘What happened?’ he thought. ‘Who are these people?’

He moved forward, unable to look away from the bodies. With a shaking hand, he reached out to one of the bodies, and trembling uncontrollably; turned it over.

“Jawad Bhai!” Abbas exclaimed. “What happened?”

Jawad merely groaned. His body was littered with bullet wounds, blood gushing from them.

“A-Al,” he gasped before slumping unconscious. Abbas didn’t need to hear the rest of the accursed word. He knew what Jawad was about to say.

Alphas. Alphas had struck the patrol unit. And they had murdered everyone. Wait. The patrol unit? Naqi and Ruqayya had been on the patrol unit!

“Naqi Bhai!” Abbas called out. “Ruqayya Api! Can you hear me?”

Abbas quickly moved around, searching all of the bodies. All were dead. But Abbas did not find Naqi and Ruqayya among them. That could mean that they got away. ]Abbas lifted his head, glancing around.

There was a set of footprints leading away. No. Two sets of footprints!

Abbas advanced forward, still holding his weapons firmly. After all, he didn’t know if the Alphas were gone or not. He eyes scanned the areas ahead for any sign of movement but there was none.

Very soon, the footprints were mixed with many other prints. There was a clear sign of struggle. Blood was visible as well. And there were two sets of feet which continued on. One was bloodied and uncoordinated. The other was clean, and clearly from an uninjured individual.

Abbas stiffened. There was someone behind him. He tightened his grip on the knife, ready to spin around and throw it; but a familiar voice sounded from behind.

“A-Abbas?”

Abbas whirled around in surprise.

“Ruqayya Api!”

Ruqayya lay there, leaning against a bush. Multiple injuries stained her, and her clothes were soaked in blood.

“Are you-” Abbas let his sentence trail off.

Ruqayya’s eyes widened in relief.

“Thank Allah! I’m fine,” she whispered through teary eyes. “But I don’t know about Naqi Bhai.”

Abbas leaned down.

“What happened?” he swallowed.

Ruqayya glanced helplessly around her.

“An Alpha,” she gasped. “He and his squadron came at us from all sides. We didn’t stand a chance. They slaughtered everyone. Naqi Bhai and I managed to break through, but...”

She stopped abruptly and Abbas noticed her wince at a wound on her arm.

“Ruqayya Api you’re hurt!” Abbas exclaimed. “We have to get you back to base.”

Ruqayya took a deep breath. She glared Abbas in the eye and abruptly began weeping.

“I told you I’m fine!” she sobbed. “You have to find Naqi Bhai! You have to tell me if he is alright!”

Abbas eyed her carefully. He didn’t have the means to take her back to base nor was he acquainted with medical procedures. He might as well go and find Naqi. He knew help was on the way.

“I’ll find him,” Abbas whispered, trying to ignore the sinking feeling in his stomach. “Don’t worry! I’ll find him.”

He gave his gun to Ruqayya.

“Keep this. In case you need it.”

Ruqayya nodded and leaned her head against the bush once more.

Abbas got to his feet.

‘Ya Allah,’ Abbas thought to himself. ‘Help me.’

Slowly, Abbas advanced forward, dreading each step. From the signs, he could visualise exactly what happened. Naqi was injured. The Alpha was not. Naqi had been fleeing. The Alpha had been chasing.

There were bullet holes in the trees. Naqi had been trying to deter the Alpha. To send him away. To save himself. But the

footprints kept going forward, meaning the Alpha wasn't deterred. The Alpha, true to the reputation of Alphas; had managed to push forward.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Naqi was a formidable opponent. To make him retreat was a difficult task, even for an Alpha. And from the way the footprints were laid out, it seemed like a smooth attack. The Alpha had not shown any sign of struggle. Meaning this Alpha was more skilled. Even amongst Alphas.

Abbas followed the trail of struggle for several minutes until he reached a river. He swallowed nervously. Some kind of explosive had gone off here. There was ash and powder all over the area. But there was something off about it. The powder was not spread out that far. Meaning it may not have been long range.

Abbas froze as it dawned on him. The flares! The distress flares! Naqi had fired them! When Alpha was getting dangerously close, Naqi must have called for help! He must have been in trouble!

"Naqi Bhai!" Abbas shouted. "Naqi Bhai!"

Abbas shook uncontrollably as he noticed the bullet marks had ceased to exist now. All that remained were a few footprints that led to a tree. A tree stained with blood. Abbas swallowed nervously as he approached the tree, his knife still in his hand.

There was something behind it. No, someone. Abbas gulped hesitantly as he moved around the tree.

"No," Abbas closed his eyes. The knife slipped from his hand and Abbas felt his knees give way.

"Naqi Bhai!" Abbas wept.

Naqi's body lay slumped against the tree. He was scarred all over. Numerous bullet wounds had pierced his body. In one hand, he held the remains of what seemed to be a rifle. In the other, a flare gun. In his chest, lodged through it, was a metal pole with a note tied to it. Abbas read the note with tear-filled eyes.

*'I'm ready Abbas! Come, if you dare.'*

Abbas felt the tears pour down his cheek as realisation dawned on him. Alpha 43. Alpha 43 was responsible for this. The assassin had returned. He had finally recovered. And even though it had been months, the Alpha was clearly ready to make up for the lost

time.

“Ab-Abbas?” Naqi groaned.

Abbas’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Naqi Bhai!” he exclaimed.

Naqi gasped.

“I am not g-going t-to make it,” he whispered breathlessly.

Abbas shook his head.

“Don’t talk like that,” he cried. “I’ll get you back-”

“Abbas!” Naqi wheezed. His face began turning pale. He reached out for Abbas’s hand and took it in his grip.

“How is Ruqayya?” he asked.

Abbas tried to wipe away his tears.

“She’s fine,” he answered.

Naqi sighed in relief, but pain was visible on his face.

“I did my duty Baba,” he cried. “I protected her.” Tears were tricking down his cheek.

Abbas could not bear the pain in his heart.

“Abbas,” he began. “I want you to hear my last will. Before I go to the next world.”

Abbas lowered his eyes. He could see the life fading away from Naqi’s eyes.

“Abbas,” he gasped. “Tell Ruqayya that I have always loved her more than anything in the world. Tell her that she was everything to me.”

Abbas felt pain sear through his entire being. He couldn’t bear hearing this. But he had to keep going.

“Tell her that I have paid all my debts and performed all of my religious obligations,” he smiled. “And that now, she must find someone else to be her companion in life.”

Abbas began to weep.

“I want her to have a family of her own one day and be happy,” he wheezed. “She has spent too many years caring for me. It is time she lived for herself.”

Abbas could not believe the love that existed between these siblings. Even on his deathbed, Naqi would only speak of her.

“You and Isa must be her brothers now,” Naqi sighed. “Maryam must be her sister. Don’t leave her alone in life.”

Abbas shook his head in disbelief. Such a selfless human being. His heart was filled with grief.

“Promise me Abbas,” Naqi coughed. “Promise me you will look after her.”

Abbas nodded as he held Naqi’s hand in assurance.

“I will. I promise Naqi Bhai, I will,” Abbas answered, pushing away his tears. “I will care for her as my sister and will protect her with my life. I will look after her and keep her away from harm. I will never abandon her.”

Naqi smiled.

“I know you will,” he whispered. “I know you will.”

Abbas closed his eyes, holding Naqi’s hand against his heart. He could hear Naqi’s voice.

“La ilaha illallah.”<sup>1</sup>

Abbas swallowed, his heart pounding in his chest as Naqi recited the kalima.<sup>2</sup>

Abbas gave Naqi’s hand a tight squeeze. His grip was weakening.

There was a sudden cold in the air. Abbas shivered abruptly and opened his eyes.

Naqi’s lifeless body lay before him. Abbas felt numb for a few seconds before bursting into a loud and painful cry. He grabbed hold of the accursed metal pole and pulled it out carefully as if Naqi could still feel the pain. Blood gushed from his wounds. Abbas was shattered. The world was shaken for him. And now, it felt like nothing mattered anymore.

Down the forest path, his sister Ruqayya was waiting with hope. Naqi cared for her like a mother and father. She didn’t know that once again, she had lost her parents. She had lost the only family she had in this world. But she wasn’t alone. She had a guardian. Someone who no matter what, would protect her with his own life.

“I will avenge your brother, Ruqayya Api,” Abbas growled. “I will kill Asghar myself.”

---

<sup>1</sup>‘There is no god but Allah.’

<sup>2</sup>Declaration of faith

# The Leadership Committee

“How could this have happened?” Kadhim asked. “How could we lose Naqi to those monsters?”

Farheen looked down.

“None of us could have foretold what happened,” she consoled. “How is Ruqayya doing?”

There was a moment of silence.

“She’s still in recovery,” Kadhim answered. “But she refuses to meet anyone. Anyone except Abbas.”

Farheen narrowed her eyes. Naqi’s death had only happened yesterday evening. Ruqayya had been shattered and everyone else had been greatly disturbed. After all, Naqi had been a friend to all. But there was another issue.

Naqi was a hunter. He gave strength to people, and his death would be a big blow to the revolution. Already, the patrol squads were quite shaken.

“Jawad has also been stirring up more trouble,” Farheen asserted.

Kadhim nodded.

The only survivor of the attack, aside from Ruqayya, was Jawad. He had lost an eye and now wore a patch. But that wasn’t the problem. The problem was that ever since Jawad had regained consciousness, he had persistently been spreading word about the attack, blaming it on the leadership.



He would say things like,  
‘They guaranteed our protection! How did this attack happen then!?’

Or,

‘The Alphas slaughtered us and Naqi who was a hunter, could not fend them off!’

Farheen looked down.

“I am also worried about Abbas,” she murmured.

Kadhim sighed.

“It can’t be easy for him. Remember what he said, Naqi died in his arms.”

Farheen pressed her hand against her temple. The revolution had been going so smoothly. They were all being a bit childish if they thought there would be no loss. That there would be no sacrifice.

“Not to mention Naqi’s will,” Kadhim continued. “Abbas has been visiting Ruqayya every hour. It seems like that is the only thing on his mind. Neither him nor Ruqayya have eaten anything since the incident.”

Farheen shook her head.

“Ruqayya loved her brother a lot. This will probably be the hardest thing that ever happened to her and Abbas has felt the trauma of a friend die in his arms.”

Kadhim took a deep breath.

“We need to fix this. And fast. Naqi will be in our hearts forever, but for the sake of our noble cause; we need to heal and we need to heal fast.”

Farheen nodded.

“Naqi will be buried today and we will mourn his loss forever,” she paused. “But then we need a victory. Something that can heal us. Something that will keep us going.”

Kadhim eyed her warily.

“What do you suggest?”

# Heartbreak

*One day we will have a rematch, Inshallah.*

The sentence haunted Abbas. Each word ringing in his ears, pinching away at them. This was the last thing Naqi had said to him before leaving for that final patrol mission. Did Naqi know at the time that he would never have that rematch? Was he ready to die?

Perhaps the part that pained Abbas most was that Naqi was never meant to be on that patrol. He had only been there because Ruqayya wanted his company.

There was a knock on the door.

“Come in,” Abbas whispered, wiping away his tears.

The door opened and in came someone Abbas would not have expected to see. Salman’s father, Khalid. The short man assumed a seat about a metre away from Abbas.

“How are you?” Khalid asked in a calm manner.

Abbas met his strange gaze.

“There is no need Khalid Uncle. I amn’t having any emotional issues.”

Khalid’s lips broke into a smile.

“Akbar is right you know,” he grinned. “You are a lot smarter than you pretend to be.”

Abbas sighed.

“But even if you say it Abbas,” Khalid continued. “I still think a talk is in order.”

Abbas rolled his eyes. Why was Khalid being persistent? Why couldn't he just leave Abbas alone? Why couldn't he understand the fact that Abbas did not want to talk about this? He was fine. He didn't need to overcome his emotions right now. This grief was giving him solace for the time being.

Khalid sighed.

"No matter what happens in life and no matter how hard you prepare, loss is hard to bear."

Abbas shrugged. He wasn't interested in talking about this.

"I am a doctor, Abbas," Khalid continued. "You know that. I have seen many deaths throughout my life. But even then, I wasn't ready when she died."

Abbas's ears pricked at that sentence. He could clearly tell Khalid was in another realm. His eyes held a faraway gaze.

"I was so happy when my wife gave me the news," Khalid began, his eyes watering. "I was going to be a father. It was the greatest moment of my life."

Abbas noticed Khalid twitch for a moment.

"We would spend hours talking about the baby," he whispered. "And we decided names. If it was a girl, then we would call her Maliha. If it was a boy, then we'd call him Salman."

Abbas felt his heart soften for a moment. He had already suspected the tragic ending of Khalid's story.

"I would always celebrate and make sure to find enough supplies to care for her," Khalid mourned. "I wanted her to live like a queen."

He took a deep breath.

"But I was a doctor," he added quietly. "I noticed that pregnancy was taking a toll on her. She was getting weaker with each day. We found out that there were some complications. I tried to warn her, but she wouldn't listen. 'Don't worry!' she would say. 'I'll be fine!,' Alas!"

There was a moment of silence.

"Some time later, she became bedridden," Khalid swallowed. "I became extremely worried. Her delivery was close, and she did not have any strength left."

Abbas looked away. He felt sorry for Khalid.

“Eventually, the delivery date arrived,” Khalid grieved. “And things went wrong.”

Tears poured down his cheek as he continued,

“Her condition was critical, and within moments, I faced the most difficult situation of my life. Either she would live or the child. But not both. And even though my heart was breaking, I made my decision. I would save her.”

He paused to wipe a tear.

“I could not live without her. But it was as though she could read my thoughts. She spoke to me. Her voice was deathly and weak, but I could understand her. I always understood her.”

Freezing almost entirely, he whispered,

“She held my hand tightly and said, ‘Save our child. Don’t let our child die! If you ever loved me Khalid, you will respect my wish.’ My heart felt the most excruciating pain.”

He paused; his hands were trembling.

“In that moment, I wanted to ignore everything. My heart filled with a foolish hope. Maybe, just maybe, I could save both. And I tried. I tried as hard as I could. But the lack of facilities and supplies in these dangerous times...we lost her. I lost the mother of my child and my closest friend.”

Abbas felt his heart ache, and his eyes water.

“The baby was saved,” Abbas finished. “You saved Salman. But she passed away.”

Khalid nodded.

“The last thing she said was...” A strange smile formed on his face. “He’s beautiful. Take care of our child, Khalid. Take care of our Salman.”

Abbas sighed.

“I’m...so sorry.”

Khalid wiped his tears away.

“I meant to help you with your loss, but blabbered on like an old man.”

Abbas shook his head.

“I really want to thank you,” Abbas stated.

Khalid looked up in surprise.

Abbas nodded.

“You really helped me. In such difficult times when our friends and family leave us and depart this world, we must try to find hope with the thought that we can reunite with them in the hereafter.”

Khalid got to his feet,

“That is true,” he answered. “That is true.”

And with that he turned and left, leaving Abbas on his own. It all made sense now. The feud between Salman and his father. Khalid had been shattered when his wife died and he tried more than anything to raise Salman to become the man he wanted him to be. But Salman did not fare well with his expectations. This must have caused the friction between Khalid and Salman.

‘He must feel like his wife died for nothing,’ Abbas concluded.

Secretly, Abbas made a mental note to focus on Salman’s training later on. He would do everything in his power to make Salman a son worthy of Khalid.

A loud noise sounded from outside, snapping Abbas out of his train of thought.

“What in Allah’s name is that?” Abbas exclaimed.

## 73

# Patrol Problems

“What do you mean?” Abbas heard an angry voice sound from the gate.

“I told you,” another voice came. “We won’t go!”

Abbas narrowed his eyes as he recognised Jawad’s slouched form by the gate. There were several others as well. Ali, Falak, Salman and Dawud.

“Listen to your squadron leader!” Ali scolded.

Dawud shook his head.

“Why don’t you ever lead a patrol?” Dawud retorted. “Instead of throwing us out into the wild with those assassins!”

Abbas’s eyes widened in surprise. Dawud was his student. Abbas had trained him. He was a full year younger than Abbas. How could Dawud speak like this to Ali?

Feeling a pulse of anger, he stormed over to the crowd.

“What is the problem here?” he asked in a bold voice as he approached the group.

Everyone turned to face him. Dawud opened his mouth to answer,

“Ali is-”

“I didn’t ask you,” Abbas overspoke in a harsh tone.

Dawud was clearly taken back and looked down with a hint of annoyance in his eyes.

“Ali Bhai,” Abbas continued with an air of satisfaction. “What is the problem?”

Ali shook his head in disapproval.

“These troublemakers have been stirring up issues again,” he complained, pointing at Jawad, Dawud and Falak.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Dawud was his student. He could easily overwhelm him and send him off. Dawud would not resist.

But Falak and Jawad were not under his influence. Falak was Maryam’s friend. Perhaps she would listen to Maryam. If only Maryam were here. Abbas did not have time to go and bring her.

On the other hand though, Jawad was older than him. Hence Abbas did not have the age advantage. It was going to be difficult as Jawad was no fool after all.

But perhaps the biggest problem was that Jawad lacked the drive for the cause. Ever since the first meeting, he had been stirring up troubles. That was why they had kept him in the patrol unit where the patrol leader, Ruqayya, could keep an eye on him. But now, with Ruqayya out of the picture; Jawad got the chance to show his true colours.

In addition, he had managed to sway some, such as Falak and Dawud, to his side.

Abbas looked down. Normally, Akbar would have handled these situations well before they reached this point. But Akbar wasn’t here. Abbas knew that he had left earlier.

“Why can’t you three just be quiet?” Salman muttered.

Dawud turned to face him with a look of disgust.

“You shouldn’t even be a part of this discussion,” he spat.

Abbas narrowed his eyes.

“Dawud!” he growled. “Watch your tongue.”

Dawud turned to face Abbas awkwardly and Abbas could see the inner battle taking place inside him.

“Abbas,” Falak spoke for the first time. “We can’t go out there just like that. What if...what if something happens to us?”

Abbas shook his head in disapproval.

“Every day that we went hunting on missions,” he paused. “Every time the hunters went, we knew there was a chance that we could die. When all of us agreed to a revolution, we knew there was a risk. But for the greater good of not only ourselves, but also our generations, we decided to take it.”

Jawad laughed sarcastically.

“Abbas,” he stated. “We were doing just fine without the revolution.”

It was now that Abbas realised the trio were beyond reason. They were not going to yield. They had succumbed to fear. Now, he needed to prevent them from spreading the fear any further.

“Are you serious?” A voice sounded from behind.

Abbas whirled around to see a most welcome sight. There stood Maryam with a look of fury in her eyes. Behind her, a couple of meters back; was Jafar.

“Did you honestly just say that Jawad Bhai?” she hissed as she approached the group.

“When you criticise the revolution,” she growled. “You devalue the martyrs who gave their life for the cause.”

Jawad opened his mouth to reply but nothing came out.

“You are basically saying,” Maryam continued. “That Naqi Bhai and all of the other patrol members died for nothing!”

Dawud looked down in shame and Falak glanced away awkwardly.

“Is this how you honour their sacrifice?” Maryam questioned in fury. “Is it?”

Abbas wanted to say something, but he too was taken aback. Even if Akbar wasn’t here, Maryam certainly wasn’t going to let anyone feel his absence.

“Maryam,” Falak began awkwardly. “We didn’t intend to imply anything like that. We just hoped to-”

“What did you intend to imply?” Maryam overspoke.

Falak went silent and just looked down.

“You don’t have to go on patrol if you don’t want to,” Ali added abruptly. “Just stop creating fitna.<sup>1</sup> Let others do their job sincerely and passionately. If we succeed, you can share the fruit of this noble cause. God forbid, if we don’t, then you can sneak back to whatever hideouts you came from and lead your life fetching breadcrumbs.”

Abbas knew what Ali was doing. If they didn’t go hard, then more damage might be done. Right now, they needed to

---

<sup>1</sup>Mischief.



be stopped. Maryam had scolded them as well. The trio looked a bit shocked and ashamed. But more importantly, the surrounding bystanders clearly sided with Ali. The goal was achieved. Ali had managed to contain them, at least for now.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend anyone.” For once, Jawad was backing off.

He turned to leave. Right behind him were Falak and Dawud. Muttering some excuse, Salman headed off in the opposite direction.

Abbas sighed in relief. He turned towards Maryam and Ali who shared similar emotions.

“Sometimes it’s more difficult to handle the devil within than the enemy.” Abbas said thoughtfully.

Ali added,

“Most of the time, it’s the struggle within the cause that results in difficulties. Jawad’s negativity was spreading a bit more than it should have. We must keep it contained or he will find more like-minded friends.”

Abbas and Maryam nodded in agreement. Maryam frowned in the direction of the trio.

“Brave soldiers like Naqi Bhai gave their lives for this cause and then you have these people...it makes me so angry.”

Ali calmed her down.

“Maryam, difficulties will make us more determined and stronger. Let’s not get frustrated. Allah will always help us, Inshallah.”

Abbas nodded as he said, “Hopefully, they will...or at least some of them will change, Inshallah.”

With that, they concluded their conversation. In their hearts, they were all praying for their duas to come true.

‘May this cause be successful and may we see days of freedom and peace, Inshallah!’

## Family Issues

Abbas watched Ali leave.

He began heading back to his quarters. As he strolled, his mind was analysing the situation.

Jawad was a problem maker. He was spreading fitna amongst everyone. And now he was starting to recruit people. He had already convinced Falak as well as Dawud.

Abbas did not understand how these people were unable to see the critical importance of the revolution. It was their only hope of salvation. Their chance for a new life. And yet these individuals continuously insisted that they were better off without it.

What was that supposed to mean?

Most likely they were cowards. Afraid of losing their lives. Afraid that Alphas would capture them.

Abbas, like many others, had risen for truth, justice and freedom. Even if Jawad and the likes weren't willing to do it for that, how could they be so foolish not to see that the Alphas would find them all eventually? They would catch each and every one of them. After all, the island was only so big.

Abbas sighed as he noticed Haider and Zahra passing by. In Zahra's arms was a little bundle of blankets which Abbas assumed was Hurr.

"Salamunalaikum," he waved.

Haider glanced in his direction. His eyes lit up and he came sprinting towards Abbas.

“Abbas Bhai,” was the only thing he said.

Abbas smiled as he embraced his brother. For a moment he said nothing but much passed between them. Abbas felt his brother’s breath against his ear.

“We haven’t had the chance to talk since Naqi Bhai passed away,” Abbas whispered.

Haider did not respond. He only buried his face further into Abbas’s arms. But there was something different about Haider today. Abbas knew his brother quite well. He could feel a difference in Haider’s behaviour.

“Is everything alright Haider?” he asked as Zahra approached.

Haider sniffed. Abbas narrowed his eyes. Was Haider crying? Abbas let go of his brother for a moment. Haider was indeed crying. But the tears weren’t of grief.

Abbas leaned in so that his head was right next to Haider’s.

“What’s wrong my brother?” he asked. “What is the problem? Why do you look scared?”

Haider sniffed once more.

“Nothing.”

Abbas rolled his eyes.

“Just tell me Haider,” he insisted.

Haider looked down.

“You have changed so much, Abbas Bhai.”

Abbas waited for him to continue.

“And one thing that has changed about you,” Haider paused. “Is that you’re no longer afraid of clashing with dangerous people.”

Abbas tilted his head in confusion before narrowing his eyes. What was Haider insinuating here? What did he mean to say? Yes, Abbas had changed. And yes, he did not fear fighting any ‘dangerous’ people who threatened their cause. Oh. Dangerous people. Abbas finally understood what bothered his brother. He was worried about Alpha 43.

“Haider,” Abbas sighed. “Don’t worry about Alpha 43. I will take care of him one day, Inshallah.”

“How can you say that?!” Haider retorted with tears in his eyes.

Abbas was taken aback. Haider had never raised his voice with Abbas before. And Abbas certainly would not approve of it now. But he also wanted to know what real issue was.

“Everytime I see Ruqayya Api,” Haider continued. “I feel something strange. Her older brother died fighting Alpha 43. What about my brother who goes out of his way to get Alpha 43’s attention?”

Abbas sighed.

“Haider, my brother, I understand,” Abbas said softly.”

Haider broke down entirely and wrapped his arms around Abbas in a tight hug.

“I can’t lose you Abbas Bhai,” he whispered. “I’m afraid that you might go too far with Alpha 43. He’s dangerous.”

Abbas felt his eyes water.

“Don’t worry my brother. Inshallah, we will always be together.”

“Inshallah,” Haider sighed.

Abbas noticed Zahra standing behind them, a teary smile on her face.

“Don’t worry Haider,” she added. “Your Abbas Bhai is tougher than he looks.”

Abbas chuckled, letting go of his brother.

“Now,” he grinned, hoping to change the subject. “Do you want to come down to train with me today?”

Haider’s eyes lit up.

“I have to visit Jafar first,” he explained. “Isa Bhai got a splinter in his hand which is going to be removed and I want to see Isa Bhai’s face. But right after that, sure!”

Abbas suppressed a laugh.

“Go ahead,” he answered. “I have a few tasks to finish first.”

And with that, Abbas bid farewell to Haider, Zahra and Hurr. For a moment, he smiled. Seeing how Isa handled a splinter was exactly the kind of thing his brother would do.

With a sigh, he walked onward.

“Abbas,” he heard a voice call.

Abbas turned to see Kadhim, Khalid and Farheen strolling toward him.

“Salamunalaikum,” Abbas greeted.

The three answered, "Walaikumassalam."

Abbas glanced at each one carefully. Even though he was a hunter, he normally wasn't visited by the leadership committee. Well, almost the entire committee. Akbar Uncle wasn't there. Abbas raised a brow. Akbar had been gone the entire morning. Where was he?

"We have an important task for you," Farheen began.

Abbas nodded.

"It is about Ruqayya," Farheen continued.

Abbas was all ears at the mention of her name.

"What about her?" Abbas asked.

There was a moment of silence.

"As I mentioned earlier this morning," Khalid explained. "Loss is always hard. But this much aloofness from everyone else is unhealthy for Ruqayya."

Abbas narrowed his eyes.

"If she wants to be alone at this moment, don't you think that we can allow her that?" he answered defensively.

Khalid turned to Farheen with an I-told-you-so look in his eyes.

"Abbas," Kadhim attempted. "We know you want to protect Ruqayya. It is admirable. Naqi would be so proud of you."

Abbas looked down.

"But Naqi would want you to do what is right for her," Kadhim added. "He wouldn't want her to suffer alone."

Abbas's eyes widened in surprise. In his mind, one of Naqi's final statements echoed.

*'You and Isa must be her brothers now. Maryam must be her sister. Don't leave her alone in life.'*

With a trembling hand, he wiped away a tear that had begun to trickle down his face.

"What do you want from me?" Abbas croaked.

Khalid was the one to answer his question.

"Find a way to bring her out of the shed. Convince her to meet with others. Like a brother, help her overcome her loss."

Abbas nodded.

"I'll try," he whispered. "I'll try."

# Mourning

The room resembled a graveyard. There was barely any light. Contents of the room lay strewn all over the floor. Besides that, there was a woman in the corner. She was staring at the floor. Her eyes were red from tears and her throat was dry.

There was a loud knock on the door. Ruqayya glanced up for a moment.

“What is it?” she called out.

She was a bit surprised to see Maryam standing in the doorway. Slung over her shoulder was a bag. Perhaps it was filled with some new supplies.

“Salamunalaikum,” Maryam greeted her.

For a moment, she didn’t answer.

“Walaikumasalam,” Ruqayya sighed. Then narrowing her eyes, she asked,

“What are you doing here? Where is Abbas?”

Maryam did not answer immediately. Instead, she just placed the bag on a small table nearby. Carefully, she began emptying out the bag.

Ruqayya looked down. Even then, she could see what Maryam had brought. There were two loaves of bread, one slightly burnt; as well as cheese and a bottle of water. There was also some grilled chicken.

“Need anything else, Ruqayya Api?” she asked.

Ruqayya shook her head.

“I don’t need anything else. Thanks.”

Maryam nodded and began strolling to the door. Ruqayya took a deep breath. This was the first time since Naqi’s death that Ruqayya had met someone. It seemed to make her feel calm and she sort of wished Maryam wouldn’t leave so soon.

As if Maryam read her mind, she turned to face Ruqayya,

“Ruqayya Api, can I sit here with you for some time please?”

Ruqayya was silent, but didn’t object. Maryam started talking.

“Ruqayya Api,” Maryam began. “Abbas worries about you. He wants to make sure that you are fine. If possible, he was hoping to meet you right now.”

Ruqayya looked down. Abbas was being very kind. The young man was serious about what Naqi had said. He wanted to meet her but there was a problem. He wanted Ruqayya to leave the room. And she didn’t want to do that. Her grief and isolation gave her solace. She did not feel anything. She didn’t even want to live. But she appreciated the kindness extended towards her. Abbas had been so kind, wasn’t it the least she owed him? All she had to do was let him see that she was fine. That was it. Nothing more.

“Let Abbas know,” she sighed. “I will be out in a minute.”

Maryam’s eyes lit up.

“Thank you so much,” she smiled. “I’m sure Abbas will be pleased to hear the news.”

And with that, Maryam bid farewell to Ruqayya and headed out.

Ruqayya watched her leave. She leaned back on the chair, massaging her head with her palms.

“Let’s go,” Ruqayya thought to herself.

With a groan, she pushed herself to stand. Her joints had numbed from sitting for so long but Ruqayya ignored it. Nothing mattered for her anymore.

Ruqayya advanced toward the mirror to fix her hijab, but upon reaching it; found herself frozen. For a moment, she stood there transfixed. A tear formed in her red eyes. Naqi Bhai would always help her with her hijab. He enjoyed helping her with pretty much anything. And now, he was..he would never be there again.

With a sigh, Ruqayya fixed her hijab. It only took her a minute and by the end of it, she found herself crying.

“No tears,” she scolded herself as she left the room. “I want Abbas to know that I’m fine.”

Closing the door, she wiped away her tears and headed out to the open grass area.

As she went, she found people noticing her. Some were flashing glances of sympathy while others were looking at her with sadness.

Ruqayya shrugged. She didn’t need anyone to show her sympathy or feel sad for her.

“Ruqayya Api!” Abbas’s familiar voice sounded from behind her.

She whirled around to see him standing there. His face was sober and his eyes were red, though not as red as hers.

‘He has been mourning as well,’ she thought to herself.

Beside him was Maryam. She bowed her head respectfully.

Ruqayya nodded and stepped forward.

“Salamunalaikum,” Abbas greeted.

Ruqayya glanced at Maryam once before answering,

“Walaikumasalam.”

She pressed her feet in the ground, feeling the dirt’s rough surface. The cool wind blew across her face, making Ruqayya wonder why she hadn’t left her room before.

“Ruqayya Api,” Abbas asked. “How are you feeling?”

Ruqayya glanced down.

“I am doing fine,” she replied, not unkindly.

Abbas took a deep breath.

“Ruqayya Api,” he began. “I understand that you are grieving right now.”

Ruqayya looked away.

“We are all grieving Naqi Bhai,” Maryam added. “He was a remarkable man.”

Abbas took over. “Naqi Bhai lives in our hearts. He is the pulse of the movement. He looks at us from there.” He pointed towards the skies and continued, “And I’m sure that he prays for our success. But Ruqayya Api, he would like to see us strong and determined. He would like us to celebrate his sincerity and



selflessness towards the cause. He would want us to smile and hold our heads up high. Our grief will be of pleasure to our enemy and Naqi Bhai would have never approved of that.”

Ruqayya’s face was covered with non-stop tears trickling down her cheeks. Maryam was no different. Abbas let her cry. It was important for her to let out her emotions.

Maryam reached out to hold Ruqayya’s hand.

“We need you back on your feet,” she said.

Ruqayya struggled to stop her hand from trembling.

“I-” she faltered. “I can’t forget my brother.”

More tears trickled down her cheek.

“Of course, you should never forget your brother. In fact, none of us will ever forget him.” Abbas said gently. “But we want you to pursue the cause he strived for, just as you always have.”

Ruqayya had a different look on her face. It was a sad smile, but her eyes showed a spark. Abbas felt optimistic.

“Please,” Maryam insisted. “Ruqayya Api. We all know what loss feels like. Both Abbas and I have lost our dear ones. I think almost each and everyone of us here have lost someone. We are all in this together.”

Ruqayya’s eyes widened in surprise. She knew the Alphas had killed Abbas’s parents. But Maryam’s as well?

Taking a deep breath, she contemplated for some time. Now that her head was feeling lighter, something very important came to her mind.

“I want one thing from you,” she continued. “I want you to bring Akbar Bhai. I need to speak with him.”

Maryam raised a brow. Glancing at Abbas, she asked,

“Why-”

“It is of utmost importance,” Ruqayya overspoke. “I need to speak with Akbar Bhai.”

“After speaking with him, I will resume my responsibilities. You are right Abbas. Naqi Bhai would want to see me strong. I will make him proud, Inshallah.” There was a calmness in her voice as well as on her face.

The two nodded in assurance and turned to leave.

Ruqayya was already feeling better. She would get a chance to ask Akbar. To find out the truth. To know if what the Alpha said was true. She had never mentioned this to anyone, but the Alpha who had attacked the patrol unit, had spared her. She had not escaped.

And he had said something to her. Something that seemed preposterous, but the more she thought about it, the more confused she became. Although she didn't believe him, she needed to know. Was Akbar an Alpha?

## A Secret Meeting

It was dawn. The sun had only just started to rise and yellowish pink streaks could be seen forming everywhere. The cool wind brushed against the grass. The trees swayed in the wind, rustling back and forth. The sky was clear.

Akbar took a deep breath. It was very dangerous for him to be here. Any Alpha could recognise him. That was why he had to wear a black cloth over his face. Still, cloth was only a deterrent to immediate recognition. If Akbar was chased by an Alpha, they would probably figure out that he wasn't an ordinary person fairly quickly.

That was why whenever he came to this place he was always careful of every detail. He was wearing a bullet proof vest, protective leg armour, as well as neck armour. He was also carrying a special assault rifle that could disintegrate a car.

Akbar leaned down and made the unique whistle noise. This was a code for the person he had come to meet. If everything was okay, he was meant to hear two whistles in response. Then they would meet. But if something was wrong, then he would hear one whistle in response. Akbar had never heard one whistle, but still, there was always a first time.

Akbar waited patiently contemplating on how he should approach this person. Normally he would have welcomed Reza, but today it was different. Akbar needed answers. He needed to know how assassination of Naqi had taken place and more importantly, why

they didn't find out in advance.

Up until now, Akbar had used Reza's information to give the targets to the hunters. It was how he always knew where the Alphas would be. More importantly, it was why the bungalow remained a secret even today. Reza truly did work hard to help the revolution and nobody but Akbar knew of it.

Akbar's ears pricked. He had just heard a whistle. Instinctively, he lifted his rifle in case of an attack. There was a second whistle.

Akbar sighed in relief. Everything was okay. Still, he needed to take precautions.

"Reza?" he whispered. "Are you there?"

There was a moment of silence before a deep voice answered, "Sorry sir, it's Bahadur today."

Akbar narrowed his eyes. He had only met Bahadur once or twice. Bahadur worked for Reza. He was a young man, decently skilled, but he certainly wasn't as good as Reza. Besides, Akbar did not remember his voice too well so he had to be cautious.

"Bahadur?" Akbar answered. "Please Step forward."

There was a rustle from one of the bushes and a moment later, a young man came climbing out.

"It's an honour, sir!" Bahadur whispered excitedly.

Akbar nodded, still keeping his distance. Now was his chance to ask the question that had been plaguing him all night.

"How did this happen Bahadur?" Akbar asked with a harsh tone, "Why didn't we get a word from Reza?"

Bahadur gave Akbar a curious glance.

"What are you talking about?" he asked. "What happened? Reza Bhai informs you whenever anything happens."

Akbar narrowed his eyes. There was no question of Reza's loyalty which meant that Reza did not know.

"Bahadur," Akbar began. "You need to warn Reza. I think he has been set up by Alpha 43."

Bahadur's eyes widened in surprise.

"Th-that is not p-possible," he faltered. "Alpha 43 is not well and is recovering from his injury."

The gun slipped from Akbar's hands. It all made sense now. He knew exactly what had happened. He knew the trick his

brother had pulled. He had faked his state of health, and carried out an entire operation. He had healed but hid it from others.

“Tell Reza that Alpha 43 is not disabled anymore,” Akbar explained. “He is faking it now.”

Bahadur gasped.

“I should go as soon as possible! Reza Bhai must know about this. Who knows what might have already happened?”

Akbar nodded and with that, Bahadur turned to leave. But at that moment, he froze. Turning back to Akbar, he whispered.

“Reza bhai wanted to inform you that one of the high security level prisons has been prepared for someone. We don’t know for who. All we know is that nobody is allowed to enter. Not even Alphas.”

Akbar nodded.

“I’ll look into it,” he answered. “But now, let’s get going.”

And with that, Bahadur bounded off. Akbar also began heading back.

It was now daylight, so he was vulnerable. He wanted to get back to base as soon as possible. At the back of his mind, he was thinking. If Reza had mentioned this prisoner to Bahadur, it was probably important. The prisoner was likely someone of high value. There was one question swirling in his mind: who was this prisoner?

# Revenge

Jumeira took a deep breath. Today was an important day. For today, the final part of the plan would be completed. As she had anticipated, Alpha 43 had been infuriated.

Jumeira had been pushing her champion to his breaking point and now it was time to release the pressure. Now it was time for Alpha 43 to strike back. And she knew that he would do so like lightning. After all, he was currently the strongest Alpha in her service. Unless she included Akbar.

A strange feeling seared through Jumeira as she remembered Akbar. How could he leave the project? With his potential, Jumeira was certain that he could have been a legend. But unfortunately, he did not share the same vision. Just as his brother Qasim didn't.

Jumeira sighed. Even though Asghar had a lot of potential and he certainly did deliver; working with Akbar was a different experience altogether. There was something different about Akbar. Something unique. Something that Asghar lacked. Something that set Akbar above everyone else.

"Alpha 31 awaits permission to enter," the computer beeped. Jumeira's lips curved into an ugly smile.

"This should be interesting," she whispered. "Let him in."

There was another beep and then silence. Jumeira leaned back on her expensive leather chair and stretched out her arms. The door swung open and Alpha 31 stepped inside. He stood there in

silence.

“Come in Alpha,” Jumeira smiled with a tone of sarcasm.

She noted how the innocent expression on Alpha 31’s face changed to one of suspicion. Jumeira had no doubts. Alpha 31 knew something was wrong. Despite that, the Alpha strolled up to Jumeira’s desk.

“You called,” he stated.

Jumeira sighed.

“I am n’t happy Alpha 31,” she began, emphasising each word. “I am not happy at all.”

Alpha 31 looked down. Jumeira lifted an antique fountain pen from her table and studied it.

“Since I made you in charge of all operations almost a year ago, we have had nothing but failure.”

There was no response. Jumeira found that interesting. He was not denying her allegations.

“It is certain now,” Jumeira added dryly. “That choosing you was a mistake.”

Again there was silence. Jumeira raised a brow. She had underestimated him. The Alpha would not take her bait that easily. Maybe she should try a direct approach.

“Someone has managed to deal a heavy blow to the revolution,” she declared. “And I invited them here as well.”

Alpha 31’s eyes shot up. Surprise was clearly imprinted on his face, but he quickly regained his composure.

Jumeira commanded in a loud voice,

“Enter!”

The door swung open and in came the only person who could break Alpha 31’s calm demeanor. The most lethal of all assassins. Alpha 43.

Alpha 43 came striding inside. For a moment, Jumeira noticed Alpha 31’s eyes glance in Alpha 43’s direction. Then abruptly his head shot up in confusion.

“B-but y-you-” Alpha 31 faltered.

“Yes,” Alpha 43 smiled venomously. “Me.”

Jumeira studied Alpha 43. Her plan had definitely worked. Asghar was back on his feet. All the envy that had accumulated

over the last year had now finally recharged him. He was definitely strong enough to take down Akbar now.

“I don’t understand,” Alpha 31 exclaimed incredulously.

Jumeira smirked.

“At this moment,” she began. “The revolution is mourning the loss of one of their Hunters.”

She clapped her hands together and a digitally projected photo appeared out of thin air. Jumeira watched as Alpha 31 observed the photo. His face had completely broken in shock, seeing what remained of the patrol squad Alpha 43 had ambushed.

“Do tell us Alpha 43,” Jumeira whispered. How did you execute this entire operation?”

Alpha 43 coughed lightly before explaining.

“After witnessing the consistent failures of Alpha 31, I felt personally responsible to do something.”

Alpha 31 looked away, his fists clenched.

“Even though I faked my state,” Alpha 43 added. “Before anyone found out, my wound had healed, I struck down one of the patrol squads with my team. I massacred them. One of the hunters was also there.”

Alpha 31 narrowed his eyes.

“Did you know the hunter who was there?” he asked.

