



ULTIMATE CONTROL

Asr Publications

Ultimate Control

Control Series - Book 2

ASR PUBLICATIONS

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Dedicated to the ones scattered to the
winds...

“Ya Zahra”

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Prologue

It was dark. A cold chill slithered in the air as an owl could be heard flapping softly in a simple attempt at adjusting it's position on the branch. The bird's yellow eyes glistened in the night as it watched cautiously for any trace. A sign. A prey lurking the night. But there was no such sign.

Crack.

The bird's eyes shot wide as it flapped violently into the air. At last. Food.

"Faiza!" came a voice. "Careful, you'll give us away."

A young woman could be seen, ducked behind a tree. She glanced up for a minute, narrowing her eyes at the owl that was flapping away.

"It's okay," she whispered back. "It's just an owl. Come on now, we have to keep moving."

From the bushes behind her, there was a rustle as a young man emerged from the bushes. He was about her age, and was tall and strong with brown eyes. In his arms, he carried a thin rifle.

"Asif is right," the man chided. "The Sada-e-Haq are spread thin already after that last attack. If you are not careful Faiza, we could get caught."

Faiza looked down as the youth stepped through. He had short, dark brown hair and carried a pistol.

"Are you alright, Asif?"

The young man nodded. Glancing at the grown man, he remarked,

"I'm good. Maybe ask your husband if he's-"

The grown man growled, eyeing Asif in frustration. He raised his gun, but Faiza was faster. She moved in between them.

“Wahab!” she chided. “He’s just a boy.”

This didn’t seem convincing for Wahab. He whispered back, “Did we really have to bring him with us?”

Faiza didn’t want to have this argument again. Not here, of all places. Why couldn’t the two men work this out.

“Wahab, I promised his mother I would look out for him.” She sighed.

Wahab glared at Faiza. Leaning in so that only Faiza could hear, in a barely audible whisper, Wahab sighed,

“You mean the same way he looked after our children?”

Faiza did not respond. She merely looked down and leaned her head against her husband’s shoulder. She knew the real reason for the animosity Wahab held it against Asif. She could barely forget that horrific day herself.

“Look,” Faiza sighed “I know you are in pain about Zainab-”

“Not just Zainab,” Wahab sighed. “Hamza too. He’s-”

“Wahab,” Faiza interrupted. “I don’t want to discuss this please. Asif’s barely twenty. As good as a child. Please just ignore him and try to focus on the task at hand.”

Wahab looked down in anger. Faiza now turned her attention to Asif. Just because Asif was young, didn’t mean he was excusable from such a fate. Asif merely chuckled. Faiza knew her husband was short-tempered and Asif wasn’t helping with his unwarranted snarky attitude.

“Asif...” she scolded. “You promised if I brought you along, you would watch that sharp tongue of yours.”

Asif shrugged.

“I don’t get why you two are so afraid...there are no Alphas for miles.”

Faiza shuddered at the mention of it. She narrowed her eyes causing Asif to go quiet.

“Better,” Faiza whispered ignoring Wahab’s glare Asif’s way. The young lad deserved that much.

“Now, lets finish what we came here to do,” Faiza whispered.

From her pocket, she watched as Wahab withdrew a small box. It was very unique in design.

Laced in silver from one end to the next, any normal person at first glance would regard it as a rich person's lost item. But first glances were often deceiving.

"Place it in front," Faiza whispered. "Let's try doing this without drawing too much attention. Asif, step back."

The youth moved back, with a quizzical expression on his face.

"Why are you so nervous?" he asked. "It'll be over soon enough."

Faiza ignored the foolhardy comment. She needed to focus.

"Alright," she whispered. "Go for it Wahab. Bismillah."

Wahab raised his gun above the box.

"Bismillah," the man whispered.

Boom! Boom!

The sounds of bullets filled the air as Wahab emptied out his entire ammunition on the box. A haze of dust erupted from the ground, a small waft of smoke following the distinct sound of a *Click*. The gun was now empty.

"Did that do it?" Faiza asked with uncertainty.

Wahab narrowed his eyes, holding out the small box in his hand in frustration. Faiza's eyes widened in surprise. There was not even a dent. Or a scratch.

"Maybe try smashing it against a tree," came Asif's voice.

Wahab shook his head.

"I have a better idea."

Reaching into his pocket, the grown man pulled out a small object.

Faiza's eyes widened as she identified the object. A grenade.

"Faiza," Wahab instructed. "Move back."

Faiza nodded and stepped several feet away, until she was right next to Asif. She raised a thumbs up, signalling Wahab that he was good to go.

"Let's hope this time it works," Asif whispered.

Wahab's silhouette ducked for a moment, and then abruptly started scrambling towards them, away from the box.

Boom!

A huge burst of bright orange flame erupted, knocking Faiza and Asif off of their feet. Faiza pulled her arms in front of her face at the wave of heat. Her eyes winced as they adjusted to the burst of light, quickly diminishing away into the darkness.

“Wahab,” she panted. “Are you alright?”

Silence.

“Wahab!” she whispered.

There was a groan. Faiza eyes widened in horror as she sprinted forward.

“Wahab!” she exclaimed, abruptly stopping at the sight of him.

He was on the ground, slightly dazed due to being closer to the explosion. But he wasn’t hurt.

“Did it work?” he asked.

Faiza glanced towards the scene of the explosion, her eyes lighting up.

“Wahab,” she whispered. “Look!”

Wahab got up glancing to where she pointed. Immediately, his eyes watered and he whispered,

“Alhamdullillah!”

The box was destroyed, corroded and burnt by the powerful grenade. But more importantly, it’s contents were destroyed.

“Alhamdullillah,” Faiza smiled. “Now we have one more. Hopefully everyone else is having progress as well, Inshallah.”

Wahab grinned.

“Lets finish your box quickly and regroup with the Sada-e-Haq.”

They might have, but at that moment Faiza had a sudden realisation.

“Asif?” she called out silently. “Asif?”

No response.

Wahab got to his feet. He smiled slightly.

“Maybe he got scared and ra-”

“ARGHH!!!”

Faiza’s eyes shot up in horror.

“Asif!” she screamed.

She pulled out two daggers and charged forward.

“Faiza, no!” Wahab called out. “It’s a trap! They want your box. Take it and get out of here!”

Faiza felt her hands go numb as she froze, glancing at the bushes behind which she could hear Asif’s scream. There was no way she could save him. Wahab was right. Faiza turned towards Wahab.

“Which way do I-” she stopped as her eyes widened in horror. “Wahab! Look out!”

Wahab whirled around as a huge shadow emerged from the bushes behind him. A small glint in his hand. A knife. Upon it’s hilt, the number 43 was inscribed.

“It’s...It’s an Alpha. Faiza! get out of here!” Wahab shouted, lifting his gun.

Faiza stumbled back in horror, as a sudden surge of pain struck her from behind, and everything went dark.

1

Fallen Kingdom

It was dark and dim moonlight barely illuminated the gloomy landscape. Grey mists masked the twinkling of stars. The wind was silent. Too silent. There were no trees in this area. Only burnt buildings that had been smashed to bits by missiles. Rusted tanks were scattered, the foul odour of their oxidised metal was polluting the area. There was a strange smell of ash in the air.

A tall structure shadowed over the land. Once an impenetrable fortress, feared by all. The base of the world's most fearsome assassins - the Alphas.

Now reduced to a skeleton, its technology and resources stripped away by the revolution that had conquered it.

Yasir took a deep breath as he assumed a seat in the makeshift cafeteria. The old rusted chair creaked under his weight. In one hand, he held a powerful rifle and in the other, a porcelain coffee mug.

Yasir's eyes fell upon the dusty window. It provided a pretty good view of the desolate landscape below. Of course, due to the lack of maintenance, the window had become murky now. In fact, the entire building had been getting run down.

Clank!

Yasir's head shot up, his eyes went wide with alarm. What was that? Maybe a mouse? Yasir took a deep breath as he rested his head against the chair. Maybe he had imagined it? Probably.

Yasir took a deep breath. He was exhausted. He wanted to

get home as soon as possible. His eyes drooped.

“All guards check in.”

Yasir’s eyes opened slightly. It must have been Isa. Lazily, he placed his steaming mug on the table and reached out for the small device. Pressing the transmission button, he chuckled, “Except for some dust, no sign of any trouble, Isa.”

There was a brief silence, followed by laughs from the other guards. Yasir yawned.

“Yes, yes,” came Isa’s reply. “Just keep your guard up. Our shift is over in less than an hour, Inshallah.”

Yasir’s lips curled into a smile. Feeling the soothing edge of his rifle, he envisioned eating samosas on the couch with everyone else. A thought occurred to him.

“Hey Isa,” he whispered into the walkie talkie. “When did you say you were heading out for the ceremony?”

Isa’s voice came through the receiver, “You know we don’t mention such details over the receiver, Yasir. Why are you asking?”

Yasir laughed, unable to keep his voice serious, “You could at least send us a few samosas so we don’t starve.”

Silence. Yasir eyed the walkie talkie warily.

“Come on guys,” he added. “I’m only joking.”

Still no response. Yasir raised a brow.

“Is everything alright, guys?” he whispered. “Can you hear me?”

The lights went dark. Yasir jumped with a start. What happened? Why did they lose power? The weather wasn’t looking so bad tonight.

‘Maybe we blew a fuse’, Yasir thought. ‘It wouldn’t be the first time’.

The backup generator would bring the lights back any minute. In any case, Yasir pulled out his thin torch, and clicked it on.

A small area of a metre or so lit up around him. He took a nice warm sip from his steaming mug. The lights would be back on soon. Glancing down at his walkie talkie, he whispered once more,

“Hey, who wants to check the lights out?”

Silence. Except for the howling wind outside.

“Come on guys,” Yasir laughed nervously; a bead of sweat trickled down his cheek. “Respond already.”

But no response came. And the lights didn’t turn back on either.

Yasir narrowed his eyes. Was he being pranked? No. Something wasn’t right. The walkie talkies had nothing to do with the building’s power. It couldn’t possibly be the case that both weren’t working at the same time.

“Okay, don’t panic,” Yasir reassured himself. “I’ll check it out. It’s probably nothing.”

Deep down, Yasir wanted to believe that was true.

Swiftly, he marched away to the door with the rifle in his hand. With a deep breath, he pushed the door open, entering the hallway. It was completely dark. Not a single trace of light.

“The backup generators should have restored everything by now,” he whispered to himself, his voice echoed along the empty corridor.

Yasir gulped. The silence was unnerving. And there was nobody there. Clutching his rifle, he advanced on.

Clank!

Yasir jumped in horror. What was that? Where had it come from? He was the only one on this floor. Wasn’t he? Unconsciously, his hand became stiff. Every footstep he took vibrated along the empty hall. He was fully alert but his heart was screaming. It wanted to leave. Yasir pulled out his walkie talkie.

“Isa, can you hear me?” he shuddered. “Can anyone hear me?”

There was no response. Yasir closed his eyes. For a moment he said nothing. He merely clutched the walkie talkie against his thundering heart beat. Someone had cut their communication.

Hiss!

Yasir fell back with a thud. There was a clatter as the walkie talkie slipped from his hand, cascading into the darkness.

Fear gripped his heart. Was he imagining it? Or was there an eerie creaking sound coming from ahead.

Yasir shivered. He was feeling cold all over. Quietly, he got to his feet. He knew he had to handle this.

Step by step, dread increasingly filled his heart as he approached the end of the hallway where the fire exit was. The creaking noise ceased all of a sudden.

Yasir gulped nervously as he reached the first step. No one was there. Then why did he feel this ghostly presence? Slowly, he began moving up the stairs.

Progress took its time. Every staircase felt like it stretched on for miles. Halfway through, a pained howl emanated throughout the building. Yasir's shoulders stiffened. Was that the wind?

It was. And he wouldn't give it another thought.

It took a few more minutes for him to reach the floor. Yasir swallowed. He knew that the danger was imminent. He wiped his sweaty hands off of his pant, narrowing his eyes. He would have the advantage of surprise.

Yasir shuddered once more as he stepped into the hallway. Panic gripped his heart. He could hear whispers. They were laughing. He felt his vision blur for a moment. There was a strange ringing in his ears.

Yasir coughed. He could smell a strange odour in the air. An odour not unlike the smell of rotten eggs. Yasir shook his head. He must be imagining things.

There was a strange sound all of a sudden. Like the scratching of nails on a chalkboard. Yasir shuddered. The whispers were louder now. And footsteps. Footsteps? Yasir's eyes widened in alarm, but he was too late. *Wham!*

He slumped to the ground, unconscious. Overshadowing him was a tall figure dressed in black.

"Sorry about that," the figure chuckled, glancing at his watch. "I would stick around longer but I have to be somewhere."

The figure leaned down to feel his victim's pulse.

"Masud!" came a voice. "What are you doing? We have to get out of here!"

Masud chuckled.

"No worries little brother," he laughed. "I know the protocol". Masud turned to face his brother who stepped into the light.

"My name is Yahya," he spat. "And we don't have time. Guards could check here any minute."

“He’s right,” came another voice, as the two women emerged from the darkness of the hallway, both armed with powerful rifles.

“Wahiba and Salma,” Masud chuckled. “Why are you so concerned? This operation is easy. And we will not have anyone see us.”

Wahiba narrowed her eyes.

“The longer we’re here, the more likely we are to get caught.”

Masud shrugged. He didn’t feel comfortable with this.

“I still don’t trust our....benefactors,” he sighed.

Yahya shook his head in disapproval.

“We’re not doing this again, Masud. Not here. We agreed together on this,” he whispered. “The League has promised us a way out.”

From his pocket, Yahya withdrew a small hard drive. Let’s just get this to them as soon as possible.

Salma and Wahiba nodded in agreement. Masud eyed them all skeptically.

“Do you want to go back to the prison?” Yahya asked.

Masud looked down. Yahya had a point. Anywhere was better than where they were right now. He opened his mouth to speak, but before he could....

Creak.

Yahya quickly pocketed the data drive.

“Yasir, is that you?” a voice sounded from across the hallway.

All four Alphas stiffened. They knew the voice. They had heard it while sabotaging the guards’ walkie talkies.

“Isa,” Masud smiled venomously. “Abbas’s friend.”

Isa narrowed his eyes. In one hand he held a knife and in the other, a powerful pistol.

“Who are you?” Isa growled. “What have you done to Yasir?”

Yahya chuckled.

“Come. we can spare a minute.”

Isa’s eyes widened in horror as he caught sight of Yasir. He growled, placing his pistol on the ground, his eyes narrowing in fury.

“I don’t know who you are,” he whispered, withdrawing a thick steel chain. “But you just picked the wrong fight.”

Wahiba laughed mockingly, clenching her fists. Isa eyed her with contempt.

“You know what I see guys?” she hissed.

Salma shrugged.

“We’re not you, so no, we don’t know what you see.”

Al four of them withdrew their blades.

“Let me tell you,” Wahiba smiled venomously. “I see four Alphas against a bug.”

Isa’s eyes widened in horror as the four Alphas chuckled, slowly beginning to drift forward.

“And you know what I see?”

The four Alphas stopped. This new voice had come from the other side of the hallway. The four turned to see a young man standing on the other side

“No Abbas,” Isa chuckled. “I don’t see what you see.”

Abbas stepped forward, whipping out his blade and revolver.

“I see four bugs against two men.”

Wahiba growled.

“You!” she screeched. “I’ll kill you! I’ll-”

Wham!

A sudden fist struck Wahiba on the temple. She slumped unconscious.

“Ouch!” Abbas laughed. “Nice one Salma Api!”

Masud and Yahya jumped back in horror.

“You!” Masud growled. “Like mentor, like student!”

He lunged forward, but Isa was faster, swiping a chain at his knee.

“Argh!” Masud growled, his knee buckling.

Wham!

Abbas slammed into the Alpha’s stomach, smashing him into the wall. The assassin collapsed on the ground.

“Masud!” Yahya shouted. He turned to Salma in fury.

“You’ll pay for this, Salma!” he growled.

Yahya whipped out his gun but Salma jumped back, kicking the gun out of his hand.

Abbas charged forward, swinging his fist, but Yahya ducked. The Alpha dived for Abbas’s legs, knocking Abbas to the ground.

Abbas kicked and punched but Yahya merely grinned. The familiar iron hands of the Alpha engulfed his throat.

“You miserable-”

Wham!

Isa smashed a knee into the assassin’s back, loosening his grip.

“Ya Allah!” Abbas roared, smashing his elbow into the Alpha’s chin. Yahya coughed slipping back as Salma charged forward with a knife in her hand. Before Yahya could react, she buried it deep into his chest.

Yahya’s eyes widened in horror as he collapsed in a pool of blood.

“Nice one shark-hunter!” Isa exclaimed.

Salma smiled.

“You don’t have to use the code names, you know? Salma Api works fine.”

Isa narrowed his eyes.

“You’re a hunter, right?” he asked curiously,

Abbas grinned.

“Let’s just get Masud and Wahiba behind bars. Then I’d be happy to discuss this.”

He held out a data drive in his hand. The one Yahya had been holding earlier.

“Let’s see who these ‘benefactors’ are,” Salma whispered.

“They’ll-”

A sudden groan like a cow sounded in the hall.

Abbas, Isa and Salma recoiled. What was that?

“Did we leave someone behind?” Isa whispered, his chain bared and ready.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. The sound was still happening. Recurring. Almost as if...Abbas stopped. Abruptly his eyes widened, with an ear to ear grin on his face as he realised the source of the noise. Yasir.

“Man, the guy sounds like an old cow!” Isa remarked in awe. “How does he reach those octaves?”

Salma shook her head.