Jumeira raised a brow. This was a good question. If the hunter was there purely by coincidence, then Alpha 43 would not be given as much credit. She made a mental note to verify this fact later.

“I struck this patrol unit in particular because a hunter was in their group,” Alpha 43 answered calmly.

Jumeira’s lips curved into an evil grin.

“I am afraid I must take the operational command of Alphas from you,” Jumeira stated with pretended disappointment as she looked towards Alpha 31. “And give it to one who has demonstrated far more superior skills. Alpha 43, you now have operational command of all the Alphas.”

As anticipated, neither Alpha reacted but Jumeira was well aware of the storms brewing inside both men.

“You may leave,” she concluded.



And with that, both Alphas left Jumeira to her solitude. Jumeira narrowed her eyes. She loved humiliating others. She loved using petty rivalries to control people. She loved success. But there was one thing she had to be careful of. Alpha 43.

One of the things that bothered Jumeira regarding Alpha 43 was that he didn't have any attachments or weaknesses. He never used the C-chip or C-gun. Those devices did not affect him anyway. In addition, he never loved anyone, not even his own brothers. In fact, he killed one of them, and he would never hesitate in killing the other.

He definitely felt nothing for his parents. Overall, he was more machine than human. And while it made him useful for missions, it also made him harder to control.

That was why Jumeira decided not to take any chances. She needed someone to watch over Alpha 43. Someone who abhorred him. Not Alpha 31, but rather someone whom Alpha 43 may overlook.

Jumeira's lips formed into a smile. She knew just the right woman for the job. Clapping her hands together to activate her computer, she called out.

“Bring Alpha 39 to my office.”

## A Midnight Stroll

Abbas leaned on his pillow, as the same words echoed in his mind;  
*It is of utmost importance. I need to speak with Akbar Bhai.*

What did Ruqayya need to talk to Akbar about? Why did she need to speak to Akbar with such urgency? It didn't make any sense. Ruqayya did not know Akbar the way Naqi did. In fact, she was generally more reserved even before... before Naqi passed away. So why did she want this now?

Haider shuffled in his sleep, drawing Abbas's attention. He was groaning and trembling.

'Probably a nightmare,' Abbas thought to himself.

He got off from his straw mattress and moved over to Haider. Silently, he leaned over his brother and stroked his head. Almost immediately, the trembling stopped and Haider began breathing calmly.

Abbas sighed. He could not forget the expression of his brother earlier that day.

*I can't lose you Abbas Bhai. I'm afraid that you might go too far with Alpha 43. He's dangerous.*

Abbas massaged his brother's head. Haider was right to be worried because whether Abbas denied it or not, he knew that he was on the top of Alpha 43's hit list. There was no doubt about it.

But Abbas was not afraid. He was not afraid at all. Yes, Alpha 43 was faster, stronger and more experienced, but Abbas

had one thing that Alpha 43 did not have. He had Allah (swt). And with Allah's help, even a mosquito could defeat a tyrant like Namrud. With Allah's help, a flock of birds could defeat an army of elephants. With Allah's help, the revolution would definitely defeat the Alphas. He said 'Inshallah' in his heart.

Abbas felt his brother grab hold of his hand. Haider tugged it forcing Abbas into a very awkward angle.

"Why don't I just get you a teddy bear?" Abbas grunted, struggling to keep his arm in a comfortable position.

But deep down, Abbas didn't mind. He was used to looking after Haider. A strange feeling seared through Abbas. How could Alpha 43 kill Qasim? How could he kill his own brother? How could he shed his own brother's blood? More importantly, how could he live with himself? Knowing that he killed Qasim. Knowing that Qasim had an infant son at the time. He had to truly be a devil to not feel anything.

Abbas slowly slipped his hand out of Haider's grip. Haider stirred for a moment before settling down. Abbas watched him snore lightly.

"Sleep well, brother," Abbas whispered.

He turned around and began to tiptoe his way out of the barn, careful not to make any noise. As he went, he heard a loud snore. Abbas froze. Turning to his right, he was surprised to see Isa.

'How loud do you snore my friend?' Abbas pondered.

Slowly, he moved forward and nudged Isa.

"Isa!" Abbas whispered. "Wake up!"

With a small shiver, Isa's eyes shot open. Instantly, his leg shot up, almost striking Abbas in the face.

"Ow!" Abbas winced, staggering back in surprise.

He glanced up. Isa stood there; arms up, weapons ready and poised to fight. He narrowed his eyes before widening them in surprise.

"Abbas! I am so sorry! It was a reflex."

Staring him in the eye, Abbas groaned.

"If you do this, I wonder what would happen if someone woke up Farheen Auntie."

Isa chuckled. He sheathed his knife, which he called Malakul Maut, as well as his chain.

“Why did you wake me up?” he asked sleepily.

Abbas massaged his dazed head.

“I was going out for a midnight stroll and was wondering if you were in the mood,” he stated.

Isa shook his head and let out a shiver. He glanced towards the exit of the barn.

“I don’t think you’ll let me be if I say no,” he grinned. “So I guess I’ll come along.”

Abbas nodded and with that, the two headed out.

It was cold that night, but that didn’t deter Abbas. He needed some fresh air. Isa however, was not as determined. His teeth clattered together. Then abruptly, as they reached the training field, he stopped.

Abbas turned to face Isa.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

Isa sighed.

“It feels so weird being here without Naqi Bhai,” he murmured.

Abbas nodded sadly.

“I still can’t accept it,” Abbas confessed.

Isa placed a hand on Abbas’s shoulder.

“I can’t imagine what you went through,” he whispered. “Naqi Bhai died in your arms.”

Abbas looked down.

“I can’t explain it Isa,” he answered. “It is one of the most painful moments of my life and I won’t ever forget it.”

Isa shook his head.

“We can’t keep mourning him though,” he declared. “We need to avenge him now.”

Abbas met Isa’s gaze.

“We will my friend,” he answered “Inshallah, we will.”

“Inshallah,” a voice sounded from behind them.

Abbas turned around to see who had joined them. A smile formed on his lips as he recognised the man.

“Akbar Uncle,” Abbas asked. “Where have you been?”

Akbar took a deep breath before walking up to both of them.

“Just been doing a few things here and there,” he answered casually.

Abbas did not ask any follow up question. Akbar clearly did not want to state his purpose for being gone the entire day. And that was fine.

“So,” Akbar sighed. “Are you two having trouble sleeping?”

Isa shook his head.

“I have been forced to march out in the cold weather, otherwise Abbas would have kept waking me up,” he chuckled.

Akbar grinned placing a hand on each boy’s shoulder. His lips curved into a grin and then abruptly, he hauled both boys off their feet in mid air!

“Akbar Uncle!” Abbas exclaimed. “What are you doing?”

Akbar laughed.

“A true hunter must be prepared for attacks at all times.”

With that, he flung both boys away. With a thud, Isa landed first and beside him, Abbas.

“Ouch,” Isa groaned. Turning back to Akbar, he grinned. “I appreciate the spirit Akbar Uncle but I think you’ll find me a bit harder to beat in a fair fight.”

Abbas shook his head. If Isa had any idea who he was challenging, he would have rather jumped off a cliff than fight Akbar.

Akbar merely shrugged.

“Give me your best shot, my boy,” he smiled. “Weapons included.”

Abbas chuckled. Isa was about to get a full smack-down.

“Are you sure?” Isa asked hesitatingly. “I mean, I don’t want to hurt you.”

Akbar looked down. Abbas could see he was stifling a laugh.

“Come on, Isa,” he encouraged. “Don’t worry about hurting me.”

Abbas watched Isa’s face tilt slightly in confusion but then he narrowed his eyes.

He lunged forward but Akbar knocked him back to the ground.

“Is that all you got?” Akbar taunted.

Abbas knew Akbar wasn’t really being mean to Isa. He was just trying to instigate him mentally as well. Half the fight is

determined by the opponent's state of mind.

Isa's hesitancy faded away replaced by determination and a hint of anger.

"Ya Allah!" Isa growled swinging his chain out but Akbar was much faster. In a flash, he caught hold of Isa's chain.

Isa stared in confusion. And awe.

"B-But nobody has ever caught my chain before," he stammered.

Akbar did not respond. He just wrenched the chain away from Isa's hand and threw it on the side.

Isa narrowed his eyes. He crouched down nice and low, and leapt forward. There was a blur and Akbar caught him mid air before dropping him on the ground. Isa shook his head in disbelief.

"Don't play easy Isa," Abbas teased. "Akbar Uncle said you could go all out."

Isa turned to Abbas.

"You show me then!" he answered.

Abbas shook his head.

"I'm not the one who challenged Akbar Uncle. Sorry my friend, you are on your own."

Isa gave Abbas a pretended look of betrayal before turning back to face Akbar. Lunging forward, he shot his fist out but Akbar caught it. In a flash, Isa drove his other hand into Akbar's stomach. Akbar grunted, before smiling.

"Interesting," he whispered. "I underestimated you."

There was a blur and Isa staggered back in surprise, holding on to his stomach.

"Marvelous Isa," Abbas applauded. "Brilliant!"

Isa collapsed on the ground, panting heavily.

"I don't know what Akbar Uncle is made of," Isa breathed. "He cannot be human."

Abbas looked up at Akbar who was busy rolling up his sleeves.

"Abbas," Akbar called out, "Your turn."

Abbas's eyes widened in surprise. He glanced over at Isa who also seemed to be caught off guard. But then, his lips curved into a maniacal grin.

"Yes," Isa howled. "Now you'll know what it feels like!"

Abbas felt his heart skip a beat. Fight Akbar? The last time he had done that was the first day of training, and he had gotten creamed. How could he possibly defeat Akbar? Besides, Akbar had just pounded Isa who was already a strong fighter, to the ground. But then again, Abbas had changed a lot since then.

He had defeated Alpha 39 as well as Alpha 71. He had wounded Alpha 43. He was a hunter. Surely, he could stand his ground against Akbar. Another thought entered his mind.

Akbar had defeated Alpha 43 about twelve years ago. So if Abbas wanted to defeat Alpha 43, he needed to know how well he could hold his ground. And given that Akbar was an Alpha, this was a golden opportunity.

“I’ll do it,” Abbas answered with determination.

Isa chuckled.

“I said the same,” he teased. “Good luck, I’ll count how many seconds you last for.”

Abbas shrugged and moved ahead, entering his fighting stance.

“Fight,” Isa called out.

Abbas did not budge. He had noticed something about Akbar’s fighting style. Akbar liked fighting defensively. He wanted his opponent to throw the first punch. So if Abbas wanted to make him uncomfortable, he would force Akbar into the offensive position.

Akbar’s lips curved into a smile.

“Alright,” he whispered. “You asked for it.”

Akbar growled and in a flash, thundered forward.

Abbas was caught off guard but only just jumped out of the way in time. There was a blur on his right as Akbar brought his foot crashing down towards Abbas. Abbas rolled out of the way and shot his leg up. It struck Akbar but did not deter him. Akbar grabbed Abbas’s leg and yanked him off the ground.

“Argh!” Abbas growled shooting his other leg at Akbar’s arm, but Akbar had already let go and Abbas landed on the ground with a thud.

“Seven seconds,” he heard Isa’s voice. “Brilliant Abbas!”

Abbas rolled his eyes. Pushing himself back up to his feet, he crouched low.

Akbar grinned and lunged forward. Abbas shot forward this time hoping to meet his force but Akbar was stronger.

Abbas felt Akbar's powerful force knock him to the ground.

"Two and a half seconds," Isa sounded. "World record!"

Abbas shook his head. Why was Akbar winning so smoothly?

Abbas jumped forward, arms extended; but Akbar whipped out his leg and struck Abbas's stomach. Abbas gasped breathlessly, simultaneously ramming his elbow into Akbar's stomach.

Akbar staggered back surprised as Abbas collapsed on the ground.

"Not bad," he remarked. "I wasn't going fully hard but still."

Abbas pushed himself to stand.

"I amn't finished yet," he forced a grin.

Akbar narrowed his eyes. Then he smiled before leaping forward. Abbas sidestepped Akbar and drove his fist at Akbar, but Akbar caught it mid way and shoulder-rammed Abbas.

"Argh!" Abbas yelled as he felt pain sear through his entire rib cage. Akbar then lifted Abbas off of the ground with one hand, holding him there. He let go.

Abbas coughed as he felt his lungs cling on to the air around him.

"The hunters need some advanced training," Akbar commented. "I'll have a word with the leadership committee."

Abbas nodded but something else was bothering him. If he had lost this way to Akbar, he would most certainly lose to Alpha 43. After all, Alpha 43 nearly matched Akbar's strength the last time they fought.

This meant that Abbas would have to focus harder on his training and become stronger. That was the only way he could beat Alpha 43. Otherwise, he would perish like Naqi. Naqi. Of course! How could Abbas have forgotten?

"Akbar Uncle," Abbas mentioned. "I have to tell you something important."

Akbar raised a brow.

"Ruqayya Api," Abbas added. "She said that she wanted to speak with you and that it was of utmost importance."



Akbar looked down and Abbas knew that he was contemplating over the matter.

“I wonder...” Akbar thought out loud.

“I am really tired now. Can I sleep please?”

Abbas glanced at Isa and nodded calmly.

“Yeah sure, thanks for staying up.”

Isa nodded before hobbling away to the barn.

Abbas turned to face Akbar.

“Let’s go”

Akbar shook his head.

“It’s late right now. We shouldn’t disturb her.”

Abbas thought about it. He knew that Ruqayya wanted to speak with Akbar. But Akbar had a point. Ruqayya deserved to rest.

“Alright,” Abbas answered. “We’ll see her first thing in the morning, Inshallah.”

# The Prisoner

*Blood flooded the entire room. The exits were sealed. His calls for help were muffled as a man emerged before him. Asghar froze. It couldn't be!*

*"Qasim!" Asghar exclaimed.*

*Qasim did not respond. He only raised his hand. From it, a bolt of electricity shot out and struck the Alpha. Asghar screamed in pain as he tried to move but he felt his body burn.*

*"Stop!" he screamed. "Stop!!!!"*

Alpha 43 awoke with a start. His heart was palpitating. Beads of sweat were washing down his cheek. Slowly his breathing returned to normal as he realised it was just another nightmare.

Another one. Just like every other night. The same nightmare. Alpha 43 did not understand. Why did this bother him so much? Why was he unable to just accept his brother's death and move on? It had been years since the incident.

Alpha 43 sighed. He pushed himself to stand. It didn't matter. Qasim was dead because of Akbar. Alpha 43 wiped away a tear. His brother's ghostly face continuously haunted him each night. Why couldn't Qasim just have listened to him? It was not like Alpha 43 would report him to Jumeira. Why would he protect Akbar then?

Alpha 43 clenched his fist. He had almost forgotten what Akbar looked like except for his eyes. Alpha 43 could never forget Akbar's gaze. The only one who had ever bested him.

“I will bury you in the ground,” Alpha 43 whispered to himself. “One day Akbar, you and I will have a rematch.”

Alpha 43 glanced down at his watch. It currently read 11:32 pm.

Alpha 43 narrowed his eyes. The prisoner would be arriving soon.

Swiftly, he moved towards his door and wrenched it open. One of the guards glanced his way before sighing in relief. Alpha 43 shut the door behind him and strolled down the dark corridors.

The halls were empty but Alpha 43 did not find that strange. If anyone was foolish to trespass here, they would very quickly regret doing so.

Alpha 43 stopped. Glancing down, he eyed the tiles carefully. He knew that only certain tiles were meant to be stepped on. The other tiles were rigged with traps. Very lethal traps. And weapons. Weapons designed to disintegrate their targets. One of the brilliant upgrades to the security of the buildings. Thousands of such trap areas lay scattered across the buildings.

Most certainly one would perish. Unless they knew the special temporary deactivation password which changed everyday. The password allowed the region’s traps to disable for roughly thirty seconds. Enough time if one were to rush a little.

“Cucumbers!” Alpha 43 hissed.

There was a beep as the traps deactivated for the region. Alpha 43 began strolling onward, a little quickly than he normally would. By the time the thirty seconds had passed, he had already reached the lifts.

“Please raise your right hand,” the scanner asked.

Alpha 43 raised his hand, holding it before the scanner.

There was a beep, and the metal doors slid open. Alpha 43 entered inside and waited as the doors began to close.

His watch beeped. Alpha 43 glanced down curiously to see that there was a message on his watch.

*‘We have received word from serpent,’ it read.’ The revolution still mourns Naqi’s death. His sister has isolated herself from everyone.’*

Alpha 43’s lips curved into a venomous smile. The revolution

had ceased all activities since he slaughtered Naqi. But he knew there was still a threat. Akbar could very conveniently turn Naqi into a martyr with Ruqayya as the face of it.

Unless Ruqayya and Jawad could spread fear amongst everyone, as Alpha 43 had hoped. Because by sparing Ruqayya, Alpha 43 had managed to keep the pain of Naqi's death alive. Like fire, it burned the revolution. But it could potentially give them strength as well.

The elevator beeped as it reached the desired floor. Alpha 43 entered the dark hallway leaving the doors to close behind him.

This floor was not like others. After Jumeira's floor, it was probably the most secure part of the building. Few people had ever seen this floor. Well, few living people. Only stories were told of this place. And rumours. For this was the entrance to the prison of the iron fortress.

Alpha 43 walked towards the end of the hall. He reached out and pressed his hand against the door. There was a beep and the door slid open, allowing him to enter. However, there was no lift. Only a dark abyss.

Alpha 43 smiled. Most adventurers would just jump into the darkness, hoping for the best. But they would find themselves skewered on the lethal spikes below. Instead, the way to go was a hidden thorned rope. Thorned in case anyone found it. These thorns were not ordinary thorns though. They were sharp enough to pierce right through the finger, and the edges were coated with poison.

This would make one wonder, how could someone possibly make it down the abyss? Anyone who tried would get destroyed. But there was a way.

From his pocket, Alpha withdrew two large black gloves. These were not normal gloves. They were extremely thick, with layers of metal sown into them. They allowed for a person to make a trip up or down the rope. A one way trip.

After a one time usage, the gloves would be damaged beyond use. Hence for this reason, the Alpha had another pair in his pocket. Only one other.

Another brilliant security precaution. Anyone intending to

pass was only allowed to borrow two pairs of gloves at a time. One for the downward trip and one for returning. And even then, they needed explicit permission from Jumeira to enter the prison. Once done, they had to return both damaged pairs to prove that they had made the journey. Aside from the CCTV footage and audio sensors of course.

Swiftly, Alpha 43 wore the gloves and climbed his way down. As expected, he did not feel any pain from the sharp thorns nor did he feel burned by the acid like poison laced over the thorned rope. It only took him a minute to reach the bottom, even with the spikes. His lips curled into a satisfied grin.

“Nobody,” Alpha 43 thought to himself. “Not even he could escape from here.”

Slowly, he made his way down the hall. There were five guards there. All at least six to seven feet in height. They were husky and armed to the teeth with weaponry.

Upon his arrival, the guard asked him,  
“Who are you?”

Alpha 43 did not respond. Very slowly, he scratched both sides of his head.

The guard’s eyes widened in surprise.  
“Sir!”

He went down on his knees immediately. The other guards did the same.

“Good,” Alpha 43 acknowledged. “I am satisfied with the security measures taken.”

The guard saluted before returning back to position. Alpha 43 nodded and advanced through the doors ahead. He found himself in a hallway. A hallway that stretched on for about a mile underground, leading to a death trap. The real way into the cells, was through a missile proof hidden door. Alpha 43 counted his steps carefully in his head. The place was impossible to locate but he knew how to get there. It was around 14 steps away from the entry.

“Twelve...thirteen..” he counted. “fourteen!”

He turned to see nothing. Or so it seemed. He pressed a hand against the wall. There was a beep followed by a click and right

before Alpha 43's eyes, a part of the wall slid open.

Alpha 43 entered inside and continued down the final hallway which led him to a sealed room. This was the room. Inside here, one of their most dangerous criminals would be kept. Well, one more dangerous criminal. There was already one prisoner who was kept here. Alpha 43 pressed his hand against the door once more.

There was a click and the door swung open. Alpha 43 entered inside. There was a woman in the corner. Her eyes were closed, but the Alpha knew she was awake.

"Well," Alpha 43 sighed. "You really did bring this on yourself, you know."

The woman did not respond. Alpha 43 rolled his eyes.

"Jumeira gave you everything," he scoffed. "But you threw it away. And for what? What did you do it for? A family?! Didn't you already have that!"

Alpha 43 shook his head in disapproval.

"I thought of you like a sister," he added silently.

The woman opened her eyes for the first time. Turning to face him, she stared him in the eye with hatred,

"I know how you treat your siblings, so please don't think of me as one."

Alpha 43 just managed to restrain his temper. She had always been able to get under his skin since childhood.

"You know nothing," he hissed. "Akbar's back."

The woman's eyes lit up. For a moment, she didn't respond. She narrowed her eyes. Then abruptly her lips curved into a smile.

"So that's why you're here. What's the matter?" she asked sarcastically. "Did he beat you up again?"

Alpha 43 growled, banging his fist against the wall.

"You were never very good at controlling your temper," the woman remarked.

Alpha 43 shook his head.

"Don't worry. This time, I will take care of Akbar."

The woman smiled again.

"You're even more mad than I thought," she laughed bitterly.

Alpha 43 looked away.

“You should be careful sister,” he grinned with an evil smile. “Soon you will be joined by another prisoner.”

The woman shook her head.

“I am not your sister,” she hissed.

Alpha 43 smiled.

“I still think of you as one. Since the day my father took you in. Besides, you didn’t even ask me who your prison mate will be? You actually know him already.”

The woman looked away in anger.

“Go on Api,” the Alpha urged sarcastically. “Ask me. Ask me the answer to my question. Just like when we were children.”

The woman did not respond immediately. She only muttered,

“You lost the right to call me Api the day you murdered Qasim. And crossed paths with Akbar Bhai.”

Alpha 43 felt anger in his mind. Couldn’t she understand that he still cared for her? Even if she hated him. She was like his older sister.

“I’ll answer it myself,” Alpha 43 replied harshly. “Your new roommate will be the one and only Alpha 16!”

The woman’s eyes shot awake, widening in disbelief. Her hands began to shake uncontrollably. In a hoarse voice, she stammered,

“B-but y-you told me-”

“I lied,” the Alpha interrupted. “He will be joining you in roughly an hour.”

The woman shook her head in disbelief before curling away in tears. Her breathing was irregular. She didn’t even look at Alpha 43. The assassin felt a strange trace of grief in his heart. But he pushed it aside.

“I thought you’d be glad to hear,” he murmured.

The woman did not respond.

Alpha 43 sighed.

“My whole life, everyone has always told me that I was never good enough,” he paused. “Father always loved you more and Mother always loved Akbar more-”

“And Qasim?” the woman interrupted, her gaze burning into Alpha 43’s. “What did Qasim do Asghar? What crime did he

commit that you murdered him?”

Alpha 43 shook his head.

“You all made assumptions,” he sighed.

And with that, Alpha 43 got up and headed to the door. As he reached it, he turned around once more.

“You can hate me as much as you like,” he hissed.

Alpha 43 pushed the door open and left with a heavy heart unaware that far above him, Jumeira was watching, overhearing his entire conversation.

“So,” Jumeira grinned. “The mighty Alpha 43 has finally shown his weakness.”



80

## Practice

“Give it a try,” Zahra encouraged.

Abbas hesitatingly glanced at Ali. The last time he fought Ali, he had been pounded to the ground. Ali was very strong, and in addition, he was a skilled fighter.

Ali grinned.

“Don’t worry,” he chuckled. “I’m sure you can do it.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes. If anyone else had said this, Abbas would have taken it as a taunt. But given how simple and sincere Ali was, Abbas took it as encouragement. Of course, Ali’s way of encouragement. Abbas managed a smile.

He crouched low and watched as Ali leaned back in a fighting stance.

“Ya Allah!” Abbas shouted and leapt forward.

Ali caught him mid way and threw him across to the other side. Abbas extended out his arms, allowing them to absorb the impact. Swiftly, he pushed himself back to his feet, ready for Ali’s follow up attack.

But it never came. Abbas turned in surprise to see that Ali wasn’t moving. He just stood there maintaining the same position.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. His lips curled into a smile. Akbar had trained Ali. This meant that in some way, Ali mirrored Akbar’s fighting style. Abbas knew that Akbar preferred fighting defensive. Hence, perhaps Ali did so as well. This meant that if

Abbas wanted to win, he would force Ali to play offensively.

Slowly, he relaxed his guard and moved back. Ali narrowed his eyes but Abbas did not budge. He knew that waiting was key to his victory. Several minutes passed.

“Do you two plan on finishing today?” Maryam asked sarcastically.

Isa nodded.

Ali lunged forward. Instantly, Abbas leapt out of the way. In a flash, he rammed his elbow into Ali. Ali staggered back in surprise.

“You’ve gotten stronger since our last fight,” he grinned.

Abbas smirked.

Ali charged once more. Abbas lunged forward, twisting his body. Grabbing Ali, he performed the flying tackle. Ali was caught off guard and he landed on the ground with a thud.

Zahra gasped and hurriedly rushed forward to check if Ali was alright. Abbas did no such thing however, for another thought had filled his mind and heart.

Glancing over to Maryam and Isa he exclaimed incredulously, “I did it! Alhamdullillah!”

Isa smiled but Abbas knew that he did not understand.

There was a grunt from the opposite side. Abbas turned in the direction of the noise. Ali stood there trying to keep Zahra at a distance.

“I’m fine,” he grumbled as she examined his head for injuries.

Abbas stifled a laugh. Ali glanced in his direction before narrowing his eyes.

“Are we still on?” he asked.

Abbas nodded, trying not to smirk.

In a flash, Ali leapt at him. Abbas jumped to the side, just managing to evade. Ali drove his right fist, striking Abbas in the stomach. Abbas staggered back.

Ali lunged forward but Abbas whipped out his leg, striking Ali in the stomach. Ali landed with a thud on the ground.

“Argh,” Abbas groaned at the red mark on his leg. “What is Ali Bhai made of? Bricks?”

Ali chuckled as he got to his feet.

“That’s it guys,” Zahra interrupted. “The fight is over.”

Abbas nodded respectfully, relieved that the fight was over. Soon they joined the other hunters. Even though he had been doing fine, he knew that if the fight would have continued, Ali would have emerged on top. Purely due to his endurance. Ali was just able to absorb hits whereas Abbas had no such superpower.

“Now,” Zahra clapped her hands together. “It is time we went over some advanced concepts.”

Maryam flashed Abbas an excited glance.

“Let’s get started,” Zahra instructed. “Okay, so Abbas and Isa, stand before Ali.”

Both youths did as they were told.

“Maryam,” Zahra added. “You’re with me.”

Maryam nodded and stood before Zahra.

“Okay,” Zahra began, turning to face Ali. “Today we will practice defense against brute force attacks.”

As if on cue, Ali grabbed hold of Zahra, lifting her off of the ground. Zahra gasped and Abbas could tell that she was struggling to breathe. Her face was turning purple. Abbas began to feel concerned. Nobody could handle Ali’s strength for long.

Abbas was about to interrupt when abruptly, Zahra growled like a panther, swinging her leg at Ali’s shin. Ali’s eyes widened in surprise and he yelped letting go.

Abbas stared in amazement.

“How did you do that?” Maryam exclaimed.

Zahra grinned, helping Ali up.

“The shin is quite weak compared to other bones and is always vulnerable to an attack.”

Abbas made a mental note of that. This would be very useful if he ever came across an Alpha. But another thought was running in his mind.

“What about cranial strikes?” he asked innocently.

Isa stiffened for a moment before flashing Abbas a curious glance. Zahra eyed Abbas warily.

“Cranial strikes are very dangerous,” she answered. “Always avoid using them.”

Abbas shook his head.

“How bad can the damage be?”

Zahra glanced at Ali in disapproval but he merely shrugged and answered,

“If hard enough, they can cause permanent paralysis,” Abbas remembered how Isa had fallen when the Alpha had struck him earlier.

“Otherwise,” Ali continued. “It could lead to death.”

Abbas let out a shiver. If that Alpha had struck hard enough, Isa could have died.

“Who fights better?” Isa asked with a grin as if trying to change the subject. “Zahra Api or Ali Bhai?”

Zahra chuckled as Maryam answered,

“Zahra Api, of course.”

Abbas saw Ali narrow his eyes and realised there was an opportunity he couldn't ignore.

“What are you talking about Maryam?” he laughed. “Of course Ali Bhai is better!”

Zahra flashed him a competitive glance but quickly regained her composure.

“That's what I thought too,” Isa added in a teasing tone.

Zahra grinned.

“I amn't a child you know,” she stated. “I can see what you two are trying to do.”

Abbas shook his head.

“Hey, what are Akbar Uncle and Ruqayya Api talking about?” Isa asked abruptly.

Abbas turned with surprise to see Akbar and Ruqayya standing at a distance. Both were speaking intently and quietly. Abruptly, Akbar's eyes widened in surprise.

He began shifting uncomfortably. Abbas noticed Ruqayya narrow her eyes before walking away in anger. Immediately Akbar began walking in the opposite direction leaving Abbas to think, what were they talking about?

# The Emergency Meeting

“In the name of Allah(swt),” Akbar began.

Abbas narrowed his eyes as he shifted uncomfortably. What he was doing was wrong. Listening in on a revolutionary leadership committee meeting was a serious offence. But Abbas’s curiosity had gotten the better of him and he needed to know what was going on. He couldn’t bear being in ignorance any longer.

For the last hour, after speaking to Ruqayya, Akbar had been very tense. He had been going from place to place anxiously, trying to gather Farheen and Kadhim for another meeting.

“You know why I called this meeting,” Akbar started.

He could hear murmurs of agreement from Farheen and Kadhim.

“How did she find out?” he heard Kadhim ask.

Abbas’s ears pricked. What did Ruqayya find out?

“Alpha 43 told her that I was an Alpha,” Akbar stated. “That is why she asked me to show her my ankle an hour ago.”

Abbas’s felt shock grip his heart. His eyes widened in surprise. What was Akbar doing? How could he expose the fact that he was an Alpha to the others? What would Kadhim and Farheen say? Worse, what would they do to him?

“He is doing this to destroy the revolution,” Farheen added quite calmly, not showing any surprise to Akbar’s statement. “He is using Ruqayya to keep our pain alive so that we can’t gather forces.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Farheen and Kadhim had not shown

any reaction to Akbar. None at all. It was as though Akbar had not said it at all. He felt his pulse calm down. They must have already known. Though Abbas could not see why Akbar would tell them something so dangerous.

“Jawad’s negative influence on others is also getting stronger,” Kadhim grumbled. “With each day, more and more people are getting demoralised.”

Abbas clenched his fist. Jawad was still stirring up trouble. He had already formed a noticeably large group of followers. Including Dawud. Abbas narrowed his eyes. He really hated Dawud. Somehow Dawud being his own student made him feel betrayed.

Falak was also following Jawad, although she wasn’t as obsessed as Dawud. She shared the same opinion as Dawud, but that was it. Unlike others, she didn’t actively misbehave or cause trouble. Abbas knew this was partially Maryam’s credit.

Since Maryam was her best friend, Falak probably did not want to spoil their friendship. But Maryam had made it clear that if Falak sided with Jawad and Dawud, the friendship would be over.

“Jawad’s group consists solely of youth,” Akbar pointed out. “He is unable to deceive adults.”

The voices went a little quiet. Abbas leaned in closer to hear what they were saying more clearly. As his ear touched the door, he could make out Farheen’s voice,

“These youths!” she mumbled. “Always so foolish. Literally begging to be deceived. Any new person comes in and they want to start following them.”

There was a murmur of agreement causing Abbas to roll his eyes. Not all youth were foolish. He certainly wasn’t. At least he thought he wasn’t. And Maryam. She was also really intelligent. But in a different way. She was really good at handling situations. Abbas recalled how she had taken care of Jawad. Isa was brilliant as well.

“We need Ruqayya,” Akbar stated. “Only she can stop these troublemakers. Only she can turn Naqi’s pain into revenge.”

Abbas nodded before realising that none of them could see him. Either way, he knew that Ruqayya needed to be convinced.

But that wouldn't be easy. Abbas himself knew how persistent he had been when he wanted to find out the truth regarding Akbar. No doubt Ruqayya would keep going until she found out the truth.

The information that would satisfy Ruqayaa was highly confidential and sensitive. But what choice did they have? They needed Ruqayya on their side. Their only option was to tell her the whole story and hope that was enough to convince her.

# Revelation

It was a bright day. The wind was blowing lightly, but the flowers were looking down. The trees were sobered, unlike the vibrant colours they had been flashing the day before. Not that it meant anything for Ruqayya.

Nothing held meaning for her in life anymore. Not after...

Ruqayya stopped. She couldn't bear to think of her brother anymore. He was gone. Gone forever.

*Crack.*

Ruqayya whipped out her brand new 1636 revolver, ready to fire. Normally she would have been afraid. But after experiencing her greatest fear, nothing scared her anymore. Nothing could make her cower.

A petrified squirrel came scrambling out of one of the bushes before running off. Ruqayya's lips curled into a grin as the animal fled. She was ready for pretty much anything just short of an Alpha.

"I have to find Abbas and Akbar," she muttered to herself. "I need to know what they are hiding from me."

Since the morning, things had been very strange. Ruqayya expected that Akbar would make a move and she was surprised to see that he hadn't. On her way to meet him, she overheard Akbar telling Abbas to convene in the fields at a certain time, he had something important to tell him. Ruqayya needed to know what was so important that it couldn't be discussed at base. What



else was Akbar hiding?

She sighed as she crossed another field.

Ruqayya knew it was a bad idea to cross paths with Akbar. But she needed to know the truth about him. Because Ruqayya did not think that it was coincidental that they got ambushed that day. They had never seen an Alpha in that forest. What were the chances that an Alpha with a fully armed squadron came across her patrol squad? No. It was more likely that the Alpha was already informed and had been waiting. Ruqayya did not want to point fingers, but for clarity of her suspicions, she needed to know the truth. After that, she would make her verdict.

Ruqayya froze. Across the field on the other side of the trees, stood Akbar and Abbas! They were both armed and were walking away from her in the opposite direction. Ruqayya crouched low; and stealthily, she followed them. The two continued to stroll ahead. They headed downhill until they reached the edge of another field.

Ruqayya narrowed her eyes. This place felt oddly familiar.

‘What are you up to?’ she thought to herself.

Ruqayya watched as Akbar settled down on the ground. Abbas hesitated before joining him. The two began speaking quietly. Ruqayya strained her ears but she couldn’t make out any words. Then it dawned upon her. This was the region where her patrol unit had been attacked. This part of the forest was where the assassin had murdered her brother. She felt a sharp pain in her heart as she watched Akbar and Abbas. These trees was where she had lost everything that mattered to her.

*Crack.*

Ruqayya whirled in the direction of the noise, ready to shoot. Her eyes widened in surprise as she noticed Jawad hiding behind a bush nearby.

‘What is he doing here?’ Ruqayya thought.

Beside him there was a youth. He looked about Abbas’s age, perhaps a year or so younger. Ruqayya recognised him. But she couldn’t remember his name. All she knew was that this boy often spent time with Jawad.

Slowly, Ruqayya moved closer to hear what they were saying.

“What is Akbar up to?” she heard Jawad mumble.

The youth growled “I want to know why Abbas is here.”

Jawad shook his head in disapproval.

“Patience Dawud,” he whispered.

Ruqayya’s eyes widened as she remembered. That was his name! Dawud!

“We have a lot of work to do,” Jawad mumbled. “But first, we need Ruqayya to join our side.”

Ruqayya raised a brow. What was he talking about?

“If Ruqayya is on our side, then we can use Naqi’s death as a cause to break off from the revolution.”

Ruqayya felt a pulse of anger. Nobody had the right to use her brother’s death for their own agenda.

Dawud nodded in agreement.

“And then we can flee, right?” he asked. “We can escape the island?”

Jawad blinked once before answering.

“Yes.”

Ruqayya narrowed her eyes. How could Dawud not see that Jawad was lying? He clearly had no plan to try fleeing the island. Perhaps, he actually believed that he could hide away from the Alphas.

“If I can find a weakness of Abbas and Akbar, I can use it to convince Ruqayya to join our side,” Jawad paused an ugly smile forming on his lips. “And then I can finally propose to her.”

Ruqayya froze. What did Jawad just say? She was certain that she had misheard. There was no way Ruqayya would ever get married to a coward like Jawad.

“You what?” Dawud exclaimed incredulously. “You want to marry her?”

Jawad nodded.

Ruqayya finally understood what the issue was. Jawad was a coward. He wanted to flee. And he wanted to marry Ruqayya. Meaning he wanted Ruqayya to flee as well. He was hoping to use Naqi’s death to convince her to leave the revolution. And unfortunately, these ignorant youths joined him.

Jawad frowned, clenching his fist.

“But Naqi entrusted Ruqayya to Abbas,” he mumbled. “And Abbas would never let me marry her.”

Ruqayya smiled to herself. Abbas was extremely headstrong and protective. And fearless. She was well aware of how seriously he had taken Naqi’s will. Of course, Abbas would never let Ruqayya marry someone like Jawad. But Ruqayya did not need Abbas for this one.

‘Keep dreaming fool,’ she thought to herself.

In a flash, Ruqayya leapt from the bushes. The two never saw her coming as she brought her revolver crashing down upon them. They both fell with a thud on the ground.

Ruqayya grinned.

“Serves both of you right,” she smirked.

There was no response.

“Oops,” Ruqayya chuckled sarcastically. “I guess I hit them too hard.”

With that, she crept back to her original hiding place.

‘They’ll wake up in an hour or more,’ she thought to herself. ‘And in the meanwhile, I can focus on Abbas and Akbar.’

Satisfied, she turned her attention back to the pair. They were still speaking in low voices. Ruqayya strained her ears but couldn’t make out anything. Carefully, she inched closer. She was determined to find the answers to her questions and as they wouldn’t tell her. She would just have to find out herself.

# Ambushed

“What are we doing here?” Abbas whispered. Akbar had told him there was something important to discuss.

Akbar didn't respond immediately. He merely studied the ground.

“Just wait for a few minutes,” Akbar replied.

Abbas readied himself. He wasn't sure what to expect. For the first time, Akbar seemed nervous. As if he wasn't sure whether he should be telling Abbas whatever he was about to tell him.

A small movement caught Abbas's attention on the right hand side. He scratched his beard, and glanced in its direction. His eyes widened in surprise.

‘Salman!’ Abbas thought to himself. ‘What is he doing here?’

Salman ducked behind the bushes almost immediately, causing Abbas's eyes to narrow. Why was Salman following them? What was he doing here? Why was he hiding? Was he spying on them?

“Abbas!”

Abbas whirled around to see that Akbar was calling him. He would have to contemplate over Salman later.

Abbas stiffened as the bushes ahead began rustling, and from there, two soldiers emerged.

Abbas froze. They were soldiers of the iron fortress!

“Surrender!” one of the soldiers shouted.

Akbar and Abbas shared a glance. Soldiers this close to base was dangerous. They needed to be taken down. Abbas roared

and leapt forward.

He shot his fist but his opponent blocked it with ease before leaping back. From the corner of his eye, he could see Akbar wrestling his opponent with no difficulty.

Abbas growled, whipping out a leg. It struck the soldier square in the chest. With a gasp, he slumped to the floor. Abbas went closer to check if he was unconscious.

*Wham!*

The soldier rammed Abbas in the stomach, sending him to the ground. In a flash, he lunged forward and grabbed hold of the soldier. With a grunt, he hauled him off the floor. The soldier began lashing out aggressively.

“Alpha...gonna...take you...down...”

“What?” Abbas’s eyes widened in horror. “There was an Alpha in the area? Maybe even multiple Alphas!”

Abbas felt his heart skip a beat. They were exposed out here. Whatever Akbar Uncle needed to talk about could wait. They needed to get out of here as fast as possible.

“Akbar Uncle!” he called.

He raised his knife to end the soldier, but a hand caught his wrist from behind. Abbas felt the knife slip from his hand.

“Argh-” Abbas struggled to breathe. He lashed out his feet, striking his opponent in fury. There were grunts from behind and the grip loosened slightly, but not enough for Abbas to free himself.

“Hold on-” his opponent began.

“Ya-A-Allah!” he wheezed.

In a flash, he grabbed hold of his opponent’s hand and gripped the thumbs violently. The soldier’s eyes widened in surprise, realising too late as Abbas wrenched them sideways. With a yelp, the soldier let go.

Abbas sputtered breathlessly as his lungs felt air returning. Slowly, he got to his feet while coughing.

From the corner of his eye, he could see that Akbar was on the verge of defeating his opponent still not realising the danger.

“Ak-” Abbas wheezed.

Akbar whirled around glancing between Abbas and the soldier.

“Run Abbas!” he yelled.

Abbas shook his head, lifting his knife from the ground.

There was a growl, causing him to whirl around. At a distance, stood the last thing Abbas wanted to see. An Alpha. In his hand was a 1636 revolver. Abbas sighed. They were in trouble now.