“Let’s get moving guys” she grinned. “We’ve got a lot to do and there’s not much time until the ceremony.”

2

Exposed

It was dark. Except for a few wax candles, each barely illuminating a few centimeters around it. If there was more light, anyone would have seen the round, wooden table, centered in the room. Surrounded by five seats. A long time ago, all seats were occupied. Now two were empty and they always would be.

The other four seats were occupied. The occupants were all dressed in black cloaks. The darkness hid their faces from each other, but it could not hide their shared ambition.

“What now?” came a voice.

The one who spoke leaned forward, his chair creaking under his weight.

“Peaceville authorities caught the squad sent to retrieve the data-”

He stopped. One of the candles was extinguished. The one directly in front of him.

“We are aware of the obvious, *Hate*,” came a woman’s voice.

Hate narrowed his eyes.

“Then what are we going to do about it, *Fear*.”

Hate took a deep breath as he heard a chuckle.

“My, my,” Fear sighed. “It seems you haven’t learnt anything from observing the experienced players of this game.”

Hate clenched his fist. In the outside world, he had more wealth than any young man of his age could ever imagine, but here, he was always assured that he was at the bottom of the

food chain. He knew that he was significantly younger than his comrades.

Hate narrowed his eyes. The other two members on the table; the ones he was really here for, had not spoken since the meeting started.

“What bothers you, Hate?” came a subtle and snake-like voice.

Hate paused, narrowing his eyes.

“We lost the C-gun and we lost Envy. Now, we are on the verge of losing Peaceville. If you have a plan, *Anger*, please share it with the rest of us-”

“The rest of us know,” came Fear’s subtle voice.

Hate froze. His eyes widened in confusion as he turned to face the silhouette of Anger once more. He would have said something, but Anger spoke first.

“When the Abbasid caliph Ma’mun,” he paused creating a slight chuckle in the air, “declared his crown prince and successor to be Imam Reza(as), do you think he was actually abdicating the throne for his enemy?”

Hate raised a brow. He didn’t see the relevance of such a point.

Anger sighed, leaning forward so that he was right behind his candle.

“The only thing I learnt in my lifetime is this. Nothing is ever as it seems. We may be giving them Peaceville...for now, but what we take back will be much more.”

Hate raised a brow? What did Anger mean? What could possibly be worth losing Peaceville? They had invested so much in that place. Why would they waste all of that gold?

“And don’t worry about Envy,” Anger whispered. “Ambition has taken care of her.”

The fourth voice finally spoke.

“I sent her our regards,” he whispered. “She’ll never betray us again.”

Anger nodded with an air of satisfaction.

Hate was starting to feel uncomfortable. He stopped leaning on his chair.

“Excellent,” Anger whispered. “Now as for you, Hate, you should know that events have already been set in motion. I have sent the most lethal adversary for Peaceville. One who will surely yield the desired results. Someone trained by the best, across all domains. Peaceville will never be ready for him. And you know the interesting thing? He made an interesting discovery..?”

Anger got up from his seat, folding his hands behind his back. Hate felt his stomach twitch. But he maintained a neutral expression. Anger couldn’t possibly know.

The door burst open.

Hate shot up, his eyes widened as all the candles extinguished.

“I hate traitors,” Anger sighed.

Hate froze. He could feel a strange coldness in the air. A dead numbness in his heart. He shuddered as the sound of footsteps sounded from the entrance.

“We know you tried to steal the box,” Ambition chuckled. “We always knew.”

Anger sighed.

“A shame. I thought you had potential, I genuinely did.”

Hate growled. If he was going down, he wouldn’t go alone. In a flash, he whipped out a revolver, aiming it straight for Anger.

Wham!

A sudden force struck his head as he collapsed on the ground. Hate moaned weakly as the gun slipped from his hand. The last thing he could hear over the ringing in his ears was the sound of laughter, and he drifted into unconsciousness.

Anger clapped his hands.

“Oh Amr,” he grinned. “You never fail to impress.”

A tall hooded figure overshadowed an unconscious Hate, who was sprawled on the ground. The hooded figure bowed respectfully.

“We are now ready to begin the plan. Take this foolish young man who actually thought that he could steal from us. You know what to do with him.”

Amr exhaled like a beast, as his huge form overshadowed everyone else. With one hand, he grasped Hate’s shoulder and began dragging the body away, Anger’s lips curled into a venomous smile.

“Enough games now,” Ambition sighed. “The board has been set up.”

“The moves have begun,” Fear whispered. “And this time, Peaceville will not find salvation.”

“We’re ready for Akbar,” Anger concluded. “Who else could be a threat?”

3

Report

“And yeah,” Abbas chuckled. “After we smashed those Alphas, we locked them up. No casualties.”

“Really,” Ali raised a brow. “No casualties.”

Abbas shrugged. The hunters had all come out unscathed? Why was Ali eyeing him meaningfully? It wasn't like anyone died or got hurt? Unless...

“Wait,” Abbas asked. “Are you talking about Yasir?”

Ali nodded.

“The doctor said he'll be in the hospital for the next few weeks.”

Abbas raised a brow.

“I mean...”

He let his sentence trail off. Yasir was formerly Isa's student, back in the times of revolution. He was well aware of the appropriate conduct of soldiers in the field. He should have been more alert.

“He spent more time getting spooked by the dark halls,” Abbas stated dryly. “Maybe if he wasn't busy scaring himself, he might have seen the Alphas in advance.”

Ali gave Abbas another meaningful look.

“Abbas,” he whispered. “Yasir was brave enough to go there in the first place. And not everyone is the same. Yasir is a little afraid of the dark. That's all.”

Abbas didn't like cowardice. Not that he blamed Yasir for it. He just didn't like Yasir tainting the success of the mission.

"He's fine Ali Bhai. A bit of bed time will do him good," Abbas concluded. "Maybe he'll learn to face his fears in the dark. His injury will last a couple of weeks and then he'll be back on his feet."

Ali narrowed his eyes. For a moment, neither of them said anything. But then Ali broke the silence.

"What about Salma, has she been helpful to the hunters?" he asked.

Abbas nodded.

Salma, formerly known as Alpha 39 was trained by the mighty Alpha 31. She had fought for the revolution behind the enemy lines and had played a pivotal role in the conquering of the iron fortress.

A few weeks ago, Abbas got quite confused when he first saw Salma wearing the hunter's uniform. But Akbar Uncle knew what he was doing. Salma had proven to be an invaluable member, given her experience and training as an Alpha.

"Her experience has proven beneficial for our unit," Abbas explained. "Like Akbar Uncle, she knows how the Alphas think."

Ali nodded. Abbas raised a brow. He knew Ali long enough to tell that something was on his mind.

"Something is bothering you, Ali Bhai?" Abbas asked curiously.

Ali's hands were folded, a clear discomfort was on his face.

"We've seen Alpha attacks," Ali whispered. "Many. But this is the first time the Alphas came back to the iron fortress. They tried to steal something."

Abbas shrugged.

"We'll know once sister Jannat does the analysis."

Ali sighed. He still seemed discomforted.

"I have a bad feeling about this," he whispered.

Abbas took a deep breath.

"I admit this is weird, Ali Bhai. The Alphas have never done something like this. As I told you before, they mentioned some benefactors. People who were interested in stealing the data. But Alhamdulillah, we managed to stop them, didn't we? The data

drives have all been moved out of the fortress to a secure location. They can't do anything. Inshallah, we'll find out who was behind this incident. I say we should wait for Jannat's evaluation of the data."

Abbas looked down at his watch. It read half past seven. A smile formed on his face.

"Only two hours to go before the ceremony," he whispered.

Ali narrowed his eyes.

"Everyone from the community will be there," Abbas whispered. "Even Ibrahim Bhai himself."

Ali raised a brow causing Abbas to shrug. The ceremony which had been on his mind for the last few days was no ordinary celebration. No. This was one of the biggest ceremonies in all of the Peaceville. It was understood that Ibrahim would be there. He was their leader after all.

"If that's everything," Abbas concluded. "Then I'll be on my way. I have to get ready for the ceremony."

Ali did not reply immediately.

"I'll be heading home soon as well, Inshallah, " he whispered, his fingers twirling a small ballpoint pen. "We'll probably see each other at the event then, Inshallah."

"Inshallah," Abbas smiled.

And with that, the young man turned to leave, leaving a thoroughly discomfited Ali behind.

4

Getting Ready

‘We’re late!’ came Murtaza’s voice from the door. “I’m waiting by the car.”

Layla’s panicked squeal could be heard from upstairs.

“Haider,” she chided. “Wear the green kurta, not the blue one.”

Haider sighed in pretend disappointment. He looked down, thinking of how he might convince his mother to let him wear the blue kurta.

“Ami,” he began. “I-”

“I said no, Haider,” Layla instructed swiftly, the stress vividly imprinted on her face. “My son, the blue kurta has a big food stain on it. I won’t let you wear a dirty kurta shalwar on this special day.”

Haider took a deep breath.

“Ok,” he conceded.

As he turned around, heading back to his room, he heard a casual *tsk tsk*.

Haider stopped, narrowing his eyes. He could sense a presence behind the bathroom door.

“So.....” Haider smiled. “The one I know of as a brother has returned.”

Clap. Clap.

The door creaked open. And in the doorway stood a young man.

“I am surprised to see that my silver-tongued comrade has returned unsuccessfully...” Abbas whispered, a cheeky challenge in his eyes.

Haider smirked.

“Please...” he grinned. “You haven’t seen my potential...brother.”

“Boys! We’re running late!”

Both boys froze, only realising just now that Layla was still standing there.

“I’ll get that kurta,” Haider grinned sheepishly.

Abbas blinked in surprise as his younger brother darted away into the other room, leaving Abbas to face his mother.

“Abbas,” she whispered softly.

Abbas straightened up, his heart tensing. The soft tone was never good news.

“Yes Ami,” he tried to grin kindly.

Layla shook her head in disapproval.

“Comb your hair,” she instructed kindly.

Abbas raised his hands helplessly.

“I’ve told you before Ami, I tried combing it down but it never-”

She eyed Abbas for just a moment, but it was a moment more than enough.

“I’ll comb my hair,” he finished quickly.

Layla smiled.

“That’s my son,” she grinned. “Now go quickly. You have to load the presents in the car.”

Abbas nodded and quick as he could, shot off to Haider’s room.

As he burst the door open, his eyes widened partially in surprise. Surely, lying relaxed upon the bed before him, with the most arrogant smirk in the world was none other than Haider.

“I wondered when I would see you again,” the boy sighed, twirling a small comb in his hand. “You need me, for I alone possess the remedy to your troubles.”

Abbas rolled his eyes.

“I could get anyone to do it,” he answered. “Do not think of yourself as the one I rely on.”

Haider raised a brow.

For a moment both brothers eyed each other, saying nothing. Then abruptly they burst out laughing.

“You broke the chain,” Abbas chuckled. “We were doing so well!”

Haider shook his head, laughing as he got to his feet.

“On a serious note,” Abbas muttered. “I have no idea how you do it Haider. How do you get the hair to sit?”

Haider made a wise expression.

“You must become one with the hair, my brother. Only then will it... Hah!”

He moved back, marvelling at his own work. Abbas glanced at the mirror in confusion. There it was. His hair was flat and combed nicely.

“You have my respects....brother,” Abbas grinned.

Haider also grinned as Abbas turned to leave.

“You owe me one, Bhai Jan!” he called out.

Abbas shook his head as he left.

He began strolling to his room to fetch his weapons. After all, he was an army captain, and had to be ready for duty at all times. Abbas paused for a moment, his heart warming as he whispered,

“Allah, thank you for helping us find the peace we so desperately sought.” “Alhamdullillah,” Abbas whispered.

It was difficult to believe that only a year ago the revolution had defeated the tyrannical Alphas, freeing their home of the cancerous enemy on their lands. Things had changed so much since then. For the better.

As Abbas glanced at the mirror, one thought entered his mind.

“At least the enemy is gone now,” he sighed.

As he turned to head downstairs, he couldn't help smirk at the frustrated sounds of Haider scampering for a fresh pair of socks.

“Abbas,” Layla's voice rung from upstairs.

Abbas grinned as he reached the bottom of the staircase. He strolled over to the living room, and sat upon the couch. There was about an hour before the ceremony. The greatest and first of it's kind.

The Night of Heroes. A very special night indeed, so named as it marked exactly one year since the revolution conquered the iron fortress. On this auspicious occasion, various awards and medals of recognition would be presented in honour and appreciation of those who played pivotal roles.

“Ya Allah,” Abbas whispered as he rested himself against the leather couch. “Keep us strong in faith so that we can face the challenges that await us in life.”

He closed his eyes for a moment. This was the life he had always wanted. A peaceful time with his loved ones. With a community that supported one another. The people had been through a lot together. They had fought so hard for this. And no matter what happened, the people of Peaceville would not lose it.

Abbas reached out for the television remote.

“Let’s see what’s going on,” he chuckled.

He turned the TV on. The weather forecast was running.

“-maybe some light showers by tomorrow morning but otherwise skies should be clear with an all time low of 14 degrees celsius” the anchor stated dryly. “We return after the break with an interesting debate in The Saleem Show!”

The Saleem Show? It was probably new. Normally Abbas was indifferent to TV shows, but debates intrigued him.

“Abbas!” Layla’s voice came. “Is the food ready?”

Abbas rubbed his eyelids. They were feeling a little sore from the previous night. Glancing at the door, he could see the boxes of food packages, ready to take.

“Yes Ami!” he called out in response.

He turned his attention back to the television. The ads had finished and the show had started. Abbas sat upright.

Saleem seemed to be an elderly man, with blue eyes and eyebrows that were creased with wrinkles.

“So today,” Saleem blinked nervously. “I mean, Asalumalaikum everyone!”

Abbas felt his curiosity getting the better of him. He wanted to see the debate.

“T-today we have a debate,” Saleem faltered. He paused, looking down for a moment. Then he looked up, resuming once

more.

“Today we have a debate regarding a controversial topic in our community.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes. He was suddenly having second thoughts about giving the program viewership.

Despite the unity in conquering the iron fortress, difference in thought process had been the cause of several disputes. Not that anything severe had happened. Not yet anyways.

“As you are all aware, it has been a little over a year since our brave and courageous movement of revolution conquered the iron fortress,” Saleem stated, his confidence was increasing. “A lot of enemies were taken prisoners. Many Alphas were taken prisoners.”

Abbas winced. Unknowingly, he had been squeezing his fist so tightly, that his knuckles had gone white. But Abbas didn't care. He was beginning to think that he knew exactly what topic this elderly man was hoping to address.

Saleem paused to create suspense.

“Ibrahim. Also known as the ‘Muhafiz e Peaceville’ which meant ‘Protector of Peaceville.’ A worthy leader and a strong young man, whose services were particularly distinguished in the revolution but despite that, he never sought a superior rank or position.”

Abbas had seen Ibrahim only once in his life. But had heard great things about him. Even though his military service could rival that of the hunters, he always kept his name hidden. He never sought position or fame, only Allah's pleasure, and that made him a worthy candidate of leadership in the eyes of the panel.

The panel consisted of religious experts. Wisest amongst men. Their job was simple. They determined who the worthiest candidate was. They determined who the Muhafiz would be.

“The first decision by Ibrahim as Muhafiz of Peaceville was a choice to put the imprisoned Alphas on probation,” he stated. “Since they claim that the c-gun or c-chip controlled them. They are under constant watch, as General Akbar Sohail assures us.”

Abbas nodded with an air of satisfaction.

Saleem coughed.

“Some however, would argue,” Saleem eyed the camera warily. “Some would argue that the government has shown mercy to the Alphas and that rather than punishing them, the government has forgiven them!”

Anger pricked Abbas’s skin. The government did not forgive the Alphas. Why were people willing to so easily surrender to such ideas?

Saleem smiled. “So today I have called two guests to argue about the following topic. Should Alphas be forgiven or not? Well, then without any further ado, lets introduce our debaters.”

Abbas shook his head in disapproval. He had guessed the topic correctly. Of course the debate would be about this. It has been one of the most irritating issues to deal with.

“Our first guest, who will argue against forgiving Alphas is a journalist. She has been one of the bravest people in finding the facts and is very popular. Let me introduce you to Miss Firuza!”

Abbas narrowed his eyes.

“Firuza,” he spat.

Abbas knew this woman very well. She was probably the most famous journalist in Peaceville. Famous for being the most annoying journalist to have ever lived.

On more than one occasion he had experienced showdowns with her. Because the issue was that Firuza was all for the camera. She would do anything for a good story. Even if that meant twisting the facts a little bit. Abbas was not surprised to see someone like her in such a debate. The publicity would be off the charts.

“Asalamualaikum everyone,” Firuza raised a hand to wave at the camera, bubbling with energy. Saleem nodded respectfully to which she took no notice. With a sigh, the old anchor turned back to the camera.

“Our second guest for today, and this may surprise some of you, for the first time in television history, is an Alpha.”

Abbas gaped at the television. What? An Alpha? Had Saleem lost his mind? On whose authority was he doing this? Alphas were not allowed to have uncensored contact without the

government's permission. And the government, unlike Saleem, was still sane. They would never allow Alphas to communicate with the people directly. Unintentionally, Abbas's hand drifted to the phone.

"Akbar Uncle will handle this," he muttered under his breath.

Saleem continued. "He claims to have repented after he was freed from the c-gun and has graciously accepted our invitation. As per Peaceville government regulations, he could not join us physically, but he has been permitted to join us virtually. Everyone, please welcome Yunus."

There was no noise. Not a trace of acknowledgement. Abbas wasn't surprised. People hadn't forgotten the pain and torture they had endured.