## Confusion

“Ya Allah!” Abbas cried as he charged forward, ignoring the warning calls from Akbar. Abbas only had his eyes on the Alpha.

The Alpha’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Wha-”

Abbas rammed the Alpha over the edge of the hill. The two went tumbling over the grass, out of Akbar’s sight.

“Agh,” Abbas grunted as he got to his feet.

Glancing over, he saw the Alpha standing still.

“I will make all of you pay for what you have done!” Abbas shouted.

The Alpha growled, withdrawing another revolver.

Abbas lunged forward knocking both revolvers out of his hands. He shot his hands at the Alpha’s eyes, striking them.

“Stop!” the Alpha squealed. “You don’t understand.”

Abbas rammed an elbow in his stomach, only to have a sudden fist ram him to the ground. The Alpha retreated several steps.

Abbas got to his feet once more, slightly confused. This Alpha fought differently from the others. He wasn’t fighting to kill. He was fighting defensively. For a moment, the two stared at each other. Then abruptly, the Alpha shot forward and grabbed hold of Abbas’s throat. Abbas whipped his leg out, but the Alpha showed no reaction to the strike.

Abbas began striking wildly as the Alpha suffocated him.

“Calm down,” the Alpha whispered. “You’re going to get hurt.”

Abbas froze. Why was the Alpha helping him? And not killing him? Abbas struck the Alpha in the shoulder, causing Alpha to howl painfully but he maintained his grip.

“You know,” Alpha smiled, speaking very loudly all of a sudden. “I expected better.”

*Boom!*

The Alpha slipped backwards. Abbas gasped once more as the oxygen flowed into his lungs. He glanced up to see who his rescuer was.

A smile formed on his face. It was Ruqayya. She was here. On her face, was a look of pure hatred. As she neared, Abbas got to his feet, picking his knife from where it had fallen.

“I am going to destroy you!” Ruqayya hissed at the Alpha. “I will cut off your head for messing with my family.”

Abbas glanced between her and the very perplexed Alpha.

“You already took my brother once. I won’t allow you to do it again!” she growled.

Abbas felt a sudden warmth enter his heart. She had called him her brother. She had called him her family.

“Don’t shoot me,” the Alpha answered quietly.

Ruqayya glared at him.

“You want mercy!” she taunted.

The Alpha shook his head.

“You will regret killing me. I am Alpha 31.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes. He had never heard of that Alpha before.

Slowly, the Alpha got to his feet.

“There is some important information I can give you but you must keep me alive. And I will only speak to Akbar.”

Abbas raised a brow. There was something very strange about how this Alpha was behaving. For one, Alphas never gave up information. In addition, Alphas were never afraid of death. Abbas decided to voice his concern,

“Why are-



A cloud of smoke filled the air and abruptly, Abbas felt a powerful force knock him to the ground.

He heard the pattering of feet and gunshots. And as the smoke cleared, Abbas managed to get to his feet. Alpha 31 was long gone. Ruqayya stood beside him with her gun in hand.

“So that’s why he was so helpful,” Ruqayya muttered under her breath. “He was stalling for a smoke bomb.”

Abbas glanced at her.

“Ruqayya Api.”

That was all he said.

She bowed her head respectfully.

“In the last few minutes,” she sighed. “I have come to realise that even though I have lost my brother,” Abbas noticed her swallow. “I still have a brother in my life,” she finished.

Abbas smiled.

“I never had a sister,” he answered quietly. “But now, I have an one.”

Ruqayya nodded.

“I didn’t trust you at first,” she confessed. “But now, I think of you as a brother. If you ever have any problems in life Abbas, just like today; I’ll be there for you.”

“And I’ll always be there for you, Inshallah” Abbas smiled.

“Akbar Bhai is fine,” Ruqayya said a few moments later.

Abbas’s eyes widened in surprise. He had forgotten about Akbar.

“What do-”

“I saw him take down those soldiers,” she overspoke. “That is why I was okay coming here.”

Abbas felt relief flood his heart. Everything had worked out.

“Let’s go see Akbar Uncle.”

Ruqayya nodded and together, they headed back up the grass to where they had left Akbar.

# Caught

“Wha-” Jawad sputtered as he pushed himself up. He could feel soreness at the back of his head.

“What happened?” he mumbled as he tried to push himself up.

“We happened,” came a voice.

Jawad opened his eyes, glancing ahead. He thought his eyes would fall out of their sockets. Before him stood Abbas and Ruqayya.

Jawad rubbed his eyes in disbelief.

“I don’t understand,” Jawad thought out loud. “Why are you all glaring at me?”

Ruqayya stepped forward. Her gaze was one of utmost fury.

Jawad looked down, realising for the first time that Dawud wasn’t there. Perhaps he had gotten away? Jawad decided not to mention it.

“Jawad,” Ruqayya addressed. “You will cease causing trouble for the revolution.”

Jawad raised a brow.

“And why would I do that?” he muttered angrily. “They are the reason Naqi Bhai-”

“You!” Ruqayya interrupted. “You don’t have the right to say my brother’s name.”

Jawad slowly got to his feet. As he did so, he heard Abbas chuckle. Jawad flashed a furious glance at him, but the young

man did not turn away.

“Jawad,” Ruqayya whispered. “I know what you did that day.”

Jawad froze. Panic seized his heart. What did she say? There was no way she was being truthful. How could she have known? No. She must be lying to him.

As if aware of the truth, she continued.

“On the day we were ambushed, you tried to run.”

Jawad looked down shamefully. Maybe she would have some pity on him.

“My brother told you to maintain your position,” she hissed. “But you fled. And because of that, they were able to defeat us.”

Jawad sighed.

“I-”

He didn’t continue.

“All I can say is-”

“There is no justification for what you did,” Abbas interrupted. “And on top of that, you lied to so many youth.”

Jawad frowned, his anger pulsing. Abbas was not to speak in this conversation. He turned his attention back to Ruqayya.

“I wanted to marry you,” he mumbled. “I wanted to live away from all of this.”

Ruqayya shook her head in disbelief.

“I admit that I am a coward,” Jawad declared. “I did try to run! Those stupid youths follow me and so, I lead them. I didn’t ask them to follow me blindly, like fools.”

Jawad waited for a reaction but neither showed him pity. In fact, both of them began smiling.

Jawad felt slightly unnerved. Something about how they were smiling made him feel like he had made some big slip-up.

“You did what?” he heard a voice gasp.

From the bushes emerged Akbar, followed by another person. Jawad’s eyes widened in horror as he realised he had been tricked.

“D-Dawud,” he stammered. “I-I can explain!”

Dawud’s eyes were in tears.

“I trusted you! I thought of you as a mentor!”

Jawad shook his head in disbelief. He shot a glance of fury at Ruqayya and Abbas.

“My boy,” Akbar sighed, resting a hand on Dawud. “I promised you that you would hear the truth and you did.”

Dawud glanced at Akbar with tears in his eyes. Jawad looked down in disbelief. He had lost.

“Now you must decide whose side are you on?” Akbar asked Dawud.

Dawud glanced at Jawad, with betrayal clearly visible in his eyes.

He turned to face Abbas.

“Abbas Bhai,” Dawud addressed. “Forgive me. I was weak in imaan and fell for the whispers of Shaitan.”

Abbas watched Dawud for a moment and Jawad began to wonder if Abbas would forgive him.

“You are now a new man,” Abbas answered, as he embraced Dawud.

“I forgive you,” Jawad heard Abbas whisper.

Dawud bowed his head respectfully and moved aside. Jawad glared at him before glaring at Akbar.

“We have a recording of your confession Jawad,” Akbar revealed. Jawad’s heart froze.

“What?” he exclaimed. “What are you going to do with me?”

Akbar shook his head in disapproval.

“We cannot let you go,” he whispered. “You know too much. If an Alpha captures you, they could learn about our entire defense system.”

Jawad closed his eyes. He knew what was coming. They would kill him.

“We will take you prisoner,” Akbar declared and Jawad noticed a surprised expression from Ruqayya. She may not have known about this plan. But in any case, it was better than being killed.

“I accept and appreciate your mercy Akbar,” Jawad whispered. “I will go to prison. I realise that I am wrong.”

Akbar nodded.

“Ruqayya and Dawud,” Akbar addressed. “You will transfer Jawad back. Abbas will accompany me. There is something we need to bring first.”

Jawad watched as Ruqayya bowed her head respectfully and Dawud saluted.

“Traitor!” Jawad thought to himself.

## Suspicious

“I don’t understand,” Abbas thought out loud. “Why do you think it is safe to send Ruqayya Api alone with Jawad and Dawud?”

It had been half an hour since Jawad had confessed and now, Ruqayya and Dawud were transporting him back.

Akbar grinned,

“My boy, it is no easy feat to take Ruqayya down. But do not worry, Ruqayya is in no danger.”

Abbas shook his head in disagreement.

“If Jawad is able to convince Dawud or if he -”

“They are not alone,” Akbar overspoke. “This is a test of Dawud’s loyalty.”

Abbas raised a brow. He didn’t understand.

“Isa and Yasir,” Akbar said.

“I’m guessing Isa and Yasir are following them, right?”

Akbar nodded.

“I would never put Ruqayya in danger,” he assured Abbas.

Abbas nodded. He knew Akbar would never put Ruqayya in danger. But not being with Ruqayya had made Abbas slightly anxious. He would only feel at ease if he saw her enter their base.

At that moment another thought occurred to Abbas. One which had been bothering him quite a bit.

“Akbar Uncle,” he began. “Before the attack, I saw Salman.”

Akbar stopped what he was doing and looked up curiously.

“What do you mean?” Akbar asked.

Abbas took a deep breath.

"I saw him watching us earlier," Abbas whispered.

Akbar looked down for a moment and Abbas could tell that the gears in his mind were in full swing. Then abruptly he looked up, eyeing Abbas carefully.

"Abbas," Akbar whispered. "Are you one hundred percent sure about this?"

Abbas nodded.

"I am sure it was him."

Akbar looked away.

"Ever since Naqi was martyred," Akbar sighed. "A thought has been bothering me."

Abbas raised a brow.

"How did Asghar know that Naqi would be there?"

Abbas's eyes widened in surprise.

"How do-"

"It can't be a coincidence," Akbar overspoke. "The first time a hunter leaves on a patrol, that patrol gets ambushed. Patrols leave the base every day but none of them get ambushed. How did Naqi's?"

Abbas shook his head for a moment. He was having difficulty accepting what Akbar was implying. Was there a traitor amongst them? Was there someone who had sold the honour of the revolution for some trivial worldly payment?

"What if Salman. . ." Akbar paused, letting his sentence trail off.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Salman was certainly under suspicion right now. Abbas knew that he had a liking for the Alphas' power, and he was desperate to prove himself. But Salman didn't seem despicable enough to do this.

"I don't know," Abbas questioned hesitantly. "I don't think Salman is capable of betraying, but we should still keep him under watch."

Akbar sighed.

"Agreed," he answered. "We should task someone to shadow his activities so that we can learn the truth."

Abbas shivered. Even the idea of a traitor made him feel uncomfortable. Until now, he had always assumed that the revolution base was safe. But deep down, he knew nowhere was safe. Nowhere was safe until the Alphas were destroyed.

Upon recalling the Alphas, a thought occurred to Abbas.

“Akbar Uncle,” Abbas thought out loud. “There was something really weird about the Alpha I fought.”

Akbar flashed Abbas a curious glance.

“He didn’t feel like the other Alphas.”

Akbar narrowed his eyes.

“Ruqayya said that he was trying to choke you to death.”

Abbas shook his head in disagreement.

“He had the chance to shoot me multiple times, but he didn’t take it. I found it a little strange. He was almost fighting. . . defensively,” Abbas finished.

Akbar stared Abbas in the eye.

“I’m sure you misunderstood.”

Abbas felt slightly odd at that moment. There was something weird about how Akbar was answering his questions.

“Akbar Uncle,” Abbas insisted. “You always note everything. If more leaves fall in Autumn than were meant to, that bothers you. How come you are so relaxed about this? How come it doesn’t surprise you that the soldiers attacked us? Alpha 31 used a smoke grenade. He could have also used a real grenade, but he didn’t.”

Akbar sighed.

“Abbas, you have become a more skilled opponent with time.”

He paused to wipe a fly away.

“You must understand that if the Alpha had a clear shot, he would’ve taken it. He must not have had an opportunity. Or maybe you caught him off surprise. Perhaps he thought that if he stayed to fight he would lose, so he decided to flee.”

“But you said it yourself!” Abbas exclaimed. “Alphas never run from a fight!”

Akbar raised his hand for silence.

“Maybe he needed to get away and he had been stalling. Honestly Abbas, I don’t see why this bothers you so much.”



Abbas sighed. Akbar was beyond reason. Maybe if he would have been there, he would have understood what Abbas was trying to say. Because Abbas knew what he had seen. He was well aware of what had happened.

Akbar placed a hand on Abbas's shoulder.

"There is something I need to tell you."

Abbas raised a brow. This was the reason Akbar had called him here in the first place.

"The committee and I have agreed to promote Ruqayya to leadership."

Abbas's eyes widened in surprise.

Ruqayya? Leadership? Would Ruqayya be ready to join the leadership committee? Would she be able to handle the pressures? Abbas shook his head. She was a strong woman. Of course, she could handle the pressures.

"I think she would make an excellent addition," Abbas answered quietly.

Akbar nodded.

"Then let's get going back to base."

And with that, they started heading back. Abbas was thinking about all that had happened and all that was about to happen. The conflicts with Alphas were increasing day by day. Eventually, one side would have to give in.

"There is a storm coming," Abbas whispered. "I can feel it."

## Alpha 16

“What do you mean you don’t know where he is?” Alpha 43 asked with a hint of irritation.

The guard looked down hesitantly. He didn’t want to be the bearer of bad news, but he needed to report the status of his task.

“Alpha 31 was last seen by the training arena,” the guard explained; a bead of sweat was trickling down his cheek. “After that, we have no idea where he went.”

Alpha 43 eyed him in fury.

“Did I not emphasise how important it is that we keep watch on him at all times?”

The soldier grunted in agreement. He knew how important this was. That was why he had been so nervous coming here.

Alpha 43 shook his head in disbelief.

“Find Alpha 31 and tell him to report to my office,” Alpha 43 instructed harshly. “I want an update in the next hour.”

The soldier nodded and turned to leave.

As he left, Alpha 43 thought carefully on what had happened. Alpha 31, his rival, had not taken nicely to losing his designation. He would definitely think of some idea to get it back. He had to be watched at all times. And now, he had disappeared into thin air. Nobody knew where he was. The camera footage which had been monitoring the area had glitched for roughly ten seconds.

Alpha 43 was well aware of what someone could do in ten seconds. What he was more curious about was why the camera

glitched. It had to have been done by someone. Someone who was an ally with Alpha 31. Perhaps Salma, his loyal student? Or maybe Jannat, the young girl who served as his head of communications. Or maybe one of his soldiers.

A sudden beeping of his intercom snapped the Alpha's train of thought.

"What is it?" Alpha 43 asked as he answered the device.

A robotic voice began speaking,

"Sir, you wanted to know when the prisoner arrived. The prisoner is here. He has been locked up in a different cell from the woman as instructed."

Alpha 43's lips curled into a smile.

"Good!" the Alpha answered, hanging up the receiver.

He got up and headed towards the door. Exiting his office he strolled towards the elevator where he entered the necessary floor. The elevator transported him to the iron fortress prison.

From there it took him a minute to reach the end of the hallway where a thorned rope lay in wait for him. Cautiously, the Alpha removed a new pair of specialised black gloves from his pocket.

With a deep breath, he climbed his way down, careful to avoid the sharp spikes below. As he reached the ground near the prison door, he heard a voice,

"Who goes there?"

Alpha 43 glanced up at the guards. Very slowly, he scratched both sides of his face simultaneously. The guard's eyes widened in surprise and immediately he and the other four guards went down to their knees.

Alpha 43 nodded with an air of satisfaction.

"I'm glad that the five of you still follow protocol even though you know it's me."

The guards saluted, allowing Alpha 43 to enter inside the hallway. The Alpha counted the number of steps he took in his head as he walked along the corridor.

"nine... ten... eleven..." the Alpha thought quietly.

"twelve... thirteen... fourteen!"

There was a beep and then a click as the wall beside the Alpha

stepped backwards, exposing an entrance. He strolled inside, preparing himself for the encounter he was about to have.

The man he was about to meet was one of the Alphas' biggest enemies. Alpha 43 took a deep breath. He knew this man quite well. Well before he had become an Alpha. This man had been like an older brother for him. But life had lead them on opposite sides, and Alpha 43 felt no connection with this man anymore. He was a prisoner. And he had some valuable information.

He pressed the handle of the door and stepped inside. The room was empty. Except for the corner. The prisoner was cuffed to the wall. A large pipe extended into his shirt.

Alpha 43 narrowed his eyes. They were keeping this prisoner sedated. That was probably a good idea. If he escaped, it would be a lot of trouble to recapture him.

"Well, well," the prisoner wheezed. "I didn't expect you here."

He didn't look up.

Alpha 43 sighed.

"I am only here, Alpha 16; to find out some things from you."

The prisoner coughed before glancing up.

"I don't go by that name anymore and I have nothing to say to you," he hissed.

Alpha 43 ignored the prisoner's comments.

"I want information," the Alpha stated dryly.

The prisoner nodded innocently; a smile formed on his face.

"I have lots of information," he replied. "I can tell you about politics, animals. . ."

Alpha 43 rolled his eyes. He knew this man would try to push his patience. He would not give in so easily.

"I will only ask once," the Alpha whispered.

The prisoner stopped smiling now, matching Alpha 43's gaze.

"Who helped you form your escape plan?" Alpha 43 asked.

The prisoner narrowed his eyes before widening them in surprise.

"It was you!" the prisoner exclaimed. "Jumeira! If you can hear me! Arrest him! He was my co-conspirator!"

Alpha 43 shook his head in disapproval. He knew this would be difficult.

“You know what comes next,” the Alpha hissed. “If you don’t talk.”

The prisoner smiled.

“Allah gives us strength,” he answered.

Alpha 43 felt a hint of anger. He wanted to strangle this man but instead he withdrew a small blade from his pocket.

“I will cut you open like a fish,” Alpha 43 smiled venomously.

The prisoner sighed.

“You know I’m not afraid,” he answered. “Say and do whatever you like.”

Alpha 43 chuckled.

“I knew you would feel that way.”

The prisoner closed his eyes. Alpha 43 heard him whisper,

“So surely with hardship, comes ease.”

Laughing, he raised his blade to the prisoner’s hand.

“There will be no ease for you my friend,” he answered. “Only pain!”

# Training

“Faster!” Abbas encouraged.

Dawud whipped out his leg even faster, this time fracturing the wooden pole.

“Mashallah!” Abbas praised. “You are getting more skilled with each day Dawud.”

Dawud beamed. Ever since he had returned, Abbas noticed a constant effort from Dawud. He was trying to earn his respect back. After all, he had been Jawad’s lead supporter. When Jawad went to prison, Dawud had faced a lot of criticism.

Abbas was pleased to see that his student was working so hard. And his efforts were paying off. Abbas had noticed a massive improvement in Dawud’s techniques.

“Abbas!” he heard a voice call out.

Turning around, he saw Isa.

“Let’s have a tournament,” the young man stated.

Abbas nodded. Clapping his hands together he called out,

“We are having a tournament, guys! All of the boys on this side and all the girls on that side where Maryam is.”

Maryam nodded and with Ruqayya, she began leading the girls away for their tournament on the other side. Abbas took a deep breath as he called out for his brother in arms,

“Alright Isa! Let’s see whose students are stronger!”

There was an “Ooooooo” from the boys as both hunters assumed a seat on the grass.

“First up,” Abbas called out, “Yasir and Hussain.”

Both got to their feet immediately.

Abbas watched intently as they got ready to fight. Hussain was about a foot taller than Yasir, but Yasir was wider; meaning Yasir was stronger.

“Fight!” Isa ordered.

Instantly, the two leapt at each other like leopards. They went tumbling away until Hussain emerged on top. Hussain brought a fist crashing down, but Yasir caught it and rammed his head into Hussain’s stomach causing Hussain to stagger backwards. Isa smiled. Yasir had scored his first point.

“Feeling nervous,” Isa teased playfully.

Abbas sighed as Yasir hurled Hussain across the arena, scoring his second point.

“Is there anyone who can defeat Yasir?” he whispered back.

Abbas smiled. He remembered how disappointed Isa had been when Yasir first fought. Now he was proud of him.

The time finished and Yasir had finished with a win of three-nil. Disappointed, Hussain headed over to the losing side and sat down.

Next came Salman and a man named Ishaq. Abbas closed his eyes. He did not want to see this fight. He was well aware of Salman’s fighting abilities. But Abbas did not want to be rude so he forced his eyes open once more.

Salman assumed a fighting stance. Abbas eyed him carefully. In the last two days of monitoring Salman, he had not shown any signs of treachery. And when he had been asked about following them, Salman confessed that he had done it out of curiosity.

These events had cast doubt on whether Salman was a traitor or not. Despite that, Abbas and Akbar were still having him watched.

The fight started and Ishaq leapt forward. Abbas watched as Salman jumped out of the way just in time. Ishaq then charged, ramming Salman off of his feet. Abbas shook his head in disapproval as Ishaq gained his first point.

Everyone burst into laughter and cries began coming in,

“Go Salman!”

“You’re gonna get destroyed!”

Isa raised his hand for silence.

Salman looked up, wiping the mud away from his face.

“Fight!” Abbas called out.

Before Ishaq could do anything, Salman leapt forward and grabbed hold of him. Abbas’s eyes widened in surprise as Salman hurled him in the air. With a loud thud, Ishaq landed in the grass.

Isa glanced at Abbas in disbelief. Had Salman just scored a point?

Abbas couldn’t believe it either. Maybe he really was trying to change himself.

Ishaq got to his feet, the rage visible in his eyes. In a flash, he leapt forward but Salman sidestepped him, just like Abbas; and rammed an elbow into his stomach. Ishaq collapsed on the ground breathlessly as silence emerged amongst the crowd. Salman had scored his second point. He was winning?

Ishaq leapt at Salman once more and the two began trading punches until Salman managed to ram his shoulder into Ishaq’s stomach, scoring his third point. He then shot his leg at Ishaq’s face, knocking Ishaq to the ground.

Abbas watched in disbelief as the match finished.

“Did Salman just win?” Isa muttered in utter surprise. “You saw it too, right?”

Abbas did not answer. He could not believe it. And even as the tournament progressed, he could not believe how Salman was defeating more and more opponents. Abbas kept waiting for the humiliating defeat of Salman, but it never came. Eventually, Salman qualified for the semi finals.

‘Maybe his defeat has helped him,’ Abbas thought silently.

Abbas clapped his hands together signalling the start of the semi finals. The four qualifiers were Dawud and Yasir. In addition, there was a younger boy who had beaten Salman last time in the previous tournament. And finally, Salman.

“First up,” Isa announced. “Dawud and Shajeeh.”

Abbas watched as the younger boy got to his feet enthusiastically. On the other side, Dawud got ready.

“Fight!” Abbas called out.



Instantly, Shajeeh leapt at Dawud who retreated. Shajeeh attempted to kick Dawud, but the young man merely dodged. Abbas smiled. Dawud wanted to wear Shajeeh out. And it worked. After about one minute of failed chasing, Shajeeh was exhausted. Dawud then began attacking and very quickly scored two points, sealing his victory.

The group roared in applause as Salman and Yasir got ready for the next fight.

Salman glanced once at Abbas. Abbas met his gaze. Salman then turned back and positioned himself in a fighting stance.

“Fight!” Isa called out.

In a flash, Yasir leapt forward. Salman dodged but this time, rather than retreating, he charged forward and smashed into Yasir’s side. But Yasir was stronger and somehow, he managed to not fall over. Yasir grabbed hold of Salman’s neck which was a mistake; for Salman grabbed Yasir’s legs and pulled them, knocking Yasir over.

Abbas applauded as Salman scored his first point.

“Come on Yasir!” Isa called out.

The fight resumed and this time Salman took the offensive. He whipped his leg at Yasir who only just managed to dodge before lifting his elbow for a followup. But Yasir anticipated this and managed to catch the elbow midway. Instantly, he rammed his head into Salman’s, knocking Salman back into the ground. Abbas felt a pinch of frustration. Yasir had scored his first point.

The boys began cheering wildly, unable to handle the suspense.

Salman lunged forth, grabbing hold of Yasir; he hurled Yasir. With a loud thud Yasir landed on the ground. Salman then flung his fist, knocking Yasir to the ground.

Abbas watched in surprise. Salman had taken another point making the score 2-1.

Salman then leapt forward. But Yasir dodged him and shot his fist to Salman’s side. Salman caught the fist, not noticing Yasir’s other fist strike his temple, knocking him to the ground.

Abbas and Isa both applauded as Yasir evened the score 2-2.

Frustration was visible on Salman’s face and Abbas began to feel a little worried. When one fights in anger, they often lose

focus. If Salman let his emotions get the better of him, then he would most certainly lose.

Salman roared and barged forward. Isa shook his head. Leaning over to Abbas, he whispered,

“He’s too angry.”

And Isa was right. Because Yasir merely dodged Salman for a few seconds before Salman threw a wide punch, exposing his ribs. Yasir, brilliant as always, struck there to seal his third and final point.

Abbas looked down for a moment as the timer ended. Yasir was the winner. Salman glanced away. He got to his feet. Abbas felt bad for him. He must have worked really hard. Salman headed over to the other side where the other defeated contenders were.

“Mashallah Salman!” came a voice.

Abbas turned in surprise to see Khalid applauding him. Salman showed expressions for the first time; his eyes widened in surprise. Silence emerged over the crowd as Khalid approached Salman.

“I am so proud of you, my boy,” Khalid whispered. “You did very well.”

Yasir nodded.

“I don’t know what your routine is Salman,” Yasir smiled. “But whatever it is, you have become so much harder to beat now. I would honestly call it my luck.”

Everyone erupted into applause.

Abbas placed a reassuring hand on Salman’s shoulder. The young man whirled around in surprise and for the first time, Abbas saw Salman smile. Eyes watered, he headed over to the corner to make room for the final.

Khalid sat down beside him. Abbas smiled and turned his attention back to the arena. For now, the long awaited final was to take place. And the contenders would be Dawud and Yasir.

“May the best fighter win!” Isa said as both youths prepared to fight.

Abbas watched carefully. He didn’t want to miss a single detail.

## Sneaky

It was midnight. Nothing could be seen as all the fires and lights had been put out. All except the border lights for the guards who were patrolling. A thick fog had descended tonight. It was making everything difficult to see. Otherwise the guards would have seen the figure hunched beside one of the barns.

She was watching the men's sleeping quarters. Not looking away for even a fraction of a second. *Crack.* The figure whirled around for a moment with a firearm at the ready. In the distance, she could make out a young man heading in the other direction.

"Abbas," Maryam recognised. 'Hmmm. He must be having trouble sleeping.'

She turned her attention back to the barn.

Ever since Jafar had brought up their parents, Maryam had been greatly suspicious that something was up with her brother. She knew that he was a good child but still, as an older sister, she felt responsible to watch over him.

Certain strange things had been setting off red flags for Maryam. For one, Jafar had not been appearing in social gatherings that often. She had confirmed this after asking around. In fact, even Haider had confessed that Jafar had stopped meeting Abbas, and Jafar loved Abbas. If he wasn't visiting Abbas and was preferring isolation, it could mean something was amiss.

That was why she was watching the barn tonight. Yesterday, Isa had mentioned seeing Jafar sneaking out of the barn. This

directed Maryam to theorising that Jafar was sneaking out at night.

Hence, she formed a plan. She would watch to see if he would sneak out and follow him wherever he was going.

But it had been a whole hour since lights had gone out at base and Maryam had also begun to start feeling sleepy.

‘If I don’t see him in the next hour, I’ll head back in,’ she decided.

As Maryam watched, the time ticked by. In that time, the guards had already changed position. Farheen Auntie had crossed along the road, heading in the same direction as Abbas. Two pigeons had flown from one roof to the other.

Maryam sighed as the forty fifth minute passed.

‘Only 15 minutes to go,’ she reassured herself.

At that moment, she noticed some movement near the barn. Maryam narrowed her eyes. There was someone there. Someone walking. But it wasn’t a big person. It was a short person.

Maryam’s eyes widened in surprise as she recognised Jafar.

“What are you up to little brother?” she muttered under her breath.

Quietly, she watched as Jafar nipped his way past the barn, staying in the shadow of the buildings.

Maryam advanced forward, carefully following him. As a hunter, she was skilled enough to shadow him without alerting him. Despite that, she couldn’t help notice how anxious her brother looked. He was constantly looking over his shoulder, glancing from left to right and carefully staying in the shadows.

‘Whatever he is up to,’ Maryam concluded. ‘He definitely does not want to be seen.’

Maryam’s eyes widened in surprise as Jafar reached the edge of one of the fences.

‘Is he going outside?’ she thought. ‘Is he mad?’

Abruptly, Jafar shot a sharp glance behind him. Maryam just managed to slip behind a bush in time. She watched as he eyed the fence carefully, and then in a flash, he began climbing the wall.

Maryam watched in horror as he scaled the five meter wall and jumped over in just a few seconds.

“Akbar Uncle did not teach you to climb so you could sneak out,” she chided.

Swiftly, Maryam sprinted towards that part of the fence. She was a better climber than Jafar since childhood. For this reason, it only took her a few seconds to scale the wall as well. Upon reaching the top, she jumped over to the other side.

There was a hiss.

Maryam froze, slowly withdrawing her gun. Now that she was outside, she was vulnerable. Vulnerable to any kind of attack. She needed to be alert. And find her brother. Whatever Jafar was doing, he was being a fool if he thought he was allowed to sneak outside at night.

‘Wait until Zahra Api finds out,’ Maryam thought to herself. ‘Wait until Akbar Uncle learns what you have done.’

She strolled near the fog. As she went, she couldn’t help feeling slightly unnerved. She was alone in the wilderness looking for her brother.

“Jafar!” she whispered. “Where are you!”

There was no response. Slowly but nervously, Maryam advanced forward into the fog. Now she could barely see anything.

*Click.* Maryam froze. That wasn’t wilderness. That was a gun. And not many friendly people had guns around here. She aimed her gun in the direction the click came from.

*Crack.*

This noise came from below Maryam. Raising a brow she glanced down. Maryam’s eyes widened in horror. She felt her heart go numb. She was standing on ice.

‘This must be a river which has frozen for now,’ she thought to herself.

But winter hadn’t started yet. Confused, she began to move forward but heard a voice,

“Freeze. You’re surrounded.”

Maryam’s eyes darted around as she saw multiple men dressed in black emerge from the fog surrounding her.

Maryam felt her heart sink. They were soldiers of the iron fortress.

“Surrender now,” one of the soldiers warned.

Maryam whispered a silent prayer.

“Ya Allah, you grant strength to your believers.”

The soldiers laughed.

“Kill her!” the lead soldier ordered.

The sound of bullets filled the air.

## Worries and Concerns

Abbas sighed as he watched the stars in the sky. How beautiful they were. Burning in the sky. Illuminating it.

“Subhanallah, how amazing our creator is,” Abbas contemplated. “He has created so many wonders in the universe that we can’t comprehend.”

Abbas smiled as he recalled the tournament. Nobody had expected Dawud to win. Yasir had been a clear favourite. But Yasir, despite losing in the final match, as always; took it like a sportsman.

Abbas was glad that Dawud had won. Not because he was Abbas’s student, but rather; because now Dawud had finally found a way to start forming bonds with his revolutionary brothers and sisters once more.

It couldn’t be easy to be an outcast. But at least now Dawud had a chance at living life the way he should have.

Abbas still could not believe how much had happened in his life in the last year. How he had lost his parents, found the bungalow, fought the Alphas, joined a revolution etc. He could not believe how much he had changed in this time. He was no longer a child. Now he was a man. He had friends. And enemies.

A strange feeling pierced through Abbas as he thought about Alpha 43. An assassin. A murderer. Someone who had shed the blood of his own brother.

Abbas knew he was on Alpha 43’s hit list. And for some

strange reason it did not bother him. Life and death did not affect Abbas's decisions anymore. All that mattered was fighting for what he believed. Fighting for the cause.

"Now what might a young man like yourself be doing awake at this hour," a voice came from behind.

Abbas turned to see Farheen standing there with a smile on her face.

"Farheen Auntie," Abbas greeted, getting to his feet. "I'm sorry, I didn't see you coming."

Farheen nodded her head, before assuming a seat beside Abbas. Abbas sat down beside her.

"I sense something is troubling you my boy," she whispered.

Abbas sighed. He didn't know what he could say and what he couldn't. He knew Farheen was trustworthy. But the burden in his heart was a lot to bear. He wasn't sure if he wanted anyone to know about it. But then again, Farheen was no stranger. She had mentored Isa. He decided to speak from his heart.

"It's nothing big, really. It's just that people I care about, worry about me."

Farheen nodded kindly.

"They think I am pushing it too far, that I might get in trouble that I won't be able to handle. That..." He paused. "That I might get myself killed."

Farheen sighed.

"And what do you think?" she asked.

Abbas thought for a moment before answering.

"I-I-" Abbas stopped for a moment. "I am tired of all the suffering we have been subjected to. I want to change our lives for the better."

Farheen coughed for a moment.

"Abbas," she answered in a very kind tone. "In life, we are all meant to face challenges. But we don't have to face them alone. You don't have to face them alone."

Abbas glanced down for a moment.

"You have Akbar," she continued. "You have Zahra, Ali and your younger brother to name a few. Then there is Jafar and Maryam and all the others like Isa, Dawud, Yasir and Salman."



Abbas's ears pricked at the mention of Salman's name.

Abbas looked up for a moment, matching her gaze.

"If you find people whom you can rely on Abbas, people you can trust; then those hardships won't be as difficult. People who care about you, worry for you; but those people are your strength too. Together, we will sail through this, Inshallah. Our sincere duas for each other will keep us going. Our love and concern for each other should not weaken us, but rather it should make us more united and more strong, Inshallah! Abbas, my boy, don't worry! Allah always sides with the truth. As it is mentioned in Quran, 'For those who believe, Allah suffices.'"

Abbas felt a strange feeling of calmness in his heart. He couldn't explain it.

Farheen's words had filled his heart with icy cool calmness and trust in Allah (swt), and a burning flame of passion for the course of truth. Abbas was enjoying the two feelings simultaneously in his heart. He gave an ear-to-ear grin to Farheen, as he responded,

"Thanks Farheen Auntie. I feel a lot better, ALhamdulillah."

Farheen smiled back at Abbas thinking in her mind how much she had started to care for all the youth of the revolution, especially the young man in front of her whom she knew had the brightest spark in his heart.

As they were both about to conclude the conversation, they heard a shriek. Abbas's eyes widened in surprise.

"Did you hear that?" Abbas asked, getting to his feet swiftly.

Farheen nodded and then abruptly her eyes widened in horror.

"I saw Maryam walking near the fence in that area on the way here," she whispered with concern in her voice.

Abbas felt panic seize his heart.

"I have to go Farheen Auntie!" he exclaimed. "Please alert the border guards. Dawud is leading guard duty tonight."

Farheen nodded and with that Abbas darted off. Farheen speedily got to her feet. She desperately hoped that all was well.

# The Frozen River

Abbas's eyes scanned the entire fence. No sign of Maryam. Swiftly, he advanced towards it. In any case, he should investigate the edge. Maybe it could give him an idea of where Maryam was.

As he approached the fence, he couldn't help notice the muddy footprints on the fence. Abbas narrowed his eyes. Someone had definitely climbed over the fence. Slowly, he grabbed hold, hauling himself upwards until he reached the top. He then jumped, landing safely on the other side.

Abbas stopped for a second. There was too much fog. Why would someone in their right mind go in there at this hour? Carefully, he started treading through the fog. He withdrew his pistol, Zulfi, in one hand and drew his knife in the other.

Abbas continued down the trail.

*Crack..*

Abbas froze. Someone else was here. He could hear voices.

Abbas lifted his gun, advancing forward until he could finally understand what was being said.

"Surrender now."

The voice was harsh and authoritative. Abbas glanced over to see who it was.

Multiple soldiers in black uniforms stood there.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. They were soldiers of the iron fortress. In the center of the soldiers, was a girl. Abbas felt his heart stop for a moment as he recognised her. It was Maryam.

She was glancing around and standing very awkwardly on the ground, as though it might swallow her up. She murmured something, and then the same voice came once more,

“Kill her!”

Abbas’s eyes widened in horror. In a flash, he raised his gun and opened fire on the soldiers.

Instantly, three of them dropped dead. Others began retreating or firing blindly in his direction.

Abbas growled.

“Ya Allah!”

Charging forward, he shot two more soldiers who were retreating. A familiar whistling noise came in his ears. Abbas stopped before jumping to the ground as the missile whizzed over his head, exploding into a ball of flame behind him.

“There he is!” came an excited cry. “There he-”

Abbas flung his knife in the direction of the call.

Glancing at Maryam, he called out,

“Come on! What are you waiting for?”

Maryam glanced up as her eyes filled with worry before looking down.

“Abbas watch your step,” she cautioned. “The ice could give way!”

Abbas raised a brow. There was no ice.

Abbas felt a massive force knock him sideways. One of the soldiers had taken advantage of his temporary distraction. Abbas lifted his elbow and in a flash, brought it crashing down upon the center of the man’s skull.

He screamed and let go. Abbas barged on, ramming another soldier nearby. From the soldier’s hand, a small device fell which Abbas recognised instantly to be a C-gun.

Of course! They were making her see ice! Abbas felt a hint of anger but controlled it.

He heard a thud behind him. Turning around, he felt a chill in his heart. Maryam had fallen unconscious, probably because of the C-gun.

Abbas moved in front of her, well aware that he was putting himself in risk. But he needed to know how many soldiers were

left.

There was a flicker of movement from ahead as another soldier emerged from the bushes. Alone. Abbas narrowed his eyes. There must have been only one left. The soldier moved forward.

“I will kill you,” he hissed.

Abbas chuckled.

“No,” he breathed softly. “No, you won’t.”

Instantly, Abbas raised his fist and brought it crashing down on the soldier’s head. He fell down to the ground with a thud.

With an air of satisfaction, he turned back to Maryam.

“Maryam!” Abbas exclaimed. “Are you all right?”

Silence. Abbas began to worry but at that moment, Maryam stirred.

“Wha-”

Abbas felt relief in his heart. Glancing up, he whispered,

“Alhamdulillah.”

“I’m alright, Alhamdulillah.” Maryam said as she rose to her feet.

For a moment neither of them said anything. Then Abbas broke the silence,

“Why were you out at this time, Maryam?” he asked. “You could have died! Or worse, you could have been taken!”

Maryam took a deep breath before answering.

“First off, I really appreciate the help and concern.”

Abbas gave a quick nod to acknowledge her gratitude. He was eager to hear the reason Maryam had for falling in this dangerous situation.

“And to answer your question,” Maryam continued, “I wasn’t here for myself. I was trying to find Jafar.”

Abbas whirled to face Maryam, confused.

“What do you mean Jafar? What happened to him?”

Maryam sighed.

“He has been acting a little weird lately,” she explained. “And recently I learnt that he has been leaving the sleeping quarters at night. So I followed him. I saw him climb over the fence. So I went after him to bring him back. Abbas, I don’t know where Jafar is right now and I must go on to find him.”

She was pretending to be stronger than she really was. Her mind was boggling with hundreds of horrible ideas combined with extreme concern for her little brother.

Abbas spoke with an understanding but firm tone.

“We need to find Jafar and we will Inshallah,” he concluded decisively.

Maryam looked at him eagerly.

“I think, for now, we should head back and report this. It’s very important that we make a solid plan. Maryam, Jafar is very dear to me too but remember, we are trained to keep our nerves calm in times of extreme pressure. We will find him soon, Inshallah.”

Abbas was finding it hard to keep the calm in his voice. He was also feeling very concerned for Jafar. Jafar and Haider were not different for him. Maryam broke his chain of thoughts.

“Okay, let’s go back fast and tell Akbar Uncle.”

With that, both of them started running towards base.

## A Bad Feeling

“Jafar,” Akbar said harshly. “Why did you go outside the fence?”

Jafar looked down. Abbas felt no pity for once. They had almost lost Maryam because of Jafar’s foolish deed. She would have died if Abbas hadn’t made it there in time.

It had taken them almost the entire night to locate Jafar and when the patrol team found him, he was asleep on the ground under a tree. Akbar asked Abbas to leave as he wanted to speak to Jafar in isolation. Abbas agreed instantly and headed out of the room.

While Akbar was talking to Jafar, Abbas headed out. His mind was thinking about the latest developments. The patrol unit had been ambushed. The revolution had lost one of their bravest soldiers, Naqi. During a meeting with Akbar, Abbas saw Salman watching him. Although later when asked, Salman confirmed that he had just been curious. In addition, there was the strange Alpha who didn’t kill him when he had the chance to do so. Now, Jafar was sneaking out and sleeping under a tree while enemy soldiers were found near the base.