Abbas loosened his grip on the phone. The government had granted the permission. Why? He had no idea. Alphas were meant to be behind bars, weren't they?

"Akbar Uncle knows best," Abbas chided himself. "He has probably accounted for something that I am missing."

"Asalamualaikum," Yunus's video appeared on the screen. "I hope you are all doing well."

"Walaikum asalam" Saleem answered. "Welcome to the show. Lets get started. I begin by asking Firuza to open the debate."

Abbas watched Firuza yawn for a moment. Her lips curled into a large grin as she began.

"First of all, I wanted to thank you for calling me here," she smiled.

Abbas scoffed. He didn't understand how such people became famous?

"I wanted to invite a guest with me today. A sister from the community. But she couldn't make it," Firuza sighed. "I asked her why and do you know what she said?" Firuza's eyes watered dramatically.

"It's been a year," Firuza cried. "A year since her son was slayed by an Alpha! One year since the day she lost her entire family because of a monster! And now you say we should let such a monster free? I say no!" Firuza slammed her fist on the table. "Never will I support injustice! Thank you." Abruptly, her face

returned back to the smiling journalist from before.

Abbas rolled his eyes.

“My condolences to the mother who lost her child,” Yunus began in a serious tone. “It pains me to hear such things.”

Firuza chuckled mockingly.

Yunus paused for a moment, eyeing Firuza who abruptly went quiet. She may have been a drama queen, but even she wasn't foolish enough to irritate an Alpha. He nodded with an air of satisfaction.

Abbas lips curled into a grin.

“The awful things we were forced to do were against our will,” Yunus paused, his eyes watering. “People need to realise that the Alphas were oppressed as well. One kind of torture is being the victim of a bullet. And then there is the kind where you are forced to pull a trigger on someone. It's very easy to blame the Alphas and hold them accountable today.”

A sudden pain appeared in his eyes. He appeared to be lost as he spoke, as though he was genuinely grieving. Saleem raised a brow. He turned to Firuza, as if expecting a counter argument.

Firuza narrowed her eyes. Abbas couldn't help suppress a chuckle. She needed to realise the kind of opponent she was competing with.

“An admirable sentiment,” Firuza spat. “Maybe you can convince the rest of your kind because they clearly don't agree with you.”

Abbas shook his head in disapproval. It was just like Firuza to mention the mercenary group. Because not all Alphas repented. Some chose a different path. Some chose to keep fighting. They had formed small groups from time to time. Akbar had deployed the hunters, allowing Salma to join their ranks, making them a formidable opposition for the minor disturbances caused by the assassins. Aside from that, the government of Peaceville was hunting them down with full ferocity.

“People want justice,” Firuza whispered. “They want justice for the loved ones they lost! They want their parents avenged. But our government is trying to forgive them.”

Abbas clenched his fist. The government hadn't forgiven the

Alphas. The government had delivered justice. They didn't know what they were doing because the C-gun had controlled their wills. The C-chips implanted in their bodies dictated their decisions.

Yunus shook his head.

“The Alphas have been put under a lot of restrictions and regulations. We are confined to our homes. We are not allowed to interact with anyone. We are not allowed to post. Also, we have been given an important job. You know about the education contract?”

Abbas nodded. The Alphas, being educated, had been given a chance to write academic books, which if approved by the Peaceville government, were going to be used in schools. The Alphas who had repented, or so they claimed, had written hundreds of books on physics, chemistry, mathematics, political science, sociology and other such subjects in the last year. They were also making videos to explain the content. It was an excellent way to create educational resources for Peaceville.

“Yes,” Firuza answered. “But a couple of books are not going to bring back our beloved martyrs. It will not bring back our heroes, like the legendary hunter and hero of the revolution, Naqi. A man who fought to his last breath. Someone who was brutally murdered by the Alphas. By people like you.”

Abbas felt a sharp surge of pain in his heart. Naqi. His brother in arms. He and Abbas had served together in an elite unit called ‘The Hunters’. This was a group responsible for neutralising the Alphas.

Naqi's code name used to be ‘Bear-hunter’. He had been one of the bravest warriors Abbas had served with. But he had been murdered by Alpha 43, one of the vilest human beings to have ever lived. Not a day passed that Abbas did not remember his dearest friend who was like a brother to him.

Unable to focus anymore, Abbas closed the television. He didn't care what arguments were made. He had lost interest in the program. Pain seared through his heart as he remembered some of the last words of Naqi.

One day we will have a rematch, Inshallah.

Naqi had said that before bidding Abbas farewell on his last

mission. The last patrol he was ever going to do.

Did Naqi know he was going to die? If so, would he have done anything differently? Would he have changed the last events of his life.

Sometimes Abbas wondered. He could have been on that patrol. He could have been martyred that day. But the honour of martyrdom had been in Naqi's fate.

Abbas's eyes watered. He remembered the last time he spoke to Naqi.

Naqi had entrusted his sister Ruqayya to Abbas. An amanat. An amanat Abbas had pledged to protect his entire life no matter what. Quietly, Abbas got to his feet, and strolled over to the door. Looking out unto the shining stars of the sky, he whispered, "I hope you are in the highest of heavens, Naqi Bhai. I have protected your entrustments. Inshallah, we will be able to give our life for the cause the way you did."

Abbas sighed, a tear was forming in his eyes. He let it trickle. This was the Night of Heroes after all. A time of reflection and resolution.

5

To Judgement

Not that Jumeira had been counting, but it had been exactly four hours and forty-seven minutes since the last nurse had checked out for the evening. She was a young girl, barely on the cusp of adulthood. Perhaps, that was why the anger and hate-ridden expression she had given Jumeira looked so out of place with her innocent features. Not that such looks were uncommon. In fact, it was rare to see a healthcare worker who treated her with anything less than absolute contempt. Begrudgingly, she had to confess that it had taken her much longer than she cared to admit to accept that kind of behaviour. After all, a lifetime of people falling over each other to serve you, whether out of sheer hope or absolute fear; it could spoil anyone.

In fact, she could say with absolute certainty that the most riveting event of her new mundane life was Akbar's visits, however few and far between they were, given that it had been two months, three weeks, twenty hours and sixteen minutes since he was last in her room. She did not fool herself. The man held no love for her. He only came to ensure that everything related to her care was in order, rarely ever speaking directly to her. Even she could confess that while she felt no maternal stirring in her heart, there was a surge of pride whenever she saw his large frame appear in the doorway.

The expressionless but humane demeanour he portrayed in front of the doctors, the elegance and poise with which he moved,

like a great and mighty panther stalking his prey. It terrified and thrilled Jumeira because she knew that beyond all the contempt and abhorrence Akbar felt for her, he was *her* creation. She never shied away from admitting that should there be anyone she considered worthy beyond herself, it was definitely him.

She had been indulged in her thoughts but even then she could just make out a very faint grind of metal on metal. 'That was odd...' she thought to herself. There was another twenty-three minutes before the night nurse would make her round. Who was here early? Was it Akbar? But all notions of that vanished when a very disturbing realisation hit her. '*That was not the sound of the door.*' From her unfortunate position that those hapless fools had placed her in, she could only see the ceiling.

Unable to turn, she felt an icy dagger of dread stab her heart when the grinding was accompanied by the soft thumps of two feet landing on the linoleum. Someone was in the room with her. More disturbingly, someone who was not meant to be in the same room as her. She could feel her heart pounding against her rib cage as the feet shuffled quietly across the floor, the sound barely discernible from the wind outside.

Slowly, a figure came into view. Jumeira was teetering on the verge of full blown panic, the machines around her beeping wildly as the readings jumped at her fast beating heart. First she could see a black jacket laden with weaponry and bullet-proof protection. Finally, what felt like decades later, a skull-face masked individual turned to face her. There was something familiar in the way he stood and the way he was dressed, and that made all the panic in Jumeira's mind reel back.

This man was an Alpha! Any lesser woman would have cried or cowered in fear but Jumeira was no lesser woman. Instead, she sucked in a breath of pride. But oddly enough, the man just looked at her and shook as though he was laughing?

'*What on earth is he laughing for?*' she screeched mentally. '*That is no way to treat your superiors!*'

As though he read her thoughts, the man just shook his head. "So this is the great and powerful Jumeira?" he mocked in a hushed voice laced with sarcasm.

That surprised Jumeira.

“What’s the matter?” he asked patronisingly. “Did you think I was here to free you? I think all this time alone has taken a toll.”

Jumeira did not react, but clearly the monitoring equipment had shown that she did not appreciate that sentiment.

“Tsk Tsk, no reason to get upset. It’s nothing personal. Just orders. I’m the only one in the city who can do this. And you are hardly innocent as it is.”

His tone was now harsher.

He turned to look out the window. “We were four brothers. Four pillars of our home. Do you know how many we are today? One, I am the only one who survived. You shot them without giving them a chance!” he spat.

There was silence as Jumeira could not reply. However, she felt that even if she could, there would be nothing for her to say. She did what she had to do for the sake of her project. Could she be blamed if his brothers were not worthy of participating?

He turned and his gaze was practically spewing acid at her. “This mission was one I was more than glad to accept. And don’t worry. I promise it’ll be painful. See Jumeira, the League doesn’t forgive easily. I’m sure you understand. They have made their decision and your time on the chess board is done.” The Alpha paused. “We will remember you. Hah, even though you never felt anything for your son, your son will become additionally unstable from your death. So I assume that if you were not incapacitated, by your logic, you would agree. This should happen as soon as possible. I mean, it’s in the name of the project.”

As he spoke, the man had smoothly withdrew a pillow from the pile beneath her head. Jumeira felt panic rush through her as he dangled it precariously above her head.

She could feel her eyes widened. Straining as hard as she could, she tried to move something. A leg. A hand. A finger. Something that could stop him. But she couldn’t. She was stuck. Trapped as a prisoner in her own body. She felt her heart threatening to burst out of her chest, the equipment around her fluctuating wildly. Panic rose in her mind. Her breaths got shorter.

Leaning down till he was right beside her head, the man whispered. “Don’t take it personally, it’s just business.”

Before she could think about what he said, the man thrust the cushion into her face.

Unable to turn, Jumeira screamed silently. Her breaths got shorter. Painful. Her lungs begging for air. Cloth-covered cotton filled her mouth. Blinding panic tore at her senses. *Air! Air!* she cried but no one could hear. Painful jolts ricocheted throughout her being as she could feel her body convulse violently, protesting the lack of oxygen. It was eighty three seconds of violent, torturous turmoil before spots began to cloud her vision, and everything went black.

6

The Drive

It was night. Normally, a city would be quiet or dark at this hour. Normally.

“Look at the fireworks,” Haider called out.

Abbas whirled, craning his neck uncomfortably against the seatbelt to get a better view.

“Wow,” Abbas gasped.

There were bursts of red and blue flames, driving up to the sky. It was mesmerising. Like a fountain.

“Ya Allah,” Abbas heard his mother whisper. “Thank you for letting us see such days.”

Abbas whispered a silent thanks to his creator as well. After everything he had been through; from washing up on that beach, to taking on the Alphas...he had never imagined such an eventful life. Not that he missed it. He was better off without it.

As he leaned against the glass of the car window, watching the road pass by, his mind drifted back to the earlier events of the evening. Ali’s words echoed in his mind.

“We’ve seen Alpha attacks. Many. But this is the first time the Alphas came back to the iron fortress. They tried to steal something. I have a bad feeling about this.”

Abbas had not given much thought to the matter. But he couldn’t help wonder. Who had sent the Alphas to steal that data? And what data had they come to steal? Why would anyone outside of Peaceville be interested in data from the iron fortress?

It didn't make sense.

Abbas shuddered. He didn't like leaving questions unanswered. Especially questions like this. But it didn't matter. At least not now. Peaceville was too secure for any enemy to attack. Akbar Uncle had taken infinite precautions.

"Baba, how much longer?" Haider asked with a hint of boredom in his voice.

Abbas blinked, his train of thought coming to an abrupt halt.

'I'll think about this after the ceremony,' he thought to himself.

He glanced at his brother when a light from up ahead caught his attention. A bright orange light.

"What's going on?" Abbas asked curiously.

It was difficult to tell, but given the large number of cars up ahead, Abbas had a feeling he knew what had happened.

"Accident, probably." Murtaza remarked.

"Must be a huge one," Layla remarked. "They've closed off most of the road."

Abbas narrowed his eyes. The traffic wasn't moving at all. That was odd. Typically the road services department would block the road off and offer an alternate route to oncoming traffic.

"Baba, please stop the car. I want to take a look," Abbas whispered.

Murtaza nodded.

Click.

Abbas's door was unlocked. He opened the door and stepped outside.

"Uh oh," Abbas winced at the sudden burst of night time cold. He shuddered, quickly tip toeing to the side.

The road was jammed about thirty meters ahead. Some orange, a flashing light was marking the end of the jam. Maybe a traffic control vehicle.

Abbas started moving forward.

The orange light was getting bigger. Abbas narrowed his eyes, before widening them in surprise. There was no construction on the road. But for some reason the road was blocked off. And the drivers at the front of the piling traffic were engaged in some kind

of argument. Abbas moved forward. As he neared, he could start making out parts of the argument.

“You can’t just do this!”

“We most certainly can. And we will.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Amongst the group of drivers, there was an old man. He was arguing out loud with a man dressed in construction uniform.

“I demand we be allowed to pass!” the old man frowned.

The other drivers shouted in agreement.

The construction worker growled.

“Leave us alone grandpa, and we won’t-”

Abbas had heard enough. He stepped forward.

“Sorry, excuse me,” Abbas stated.

Both old man and the construction worker turned to face him.

“What seems to be the matter?” Abbas asked.

The old man raised his hand and croaked,

“These boys have blocked the entire road to fix the street light!”

Abbas narrowed his eyes.

“Is this true?” Abbas asked.

The construction worker laughed mockingly.

“Who are you to ask me questions?” he spat.

Abbas raised a brow. Clearly, this construction worker had no idea who Abbas was.

Abbas sighed.

“I asked you a question, sir,” he whispered. “Please answer me.”

The construction worker shook his head.

“Get lost young man, this is between us.”

If Abbas had any patience left, it was gone now. The construction worker was asking for it.

“I told you-”

“Sorry I don’t think I introduced myself,” Abbas grinned kindly. “My name is Captain Abbas Murtaza.”

The construction worker froze instantly, his eyes widening in horror.

“I will ask you again what you are doing out here Mr.....Mahmud,” Abbas smiled, reading the name on his badge

The construction worker coughed, the colour was draining from his face.

“I- I am here with my crew, f-fixing some street lights,” he stammered.

Abbas glanced curiously at the truck. it was huge. Like the ones used to tow away a broken down truck.

“How many street lights are burnt out?” Abbas asked.

“One,” Mahmud replied nervously.

Abbas raised a brow.

“Why would you bring such a huge truck for one light?” he asked.

The worker shrugged.

“We weren’t sure how bad the issue was.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes. That was weird.

“You didn’t know how bad one light was?” Abbas repeated, his eyes widening in disbelief. “You blocked the entire road for this.”

The construction worker looked down.

Abbas pulled out his badge from his pocket.

“I’m instructing you to open up the left two lanes,” Abbas stated. “Block off the right two lanes and fix that late. Be quick and free up the road quickly. I don’t want to see this happening again.”

The construction worker met Abbas’s gaze, the frustration was visible on his face.

“Yes sir,” he mumbled begrudgingly.

Abbas turned towards the old man.

“Uncle, the next time you face such a trouble, just call the road control services. They handle these kinds of issues.”

The old man bowed his head kindly and said with a smile,

“Or I could just call a helpful young man like yourself.”

And with that, the old man turned and headed back to his car.

Abbas smiled back.

7

The Deep Woods

It was cold. Very, very cold. The storms of the previous nights had cast their mark over the ice-covered land. Even though the sun was shining brightly, its warm rays had no effect on the stubborn snow. The vibrant trees of fall had been reduced to jagged structures. The wind had calmed down significantly from the previous night, but if one were to strain their ears, they would hear an eerie whistling.

No animals could be seen for miles, except maybe the occasional squirrel. So naturally, one would not expect hunters to be out and about. After all, what would they hunt? Everything was either dead from the cold or in hibernation. That was what made this normal day a bit unusual.

Two hunters could be seen treading the snow. One of them was significantly younger than the other. The younger one, probably in his late teens, was dressed in traditional white robes to camouflage with the snow. He was armed with a simple wooden spear. His companion, an elderly man, was wearing a similar attire and armed with a cross bow.

There was a gust of cold wind, causing both hunters to shiver. The older one narrowed his eyes. Glancing from the sky to his comrade, he whispered,

“Ilyas, we are in for another storm soon.”

Ilyas clutched his spear tightly, his knuckles were turning white from the cold.

“Hafeez Uncle, we can find cover by the caves,” he answered. “They are not far from here.”

Hafeez placed his decrepit crossbow on the snowy floor to warm his hands. He knew that they should find cover. The storm would be very nasty. But if they left now, the tracks they were following would be omitted by the snow.

“My nephew,” Hafeez began. “This is the farthest we’ve ever made it. I know we’re close.”

Ilyas shook his head hesitantly. He knew why his Uncle Hafeez was insisting so much. But right now, staying out in the forest was unreasonable.

“You have nothing to prove to my father,” Ilyas answered. “And as I’ve told you before, even if you brought back the beast, it would do no good. My father will not forgive you.”

Hafeez’s eyes widened in surprise. He didn’t say anything, but Ilyas could see the pain in his eyes.

“This is not j-just about your father,” Hafeez croaked. “This is about my honour. Your father will only give me back my honour if I bring the beast home.”

Ilyas looked down. He was unsure what else to say. Hafeez was desperate to earn back his honour. And the only choice given to him was to bring back the beast. Some creature that had been devouring the tribes cattle. Every day, one of their animals would go missing. Sometimes it was a sheep, other times it was a goat or a cow. It had been causing a lot of financial damage to the tribes.

Ilyas blinked, wiping away the moisture that was freezing around his eyelids. The temperature was dropping. They didn’t have much time.

“I’m going anyway,” Hafeez declared adamantly. “You don’t have to accompany me. But you should know that if Musa was here, he would have supported me.”

Ilyas frowned. Of course he would not abandon his uncle. Why then did Hafeez feel the need to bring up Musa?

“I’ll help you,” Ilyas shuddered.

Hafeez smiled, stroking Ilyas’s hair affectionately.

“I knew you would,” he whispered.

Ilyas sighed as they advanced onwards. He knew that they were making a mistake. And he was right. For only a few minutes had elapsed before the heavy showers of snow began.

Ilyas coughed as he struggled to keep his balance. The snow was making it almost impossible to see. And the howling winds sent chills up his spine. Ilyas could barely see a few centimetres in front of him.

“Hafeez Uncle!” Ilyas shouted. “We need to turn back!”

His cries were drowned away in the wind. Ilyas’s eyes widened in alarm. He was losing traction on the snow and ice. He needed to anchor himself.

Just as he was taught, Ilyas raised his spear above the ground. Ignoring the wind chill he drove the spear as hard as he could into the ground. *Crack!* The blade of his spear had penetrated the ground successfully. Glancing ahead, he could see the white robe of his uncle, struggling to retreat.

“I’m coming uncle!” Ilyas called out, hoping Hafeez had heard him.

Cautiously, he yanked his spear, now blunted, from the ground and began trekking forward. Ilyas saw Hafeez shivering, unable to do anything in the violent weather. But Ilyas had to be careful. If he rushed, he could risk slipping and losing his uncle in the storm. It was then that it happened.

A loud roar echoed through the chasm. Ilyas’s eyes widened in alarm. From the distance, a few meters ahead of Hafeez, stood a black figure. It was huge. At least twice Ilyas’s size. Perhaps a bear? What did it matter? They had found the beast. They had found the monster. Or more appropriately, the beast had found them.

Despite the numbness in his hands, he did not move. He did not want to alert the creature. Quietly, he tried reaching out for his uncle, only to feel his heart freeze. Hafeez was drawing an arrow into his weapon. He was going to try to kill the beast! But the beast couldn’t possibly be killed with such a weak crossbow.

Ilyas wanted to warn Hafeez, but if he made a noise the creature would surely hear them.

“This is for my honour,” Hafeez hissed.

The beast's head shot up. He must have heard them.

"Die!" Hafeez growled firing his arrow.

The beast ducked, dodging the arrow which flew meters ahead striking a tree. The creature lunged forward, knocking Hafeez to the ground.

"No!" Ilyas yelled.

In a flash he charged forward ramming the beast but the beast did not move. The beast then looked up. Ilyas's heart froze. It was a young man! The young man growled.

Wham!

He lunged forward, knocking Ilyas to the ground. Ilyas coughed as the young man's hands engulfed his throat.

"Haf- Hafeez unc-" Ilyas wheezed.

The young man tightened his grip. Ilyas felt the oxygen leaving his throat. He was unable to breathe. Within a few moments, he would be dead.

Ilyas lashed out desperately but to no avail. The young man was just too strong.

Wham!

Ilyas felt his lungs trying desperately to breathe. He could feel the pain in his throat.

"Agh," Ilyas cried as Hafeez pulled him to his feet.

Hafeez's eyes were filled with worry as he pushed Ilyas to walk. In Hafeez's hand was a strange box. Probably what he had used to knock the young man out. It was a very nice box, made from some strange metal like material and adorned with strange markings.

Hafeez held it greedily. It seemed to be worth alot.

"We have to get out of here," Ilyas coughed.

Hafeez did not respond. He merely stared at the young man. Quietly, Hafeez withdrew a small arrow from his quiver and gently prodded the young man.

"What are you doing uncle?" Farhaz cried.

Hafeez returned the arrow to his quiver. In a withdrawn tone, he stated,

"Ilyas my boy, we have caught the beast."

8

The Village

There was a strange ringing. Pain emanated from the back of his head. He wanted to stroke it, but something was holding him in place. Hamza struggled to open his eyes. He could hear strange voices. He could sort of make out what they were saying.

“Burn him!”

“He killed our sheep!”

“Bury him alive!”

Hamza woke up with a start. He coughed. It was very dusty. It was also dim. Hamza struggled as his eyes adjusted to the reduced light.

He was in some kind of tent, or cloth-made dwelling. It was cold and his hands were tied. His lips curled into a smile. Even though the ropes were tied nicely, they weren't strong enough to hold him. With a bit of effort, he would be able to free himself. That already gave him an edge over his captors.

Quietly, he tugged at his ropes ignoring the pain he felt in his hands. He needed to get out of here. From the sound of it, the villagers were in the mood of roasting him alive.

‘Once I'm out of here,’ Hamza concluded. “I'll look for my box.”

His box. It was very critical that he found it. Why? He didn't know. All he knew was that this box held the key to his past. A mystery which he had yet to solve.

“Saun Ow Mo Mee So Shoosh.”

Hamza's head shot up in alarm. There was a guard in front of him. A thin short guy, armed with a thick wooden spear, the edge of which was fastened to a finely forged steel blade. This man wore several ribbons around his waist.

Hamza narrowed his eyes. It was possible that it was a fashion custom, except this man didn't seem like he cared for that kind of thing. No. He seemed more like a warrior. A man of principles. And that indicated that the ribbons were most likely either ranks or medals of honour. Maybe even accolades.

The man raised his spear, pressing it against Hamza's face. Hamza didn't even blink. He wasn't scared of the guy, and more importantly, he knew the importance of making an impression. Such men were vulnerable to their own valour.

He narrowed his eyes at the man and growled.

The man did not budge. Hmm. Turns out that he was fearless as well. Maybe an honoured hunter of some kind.

"Who are you?" the man whispered.

Hamza could not help feel a little surprised.

"My name is not relevant. I wish to speak with the chief."

The man's lips curled into a smile for the first time.

He raised his spear and brought it crashing upon the ground.

"I am the chief of this tribe."

It all made sense now. The honoured uniform. The fancy weapon. Well then, that meant that Hamza only needed to convince this man.

Hamza met the man's gaze with ferocity.

"Why do you keep me here?" he growled.

The chief tilted his head slightly.

"I intend to execute you," he hissed. "For killing my flocks."

Wham!

Hamza's hands were finally freed. He lunged forward, ramming the chief to the ground. The chief swung his elbow but Hamza was faster. In a flash, he was on the top. But Hamza needed a friend, not a foe. Loosening his grip, he allowed the chief to smash a shoulder in his stomach, sending him staggering backwards.

Hamza gasped breathlessly as the chief got to his feet.

"Finally," Hamza smiled. "A worthy opponent."

If the chief was flattered by the compliment, he certainly did not show it.

“Argh!” the chief roared driving his spear forward. Hamza sidestepped the weapon, swinging his leg at the chief’s vulnerable knee. Restricting his force, he caught the blade, yanking the spear out of the chief’s hand. But the chief had to score blows. Otherwise Hamza wouldn’t be able to leave. Hamza raised his fist wider than normal, allowing the chief to block it and ram him in the stomach.

The two fell over.

Hamza flipped back up to his feet.

The chief looked up at him with a strange look.

“What is a fine warrior like yourself doing in the forest?” he exclaimed.

Hamza felt a sense of relief. The plan had worked.

“I am a traveller,” he answered in a confident tone. “I seek challenge to improve my skills.”

The chief chuckled.

“My brother said that you were the one who had been killing our flocks. But after seeing your chivalry, I realise that you must be the son of a fine warrior.”

Hamza nodded. The chief couldn’t have been more wrong. Hamza did not remember his father, or anything for that matter. But Hamza needed to stay alive right now.

“It is an honour to meet such a brave leader like yourself,” Hamza whispered, lowering his head respectfully.”

The chief raised his hand. Hamza bowed down partially. He was well accustomed to the way of the tribesman.

“Allow me to host you as a guest,” the chief invited. “Maybe my son Ilyas will learn something from you.”

Hamza nodded, and with that the chief barked something out in a language Hamza could not understand. Two guards came in. Each one held a sharp spear like their leader.

“They will help you get ready, and you will honour my family with your presence in the evening. I will also send one of my warriors, Burair, to escort you.”

Hamza raised his hand to his chest. His escape plan was already working.

9

Getting Dressed

“Desperate times call for desperate measures,” Hamza reminded himself as he eyed his reflection.

The sacred tribes uniform was a little uncomfortable but it had an amazing fragrance. Hamza wasn’t sure how they created such scents but he had a feeling that ignorance would be better in this regard. He took a deep breath.

He would be with the chief tonight. A chief who was all for his customs and honour. A chief who had no idea of how strong or skilled Hamza was. In fact, even Hamza didn’t know that.

One year ago, Hamza woke up in a forest. He could only remember his name, nothing else.

Adaptation in the wild wasn’t difficult as Hamza found out pretty quickly that he was fast, agile and strong. It was almost as though he was built for a life in the wild. The only trouble was concealing his talents.

‘Just a little longer,’ he thought to himself. ‘Then you’re out of here.’

Where would he go? He had no idea. Hamza had been living in the forest for the last year. Maybe he would leave the forest altogether after escaping. He wasn’t sure. But before he left, he would find his box.

The box that perhaps contained the only clue to his identity. When Hamza woke up a year ago, he was holding a box. A strange one, forged from some kind of steel. It was exceptionally resilient,

as it had yet to give way before any attempt Hamza made at opening it. Hamza had assumed he lost it during the fight with the old man and the youth who had attacked him.

“Saun man mo ko sho,” a voice came.

Hamza whirled around to see a short, chubby tribesman, who wore several lion scales. One of his eyes was damaged beyond repair and his face was scarred with the marks of claws.

Hamza narrowed his eyes. This man seemed more like an honoured hunter. His eyes widened in realisation. This man was probably Burair, the warrior the chief had sent to escort him.

“Is it time?” Hamza asked curiously.

Burair tilted his head, slightly confused. Then abruptly, he clenched his fist, growling at Hamza.

Hamza growled back. Why should he tolerate any kind of aggressive behaviour?

The tribesman hissed going behind Hamza. Angrily, he slapped Hamza on the back. Hamza glared at him. How dare he? He turned to face the tribesman, meeting his gaze with ferocity.

Burair did not turn away. He was fearless as well. But unlike the chief, Hamza didn't need to be nice to this guy.

The tribesman raised his hand once more, but Hamza grabbed it, holding it in place. The tribesman's eyes widened in alarm as he struggled to free himself.

Hamza further tightened his grip. He wanted to make his meaning clear.

Burair squealed in pain before Hamza let go. Eyeing him furiously, Burair turned to leave. Normally, Hamza might have expected him to have called for help, but clearly this man was too proud to admit to such a humiliation before his fellow tribesmen.

Hamza shook his head in disapproval. He didn't like being underestimated.

He advanced towards the exit of the tent. It was time after all. Time for the dinner.

As he entered under the open night skies, Hamza sighed. Being in these strange people's company was tiresome.

He tightened his posture as he approached the entrance to the tent. There was a relatively elderly man leaving the tent

simultaneously.

Hamza froze, his eyes narrowing in recognition. It was one of his attackers! The old man who had fired an arrow at him. This meant that his attackers were members of this tribe. He would deal with them later. But what would happen if people heard that he had attacked one of them? Hamza was well aware of the tribal ways.

He looked the other way intentionally, hoping the old man would not recognise him. There was no other escape except running, and Hamza wanted to reserve that as a last resort. He was hoping that his plan to earn the chief's respect and trust before escaping would work.

The old man crossed by, without noticing Hamza. He was clearly distracted. Relief flooded Hamza's heart.

"Well," he sighed as he reached the tent. "Here goes nothing."

10

A Tribal Dinner

Hamza took a deep breath. Reaching out, he swept the cloth aside and stepped through the entrance. He paused to take in his surroundings.

It was a quaint establishment. The floor was covered with a large quilt, stitched from animal skin. The walls of the tent were held upright by thick wooden pillars.

Hamza raised a brow. There were plenty of trophies decorating the walls. Like heads of various beasts, from tigers to crocodiles. The chief clearly had an interest in hunting. And from the interactions Hamza had, it was clear that the chief was someone who followed traditional warrior code.

Such individuals were usually impressed by valour and respect. And if Hamza wanted to survive his imprisonment, he would need to demonstrate such a personality.

“Come,” Hamza heard a voice.

Turning, he saw the chief seated at a long sheet. There was also a woman, presumably his wife, for she wore similar ribbons as the chief.

Hamza raised his hand to his chest respectfully, before assuming a seat.

“She is my wife, Shahida,” the chief whispered, gesturing to the woman.

The chief turned to his wife. Pointing to Hamza, he said something in the local dialect. Hamza was about to ask, when

the entrance cloth opened once more and a youth stepped inside.

Hamza narrowed his eyes. This youth was tall, and his build was strong. He was dressed in simple clothing, but slung on his shoulder was a large hammer.

“He is my nephew, Musa,” the chief introduced the young man. “He is aspiring to be a strong warrior just like you.”

Hamza nodded. Turning to Musa, he waved. Musa took no notice but merely smirked. Hamza couldn’t help feel slightly annoyed. This youth was clearly full of himself.

Musa bowed his head facing towards the chief and then removed the hammer he carried. With a clank, he dropped it in a corner before joining the table.

“It is a tradition in our tribe that young men aspiring to be warriors must train under the tutelage of a warrior for about a decade before being considered worthy of the status.”

Hamza suppressed a grin. If the chief had trained ten years under the tutelage of a warrior and fought the way he did, then Hamza couldn’t help doubt how useful such a tutelage would be.

The chief narrowed his eyes. Turning to Musa, he growled, “Why are Ilyas and Hafeez not here?”

Musa’s lips curled into a grin. He raised his hands, moving them in a funny way.

Hamza’s eyes widened in surprise. Musa was using sign language to communicate. Hamza knew sign language well. Of course, how? He didn’t know. Hamza narrowed his eyes as he made sense of what Musa was saying.

They won’t come because he’s here. They are angry because you invited him.

Hamza couldn’t help think Musa was referring to him. And most likely Ilyas and Hafeez were people who knew him. Maybe they were his attackers? In fact, chances were that one of the individuals leaving the tent, whom Hamza had identified as an attacker, was either Ilyas or Hafeez. And if they were eating with the chief, then they were probably part of his family.

Hamza looked down. The situation had just become much more complicated.

The chief smiled respectfully at Hamza, probably assuming

that Hamza didn't understand anything. Then abruptly, he got to his feet and barked something out in the local dialect.

A thin guard came sprinting inside. The chief growled at him before assuming his seat once more.

Hamza looked down. What was he going to do? He could hear angry voices outside. He took a deep breath. He would just need to hope that he had won the chief's favour. But if he hadn't, then?

Hamza noticed a butter knife on the table. It was within reach but not sharp enough. He noticed a sword hanging on one of the walls. It seemed nice but it was sheathed. It could be fake. Even if it was real, it might be blunt. Hamza looked back at the butter knife. It would have to do.

Quietly, he reached out for the small blade, holding it above his food. He didn't want to take the chief hostage, but he would if it came down to that.

The entrance opened. Hamza looked down as he saw several people enter from the corner of his eye. Hamza narrowed his eyes. Everyone in the group was a guard. Everyone except two of them. A young man and an elderly one. As Hamza had suspected. Ilyas and Hafeez were his attackers.

"What is he doing here?" the young man growled, pointing to Hamza.

The chief got to his feet.

Strolling up to the youth, he hissed.

Wham!

The chief slapped the young man on the face. The youth looked down, the fury was visible in his eyes.

"Rizwan," the elderly man growled. "Don't. Leave Ilyas alone."

Ilyas. That was the name of the youth. Which meant Hafeez was the elderly man.

The chief glared at them. Hamza narrowed his eyes. Rizwan. That was the name of the chief.

"My taking away your honour wasn't enough," Rizwan growled. "How dare you disrespect me like this?"

Ilyas spat on the floor.

“You hold no respect for us,” Hafeez’s lips curled into a venomous smile. “You never loved your son.”

Hamza shook his head. Hafeez was clearly provoking Ilyas against his father. Why was Ilyas so foolish to not see that?

“My son must achieve something like Musa did, to earn my respect,” Rizwan answered.

Hafeez raised a brow.

“I will not tolerate you degrading me any longer,” Hafeez muttered under his breath.

Rizwan’s small head looked like it was about to pop. And Hamza was starting to feel worried. If Rizwan’s brother and son hated him, then his position as a leader couldn’t possibly be strong.

“Either this man leaves,” Hafeez growled, pointing to Hamza. “Or I will.”

Rizwan shook his head.

“No,” he answered.

Hafeez chuckled.

“You leave me no choice, brother.”

He pulled out some stone locket from his pocket.

Hamza rolled his eyes. Was this some tribe thing? Hamza glanced at Musa. He raised a brow. Musa’s eyes were horrified. Shahida was no better.

“I challenge this man,” Hafeez spat, pointing to Hamza. “To a duel of honour.”

He threw the locket in front of Hamza.

Hamza chuckled. For the first time, he got to his feet moving up to the two attackers.

“I accept your challenge,” he hissed.

Hafeez clenched a fist before turning to leave, and behind him, left Ilyas.