Why were enemy soldiers near the base? Abbas needed to know. He needed answers to all these mind-boggling questions.

From a distance, he could see Isa speaking with Kadhim Uncle. Swiftly, Abbas sprinted over to where they were.

“Salamunalaikum,” Abbas greeted them.

“Walaikum asalam,” came a combined reply from Isa and

Kadhim.

“Something bothering you Abbas?” Kadhim asked, raising a brow. There was a suspicious look in his eyes.

“I need to investigate the site of the dead soldiers,” Abbas whispered.

Kadhim narrowed his eyes.

“What are you suspecting?” he asked.

Abbas responded.

“Something about last night felt very strange to me,” Abbas answered. “I am hoping to find some clues.”

Isa looked down.

“I can’t come with you,” he sighed. “I have to do something for Farheen Auntie.”

Abbas looked down for a moment. He rarely ever went on a mission without Isa.

“Take Dawud,” Kadhim declared. “And Yasir.”

Abbas nodded, and with that, the group split apart and headed their separate ways. Abbas moved swiftly. He was having a very bad feeling today.

## Investigations

“Bismillah,” Dawud whispered as they entered the forest.

Abbas muttered a dua under his breath. Slowly and carefully, they moved forward. Abbas was leading, covering both the front and left side. Yasir watched the right side and Dawud covering their rear in case an attacker attempted to strike from behind.

“What are we looking for?” Dawud whispered.

Abbas narrowed his eyes.

“The committee has already sealed off the area,” Abbas whispered. “Khalid Uncle and Ruqayya Api have been investigating since morning.”

Dawud nodded.

“I understand, but then why are we here and what do you hope to find?” he repeated quietly.

Abbas sighed as the site of the incident came into view.

“I want,” he paused. “Answers.”

Abbas advanced forward leaving both of them behind. That would have to satisfy Dawud’s curiosity. He approached the edge where the guards stood. They didn’t even bother asking Abbas anything and just let him through.

Upon entering the site, Abbas motioned for Dawud and Yasir to follow. They both entered the area as well. Abbas motioned for both of them to listen closely.

“I want both of you,” Abbas whispered. “To search the area past this zone. I want you to see if there are any traces of soldiers



ahead. If you do, one of you should come let me know.”

Both of them nodded and advanced ahead.

“Salamunalikum,” Abbas heard from behind.

Turning around, he saw a very welcome sight.

Ruqayya stood there with a thick pair of muddy gloves in her hand.

“Walaikum asalam,” Abbas grinned. “How are you doing Api?”

Ruqayya smiled.

“Alhamdulillah, I’ve been trying to accumulate any evidence I can find,” she paused to wipe the sweat off her forehead. “But that has meant a lot of digging in dirt.”

Abbas nodded in agreement.

“I was hoping to do some searching myself too,” he explained. “Kadhim Uncle gave me permission.”

Ruqayya sighed.

“Sure. Hopefully, we can find some clues,” she stated before turning to resume work. “Khalid Bhai has left for a few minutes to bring something from his work station. He should be back soon.”

Abbas acknowledged before moving forward.

‘What am I looking for?’ he thought to himself. ‘Ya Allah, help me find what I need.’

As he reached the area under the big tree, he began examining the pile of bodies. There were about 10 bodies which surprised Abbas. In the moment he hadn’t realised there were so many. Maryam’s protection took over everything else at that time.

One of the soldiers had a knife embedded in his chest. Abbas’s knife. Abbas remembered throwing that knife. He reached down and grabbed hold of the blade.

With a slight tug he pulled the blade out. At that moment, Abbas noticed something. None of the soldiers had any equipment.

Turning to Ruqayya, he called out,

“Where is their equipment?”

Ruqayya glanced his way for a moment.

“It’s in the corner by that tree.” She pointed in the direction.

Abbas nodded in acknowledgement before moving forward. As he reached the tree, his eyes began scanning the pile of tiny gadgets. There was a bunch of small hand radios as well as guns and knives.

Abbas eyed the receivers warily. His eyes moved on to the guns. They were modern weapons. Abbas picked one in his hand and begun studying it carefully.

It was a very powerful pistol. Abbas could tell that its bullet would've ripped through anyone,.

'Funny,' Abbas contemplated. 'I don't recall anyone firing these kind of powerful bullets at me. These would have ripped away at the trees.'

Abbas glanced up to where he had taken cover during the fight the night before. There were bullet marks on the trees but none of them were the kind these powerful bullets would have left.

"Ruqayya Api," Abbas asked. "Did these men carry any other guns?"

Ruqayya shook her head, strolling up beside Abbas.

"None of the bullet marks from last night came from these guns," Abbas explained.

Ruqayya's eyes narrowed and Abbas could tell the gears in her mind were running.

"Why would you bring a gun if you didn't intend to fire it?" she asked.

Abbas took a deep breath.

"Let's try firing one of them," Ruqayya suggested,

Grabbing hold of one of the guns, she pressed the trigger. There was a loud boom noise and a puff of smoke but nothing came out.

"It's a fake!" Ruqayya exclaimed. "You know these guns were hidden in odd places. They had been angled in trees and were positioned."

Abbas's eyes widened in surprise. That was highly unusual.

"We should pry one open," he whispered.

Abbas tightened his grip on the firearm he already held. He began prying at the edge with his knife. Almost instantly, the gun split in two.

Abbas watched in surprise. Inside, there was some kind of machine and circuitry!

He narrowed his eyes.

“It was made to look like a gun, so that someone would disregard it if they found it.”

Ruqayya nodded.

“There is a lens,” she whispered pointing to where the front of the gun was. “I’m guessing this was some kind of camera.”

Abbas could not believe what he had just found out.

“Allahu Akbar,” he whispered. “Ruqayya Api, we need to pack these up and present them to the committee. They need to know about this.”

## An Important Meeting

“Audhubillah hi mina shaytan nir rajeem,” Akbar began “Bismillah hir rahman nir raheem.”

“Brothers and sisters, Asalamunalikum. Today, have some very important things to discuss,” he nodded towards Ruqayya to speak.

The remaining members of the leadership committee nodded in agreement.

“An hour ago,” Ruqayya started to explain. “Abbas and I made a startling discovery about the attack that took place last night.”

Ruqayya took a deep breath. This was the first time she was participating in a leadership committee meeting as a full time member and it felt slightly odd to be in such a position.

“The soldiers that were found near our base,” Ruqayya explained. “Were carrying hidden camera equipment.”

She paused as Akbar raised a brow.

“So they were taking photos and videos,” Kadhim stated.

Ruqayya nodded in acknowledgement.

“Abbas and I don’t understand why they were doing this.”

Akbar coughed for a moment.

“Does anyone else know about this Ruqayya?” Akbar asked.

“Aside from us four and Abbas.”

Ruqayya shook her head.

“Even Khalid doesn’t know. We thought it would be best if less people knew.”

Akbar nodded with an air of satisfaction.

“That is good,” he acknowledged.

There was a moment of silence as all four members of the committee sat there contemplating on the facts.

“I theorise that the soldiers were gathering information,” Akbar began.

Farheen’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Do you think...” she paused. “Do you think they were looking for our base?”

There was an eerie silence. As everyone realised what that meant. The fact that those soldiers got so close, it meant that they were on the verge of discovering the location of the revolution’s base.

“I believe you are correct, Farheen,” Akbar replied. “I think that this was one of many groups looking for our base. And this group actually managed to find us, but thankfully Abbas took care of them.”

There was a murmur of agreement.

“I only question one thing,” Kadhim asked quietly. “Why was Abbas there that night? Doesn’t anyone find it a little weird?”

Ruqayya narrowed her eyes, just managing to control her temper.

“What are you suggesting Kadhim Bhai,” she snapped. “What are you trying to imply about my brother?”

Kadhim’s head tilted in confusion.

“Your broth-” he let his sentence trail off. Awkwardly, he glanced down.

“All I’m saying,” Kadhim whispered. “Is that I can’t see this as a coincidence that Abbas-”

“Abbas,” Akbar overspoke. “Had gone to help Maryam. She had been ambushed.”

Kadhim nodded awkwardly.

“And why was Maryam there?” he asked silently.

Ruqayya felt her anger pulse. How could Kadhim accuse Abbas or Maryam of treachery? How did he have the audacity to

suspect them?

“What is the problem Kadhim?” Farheen asked defensively. “Are you honestly suspecting two hunters of being traitors?”

Kadhim sighed.

“Not at all. I’m trying to tether all the details so that we don’t miss out on any possible clue about the incident.”

Ruqayya nodded her head in satisfaction. Kadhim was just being cautious. And that was good.

Farheen continued, “If the Alphas are close to finding our home, then we are in a serious situation.”

There was a murmur of agreement from everyone. They all knew that this was indeed a danger.

“If the Alphas have found us,” Kadhim stated. “Then we are in a very difficult position.”

Akbar shook his head.

“I would disagree with you there Kadhim,” he sighed with a meaningful smile on his face. “From my experience, I feel like we can turn this into an opportunity.”

Ruqayya narrowed her eyes. What exactly did Akbar mean?

“They haven’t found our base yet,” Akbar continued. “Or they would have already attacked.”

Ruqayya ignored the minor worry that was starting to fill her heart.

“We should use this to lay a trap,” Akbar explained. “A trap which avenges our martyrs.”

There was a murmur of agreement from everyone.

“Alright Akbar Bhai,” Ruqayya answered. “What do you have in mind?”

## A New Discovery

Alpha 43 took a deep breath as he waited outside of Jumeira's office. Today, he had big news for her. Very big news. Something that would consolidate his position. For through his immense efforts, Alpha 43 had finally discovered the location of the revolution's base.

The door swung open and Alpha 43 went through. As he approached, he couldn't help notice Jumeira seemed slightly agitated. But that didn't matter.

"You wished to see me," Jumeira stated with a hint of disinterest.

Alpha 43 nodded.

"We have acquired some essential information."

Jumeira raised a brow.

"We have learned the location of the revolution's base," he uttered the words hastily with excitement.

Jumeira's eyes lit up and for the first time, Alpha 43 saw her straighten up; her interest was clearly visible in her eyes.

"How did you acquire this information?" she demanded.

Alpha 43 took a deep breath, relaxing himself slightly.

"I sent out patrols of soldiers to search for the base," he explained. "Every unit was required to report their progress back to base but one of the units did not transmit since last night."

Jumeira's lips curled into an ugly smile.

"And that patrol unit," she concluded. "You found them with the base, correct?"

Alpha 43 nodded in acknowledgement.

“I suggest we attack with a massive force,” he stated. “As you are aware, this is the base of the revolution. The fight will not be short of a war.”

Jumeira looked down, thinking over the matter.

“Are you sure about this Alpha?” she questioned.

Alpha 43 raised a brow.

“A thousand percent. Why?” he asked. “What makes you doubtful?”

Jumeira looked up, meeting his gaze.

“It doesn’t feel like something Akbar would overlook,” she barely whispered. “He has always been so careful.”

Alpha 43 almost clenched his fist. In as calm of a tone as he could manage, he answered,

“Akbar isn’t perfect. Maybe he hasn’t learnt about this yet.”

Jumeira shook her head in disagreement.

“I will trust you Alpha,” she declared. “I will assign you a strong force. But you must promise me one thing.”

Alpha 43 raised a brow.

“Bring back Akbar’s body,” she hissed. “Its time to end his interference in our plans.”



## Preparations

“Move these blockades over to the east side!” Akbar’s voice sounded. “Reinforce the walls on that border.”

There was a unanimous shout of ‘Yes sir!’ as the next team departed for reinforcements.

Abbas took a deep breath as he strolled along the edge of the hay. This was the same hay fields where the revolution’s first meeting was held. The place where Abbas had slayed his first Alpha. A student of Alpha 43.

This was also the place where Abbas had met Naqi for the first time. A slight sadness descended over his heart as he recalled their first encounter. They had fought together to defeat three Alphas. And now, his brother in arms, his commander and most importantly his very good friend was gone.

“Are you alright?” Abbas heard a voice behind him.

Startled, he glanced in the direction of the voice to see Khalid. The doctor had been working very hard as well.

“Yes, Alhamdulillah,” Abbas sighed. “It’s just...I couldn’t help remember the first time we all gathered here.”

A small smile formed on Khalid’s face.

“Ah yes,” he took a deep breath. “I remember that time clearly. I remember when you riled everyone up, throwing those Alphas’ bodies courageously before the crowd.”

Abbas looked down.

“It was needed,” he answered quietly. “They needed a push.

The Alphas' undefeatable image needed to be shattered. Allah (swt) helped us, Alhamdulillah."

Khalid nodded.

"I never got to thank you," he stated abruptly, causing Abbas to look up. "For what you did with my son."

Abbas took a deep breath.

"Salman is like a brother for me. His troubles are my troubles."

Khalid glanced down nervously.

"This is going to be a big battle," he paused. "I am a little worried."

Abbas raised a brow.

"Salman is a strong warrior, Khalid Uncle. You don't have to worry about him. Inshallah, he will be fine."

Khalid sighed.

"He is my only child," he whispered. "He's all I've got."

Abbas took hold of Khalid's hand.

"We are all each other's strength, Khalid Uncle. And we will all protect each other with our own lives. Don't worry, we will succeed, Inshallah!"

Khalid paused for a few seconds. "If we aren't able to defeat them, what is the back up plan?"

Abbas grinned.

"We will defeat the Alphas, inshallah," he stated with confidence. "Allah (swt) is with us."

Khalid nodded as he said 'Inshallah' as well. After that, Khalid walked away gesturing 'Allah Hafiz'.

So many things were on Abbas's mind right now that he could not explain. Ever since Ruqayya had presented the evidence of camera footage, massive preparations were made to strike the Alphas down.

The bodies of the dead squadron had been dragged over to the old hay fields where the soldiers of the iron fortress located them, stumbling upon a fake version of their base.

This would be a great battle and the revolution was determined to win it.

# Operation Grey Cloud

“What about the rocket launchers?” Alpha 43 questioned.

“All taken care of sir,” the soldier responded.

Alpha 43 nodded, turning his attention towards the armoured vehicles. They needed to be double layered this time. He wanted to be sure that everything was perfect. Alpha 43 glanced down for a moment. In his hand was a pistol. The pistol known as Bloodshot.

It was with this pistol that Alpha 43 had shed the blood of his brother, Qasim. And now he was going to shed the blood of another brother. Akbar. The perfect one. The brilliant one.

Alpha 43 clenched his fist.

Today was the day. Operation Grey Cloud was in effect. It was going to be a massacre. A total of sixty soldiers and five Alphas; including himself, were being deployed for this mission. And the commander was Alpha 43.

He knew how critical this mission was. This mission was their best chance to end the revolution.

“Sir,” came a voice.

Alpha 43 glanced irritatingly in its direction. He hated being disturbed while thinking.

A short stout soldier stood there.

“What is it?” Alpha 43 asked.

“Everything is set. The men have gathered,” the soldier explained.

Alpha 43 sighed. He strolled forward to where the soldiers

had accumulated. Alpha 43 sharpened his gaze. He needed to motivate them now.

“There comes a moment in every soldier’s life,” the Alpha began. “When he is faced with challenges.”

There was silence.

“What makes you a warrior is how you overcome those challenges!” the Alpha shouted.

There was a murmur of agreement.

Alpha 43 took a deep breath.

“We have an oath to conquer! To dominate!” he shouted. “And now is our moment to rise! Now is our moment to attack our enemy! To destroy them! They will crumble in fear of us!”

There was a roar from the soldiers. Alpha 43 noted the Alphas were silent. Of course they were. They needed no motivation to kill.

“Enter your vehicles, my soldiers!” Alpha 43 shouted. “And let’s rain hell on our enemies! The streets will run with their blood!”

The soldiers roared once more, marching into their vehicles. The Alphas were right behind them.

“Move out!” Alpha 43 ordered.

The gates swung open and the engines roared to life. As the vehicles began driving out, Alpha 43’s lips curled into a smile.

“I’m coming Akbar,” he whispered. “I’m coming Abbas.”

# War

Abbas narrowed his eyes; his ears were alert for the slightest sound. His rifle was trained on the road ahead. The enemy could potentially enter from here.

A small rustle sounded on his right. Abbas shook his head in disapproval; he glanced on his side to see Yasir crouching nice and low.

“Don’t make so much noise,” Abbas whispered. “You’ll give us away!”

Yasir nodded. On his other side was Ruqayya, armed with a sniper. Abbas smiled. He was glad that Akbar put her in his squadron.

Directly behind them was a young man named Hussain. Abbas remembered him from the tournament. The last member of their squad was Maryam’s best friend Falak. She was more hidden than the others to protect them in case of an ambush.

The hand radio crackled,

“Wolf-hunter, status report.”

Abbas took a deep breath. Reaching down for the receiver, he whispered.

“No sign of them yet.”

There was a buzz of static and a reply came almost a second later,

“Keep watching carefully.”

Abbas recognised the voice as Zahra's, but he knew he wasn't to take any names.

"Understood," Abbas answered.

And with that, he glanced up once more, ignoring the chilly weather.

The Alphas were coming. The revolution was well aware of that. And they knew from their spies' reports that the attack would be soon. Abbas could feel it in his heart. He had been feeling bad for a while now.

Abbas looked down for a moment. He knew deep down that Alpha 43 would be there. The assassin who had terrorised them for so long. Abbas wanted to face him more than anything. He wanted to make the Alpha feel pain. He wanted to torment the assassin. He wanted to punish him.

It didn't matter to him that Alpha 43 was Akbar's brother. Abbas only saw him as an evil and cruel tyrant.

"I see them!" Hussain hissed, snapping Abbas out of his train of thought.

Abbas felt his heart freeze as Ruqayya crawled over to the bush where he was hiding. Hussain handed her the binoculars and she peaked through. For a moment, she didn't respond. Then abruptly, she dropped the binoculars on the ground.

Abbas raised a brow.

"What's wrong Ruqayya Api?" he asked.

She turned to face him, meeting his gaze.

"There are so many of them!" she whispered. "And Alpha 43 is there as well."

Abbas felt his heart skip a beat.

With a shudder, he grabbed hold of the receiver and whispered, "This is Wolf-hunter. It's raining. I repeat, it's raining."

Abbas took a deep breath; remembering the 77th verse of Surah Nahl,

*"And to Allah belongs the unseen [aspects] of the heavens and the earth. And the command for the Hour is not but as a glance of the eye or even nearer. Indeed, Allah is over all things competent."*

"Ya Allah!" Abbas whispered. "Grant us victory over the Namruds and Firauns that will attack us today."

“Ameen!” everyone cried.

With that, Abbas crawled his way forward, watching as the men came in sight.

Abbas’s eyes widened in surprise. He had never seen so many soldiers together at once. They were armed to the teeth in bullet proof armour; some carrying huge assault rifles. Others held machine guns.

As they reached the vicinity of the old hay fields, Abbas noticed the men started splitting up. Some soldiers began moving around the field, to outflank the building perhaps.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. So far, he counted two Alphas amongst the remaining soldiers, but neither was the Alpha he was looking for.

He watched as the soldiers approached the edge of the building from the front.

Across the hay fields, he could just see some black dots moving across.

‘Alpha 43 must be amongst them,’ Abbas thought to himself.

He watched as the soldiers closer to his own squadron neared the field.

As Akbar had anticipated, they were hoping to use the field to get close to the neighbouring building where Abbas, Isa and Naqi had fought two Alphas many months ago. This was where the first revolution meeting had taken place.

Abbas clenched his fist.

“I will avenge you brother,” he muttered under his breath.

“We both will,” came Ruqayya’s voice.

Abbas glanced in her direction.

She gave him a reassuring nod. Abbas took a deep breath, and glanced back at the enemy soldiers.

Silently, he watched as more and more entered the field.

‘Only a few left,’ Abbas thought to himself.

Akbar had been explicit. Nobody was to start attacking until all the soldiers were in position.

A smile formed on Abbas’s face as he watched the last man enter.

“All of them have entered the field from our side,” Abbas whispered into the receiver.

After a brief buzz of static, Zahra’s voice responded, “Good! Almost all of them have entered from our side too. I’ll detonate when they’re all in place. Then, you attack.”

Abbas nodded, realising afterwards that she could not see his nod. He placed the receiver on the ground and signalled everyone to get ready.

The next few seconds were stressful. Abbas’s finger itched on the trigger of his rifle. He could feel a bead of perspiration trickle down his cheek.

There was a sudden yell from the field, “Take cover!”

Abbas’s eyes widened in surprise as a giant orange ball of flame erupted in the fields. His lips curled into a smile.

“It’s time,” he whispered. Taking a deep breath, he shouted as loud as he could,

“Attack!”



## The First Wave

“We’re taking fire!” Abbas heard a soldier shout from the fields as his squadron advanced further.

From the corner of his eye, he could see Isa’s squad moving in as well.

“Kill them all!” Ruqayya shouted as another explosion ripped through the field.

Abbas spotted three soldiers at the edge of the field. In a flash, he aimed with his rifle and opened fire.

The soldiers fell to the ground instantly, covered in blood.

“Ah!” Abbas heard a yelp from behind. Whirling around, his eyes widened in surprise.

“Hussain’s been hit!” Abbas exclaimed. “Yasir! Help him get back! Ruqayya Api! Falak! Continue with me!”

Abbas, Ruqayya and Falak advanced forward.

The Alphas had been caught completely off guard. At least ten soldiers had already been killed in the initial bombings, and Abbas’s team had wiped out at least five more.

“Get in formation you fools!” a loud growl sounded from the near some hay stacks. Abbas narrowed his eyes. Such arrogance could only belong to an Alpha.

Abbas raised his gun, but Ruqayya stopped him.

“Allow me,” she smirked.

In a flash, Ruqayya whipped out a grenade, pulled the pin and hurled it towards the hay. The grenade disappeared. There was

silence. And then a gasp. A head peaked from where the growl had come from.

Instantly, Abbas raised his gun to shoot, but a huge explosion blew the area in front of them to dust. Abbas coughed, turning to Ruqayya with an air of satisfaction. They had taken care of their side.

Beside them, he noticed Isa stabbing a soldier repeatedly on the ground.

Abruptly, he glanced up.

“We’re good here,” he stated breathlessly. “We got the other Alpha.”

Abbas noticed the Alpha’s dead body at the edge of the field littered in bullets.

‘The Alpha must have tried charging at them,’ he thought to himself.

Turning to Ruqayya and Falak, he ordered,

“Guard this side of the field with Isa’s squadron. I’ll check on Hussain and report back.”

With that, Abbas sprinted back to the bushes where they had been hiding. He felt his heart soar. They had slayed two Alphas and almost twenty soldiers!

He moved to the other side where Yasir stood on guard. Beside him on the ground lay an injured Hussain.

“How is he?” Abbas asked Yasir.

Yasir looked down nervously.

“I can’t say,” he whispered. “But his pulse is weak. He needs urgent medical attention.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes.

“Khalid Uncle is in Zahra Api’s squadron. Let’s let them know.”

He reached for his receiver.

“This is Wolf-hunter. We managed to secure our side. But one of our men is down. We need a medic.”

There was silence. And then a brief buzz of static followed by a laugh. An unsettling maniacal laugh.

“Hello?” Abbas asked cautiously.

The laugh stopped and a strange voice came through,

“Well done, Wolf-hunter! Or should I say...Abbas.”

Abbas froze. He felt his heart pounding in his chest. He could recognise that voice anywhere. Alpha 43.

“Come Abbas,” came his evil voice once more. “Zahra Api could use some help.”

100

## Back Up

Abbas felt the receiver slip from his hand. Every muscle in his body froze. Alpha 43 was there. And he was calling him.

“Don’t go there!” Yasir chided. “He’s baiting you!”

Abbas shook his head.

“Zahra Api is in trouble,” he whispered. “I can’t leave her and the squadron there.”

Yasir glanced down nervously.

“What do we do? We can’t just leave this area unguarded.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes.

“Go Yasir,” he ordered. “Let Isa and Ruqayya Api know what happened. I’ll inform Akbar Uncle.”

Yasir nodded and sprinted off.

Abbas glanced down at Hussain. Beside him was the second receiver. This one allowed them to contact Akbar’s squadron.

“Wolf-hunter here.”

There were a few moments of silence before a familiar voice came through,

“Wolf-hunter?” Jafar asked. “What happened?”

Abbas had no choice but to abandon all code names. There was no use now anyway. He needed Akbar Uncle’s help and fast.

“Our side is secure, but Zahra Api’s squadron is in trouble. Alpha 43 has them.”

He heard Jafar gasp on the other side.

“But Akbar Uncle is not here!” Jafar exclaimed. “We are facing some issues on this side. The soldiers here managed to get in formation.”

Abbas heard gunshots on the other end.

“You have to save my sister!” Jafar cried.

“Jafar, calm down,” Abbas responded, trying desperately to control his rising panic. “I am heading there with a team now. When you get the chance, let them know.”

With that, Abbas shut the receiver. He couldn’t maintain his composed illusion any longer. From bad, the situation had just gotten worse. Akbar was stuck on the third front. That left Abbas and Isa’s squad to defend the front and combat Alpha 43.

Abbas felt worried. He knew how difficult this was going to be; especially now that Akbar was not there. The bushes ahead of him rustled as Isa and Ruqayya advanced towards him. They had arrived.

“Absolutely not!” Ruqayya cried. “I won’t let you go there alone Abbas! I already lost one brother to that monster!”

Her eyes glistened. Abbas felt a pang of pain in his heart. He didn’t want to hurt her.

Abbas glanced at Isa who, contrary to Ruqayya, looked angry.

“I am n’t letting you go there alone,” he growled. “We are a family!”

Abbas felt a wave of gratitude for the sincere companions he had by his side.

“I wasn’t planning on going alone,” he whispered. “But I think that a smaller squad of three is less likely to be seen. Falak can guard this end with Isa’s squadron. Api and Isa, let’s go avenge Naqi Bhai.”

Isa growled in response, gripping his rifle firmly. Ruqayya nodded. Her expression resembled that of a fierce lioness.

The trio emerged from the bush and began treading along the edge of the hay to where Zahra’s squadron had been positioned.

The sounds of explosions shattered the field; its ashes giving a rotten smell in the air.

‘Ya Allah,’ Abbas prayed silently as they neared the area where Zahra had been guarding. “Don’t let us be too late!”

Carefully, they advanced their position.

Movement caught Abbas's eyes on the right. In a flash he spun and began firing wildly in that direction. There was a scream followed by silence. Ruqayya and Isa glanced at Abbas in confusion as if he had gone mad. At that moment, a dead soldier fell from the hay and collapsed on the ground before them.

"That was a lookout," Ruqayya remarked. "He most likely knows we are here now."

Abbas nodded. They treaded towards the trees where Zahra's squadron had been hiding.

Abbas froze. A few feet ahead, Zahra's entire squadron was tied up and gagged. Behind each of them was a soldier with a gun, ready to shoot.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Where was Alpha 43?

"Hello Abbas."

Abbas whirled around with his gun ready. He felt his heart skip a beat. There he was. Right in front of Abbas. Alpha 43's lips curled into a venomous smile.

"I'm glad you came. Things would have been boring without you."

Abbas felt his heart pound uncontrollably. What was he going to do now?

## A Rematch

“You’ve grown since we last met,” the Alpha remarked casually as he withdrew a knife.

Abbas did not react. He was completely caught off guard.

“I’m going to enjoy this,” Alpha 43 chuckled, slowly raising his blade.

Abbas’s mind scanned for a solution, but he couldn’t find any. He was at a complete disadvantage. Before he could do anything, the Alpha would kill him.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. He wasn’t going down without a fight. That was how he and Isa had...wait. Where was Isa? Wasn’t he captured? Why didn’t Abbas see him? Had the Alpha possibly missed him?

Abbas’s lips curled into a smile. If Isa and Ruqayya were captured, Alpha 43 would have mentioned it. He must have thought Abbas was alone. That meant he would not see them coming.

“Nice attitude before death,” Alpha 43 stated dryly. “Smiling and all.”

Abbas sighed.

“What can I say?” he answered.

Alpha 43 narrowed his eyes.

“Why are you-”

A grey blur knocked Alpha 43 sideways. Before the Alpha could react, Abbas charged forward, ramming him in the stomach.

Together, they went tumbling over the hill.

Abbas growled as they reached the bottom. "Ya Allah!"

Abbas swung his elbow up, striking the Alpha's chin. Alpha 43 swivelled back.

"Agh," Abbas gripped his elbow. Alpha 43 was even tougher than Ali.

Alpha 43 turned around, his eyes on fire.

"I will rip you apart for that!" he hissed.

Abbas met his gaze.

"I'd like to see you try."

Alpha 43 roared and charged forward. Abbas leapt out of the way just in time. Instantly, the Alpha whipped his leg at Abbas. The kick struck Abbas, sending a surge of pain to his stomach; but he forced himself to endure it.

"Ya Allah!" Abbas rammed his head into Alpha 43's stomach. The Alpha did not budge.

A smile curled on his lips.

"Is that all you got?" he taunted.

Abbas roared and leapt forward but Alpha 43 grabbed hold of him. Instantly, Abbas felt bone cracking pressure as Alpha 43 squeezed him.

Abbas coughed. He felt himself turning purple. He was losing air. He tried to break free, but he couldn't. It was hopeless. He wouldn't be able to save Zahra and Ali. Alpha 43 was too strong. Wait. Abbas remembered how Zahra had broken free during a training exercise.

"Take that!" Abbas swung his foot as hard as he could at Alpha 43's shin. The Alpha yelped and let go.

Abbas coughed as his lungs welcomed air once more.

"You have gotten stronger," Alpha 43 laughed. "Now it will be more fun to beat you."

Abbas ducked as the Alpha swung his fist once, but he missed the Alpha's kick immediately after that sent a surge of pain up his spine.

Alpha 43 grabbed hold of a breathless Abbas, and flung him across the grass.

With a thud, Abbas landed on the ground.



“Ow,” Abbas groaned as he struggled to get to his feet. He could barely see what was happening. His head was spinning.

‘I can’t beat him,’ Abbas realised. ‘He’s too strong.’

Alpha 43 laughed.

“What had you said Abbas? I was next on your list?”

Abbas wheezed as he finally managed to stand up.

“All of you will die Abbas!” Alpha 43 hissed. “First, I’ll kill you. Then I’ll kill Akbar. Once I’m through with both of you, I might as well reunite Ruqayya with her dear brother.”

A sudden force took over Abbas. A powerful one. Somehow, his pain ceased to exist. He couldn’t feel it. Slowly, Abbas withdrew his knife.

Alpha 43 raised a brow.

“Unwise choice Abbas. You clearly haven’t heard of my reputation.”

Abbas did not respond. His mind was only focused on one thing. He needed to end this fight. Abbas took a deep breath and waited.

Alpha 43 lunged forward, whipping out two knives. Abbas ducked and swung his blade straight at the Alpha’s head.

Alpha 43 caught Abbas’s blade and knocked it out of his hand.

Abbas felt a surge of pain in his right side as Alpha 43’s knife struck him deep. And then he did it. He jumped on the Alpha, grabbing hold of his face and jabbed his thumbs in the Alpha’s eyes.

“Ah!” the Alpha screamed, driving his blade into Abbas’s side once more; but Abbas didn’t yield. He was going to finish this once and for all. He was going to-

*Boom!*

Abbas felt a surge of pain as a bullet struck him in the back. He couldn’t focus. His consciousness was fading and his grip weakened. He felt the Alpha’s sudden force fling him to the ground.

Abbas groaned. He felt his pulse weaken as he saw the Alpha retreating; his hand over his face. Simultaneously, he noticed a figure in his peripheral vision; but had no strength to look up. Abbas tried to raise his head. This person had shot him in the back and saved Alpha 43. The bullet that struck him in the back

had immobilised him.

He noticed the figure move ahead.

“Wait,” Abbas moaned.

The figure paused for a moment, turning to face him.

Abbas felt his heart stop as he recognised the individual. He knew this person.

“Salman?” Abbas mumbled weakly. “You’re...the traitor...”

Their eyes met for just a second before Salman sprinted after Alpha 43. Abbas could not believe it.

His own student. A brother in arms. He was the traitor.

“Abbas!” he heard someone scream as Ruqayya came into sight. “What happened?”

Abbas tried to speak but only ended up coughing blood.

“Abbas, don’t try to say anything,” he heard Ali’s familiar voice.

Abbas ignored it. They needed to know.

“Sal-Salman,” he coughed more blood. “Salman did this.”

Everything went black.

102

## Sick Day

“Ah,” Abbas groaned. “Where am I?”

He forced his eyes to open.

“Agh,” Abbas squinted. The light was hurting his eyes.

“Take it easy,” he heard Jafar’s voice. “You took several bad hits.”

Abbas took a deep breath. Abruptly, he started coughing.

“Don’t strain yourself. Your wounds haven’t healed yet.”

Abbas shivered and pushed himself upright, ignoring the pain in his right side.

Jafar placed a pillow for him to lean on.

“Give me a minute,” Jafar excused himself before darting out of the room. Abbas closed his eyes. A few moments later, he heard several voices.

“Abbas!”

“Allah, is he alright?”

“Inshallah, he’ll be fine.”

Abbas glanced from left to right.

He was surrounded by Akbar, Ali, Zahra, Maryam, Jafar, Haider, Dawud, Farheen, Ruqayya and Isa.

“What is your name?” Akbar asked in a serious tone.

Abbas sighed. Akbar was checking to make sure that he wasn’t having amnesia.

“My name is Abbas,” he mumbled weakly. “My father is Murtaza and my mother is Layla.”

There was a sigh of relief.

“Are you okay?” Ruqayya asked him kindly.

Abbas shook his head lightly.

“I still feel a little dizzy,” he answered. “And my right side hurts a lot. Breathing hurts.”

Akbar placed a hand on Abbas’s forehead.

“You gave us a heart attack,” Isa chided. “One minute you’re fine, and the next minute you’re on the ground bleeding out.”

Abbas took a deep breath, and then started coughing again.

“He should rest,” Jafar whispered.

Everyone nodded and began heading out. In the next minute, the room was empty. Abbas really wished everyone would stay. But he knew they couldn’t. He was about to close his eyes to rest when he heard a voice.

“Now we can talk.”

Abbas waited as Akbar stepped into view.

“We have some important matters to discuss,” he stated. “What happened?”

Abbas closed his eyes as he remembered the events that had taken place. He remembered Salman’s treachery.

He narrated the incidents one by one; not omitting a single detail. Akbar was very surprised to hear that Abbas had overpowered Alpha 43. But even that was drowned by Salman’s treachery.

“So,” Akbar narrowed his eyes. “Salman was the traitor. He hadn’t been following us out of curiosity that day. He had been following us to report it.”

Abbas clenched his fist, ignoring the stinging in his chest.

“He’s the reason Naqi Bhai got killed,” Abbas growled.

Akbar nodded.

“He probably told the Alphas about the first revolution meeting as well.”

Abbas felt his blood boil.

“He was my own student, and he lied to me! He was a brother in arms, and he back stabbed me!” Abbas fumed. “He shot me in the back. He let Alpha 43 escape!” Abbas felt a sharp pain in his right side, and quickly tried to calm himself.

Akbar looked down.

“I cannot believe that he pulled this all off on his own, honestly,” Akbar confessed.

Abbas shook his head in disbelief.

“Salman fooled us all using the guise of a fool.”

Akbar took a deep breath.

“Zahra said that he abandoned his position which allowed Alpha 43 to escape from the field with his men.”

Abbas clenched his fist. He wanted the traitor to be killed as soon as possible.

Akbar narrowed his eyes.

“I don’t understand,” Akbar thought quietly. “It doesn’t add up to me.”

Abbas held his right side, trying to soothe the pain.

“I am not in a position to help right now,” he sighed. “I need to rest a bit. All I want to know is, did we win?”

Akbar nodded.

“Yes. Naqi’s blood has been avenged. They are calling it the ‘Battle of the old Hay Fields’. We killed four Alphas in the attack and the soldier body count has reached more than fifty. We had almost no loss compared to them, Alhamdullillah.”

Abbas took a deep breath. He felt himself cough once more.

“Alhamdulillah,” Abbas said in a low and drowsy voice.

Akbar realized that he was too weak right now. He stroked Abbas’s head. Abbas let his eyes droop, eventually falling asleep. Akbar smiled.

“Rest my lion. We all need you. I need you. Our battle is not over yet.”

103

## Reflections

“Argh!” Alpha 43 smashed his fist against the wall.

He couldn’t understand how this had happened. It didn’t make any sense. It was a perfectly planned operation. Every detail was revised multiple times. How had it gone so wrong?

‘And to think,’ Alpha 43 reflected; rubbing his sore eyes. ‘I was saved by a fool.’

This was the second time Alpha 43 had underestimated Abbas. The young man had only managed to get hold of his eyes for a few seconds. If he had managed any longer, Alpha 43 would’ve gone blind.

“I will never play easy with Abbas again,” Alpha 43 decided. “I will kill him the moment I see him.”

But it was not just Abbas. The entire revolution had surprised him. They had been so organised and so well prepared for this encounter. They had been in much larger numbers than the Alpha had anticipated. All of them had been proficient in firearms and hand to hand combat.

Deep down, Alpha 43 knew that if Salman had not abandoned his position, Alpha 43’s team would not have been able to escape the hayfield alive.

These weren’t ordinary rebels. These people were becoming an army. Akbar’s army. This army was killing Alphas and growing in strength.

“We need to sort out this revolution as soon as possible,” he

muttered under his breath. “If we don’t, then they may cause the end of us.”

But something else had been biting away at Alpha 43. The revolution had been exceptionally well prepared for the attack. Almost too well prepared.

He recalled how Zahra’s squadron had self-made rocket launcher blockades. Each of their groups had more men than the Alphas. They were prepared for everything as if they somehow knew the Alphas were coming.

Alpha 43 narrowed his eyes. What he was suspecting was very dangerous. If he was wrong about this, he could get the death penalty. But everything seemed to point towards one thing. There was a traitor on their side.

## Wounds

“Take it easy Jafar!” Abbas yelled as Jafar examined his wound.

“Abbas Bhai,” Jafar said in a matter-of-fact-tone.

Abbas sighed. Jafar had to change his bandages and examine his wounds, but it was taking slightly longer than Abbas would have preferred.

“Your back wound is healing well, Alhamdullillah,” Jafar commented.

Abbas whispered a silent prayer in his heart. Jafar bandaged up his back once more.

“Ow!” Abbas winced as Jafar removed his chest bandages.

The wounds inflicted on his body by Alpha 43 had left their mark. But what Abbas couldn't forget was that he was unable to defeat Alpha 43. In spite of all his effort and training, the Alpha had been much stronger. But one thing did happen. Despite the Alpha's strength and skills, Abbas had managed to gain the upper hand. Had Salman not intervened, he would have blinded Alpha 43.

Abbas clenched his fist. While the Alpha's inflicted wounds were more dangerous, Salman's betrayal hurt much more.

“These wounds are also healing nicely, Alhamdulillah,” Jafar remarked. “You can probably get out of bed now. But Abbas Bhai, you cannot run or fight or do anything that is physically exerting. The most I can allow you is slow walking.”

Abbas nodded, trying to ignore his increasing frustration. He had to be nursed like a child!



Very slowly, he pushed himself to stand. His side stung a little, but soon Abbas was able to get to his feet.

Jafar finished up his bandaging and gave him a new shirt. With that, Abbas headed out. Occasionally, his wounds would sting a little, but Abbas didn't care. He had been cooped up in the hospital wing for long enough.

Abbas strolled along the edge of the barn, ignoring the curious glances thrown his way.

"Abbas!" he heard someone call.

Abbas turned his neck to see Dawud at a distance. The youth was jogging. Within the next minute, he reached Abbas.

"Salamunalaikum," he greeted respectfully.

"Walaikumasalam," Abbas answered.

Dawud sighed.

"What brings you out here?" he asked.

Abbas met Dawud's gaze with a smile.

"I got the go ahead for walking, so that's what I'm doing."

Dawud nodded.

"We've all been so worried about you," Dawud stated sadly. "After the incident, everyone thought you wouldn't get up again."

Abbas chuckled. He didn't know why he did. Maybe fearlessness came after one brushed so close with death.

"I can't believe you took on Alpha 43," Dawud whispered with a hint of amazement.

Abbas grinned. Leaning in, he answered,

"That makes two of us."

Dawud smiled, bowing his head respectfully. Then he jogged off; continuing his routine.

Abbas decided that he would head over to the training arena. Isa would be there. Despite Dawud's politeness, Abbas couldn't help notice that he was looking a little down.

'Like everyone else, he must be shocked by Salman's betrayal,' Abbas realised. He shook his head in disappointment as he made his way to the training grounds.

105

## A Little Birdie Told Me

It was midnight. Jumeira took a deep breath, turning over a pen repeatedly in her hand. Normally, she would not be available for meetings at this time, but today she had made an exception.

One of her subordinates had requested an urgent meeting with her. He claimed to have some valuable information. From her experience, this person had always been credible, hence Jumeira decided to go ahead with the meeting.