Rizwan shook his head in disapproval.

“I apologise for my brother,” he whispered.

Hamza raised his hand for silence.

“He has challenged me. I will deal them their due.”

The chief looked down.

“You impress me more, the longer I know you. You aren’t afraid of an honour duel.”

Hamza shrugged.

“He cannot control my honour.”

Rizwan nodded.

“You are right. Only a chief can do that.”

Hamza was about to laugh. But the chief was dead serious. Wait. Did he actually believe what he just said?

Hamza bowed his head respectfully.

“I need to prepare. When will the duel happen?” he asked.

Rizwan sighed.

“Tomorrow. That is our custom.”

Hamza nodded. And with that, he left. Determination filled his heart. He would punish those two for messing with him.

11

The Night of Heroes

There was a sombre tone in the atmosphere. As Abbas moved around, he couldn't help but notice that despite the smiles people wore when they greeted each other, or the joyous squeals of the children darting around the furniture, there was a weight in the air. Maybe it was the assemblage of pictures that adorned the adjacent wall. The wall of the fallen. Abbas was surprised at how many faces he recognized. His eyes roamed settling on one picture in particular. He looked so carefree, smiling toothily at the camera with shining eyes. His gaze flickered to a couple moving around the hall. Ruqayya and Reza, now married, greeting arriving guests.

It was strange. Abbas knew that he would be given awards and medals. But if he was truly honest, it didn't really matter to him. None of those shimmering plaques would ever compare to the hours of blood, sweat and tears they all had sacrificed to build Peaceville to where it is today.

"Did you notice that Ibrahim Bhai isn't here?" Abbas suppressed his surprise at Maryam's sudden appearance and took a look around. She was right. Ibrahim was nowhere to be seen. And unlike Maryam, Abbas knew that he was meant to show up. And considering that this was one of the biggest events of the city, Abbas was expecting him to have reached here by now.

"That's...strange. Do you have any idea why?" Maryam asked curiously.

Abbas shrugged.

Maryam nodded lightly, before heading off towards a guest. As the two women hugged, Abbas noticed another adorned wall behind them. He was too far to read it but he would recognize that crest anywhere. The hunters. He didn't have to go close. Isa, Salma's and his own pictures would be on that wall. Abbas didn't have time to think further as he was swarmed with new arrivals eager to greet him and shake his hand.

At the front of them was a short man with whisker-like hair on his head. Abbas recognised him. His name was Junaid. Back in the earlier days of the revolution, he use to do the job of cleaning the camp and washing the dishes.

"Salamunalaikum Junaid Bhai," Abbas greeted kindly.

Junaid bowed his head respectfully, extending his hand. Abbas shook it.

"So," Junaid remarked. "You are the legendary Abbas Murtaza."

Abbas's eyes widened in surprise. Legendary? No. No. That wasn't right.

"No," Abbas grinned. "I'm just Abbas."

Junaid shook his head.

"You are the brave man who liberated our island. The one who slayed Alpha 43."

Abbas couldn't help notice that Junaid leaned with a bias on his left leg. Most likely his right leg was injured. Abbas shrugged.

"Alhamdullillah. But-

"My son is a little boy," Junaid wheezed. "He idealises you. Always goes around carrying his twig sword, shouting 'I'm Captain Abbas!' or stuff like that."

Abbas bowed his head respectfully.

"I-

"I promised him," Junaid interrupted. "For his birthday present, he wants to meet you."

Abruptly, Junaid stopped, eyeing Abbas expectantly. Abbas's eyes widened partially. Was he expecting an answer now? Abbas glanced down for a moment.

“Well, of course,” he answered. “I would love to meet your son.”

Junaid grinned.

“Thank you! Thank you so much! You really are as kind as they say you are.”

Abbas forced a smile. He really wanted to conclude this conversation.

“I should get going, Junaid Uncle,” he muttered. “I’ll see you later then, Inshallah.”

Junaid grinned, raising his hand playfully in salute. And with that, the man began hobbling away.

‘People are so strange sometimes,’ Abbas thought to himself, continuing on.

The event was filling up quite nicely. There were plenty of people moving around, meeting each other. Greeting each other. Abbas as about to move forward, when a familiar face caught his eye.

“Ali Bhai!” Abbas greeted warmly.

Ali stood there in the corner. Upon seeing Abbas, his eyes lit up and he waved. Abbas was a little confused. Ali was waving like he was glued to the spot. Abbas shrugged. He didn’t know why Ali was standing so still. Maybe Ali was tired or....Abbas stopped. His lips curled into a smile. He could see what the problem was.

Beside Ali, clinging on to his leg, was an infant. Abbas’s heart melted. Ali and Zahra’s child, Hurr, was becoming more adorable by each passing day. He was wearing a bright yellow kurta shalwar.

As Abbas approached, Ali caught sight of him. The huge man waved towards Abbas.

Abbas trotted forward.

“Asalmualaikum Ali Bhai,” Abbas greeted.

Ali smiled.

“Walaikum asalam,” he answered. “I might have come to greet you...” Ali let his sentence trail off as he gestured to the adorable bundle that was clinging to his leg.

“Mashallah,” Abbas admired as he studied the child.

Hurr was too occupied with Ali's feet to notice anything. The kid kept trying to wrap his tiny arms around Ali's ankle.

"I want to see how many attempts it will take before he works out that he can't do it," Ali chuckled.

Abbas smiled. He glanced down for a moment.

"Did you see Firuza's latest gambit?" he whispered.

Ali shook his head in disapproval, the frustration on his face was clearly visible.

"What did she do this time?"

Abbas told him about the debate on the Saleem show.

"I swear," Ali chuckled. "I never saw Firuza during revolution."

Abbas nodded. He had once asked around about her and found some interesting information. She had a younger sister named Asiya who was roughly a year older than Haider. During revolution she was part of the maintenance team which means that she had never been on a field mission ever.

Hurr began to get tired. Abbas looked down to see that he was making faces as he wanted Ali to lift him up. Ali bent down with a smile to pick up little Hurr who put his head on Ali's shoulder immediately, ready to take a nap.

"The joys of fatherhood," Ali patted his back lovingly.

"By the way, how did Maryam's math test go? Did she top it again?" Abbas asked, suspecting he already knew the answer.

Ali chuckled.

"Can anyone defeat her?" he asked rhetorically. "She studies all day and night." Abbas chuckled. Maryam had been outperforming everyone in her class. After she had quit the hunters, that is. But Abbas could not resist a little taunt.

"That's because she doesn't have any real competition," he smirked. After the revolution, Maryam decided to focus on her studies and had left the hunters.

Ali grinned.

"Well, the only one to have ever defeated her, joined the army so..." Ali let his sentence trail off.

Abbas's lips curled into a grin. He couldn't help remember the time when he defeated her during their training on the points chart. That was more than a year ago. Now things had changed.

“Waaaaaaa!”

Ali’s eyes widened in horror as his son’s eyes opened abruptly. He must have had a bad dream, like someone took his toy, or even worse, his candy.

“Waaaaaaa! Waaaaaaa!”

Abbas stroked the baby’s head.

“Shhhhh,” he whispered. “You miserable little thing, quiet!”

Ali held the child up. He began stroking the child’s head but Hurr endured. And continued on his rampaging tantrum.

“What is going on?”

Abbas turned in surprise to see an elderly woman.

“Farheen Auntie,” Abbas exclaimed.

His eyes widened in relief.

“What happened?” Farheen asked.

As if on cue, Ali and Abbas both raised a finger, pointing at the little child.

“He won’t stop!” Abbas complained.

Farheen eyed Ali warily.

“Give me the child,” she whispered.

Ali nodded. With a typical exhausted parent look on his face, he passed the child to her. The moment Hurr landed in her arms.....there was silence.

Abbas froze, his eyes widening in confusion? What? How? How did she do that? He turned to Ali who was speechless too.

“How did you do that?” Abbas exclaimed.

Farheen smiled softly.

“I’ve been a mother, Alhamdullillah,” she whispered.

Abbas raised a brow. He never knew that Farheen had kids. Unless she was counting Isa, Abbas’s closest friend. A young man who lost his parents before he could remember, but was found by Farheen. She raised him as one of her own. Farheen probably meant that.

“Ali my boy,” Farheen smiled weakly. “He’s probably hungry and misses his mother.”

Ali nodded respectfully, the relief on his face was visible. Hurr was fast asleep at this point.

“Abbas.”

Abbas blinked, his mind returned to reality.

“Y-yes,” he faltered.

Farheen bowed her head respectfully and turned to leave. Ali headed the other way, towards Zahra, who was busy discussing something with Abbas’s mother, Layla.

Abbas grinned. Everyone was here. And it was perfect. Absolutely perfect. Abbas couldn’t have wished for anything better. Everyone, gathered together to remember the past, to remember the ones they lost, and to thank Allah for what they had.

Abbas narrowed his eyes, a smile was forming on his face. At some distance, he could see Haider and Jafar standing with Isa. All of a sudden, a thunder of applause sounded from his left.

“Nara e Haidery!” came a loud voice.

Abbas turned to see a horde of people, crowding excitedly. What had happened?

Casually, the young captain strolled forward. He had no idea why everyone had suddenly rushed to the door.

A small streak of green caught his attention. It was a flag, with a Tasbeeh in the center. Beside it was a Zulfiqar. Abbas smiled. It was Peaceville’s flag. Which could only mean one thing. Ibrahim was here.

12

Ibrahim

“Allah bless you sir!” a man shouted from the group.

Ibrahim bowed his head respectfully.

“Inshallah brother, may Allah ease your difficulties in life,” he replied kindly.

Ibrahim was unlike any human Abbas had ever seen. He was more than six feet tall, with wide and powerful shoulders. His face wore a softness yet sternness at the same time. Standing tall and proud, he was the leader of Peaceville.

“SubhanAllah,” Abbas remarked. “He looks strong enough to stop a train with his bare hands.

Indeed he did. The man’s walk, his posture, his gaze, it was...powerful. Abbas had only felt such amazement with one other person. His mentor. Akbar. Speaking of which, Abbas’s lips curled into a smile. Right behind Ibrahim, strolling confidently, was Akbar Uncle.

“Akbar’s glance met Abbas’s and Abbas waved to him.

Akbar looked at Abbas, his eyes immediately lighting up. He responded with a fatherly smile. Then, after a few seconds, Akbar bowed his head respectfully. Abbas followed suit.

“Everyone, move back please.”

Abbas blinked, turning to see Bahadur who was struggling to stop people from approaching Ibrahim. He was in charge of Ibrahim’s security. No doubt, he was anxious today.

“Everyone, please move back,” Abbas tried to help. “Give them room to cross, please.”

People moved back, though some continuously persisted, Bahadur eventually deterred them. As Ibrahim and Akbar, leader and general of Peaceville, approached Abbas, Akbar raised his hand, motioning for Abbas to join him.

Abbas jogged up to Akbar. As he neared, he couldn't help notice the thick woollen socks on Akbar's feet, stretching well past his ankle. They served a simple yet critical purpose. They masked Akbar's Alpha scar. The number forty-three which he carried forever.

Many didn't know this, but Akbar had once been an Alpha. Not just any Alpha, he was, in fact the greatest Alpha, Alpha 43. Until he broke free from the C-gun years ago.

“Yes Akbar Uncle,” he asked respectfully.

“Is everything ready?” Akbar asked.

Abbas nodded.

“Good,” Akbar grinned.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. He knew Akbar long enough to know that the smile was forced.

“What concerns you, Akbar Uncle?” Abbas whispered.

Akbar eyed Abbas.

“Keep a sharp watch,” he instructed.

Abbas raised a brow. He had expected many things, but not this. Why was Akbar telling him to keep a sharp watch. Was there some kind of threat? Abbas might have asked, but he knew better. This was not the time nor the place for such a discussion.

Again his mind drifted back to the incidents that occurred earlier today. A group of Alphas attempt a high risk mission, trying to steal data for some benefactor. Could there be some connection between that and this cryptic instruction that Akbar Uncle gave him?

Abbas looked down, feeling the reassuring bulge of his revolver. His eyes glanced over the crowd of cheering people. If there was some danger, it would be virtually impossible to know from where it could come.

“Allah help us,” Abbas muttered to himself.

13

Ceremonies

“Bismillah hir Rahman nir raheem!” Ibrahim called out. “Salams dear brothers and sisters of Peaceville!”

The audience erupted in applause.

“Nara e Takbir!” came some man’s voice.

Everyone shouted in response,

“Allah hu Akbar!”

A small static echoed throughout the large room, drowned away by the excited chatter in the audience. This was it. The event was going to start.

Ibrahim took a deep breath.

“It is great to see everyone here this evening,” Ibrahim smiled kindly. “It brings me joy to see you like this. Please recite a loud Salawat!”

The Salawat echoed loudly through the hall.

Ibrahim narrowed his eyes.

“That wasn’t good enough,” he sighed. “It seems like everyone is a bit sleepy right now...”

“ALLAH HUMA! SALI ALA MUHAMMAD!...”

The salawat boomed throughout the area. Much louder.

“Yes, yes,” Ibrahim smiled. “That’s more like it now.”

Abbas found himself intrigued. Ibrahim was waking the crowd up.

“Brothers and sisters,” Ibrahim sighed. “One year ago, we fought a great battle.”

As if on cue, a huge projector screen behind him opened. An ayaat appeared on the screen. One that Abbas knew all too well.

“So, surely with hardship comes ease.” (94:5)

Ibrahim took a deep breath.

“I will start this ceremony with our first award of the evening. This medal of honour is called the ‘Wilayat award’ and it is for a special group of individuals. These people are those who, when the times were difficult, did not cower. Rather, they united the people, fought bravely and boldly, and it was their actions that guided the revolution to success.”

Abbas beamed. He knew exactly who Ibrahim had in mind.

“First of all,” Ibrahim smiled. “I would invite our dear brother, and our chief army general, Akbar Sohail. For serving as the foundation stone of this great movement.”

Abbas strained his eyes, just barely able to see Akbar moving up towards the stage. He bowed his head respectfully as Ibrahim placed the medal on his shoulder.

“Salawat for him!”

The audience erupted in a loud Salawat. After all, Akbar Uncle was the one who had brought everyone together in the first place one year ago.

“Sister Farheen!”

Abbas applauded loudly as he caught sight of the old lady making her way onto the stage. Everyone applauded ecstatically as she received her medal.

“Next,” Ibrahim announced. “Brother Kadhim!”

Abbas stopped. All of a sudden he wasn’t laughing. He wasn’t thrilled. And an uncanny distaste overtook him. Not just him, the audience were a bit quiet too.

One year ago, Kadhim had made a very bad mistake. He had falsely accused Abbas of being a traitor, eventually getting Abbas and his loved ones exiled out of the revolution. When the truth was revealed, Kadhim had earned a collar of shame no service would ever undo.

Awkwardly, Kadhim took his medal and left.

Ibrahim eyed the audience.

“Please recite a loud Salawat!”

The Salawat was strong, but not as strong as the last time.

‘People must be distasteful that he earned a medal,’ Abbas thought to himself. ‘Even if he was on the revolution leadership committee, it doesn’t change what he did.’

Abbas stopped. There was no point in dwelling on such ideas.

“Now we move on to our next award,” Ibrahim whispered, the microphone echoing his voice. “This one is known as the Zulfiqar e Ali award. There is only one recipient for this award.”

Everyone went quiet.

“A brave soul, who despite all odds, fought bravely, and rid the world of one of the greatest tyrants we have ever known. Please welcome Abbas Murtaza!”

The audience erupted in a loud applause. Even louder than the one for Akbar Uncle.

Abbas froze. Had he heard right?

“Go, my boy!” one of the men sitting behind Abbas stated.

Abbas didn’t need to be told twice. His heart pounded excitedly in his chest as he got to his feet, and began strolling forward. As he went, he wrestled the sudden adrenaline burst in his body. His eyes scanned for any familiar faces. But in the vast crowd, he couldn’t even see his parents.

‘I’ll get a better view on stage,’ Abbas thought to himself.

As he moved, he couldn’t help feel a small sense of pride in his heart. He had vanquished Alpha 43. Alhamdullillah. He had defeated the legendary assassin. This was a recognition of it.

“Congratulations,” Ibrahim smiled warmly. “Mashallah.”

Abbas bowed his head respectfully as the leader of Peaceville pinned the medal to his shirt. As he did so, Abbas couldn’t help notice that Ibrahim wore a simple wooden pendant, in the shape of a Zulfiqar. It looked nice.

“Keep shining and growing,” Ibrahim congratulated.

Abbas thanked him. Turning to the audience, he shouted,

“Nara e Takbir!”

Everyone shouted in response,

“Allah hu Akbar!”

Abbas grinned.

“Nara e Risalat!”

The voices echoed throughout the area,

“Ya Rasulallah!”

Abbas swallowed. This was the last and the loudest.

“NARA E HAIDERY!”

“YA ALI!”

“HAIDERY!”

“YA ALI!”

“HAIDERY!”

No response. Abbas blinked. Why had everyone gone quiet? He turned to Ibrahim who seemed equally confused. While Abbas was too far, he could make out some murmur of discomfort. Discomfort due to what, though?

A child raised his hand, pointing to an area behind Abbas. The young captain whirled around, his eyes immediately widening in confusion.

The projector screen, the one through which the ayat of the Quran had been displayed, was flickering. Glitching. Not like a normal glitch. This was a violent pixelation of the screen.

“Abbas.”

Abbas turned to see Ibrahim.

“The mic is not working,” he whispered.

Abbas tapped the microphone with his own hand. Ibrahim was right. It wasn't responding. What was going on? Why was the system glitching? Abbas narrowed his eyes. He could see the crowd getting a bit confused. On his right, he glanced to see Akbar who was equally perplexed. Okay, something was definitely not right.

Abbas eyed the projector curiously. It didn't seem broken. And it would definitely have been tested thoroughly before the event.

“Is it a glitch?” Ibrahim asked uncertainly.

Abbas was silent. Akbar's words from earlier on echoed in his mind.

Keep a sharp watch.

“No,” Abbas spat. “They're back.”

Ibrahim flashed Abbas a curious glance.

“Who is back?” he whispered.

The projector screen flickering stopped. But there was no Quran ayat on the screen anymore. No. Now there was someone there. A man, wearing a black mask and hood. Abbas narrowed his eyes.

“The enemy has returned,” he growled.

14

The Enemy

“Greetings dear brothers and sisters of Peaceville,” the hooded man on the screen spoke through a clearly computer-altered voice. “Asalumalaikum.”

There was no response. Everyone was just watching, completely confused as to what was going on. Abbas was feeling uncomfortable. His eyes searched the crowd for his parents, but neither Layla nor Murtaza were in sight.

“I will only need a few minutes of your time,” the hooded figure sighed.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. The hooded figure wheezed.

“My name is Amr,” he whispered with a sly chuckle. “And I will be your host for the rest of the evening.”

There were murmurs of discomfort from the audience.

“Is this part of the event?”

“Who is this guy?”

“What’s going on?”

Abbas growled.

“Who are you?” he spat. “What do you want?”

The hooded figure sighed.

“Alas,” he answered. “I wish the same as you....Captain Abbas. I merely wish for the truth to be revealed. And that will happen tonight...”

Abbas scoffed.

The lights flickered.

“Agha Ibrahim,” Abbas whispered. “Get behind me.”

Ibrahim merely blinked.

“Sir, please,” Abbas whispered, reaching out, but he felt nothing.

Abbas’s eyes widened in confusion. Where had Ibrahim gone? He had just been here a second ago.

“You all came here for the Night of Heroes,” Amr whispered. “But all you do is celebrate criminals.”

Abbas could hear nervous murmurs in the audience.

“The lies end here,” Amr spat. “Dear Peaceville, do you recall how much you hate the Alphas?”

Amr chuckled.

“You were told that the Alphas were put behind the bars,” he growled. “Would you believe me if I told you that there are still Alphas among you?”

Gasps. Shock. Abbas turned around. What was this? What Alphas? All of them were in...no. Not all the Alphas were in jail.

“I will expose the Alphas for you,” Amr growled.

His screen faded, replaced by a picture of four faces.

Abbas’s eyes widened in horror.

“Ya Allah,” he gasped.

On the screen was a face. A face Abbas knew all too well.

“I give you Salma, also known as Alpha 39.”

Abbas’s eyes widened in horror.

“Jannat,” he shouted in his earpiece. “Cut the feed!”

“I’m trying!” came her reply. “It’s not working!”

“Then trace the signal!” Abbas growled. “Where is he broadcasting from? It can’t be far from here!”

Amr sighed.

“While they foolishly try to stop me, I offer my congratulations to sister Ruqayya for her recent wedding with Alpha 31!”

There were gasps of horror in the crowd.

Abbas spotted Reza, the shock was imprinted on his face. Beside him, Ruqayya was standing, her eyes were wide with horror. People began eyeing the couple, with audience starting to back away from them.

“Not to mention Alpha 16!” Amr chuckled. “Brother Murtaza, don’t be shy. Let everyone see you for who you are.”

People were now off their seats, confusion and disbelief was spreading faster than a plague amongst them.

“Anytime now, Jannat!” Abbas hissed.

“I’m working on it!” she cried. “I’m narrowing it down, I just need a minute!”

“We don’t have minutes!” Abbas spat.

What was she doing? She had to stop Amr before he finished.

“The best is yet to come, however!” Amr whispered. “The ones I have named for you have nothing on this next guy. For he’s the one who lied to you the most of all.”

“Oh no,” Abbas gasped.

He closed his eyes. He couldn’t bear to see this.

“General Akbar Sohail...or should I say...Alpha 43!”

A huge gasp erupted from the audience. Everyone was now off their seats, watching each other with uncertainty, as though the person next to them was some kind of Alpha.

There was an uncertainty in the air. And something else. Something Abbas hadn’t felt in a long time. Fear.

“But Captain Abbas killed Alpha 43?” someone from the audience shouted.

Abbas whirled around. Of course he had killed Alpha 43. But few knew that the Asghar was not always Alpha 43. The original Alpha 43 was Akbar, whose departure allowed Asghar to claim the title.

“No,” Amr smiled venomously. “The original Alpha 43 was Akbar. He lied to you! He used your blood and martyrs to overthrow Jumeira and claim Peaceville for himself. You don’t need to take my word for it.....ask Akbar. Go on. Ask him to show his ankle. We all know Alphas carry that special scar on their ankles! You will all-”

Boom!

A bullet went whizzing through the air, striking the projector. The small device fizzled violently, and the screen blacked out.

“What was that?” someone whispered.

Abbas sighed in relief, lowering his gun. He should have shot sooner. Amr had already said too much. But at least he had silenced the demon. Or so he thought.

“Why did you shoot?”

Abbas whirled around, suddenly realising that everyone was watching him. Everyone.

“Abbas, is this true?” someone called out.

Abbas turned in surprise to see a familiar short man. Junaid Uncle. The strange man who wanted Abbas to meet his son. Abbas faltered. He wasn't sure what to say. He had never been in this position before. Where was Akbar? Murtaza? Reza? Anyone who could take charge.

Abbas was starting to feel a bit isolated. He might have said something, but a sudden voice sounded.

“Abbas!”

Abbas's eyes lit up. It was Jannat.

“He severed the connection but I used a special algorithm to narrow down the possible locations-”

“Jannat!” Abbas growled. “Where is he?”

“100 meters from the building, south exit!” she rushed.

“Alright!”

Abbas glanced at everyone.

“Please just...stay calm and wait for Akb...I mean... Agha Ibrahim,” he muttered.

And with that, Abbas turned around and darted towards the south exit of the building, a new fire was ignited in his body.

“I'm coming for you Amr!” he growled.

15

Chase

It was quiet, and it was dark...but Abbas didn't care. A powerful force flowed through his entirety, driving him forward. He was angry. And the only thing that would cool his temper would be the sight of that hooded figure, torn limb by limb.

"Abbas, take a left at the next intersection...." Jannat instructed.

Abbas narrowed his eyes, pushing forward. He didn't know why Akbar Uncle didn't appear. And that didn't matter right now. All that mattered was that Amr must get caught. They could work out the details later.

Abbas coughed as he reached the intersection, shooting left as Jannat instructed.

"Now what?" Abbas asked.

"Okay," Jannat's voice came through. "Take a right."

Abbas shot right.

"That's it!" Abbas heard Jannat exclaim. "He's just a hundred meters ahead of you."

Abbas smirked. For such a smart cyber hacker, he was pretty bad at hiding himself. This was too easy. Abbas suddenly stopped, narrowing his eyes. This was too easy.

"Has he not moved yet?" Abbas whispered into his earpiece. Jannat's voice came through.

"Why no...he's still there. Come on Abbas, get him!"

Abbas shifted uncomfortably, drawing his knife. Something

didn't feel right. Why hadn't Amr moved until now? It seemed a strange thing to do. First, broadcast to the public and then stay still as if-

"Waiting to be caught," Abbas realised. "Wait. Jannat, you couldn't cut the feed when Amr didn't want you to, but you were able to track his exact location?"

Abbas didn't understand. It didn't make sense. Especially the fact that Amr hadn't moved yet.

"Oh, but she wasn't..."

Abbas froze, feeling a shiver up his spine. What did Jannat just say? She wasn't what?

"Jannat?" Abbas asked suspiciously.

Static.

Beep.

"Abbas!" Jannat's voice came through. "Abbas! Can you hear me! I've been trying to reach you forever! Where are you?"

"I've been here!" Abbas retorted. "Why are you?"

A sudden burst of orange erupted from ahead, a powerful force of wind knocking him off of his feet. Abbas growled, rolling sideways behind a mailbox as the fire burnt where he had been only moments earlier.

"Abbas!" Jannat shouted. "Are you there?"

Abbas groaned, wiping the sweat off of his forehead.

"Ah," Abbas winced, pushing himself to sit up.

Far ahead, he eyed the sight where the explosion had just happened. The van up ahead, the one Amr had supposedly been in, had been rigged to blow. Abbas's eyes widened in horror. If he had kept going...he would have died.

Verse 185 of Surah Ale Imran from the holy Quran echoed in his mind,

Every soul will taste death, and you will only be given your [full] compensation on the Day of Resurrection. So he who is drawn away from the Fire and admitted to Paradise has attained [his desire]. And what is the life of this world except the enjoyment of delusion.

He finally understood. It wasn't Jannat who had directed him here. It was Amr. Amr had misled him. He had used some

kind of voice modulation device to mimic Jannat's voice. He used Abbas's hastiness against him and as a result, almost killed him. Almost.

Abbas growled in frustration. Amr was probably long gone, laughing at how easily Abbas had played into his hands.

"Argh!" Abbas snarled, kicking the ground. "This isn't over Amr! Do you hear me! I will tear you apart! This is not over!"

Abbas took a deep breath, his heart was pounding and his blood was boiling. He turned and began heading back to the venue. As he went, he was so engrossed in his fury that he didn't notice a rat scurrying along the street. He didn't even notice the pigeons on his left. Or the hooded figure, standing across the street, next to the alleyway.

Amr took a deep breath.

"You're right Abbas," he whispered. "This isn't over. This is only the beginning..."

16

The Honour Duel

“Saw Ho Sho!” “Man haw sho!”

Cries could be heard. Even if one didn't speak the dialect, it didn't matter. Some things, one just understood.

They were battle cries.

Hamza closed his eyes.

“Concentrate,” he whispered under his breath. “Focus.”

The battle cries didn't matter. Nor did the glory. Hamza only cared about the battle to come. He knew he was fast and strong. He could defeat any opponent.

A sudden silence occurred outside. Hamza's lips curled into a smile. He got to his feet. It was time. Quietly, he strolled forward, pushing aside the cloth of his tent.

A small ring had been set up in the centre of the tribe. Hamza exited the tent advancing forward. He knew he could win this and he was determined to do so too.

A huge crowd had gathered. This was probably the most exciting thing that had ever happened to them.

Hamza took a deep breath as he neared the ring. He could see Rizwan sitting on a simple, tawdry throne. He must have been furious. His own guest being challenged by his brother. Hamza felt pity for him.

His eyes landed upon Hafeez. The frail man was dressed in a traditional tribal armour. He met Hamza's gaze with contempt.

‘You picked the wrong fight,’ Hamza thought to himself.

He assumed his position on one side of the ring.

“Alright,” the chief growled, glancing at Hamza. “The rules are simple. Each contender must be open to a challenge by any member of the tribe.”

He held two twigs in his hand.

“By the time your twig burn up, you will need to be standing. If one of you fall before the twig has burnt, then that contender is considered defeated.”

Hamza narrowed his eyes. He would not accept defeat. But something occurred to him.

“What if we both survive this challenge?” he asked.

Rizwan turned to face him.

“Better if that doesn’t happen,” he whispered.

Hamza raised a brow. He wasn’t intimidated by any challenge. Still, he knew that the chief was not a coward. The tiebreaker was probably harsh.

“Lets go, Hafeez first.”

Hamza watched as Hafeez advanced towards the weapons shelf. He pulled out a spear and shield. With a growl, he entered the arena.

The first twig was ignited.

“Who dares to challenge me?” Hafeez hissed.

“I will!”

Hamza turned to see who it was. He narrowed his eyes. It was Ilyas. The son of the chief. He smirked as he approached the arena, pulling out a sword and shield from the weapons. Hamza shook his head. It had all been planned. Hafeez’s challenge. Ilyas’s volunteering against Hafeez.

It didn’t surprise him when Hafeez turned out to be surprisingly so much better than Ilyas. Or so one would think. Hamza was experienced enough to know that Ilyas wasn’t even trying. He was just wasting time for his uncle. The spite he held for his father fueled this.

Every blow Ilyas swung was blocked. And as the twig reached the end of it’s life, Hafeez rammed his shield into Ilyas’s stomach, disarming him. A simple, clean victory. No. A planned victory.

The chief lifted the second twig.

“Hamza is next.”

Hamza took a deep breath and got to his feet. He glanced at the weapons shelf. All kinds of blades lay there. But Hamza wanted to make a statement.

Casually, he turned away, entering the ring.

There were murmurs of surprise in the crowd. No one had expected him to do such a thing. They either thought he was a very big fool or a very brave fighter.

The twig was ignited.

Hamza glanced over the crowd, his eagle-like eyes studying all of them. Who would challenge him?

“Argh!”

Hamza whirled around, his eyes narrowing. It was Burair. The warrior who had tried disrespecting him earlier. Of course he would challenge him.

Burair growled as he made his way into the ring. In his hand, he held a thin sword. Hamza narrowed his eyes. The sword was thin, meaning it would cut through the air quickly. This was a warrior of speed.

Burair clapped his hands together as tribal chants filled the air.

“Fight!” Rizwan shouted.

Hamza immediately went low, loosening his body. He would need to be swift. Burair lifted the sword, facing it’s tip towards the sky. That was an odd angle to use. It wouldn’t give his attack any strength.

Hamza’s eyes widened in alarm. This attack would be a distraction. Burair had some trick up his sleeve. Better to attack while he does his distraction. He wouldn’t expect that.

Burair growled, swinging the blade. Hamza ducked just in time, swinging his elbow at Burair’s knee simultaneously.

“Agh!” Burair screamed, staggering backwards as a small grey object slipped from his hand onto the ground. A knife. Hidden behind his back. So that was his real attack. Hamza smirked as Burair leaned back on his sword. Clearly his knee was damaged, to the extent that it couldn’t support his weight.

Hamza smirked.

“I’ll show you how it’s done,” he whispered.

He jumped forward, driving his knee like a spear. Burair instantly dropped low, bringing both hands in front. Hamza roared, smashing his fist into Burair’s temple, which was now exposed.

Burair shrieked before dropping unconscious on the ground. Hamza smirked once more, with an air of satisfaction, unable to resist the urge of glancing at Hafeez and Ilyas.

“That’s how you win a fight, Hafeez!” he called out.

The old man eyed him in fury.

“We have a challenger!” the chief called out.

Hamza’s eyes widened in surprise. He hadn’t seen anyone volunteer. Or heard anyone. He turned around to see Musa.

Of course. Musa couldn’t talk. Hamza eyed the youth. He was holding a grey hammer, the same one from dinner. A smirk was on his face.

“Fight!” the chief growled.

Wham! Musa smashed the hammer at the ground, creating a slight haze of dust. He lifted his hammer to reveal a crater in the ground.

Hamza chuckled.

“Not bad,” he smirked. “Maybe try it on a real opponent.”

Musa narrowed his eyes. He hauled the hammer onto his shoulder. Hamza studied the youth. His weight was shifting to his back leg, meaning he wanted power, not speed. His left foot was perpendicular to his right. Hamza suspected Musa would try a horizontal swing.

Hamza shot his hand forward as Musa swung the hammer, catching it midway.

“Too slow,” Hamza smiled.

He yanked the hammer out of the youth’s hand, tossing it on the side with a loud clank.

At the corner of his eye, he could see Hafeez glaring at him. Clearly, the old man didn’t think Hamza was this skilled.

Musa lunged forward. Hamza sidestepped, grabbing his throat. With a growl, he hauled the boy off of his feet before letting go. Musa landed with a thud.

“Anyone else!” Hamza growled.

There was silence. Hamza had achieved the objective he had hoped for. They were too afraid to fight him.

The twig burnt out.

“Now,” the chief sighed. “As both competitors still stand, we must have a tiebreaker.

Excitement erupted from the crowd.

“We will have the saw mansaw,” the chief announced.

Cries erupted again from the audience.

“Saw mansaw!” “Saw mansaw!”

Hamza narrowed his eyes. He was determined to win this. For a moment, he turned to Hafeez. His eyes widened in surprise. Hafeez seemed to be in dismay. It was as if he had been relying on Hamza losing that round.

“How come everyone is so afraid of the tiebreaker!” Hamza exclaimed. “It can’t be that bad, can it?”

17

Saw Mansaw

Hamza looked around him. He still couldn't understand why the tiebreaker was so frightening. He knew it was a different challenge from the round they had just faced. But what could possibly be so bad about it.

"We shall move to the pits," the chief instructed.

Pits? Hamza shook his head as people began moving in that direction. Hamza followed the current. At the corner of his eye, he still couldn't help notice that Hafeez was looking worried. Perhaps he feared this saw mansaw, whatever that was.

They walked for about a minute until a large pit came into sight. Hamza froze. He knew what the tiebreaker was going to be.

There was a huge pit, about three metres deep. and twenty meters long. One side was empty, and the other had a cage, filled with leopards. There was a rope attached to the hinge. If Hamza's deductions were correct, tugging the rope would open the cage for a leopard to come through.

"Hafeez and Hamza," the chief instructed. "Step inside."

Hamza turned to face Rizwan.

"Don't I get a weapon?"

The chief shook his head.

"You were offered the choice of weapons at the beginning of the honour duel. Now you must use that weapon only for the remainder of the duel.

Hamza narrowed his eyes. How could he have been so foolish to go in without a weapon? He didn't bother looking at Hafeez. Hamza didn't have the patience to deal with his glares.