The door opened and in came Alpha 31. Jumeira watched as he strolled up to her desk.

“What is it that you wanted to speak about?” she asked in a cold tone.

Alpha 31 took a deep breath.

“Maam, I have acquired information regarding Alpha 43 which I feel you should know.”

Jumeira raised a brow. This felt like *deja vu*. She could remember when Alpha 43 had come to her office many months ago, in the same manner. He had wanted to report information regarding Alpha 31.

“Maam, I need to show you a photo,” Alpha 31 added quietly.

Jumeira nodded as Alpha 31 placed a photo on her desk. She reached out for it. The moment her eyes landed on the picture she felt her heart stop.

“Wha-What is this?” Jumeira gasped.

Alpha 31 sighed.

“That is what remains of the squad you assigned to Alpha 43.”

Jumeira shook her head in disbelief. Her soldiers’ bodies were littered across a hay field, burnt savagely. Some were piled up while others lay strewn over the floor.

But what caught Jumeira’s attention were the four Alphas whose dead bodies were hanging off a tree.

“How did. . .” she let her question trail off.

Alpha 31 took a deep breath.

“This note was found beside the Alphas’ bodies.”

He handed her a small sheet of paper upon which was written,

*‘This is only the beginning Jumeira.’*

Jumeira felt the note slip from her hands. She shook her head in disbelief. How had the revolution gotten so powerful? How had they managed to defeat such a large squadron?

“What about Asghar? I mean Alpha 43,” Jumeira corrected herself.

Alpha 31 looked down.

“He returned to base a few days ago, but hasn’t met with anyone since.”

Jumeira took a deep breath.

“Thank you Alpha. You may leave.”

The assassin bowed his head respectfully before leaving.

Jumeira felt her anger rise and struggled to control it. Alpha 43’s failure cost a fortune. Those people should be trembling before Alphas! But instead, they were growing braver.

‘Akbar has trained them too well,’ she concluded. ‘But Asghar should not have failed so miserably. He will be punished. He must be punished for this.’

She reached down for her receiver.

“Yes,” came a woman’s voice.

Jumeira narrowed her eyes.

“Salma,” she ordered. “I have an important job for you. It’s related to Alpha 43.”

Salma’s voice came from the receiver, “Yes Maam. I am ready for the job.”

Jumeira’s lips curled into a smile. Salma had been determined to get revenge against Alpha 43 ever since he had almost gotten

her terminated many months ago. She was also fiercely loyal to Alpha 31. Jumeira had already tasked Salma with monitoring Alpha 43.

“Where is Alpha 43 right now?” she asked.

“In the prison,” Salma replied. “He goes there a lot, especially outside of normal hours.”

Jumeira sighed. Asghar was always so predictable. Of course he would visit the prisoners.

“Go and punish him Salma. Don’t kill him,” she added quickly. “Just give him a scare.”

There was a gasp, followed by a determined, ‘Yes Maam!’

And with that, Jumeira put down the receiver. It was time Asghar was reminded of his place. He must be realise that he will never be safe from her wrath. And that meant using the only weakness she knew. The prisoners. Or to be accurate, the woman who was being kept as a prisoner. The woman whom he saw as an older sister.

“This is why I always preferred Akbar,” she sighed. “He never failed like this.”

## Conflicts

Abbas winced as he went in prostration. It was very painful to pray nowadays; but despite that, Abbas was determined to finish his salaah ul layl.

For many months now, Abbas had been praying salaah ul layl. And every time he did, he couldn't explain what happened to him. Some new found strength would fill his heart. A strength that made him feel like he could move mountains. In a way, he felt recharged after his salaah ul layl. It was a time when he could confide in his creator.

"Allah hu akbar," Abbas whispered as the prayer came to an end.

He raised his hands to make dua.

"Ya Rabbi," he whispered. "Help me recover so that I can serve this noble cause. Help me become strong enough to defeat Alpha 43."

A tear trickled from his eye.

"Help me move past the pain of my parents. Let them be proud of their son. Ameen."

Slowly, Abbas pushed himself to stand.

'It looks like a good time to go for a walk,' he thought.

He wrapped his prayer mat and moved to the door. In the next minute, he found himself outside enjoying the cool morning breeze. Abbas made his way along the edge of the barn along his familiar path. As he did, his mind drifted to his wounds.

They had been healing quite well. The back one was even starting to fade away. The ones on his side, however, were still scabs and maintained a continuous dull pain.

Abbas knew that he would carry these scars permanently. They would be marks of his experiences in battle.

“Abbas,” he heard a voice call him from behind.

Abbas turned to see who was awake at this hour.

“What is going on?” Abbas asked in surprise as he saw Kadhim approach.

Kadhim smiled and placed a hand on his shoulder. Abbas forced a smile. Was he imagining it? Or was Kadhim acting a little weird?

“I’m sorry about what happened to you,” Kadhim sighed. “With Alpha 43, and... and you know, Salman.”

Abbas looked down. Even though it had happened several days ago, the incident was imprinted in his brain.

“Thank you Kadhim Uncle,” Abbas answered politely. He was about to turn but Kadhim placed a slightly firm hand on his arm, preventing him from doing so.

“I wanted to talk to you privately,” he whispered.

Abbas raised a brow. He didn’t like the idea of moving away in the dark and speaking with someone. His experience had taught him to always take precautions.

“We can talk here,” Abbas stated.

Frustration flashed across Kadhim’s face. But he nodded and motioned to Abbas to have a seat. Abbas sat down, ignoring the spike of pain in his right side.

“What is it?” Abbas asked. “What is bothering you Kadhim Uncle?”

Kadhim took a deep breath.

“I have been reflecting a good deal over the incidents of the last couple of months. I have been contemplating on everything that has happened and...” he paused.

“And?” Abbas prompted.

Kadhim looked down awkwardly.

“I can’t help notice that whenever anything goes wrong, you happen to be there.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes.

“For example,” Kadhim began. “You were the first person to survive Alpha 43. How did you do it?”

Abbas chuckled sarcastically.

“I drove a metal pole through his shoulder. That’s how I survived! What is the relevance of this?”

Kadhim met Abbas’s gaze and Abbas could see doubt in his eyes.

“The first revolution meeting. You killed *two* Alphas and survived.”

Abbas felt his anger building.

“I had help! And I collapsed immediately after. What are you accusing me of?”

Kadhim shook his head.

“The third time, *you* were the one to find Naqi’s body. Not to mention, you left the base with Salman shortly before the patrol was attacked. Seems like quite a coincidence to me.”

Abbas slammed his fist against the edge of the barn.

“Are you seriously questioning my loyalty? Salman led me away on purpose! I tried to get there but everyone was already dead! And Naqi Bhai entrusted Ruqayya Api to me! He trusted me! Why don’t you?”

Kadhim’s lips curled into a smile.

“We heard the story from you, Abbas. How are we meant to know if everything miraculously happened the way you said it did?”

Abbas scoffed in disbelief. Kadhim was accusing him of treachery!

“And you magically happened to come across the soldiers near our base?” Kadhim asked harshly.

Abbas laughed. He laughed loudly. It was a cold, unnerving sound.

“If you are honestly that simple minded Kadhim Uncle,” he paused. “That you can’t see the wounds on my back or chest. That you can’t see the blood I’ve shed so many times. Then I have nothing to say to you.”

Abbas got up to leave, ignoring Kadhim. His blood was boiling from what had just happened. He heard Kadhim call out from

behind.

“You seem to be awfully lucky with Alphas, Abbas! Somehow you always manage to survive!”



# Interrogations

Alpha 43 growled as he struck Alpha 16 once more. “Who is the traitor? Who helped you escape?”

There was no response. Just a small whisper,  
“So s-surely w-with hardship comes ease.”

Alpha 43 could barely control his frustration. The prisoner still refused to tell him anything despite the tortures Alpha 43 forced him to endure.

Alpha 43 grabbed hold of his neck. Leaning in he whispered,  
“We both know someone helped you escape. Someone helped you plan everything. So why don’t you just tell me who it was, and I’ll put you out of your misery.”

The prisoner glanced up weakly.

“Nobody helped me. I escaped... myself,” he coughed.

Alpha 43 shook his head in disapproval.

“I know someone helped you. And even if you don’t tell me, I’ll find out myself.”

The prisoner coughed before slumping down, unconscious.

“Agh!” Alpha 43 growled.

Alpha 16 was out cold again.

“We’ll continue this later.”

The Alpha turned to leave. As he left, his eyes drifted to the other room where his adopted sister was being held. Alpha 43 felt himself hesitate. He didn’t want to interrogate her. But what choice did he have? Alpha 16 would not break.

He moved towards the door. Wrenching it open, he entered inside.

“I have to talk to you,” he stated dryly. “It’s important.”

The woman sighed, glancing up at the Alpha. Alpha 43 couldn’t help notice how weak she was looking. A strange grief entered his heart, but he ignored it. She was alive. That was all that mattered.

“Why do you. . .” the woman groaned. “Have that look?”

Alpha 43 narrowed his eyes.

“What look?”

The woman chuckled.

“You know what I mean. That look you would make when Akbar beat you up or something.”

It took everything to restrain his temper.

“Look Api,” Alpha 43 continued, ignoring her comment. “I know you and Alpha 16 had help in your escape. There is no way the two of you could have attempted this alone.”

The woman shook her head.

“We had no such help.”

Alpha 43 sighed.

“I need to know Api,” he felt a strange pain in his heart. “One of you has to tell me. And since he won’t, that leaves you.”

The woman met his gaze with intensity in her eyes.

“I will never tell anything to a dog like you,” she growled.

Alpha 43 shook his head. He did not want to do this. He drew out his dagger. The woman’s eyes widened in surprise as he dropped it before her.

“The other choice is this.”

From his pocket, he removed a small C-gun.

The woman looked down.

“After you killed Qasim, I knew you could torment me as well. After all, our relation means nothing to you.”

Alpha 43 felt his heart burn. The pain she was about to go through would be severe. But he had to know. He aimed the C-gun at her, and activated it.

Instantly, the woman stopped speaking. She began to shiver. But she didn’t break. Alpha 43 narrowed his eyes. He would have

to turn up the power of his C-gun. He moved the small dial to level two.

The woman coughed, but she still didn't break. Alpha 43 felt pity but ignored it. He needed to know the truth. He turned the dial to level three. Now the woman began shivering violently as if she was having a seizure. She began screaming and swinging her legs out.

Alpha 43 looked down. He hated this. He wanted it to end more than ever.

"Just break!" he shouted.

But she didn't.

"You leave me no choice," the Alpha swallowed.

Slowly, he turned the dial to the highest level. Level four.

The woman began crying. She was screaming loudly. Her arms pulled against the chains that held her. Alpha 43 clenched his fist, and watched in silence. Abruptly, the prisoner stopped screaming and collapsed.

Alpha 43 sighed. She had broken. She slowly raised her head, studying her surroundings.

"When are we going?" she asked Alpha 43 curiously.

Alpha 43 looked down.

"I see. He is going to arrange the diversion as planned."

Alpha 43's head shot up. His eyes narrowed. So there was a traitor. And it wasn't any of the women.

"Okay, I'll keep the aqeeq ring. But why do we need it?"

She moved her hand forward and closed it as if taking something from someone.

"Isn't it risky to keep such valuable information in your aqeeq ring? I mean, if they find it, they could learn his identity."

Alpha 43's ears pricked. He knew what he had to do. He knew where the answer was hidden. There was no need to subject her to this any longer. He lowered the C-gun.

Instantly, the woman fell unconscious. With a heavy heart, Alpha 43 placed the C-gun in his pocket. The pain of such a high level was severe. But she would recover. Eventually.

On the other hand however, Alpha 43 had succeeded. It was confirmed that there was a traitor and he knew how to find him.

The aqeeq ring.

Alpha 43 eyed the unconscious woman.

“I know what to do now thanks to you Api.”

Swiftly, he turned to leave. This was his moment of redemption. This was his chance. This was his opportunity.

Abruptly, the door swung open. Alpha 43’s eyes widened in surprise.

Outside the room there were several men dressed in black.

“Who are you?” the Alpha hissed whipping out his dagger.

None of the men responded. Then abruptly, they charged towards him.

Alpha 43 barged at them; ramming one to the ground.

He felt a shot of pain in his head. One of them had knocked him from behind.

The Alpha flipped back up to his feet and crouched low. He realised instantly that these men were skilled. And by his count, there were seven of them.

Alpha 43 leapt forward, driving his blade into one of the attackers. Instantly, the man dropped dead. The Alpha ducked to evade the punch of the next attacker; simultaneously driving his fist into the man’s throat.

“Two down,” Alpha 43 hissed as the second attacker crumbled. “Five to go.”

Three of them leapt at him and pushed him to the ground. One of them brought a fist crashing down on his face.

“Argh!” The Alpha growled, ramming his head into the center one’s stomach. The center one staggered back in surprise, allowing the Alpha to strike both remaining men in the throat.

“Four down,” the Alpha chuckled. “Three to go.”

The remaining men also realised this. For at that moment, one of them withdrew a small blade and held it to the woman’s throat.

“Api?” Alpha 43 whispered under his breath.

The attacker met Alpha 43’s gaze. His meaning was clear. Surrender. Or she dies.

Alpha 43 dropped his knife to the ground and went to his knees. He had a plan, but he couldn’t risk the woman getting

killed.

The attacker nodded and gestured to his comrades to apprehend the Alpha. In that fraction of a second, Alpha 43 whipped out a knife and hurled it at the man. Before the attacker could react, the knife struck him in the center of his skull and he collapsed in a pool of blood.

The other two lunged forward, but Alpha 43 knocked them both down. In a flash, he hurled two more knives and both of the remaining soldiers fell to the ground.

“What is this?” the Alpha growled. “Who had the audacity to do this?”

Someone had just attacked him. And Alpha 43 did not find it coincidental that he had been with his adopted sister at the time. The attack was nowhere near strong enough to kill him which meant that it was a warning shot. Someone was warning the assassin. Showing him their power.

Because if someone really wanted Alpha 43 to die, they would have to send more than just seven men.

‘Sad deaths,’ he sighed. ‘They were in for a very unfair fight.’ He headed towards the door.

‘Either Jumeira did this,’ Alpha 43 concluded. ‘Or an Alpha.’

And Alpha 43 would find out. But first he had to think about his new lead. He needed to find the aqeeq ring.

## New Information

“What do you mean he questioned you?” Akbar growled. “He does not have the authority to do that!”

Abbas nodded in agreement. He was still fuming from the incident.

“Kadhim Uncle suspects me because I’m alive,” Abbas added. “He even suspects that I mistold what happened whenever I was in a situation.”

Akbar shook his head in disbelief.

“How can he not account for everything else!” Akbar paused. “I mean, you almost died each time! Someone should at least consider the person they are accusing, before they accuse!”

Abbas nodded in agreement. He couldn’t believe Kadhim had even tried to suggest he was a traitor. Abbas had shed blood for this revolution. He had fought for this revolution.

“Farheen Auntie and Ruqayya Api are with us,” Abbas mentioned. “But something tells me Kadhim Uncle won’t back out.”

Akbar nodded.

“He may try to gain support of the people.”

Abbas shook his head.

“Our family would never sell me out,” Abbas was confident. “There are others who will support me like Dawud, Isa, Yasir-”

“But,” Akbar overspoke. “There are many more people than that. I don’t understand how Kadhim could convince everyone without evidence, but we should be prepared anyway.”

Abbas looked down. No matter how many troubles they dealt with, it felt like more always came their way.

“God gives strength to His believers,” Abbas whispered quietly.

Akbar nodded in agreement.

“There’s something else on my mind.”

Abbas raised a brow.

“I suspect that we might be seeing another attack from the Alphas in the next few weeks,” Akbar finished.

Abbas felt his heart freeze for a moment. What did Akbar say? Another attack? The revolution was in no position to handle another attack.

“Wh-why would you say that?” Abbas stammered. “Didn’t we just defeat them?”

Akbar nodded.

“We did,” he answered. “That doesn’t mean they’ll stop attacking.”

Abbas looked down; his hand pressed over his right side. While he had certainly been recovering at a miraculous pace, he still wasn’t ready for an all out war.

“I need to think about this a bit,” Akbar stated. “Try to keep yourself out of trouble until I come up with a new plan.”

Abbas nodded.

‘What am I meant to do?’ Abbas thought as he sat down. ‘Trouble always seems to follow me.’

# Betrayal

It was cold and dark. A strange whistling could be heard as wind entered the cave. A small pile of ash lay in the center. Beside it was a figure hunched against the wall. There was a traditional rifle slung over his shoulder and in his pocket, he held a small revolver.

Salman shivered as another cold breeze blew in the cave.

“How did I do that?” Salman thought remorsefully.

He could not forget the look on Abbas’s face. That look of...betrayal. Abbas had never anticipated it. He was caught completely off guard. And he had seen Salman’s face.

Salman could never go back. Nobody would ever forgive him. He had pulled a trigger on his own brother in arms. He had back-stabbed his own mentor. How could anyone ever forgive him?

If only they knew. If only they could understand what Salman was going through. But they couldn’t. They wouldn’t. They would never understand the situation he had been put into. A tear trickled down Salman’s cheek.

He had been sending information to the Alphas for months now. He was the one who had helped the soldiers find the revolution base. The day the patrol was massacred, he had purposely drawn Abbas away from the base on the orders of Alpha 43.

Salman felt a strange pain in his heart. He had never known Naqi would be in that patrol. He had only done as instructed.



However, he hadn't been able to warn them about the most recent battle. The security in the revolution was too tight during that time. He never had a chance to slip away. He wished he could have been as lucky with previous events.

"It's too late now Salman," he muttered to himself.

"What's too late?" he heard a voice ask.

Salman's eyes shot awake as he whirled towards the cave entrance.

A man stood there.

Salman's hand fumbled with the gun.

There was a chuckle. Followed by a clapping noise as Alpha 43 stepped closer.

Salman's heart froze. He hated meeting this Alpha.

"Salman," Alpha 43 smiled calmly, gesturing for him to sit down. "Don't feel remorseful for what you did."

Salman wiped away a tear as he sat down beside the assassin.

"You did your duty," Alpha 43 smiled.

Salman shook his head.

"Wh-what do you want from m-me?" he stammered.

Alpha 43 sighed.

"I need to know more about the revolution," he asked. "What drives them? Who drives them?"

Salman took a deep breath. He knew how dangerous the information he was divulging would be, but he started speaking. He told the assassin about everything. The leadership committee, the border guards, the real location of the base, the hunters etc.

"And that is pretty much it," Salman whispered quietly.

Alpha 43's lips curled into a venomous smile.

"Tell me more about Akbar's role in the revolution," the Alpha asked. "What does he mean for them? How does he motivate them?"

Salman sighed.

"As I said before, Akbar Uncle is mainly part of the leadership committee," Salman answered. "He doesn't enter the field too often, probably because of age."

The Alpha nodded, although Salman could see he was finding it amusing.

“In any case,” Salman continued. “Akbar Uncle trains the hunters and the hunters train everyone else.”

Alpha 43 narrowed his eyes, trying to parse through all the information he had just learnt. He already knew Abbas had been there when Alpha 39 was killed. When people were losing courage in the first revolutionary meeting, he led the hunters against the Alphas and brought their bodies back. When Jawad stirred up trouble, Abbas was part of getting rid of him. Abbas had killed the squad of soldiers that found the revolution base. Abbas had rescued Zahra’s squadron. Akbar seemed to handle strategising, but his henchman was clearly Abbas. Abbas was, in a way, the face of the revolution. Abbas was a symbol of hope for them.

“In that case...” The Alpha thought out loud. “We need to remove Abbas.”

Salman’s eyes widened in surprise.

Alpha 43 ignored him.

“This revolution fights on the basis of ideology and hope. We need to destroy their hope.”

A smile curled to his lips.

“First we’ll make them lose faith in Abbas. That’ll weaken them. Then, we’ll slaughter them all like sheep.”

110

## Taken

The woman groaned helplessly as the cuffs dug into her wrists. She had been here for so long now. Her eyes ached, but she couldn't close them. The worry for the prisoner in the other room had forced her to stay awake.

Was he alive? Was he well? She didn't know. She didn't dare ask Alpha 43 about his condition. He would never tell her.

The woman sighed. Her life had been tragedy after tragedy. First she lost her adopted brother Qasim. Then she lost her husband and children. Her heart could not bear much more pain.

The woman's ears pricked. Someone was outside her door. She watched in contempt as the door swung open and Alpha 43 stepped inside.

"Api?" he greeted.

The woman did not respond. She just looked the other way. He had probably just come to get more information.

She still could not believe that he had used the C-gun on her. That he would put her through that pain. She had been with him since childhood. She had read him bedtime stories, made food for him when he was ill and taken care of him. How could he use the C-gun on her? How could he let her rot away in this prison?

"What do you want now?" she whispered in a weak voice.

Alpha 43 chuckled.

"We're going for a drive," he answered.

The woman's eyes widened in surprise. What did he say?

“What do you mean?” she asked. “Why would I go on a drive with you?”

The Alpha smiled, causing the woman to feel disgusted.

“I want you to meet someone, Api,” he explained. “Trust me, you’ll really want to meet this person.”

The woman shook her head in disbelief.

The Alpha sighed.

“I am not asking Api,” he stated. With that, he pressed a syringe in her neck.

The woman felt her energy drain and she slumped down unconscious.

111

# Mystery

“Aye!” Abbas winced as Jafar removed the last bandage from his back.

“You’re on the verge of recovery, Inshallah!” Jafar stated. “I have removed all the bandages. Though you will have a scar, the wound itself is almost healed. You can also resume physical activities.”

Abbas sighed in relief. The last couple weeks had been brutal. Not being able to train or practice or do anything except stay bedridden was incredibly frustrating.

“Just be careful about one thing,” Jafar cautioned. “The places where your wounds were, are still vulnerable. If you get hurt there, it will be extremely painful. And you will be bedridden for much longer.”

Abbas nodded.

“Thanks Jafar,” Abbas answered.

The young medic nodded before yawning.

“I’m gonna take a nap now,” he mumbled abruptly.

Abbas raised a brow. He didn’t know why, but for the second time in his life, he sensed a strange emotion in Jafar. Dishonesty.

Abbas narrowed his eyes.

“You know it’ll be daylight soon, right?” Abbas asked curiously.

Jafar nodded and casually, he headed out of the ward. Abbas waved him farewell before laying down on the ground.

The moment he heard the door shut, he shot up and tip toed

over to the door. He could hear excited pattering outside. Jafar was in a hurry.

He watched as Jafar slung a small bag over his shoulder and very casually, exited the hospital wing.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Jafar was up to something. Correction. Jafar was still up to something.

Abbas felt a hint of anger. So much had happened that he had not brought up this issue, but now, Jafar was pushing his limits.

Silent as a panther, Abbas sneaked after him. He was determined to solve this mystery today, before daylight struck.

Abbas was more skilled than Jafar, and for this reason, had no difficulty following him as he crept his way through camp. Jafar was still being cautious though. Every minute, he would abruptly glance over his shoulder to see if he was being followed.

As the minutes progressed, Abbas felt his anger build. Jafar was heading to a new part of the boundary fence.

“One adventure wasn’t enough for him!” Abbas muttered sarcastically under his breath.

He watched as Jafar scrambled up the fence and jumped over to the other side. Abbas knew he should tell someone where he was going, but he didn’t have time. He could risk losing Jafar.

“Argh!” Abbas grunted as he reached the fence. “I’ll just bring Jafar back myself! Akbar Uncle can take care of him then.”

Abbas climbed his way up until he reached the top of the fence. With minor discomfort, he hauled himself over to the other side.

“Alright,” Abbas whispered. “Let’s get him home.”

Abbas began to jog in the direction of the footprints, determined to reach Jafar as soon as possible. He didn’t like the idea of being outside the fence, especially when he was wounded.

As a matter of caution, Abbas withdrew his knife and revolver. His eyes darted from left to right as he reached the trees.

‘Where in Allah’s name has this boy run off to?’ Abbas pondered in confusion. ‘Why is he going so far from base?’

Abbas treaded his way through the trees. Leaves crumbled under his shoes as he scanned the area. But there was no sign of Jafar.

Abbas heard a gasp.

Whirling around, he saw Jafar standing there. In his hand was a C-gun!

“Jafar!” Abbas exclaimed in confusion. “What are you doing there? And why do you have a C-gun?”

Jafar merely watched in horror as Abbas approached him. The C-gun slipped from his hands and he stumbled backwards.

“Abbas Bhai I-”

“We are heading back!” Abbas ordered. “Don’t you know how unsafe it is to be here?”

Jafar looked down shamefully.

“Sorry,” he mumbled.

Abbas shook his head in disapproval.

“Come on,” he chided. “You can explain everything when we get back.”

They both turned to leave. Abbas’s mind was in a whirl. What was Jafar doing here? Why did he have a C-gun? The C-gun! They had forgotten it!

“Keep going,” Abbas instructed. “I’ll be right behind you. I mean it.”

Jafar nodded slightly and continued on towards base.

Satisfied, Abbas turned around and headed back to where Jafar had dropped the C-gun. But when Abbas arrived at the spot, to his surprise, the C-gun was gone! Abbas narrowed his eyes. Where could it be?

*Crack!*

Abbas whirled around, weapons at the ready; but even he could not be prepared for what stood behind him.

“Salman!” Abbas exclaimed.

There, in the grass next to the tree, stood Salman. Salman the traitor. Salman who shot Abbas in the back. Salman who helped Alpha 43 escape.

“Abbas,” he whispered quietly. “Please go back.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes, rage filling up inside him.

“You think I’m going to let you go after what you did!”

Instantly, Abbas charged at him. Rather than facing Abbas, the young man turned around and darted off in the opposite direction.

“Just like a coward!” Abbas growled.

Abbas felt sharp pain in his back and right side, but he ignored it. Right now only one thought was running in his mind. Kill Salman. Gut him open like a fish. Punish him for what he did.

Abbas raised his revolver to fire a warning shot.

*Boom!*

Salman jumped behind a tree. Abbas kept running towards him.

“You will pay for what you did!” he roared as he caught up with the boy.

Salman raised his hands.

“Please Abbas,” he whispered. “Go back!”

Abbas shook his head. Without another word, he raised his gun to fire. He was going to put a bullet in this traitor’s head.

“Agh!” Salman cried, leaping at Abbas.

Abbas was caught off guard. He found himself falling over with Salman as the two went tumbling across the floor.

Salman wrenched the gun from Abbas’s hand.

Abbas smashed his head into Salman’s stomach. The youth staggered back breathlessly.

“I’ll kill you,” Abbas hissed.

Salman shook his head and abruptly started running in the opposite direction.

Abbas felt his frustration building. Why did Salman keep running away?

Abbas sprinted after him. They reached the end of the trees at a burnt neighbourhood.

Salman darted inside a wrecked house, slamming the door behind him. Abbas rammed the door down a second later, falling as he did so.

In a flash, Abbas was back on his feet. His wounds were aching, but he didn’t care. His attention was on the pattering of feet he heard upstairs. Abbas sprinted as fast as he could towards the noise; his knife was ready for any possible situation. Reaching the upstairs floor, he noticed two doors. Abbas kicked down the first one. It was a bathroom. Nobody was inside. Furiously, he turned his attention to the second door.



Abbas whipped his foot at it. The door cracked before swinging open. Abbas felt his heart stop.

There was a man sitting in the room. But it wasn't Salman.

"Hello Abbas," Alpha 43 smiled venomously.

## Battle of Words

“Well that was easier than expected,” Alpha 43 chuckled, getting to his feet.

Panicked, Abbas whirled around to run, but found himself face to face with several soldiers armed to the teeth. They all had machine guns aimed at him.

Abbas felt dread in his heart. How could he have fallen so easily for such a simple trap? He knew he couldn’t take them all down at once. He turned around to face Alpha 43 once more.

“What do you want?” he asked.

Alpha 43 sighed, his lips curling into a satisfied grin.

“First of all, don’t try to run. Or try any tricks for that matter. By the way, your shirt is looking very nice today.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes, glancing down at his shirt. A small laser red dot hovered over his second button.

Abbas glanced up at the window. Even though he couldn’t see it, there must be a sniper watching him. Realising that he could do nothing, Abbas let go of his knife.

With a clatter, it landed on the floor.

“Smart choice,” Alpha 43 commented, motioning for one of his soldiers to pick it up. A soldier, slightly shorter than Abbas, advanced forward and picked it from the floor.

It was then that Abbas did it. He lunged forward and wrapped his arms, around the man’s neck. Before anyone could react, he had the soldier in a neck lock.

“Let me go!” Abbas growled. “Or I’ll snap his neck in two.”

Alpha 43 raised a brow.

“Why there is no need to Abbas,” he chuckled. “I’ll do it for you.”

There was a blur and before Abbas could react, the soldier slumped in his hands with three knives embedded in his chest.

Abbas dropped the soldier in horror and looked up. How could the Alpha kill his own soldier so easily?

“This is my final warning,” Alpha 43 mentioned casually. “If you try anything like that again, the next knife goes in your head.”

Abbas stared at Alpha 43, hatred pouring from his eyes.

“Have a seat, Abbas.”

Abbas’s eyes widened in surprise. What was the Alpha trying to do here? Why was he inviting him to sit?

Abbas advanced, assuming a seat beside the assassin. The Alpha nodded his head.

“I have some important matters to discuss with you,” he started.

Abbas ignored the heart pounding in his chest. He awaited the moment when the Alpha would whip out a blade and slice his throat.

“I wanted to make you an offer,” the Alpha explained. “You have. . . impressed me with how you have been these last few months.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes, ignoring his trembling hand.

“Why am I really here?” he asked.

Alpha 43 glanced down for a moment.

“There’s someone you should meet,” he whispered. “I’m sure you would want to meet them badly.”

Abbas raised a brow.

Alpha 43 turned to one of the soldiers at the door.

“Go bring her.”

Her. Abbas’s ear pricked at the mention of that word. Who was being brought?

“In the meanwhile,” Alpha 43 continued. “I’d urge you to reconsider your decision.”

A few seconds went by and Abbas heard a loud footsteps outside. There was also a woman’s voice,

“Let go of me!”

Abbas froze for a moment. That voice sounded strangely familiar. Abbas glanced anxiously at the doorway as two soldiers entered. Between them was a woman.

Abbas felt his heart stop. His hands went numb. His eyes widened in shock. No. It was impossible! There was no way it could be her! His heart pounded uncontrollably as he recognised the woman.

“Ami?” Abbas exclaimed.

The woman froze. She met Abbas’s gaze. Her eyes narrowed before widening in recognition.

“Abbas!” she exclaimed.

Abbas rushed forward. The soldiers let go of Layla and she rushed forward as well. Mother and son burst into tears as they embraced.

Abbas forgot about everything. Alpha 43. The iron fortress. Everything. None of it mattered. The entire world stopped for him in that moment.

“Ami!” Abbas cried.

“Abbas,” he heard his mother whisper hoarsely. “What are you doing here?”

Abbas did not reply. He merely held onto his mother with tears streaming down his cheek.

“I love you so much Ami!” he cried.

His mother stroked his hair lovingly.

“I love you more than anything else in the world, my son!” Layla whispered.

Abbas held his mother’s cold hand in his own.

Slowly, he looked up at Alpha 43 with utmost hatred in his heart. Alpha 43 however, turned to Layla and whispered,

“Api, isn’t there something you need to tell Abbas?”

Layla narrowed her eyes. Between tears Abbas saw her glance at the ground before looking up to meet his gaze. Her eyes had a hint of remorse.

“Your father....is alive Abbas.”

Abbas froze. His mother’s hand slipped from his grip. What did she just say?

“A-Ami?” Abbas stammered. “He d-died in a boat crash.”

“Really?” came Alpha 43’s sarcastic voice. “And did you see his body?”

Abbas closed his eyes. Whatever game the Alpha was playing wouldn’t work this time. Murtaza had been killed. But a small part of Abbas could not deny that he had not seen the body. He only saw the boat on fire.

Abbas shook his head in disbelief. With a trembling voice he turned to his mother.

“Is Baba alive?” he managed to say. “Is he really alive?”

Layla tearfully nodded in the affirmative.

Abbas felt a strange pain in his heart. For almost a year now, he had been grieving the loss of his parents. And now here he was, with his mother. And his father was alive as well.

Abbas was shaking, overwhelmed with emotion.

“Alright,” Alpha 43 said dryly. “That’s enough of the happy reunion. Take her away!”

Abbas whirled to face the Alpha, fury vivid on his face.

“There is no way I will let you take her,” he growled.

Alpha 43 shook his head. He raised his hand.

*Boom!*

A bullet whizzed just by Abbas’s head, shattering the wall behind him.

Abbas jumped, startled. He had forgotten about the sniper.

“I don’t care about what will happen to me,” Abbas clenched his fist.

Alpha 43 raised a brow.

“That may be true,” he answered quietly. “But you do care about her, right?”

Abbas felt a bead of sweat trickle down his neck.

“What would happen,” the Alpha paused. “If my sniper shot her instead.”

Abbas’s eyes widened in horror. Slowly, he raised his hands in surrender and sat down. His hands were shaking uncontrollably.

The Alpha nodded satisfactorily.

“Wise choice again, Abbas.”

“You’re a monster!” Layla hissed at Alpha 43, “I am no sister to you! How can you do this to us!”

Alpha 43 looked down. For a moment, he didn't say anything. "Take her away," he ordered calmly.

Abbas watched helplessly as his mother was forced to stand and made to walk away.

Layla did not leave easily though. She kept kicking the soldiers, trying to stay with Abbas; but eventually they managed to drag her away, and with her went Abbas's heart.

113

## Revelations

“What do you want from me?” Abbas swallowed.

His disgust for the Alpha had increased tenfold. He knew Alpha 43 had done this to weaken him. The sly Alpha was setting up some kind of game.

“I am here to tell you the truth about your parents,” Alpha 43 whispered.

Abbas shook his head.

“I already know who they are.”

Alpha 43 sighed.

“Why do you always do this, Abbas?” he asked frustratingly.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Did the assassin know Abbas had been a victim of amnesia? If so, how did he know? Not many people knew about this. How could he have possibly found out?

“Your mother was adopted into my family,” Alpha 43 began. “And she was treated by my parents as one of our own.”

Abbas looked down. He didn’t trust anything Alpha 43 said. But so far, this was in accordance with what Akbar had told him about his parents.

“Layla Api was a scientist. She worked with my father on the C-gun.”

Abbas’s eyes widened in surprise. His mother had worked on the C-gun? No. That was preposterous. Why would she have ever done that?

“And your father Murtaza...” Alpha 43 paused. “He was

brilliant. He was probably one of the best Alphas I have ever seen.”

Abbas froze. What had Alpha 43 just told him? No. These were all lies! His father couldn't be an Alpha! His mother couldn't have been part of the C-gun design!

“You're lying!” Abbas growled. “You're trying to trick me.”

Alpha 43 raised a brow.

“Your father survived a fight with my older brother Akbar,” he answered. “How do you think he did? Let me ask you this. With all your skills, how long could you last against Akbar? Now think, if your father was an ordinary engineer, do you honestly think he could have lasted more than a few seconds?”

Abbas refused to acknowledge it. But a part of him was curious now. How did Murtaza survive Akbar? How did Murtaza know how to use rifles proficiently in their boat chase? He certainly wasn't anyone ordinary.

‘If I survive, I will ask Akbar Uncle about all of this,’ Abbas decided.

Alpha 43 took a deep breath. He glanced down for a moment. Then abruptly, he narrowed his eyes.

“Abbas,” he asked curiously. “For how long have you had that aqeeq ring?”

Abbas looked down at his hand upon which he had his father's aqeeq ring. It was the only inheritance he had from his parents.

“I just got it,” Abbas lied. “Found it lying about somewhere.”

Alpha 43 raised a brow.

“That's not your style Abbas,” he confronted. “You're much too honorable to do that.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Alpha 43 got to his feet.

“I really am sorry about all of this, you know,” he paused. Glancing towards one of his soldiers, he asked,

“Do we have everything we need?”

The soldier nodded in the affirmative. Alpha 43 looked down at Abbas.

“It looks like we have everything we need. I apologise for the next events which are about to take place in your life. Including this.”



Instantly, the Alpha brought his fist crashing down on Abbas. Before Abbas could react, his head was struck and everything went black.

114

## A Report

Jumeira's eyes widened in surprise as she read the reports coming in. She could not believe what she was seeing.

"Half of our investors have backed out," she realised.

This wasn't good news. Jumeira needed the investors to keep supporting the project. Without them, she would face many more obstacles.

"Maam," a computerised voice called out. "Alpha 43 has arrived as you requested."

"Let him in," Jumeira answered.

Today, she was going to hold Alpha 43 accountable. Today she was going to punish him. His consistent failures were now causing them serious trouble.

The door swung open and Alpha 43 stepped inside. Jumeira narrowed her eyes as he reached her desk.

"You called?" the Alpha asked.

Jumeira shook her head.

"I'm not happy, Asghar," she frowned. "Not happy at all."

If Alpha 43 was annoyed by being called his real name, he didn't show it.

"Ever since I gave you control of the Alphas," Jumeira continued. "You have messed things up way more than Alpha 31 ever did! You got a full battalion slaughtered at the hands of a few rebels!"

She paused for a moment.

“I read your report,” Jumeira hissed. “How can you request for grade ‘A’ military tanks? What makes you think that I will trust you with such resources again?”

Alpha 43 took a deep breath.

“Maam, I requested the tanks to guarantee victory,” he answered. “The revolution is much stronger than any of us anticipated. They are not a few token rebels. They are a fully functional army.”

Jumeira shook her head in disapproval.

“I remain unconvinced,” she stated dryly.

Alpha 43 sighed.

“You cannot win against them without superior weaponry,” he persisted. “Can’t you see that? Akbar has been training them for a year! And based on my recent information, they could be preparing to attack us!”

Jumeira’s eyes widened in surprise. Had the revolution made a plan to attack them? Were they really that confident in their abilities? If that was the case, then they might have a need for advanced weaponry. But that didn’t mean Alpha 43 was required to command it.

“I am taking control back from you,” Jumeira declared. “You no longer command the Alphas.”

Alpha 43 clenched his fist, but Jumeira didn’t care. She could not risk something like this again.

“I will arrange the tanks and it will probably take several weeks for them to get here,” she added. “But the commander of my army will not be you.”

Alpha 43’s frustration was barely visible. But Jumeira knew that a storm was thundering inside him.

“Who will you appoint as the new commander?” he just managed to muster.

Jumeira looked down for a moment.

“Yunus,” she whispered.

Alpha 43 shook his head.

“Wrong choice,” he commented. “Yunus is strong, but nowhere near strong enough to handle Akbar. Or Abbas.”

Jumeira sighed.

“Well, both of my strongest Alphas have failed miserably to do anything, so why don’t you leave the decision making to me,” she snapped. “Now go!”

Alpha 43 shook his head in disapproval once more.

“You are making a grave mistake by removing me from commandship,” he stated.

With that, he turned to leave. Frustration burned inside him as he reached the door. He knew this would make his job harder. But it wasn’t going to stop him. At least Jumeira would order the tanks.

As it was, he had already dealt the revolution a heavy blow with Abbas. The new move he had made on the chess board would destroy their hope and faith.

‘Once I see the desired result of my plan,’ the Alpha decided. ‘I will take the commandship from Yunus and finish the revolution off personally.’

115

## A New Problem

“Wha-what happened?” Abbas groaned. “Where am I?”

He felt a soft ringing in his ears. And his head hurt. His body felt numb. He must have been here for quite a while.

“Ow,” Abbas grumbled as he tried to remember what had happened. He had gone to follow Jafar... and then...

“Ami!” Abbas exclaimed.

His eyes shot awake and he pushed himself upright. Breathlessly, he glanced around himself, taking in his surroundings. He was still in the room where he had met the Alpha, but now, nobody was there. Alpha 43 was gone. All of his soldiers were gone. Salman was gone. But most importantly, his mother was gone.

“Argh!” Abbas growled, smashing his fist against the old decayed floor. How could he have made such a big slip up? How could he have failed to capture Salman? Failed to rescue his mother? Failed to escape the Alpha? Abbas had been completely fooled by the simplest trick.

‘I let my anger get control of me,’ Abbas realised. ‘I didn’t see what was coming until it was too late.’

Abbas coughed at the dust in the room. For a moment he glanced down, his eyes widening in alarm.

“My aqeeq ring!” he exclaimed. “It’s gone!”

Abbas’s eyes darted around the room, but it was nowhere in sight. Abbas scowled. Alpha 43 must have taken it.

‘But why?’ Abbas thought. ‘Why would he-’

Abbas coughed again.

“I should get out of here,” he muttered under his breath.

Slowly, Abbas got to his feet, ignoring the soreness in his head. A small shining object caught his attention. Abbas narrowed his eyes. It was his firearm, Zulfi. Beside it, was his knife. The Alpha had very ‘kindly’ left his weapons with him.