Hafeez jumped into the pit. Hamza raised a brow. Were they going to enter simultaneously? He turned towards the chief. There was a cunning grin on his face. Hamza's lips curled into a smile. The chief had solved his issue.

With a deep breath, he jumped into the pit.

"You cannot defeat the leopard without a weapon," Hafeez hissed. "You are a fool."

Hamza chuckled as the rope was pulled, and the first leopard was released.

"I know," he whispered. "And thanks, by the way."

Hafeez turned to face him.

"Wha-"

Wham!

Hamza rammed Hafeez in the stomach, knocking him to the ground. The spear slipped from his grasp. Hamza dived forward, grasping hold of it. He was now armed. He looked up at the chief who nodded with an air of satisfaction.

There was a growl as the leopard eyed the two of them. Hamza met its intense yellow gaze. It looked mad. Its teeth were bared. This leopard was a man-eater. A second leopard joined its side as the cage was shut once more.

Hamza poised himself for the attack. Hafeez still hadn't gotten up. Hamza raised a brow. He hadn't hit him that hard?

There was a growl. Hamza's eyes widened in alarm.

He ducked just in time as a leopard whizzed over his head, landing on the ground before him. Hamza's pulse quickened. This was an opponent who knew how to fight.

The leopard met his gaze. Hamza could see the bloodlust in its eyes. It growled. Hamza growled back. Its claws were digging in the dirt. Any moment now.

The leopard lunged forward.

Wham!

Hamza drove the spear straight for its heart, but the beast was faster. It swung a paw, knocking the blade down. Hamza leapt

out of the way just in time. The predator was clearly familiar with spear-hunters.

Hamza charged forward, swinging the weapon. The leopard ducked before charging forward.

“Argh!” Hamza growled as the beast’s claws struck his arms.

He fell to the ground. The leopard bared it’s teeth. It was going for the kill.

Wham!

Hamza smashed his elbow into the leopard’s head, sending it staggering backwards. It seemed genuinely disoriented. Hamza got to his feet. Now was his chance.

He hurled the spear forward. It struck the beast in the chest. The leopard wheezed before collapsing in a pool of blood. Hamza hissed.

Moving forward, he reached out for the spear. It had gone deep. With a grunt, he yanked it out of the creature. First leopard down.

He turned to Hafeez who was still on the ground. The leopard was sniffing him, seemingly confused. Hamza narrowed his eyes. Hafeez was playing dead. Trying to get the leopard to attack Hamza .

His lips curled into a smile. There was a very simple solution to the problem. Of course it would cost Hafeez a lot. But Hamza didn’t care. Hafeez had caused him enough troubles for one day. He had almost gotten him killed on multiple occasions. Hamza would repay him now in kind.

Glancing down, he scooped a small pebble. He would need to be precise.

He closed one eye, extending his arm. The pebble would strike Hafeez’s face, where it was bound to show the leopard that he was alive.

He took a deep breath. With a growl, he hurled the pebble straight at Hafeez. The leopard looked up in surprise as the pebble struck Hafeez’s nose. Hafeez winced.

Hamza narrowed his eyes as the leopard licked it’s lips. It understood.

The leopard raised a claw above Hafeez’s throat.

“No!” Hamza heard from the crowd. “Get up, Uncle!”

But it was too late. The leopard lashed at Hafeez, ripping out his throat. Hamza turned away. Vengeance was served. Punishment was delivered. Hafeez had tried to kill him several times. And on top of that, he sent him to this death duel.

“You did this!”

Hamza turned to see Ilyas, who glared at him with an expression of utmost fury.

“I won’t let you get away with this,” Ilyas spat.

Hamza narrowed his eyes. The youth was looking mad.

Ilyas ran around to the other side of the pit. Hamza’s eyes widened in horror. His heart froze as the youth tugged the rope opening the cage. He was letting all the leopards out.

18

The Pit

“I officially hate the saw mansaw,” Hamza growled as the beasts slithered towards him. There were almost ten of them by his count. Not including the one that had just killed Hafeez. It’s teeth were covered in red.

And all he had was a spear. He took a deep breath. There was no way he could survive this. The leopards outnumbered him. He clenched the spear. If it was his time, he wouldn’t go down without a fight.

The leopards hissed. Their bright yellow eyes were focused on him. He eyed them all. But it wasn’t easy. For the leopards began drifting apart.

He struggled to maintain eyes on all of them. They were trying to encircle him. Make him panic. His heart pounded in his chest. He took a deep breath closing his eyes.

There was a growl from the right. But the ones on the left had their teeth bared. They would attack first. Hamza narrowed his eyes. Which one would do it?

“Look out!” a man cried.

Hamza ducked as a mass whizzed over his head. One of them had attacked from behind! He had been wrong. Hamza growled. He began swinging his spear desperately in all directions, trying to hold them off. Maybe if he frustrated them, they would give up.

But he knew that wouldn’t work. He was the only prey in

their reach. They wouldn't let him go that easily.

A leopard from the front hissed. Hamza shot the spear out at it, causing it to retreat. He couldn't hold them much longer.

Boom

Hamza's eyes widened in alarm. Turning towards the other side of the pit. Someone was there. One of the leopards turned and charged towards the person.

"Look out!" Hamza called out.

The person barged forward, pulling out a huge steel hammer.

"Musa?" Hamza recognised.

The youth brought his hammer crashing down upon the leopard's head and it fell down unconscious. Probably dead. The youth smashed his hammer against the ground, making the leopards turn to him.

Hamza saw an opportunity. He growled, driving the spear into one of the leopard's stomach. The leopard collapsed in a pool of blood.

Wham!

One of the leopards rammed Hamza off his feet. It growled digging its claws in him.

"Argh!" Hamza screamed.

Another leopard joined him. Hamza felt his strength weakening. He couldn't push them off.

Wham!

The pressure weakened. Hamza opened his eyes weakly. He could barely breath.

Who was his rescuer? Who had saved him? He felt his eyes droop, and he slumped down unconscious.

19

Punishments

“Do you have any honour?” Rizwan growled. “Did I raise you like this?”

He seemed genuinely disgusted.

Ilyas looked down, struggling to suppress the raging storm inside him. Rizwan was actually disgusted.

“He is responsible for my uncle’s death,” Ilyas whispered.

His father scoffed. Like he had always done. Since the time Ilyas was a child.

“You set Hamza to fail,” the chief growled. “You sabotaged the trials!”

Ilyas looked up, meeting his father’s gaze. He would not deny what his father was saying. But there was no point in arguing.

“You will never be a true warrior,” Rizwan sighed. “Never!”

Ilyas glared at him.

“That man you defend is my uncle’s killer,” Ilyas retorted. Rizwan shook his head.

“Hafeez challenged my guest to an honour duel.”

His eyes watered.

“And my older brother lost. That’s all there is to it.”

Ilyas shuddered. He knew his uncle Hafeez was not the best person. He was greedy and ambitious. And he also wanted the throne. But he was still family.

“There is nothing left for me,” Ilyas spat. “Nothing. I will leave this land. And when I return, I will avenge my uncle.”

Rizwan narrowed his eyes. Ilyas didn't care for it though.

He turned to leave.

"If you go," Rizwan whispered, his eyes watering. "I will never allow your return."

Ilyas growled.

"I have made my choice."

Ilyas reached into his pocket, withdrawing a small pendant. The mark of his future chiefhood. His father's eyes showed no reaction as he tossed it onto the ground.

"Farewell," he whispered. "Father."

Without a moment to waste, Ilyas turned around and began leaving. As he left, he couldn't help feel a strange pain in his heart. But Ilyas pushed it aside. The anger burning inside him was stronger than any other feeling.

"I will avenge you, Uncle," he muttered under his breath. "I won't let him go free".

There was only one thing that would quench the flames inside of him. Hamza's corpse.

20

The Past

It was a dark night. Clouds had filled the sky and the fog was starting to become unbearable. The creepy swishing of the grass only added to the already unsettling night. Most people would be asleep at this hour. Most.

A woman could be seen, quietly treading through the wet grass of the night. She wore a small hood to avoid recognition. After all, everyone in Peaceville knew who she was. If she was seen, there was no telling how bad things would get. Especially after the horrific ceremony that had taken place. The Night of Heroes.

Crack.

The woman froze, her eyes widening in alarm. Glancing back, her panicked eyes scanned the area behind her. She sighed in relief as a small bundle of fur wet darting in the opposite direction. It was only a squirrel.

“Okay” Layla sighed in relief.

Swiftly, she went on travelling through the grass. She was almost there. If she remembered correctly, it was on top of the hill, next to some tree. Layla glanced back once more. If Murtaza or Akbar saw her, it would be very difficult to explain why she was all the way out here at this hour.

It took her the full minute, but when she eventually reached the top, she spotted the lone tree, standing tall and proud, and the gravestones next to it.

Upon seeing them, Layla’s eyes widened, her hand drifted to

her mouth. her breathing stopped. Her eyes watered. A sudden weakness filled her knees as she moved up to the two gravestones. Her legs gave way as she weakly collapsed next to the graves.

“Asalamulaikum little brothers,” Layla whispered, her head spinning with uncertainty.

She had no idea why she came here. She had pledged to never come here. But one year had passed, and she had to settle the burden in her heart.

Layla placed a hand on each grave.

“Oh Qasim,” she cried. “My dear Qasim.”

She cried and cried.

“I remember when you were four, you hated being alone..” Layla shuddered. “I am here, dear brother.”

A pain in her heart that would never go away. This is because since her childhood, Layla was raised by Akbar’s family. She had never known a life outside of them. She became the fourth child of the family, a big sister for Qasim and Asghar and a little sister for Akbar.

“You have a grandson, Qasim,” Layla smiled tearfully. “You know Hurr? He’s such a handsome boy. I think he’ll grow up to be just like you.”

She paused, as if there would be a response. But there was none.

“Alhamdullillah, your children are so talented Qasim!” Layla whispered. “Zahra is kind and intelligent, and has found a suitable husband. Maryam, such an amazing young lady, and Jafar, he’s a smart young man.”

Her hand tightened on the stone, her knuckles were turning white.

“How I wish you could have seen them? They miss you so much. They never say it because it would upset Akbar Bhai, but their lives will always be missing the whole of your and Khadija’s love.”

Khadija was Qasim’s wife. She too, like her husband, had died on that accursed day. The day Asghar had betrayed their family. Which brought Layla’s attention to the second gravestone.

It was simpler, marked only with an ‘A.’

‘If people knew this was Alpha 43’s grave,” Layla thought to herself. “They would destroy it.”

She eyed the second gravestone with mixed emotions. What should she say? She didn’t know.

“Asghar,” she sighed. “You had been a joy in my life. You were my strength, my support. I knew you as a strong brother whom I could lean on in life. You promised me when I was younger, that you would never leave me alone.”

Layla stopped, her eyes were filling with tears.

“How could you abandon me?” she cried. “You left me all alone. You struck your own brother, Asghar. You imprisoned me and Murtaza.”

She wiped the tears from her eyes.

“You were there when I was expecting my children,” she whispered. “You helped me name them and held them in your own arms. How could you forget everything and torment Abbas? Forcing him to see me in chains and using me to hurt him. I have already lost one child and you tried to take another from me. How could you forget everything for your mad revenge? You hated Akbar. But what did Qasim do to you? What did I do to you?”

There was no response.

“Tomorrow, there will be chaos. Amr has struck Peaceville a fatal blow. I wish you had listened to me and repented. You could have been with us today. Now your brother Akbar stands alone, fighting our enemies. You should have been by his side. But your greed ended you.”

Layla held a hand against her thumping heart.

“You hurt me in a way that I could never imagine,” she whispered. “I hope somewhere, wherever your soul is, that you remember the pain you inflicted on us as a family.”

And with that, Layla got up to leave. She glanced back at the gravestones one last time. Then she began to leave. As she went, she didn’t notice a man standing behind the bushes, with tears in his eyes. She didn’t know that he was watching the entire time.

Akbar looked down, swallowing.

“If only you knew sister,” he whispered. “Death is the only

relief from the burden I carry. And tomorrow, things will only get worse.”

21

War

It was a quiet night. Mist trailed down from the sky, creeping across the grounds. Pure white in colour, it's foamish texture made it extremely difficult to see. Nobody out and about could know what was going on.

A murder of crows could be seen, pecking away at the ground for crumbs left by the day dwellers.

“Caw! Caw!” they wheezed, clearly enjoying themselves.

Despite strong senses, in the thick fog, even they couldn't see anything, let alone the silhouette of a fisherman on his way home after a long day of work.

As a short man, in his late twenties, Zafar was a strong youth. His arms bore the marks and scars of hard work. Something his father had passed down to him.

In one hand, he held a small oil lamp. In the other, a small knife.

“The little fish swimmin through the water,” he sung to himself jovially as he advanced on, his hands exhausted.

It had been a long day at the fish market, and now he was looking forward to a nice long sleep. His stomach gurgled.

“Shouldn't have said no to em salmon seller. I hope Farha cooked somethin nice!”

Zafar plodded along, his mind was drifting to his daughter. She was adorable and loved to hear the stories of his adventures. And how he loved telling her those stories. To see her little face,

watching him excitedly. It meant more to him than anything.

Zafar chuckled as he went, scratching his thick beard. He also wanted to speak with his wife. After all, she had gone to the ceremony of the Night of Heroes. Zafar was curious about how it had gone. What had happened?

He really wanted to go, but he had to work. After all, his job, while he loved it, certainly wasn't the best from a financial point of view.

Zafar sighed, shuddering. He didn't like to think about these things. They bothered him. He recalled what his father, another great fisherman like Zafar, used to say to relieve him from his worries.

"Son, remember Allah is always watchin you, he knows what worry you in your life. When you're sad, remember what he said in Quran,

And We will surely test you with something of fear and hunger and a loss of wealth and lives and fruits, but give good tidings to the patient.

Zafar grinned toothily. He would always answer his father with,

I'm patient!

Zafar continued his walk, returning back to the ceremony he wasn't able to attend. What was it called? The time of heroes? Something like that.

"I'm sure me wife and daughter had a great time," Zafar thought out loud. "Maybe they-

"ARGH!"

Zafar stopped, his eyes widening in horror. Someone screamed. Who? Where? His eyes darted left to right, unsure of which direction the scream had come from.

"HELP!"

The left. Someone was in trouble. Zafar dropped his oil lamp, ignoring it's little sizzle. Gripping his fishing knife, he eyed the area ahead.

"Zafar, fear nothin!" he growled. "Bismillah!"

In a flash, he darted into the fog, swaying his knife wildly as though someone would pop out from anywhere. His eyes

sharpened. The noise was getting louder. That was when it happened. An ear splitting growl sounded in the air.

“Attack!”

The ground rumbled as if there were a stampede. Except, no animals were there. Zafar knew that. In addition, from the distance, there were orange flashes. Zafar’s eyes widened in horror. The unmistakable sounds of metal striking metal and battle cries filled the streets. What on earth was going on?

22

The Dead

It was a quiet afternoon. Despite the sunny atmosphere that would normally bring a smile to everyone's face, there was one who didn't notice. A man, whose day had long been ruined. He stood there with a lost gaze in his eyes as he watched the gravestone before him.

Akbar took a deep breath, his eyes were swollen with tears. He could hear voices in the back of his mind.

"I'm sorry to say sir, but we suspect..."

Akbar shuddered.

The investigators believed that this may not have been a natural death. There were bruises found on her face. Someone suffocated her by shoving something in her face, presumably a pillow or blanket.

He eyed the gravestone, a strange pain occurred in his heart.

"Your ambition killed you, mother," Akbar cried. "In the end, they took you as well."

He looked down. There was a stale grievance in his heart.

"Both of my brothers died because of your greed. Qasim's children never knew their father because of you."

Akbar sighed.

"You know, I always wondered what I would feel if you passed away. Sometimes I doubted I would feel anything. But you have left me with a rotten hurt in my heart that cannot go away. You may as well have killed me with what you forced me to go

through.”

He looked down.

“I never wanted it to be this way, Maa,” he whispered.

“Alas...sometimes it feels like in spite of all the victories...I have lost everything.”

He rolled up his leg sleeve, eyeing his most hated mark. A mark he was cursed to carry for the rest of his life. The mark of his past. A scar shaped as a number 43.

“Allah,” he whispered. “Help me in this arduous battle. Allow me triumph over our enemies once more.”

Remorse

It was a bright morning, the sun was shimmering brightly. Warm rays illuminated the land. Trees stood tall and proud, casting shadows over the grasslands. Butterflies could be seen, flapping delicately.

Isa didn't care. His mind was in an uncanny lurch. His eyes were swollen from crying last night, unable to swallow what he had learnt. His eyes watered as he leaned quietly against a small stone on the ground where two names were engraved.

"Ami, Baba," he whispered. "I love you so much. I wish you were here with me."

Today, Isa was experiencing something he was all too familiar to. Heartbreak. The only difference was that this time it felt so much worse. For today, Isa had found the answer to a question that had long bothered his mind. He had wanted the answer so desperately but he never imagined that the truth would be so horrific.

He leaned down placing his forehead against the cool stone. As he closed his eyes, ignoring the tears that dripped down his cheeks, he recalled the verse 156 of Surah Baqarah.

Who, when disaster strikes them, say, "Indeed we belong to Allah, and indeed to Him we will return."

Isa wept, his lips quivering.

"Isa... Isa..."

Isa blinked, sneezing lightly. A soft hand ran along his belly,

lifting him off of the ground. He looked at his beautiful mother, her love visible in her warm gaze. "Mmma", he bubbled, trying to say Ami.

She hugged him, bringing him to her chest. Isa could feel her heart pounding against her own. And despite being only two feet tall, in her arms, he felt like he could take on the entire world.