Abbas took a deep breath. He lifted each weapon one by one, sheathing his knife in his pocket and holding his revolver in his hand.

The last thing he could remember was being clobbered on the head by Alpha 43.

‘I bet he enjoyed that,’ Abbas scorned as he headed downstairs.

He could vividly imagine the Alpha smirking over his unconscious self and the soldiers repositioning his body, placing his weapons beside him.

As Abbas reached the front door, he had to remind himself that he was still outside base. He was still in dangerous territory. He would need to take precautions on his way home.

Abbas pressed down the handle slowly, his gun at the ready. With a deep breath, he opened the door just slightly, and peeked outside. There were plenty of burnt buildings and wrecked playgrounds, but no sign of any life. Cautiously, Abbas exited the house and headed towards base. As he went, questions and thoughts flooded his mind.

His parents were alive. They were actually alive. Abbas had met his mother. He had hugged her. He had spoken to her. She had embraced him. Abbas felt the part of his head where she had stroked him. He would never forget that moment.

His father was also alive. His brave father. Murtaza. He had not perished that night in the boat chase. He had survived.

Abbas felt a strange sadness in his heart as he reached the edge of the forest. His parents were in the hands of his enemies. They had probably been tortured. They had probably been tormented. They must have missed their children.

Abbas sighed. How was he going to rescue them? They were in the iron fortress. The home of the Alphas. It was suicidal to try to go there. But Abbas knew that soon, he would find himself

going there anyway. His heart could not bear being apart from his parents anymore.

Abbas stopped for a moment. There was a tree beside him. That tree was where Abbas had cornered Salman, and Salman had then jumped at him. Abbas narrowed his eyes. He estimated that he was around four to five minutes away from base. With a sigh, he continued on.

Salman had clearly been sent to lure him in the trap. Alpha 43 had known Abbas wouldn't be able to control himself if he saw Salman. He wouldn't be able to think clearly. He wouldn't be able to stop himself from pursuing.

Abbas felt slightly disappointed with himself for being so predictable. He had literally run right into Alpha 43's hands. And that was perhaps the weirdest thing of all. His encounter with Alpha 43.

Abbas had met with many Alphas, and never had he felt so odd about an encounter. Usually when Abbas would meet an Alpha, they would draw some weapon at him and duel to the death.

The fact that the Alpha had sat down with Abbas made it feel even weirder. Alpha 43 could have done many things with Abbas at that moment. He could have killed him. He could have taken him prisoner. He could have used him as bait or for bargaining. So why did Alpha 43 spare him? Why did he let him go? And why did he tell Abbas so many strange things about his parents? It didn't make any sense.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. He felt a minor sense of relief. He had finally reached base. Slowly, Abbas trudged along until he reached the edge of the fence. He could've gotten shot for doing what he was about to do, but he didn't care. He was too occupied mentally to think about going around to the front.

He reached out and climbed up the fence, just as Akbar had taught him to. Even in his exhausted state, it took him only a few moments before he was at the top. In the next few seconds, he jumped, landing with a light thud.

"Thief! Thief!" Abbas heard someone cry.

He glanced down in the direction of the voice to see a little kid pointing at him. Upon being seen, the child went silent and

darted off.

Abbas rolled his eyes. He wanted to get some rest. But first, he had to speak with Akbar. Silently, he made his way to the place of the leader's quarters.

As he went, Abbas couldn't help feel odd. Something strange had descended over the revolutionaries. They were all being exceptionally quiet. Even as they saw him, they were not greeting him with the usual warmth that they used to.

'Has something happened?' Abbas thought to himself.

He caught sight of Dawud at a distance and was about to wave to him; but surprisingly, Dawud turned around quietly and headed off in the opposite direction! As if he didn't want to greet Abbas.

'Okay,' Abbas realised. 'Something is definitely wrong'.

Quickly, he turned towards the area where the leadership committee used to meet. He needed to speak with Akbar urgently. Akbar had to know what had happened to Abbas.

As Abbas reached the entrance to the shed, he heard voices from outside. The committee's voices. Abbas narrowed his eyes. Somehow, it seemed like the committee was... arguing?

'This can't be coincidental,' Abbas concluded.

He approached the door. Just as he reached out however, he heard a voice call out from behind him.

"Wait!"

Abbas paused and turned to see his friend Isa approaching him.

"Salamunalaikum," Abbas greeted.

Isa's eyes were filled with worry as he answered,

"Walaikum asalam."

Abbas narrowed his eyes.

"What happened Isa? Why does everyone look so down?"

Isa took a deep breath.

"Abbas," he whispered. "You should get out of here before too many people see you!"

Abbas's head tilted in confusion. What on earth was Isa talking about?

"I need to talk to Akbar Uncle," Abbas stated.



With that, he turned towards the door. Pressing down the handle, he pulled the door open and stepped inside.

116

## Accusations

“Well well,” Kadhim addressed Abbas as he entered. “Look who finally showed up.”

Abbas raised a brow. Glancing around the room he saw Ruqayya, Akbar and Farheen sitting at different places. All of them looked frustrated. Upon seeing Abbas though, they all showed signs of surprise and shock.

“Where have you been?” Ruqayya exclaimed. “We have been so worried about you!”

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Farheen was watching him carefully as if she was trying to read his mind.

“What happened?” Abbas asked. “Why is everyone behaving so strangely?”

Kadhim chuckled sarcastically.

“You cannot fool us any longer, Abbas!” he scoffed. “The cat is out of the-”

“Quiet Kadhim!” Akbar growled. “I told you we would hear Abbas out when he came. Now he’s here, so Let’s ask him.”

Abbas could not have been more confused than he was in the last three minutes.

“Can someone please tell me what is going on?” Abbas asked.

Akbar took a deep breath. He tossed a small brown folder in front of Abbas. Abbas eyed the folder cautiously as he took it in his own hands. With a deep breath, he opened it and began viewing its contents.

“What?” Abbas gasped. “What is this?”

There were photos. Loads of them. Some had Abbas seated with Alpha 43 at a table. Abbas was handing him over a small chit of paper. Others contained photos of him shaking hands with Alpha 43 and in one, Abbas was actually hugging Alpha 43!

“Let’s see how your luck helps you out of this!” Kadhim taunted. “Go on! Tell us a nice crazy story of what happened.”

Abbas shook his head in disbelief. He finally understood the trick he had been pulled into. Alpha 43 had been taking photos of their meeting and had edited them, trying to make it look like Abbas was a traitor . Abbas was at a loss of words. He knew Kadhim would not accept anything he said. But he had to try. He began narrating the incident; omitting parts of the story, like how he met his mother and what Alpha 43 told him about his parents.

At the end of it, Kadhim chuckled once more.

“I don’t believe it,” he smiled. “How did you come up with that on the spot?”

“I-”

“You betrayed us!” Kadhim growled. “Just like your student, Salman!”

“Alright enough!” Ruqayya hissed.

Standing up, she moved between Abbas and Kadhim.

“Abbas has given more for the revolution than anyone ever has! We cannot discount it.”

“We,” Farheen paused. “Should handle this the proper way.”

Abbas raised a brow.

“A court should be set up three days from now,” she declared.

“A verdict will be given about Abbas after deliberation.”

Abbas felt shock grip his heart. Why hadn’t Farheen Auntie sided with him?

“In the meantime,” she concluded. “Abbas should be imprisoned.”

Kadhim nodded in agreement.

Abbas shook his head in disbelief.

“Farheen Auntie?” he asked sadly “Are you really going to put me behind bars?”

Farheen sighed, avoiding Abbas's gaze. Her eyes glistened as she whispered,

"Yes."

Abbas wished he had never heard her say that. Infuriated, he turned to face Akbar who was silent. Merely watching Farheen. Abbas watched Akbar carefully, waiting for him to argue for Abbas. Waiting for him to overrule their decision.

Akbar took a deep breath. He glanced up, meeting Abbas's eyes. He smiled faintly and then said,

"Send him to prison."

Abbas's eyes widened in surprise. What was going on? How could Akbar Uncle! Akbar Uncle of all people did not side with him? Abbas glared at Akbar who was still smiling as if nothing had happened. As if he hadn't just made that decision. Abbas narrowed his eyes.

There was something strange about Akbar. He never would have voted against Abbas. Abbas knew that. So perhaps, he wasn't. Perhaps he was smiling to make Abbas realise something was wrong. Maybe he was playing some game by agreeing and he wanted Abbas to play along.

Abbas bowed his head.

"I accept your decision," he sighed.

Ruqayya shook her head in anger.

"I do not accept it! I will not let you put him behind bars."

Abbas met Akbar's gaze, which appeared to be worried. Ruqayya needed to agree.

"Ruqayya Api," Abbas whispered as kindly as he could.

She turned around to face him.

"You need to agree with them," he said quietly.

Ruqayya shook her head with tears in her eyes.

"I will not let you be dishonoured!" she hissed, flashing a furious glare at Kadhim.

Abbas took a deep breath.

"I'll be alright, Inshallah," Abbas whispered. "You will see. I'll be in and out, Inshallah. Allah does not abandon his sincere servants. Trust me, I rest my case with Allah."

Akbar nodded in agreement.

“Ruqayya,” he added. “Don’t worry, I won’t let anything happen to him,”

Ruqayya’s eyes narrowed. She watched Abbas carefully. A few seconds passed before she finally nodded.

“I concede to your decision,” she declared.

Kadhim’s lips curled into a smile.

“Brilliant! Lock that traitor up!”

He clapped his hands together. The door swung open and in came Isa and Hussain.

“Arrest him!” Kadhim ordered.

Hussain hesitated.

“Hands behind your back,” Isa swallowed.

Abbas sighed, placing his hands behind his back. He couldn’t believe what was happening to him. He couldn’t accept it.

“Three days from now Abbas!” Kadhim chuckled. “Three days!”

And with that, the cuffs snapped shut. Abbas was marched away. As they took him, he couldn’t help feel a hint of sadness. Amongst his own people, he was accused of being a traitor.

117

## A Confession

Jafar glanced down helplessly. His eyes blinked in confusion

“How could this have happened?” he squeaked. “It’s all my fault!”

He hopped from place to place unable to handle what was going on. Abbas was in trouble because of him.

The door creaked open. Jafar watched nervously as his older sister Maryam entered the room. Her gaze was harsh. Very harsh. Jafar knew that he was in big trouble. He moved over to a chair and sat down.

“Alright,” Maryam addressed him. “I want to know the truth.”

Jafar blinked, desperately trying to control his expressions.

“I don’t know what you mean,” he mumbled.

He blinked once more. Maryam chuckled sarcastically.

“This is your last chance to get out of this without punishment, Jafar. Tell me what you were up to. Ruqayya Api told me that Abbas said he was following you outside the gate. Then he got lured into a trap. What were you doing out there with this?”

Maryam pulled out a C-gun from her pocket.

“Jafar,” she sighed. “Abbas is in serious trouble. Tell me if you know something.”

Jafar felt his eyes water. The truth was perched at the tip of his tongue. He knew that he should confess. He owed that much to Abbas.

“I was using the C-gun on myself!” Jafar cried.

Maryam's eyes widened in surprise.

"Why-"

"I see my parents!" Jafar sobbed. "Every time I enter the C-gun. I know they're fake and all, but I can't help it! It feels so real! It is the closest I have ever been to them!"

Maryam blinked. She placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Oh Jafar," she sighed. "I understand why you are upset about this. But you need to realise. Ami and Baba are not gone. They are waiting for us on the other side."

Jafar sniffled.

Maryam smiled, tears trickling down her cheeks as she took her brother in her embrace.

"One day, we will be with them, Inshallah. And nobody will be able to separate us then."

Jafar looked down.

"It's all my fault," he mumbled. "Abbas Bhai got in trouble because of me. If I hadn't left... then he wouldn't have followed..."

Maryam took a deep breath.

"Is it your fault?" she asked rhetorically. "Yes it is. But the past is in the past. The most important thing for you to do now is realise your mistake and come with me."

Jafar raised a brow.

"Why-"

"Abbas needs to hear this," Maryam overspoke. "He needs to hear your apology."

118

## Prison Visits

Abbas watched the metal bars in disbelief. His mind was in a whirl. How did it come down to this? How had people actually believed this? How could anyone think Abbas would betray the revolution?

Abbas was more angry with some than others. For example, Farheen Auntie. She should have sided with him. But she didn't.

"This is ridiculous," Abbas mumbled.

Isa took a deep breath.

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Abbas," he consoled. "We'll find a way to get you out."

Abbas sighed. Glancing down, he noticed a small beetle crawling near his toe.

"I think it's karma," came a taunting voice.

Abbas glanced up at the cell directly opposite to his. He watched Jawad flash a cheeky smile at him.

Ever since Abbas had been put in a cell, Jawad had been throwing taunts and insults of all kinds his way. Abbas glanced down at the beetle; a mischievous idea formed in his mind.

Quietly, he reached down for the beetle. Taking the wriggling bug in his hand, he glanced at Jawad.

"Hey Jawad Bhai!" he called, tightening his grip on the beetle. "Catch!"

Swiftly, he hurled the beetle straight at Jawad. Jawad was unable to react fast enough and the insect landed straight in his



lap.

Abbas and Isa smirked as Jawad screamed, desperately trying to swat away the nasty insect.

“As I was saying,” Isa chuckled, turning back to Abbas. “I won’t let anything happen to you, Inshallah. Don’t worry.”

Abbas nodded before retreating into the corner of his cell. It had only been a day, but the anxiousness would not leave mind. In two days, he would be tried.

Abbas looked down. He knew that he was safer behind bars. That was why Akbar and Ruqayya had voted for him to go to prison. That was why they had assigned Isa to ‘guard’ him. That was why he himself had accepted to go to prison.

The only possible explanation for Farheen was that she was following the rules of the revolution and was trying to deliver justice fairly. Who knows? Maybe she thought she could buy time for Abbas? In any case, Abbas knew that his situation was becoming dire.

His arrest had impacted the revolutionaries quite severely. According to Isa, fights had increased and there was generally a negative atmosphere amongst everyone.

Abbas sighed. He knew Maryam, Zahra, Ali and Jafar had all argued very harshly for his release. Khalid as well. He had been heart broken after Salman’s treachery, but that hadn’t stopped him from supporting Abbas. And finally, Isa. His loyal friend who refused to leave his side for even a moment.

As if on cue, there was a knock on the door and Isa strolled off to answer it.

‘Almost poetic,’ Abbas thought as Isa returned to his side.

A moment later, Jafar and Maryam came into view as well.

“Salamunalaikum,” Maryam greeted.

Abbas turned to face her.

“Walaikumasalam.”

Maryam took a deep breath.

“Jafar has something he needs to say to you,” she explained.

Abbas glanced curiously in Jafar’s direction. He listened respectfully as the child confessed the emotional burden that had been weighing on his heart.

“Wow,” Abbas commented as Jafar finished. “You know Jafar, the first time I was exposed to the C-gun, I saw my parents as well.”

Jafar’s eyes widened in surprise as Abbas explained him his own struggles with the C-gun and how he had dealt with them.

“And from that day onward, the C-gun never affected me, Alhamdulillah,” Abbas finished.

Jafar sniffled, bowing his head respectfully.

“It’s my fault that you’re in here,” he mumbled.

“Don’t worry Jafar,” Abbas sighed. “Inshallah, I will be fine.”

Jafar nodded and with that, he bid farewell to Abbas. Maryam followed and in the next few minutes, Abbas found himself alone in his cell once more.

119

## A Mother's Prayer

Layla groaned as she heard steps outside of her cell. She looked down and closed her eyes, hoping that her visitor would go away. That the ground would swallow him up. That his heart would stop functioning. Anything to keep him away.

She hated him more than anything. She hated his voice. She hated his face. The torture he had subjected her to was so harsh that she could never forgive him.

The door swung open and she heard footsteps. And then a loud voice.

“Api?”

How Layla hated it when Alpha 43 called her that.

There was a sigh. And then a cough.

“Knock it off Api, I know you’re awake.”

Layla did not open her eyes. She did not say anything. She had nothing to say to this monster.

“I understand...you may feel...hurt,” the assassin stated. “But I had no choice.”

Layla did not respond. She was tired of Asghar always blaming the world for his problems.

“I want to compensate for your pain since you don’t have much time left here.”

Layla’s eyes shot open. She felt fury build inside her.

“Compensate!” She screamed. “After what you put me through! May Allah take you from your mother the way you took my son

from me!”

Alpha 43 shook his head in disbelief.

“My mother would not care if I died,” he whispered.

Layla felt tears trickle down her cheeks. Fury flooded her mind and heart.

“You have set a fire in my heart, Asghar,” she hissed. “And you will pay for it! You will be punished! Inshallah, your punishment will strike you like lightning and destroy you forever!”

Alpha 43’s eyes widened in horror at her words. The hate in her voice shook him from the inside. His hand trembled. For a moment he said nothing. Then he swallowed,

“I will allow you to meet your husband,” he whispered.

Layla’s ears pricked but she showed no reaction.

“I expected you to be happier,” the Alpha said quietly.

Layla shook her head in disagreement.

“You will just snatch him away in a few seconds,” she answered. “Just like you did with Abbas.”

Alpha 43 sighed. He advanced forward. Layla closed her eyes, unsure of what to expect.

*Click. Click.*

She felt her handcuffs open for the first time in months.

“Agh,” she winced as she felt the marks on her arms.

Curiously, she glanced up at Alpha 43.

“Go meet him. He is behind the second door,” he whispered. “You have five minutes. Come back yourself. I don’t want to have to bring you back here by force.”

Awkwardly, Layla got to her feet. Alpha 43 sighed as she limped over to the door and pushed it open. Desperately her eyes darted around and she caught sight of the second door. Layla reached out for it and pushed it open.

“Murtaza?” she asked uncertainly as she entered the room.

There was a groan.

“Layla?”

Layla felt her heart skip a beat. Turning in the direction of the voice, she saw him. Her husband was chained against the wall. His arms were scarred and burnt from torture.

Layla began to weep as she limped over to her husband.

“Alhamdulillah,” she cried. “You’re still alive!”

Murtaza coughed.

“Layla, my dear,” he managed a weak smile. “I c-can’t believe you are alive.”

Layla’s eyes watered.

“I have so much to tell you!” she cried, wrapping her arms around him. “I met our son! I met our Abbas!”

Murtaza’s eyes widened partially.

“R-really?” he groaned. “Is he here?”

Layla shook her head.

“No. He is out there,” she paused. “He has become a warrior. A strong brave warrior. He has joined a revolution.”

Murtaza coughed once more.

“A-Akbar has m-mentored him well.”

Layla nodded.

“Akbar Bhai always does things in the best possible way.”

Murtaza looked down.

“Inshallah, Allah (swt) w-will help our s-son reach the highest of spiritual levels, Inshallah,” he whispered.

“Inshallah,” Layla whispered. “And may Allah (swt) resolve any difficulty in his path.”

“A-Ameen,” Murtaza wheezed.

There was a loud clanking on the door.

Layla felt her heart sink.

“I have to go back,” she whispered. “If I don’t, they’ll drag me away.”

Murtaza sighed.

“G-go. I can’t b-bear to see you get h-hurt.”

With watery eyes, she gave him one final hug before turning to leave. As she walked away, she glanced back one last time. Her husband’s condition was becoming critical. He was getting worse with each passing day. Layla recited a verse from the holy Quran.

*“So surely with hardship comes ease.”*

# The Trial

Abbas felt his heart pounding in his chest. Today was the day. Today, he would be questioned about the accusations made on him. Today, his fate would be determined.

“You’re gonna get executed, Inshallah,” Abbas heard Jawad mumble.

Abbas ignored his comment, preparing himself as Isa and Dawud showed up to collect him.

“The court is ready,” Isa whispered. “Don’t worry. You will be fine, Inshallah. You got this!”

Abbas nodded as they brought him out of the cell, cuffed. One grabbed hold of each arm. Abbas winced at how tightly Dawud had gripped his arm. Turning to the young man, Abbas asked,

“Do you think I’m guilty?”

Dawud sighed.

“I don’t know what to think,” he confessed.

They took Abbas out of the prison towards the barn. Abbas narrowed his eyes. That was where his fate would be decided. Abbas didn’t bother looking at anyone throughout the time he was walking. He was tired of people goggling at him as if he was some zoo animal.

Eventually, he reached the barn and after a minute, were admitted in. Inside, there were three small benches and a big table. Seated at the big table was Khalid. Abbas narrowed his eyes. Khalid would be judging his case.

On one side, he saw Ruqayya, Akbar and to Abbas's delight; Farheen. They were all here to support Abbas. On the other side Kadhim sat alone.

Abbas assumed a chair at the middle seat.

"Audhubillahimina shaytan rajeem. Bismillah hir rahman nir raheem," Khalid began.

Abbas glanced at Kadhim. He looked determined and focused. Abbas took a deep breath. This was the critical moment. He had to get through this successfully.

"We will start with Abbas," Khalid declared. "Abbas. You have been accused of betraying the revolution. You have been accused of sending information to the notorious Alpha 43 and finally, cooperating with the convicted traitor," Khalid swallowed. "By convicted traitor, I mean Salman. What do you have to say about this?"

Abbas waited for Khalid to gesture for him to speak.

"Allah (swt) is my witness," Abbas began. "Alpha 43 and I are sworn enemies. This is a well known fact amongst everyone. I almost died trying to blind him in the battle at the old hay fields. I received two blows on my right side at that Alpha's hand. In addition, I received a bullet wound at the hand of Salman. And most importantly, I was the one who told everyone that Salman was a traitor. If I worked with him, why would I do that?"

Khalid nodded.

"Now I ask Kadhim. Please present your case."

Kadhim took a deep breath.

"Your Honour, there is no doubt that Abbas is very brave. He always fights on the front line. You know who else did that?" Kadhim paused. "Salman. He also fought at the front line for the revolution."

Abbas stopped himself from growling as Kadhim continued.

"I find it interesting that Abbas received so many blows in the battle of the old hay fields, yet he still survived. Is it strange that even Alpha 43 wasn't able to kill Abbas? That no one is ever able to kill Abbas?"

Abbas frowned. They were difficult arguments to refute.

"Next we will have Akbar, Farheen and Ruqayya."

First Ruqayya stood up.

“Abbas is an honourable warrior. When my brother was alive, he always spoke very highly of Abbas,” Ruqayya paused for a moment. “When he was martyred, he entrusted me to Abbas. This means that he trusted him. Naqi Bhai trusted Abbas.”

Khalid nodded, motioning for the next person. Farheen stood up.

“Your Honour,” Farheen sighed. “We all know how hard Abbas works for the revolution. Remember that in the battle of the hayfields, Abbas saved Zahra’s squadron. If he was a traitor, why would he?”

Khalid nodded and Abbas was starting to think he had this case in the bag as Akbar stood up.

“Your Honour,” Akbar began. “I would like to bring up that the reason Abbas gets injured frequently is due to the nature of his job. He serves on the front line. Naturally, that means he will get wounded. Now with regards to Kadhim’s earlier comment, where he says Salman also served at the front line; there are many people who serve at the front line. So by that logic, are all those people under suspicion?”

Khalid narrowed his eyes. He glanced from one person to the next. Abbas was once again unsure if he had the case in hand.

“Please submit any evidence that you have,” Khalid stated.

Kadhim shot to his feet. In his hand, the same brown folder. Abbas watched as Kadhim handed Khalid the folder and returned back to his seat. Khalid took a deep breath before opening the folder and glancing at the fake photographs inside. His eyes widened in surprise.

“I don’t believe it,” he whispered as he reached the end of it. “This is critical evidence.”

Abbas felt his heart skip a beat. What exactly did critical evidence mean?

After a few moments, Khalid cleared his throat and said, “I, Khalid, have judged this case. I find both parties’ evidence and arguments to be strong and hence. . .” Abbas strained his ears.

“I declare the case inconclusive,” Khalid finished.

Abbas’s eyes widened in surprise. What did he mean? It was



clear that Abbas was innocent!

“It remains unclear as to whether Abbas is innocent or guilty,” Khalid added. “Hence my verdict is to be safe rather than sorry but not unjust. We must punish Abbas, but we won’t kill him.”

Abbas felt his mind in a whirl. He couldn’t understand what was going on.

“We will exile him,” Khalid decided. “This case is brought to a close.”

121

## Exile

“Come on Jafar!” Maryam scolded as he packed the last of his possessions.

Abbas sighed. Ever since the court case, things had spiralled out of hand. Akbar, Ruqayya and Farheen were furious. There had been many fights and arguments. But Khalid’s decision was supported by most others outside the committee, which meant that Abbas was going to be exiled.

“What’s wrong?” he heard Maryam ask.

Abbas glanced up, meeting her gaze. He shook his head in disbelief.

“I- I honestly cannot believe that this is happening,” he answered.

Maryam sighed.

“We won’t ever leave you alone, Abbas. Whatever that entails. We know you’re innocent.”

There was silence as Abbas thought about what was about to happen. As they had been unable to reverse the decision, the entire family had decided to leave. Akbar, Ali, Zahra, Maryam and Jafar. Even little Hurr was coming as well.

Abbas felt slightly proud and overwhelmed with how they were supporting him. Even when he was being exiled, they stuck with him as if he was family; and that was healing Abbas from within.

“What lies ahead doesn’t matter,” Maryam added. “We’re a family. Whatever happens, we stick together.”

“Yeah!” he heard Haider exclaim.

Abbas turned around, ruffling his brother's hair. For a moment, his eyes hovered over Haider with a hint of sadness filling his heart. He still hadn't told his brother about their parents. It was not the right time.

'I'll tell him once we leave,' Abbas decided.

Quietly, the group headed out making a conscious effort to ignore everyone's hostile looks. Abbas knew that most people here thought he was guilty. They were unable to understand that the photographic evidence was fraudulent.

Abbas took a deep breath as they reached the front entrance. Zahra, Ali and Hurr were already there. And Ruqayya!

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Walking up to her, he was about to say something but she already spoke,

"Don't bother trying to convince me," she said flatly. "I refuse to leave you alone. You are my family now. I go wherever you go."

Abbas felt a sudden warmth in his heart.

"Thank you Ruqayya Api," he answered quietly.

She smiled in response.

"Wait Akbar!" Abbas heard someone call.

Glancing to his right, he saw Akbar approaching. Slung on his shoulder was a large bag. In his hands was a powerful rifle. Beside him was Khalid.

"You don't have to do this," he heard Khalid whisper as he neared. "We can find a way to bring Abbas back."

Akbar shook his head.

"I made my stance clear," he answered. "If Abbas goes, we all go."

Khalid shook his head in disbelief. He avoided Abbas's gaze.

"I did this to protect Abbas," he whispered. "I sent him away to save him from execution."

Akbar shook his head.

"Whatever you did was wrong and we have to get going now; so unless you have something important to say, we shall be on our way."

Khalid took a deep breath.

“There is a small cottage,” he explained. “About ten minutes north of the old hayfields. It has some old provisions which I abandoned before the revolution. You might find them useful.”

Akbar nodded.

With that, he turned to join the remainder group. Abbas was about to join them as well, but Khalid stopped him.

“I’m so sorry Abbas,” he whispered. “I have no control over this.”

Abbas struggled to control his anger.

“I have to go,” Abbas answered.

And with that, he turned to join the rest of the group.

“You have all made a big mistake,” Abbas muttered under his breath. “May Allah save you from its consequences!”

## In the Woods Once More

“Come on everyone,” Akbar whispered. “We’re moving a little slowly.”

Abbas nodded as they reached the river. It had been an hour since they left the revolution base and the small group had crossed through a few grass fields making their way to the forest.

Abbas glanced back for a moment. The base had long disappeared and for the first time, Abbas felt a strange weakness in his heart. He had worked so hard for the cause. He had trained so hard. He had lost brothers. He had shed blood. And now, he was exiled.

“What are we going to do now?” Abbas asked as he crossed the river.

Nobody answered. Nobody knew. It was as though the last twelve months of events had amounted to nothing.

Abbas shivered as he reached the other side of the river. He had been forced to bid farewell to so many. His students. Even Isa and Farheen Auntie. They had both wanted to come, but Abbas convinced them to stay. Someone needed to stay in the revolution. Someone needed to make sure that the Alphas were stopped.

“We’ll collect the provisions Khalid mentioned,” Akbar said as they reached the bottom of the hill. “And we’ll see from there.”

“Maybe we could go back to the bungalow?” Maryam asked as they began walking uphill.

Akbar shook his head.

“We don’t know if it’s safe,” he whispered. “The bungalow has been abandoned for many months now.”

Abbas paid no attention to their conversation. His mind was focused on the field ahead. Many months ago, he remembered when they had first journeyed here. The time when they had first decided to rebel against the tyranny of the Alphas. This was where he had met so many people for the first time. Naqi, Ruqayya, Isa, Farheen.

A sad smile formed on Abbas’s face. His services to the revolution were over.

“We’ll find a way to survive this test from Allah as well, Inshallah,” Ali whispered. “We’ll find a way.”

Eventually, the group reached the top of the hill. Akbar lead them forward. Abbas glanced over at the old hay fields; now reduced to ashes after the furious battle that had taken place there.

The pungent smell of death still hung in the air. Traces of the clash could still be seen. Abbas narrowed his eyes as they landed on the forest edge. That was where he had fought Alpha 43. And just a short distance from there, he had been shot in the back by Salman.

Abbas clenched his fist.

“This is where he shot me,” Abbas growled.

The group stopped moving.

“We’ll get Salman for that, Inshallah,” he heard Ruqayya pledge. “Just like we’ll get Alpha 43.”

Zahra nodded in agreement.

“We’ll find a way to stop them,” she added. “It won’t end here.”

Abbas took a deep breath as Akbar beckoned them to keep moving.

For the next few minutes, nobody said anything. The group travelled past the old hay fields; eventually leaving them far behind. Now they found themselves at the end of the grass. A mud field stretched as far as the eye could see.

“There’s a windmill,” Maryam stated abruptly.

Abbas narrowed his eyes, trying to see what she was pointing

at. Surely enough, at the edge of the mud was a small windmill. Beside it was a run down shed.

“So this is where Khalid Uncle was staying before the revolution,” Abbas thought out loud.

Maryam nodded.

They treaded through the mud. As they went forward, Abbas heard a dissatisfied grumble. Zahra was trying to hold Hurr and simultaneously keep her clothes out of the mud.

Ali reached out to take Hurr, but she swatted away his hand impatiently.

“Here Zahra,” Ruqayya addressed her. “Let me help you.”

Zahra flashed her a grateful smile as she handed over her son to Ruqayya. Then she lifted the edges of her clothes and trudged through the mud.

Abbas chuckled as he saw Ali watch the scene in confusion.

“Why. . . Why not just give him to me?” he grumbled.

Abbas caught Jafar’s eye and they both suppressed a grin. After a few grueling minutes, the run down shed finally came into view.

“Let’s get the supplies,” Akbar whispered quietly.

He reached out and pushed open the door.

Abbas coughed as the door creaked open, creating a haze of dust.

“I can see why this place is abandoned!” Maryam coughed as they entered inside.

It was a simply designed room. There was a large rusted table in the center of the room. On either side, there were chairs. Abbas placed his bag on the table.

“We should rest a little,” Ruqayya suggested as she gave Hurr back to Zahra.

There was a murmur of agreement. Soon, everyone began assuming a seat somewhere.

Abbas sat down beside Haider. Now was the time to tell him the truth about their parents. Abbas had been struggling to restrain himself the entire time.

“Haider,” Abbas began, kindly placing a hand on his younger brother’s shoulder. “There’s something I-”

The door swung open abruptly. Abbas's eyes shot up in alarm and he immediately whipped out his gun. From the corner of his eye, he could see Akbar had his rifle aimed for the door as well.

*Boom!*

Abbas ducked as a bullet whizzed in through the window, landing right next to Hurr. Abbas felt his heart freeze as he heard a rough voice from outside.

"We are the soldiers of the iron fortress. There are snipers on all of you! If you don't surrender in the next ten seconds, we will shoot the baby!"

Zahra shrieked in horror. In a flash, she moved in front of the child. Beside her, Ali stood firmly.

"Surrender now!"

Abbas met Akbar's gaze.

"What should we do?" he mouthed.

Akbar glanced back helplessly at Zahra and Ali.

"We can't do anything," he sighed. "We're trapped."



123

## The Traitor

Abbas growled as two soldiers tied his hands to a wooden chair. “I’ll kill you for this!”

The soldiers ignored him. They tightened the knot and let go. Abbas pulled at the ropes, but they were too tight. Unlike Salman, these guys knew how to tie a good knot. On his left, Ruqayya was tied to another chair. And next to her was Maryam, then Akbar; followed by Ali. Beside him was Zahra. Hurr was sleeping comfortably on the table, unaware of the danger he was in.

“How did you find us?” Maryam hissed. “How did you know we would be here?”

The soldiers glanced between one another and chose to ignore her question.

*Wham!*

Abbas slammed his feet off the ground.

“Answer her!” he shouted. “How did you know? Who told you?”

“I told them,” Abbas heard a whisper from behind him. “I told them.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes. That voice was familiar.

Abbas heard footsteps as the figure stepped out from behind him into his view. His heart froze. Abbas gasped. No, it couldn’t be true. There had to be some mistake.

“Kh-Khalid Uncle?” Abbas stammered. “Wh-what...”

Abbas couldn't finish his sentence. It all made sense now. Salman could not have been the only traitor. He wasn't skilled enough to pull off everything he did. And how could he betray without Khalid suspecting? And then there was the court case. Despite Abbas being innocent, he exiled him.

"You!" Abbas yelled.

Maryam stared in disbelief.

"Why Khalid Uncle?" she swallowed. "How could you do this to us?"

Khalid looked down. He turned to the soldier and said,

"Let Alpha 43 know that I have carried out my job. I have handed them over to you."

Akbar shook his head in disapproval.

"You will pay for this Khalid," he muttered under his breath.

Everyone watched in shock as he turned to leave. Abruptly he paused, turned around and called out,

"Salman, guard them while I'm gone."

Abbas's eyes widened in surprise. Salman was here?

Khalid left before their eyes, leaving them with the soldiers and Salman. There was a sound of a motor roaring to life, gradually growing distant. Within the next minute, its noise had completely faded away. Instantly, he heard Akbar call out from the other side of the room,

"So Salman, my boy, how much did you sell us out for?"

Salman did not respond. He merely walked up so that he was in front of them. Abbas narrowed his eyes. Salman was crying. Again. Just like when Abbas had chased him.

"Why do you cry?" Abbas asked.

Salman looked down. Taking a deep breath he answered,

"I never wanted it be this way."

Abbas chuckled sarcastically.

"What were you expecting?" Abbas shouted. "You sold us out to the Alphas! You betrayed your own brothers in arms! You're the reason Naqi Bhai is gone!"

Salman's lip quivered as he glanced the other way.

"How could you do this?" Maryam chided. "How could you betray us?"

Salman looked up for a moment.

“What none of you realise,” he cried. “Is that we were never going to win!”

Abbas narrowed his eyes. He could feel his temper on the verge of bursting.

“They are bringing tanks and fighter jets!” Salman confessed. “Soon they will be here!”

Abbas’s eyes widened in surprise. The revolution was strong, but nowhere near strong enough to be able to fight tanks and jets.

“We cannot stop the Alphas,” he sobbed.

Abbas heard Ruqayya growl,

“So you decided to give up! Is that what our faith teaches us?”

Salman glanced down.

“All these months of spying,” he sighed. “They promised us a way out. A ticket to a new home away from this accursed place. Things became tricky when the information about the first revolutionary meeting at the old hay fields did not work.”

Abbas shook his head in disbelief. How could Salman be so foolish? How could Khalid be so foolish? How could they actually believe that the Alphas would let them leave? They were mad.

“You always wanted to be a hero, Salman,” Akbar hissed. “Congratulations! You sold out your brothers, cast out your honour and got everyone killed. You abandoned your religion’s teachings. You aided the enemy so skillfully that you will always be remembered for your chivalry!”

Salman shuddered.

“I am sorry,” he mumbled. “But I have to do this. I’m sorry for being a traitor.”

Salman paused. Turning to face Abbas, he whispered,

“I let you down. But I had no choice.”

Abbas scoffed.

“Isn’t the blood you shed enough?” he asked. “Isn’t it enough-”

“Quiet,” Salman interrupted but Abbas continued.

“-that you shed Naqi Bhai’s blood and that now-”

“I said quiet!” Salman hissed but Abbas kept ranting.

“You’ll shed my blood as well! Will it ever be enough for you?”

“Enough!” Salman shouted, grabbing hold of Abbas’s collar. Abbas narrowed his eyes.

“I cannot do anything to help you,” Salman whispered. “So stop whining!”

He moved around to Abbas’s back.

“Forgive me,” he muttered breathlessly. “I tried to warn you not to follow me, but you didn’t listen!”

Abbas felt his heart skip a beat. The ropes around his hands were getting looser. Was Salman untying him?

“I never wanted it to be this way!” Salman growled. “But I had no choice.”

Abbas felt the last rope fall from his hand. Then Salman placed something heavy in his hand. Abbas felt the edge. It was a knife. The youth turned and strolled over to Akbar.

“Oy!” one of the soldiers called out. “What are yo-”

Abbas hurled the knife at the soldier and leapt forward, knocking two more to the ground. There were gasps as he rolled over, dodging a storm of bullets.

“There!” he heard Salman exclaim as Akbar got to his feet. The five remaining soldiers retreated to the corner of the room.

“I got this,” Akbar growled.

In a flash, he lunged forward. There was a blur and the first soldier dropped to the floor. Moments later, Akbar whipped his leg at another, knocking that soldier to the ground before driving a fist into the third. He also dropped down. The last two leapt forward, but Akbar rammed his shoulder into one, knocking the wind out of him before slamming his head into the other. That soldier collapsed on the ground; unconscious.

“Aye!”

Abbas heard a yelp.

Turning around, he saw Maryam holding a knife to Salman’s eye.

“I am going to gut you open!” Maryam growled.

Abbas smirked as Salman went to his knees with his hands raised.

Maryam shot her fist to Salman's temple and he collapsed on the ground unconscious.

"We can deal with him later," Maryam sighed. "Right now, we have to handle this new issue."

# Planning the Final Battle

“Alright,” Ali started. “What’s our plan?”

It had been ten minutes since they captured Salman and the soldiers. Now they were up against the clock. In the next few hours, Jumeira was going to send a fleet of tanks and fighter jets that would wipe the revolution out.

“We need to take care of multiple problems,” Akbar answered. “First, there is the issue of Hurr, Jafar and Haider.”

Abbas noticed Jafar and Haider frown. They probably did not want to miss out. But Abbas knew that they were too young to be put in danger.

“We cannot expose them to any kind of danger,” he declared. Zahra nodded.

“We’ve tied up the soldiers and they won’t be waking up any time soon, so perhaps they could stay here.”

There was silence and Abbas could tell that Akbar was thinking it over.

“Someone has to stay with them,” Ali answered.

Akbar nodded.

“Maryam will stay with them.”

Maryam’s eyes widened in surprise but she quickly regained her composure.

“I’ll be at ease if I know you’re here,” Akbar added kindly.

Maryam took a deep breath before nodding in acknowledgement.

“Alright,” Abbas continued. “What about Khalid?”

Ruqayya raised her hand.

“I will handle that traitor.”

Akbar glanced at her for a moment before nodding in agreement.

“Zahra will go with you,” he ordered. “The two of you will have to handle Khalid and warn the revolution about the attack.”

Akbar took a deep breath.

“Ali, Abbas and I will go to the iron fortress.”

Abbas froze. Surely he had misheard what Akbar had just said?

“What?” Ruqayya exclaimed. “What did you just say?”

Akbar sighed.

“I’ve been giving a lot of thought to the matter,” he rubbed his hand against his forehead. “And I feel that a smaller squad can achieve success in the mission.”

Abbas was skeptical. Why did they need to do this?

As if on cue, Akbar added,

“We need to deactivate the c-chips which control the Alphas. This can be done, but the control panel which allows it lies deep within the iron fortress.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes.

“Isn’t that too risky Akbar Uncle?” he asked.

Akbar shook his head.

“Even if we manage to warn the revolution in time,” he stated.

“It’s not like they can do anything but evacuate. The tanks will still be sent. The fighter jets will still be sent. But by deactivating the c-chips, we render their strongest weapon, the Alphas, useless.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes. It was an insane idea. It could get them all killed. But he knew that Akbar was speaking the truth. Remembering his father’s courage, he answered,

“I’ll do it.”

Ruqayya whirled towards Abbas, her eyes widening in alarm.

“Abbas...” she hesitated. “What are you saying?”

Abbas looked down.

“We have to end this Api,” he whispered. “And that will only happen one way.”

Ruqayya looked down for a moment. Nobody said anything as she raised her eyes, meeting Abbas’s gaze.

“If you survive,” she whispered. “Then come home victorious, Inshallah.”

Abbas took a deep breath. His heart was pounding in his chest.

“And if you get killed, God forbid,” she took a deep breath. “I won’t be able to handle it.”

Abbas looked down.

“Inshallah,” he whispered. “I will return, Inshallah.”

On the other side, Abbas noticed Zahra was on the verge of tears. Ali was looking down.

“Ali,” she muttered. “Just know that you have to survive. You have to survive for our son.”

Ali nodded slowly.

“Nobody wishes Akbar Uncle,” Akbar grumbled. “Everyone prays for Abbas and Ali.”

Zahra’s lips curled into a smile at her uncle’s comment.

“I guess everyone has confidence in your abilities and besides that, you’re always in our duas Akbar Uncle,” Maryam smiled.

And with that, they got ready to leave.

“Best of luck,” Haider hugged Abbas. “Every moment, my duas will be with you.”

Abbas nodded and glanced towards Akbar. Their gaze met. For a moment, neither said anything.

Abbas ruffled Haider’s hair playfully. Deep down, a thought was bothering him. This could be the last time Abbas would ever see his brother.



## A Shocking Truth

“This uniform is really uncomfortable!” Abbas grumbled. “How do the iron fortress soldiers ever manage in one of these?”

It had been an hour since Abbas, Ali and Akbar had left for the fortress. Normally this journey would take many hours, but thankfully, Ali had discovered the area where the soldiers parked their vehicles. With the use of their vehicles, it would take them less than two hours to reach.

“There are some things I need to explain you about the iron fortress,” Akbar began as he drove. Certain rules exist to keep discipline amongst the ranks.”

Abbas leaned closer. He didn’t want to miss a single detail.

“Jumeira is the most senior in the chain of command,” Akbar explained. “Her code name was Queen Bee back when I was there.”

Abbas raised a brow. He could already sense the arrogance in that despicable woman.

“Next in the chain of command are the Alphas,” Akbar continued. “Alphas are difficult to deal with. Never cross paths with one intentionally. It wouldn’t take an Alpha long to work out that you don’t belong there.”

Ali grunted in acknowledgement.

“If, however, you find yourself in front of an Alpha,” Akbar added. “You must not by any means, and I emphasise by any means, show any sign of fear. Alphas publicly punish soldiers

who show fear.”

Abbas’s eyes widened in surprise. He had no idea that so many rules existed in the iron fortress. It sounded like an atmosphere where the soldiers were groomed for certain skills of cruelty, brutality and shamelessness.

“Don’t speak unless spoken too,” Akbar declared. “Normally, soldiers stay quiet unless the squadron leader is speaking to them.”

Abbas nodded.

“You’re the squadron leader right?” he asked.

Akbar shook his head.

“I will be recognised too easily and there’s a high chance of you getting recognised as well Abbas,” he answered. “Ali will be the squadron leader. Also, try to behave as normal as possible because if you aren’t able to. . .”

Abbas didn’t need Akbar to finish his sentence. He knew what would happen. But for some strange reason, Abbas found himself strangely calm. Somehow the inevitability of the danger he was about to enter in made him lose all sense of fear.

Something else was also bothering Abbas. His parents were imprisoned in the iron fortress. And for some reason, Abbas hadn’t told Akbar as yet. Honestly, he had simply never gotten the chance.

‘I should tell him,’ Abbas thought quietly.

“Akbar Uncle,” Abbas whispered. “There’s something I need to tell you. Can you please stop the car?”

Akbar flashed Abbas a curious glance.

“Can’t it wait Abbas? We have to get to the fortress and time is ticking against us.”

Abbas could not hold it any longer.

“My parents are alive,” he confessed.

Akbar swerved the car abruptly. Abbas went flying forward.

*Wham!*

Abbas felt his face collide with the side of the vehicle. Groaning, he pushed himself upright. Akbar sat in the front seat, his hands pale.

“Wh-what did you just say?” he stammered.

Ali's eyes were wide in shock as well. Abbas narrated the entire incident, mentioning what happened to his mother.

"He's keeping them as prisoners," Abbas finished.

Akbar took a deep breath. His mind was filled with a roller coaster of emotions. But he was well aware of the seriousness of the situation. He had to keep his mind clear. Any negligence could result in irrecoverable loss. With Murtaza and Layla being alive, the stakes had escalated to an all-time high. He made a conscious effort to put his thoughts aside for now. He felt hope; and that brought a faint yet sincere smile to his face.

"You should have told me this earlier," he whispered. "You should have told me that my closest friend, Murtaza was alive."

Abbas sighed.

"I never got the chance to tell you," he answered.

Akbar narrowed his eyes.

"I will punish you for this Asghar," he growled. "I will punish you for this personally."

126

## Reza

“Alright,” Akbar declared. “We’re here. Remember, follow my lead.”

Abbas couldn’t help peek curiously out of the window. He narrowed his eyes. There were four giant steel walls stretching higher than Abbas could see. The one they were driving to had a large automated gate that was bolted shut.

Akbar glanced in the opposite direction as they reached the gate. Calmly, he pointed somewhere on the ground and Abbas; as he had been instructed earlier, glanced down in that direction.

There was a beep and the gates began to open. As they did, Ali started the vehicle once more and drove inside.

Abbas’s eyes widened in surprise. There was a huge skyscraper surrounded by an electric fence that was at least five meters tall. Abbas noted that the only place not covered by the fence was the entrance, where ten soldiers stood guard. Each of them held a large powerful rifle. Their gaze was sharp; they were ready for an attack at any time.

Abbas felt his heart pound as the vehicle drew close. Would they be able to enter? Or would they be caught?

‘Stop!’ Abbas scolded himself silently. ‘You have to stay calm or you’ll mess up.’

Abbas looked forward trying to focus on the seat in front of him. He tried to clear his mind and focus, but it was a bit of a struggle. Alpha 43 was in this sky scraper somewhere. And so

were his parents.

“Where are you coming from?” the head guard asked.

Abbas tried not to attract attention as he heard Ali answer casually, “Patrol.”

The soldier nodded and was about to allow them in when his eyes fell on Abbas. For a moment, he eyed the back of the car. Then abruptly, he turned to face Ali.

“Where is the rest of your squad?” the head guard asked. “We never send patrols of less than five soldiers.”

Abbas felt fear grip his heart.

“They are dead,” Ali answered calmly. “We encountered trouble. But we managed to get out.”

The head guard narrowed his eyes.

“Who is your Alpha?” he asked casually. “I would like to ask him about you.”

Abbas’s foot began to tremble slightly. He gripped his leg with his left hand trying to keep it still. But he knew things were going wrong. How were they going to get inside? There was no Alpha who knew them. Well, no Alpha who knew them and wouldn’t kill them instantly on sight.

“I-” Ali paused. “Our Alpha is-”

“Just what is the meaning of this?” a voice called out.

Abbas turned curiously in the direction of the voice. His eyes widened in horror. Alpha 31 stood there. Abbas remembered him from an earlier encounter in the forest. The assassin strolled over to the vehicle. Abbas readied his gun. If he was going to die, he would take a few of them with him.

Alpha 31 turned to face Ali and growled,

“Where have you been?”

Abbas froze. What did Alpha 31 just say?

“The guards won’t let us in sir,” Akbar complained.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. What was Akbar doing?

Alpha 31 turned towards the head guard who had now lost his swagger. Grabbing hold of the head guard’s collar, he clenched his hands and lifted the man off the ground.

“You know Abbas,” he sighed. “I really hate it when people interfere with my business.”

Abbas shuddered. The head guard's name was also Abbas!

"S-sir," the guard stammered. "I was o-only-"

"Silence!" Alpha 31 hissed. "If you interfere with my men again, I will rip your head off your body."

With a growl, he let go of the head guard.

"Let them in!" Alpha 31 ordered.

There was a cry of 'Yes sir!'

Abbas sighed in relief as he adjusted his sheet. They were safe. For now. But as their vehicle drove past the gate, another thought occurred to Abbas. They were in. They had made it. Now they would just need to take care of Alpha 31. But Abbas was quite confident that with Akbar, himself and Ali, they could do it.

The door swung open, and Alpha 31 assumed a seat in the front of the car, next to Ali. Abbas felt the tension return. Here he was. An Alpha just a metre in front of him.

"Take us to the entrance soldier," The Alpha ordered. "Another soldier will handle the vehicle."

Awkwardly, Ali drove the vehicle forward. Within the next minute, they were at the entrance.

"Follow me," Alpha 31 ordered. Swiftly, they exited the vehicle and lined up.

Alpha 31 began to walk, and they followed. The automatic doors slid open as they neared.

With a deep breath, Abbas stepped inside. Had this not been the base of their enemy, Abbas might have stopped to take photos. There were soldiers everywhere. Literally everywhere. He whispered a silent prayer in his heart. No matter how well their plan was made, they were on the battlefield now. He sincerely pleaded to Allah for His mercy and blessings. A strange clam filled his heart. He brought his mind back to the present.

In one corner, some soldiers were repairing a part of the wall. On another side, some were carrying off machine guns.

"Abbas!" he heard a quiet whisper.

Abbas whirled in the direction of the noise to see Akbar glaring at him in disapproval.

'Right!' Abbas realised. 'I have to behave like a soldier.'

Abbas walked on, keeping close to Akbar. He felt like a lost child in a new school. He felt his heart skip a beat as an Alpha strolled past him. Eventually, they reached a door.

Alpha 31 extended his hand. A few seconds passed and then came a loud beep. The door swung open and Alpha 31 stepped through. Just as he entered however, he paused and held the door open. Swiftly, Akbar crossed through. Abbas and Ali followed.

Abbas took a deep breath. They were in a relatively quiet hallway. Not too many people were there. But there were some, nonetheless. Abbas could not strike the Alpha yet.

Alpha 31 began walking forward once more. The three began strolling after him. Abbas couldn't help find this a little strange. This had to be a divine miracle or a trap. There was no other explanation. They definitely were not the soldiers Alpha 31 had been expecting.

Silently Abbas, Ali and Akbar followed until they reached a door.

Alpha 31 extended his hand. The door beeped before opening. Once again, the Alpha stepped inside followed by Abbas, Ali and Akbar right behind him. As the door closed, Abbas narrowed his eyes. This room was much smaller than the others. And nobody was inside. Just a table and a few chairs. They could easily eliminate the Alpha here. Quietly, he withdrew his knife.

The Alpha paid no attention as he advanced toward the table. Abbas raised his blade to strike. He would only have one shot. In a flash, he brought the knife down upon the assassin, but a sudden force on his right knocked the blade out of his hand!

Abbas glanced towards his right in horror. Akbar stood there with a look of disapproval. What was he doing? How could Akbar jeopardise their cover?

The Alpha whirled around upon hearing the knife land on the stone tile floor.

His eyes landed on Abbas before turning towards Akbar.

"Now now," Alpha 31 smiled. "Don't get pulling blades on me now, Abbas."

Abbas's eyes widened in alarm. How did Alpha 31 know it was him? Alpha 31 knew it was him!

Abbas watched in horror as the Alpha turned to face Akbar.

“You never told him,” the assassin grinned. “Did you?”

Akbar smiled. Turning towards Abbas he said,

“Abbas. Allow me to introduce you to an old friend of mine,  
Reza.”



# Infiltration

Abbas's mind was in a whirl.

"What is going on?" he questioned Akbar.

Akbar shared a knowing smile with Alpha 31.

"I probably should have told you about this earlier," Akbar said. "Abbas. Have you ever wondered why nobody ever found the bungalow?"

Abbas narrowed his eyes. He had always assumed that the bungalow was difficult to find. But now that he thought about it, it wasn't so well hidden that no one would be able to find it for thirteen years.

Abbas narrowed his eyes as Alpha 31 smiled.

"Whenever there was a trace found, I got rid of it."

Abbas shook his head in disbelief. Beside him, Ali was no better off.

"Wh-why would you help us?" he asked.

Alpha 31 sighed.

"I lost my family as a boy and had been dragged into this accursed place. I was taught to kill. My mentor was Akbar."

Abbas's eyes widened in surprise. Akbar had never mentioned that.

"When Asghar killed Qasim all those years ago," Akbar continued. "I fought with him. And won. But just as I was about to deal a finishing blow, Reza showed up."

Abbas glanced at Alpha 31 curiously as if he was some strange specimen in a museum or something.

“As I was injured,” Akbar whispered. “I decided to flee. I got Zahra, Maryam and Jafar and tried to run away but Reza pursued. Then I fought him.”

Ali coughed abruptly.

“Sorry,” he apologised. “Please continue.”

Akbar took a deep breath.

“During our fight, he managed to free himself from the c-chip.”

Abbas shook his head in disbelief.

“Reza Bhai,” he asked uncertainly. “Have you been working here as a spy ever since?”

Alpha 31 nodded.

“It has been hard, no doubt,” he replied. “But I have a team of reliable people. My commander, Bahadir. My student, Salma. My head of communications, Jannat. All of them have been working with me to help the revolution.”

Abbas’s eyes widened as he finally understood. It all made complete sense now.

“You were holding back in the fight!” he exclaimed.

Reza smiled.

“And that is why Akbar Uncle purposely discarded my claims,” Abbas deduced.

Akbar chuckled.

“That day, I wanted to introduce you to Reza in case something happened to me. But two of his soldiers confused their instructions and attacked us.”

Reza nodded.

“I was going to tell you, but once that woman showed up, I had no choice but to continue the charade.”

There was a knock on the door. Reza raised his hand for silence. Slowly, he coughed. And then he coughed once more.

There was no response immediately. And then abruptly two knocks.

Reza sighed in relief.

“It’s okay. It’s our own team.”

The door swung open and in came a man and two women.

Abbas's eyes widened in recognition.

"I twisted your thumbs in that fight!"

The man narrowed his eyes, his lips curling into a smile.

"Yeah," he whispered. "I remember."

Reza grinned.

"Bahadir has not been the same since you defeated him."

Abbas couldn't help smiling as Bahadir assumed a position beside Ali.

Abbas narrowed his eyes in recognition of one of the women.

"I know you as well!" he recognised. "You are the Alpha Maryam rammed through a window during the time of the first revolutionary meeting."

The woman shuddered for a moment.

"Don't remind me," she whispered. "That girl was crazy. I had to take the hit for her, you know."

Ali chuckled.

"And to think Maryam actually thought she scared you off," he grinned.

Reza took a deep breath.

"You have all met Salma," he whispered. "The last person left to meet is Jannat."

The last woman appeared to be significantly younger than Salma. She almost seemed to be Abbas's age.

"She is the head of my technology and logistics department," Reza explained.

Abbas could not believe everything that was happening. Here they were in the iron fortress. With an Alpha. No, two Alphas! They were a small group of rebels. And they were going to take down the iron fortress. It all felt like a dream.

"What's the plan?" Salma asked.

Akbar took a deep breath.

"Reza has removed camera footage and audio sensors from this room so we are safe to discuss or send messages from here."

Reza nodded.

"I must take care of Alpha 43," he whispered. "He has almost pieced everything together. I have to take him out before its too late."

Akbar eyed Reza warily.

“Taking Asghar down is very difficult, my friend,” he cautioned. “Take Ali with you.”

Reza looked down for a moment before nodding in agreement.

“Salma will take Akbar and Abbas to Jumeira,” he said in a low voice. Turning to face them, he explained, “As an Alpha, she will be able to guide you right up to Jumeira. Once you are there, you will need to get her locket. It is the key to this entire building. It is also the only way to reach the mainframe.”

Abbas raised a brow.

“I don’t understand?” he asked.

Reza elaborated.

“The mainframe is a room which contains only two things. Two critical things. One, the fail safe feature. If the entire building falls, that fail safe is designed to kill everyone inside, although I don’t know how.”

Abbas shuddered. They really had thought of every possible defense for this place.

“The other thing is of even more critical importance,” Reza stated. “And that is the motherboard. The motherboard is what controls the c-chips that are implanted in the Alphas. Once you smash that, the Alphas will not be under its control anymore.”

Abbas nodded in acknowledgement.

“So Akbar Uncle, Salma Api and I can handle that,” Abbas concluded.

Reza nodded.

“Jannat will maintain communications. Bahadir, you will stay close by here for Jannat’s safety.”

Both of them nodded in affirmation.

“In that case,” Akbar whispered. “Let’s get going. Ya Allah, help us. Bismillah! Let’s do this!”

## Entering the Fortress

Abbas took a deep breath as he struggled to maintain a calm walk. Beside him, Akbar was strolling with ease, like an ordinary guard on patrol. A few steps ahead was Salma. She was striding confidently as if nothing and no one could stop her.

As they went through the quiet halls, Abbas couldn't help ponder over how much evil had been done in this building. How much torture had been carried out within this place? It had orphaned so many. It had widowed so many. Friends had been separated and families were torn apart. This building smelt of blood. The blood of innocents.

His train of thought was broken as they reached a door. Salma turned to face both of them. She motioned for them to stay silent. Abbas watched as she approached the door.

“What is the password?” a robotic voice asked.

Silence. Abbas narrowed his eyes. Why was Salma silent? She just wasn't responding. Abbas glanced curiously at Akbar who appeared calm.

Abruptly, the door swung open exposing a flight of stairs. Salma beckoned for them to follow. She advanced forward with Abbas and Akbar right behind her.

They found themselves travelling down the stairs. As they did so, Abbas couldn't help think about how smart the password lock had been for the door. It prompted for an answer but the access code was silence.

A small elevator came in sight. Salma sighed, motioning for them to follow. In the next few seconds, they entered the elevator. Abbas almost gasped as the powerful doors slid shut behind him.

“Which floor?” A robotic voice asked.

Salma took a deep breath.

“Take us to the Queen Bee!” she ordered.

Abbas felt his heart pound in his chest as the elevator carried them upwards. He could feel butterflies in his stomach. They reached the desired floor and the doors slid open.

Abbas swallowed nervously and stepped outside of the elevator. Right behind him was Akbar. And a moment later, Salma. Swiftly, she advanced ahead of both men, leading them further inside.

Abbas watched his surroundings carefully. They were in a hallway. A hallway which stretched on for about twenty metres. At the end of it was a portrait. Salma raised her hand to stop.

Slowly, she turned to Akbar and put both hands on her neck. Akbar narrowed his eyes before nodding, leaving Abbas in confusion.

Abbas watched as Salma moved carefully on her toes, as if she was avoiding stepping on certain places. Of course. The floor must have been booby trapped. And Salma just warned Akbar of that.

Akbar began following her, matching her steps. Right behind him, Abbas did the same.

Abbas could feel a bead of perspiration trickle down the edge of his ear as he reached the other side safely. Salma motioned for them to continue.

Abbas and Akbar followed as she reached out for the portrait and unhinged it; exposing a red button. Salma turned around once more. Slowly, she placed her index finger under her head. Then she scratched it. Abbas narrowed his eyes. What was she trying to say?

Akbar must have understood something for he grabbed hold of Abbas from behind. Abbas flashed him a curious glance before turning back to face the portrait.

Then, Salma reached out and abruptly pressed the button. Initially, there was no movement. Then Abbas felt Akbar’s massive force drag him to the ground. He heard a slight whistling and

then it stopped. Akbar let go of Abbas, allowing him to stand. He turned to see Salma getting up as well.

A part of the wall gave way, revealing a passage. Abbas flashed Salma a curious glance. He didn't understand why that was necessary. Salma shook her head in disapproval, and pointing to the area behind Abbas.

Abbas glanced back and had to stop his eyes from falling out. There was about a million darts embedded in different parts of the ground. Most certainly if one didn't know, they would have been caught by this trap. Abbas shivered. He was beginning to understand more and more of Jumeira's cunning nature and he didn't like it at all.

Salma motioned for them to follow her inside. Carefully, both Abbas and Akbar entered as well. At that exact moment, the wall slid back in place. Ahead of them was a door.

"This is it," Salma whispered. "No audio sensors here. Jumeira's rule."

"Is she behind that door?" Akbar asked with a strange look in his eye.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. He had never seen Akbar look so intense before.

"Yes," Salma answered.

Very slowly, Akbar crept forward. He sighed as he reached the door.

"Here we go," Abbas whispered.

The snake. The source of all pain. The creator of the Alphas. The mastermind of this entire operation was right behind this door.

Akbar growled. In a flash, he whipped his leg at the door, knocking it out of its hinges. Swiftly, he sprinted inside. Abbas and Salma right behind him.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. There was an elderly woman seated behind a large golden desk. Her gaze was penetrating. Her hair slightly grey.

Upon seeing them, her eyes widened in surprise. Then abruptly, they narrowed in recognition. The woman's lips curled into a smile and she slowly brought her hands together.

“Akbar,” she said. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”  
Akbar eyes were cold as he watched her with hatred.  
“Hello mother,” he hissed.



129

## Solving a Riddle

Alpha 43 eyed the strange ring in his hand. He couldn't understand how this was going to point him towards the traitor. Ever since he had stolen it from Abbas, Alpha 43 had spent hours studying the aqeeq ring; trying to decrypt it.

"Come on," the Alpha muttered under his breath as he stared at the ring. "I know you're hiding something."

Alpha 43 placed the ring on the table and eyed it in silence. This aqeeq contained some form of information. Some kind of clue that would point him to the betrayer.

"Sir," he heard a voice call.

Alpha 43 glanced in the direction of the voice.

"Come in Farrukh," Alpha 43 stated. "Go and send a message to the forensic department. Tell them that we require some urgent advice."

Farrukh nodded.

"Yes sir," he answered obediently and headed off immediately. Alpha 43 turned his attention back to the aqeeq. He needed to focus. The answer had to be somewhere. He must be overlooking something.

'How could Murtaza hide this information?' he thought to himself. 'He may have engraved something. But I already checked that thoroughly.'

The stone had been examined under microscopes and powerful lenses, but nothing was found. Then the remaining part of the

aqeeq was searched. Again, no useful information was found. The ayat engraved on the stone had also been examined; no encrypted clues were found there either.

“It wouldn’t make sense for Murtaza to keep a record of the traitor’s name,” Alpha 43 asserted. “So, he probably had some kind of information hidden that he needed to be able to reach that person. In my hands, the information would point me to the traitor.”

A thought occurred to Alpha 43. One that made him feel slightly embarrassed. What if the information was hidden underneath the stone? It seemed unlikely given how tightly held the aqeeq stone was, but still.

Alpha 43 slowly unsheathed a knife. It was a long thin one. Carefully, he began prying at the stone. The Alpha narrowed his eyes. The stone was loose. There was room underneath it. With a final tug, the Alpha pried off the stone.

His eyes widened in surprise before narrowing. His lips curled into a smile. Inside the ring mount, was a small chit of paper.

Alpha 43 sighed. He had seriously overcomplicated the procedure.

“Let’s see what information you have for me Murtaza,” the Alpha chuckled triumphantly as he unfolded the tiny chit of paper. Alpha 43 leaned closer to see what was written.

‘ Q58W69G31 ’

Alpha 43’s eyes widened in surprise. This was a communication code. For an Alpha. Alphas often used these codes as verification to form secure communication links when going on missions. Usually the last two digits were the Alpha’s own unique number. That meant that the traitor was an Alpha. Murtaza’s contact was an Alpha.

Alpha 43 glanced at the last two digits of the code. He froze; his eyes widening in horror as he realised who the traitor was.

“Jumeira needs to know about this immediately,” Alpha 43 realised.

He rose from his chair but abruptly felt a sudden pressure on his head.

Alpha 43 went still. This pressure was very familiar to him. It was the pressure of a gun. Someone was holding a gun to his

head.

“So?” he remarked casually. “For how long have you been working for them, Alpha 31? How long have you been working for Akbar?”

There was a chuckle from behind. “That took you long enough. Now, hands up...slowly,” Reza responded. “Where I can see them.”

Alpha 43 raised his hands. His mind was calculating how he could break free. He knew his attacker could react fast enough to any counter strike.

“Turn around slowly,” Reza ordered.

Calmly, Alpha 43 turned around to face him. He raised a brow. Reza was not alone. There was another man, quite large in size. But Alpha 43 was bigger.

“How did I not suspect you?” Alpha 43 hissed at Reza.

Reza merely smirked.

“The game is over 43,” he answered quietly. “This is the end of the line for you.”

Alpha 43 narrowed his eyes and Reza could tell he was looking for an escape. Reza took a deep breath. He raised his gun to the Alpha’s head.

“Goodbye,” he whispered.

Abruptly the door swung open. Reza whirled to see Farrukh; Alpha 43’s number one soldier. His eyes widened in alarm.

In a flash, he whirled around and darted off.

“Stop him!” Reza growled.

*Wham!*

Reza felt a sudden force knock him backwards. With a thud, he landed on the ground. From the corner of his eye, he could see Ali lunge forward.

Reza scrambled to his feet. He needed to stop Farrukh. Instantly, he wrenched the door; leaping outside. Farrukh was at the end of the hallway, waiting eagerly for the elevator to open.

Reza sprinted forward. Before he could do anything, Reza drove a knife through his head. With a sputter, the soldier fell to the ground.

Reza grabbed hold of the body, dragging it away. He needed to hide it. The best place was the room where. . .

“Oh no!” Reza exclaimed. “Ali needs my help!”

In a flash, Reza darted back to the door. Just as he was about to press the handle, he heard a loud *Click*.

“Drat!” Reza growled. “The door’s locked.”

Reza took a few steps back, before charging forward.

*Wham!*

The door snapped in two pieces as he landed in the room. Glancing up, he saw Alpha 43 hovering over an injured Ali with a knife in his hand.

“Argh!” Reza growled, Some of the wood from the door had penetrated his arm.

Alpha 43 narrowed his eyes.

“I know you. . .” he whispered glancing at Ali. Abruptly, his eyes widened in alarm. “You were with Akbar! If you’re here then. . . then that means. . . that means Akbar is here as well!”

Reza shook his head, trying to get to his feet.

Alpha 43 glanced at Reza before grabbing hold of the chair behind his desk. In a flash, he swung it at the window, causing the window to shatter. He jumped out a moment later.

“No!” Reza roared, smashing his fist off of the desk.

This had gone massively wrong. Alpha 43 had escaped. And he knew they were here. He knew that they had entered the fortress.

130

## Mother?

Abbas was sure he had misheard. He couldn't understand what Akbar had just said. Jumeira was his mother. The snake who had tormented them all; was Akbar's mother. It all made perfect sense. Jumeira getting her hands on the research of Akbar's father. Asghar and Akbar both being Alphas. Qasim escaping. Jumeira was his mother.

"I must say Akbar," Jumeira chuckled. "You never fail to disappoint."

Abbas glanced at Akbar. The former Alpha was looking at her with disgust.

"It ends here, " he hissed. "We won't let you continue this any longer. You will no longer oppress people. We are going to destroy your empire."

Jumeira shook her head.

"That was always your problem," she whispered. "You could never see the big picture."

For a moment, she paused and glanced over at Salma.

"So," she hissed. "You are the traitor."

Salma narrowed her eyes but did not respond.

"And finally," Jumeira chuckled. "We have Abbas!"

Abbas shuddered as her gaze turned to him.

"You are the one who has given me so many headaches up until now," she sighed.

Abbas just glared at her. This snake was the reason his family and many others had been tormented.

“Why did you do this?” Abbas asked with utmost disgust in his voice.

Jumeira raised a brow.

“Curious one, aren’t you?” she smiled venomously. “Well, let me tell you.”

Abbas saw Akbar and Salma from the corner of his eye. They both had guns raised; they were ready for any trouble.

“A war rages in our archipelago of islands,” she explained. “And I am going to win this war.”

Abbas raised a brow.

“My C-guns, C-chips and Alphas are going to be the newest and the most advanced weapon in this war,” she continued. “Weaponised humans. Humanity at its full ruthless potential. Akbar is living proof of this.”

Abbas shook his head in disbelief. He could comprehend that she was doing this for money and power. But what was incomprehensible to him was the cost she willingly paid. She lost her son Qasim in the past and her remaining two sons were sworn enemies of each other. Was this all really worth it? His chain of thought was interrupted by Jumeira’s voice.

“The C-guns and C-chips are almost optimised now. Not you nor anyone else in the world can stop me. The three of you have made a very bold, yet foolish decision coming here. None of you will leave here alive. The Alphas will get you. You will never meet your parents, Abbas.”

Abbas felt a hint of anger, but he restrained it easily. He would not fall prey to anger again.

“And say, ‘The truth has come and falsehood has vanished. Indeed, falsehood is bound to vanish.’<sup>1</sup>” Salma quoted the translation of an ayah of Quran. She continued, “We take our strength from the Quran. From Allah swt, the Almighty and All-Powerful.”

Abbas nodded, determination filling his heart.

“You can send the world after us,” Abbas declared in a calm

---

<sup>1</sup>Surah Isra, Ayah 81

and strong voice. "But if it is not our time to die, nothing you do and nothing your Alphas do can bury us."

Jumeira watched Abbas intently.

"I wish I could have had a soldier like you," she whispered under her breath. "You would have made a very fine Alpha."

*Boom!*

The room shook violently knocking everyone off their feet.

"What's happening?" Abbas heard Jumeira exclaim.

A robotic voice answered,

"Maam, reports are coming in of three attacks at the border gate. It seems like the revolution has attacked the iron fortress."

Abbas's eyes widened in surprise. Zahra and Ruqayya must have convinced them. He felt courage fill his heart. His brothers and sisters in arms had returned. They were fighting at the entrance.

Akbar raised his gun to Jumeira.

"You're not going to kill me," she whispered. "Don't try to play that game."

Akbar sighed.

"Killing isn't the only way to inflict pain," he answered. "I'll take that!"

Akbar snatched the locket from her and pocketed it. Jumeira frowned. Her eyes watched her son in fury for the first time. Abbas got to his feet.

"Let's go," Salma whispered. "The Alphas must know we are here." Jumeira laughed maniacally.

"Oh they know, alright!"

Abbas ignored the fear in his heart.

"But..." he smiled. "Would they shoot their beloved Queen Bee?"

Jumeira stopped laughing; the smile faded from her face.

"You!" she growled. "You are going for the mainframe!"

Abbas chuckled.

"You're going to take us there," Akbar hissed. "You're going to help us undo what you started yourself."

131

## The Final Strike

“Get down!” Zahra heard Isa’s voice as a missile whizzed over their heads and crashed into a tree behind them.

*Boom!*

The tree was reduced to ashes.

“Keep firing!” Zahra shouted as they aimed their rifles at the front gate.

But it wouldn’t give way.

“Ya Allah!” she heard one of the revolutionaries cry. “Help us break these gates like you helped our ancestors break the gates of Khyber!”

There was a loud boom as another missile passed over their heads.

Zahra ignored the worry in her heart. Ali was in there as well as Akbar and Abbas.

*Creak.*

Zahra’s eyes widened in surprise. The gate was actually opening!

“The gate is opening!” she heard Ruqayya exclaim. “Charge!”

There were cries of “Ya Allah!” as the revolutionaries charged forward, breaching the gate. Zahra hissed as they reached the entrance. There were hundreds of soldiers standing there; all were armed to the teeth.

“Bismillah!” Isa growled charging forward. Behind him was Dawud, followed by Hussain. On another side, Ruqayya was marching forward with Kadhim by her side. Men and women



barged into the entrance. Zahra felt her lungs get squeezed as they poured inside, overwhelming the front line of the fortress soldiers.

One of them swung a fist at Zahra but she ducked and rammed an elbow into his throat. The soldier collapsed in a pool of blood. Beside her, Isa was gutting open several soldiers, spraying their blood over the floors.

“Don’t let them in!” she heard someone call.

Zahra narrowed her eyes. There was an Alpha standing there. In a flash, she hurled a knife at the assassin. The Alpha caught it mid air.

Zahra growled as they pushed the soldiers back. The Alpha’s lips curled into a smile as he leapt at her.

*Wham!*

Isa’s chain struck the Alpha, bursting his skull.

“Charge!” Isa called out once more. “Our brothers and sisters need our help.”

There was a loud ‘Allah hu Akbar!’ as the front doors were wrenched open and the revolutionaries barged in.

Zahra took a deep breath. There were a bunch of Alphas there accompanied by another brigade of soldiers.

“Let’s get them!” a man cried out.

Zahra narrowed her eyes as the sounds of “Ya Allah!” filled the halls once more.

# Hostage

Abbas swallowed nervously as they reached another hallway. His eyes scanned the area as they progressed. They needed to get to the mainframe. And to do that, they had kidnapped the Queen Bee, Jumeira. Akbar's mother.

"They won't let you get away with this," Jumeira hissed as they reached the lift. "They will kill all of you."

Akbar chuckled.

"Let's see how many are loyal to you once they are freed," he answered.

Slowly and cautiously, they made their way into the lift. As they did, Abbas felt his mind in a whirl. All the events of the last year had amounted to this day. Today was the day they were going to avenge their losses. Today they were going to plant the flag of the revolution in the heart of the enemy's base.

The doors slid shut.

"You can't take this from me! Nobody can!" Jumeira hissed. "Learn from the result of those who tried to do so in the past."

Abbas glanced at Akbar and Salma. Both of them were smiling.

Akbar leaned in closely and whispered,

"You created a monster, mother. You taught it to destroy. Now it will destroy you as well."

Jumeira shook her head in disbelief. Abbas narrowed his eyes. Jumeira was sweating. Abbas chuckled. She was a coward internally.

The doors of the lift slid open.

Abbas raised his gun, moving forward first.

Right behind him was Salma with a revolver. Finally, Akbar came.

“We’re almost there,” Salma sighed. “Just around the corner is the control room. It has a direct passage to the mainframe.”

Abbas sighed in relief. They were almost there. They were going to win soon, Inshallah.

The group moved forward being very careful of any possible ambush. There was a crack from Salma’s radio. It was Bahadur.

“I opened the gates,” his voice came. Bullets and explosions could be heard in the background. “The revolution has entered the iron fortress.”

Abbas felt courage fill his heart once more. The revolution had breached the gate. They were taking over the fortress.

“Alhamdullillah,” he heard Akbar whisper.

Salma turned the radio on and answered quietly,

“We’ll reach the mainframe soon, Inshallah.”

With that, the group progressed ignoring Jumeira’s protests. She, obviously, was not pleased to hear Bahadur’s news.

Within the next minute, they reached the corner of the hall. A right turn from here and they would reach the control room. Abbas strolled a few steps ahead turning around the corner.

He felt his heart freeze and his eyes widened in alarm. There were dozens of soldiers there, armed to the teeth with their guns raised! In front of them was an Alpha. He was tall and wide. He too held a rifle which was aimed at Abbas.

“Let Queen Bee go,” the Alpha demanded.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. “I don’t think we will,” came Akbar’s voice from behind. “Tell your men to back off, or else. . .”

The Alpha raised a brow.

“Are you going to shoot your mother, Akbar?” he asked casually.

Abbas took a deep breath. They needed the Alpha to retreat.

“I will shoot her!” Abbas heard Salma growl as she raised her revolver to Jumeira’s head. “Back down Alpha! Order your men to retreat!”

The Alpha narrowed his eyes. He took a deep breath.

“What are you waiting for?” Jumeira hissed. “Retreat!”

The Alpha’s eyes widened in surprise at her order. He raised his hand; signalling his men to move back.

Abbas smiled as the soldiers retreated into another hall, out of sight.

‘Jumeira is a coward,’ he confirmed his previous thoughts. ‘She is willing to save her life at any price.’

Swiftly, Salma led them forward; Akbar still kept his gun aimed at Jumeira’s head. With every passing moment, the danger was increasing. Abbas followed behind. Cautiously, he watched as they approached a large steel door labelled ‘Control Room’.

“Let’s go,” Abbas whispered.

Salma held out her hand. The door beeped and swung open. Quickly, the group entered inside and sealed the door behind them. Taking a deep breath, he turned to view the control room.

Immediately, his momentary calm was gone and he felt his heart freeze. His eyes widened in horror.

“Ami? Baba?” Abbas exclaimed.

There before him stood his parents. They were both watching him with tears in their eyes. Abbas narrowed his eyes in fury. Alpha 43 stood behind them holding two firearms. One was aimed for Layla’s head. The other was aimed at Murtaza.

“Nice of you to stop by,” the Alpha smirked. “But your games end here.”

Abbas glanced at Akbar and Salma in horror. What were they going to do?

“Drop the weapons Asghar,” Akbar whispered. “You are out gunned. I have our mother hostage.”

Alpha 43 chuckled sarcastically.

“I don’t care,” he sighed, causing Jumeira to widen her eyes in surprise. “She has never been a mother for me anyway.”

Jumeira’s face formed into a frown.

“Drop the guns, Asghar!” she commanded. “That is an order!”

Asghar laughed maniacally.

“I don’t think I will,” he whispered in an icy tone.

Akbar growled.

“I’ll shoot her Asghar,” he repeated with intensity.

“No,” he answered; his lips curled into a smile. “I will.”

Instantly, the Alpha raised his left gun to Jumeira and pulled the trigger.

There was a loud boom and Abbas watched in horror as Jumeira slumped down on the ground in a pool of blood.

“Now where were we?” Alpha 43 whispered calmly as if nothing unusual had happened. He had won the war with a single bullet.

133

## The Control Room

Abbas shook his head in disbelief at what had just happened. Had Alpha 43 really just shot his own mother?

“Drop your weapons,” Alpha 43 whispered. “Otherwise...”

Abbas didn't need him to finish. He knew what Alpha 43 was going to do if they didn't obey. Akbar shook his head.

“Don't do this,” he whispered.

Alpha 43 growled.

“I said drop your weapons!” he shouted.

Abbas felt a bead of sweat trickle down his cheek. His mother and father were right in front of him. They were at the mercy of his worst enemy. An enemy who was merciless and inhuman.

“Don't d-do it,” Murtaza croaked.

Abbas felt his hand tremble. From the corner of his eye, he could see Akbar silent. Salma also watched in confusion, unsure of what to do.

“Throughout m-my life,” Murtaza coughed. “I n-never surrendered to the enemy. Remember Akbar.”

Abbas noticed Akbar's eyes widen in surprise, but he quickly regained his composure. Abbas felt his heart skip a beat. Did Murtaza just tell something to Akbar? Some kind of duress code?

Abbas shuddered nervously. He glanced at Akbar once more. Abbas felt his heart freeze. Akbar was withdrawing a small knife from behind. He was going to try to hurl it.

For a moment, Salma met Abbas's gaze. Her eyes narrowed,

but she quickly resumed her original expression. Abbas felt panic seize his heart as he saw her withdrawing a small blade as well. They were going to try to free his parents.

“Sentimental as always Murtaza,” Alpha 43 sneered. “Why don’t yo-”

In a flash, both Akbar and Salma hurled their knives at the assassin. Alpha 43 swiftly moved to catch both, but the distraction gave Murtaza the chance to sweep kick him causing him to fall backwards.

Abbas rushed forward, moving in front of his parents.

Alpha 43 shuddered before looking up to meet his gaze. Utter fury could be seen in his eyes.

“I am not going to lose this fight!” he roared.

In a flash, the Alpha leapt out at a lamp, knocking it off the table.

Immediately a part of the wall gave way and the Alpha charged inside.

“He’s heading for the mainframe!” Salma exclaimed.

Abbas charged forward; jumping inside. A moment later Akbar jumped in right after him.

Salma was about to move forward but the door slid shut.

Salma anxiously held out her arm. There was a beep,

“Access denied.”

Salma’s eyes widened in horror. Turning to Murtaza and Layla, she gasped,

“He locked down the mainframe. Only senior ranking Alphas can enter. Abbas and Akbar Bhai are on their own!”

134

## Taking Over

“Keep moving!” Isa shouted. “Kill them all!”

There was a roar as the revolutionaries barged on. They were slaying soldiers wherever they found them. Isa glanced to his right where Dawud was punching a soldier repeatedly on the ground.

“Allah hu Akbar!” Isa growled.

There was a unanimous cry of “Allah hu Akbar” as the revolution pushed forward.

They had already taken many floors.

A soldier lunged at Isa, who side stepped him, whipping out his knife. Before the soldier could react, Isa had already buried the blade in his chest. The soldier collapsed instantly.

“Catch that Alpha!” he heard Ruqayya growl.

Turning, he could see an Alpha limping away.

“Not today!” one of the revolutionaries shouted, as they both raised their guns. There was a spray of bullets and the Alpha fell to the ground.

Isa nodded with an air of satisfaction.

“Let’s go!” Kadhim shouted.

Swiftly, the revolution barged forward. A small group of soldiers came running from around the corner.

One of them hurled a small black object at them. Isa’s eyes widened in alarm.

“Grenade!” he shouted.



Yasir lunged forward, grabbing hold of it. In a flash, he hurled it back at the soldiers.

There was a gasp as the grenade exploded in a ball of flame, killing all the soldiers.

“Take that!” Yasir roared.

The revolution marched on.

Isa took a deep breath. He could not believe it. They had almost taken the entire building.

“Keep going!” Zahra shouted. “We’re almost there!”

And with that, the group charged forward.

135

## The Mainframe

Akbar glanced back at the door in alarm. He knew the door to the mainframe had been timed to prevent it from being left open. But why hadn't Salma come through?

"The door must be jammed," Abbas deduced.

Akbar nodded.

"Let's go then," he decided.

Abbas raised a brow.

"Isn't this the only way in?" he asked curiously.

Akbar shook his head in disapproval.

"Remember what Reza told us earlier," he whispered. "The iron fortress has a fail safe. If the building is taken, the mainframe can be used to kill everyone inside."

Abbas's eyes widened in surprise.

"Why are we still here then?" he gasped. "We need to get there immediately!"

Akbar eyed Abbas warily.

"He can't access the fail safe without Jumeira's locket," he whispered, withdrawing the locket from his pocket.

Abbas took a deep breath.

"But we can't destroy the motherboard without the locket either," he finished.

Akbar nodded.

"So we have to go there, but be ready for any kind of attack. Alpha 43 could come from any direction."

Abbas took a deep breath. Akbar could tell that he was nervous. Placing a hand on his shoulder, he whispered reassuringly, “Abbas. We have almost won. Inshallah, we just need to finish this final step.”

Abbas met Akbar’s gaze.

“Your parents have been saved, Alhamdullillah,” Akbar whispered. “We just have one final snake to slay.”

Abbas nodded and Akbar could see the courage and determination returning in Abbas.

“Let’s do this,” Abbas growled.

They started to move forward.

The hallway was dark. And silent. It was like walking in a dark tunnel.

Akbar kept Abbas behind him, his revolvers in hand. His ears strained to hear even the slightest noise, but he knew his brother was more skilled than that.

Akbar took a deep breath as they reached the end of the hall and rounded the corner. At the end of the tunnel was a blue light.

Slowly, they treaded towards it. As they reached the end of the hall, Akbar heard a slight rustle. Instantly, he whirled around ready to fight; but nothing was there. Akbar felt a bead of sweat trickle down his cheek. He knew his brother was hiding here somewhere.

“Akbar Uncle?” Abbas asked with uncertainty. “Look at this.”

Akbar did not respond immediately. Nor did he turn around. He knew what the main frame looked like.

It was a small room. The entrance of this room was protected by thick bullet proof glass. He knew that there was a thin steel bridge which led to the mainframe. And failsafe.

“Abbas,” Akbar whispered. “Open the gate. Go inside and finish the job. I will stand watch here.”

Silently, he handed Abbas Jumeira’s locket. There was a patter. Akbar jumped back in position, ready to fight. Asghar was here somewhere.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Abbas extending his hand to scan the locket off a scanner.

*Click.* The door opened. Quietly and somewhat nervously,

Abbas moved to step inside. Akbar heard a rustle from the other direction. For a moment, he glanced towards there.

*Wham!*

A sudden force from the opposite direction knocked him sideways. Akbar flipped back up but he was too late. There was a beep. And the glass door was locked.

“No!” Akbar growled, ramming his fist against the door. He had been locked outside the mainframe. But more importantly, Abbas was locked inside. With Alpha 43.

## One Last Time

Abbas watched in horror, as he realised what had just happened. Akbar was locked outside of the room. He could not enter. Abbas was locked in the room with Alpha 43.

The assassin smirked.

“I’ve been waiting a long time for this,” he hissed in a venomous tone which emanated utmost arrogance.

Abbas pushed aside the fear in his heart. This was a do or die situation. He would not give in to the Alpha. He knew that it was all on him now. He needed to win this fight at any cost. He must defeat Alpha 43.

“You can do this Abbas!” Akbar encouraged.

The entire revolution was relying on him. If he couldn’t, then everyone; Ruqayya, Isa, Zahra, Ali, Farheen, Dawud, Yasir would perish.

“It has come down to the two of us,” Abbas whispered.

Alpha 43 laughed mockingly.

“Except this time, Akbar won’t be here to save you!”

Abbas nodded. With a smirk he answered,

“And this time, Salman won’t be here to save you!”

The smile faded from Alpha 43’s face and Abbas heard him growl. Abbas positioned himself as the assassin withdrew his knife, ready for what was about to happen.

“Ya Allah, help me,” Abbas whispered.

Alpha 43 took a deep breath.

Instantly, Alpha 43 lunged forward, swinging his dagger. Abbas leapt out of the way. Abbas charged forward, ramming the Alpha into the side bar.

“Argh!” Alpha 43 growled.

Abbas felt the Alpha haul him off his feet, hurling him across the bridge, but he landed gracefully.

“Keep going!” Abbas heard Akbar yell.

Abbas felt a bead of perspiration trickle down his cheek.

Alpha 43 leapt forward, whipping his leg at Abbas. Abbas caught his leg, absorbing the shock of the kick but he missed the Alpha’s fist.

*Wham!*

Abbas staggered back as the Alpha’s fist struck his forehead. Abbas felt his vision blur for a second. That punch was hard.

Alpha 43 barged forward. Breathlessly, Abbas sidestepped him; simultaneously swinging his fist but the Alpha caught it. Abbas rammed his knee in Alpha 43’s stomach. The assassin chuckled.

“That won’t be enough, my boy,” he laughed.

Alpha 43 rammed his head into Abbas’s but Abbas simultaneously drove his knee even harder into the assassin’s stomach. Both retreated breathlessly in opposite directions.

“Abbas!” Akbar shouted. “Come on!”

Alpha 43 growled and Abbas could tell that he was getting frustrated. Instantly, he charged forward. Abbas barged forward as well. The two collided and Abbas felt the force of the Alpha knock him to the ground.

Alpha 43 brought his foot crashing down at him. Abbas rolled out of the way just in time, immediately whipping his foot at the Alpha’s knee.

Alpha 43 grabbed hold of Abbas’s leg.

Before Abbas could react, he brought his elbow crashing down on Abbas’s knee.

“Ah!” Abbas screamed as pain surged through his leg.

Abbas shot his other leg at the Alpha’s stomach.

Alpha 43 gasped, staggering backwards.

Abbas felt his leg. That blow had been critical. Ignoring the pain, he tried to push himself to stand but his leg would not support his weight. From the corner of his eye, he could see Akbar watching him, wide eyed with worry.

Alpha 43 chuckled.

“What are you going to do now?” he taunted.

Abbas grabbed hold of the sidebar, dragging himself to stand. Painfully, he leaned back on the bar. His leg would not support his weight. He knew that. But he was not going to give in.

Alpha 43 lunged forward, shooting his blade at Abbas. Abbas caught his arm; ramming his elbow in the Alpha’s neck.

The blade slipped from Alpha 43’s hand landing before Abbas as the assassin coughed breathlessly; his eyes widened in surprise. He staggered back once more. He had not anticipated such an aggressive defense from Abbas.

Abbas reached down, grabbing the knife. At that moment, his eyes glanced down below. Down below, under the steel bridge. He couldn’t believe what he saw. There was a bunch of sharp metal wires. Abbas narrowed his eyes. The wires were electrically charged. It was an electric death trap.

“Abbas!” Akbar screamed.

Abbas ducked just in time as the blade of the Alpha whizzed over his head, but he didn’t see the Alpha swing his knee.

*Wham!*

Abbas groaned painfully as he fell upon the ground. His knee was hurting more than ever.

Abbas growled with tears in his eyes.

He slowly pushed himself to stand once more, but the assassin struck him in the arm. Abbas felt the blade strike him deep. His vision blurred for a moment. He couldn’t continue. But he had to. Painfully, he turned over so that he was lying on his back.

The Alpha chuckled.

“Honestly,” he paused, pulling out his blood soaked dagger. “I expected better.”

Abbas groaned as the Alpha raised his blade for the finishing blow.

“This is it,” Alpha 43 laughed. “This is your doom!”

Abbas tightened his grip on the knife he held. Alpha 43 didn't see it as he brought his own blade down upon Abbas. Abbas growled painfully as he felt a surge of pain from the Alpha's dagger. It had buried itself deep in his chest. But while feeling the pain, Abbas grasped hold of the Alpha's arm.

"You will bleed!" Abbas roared.

Savagely, Abbas drove his blade in the Alpha's arm. The Alpha screamed but Abbas didn't let go. Pulling his dagger out, he struck the Alpha's arm with the blade once more.

"Argh!" Alpha 43 shrieked. "Let go!"

The Alpha rammed his fist at Abbas but Abbas ignored it. Repeatedly, he began striking the Alpha's arms. Blood oozed from both of them.

The Alpha screamed and lashed out but Abbas didn't let go. He just kept striking Alpha 43's arm. Nothing would make him let go. Nothing in the world mattered. He just wanted the Alpha to feel pain. He wanted the Alpha to suffer.

The Alpha twisted his already buried dagger in Abbas's side.

Abbas yelped, letting go. Alpha 43 screamed, retreating. His arm was bleeding savagely from Abbas's attack.

Abbas coughed up blood. His vision was blurring and he could hear a strange ringing in his ears as he slowly pulled the dagger out from his side.

"Ah," Abbas winced as he cast the blade aside.

He felt his entire body burning as he pushed himself to stand.

"I-I have to..." Abbas coughed. "Motherboard."

Abbas limped his way there, merely dragging his body to the mainframe. It was a small chip, connected to a stand. Abbas knew very clearly what he had to do.

He raised his arm, ready to smash. This was it. This was the moment. Abbas growled and was about to smash it when all of a sudden, he heard a scream.

Abbas's eyes widened in surprise.

"Ami?" he whispered. "Wha-"

There was another scream and the room began transforming for Abbas. Slowly, Abbas's leg moved back.

"What?" Abbas coughed as he struggled to breath. His leg



moved back again, taking him away from the mother board. Abbas could hear his father's voice.

"Abbas!" he heard a voice. "It's not real!"

Abbas turned in the direction of the voice. He could not see anyone there, just the plain sands. How had he gotten here?

Akbar watched helplessly as Abbas retreated from the mother board. Alpha 43's lips curled into a smile as he held on to his C-gun.

"Good boy," Alpha 43 whispered as Abbas started screaming and wriggling on the floor.

"You like that?" Alpha 43 hissed, still clutching his arm painfully. "That's the most advanced C-gun we have."

Alpha 43 heard a voice from behind.

"You are shameless!"

He turned to face the person he hated the most in the world.

"I guess shedding Qasim's blood was not enough," Akbar hissed.

Alpha 43 clenched his fist.

"You were always her favourite," he wheezed. "You were always the best at everything."

Akbar growled. Alpha 43 merely looked down, his eyes watering.

"Always you! I was nothing!"

Akbar glared at him.

"My mother always thought of me as useless and made sure that she expressed it as well," he whispered. "She always praised you. I served this cause longer than you ever could! And still, she considered you her prodigy!"

Akbar shook his head.

"So you decided to become an assassin," Akbar retorted. "You killed innocent men. Innocent women. Innocent children. And then you try to blame me? No Asghar. You were a monster since the day you were born!"

*Wham!*

Akbar slammed his fist against the glass door. Tears trickled down his cheek.

"I always wondered," he whispered. "Would you pull the trigger? Would you shoot me? But then you killed our beloved

brother Qasim. You orphaned my nieces and nephew.”

“All of you made your assumptions!” Alpha 43 screamed. “All of you drew your own conclusions! I never wanted Qasim Bhai dead! He was never meant to be there!”

Akbar’s eyes widened in surprise.

“I had gotten an anonymous tip that *you* were hiding out there” Alpha 43 cried viciously. “But when I went there, Qasim Bai was there instead. His wife Khadija died when we were blowing the door down. And Qasim Bhai... he refused to get out of my way. He wanted to protect you. But you wouldn’t come out of hiding! I called out for you! But like a coward, you wouldn’t come!”

Akbar shook his head.

“Qasim Bhai was never good at fighting,” Alpha 43 whispered. “He tried to knock me down.” Alpha 43 trembled, his eyes lost in thought. “It was a reflex... an accident. It was an accident!”

Alpha 43 paused. Wiping his tears, he glared at Akbar.

“It was never meant to happen!” he screamed. “It was never meant to happen! I stopped using guns because of that. I forced myself to become stronger with knives. You can never accidentally shoot someone with a knife.”

Akbar was shocked. For a few moments there was silence.

“You had lost your soul long before then,” Akbar coughed, wiping his eyes. “You were slaughtering children in front of parents well before that time!”

Alpha 43 slammed his fist against the glass wall.

“I also wondered you know,” he whispered. “If I could ever bring myself to kill you. But you know what Akbar? I would gladly put a bullet in your head.”

Alpha 43 roared.

“I will be the only winner of this battle! I will kill everyone! Asghar is gone. Asghar died with Qasim. Now there is only Alpha 43! There will only be Alpha 43!”

Akbar shook his head in disbelief.

“You have lost your mind,” he answered. “Just like you lost your soul. All that matters, is that you have chosen your side.”

Alpha 43 narrowed his eyes. It felt like an odd thing to say

at the time. At that moment it dawned on Alpha 43 that Abbas had stopped screaming. Turning around in panic, he felt his heart freeze. Abbas stood there; he was injured, but fine. The C-gun was activated and aimed at Abbas, but the youth was not reacting at all. It was as though it wasn't there.

"H-how?" Alpha 43 could not believe it. "Th-that is impossible!"

Abbas glared at Alpha 43, resisting the effects of the C-gun.

"I am not out of control. You cannot deceive me anymore."

Alpha 43 growled.

"I'll kill you myself."

Abbas narrowed his eyes. He needed to end this now. He thought of a technique he saw in the first revolutionary meeting. The cranial strike.

"Do your worst!" Abbas shouted.

Akbar watched in worry as Alpha 43 stopped clutching his bleeding arm.

"Argh!" Alpha 43 charged forward. Abbas took a deep breath. He didn't move. Silently, he waited.

'Not yet,' Abbas thought patiently.

Alpha 43 raised a knife. He lunged at Abbas.

'Now!' Abbas thought.

Instantly, Abbas sidestepped Alpha 43; shooting his hand straight for the side of the assassin's head. The Alpha's eyes widened in surprise as he slipped forward.

"Wha-" he sputtered as he collided into the edge of the bar; falling over the edge.

Abbas watched as Alpha 43 landed on the electric death trap. There was a burst of blue light as the electric current from the wires burnt away at his body savagely. The Alpha screamed for the last time.

Abbas closed his eyes as the screaming stopped. It was over. Alpha 43 was gone. Alpha 43 was dead. Abbas took a deep breath. Then abruptly he vomited some blood out of his mouth.

"Naqi Bhai," Abbas coughed. "Your soul can rest in peace now."

"Abbas," he heard Akbar croak from behind. "The motherboard."

Abbas glanced at the small chip. He could feel his pulse weakening, but it didn't matter. Very slowly, he limped over to the motherboard; the past twelve months of struggle and pain replayed before him. This was it. This was their freedom. Abbas raised his fist above the motherboard. He took a deep breath.

"Ya Haqq!" Abbas growled, bringing his fist down. The motherboard snapped into pieces and immediately the C-gun powered down. The electric trap below turned off. There was a beep and the glass door swung open.

"Abbas!" Akbar exclaimed rushing forward.

Abbas felt very weak as Akbar wrapped his arms around him.

"We need to get you to a medic!" Akbar exclaimed. "You're bleeding out!"

Abbas was already having moments of black-outs; his body was no longer supporting him.

He shook his head.

"I'm f-fine," he almost collapsed.

Akbar glanced down for a moment. He looked up at Abbas, his eyes filled with tears.

"I can't believe he is actually gone," he swallowed.

Abbas took a deep breath.

"I can't believe it either," he whispered.

Akbar sighed tearfully.

"Let's go," he said. "Our revolutionary brothers and sisters await."

## Rising from the Ashes

The ashes cleared as the revolutionaries watched the iron fortress. The place they had feared. The place that had tormented them for so long. And now. . . now it was all over.

Zahra looked down. She couldn't believe that they had actually done it. With Allah (swt) help, they had actually freed themselves. They had taken over the building. Now, everyone had gathered outside the skyscraper.

"Zahra!" she heard a voice call out.

Zahra turned in the direction of the voice, ignoring the small gash on her ankle. Her heart skipped a beat.

"Ali!" she exclaimed.

Swiftly, she rushed towards him. For a moment neither said anything.

"It's over Ali," she whispered. "The Alphas, the fortress. . . I can't believe it."

Ali smiled.

"Alhamdullillah. Our son Hurr can live freely now, as we named him so."

Zahra smiled.

"What about Akbar Uncle?" Ali asked curiously.

Zahra looked down.

"We can't find him. Or Abbas."

Ali shook his head in disbelief.

“I’m sure they’re in there somewhere. You probably just missed them.”

Zahra nodded.

“Isa’s been searching relentlessly. But he hasn’t found them.”

Ali sighed.

“What did they do with the Alphas and soldiers that were taken as prisoner?” he inquired.

Zahra’s lips curled into a smile.

“Farheen Auntie has taken care of that; no need to worry. We handed Khalid and Salman over to her as well. None of them will even dream of escaping.”

Ali chuckled. He glanced up at Kadhim who was standing awkwardly in the corner.

“He won’t be accusing anyone anytime soon,” Ali remarked with a smile. A little bit of humour was proving to be therapeutic after such an intense event.

Zahra nodded. Then abruptly she glanced up; her eyes widened in surprise.

“Akbar Uncle!” she exclaimed. “Abbas!”

Ali whirled around to see Akbar standing tall. Beside him was Abbas. He was seriously injured and could barely walk. In one hand, he held a supportive walking stick. His other hand was clasped over a part of his chest which had been bandaged.

The moment they came, everyone went silent.

Akbar took a deep breath.

“We did it Alhamdulillah,” he cried. “By the grace of Allah (swt), we defeated them!”

Everyone began clapping as the cries of “Ya Allah!” and “Ya Haqq!” filled the air.

Abbas raised his head. His eyes had a distant look.

“We joined hands together. We suffered losses together. We shared pain together. But then we rose from the ashes! We fought back! Alpha 43 is no more!”

There was a gasp in the crowds. And then everyone recited a loud salawat. The pain could be felt as many emotional wounds were wiped away.

Ali took a deep breath. His family had finally been avenged.

“We will rebuild from here,” Akbar continued. “We will form a city of strength. An Islamic city of peace. This will be our . . . Peaceville!”

The people clapped loudly.

“Inshallah!”

Abbas glanced around curiously; his lips curled into a smile as he recognised Isa amongst the crowd.

“Let this be our day!” Abbas shouted. “Allah hu Akbar!”

The cry of ‘Allah hu Akbar’ filled the air.

Abbas bowed his head respectfully and turned to leave. He was still very weak. He felt exhausted. He couldn’t believe anything that had happened in the last twenty four hours, starting with his exile.

Slowly, he hobbled down towards a relatively secluded corner. There were two people there. A man and a woman. They were both wounded, just like their son.

“Baba,” Abbas whispered as they caught sight of him.

“Abbas!” his mother exclaimed rushing forward to hug him. Behind her, Murtaza followed, weak and overwhelmed.

Abbas let them encompass him in their arms. This was the most important moment of his life especially.

“Ami, Baba,” he cried, his eyes watering. “I am never leaving you again.”

Layla’s tears drenched Abbas’s sleeve.

“We are never leaving each other my boy,” she cried.

Murtaza weakly smiled.

“Inshallah! Abbas, I am proud of you,” he addressed his son. “You have grown into such a strong young man.”

Layla nodded.

Abbas felt his heart warm up. His longing was finally over. The hole in his heart had finally been closed.

“There’s so much I need to tell you,” Abbas whispered.

Murtaza placed a hand on Abbas’s shoulder.

“There will be plenty of time, Inshallah. There will be plenty of time from now on.”

The trio began strolling away. Once again, life had brought them together. And they were determined to make up for lost time.

## A Hospital Visit

*6 weeks later.....*

Beep... Beep... Beep...

There had once been a time when Jumeira welcomed such calm moments of the day. Those few minutes when she wasn't running a military campaign or rushing between meetings. But rather than comforting, the dull beeping of the machine was beginning to wear down her already thinning patience. That, coupled with the niggling notion at the back of her mind that something wasn't right, left Jumeira tense.

The room was dimly lit, only by the sun rays creeping through the partially opened curtain. Much to her annoyance, she had found herself unable to move.

*'Probably some pain medication. It would explain why I can't feel anything.'*

It was disconcerting, especially for someone like her, but she settled for attempting to diagram her room. On her right side there were a cluster of machines flashing various numbers that meant nothing to her. Her left was free, occupied only by a chair. Aside from the muted but rhythmic cacophony of electric beeps, there was little else going on. She watched the minutes tick by on the clock on the adjacent wall.

She had just crossed her forty-second minute when she heard the door open. Dull footsteps scuffed the floor and she frowned mentally, wishing she could tell whoever it was to pick up their



feet. Turns out she didn't have to wait long when a balding middle aged man entered her view and gave her a toothy grin.

"Yep, she's awake!" he called out to someone. She huffed internally, unable to turn and see who it was. A thin line of dread chilled her heart but she forced it down. She was in the safe and protected environment of a hospital. The doctor turned to address her with the same annoying grin he had shared with her other mysterious visitor.

"How are we doing Ms.." he looked down to consult his board, "Jumeira?"

She rolled her eyes; something she could thankfully still do.

Undaunted he just smiled and ticked something on his board, "Much better by the looks of it" he chirped.

He then proceeded to check the various machines, pausing every now and then to scribble on his clipboard. Unable to do much, Jumeira focused her eyes on the clock again. Exactly seven minutes and twenty three seconds later, the doctor gave a satisfied hum and moved out of her view. She sighed mentally; his unwarranted cheery mood was most unprofessional.

*'I will inform the hospital administrator the moment I leave'* she decided.

She could hear him scribbling away at the foot of her bed, no doubt still wearing that silly grin. She had begun to count the tiles on the roof when she realized he was speaking with the guest. Straining herself as much as she could, she could only just make out their conversation.

"I've completed the analysis. Her vitals are stable, fluids and oxygen are okay. She seems fine; well, as fine as she can be."

"Thank you doctor." A smooth deep voice replied. Jumeira couldn't help notice that it sounded very familiar. Almost like her husband, but there was no possible way for that to be true.

She heard the doctor scuff again across the floor followed by the creak of the door. Now it was just her with the stranger. Jumeira could feel her heartbeat quicken. She cursed the machinery as the beeping intensified. The slow, deliberate thuds brought her attention to the vacant bedside. Swivelling her eyes away from the machines, she locked gazes with the mysterious visitor.

Jumeira had spent decades dealing with thugs, mercenaries, assassins and mafias; but never had she felt a surging fear like the one that emerged in her chest as she stared into Akbar's eyes.

He held her gaze, unwavering. While his face remained expressionless she could almost see the swirling storm of hatred, anger, resentment and above all, intense pain in his eyes.

*'Too soft. You never were able to hide who you really were. Definitely from your father's side.'* she thought bitterly.

Akbar had been her greatest project; one that she had personally devoted herself to. Hours, weeks and years had gone into carving and moulding him into a perfect warrior. Every action and response had been crafted to perfection. But she never factored his emotions into the equation. She learned the hard way and made sure that her second son would not fall victim to the same mistake. He was good, but he wasn't Akbar. No one could come close to Akbar. Akbar was the masterpiece of her genius.

Even now, despite the obvious inner turmoil, he stood erect and towering over her.

*'Intimidating'* her mind whispered, almost in glee. It seemed that even so many years later, he was still the same Akbar. Her Akbar. Her prodigy. The perfect one.

He wasn't there to hurt her, that much was obvious. So why was he here? To apologise?

*'Don't be ridiculous.'* she chided herself.

She was drawn out of her thoughts by a long-suffering sigh from Akbar. Passing a hand over his face, he sank wearily into the chair beside her. Up close, Jumeira could see the grey streaks in his hair and beard, and the wrinkled folds of skin around his eyes. It just occurred to her how old and tired he looked at that moment.

She watched curiously as his eyes remained transfixed on his hands.

"I buried Asghar this morning."

A pang of disbelief struck her heart. Her eyes transfixed on his face. The machine beside her beeped a warning, but Akbar didn't look up.

"I laid my baby brother into his grave with these two hands."

His voice was devoid of emotion. There was no happiness or grief. Jumeira felt her heart race.

*‘No, it’s not possible! He’s lying!’* she could feel herself screaming.

He looked up and snorted at her gaze. Sliding a hand into his pocket, he pulled out an eerily familiar dog-tag style chain. Jumeira would have recognised it anywhere. She had given that to Asghar when he finally joined the Alphas.

Akbar threw it onto the sheets of her bed. Jumeira strained herself but was unable to move even a finger to pick it up.

“I trained the man who killed him,” he mentioned, running his hand on his knee.

Jumeira frowned mentally. Where was he going with this?

“I hated what Asghar had become; what you turned him into.”

Jumeira shivered at the venom in his voice.

“But he was my brother. I didn’t want him dead.”

He went silent. For maybe the first time in her life, albeit due to her lack of ability to do much else, she listened carefully.

“But *you*. You forced my hand. You turned him into a monster. You turned us all into monsters.” Akbar’s voice began to climb in volume and she could hear the anger seeping into it.

“You destroyed us!” he shouted, startling her violently.

He was gripping the sides of the chair hard enough to turn his knuckles white. Jumeira was genuinely scared as she watched his composure cave.

“You never cared about us,” he spat. “The same way you never cared about Baba and the same way you didn’t care about Qasim!”

Akbar rose angrily from his chair and moved to the window. Leaning heavily on the frame, his chest rose and sank with the deep breaths he took.

“You killed all of us. Our family, our childhood, our lives, everything!”

His voice trembled when he uttered the next words.

“I lost my father. Both my brothers and now in a way, I’ve lost you too.” He turned to face her.

Slowly, he made his way back to the bedside.

Jumeira felt her pulse race; a sliver of fear gripped her heart.

Akbar sighed, "You're paralysed forever,"

Jumeira felt her heart jolt. What was he talking about?

"Asghar shot you, remember?" She shut her eyes as those memories came flooding back.

When she opened her eyes, Akbar was watching her.

"It hit your spine." Jumeira felt her heart sink. She wasn't a doctor, but she knew that was not good news.

"And severed your spinal cord."

He turned to face her. "You will never be able to move again."

Jumeira sucked in a breath.

*'He's playing with you. That can't be true.'* She looked up at his face. *'He's lying!'*

Akbar shook his head and as though he had read her thoughts, "What good would it do for me to lie to you?"

At that moment, he didn't resemble the worried and troubled man that she had been chasing. At that moment, his very look made her tremble. She was completely defenseless.

Akbar took a deep breath.

"So many innocent people cursed you for what you did to them, to their families. Now, you will never destroy another family, orphan another child or brainwash another innocent soul ever again."

His eyes met Jumeria's shocked look.

"Allah's (swt) mercy is great," he paused and looked hard at Jumeira. "But so is his justice."

For a few moments, a deafening silence weighed down on both of them as she struggled to string two words together in her mind. A knock on the door was followed swiftly by a young nurse entering. She saw Akbar and began to apologise when he stopped her.

"I was leaving anyway," he replied with a small smile. She nodded and gestured to the other nurses outside.

Jumeira watched as Akbar turned and left without sparing her a second glance.

Feeling the nurse's cold hands poke, prod and nudge her, Jumeira finally understood what had happened.

A tear escaped her eye and rolled down her cheek as her eyelids fluttered close.

Like a corpse, she lay silently. Unable to move, respond or refuse. When the nurses finally finished, she opened her eyes which were bleary with tears and spotted the clock.

It had been forty three minutes and seventeen seconds since Akbar had left.

139

## Reunion

“We’re late!” Abbas heard his father exclaim from downstairs.

His gaze fell upon his watch. It was 12:34. His eyes widened in alarm. They had to be there by 1:15!

Swiftly, Abbas grasped his comb and engaged in the furious battle of taming his hair.

“Ugh!” he grumbled, tossing the comb in frustration onto his bed.

He reached out for his perfume and spraying a few wisps of fragrance on his new shirt.

“Abbas!” he heard his mother exclaim from the hallway. “Fix your hair!”

Abbas shook his head in disbelief.

“It’s pointless Ami,” he explained. “Nothing will-”

Layla stopped and turned to face him. Abbas glanced away as she stared at him with a look of ferocity.

“Y-yes yes,” Abbas stammered. “I’ll fix my hair.”

With a nod of satisfaction, she strolled on.

Abbas grabbed hold of his comb once more. This time he had to do it. Quietly, he tried to straighten out his hair once more, but it would not obey.

“Oh man,” Abbas grumbled. “Why won’t you break?”

“Tsk tsk,” Abbas heard Haider chide.

Turning to face his younger brother, his eyes widened in surprise. Haider’s hair was combed perfectly.

“Captain Abbas can lead a squadron,” Haider chuckled. “But he can’t comb his own hair.”

Abbas shook his head in disapproval.

“You do it then,” he challenged.

Haider smirked. Stepping forward, Abbas saw him casually stroke a few times.

“Voila!” Haider praised. “Masterpiece!”

Abbas turned to look at the mirror. His eyes widened in surprise once more. His hair was combed perfectly.

“Wha- How?” Abbas stammered.

Haider grinned cheekily.

“I cannot divulge my secrets,” he whispered.

Abbas sighed.

“Baba sent me to let you know that he wants you downstairs,” Haider added.

Abbas nodded. He turned to his dressing table drawer and pulled it open. There were several belongings inside. Some pencils, a toothbrush, a handcream, his military badge and finally, a revolver.

Abbas reached out for his badge, placing it in his pocket. By the Peaceville army rules and regulations, he was required to carry his badge at all times. He picked up the revolver. Holding it in his hands, his lips curled into a smile.

This was his first revolver. Akbar had given it to him more than a year ago. Abbas had named it Zulfi which was short for Zulfiqar.

“You don’t need Zulfi!” Haider exclaimed. “We’re only going to Akbar Uncle’s house.”

Abbas shook his head.

“I must always be ready for action,” he chuckled.

He pocketed his revolver like an expert.

“Let’s go,” he whispered. “Bismillah”

He made his way down the stairs where his mother was fixing her hijab. Abbas smiled. She was wearing a bright purple dress.

“Everyone in the car please,” Murtaza called out. “I won’t wait much longer.”

Abbas nodded and all of them headed to the door. He pressed down the handle and stepped outside. A cold breeze greeted his face as he noticed his father standing by the car. Abbas strolled over to his father.

“Are you ready?” Murtaza asked.

Abbas nodded. Glancing down at his watch, he whispered, “It’s 12:41. You promised Akbar Uncle that you would be there early.”

Murtaza chuckled.

“Maybe you can get your mother to sit in the car. I certainly can’t!”

Abbas’s lips curled into a mischievous smile. He leaned close to his father to whisper the bright idea that just came to his mind. Murtaza’s eyes lit up.

“What do you think?” Abbas’s eyes twinkled. “Let’s give it a try!”

Murtaza nodded.

“I am up for it,” he answered. “But if we are caught, then this was your idea.”

Abbas grinned as he headed towards the house. He needed Haider as well.

Abbas entered the house. His eyes widened in surprise. His mom was still fixing her hijab! Another idea popped into his mind. In a flash, he charged at his mother and at the last minute quickly changed direction.

“Abbas!” his mother scolded amusingly. “How many times have I told you not to do that!”

Abbas darted off to the kitchen where Haider was busy eating left overs from the fridge.

“Haider,” Abbas called out loud enough for his mother to hear. “Are you eating from the fridge?”

Haider glanced up in horror as a pattering of feet sounded in the hallway. A minute later, Layla was in the kitchen.

“Haider!” she reprimanded. “I told you not to eat from the fridge! You are going to-”

“It’s 1:00!” Murtaza called out. “And it will take at least thirty minutes for us to get there.”



Layla's eyes widened in alarm as he darted off muttering something about her shoes.

Abbas turned to Haider who flashed Abbas a fierce look of vengeance the moment their mother had left. Abbas leaned close to his brother and whispered his master plan. Haider's eyes lit up.

"Let's do it!" he answered excitedly.

Swiftly, both boys headed towards the exit trying to look as guilt-free as they could. Eventually, they managed to reach the car. Murtaza was already sitting in the driver's seat.

"Get in," he urged.

Swiftly, both boys sat in the back seats.

"We're ready!" they declared simultaneously.

Murtaza chuckled.

"She's going to kill us for this, you know?" he whispered.

Murtaza raised his hand before bringing it crashing down on the horn.

*Beeeeeeeeeeep!*

Layla came sprinting out of the house; her eyes were wide with worry. Seeing the three of them, she shook her head in disapproval marching to the car like a drill sergeant.

"And here she comes," Murtaza whispered. "I reckon that she'll wack you first, Abbas. Then Haider."

Abbas shook his head.

"I think she'll focus on you," he countered.

Murtaza narrowed his eyes.

"We'll see."

Abbas watched as his mother opened the car door and sat in the passengers seat.

"Ami—"

Abbas and Haider laughed as Laila playfully smacked the back of their heads. She then turned to Murtaza, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"Let's get going," she whispered kindly.

Murtaza started the car engine. And with that, they drove off. As they went, Abbas's mind couldn't help drift back to the past. There was once a time when travelling openly was forbidden. It

was dangerous. There was once a time when the buildings were wrecked and homes were destroyed. But now, if someone were to visit Peaceville, they would see new buildings and new structures being created in the place of a once demolished and destroyed city.

It had only been six weeks since the ‘Great battle of the Iron Fort’ as they called it. But for Abbas, it felt like a lifetime. He could still remember the day he and Haider had awoken on the beach, many months ago. From there, he couldn’t believe how they had reached here.

A man was jogging outside. Abbas smiled as he recognised him.

“Hey Dawud!”

Dawud glanced up for a moment. Seeing them driving off, he waved. Abbas waved back.

People were adjusting nicely to the new peaceful and comfortable life. They were happy. And for Abbas, that was the only thing that mattered.

“Baba,” he heard Haider whine. “How far are we?”

Murtaza shook his head in disapproval.

“It’s only been 10 minutes Haider. Straighten up or you’ll develop a hunchback.”

Haider grumbled as he straightened his back, making him look much bigger than before.

“Haider,” Abbas teased playfully. “Don’t take all the oxygen in the room!”

Haider merely blew a raspberry before turning back to his window.

About half an hour passed before they finally caught sight of the bungalow.

Abbas smiled. So many memories were attached to this place. This is where he had learnt to fight. This is where he had trained. And this is where he became what he was today.

Abbas shook his head in disbelief as he counted the cars parked in front of the house.

“We’re the last ones,” Abbas sighed. “Again.”

They waited as Murtaza began parking the car.

“Oh no,” Haider muttered quietly. “Not this again.”

Abbas chuckled. His father was obsessed with the perfect parking. He was very particular about it. He could not tolerate his car being even slightly angled.

“Murtaza dear,” Layla whispered kindly as he reattempted to park his car straight. “Do you mind letting us off before I lose my mind?”

Murtaza stopped the car, allowing them all to get off.

“Thank you,” Layla smiled. They headed up to the bungalow. Abbas took a deep breath as they reached the entrance.

“Remember to say salaam,” Layla whispered.

Abbas grinned.

“Yes Ami.”

“And remember to sit up straight the entire time,” Layla added quietly.

Haider giggled,

“Yes Ami.”

Layla reached out, pressing the door handle.

There was a shuffling of feet outside as Murtaza arrived behind them and the door swung open simultaneously. Abbas felt joy in his heart as Ali and Zahra stood at the entrance. Zahra was holding a fairly chubby Hurr.

They greeted each other with excitement. Abbas raised his hand in salute in front of Ali.

“Salaamunalaikum Lieutenant Ali!” he greeted playfully.

Ali playfully saluted back.

“Captain Abbas,” he replied in a slightly stern voice. “You’re nine minutes late.”

Abbas chuckled pointing to his mother who was busy adoring Hurr.

There was a patter of feet as Maryam entered the room.

“Salamunalaikum Layla Auntie,” she greeted warmly.

Layla wrapped her arms around Maryam.

“Walaikum asalam Maryam.”

She let go, allowing Maryam to step forward.

“Salamunalaikum Haider,” she greeted. Playfully she raised her hand in salute,

“Salamunalikum captain Abbas.”

Abbas chuckled.

“Walaikum asalam,” he answered politely.

For a moment neither said anything. They just stood there. Then a voice sounded from behind Maryam.

“How are you my girl?”

Maryam turned to greet Abbas’s father.

Abbas smiled. Murtaza favoured Maryam alot. Somehow, the two got along really well.

A hand landed on his back. Abbas whirled around to see his mentor Akbar.

They greeted each other warmly.

Abbas wrapped his arms around Akbar giving him a tight squeeze.

“Oh!” AKbar exclaimed with a smile. “Don’t break my old ribs yet!”

Turning to Layla he asked,

“How are you Layla?”

Layla smiled.

“With your duas, Alhamdullillah.”

Akbar’s lips curled into a smile. Glancing at Murtaza, he asked in a playful stern voice,

“Is this man giving you everything you want?”

Layla giggled like a little girl.

“The only thing he won’t give me is enough time to get ready.”

Akbar turned to Murtaza with pretend sternness.

The two then opened arms, taking each other in a tight hug.

“The food’s warm,” Zahra said. “Jafar has cooked something which is meant to be pasta, but I prepared barbeque anyway.”

Abbas suppressed a grin as they headed towards the kitchen.

He could smell the aroma of food before they entered inside. There was a large dining table with chairs laid around it. A white cover had been laid on its surface. In front of each chair, there was a large plate, a glass and some cutlery.

Abbas watched the table in awe. There was a large barbeque platter, filled with various kinds of meats. It was steaming. There was also cut cucumbers laid along the edges of the platter. In

another tray, salad had been sliced. And finally there were three large jugs of orange juice.

There was a pattering of feet outside as Ruqayya strolled inside.

“Salamunalaikum Api,” he greeted. “How are you?”

A smile formed on her lips.

“Alhamdulillah. Have you seen Jafar’s recent masterpiece?”

Abbas raised a brow as she pointed to the corner of the room on the left side.

Abbas had to suppress a laugh. It was a large mound of sand with some holes poked here and there.

“What is that meant to be?” Reza asked curiously as he stepped inside.

Abbas turned to face him.

“It’s a sand castle,” Abbas answered.

Everyone began to take seats at the table. Abbas took a deep breath as he watched the last person take a seat. Everyone raised their hands in prayer.

“Ya Rabbi,” Akbar began. “Keep us happy like this, forever, Inshallah.”

“Ameen!” everyone called out.

Murtaza went next.

“Ya Rabbi keep us united in this world and the hereafter.”

“Ameen!” Everyone called out once more.

Layla went next.

“Ya Rabbi,” she whispered. “Allow our Islamic community to flourish”

“Ameen!”

Next was Zahra.

“Ya Rabbi,” she smiled. “Help us raise our children to be worthy of being the companions of the Imam of the time (ajtf).”

“Ameen!”

Ali spoke next.

“Ya Rabbi,” he added. “Help us whenever we are in difficult times.”

“Ameen!”

Then came Reza.

“Ya Rabbi,” he sighed. “Help me find a suitable life partner!”

Everyone laughed,

“Ameen!”

Next was Ruqayya’s turn.

“Ya Rabbi,” she whispered. “Keep us safe from the pain of losing a loved one.”

Everyone sobered for a moment.

“Ameen,”

Next was Maryam’s turn.

“Ya Rabbi,” she spoke. “Help us reach the highest of ranks in this world and the next.”

“Ameen!”

Next came Jafar.

“Ya Rabbi,” Jafar prayed. “Let the pasta taste good today, Inshallah!”

“Ameen!” everyone smiled.

Haider took a deep breath.

“Ya Rabbi,” he whispered. “Make us all super rich one day, so we can buy all the toys we want!”

“Ameen!” everyone laughed once more.

Finally came Abbas’s turn. Abbas took a deep breath.

“Ya Rabbi!” he whispered. “Keep us strong in heart, wise in mind, and solid in faith. Let us always be a strength for the oppressed and a punishment for the oppressors. Don’t let us ever get out of control.”

“Ameen!”

And with that the food was passed around. Abbas smiled as he watched everyone. It was perfect. Everything had returned to normal. His lips curled into a smile. He knew that troubles would find them in the future, but for now; everything was perfect. As he reached out for the salad bowl, an ayat of Quran echoed in his mind.

*‘So surely with hardship comes ease.’*

Life is a ruthless journey. In times of darkness, when hardships and tribulations strike like lightning in a storm, faith is one's sole hope of survival. When it seems like there is no option other than drowning in the darkest abyss; belief in truth, justice and a power greater than all keeps one afloat.

These are the times when death, destruction and disaster prevail. Inhabitants of the island are hurt, scared and terrified. Despair hurls around the horror that plagues their home.

The accursed black shadow cast itself on their lives. People disappear, never to be found. All that remains are echoes of screams and cries for help; overshadowed by the maniacal laughs of their enemy.

People call them *Alphas*. Their names are whispered ominously amongst the dancing flames of campfires, in the hushed whispers of scared children and gasped from the lips of fearful townsfolk. Rustling leaves hide watching eyes, and winds carry all murmurs to them. A mere mention strikes fear in every beating heart. And rightly so. Crossing an Alpha left one wishing for death. One could only hide for so long when Alphas were on the hunt.

It is in these dark moments that we find the strongest warriors. Those who remain steadfast with the strength of unwavering belief.

They will fight back, and they do not intend to lose.



**ASR PUBLICATIONS**

ISBN 978-1-7396533-0-9



9 781739 653309 >