Isa closed his eyes, a tear trickled down. He couldn't do it. He couldn't relive the pain of it all. The scream of his mother before she was killed. His father's look before being stabbed, right above his heart as he desperately tried to protect Isa.

"Forgive me..." Isa cried. "Allah, how can I look at *that man* in the eye...he killed my parents."

24

The Post

Noman took a deep breath. “It’s just another house. Just another letter.” He assured himself with a deep breath, in a weak attempt to calm his ragged breathing. His work shoes pounded soundly on the pavement, the thudding echoing in his ears alongside the racing throbbing of his own heart beat. A thin sheen of sweat coated his forehead. Steadying his shaking hand, he pushed the doorbell.

Those few seconds were the longest moments of his life. Tapping his foot nervously on the porch, his eyes flitted from window to window. He flinched as a noise came from behind the door. Noman hurriedly looked around and was relieved that there was no one around to see.

‘That also means that there’s no one who would see if-’

He didn’t get a chance to finish that thought as the lock turned and the door opened.

‘Big.’ Noman’s thoughts echoed. The man in front of him was huge. He easily stood at least a foot taller and was twice as wide. His hands were so large that they could have snapped his neck in a second. The bulging holster on his belt did nothing to soothe his wavering courage. Noman swallowed nervously. The man raised an eyebrow at that action, sending Noman’s heart plummeting into his stomach.

“Salam Alaikum.” his voice was low and heavy, almost like a bear.

‘W-Walaikum Salam.’ Noman cursed the tremble in his voice. “Letter for General A-Akbar Sohail”. The name felt insidious on the tongue, so much so that he wanted to run back home and wash his mouth out with soap.

The man took the letter from Noman’s outstretched hand. He frowned when Noman’s hand did not let go. He took a look and Noman’s frozen hand flew opened, his face became pale.

The man turned to leave but paused, watching Noman with a piercing gaze.

“Is there anything else?” he asked. Noman’s head hurriedly shook in the negative. With a farewell nod, Noman turned, preparing himself for the departure. In reality, he couldn’t wait to get away.

Reflections

It was dark. And quiet. Except for a slight pattering, probably a bird pecking the window sill. Abbas shuddered uncomfortably. He didn't enjoy such noises. Yawning lazily, he got to his feet. That was when he realised it.

"Where am I?" he gasped.

It seemed like the middle of nowhere. Trees surrounded him, swaying back and forth from the powerful wind. The ground was covered in snow, knee deep; but Abbas wasn't feeling cold. He tilted his head in confusion. Where was he?

"Help!"

Abbas's eyes widened in alarm. In the swivelling wind, he could almost swear that he heard a voice.

"Help!"

He did hear something! No. Someone. Someone was in trouble! Abbas blinked, his eyes searching his surroundings. Where was this person who was calling for help? "Help me please! Please!" Abbas scanned left and right, but the snow impaired his vision. He stepped forward. "Ah!" Abbas gasped. His foot slipped as the snow collapsed and Abbas went tumbling in the snow. "Ow!" He growled. "Ouch!" For what felt like an hour, Abbas cascaded down the soft snowy hill-like surface, his eyes shut, until he finally reached the bottom. "Allah," Abbas shivered. Abbas got up, exhausted by his fall. He looked up wondering how in Allah's name was he still alive. That was when he saw it. A grey patch

in the snow far ahead. But there was something different about this grey streak. Part of it was rising slightly, as if it was... "breathing!" Abbas exclaimed. "Allah! That's no patch. That's a wolf!" Surely enough, a grey wolf lay there, on the ground. It's once powerful body now weakening to the external forces of nature. It's once, strong resolve was now giving way to the force of nature. It had lost hope of survival. Abbas watched as the wolf cringed in pain. He couldn't explain why, but for some reason, his eyes were transfixed on the wolf. "Get up wolf!" Abbas called out. The wolf did not respond. It merely lay there, weakened for some reason. "I can't." Abbas heard it cry. His eyes widened in horror. Had the wolf just spoken? Had it- Wait. Was the wolf the one calling for help. The wolf cried. "You can't give up, wolf!" Abbas called out. He stopped. There was a strange fuzzy feeling in his heart. And he felt the connection with the wolf weaken. What was happening? "Don't leave me," the wolf cried. Abbas didn't know what was going on. His mind was in a whirl. He would have said something, but then everything faded away.

Abbas's eyes shot awake. He glanced around himself anxiously.

"Wha.." he coughed. "Where?"

There was no snow. No windy woodland, and no wolf. Abbas took a deep breath, struggling to control his heart beat. He was in a bed.

Abbas sighed in relief suddenly realising the truth. It had only been a dream.

"Allah," he whispered, clutching his chest painfully. "Inshallah, whatever I saw wasn't a bad sign."

He shuddered uncomfortably. That had been a weird dream. And Abbas wasn't sure what to make of it.

"Maybe it was pointless," Abbas thought to himself. "Let's just forget about it- Ow!"

Haider nudged Abbas on his left, half asleep.

"I....want...eechaawooooo" he drooled.

Abbas raised a brow.

"Some of us have weird dreams," he remarked, carefully lifting Haider's head off him, so he could leave. "And some of us have weirder dreams."

Slipping out, he carefully dragged a pillow and placed Haider's head on it, so he wouldn't feel the difference of Abbas not being there. After that, he moved up to the window. As he went, he couldn't help notice the small television remote on the table.

"Allah," Abbas sighed. His mind was racing with confusions.

He reached out for the remote, and turned on the television, ignoring Haider's snores. The first channel to appear was Peaceville news. Abbas narrowed his eyes. That obnoxious Firuza was part of this channel. The same Firuza had appeared on the Saleem show last night. The same Firuza who died for publicity. Abbas rolled his eyes. Coincidentally, her program was running.

"Of course," Abbas scoffed. "She's going to get a feast over what happened."

Abbas looked down. The headline running had been the same one since the previous night.

The Dark Side of Peaceville?

Firuza was interviewing a pedestrian about this.

"Last night was peculiar, no?"

Firuza asked with a smile on her face.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. The pedestrian was definitely going to be rigged. Someone paid to-

"I don't believe Amr," the man stated dryly.

Firuza stopped. Her eyes widened partially. She grinned.

"I like controversy," she whispered. "Do you mind telling us why, sir?"

She turned to face a camera.

"It seems like our beloved general has been hiding things from us. Do you think he used us to take power from Jumeira?"

The man shook his head.

"I saw General Akbar Sohail during the revolution. He led us with courage. I know that evidence suggests that he was an Alpha, but I don't believe it."

Abbas grinned. The man was incorrect. There was no evidence incriminating Akbar except for the claims of Amr. And Akbar's scar. But what followed next was the real problem.

"Captain Abbas was clearly nervous on stage. Remember how he shot the projector. He didn't want Amr to expose Akbar any

further. And he ran away because he couldn't face the truth."

Abbas growled, clenching his fists. He wasn't afraid of anything or anyone. He had faced Alpha 43 and far worse. He never ran from any truth.

"Firuza is just doing this to get views," Abbas reminded himself. "She'd take any lame story to get views. You don't need to defend yourself against this useless individual."

Abbas looked down. It was all too sudden and unexpected. He didn't know what to do on the stage, and Akbar never showed up to help him. Neither had Murtaza or Layla or anyone for that matter. Abbas narrowed his eyes. Now that he thought about it, why didn't Akbar or Murtaza take charge. Layla, he still understood. She might have been caught in the shock of the moment. But what about Akbar and Murtaza?

They were greatest Alphas at one time, definitely capable of handling pressure. If anything, they should have felt some urgency, given how Abbas and Ibrahim were on stage.

Abbas stroked his beard lightly, a sudden realisation dawning upon him.

"Where was Ibrahim?" he whispered.

Where had the brave and bold leader of Peaceville fled to? And at a very timely moment like that. Abbas remembered Ibrahim being there from the start until right before Amr's cyber attack.

Abbas's eyes widened. What was he doing? How could he suspect the Muhafiz e Peaceville? Ibrahim would never betray them. How could Abbas doubt his leader? But then again, Ibrahim's disappearance felt as though he...as if he,

'Actually knew,' Abbas thought to himself. 'Did he?'

Did their noble leader know when the attack was going to happen? Did he know what Amr was going to do? Abbas shuddered, all of a sudden feeling very uncomfortable. Did Ibrahim know Amr?

Clank! Clank!

Abbas blinked. Someone was at the door.

He strolled over to the entrance, and with a deep breath, pulled it open.

“What is it Jafar?” Abbas asked the young boy standing there. Jafar eyed Abbas warily.

“Akbar Uncle is calling you. He wants to talk.”

Abbas nodded.

“I’ll be there in a minute.”

Jafar nodded, bowing his head respectfully. Abbas followed suit, and with that Jafar turned to leave. As Abbas watched him go, he narrowed his eyes. What did Akbar Uncle want to talk about?

26

Regrouping

Silence. The whole room was quiet except for the small clicking sound from Murtaza's pen, or the occasional creak from someone's chair. Abbas took a deep breath, glancing around. He saw several people. Each of these individuals were very special. For each of them played an undeniable key role in the revolution. The most trusted. The best of the best.

There was Reza, formerly Alpha 31. He had served the revolution for years behind enemy lines as a spy for Akbar. He was also one of Akbar's finest students. Normally, he held a relaxed but firm persona. Today, however, he looked agitated. Obviously, people had not been sympathetic when they learnt about his past.

Abbas couldn't blame them. In some way, these people had lost their loved ones to the Alphas. Friends, parents, children and more. So naturally, they hated Alphas. They failed to realise the struggle people like Reza endured for the cause of Islam, for the cause of freedom. Reza had to hide in plain sight of the enemy for years, ignoring the temptations of power and fight the war behind the enemy lines. The revolution might not have succeeded without his frequent leaks of information. He didn't deserve this treatment.

The next in line was Reza's wife, Ruqayya. She too, like Reza, endured great struggles in the name of Islam. Back in the days of the revolution, Ruqayya had been a patrol squadron leader. In the fight against the Alphas, she lost her beloved brother Naqi to the

cruelty of Alpha 43. It had taken a huge toll on her emotionally. Till today, she still grieved her brother's loss.

Before Naqi had breathed his last, he entrusted Ruqayya to Abbas. Abbas did his best to carry out his duties as a brother. His family had owned her as a daughter of their own.

Ruqayya was looking down today. Obviously, seeing Reza in this state must have pained her. It made Abbas even more angry. Amr had crossed far too many lines. Abbas was going to make him pay.

Next, seated beside Ruqayya, was Maryam. Abbas suppressed the trace of irritation at her sight. He still hadn't forgiven her for quitting the hunters. She didn't have to. Abbas scolded himself. He needed to focus on the matter at hand.

Maryam was Akbar's niece. Her father, Akbar's younger brother had been killed when she was a child. She had no memory of him. Akbar raised her, and trained her to become a hunter. Which she, then ungratefully quit.

'Come on,' Abbas chided himself.

After Maryam, was Farheen. A kind elderly lady. But her age did not fool Abbas anymore. Farheen was a formidable martial artist in her days. She wielded blades with uncanny accuracy. Sometimes Abbas wondered where she learnt to fight so well.

'She's extremely talented if she's self taught,' Abbas thought to himself.

Next was Jannat. Abbas suppressed a frown. He was very displeased with Jannat due to the previous night. Jannat was a specialist in computer science. She also served the revolution behind the enemy lines, though under the protective wings of Reza.

Since she worked in the iron fortress, Abbas knew Jannat had worked with advanced computer technology. So, how was she so helpless under pressure. She wasn't able to stop the broadcast. Abbas ended up doing so when he shot the projector. She wasn't able to trace Amr. And in the end, Amr almost killed Abbas because Jannat couldn't prevent him from tapping into the network.

'Jannat cannot handle pressure at all,' Abbas thought to

himself.

And it irritated him. Why was she working at such a critical post if she cannot perform her duty correctly? Because of her, Amr was able to cause such devastation and havoc.

People were confused. Their leaders, the ones whom they looked up to, all of them turned out to be Alphas. How could they not understand that things were so much more complicated than that? These people, intentionally or unintentionally, started on the wrong side. They had the opportunity to become powerful and rich but they chose not to. They served Islam faithfully for years, fought the most dangerous and difficult battles that everyone else had given up on.

Abbas shrugged his thoughts and turned his attention to the next individual. Salma, formerly Alpha 39. The original Alpha 39 was killed by Akbar a little more than a year ago, after which, she had received the title. She was a student of Reza, and he was the one who freed her from the influence of the C-gun. He trained and taught her everything she knew.

Salma, like Reza, had also served behind enemy lines. Abbas felt bad for her. She had helped them hunt so many escaped Alphas after joining the hunters.

Beside Salma, Zahra was seated. She was Akbar's niece and Maryam's older sister. Recently Allah (swt) had blessed her, and her husband Ali, with an adorable child named Hurr.

How could Amr dare to do this? Abbas wanted to rip him apart so badly. He sighed. After everything, he'd never imagined that the enemy would return. Abbas looked down. How could he be so naive? Of course, the enemy wasn't gone. And now, they had made their first move on the chess board.

Abbas's eyes drifted over to Ali, Zahra's husband. He was quiet. There was a lost look in his eyes. What was he thinking? Abbas had no idea. Maybe he was remembering that night so many months ago, when Abbas revealed to everyone that Akbar was an Alpha.

Abbas sighed as he turned his head to see Isa. His good friend. Abbas knew Isa well enough to see that he was in a deep thought. Something was on his mind.

Finally, there was Murtaza and Akbar. Both men were quiet. They were clearly disturbed. After all, both of them were well known, especially Akbar. Abbas shuddered uncomfortably. Since yesterday, the panic and confusion amongst people was spreading faster than a virus. The amount of negative attention on Salma, Reza, Murtaza and Akbar was unfair. Especially, considering how much they had sacrificed for the revolution. How could people be so naive to be tricked by the enemy this way?

Abbas didn't understand this. All he knew was that he wanted to rip Amr apart for causing so much pain to those who were very dear to Abbas.

"Bismillah hir rahman nir raheem," Akbar began. "Asalamu alaikum everyone."

There was a strange weakness in Akbar's voice and his eyes were slightly swollen, indicating that he had been awake all night.

Abbas couldn't blame him for that. To have the worst part of your life, the darkest elements of your past, wrenched from the shadows and paraded in front of the very people who put their faith in your hands. It must be horrible.

Akbar was a man of many secrets and Abbas was not oblivious to the fact that there was much that his mentor hadn't told him. Especially about the days when he was an Alpha. His own experience was very much second-hand. The whispers amongst the former Alphas, Akbar's own family and Alpha 43's continuous effort to surpass his older brother told Abbas enough.

Besides, had he not himself witnessed the havoc the Alpha's wreaked upon everyone's lives? There was no doubt that each and every person wringing their hands at home had a good reason to be worried.

But then again, Abbas also knew Akbar. Beyond the rigid, militarial exterior, they saw an Alpha, but he saw the man who gave his teenage self and his little brother a home and food to eat, and that too, with a lot of love and compassion. He not only fed their stomachs but also healed his wounded soul; something that Abbas could never repay for.

Akbar and all those ex-Alphas may have darkness in their past, but they had moved forward to not just challenge the status quo,

but become the spear-heads on the front line. The warriors with utmost commitment and sincerity. Many of them were slain but the fire in their hearts could not be extinguished. And the very event which the enemy used to tarnish their reputation, was itself an evidence of their loyalty and sacrifice, A day when those fallen heroes were getting recognised for their commendable services to the cause of revolution. Was it not enough to prove their truth? One of the most effective weapon against truth is the simple-mindedness of the masses which the enemies of truth use sparingly, as a tool to not lie, but just blur the truth, and that is what exactly what their enemy did. They tried to blur the truth and create suspicion, A deadly and effective arrow which rarely misses the target.

Abbas had often considered the possibility that it could have been him in their place. He had seen the C-gun and what it could do, how powerless he felt against it the first time they were training. What if an Alpha had found him first? What if he had been forced to become an Alpha?

No, he told himself, no matter what people thought, or what that video said, each and every one of the brave and courageous men and women at that table had earned themselves that place. If they had a past, it was long gone and erased by their blood, sweat and tears.

He was pulled from his thoughts by Akbar's voice.

"I'm sure you're all feeling the effects of the attack by the enemy. I have invited you here for a very important reason and you are free to respond once I'm finished."

Abbas was completely attentive now. Akbar continued,

"As you all know that I have been leading our struggle, our movement, our journey; to break free from the shackles that enemy had put not only around our bodies but also around our souls. Treading this path has been like walking on the bridge of sirat, where every second was a deciding one between our lives and deaths and we bore the wounds of many who fell on the way."

Akbar paused for a second as his eyes watered. He continued, "This kind of arduous path can only be walked upon with one hundred percent perfect code of actions and thought process.

Now, after what all has happened in the last few days, I feel the need to clarify certain things. Firstly and most importantly, I do not wish to tolerate any doubts. As you all know, an army is successful when they trust their commander unconditionally. And a commander is successful when he has earned that trust. Anyone who believes that my intentions regarding Peaceville are not sincere or that I have ulterior motives beyond what looks apparent, is free to go.”

Abbas’s eyes widened in surprise. He glanced around curiously. People were exchanging nervous glances with each other.

Isa raised his hand. Abbas’s eyes widened in surprise. Was Isa going to leave?

“Yes my boy,” Akbar acknowledged.

“I would like to speak with your permission, Akbar Uncle,” he whispered.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Akbar motioned kindly, allowing him to speak.

“Alhamdulillah, Farheen Auntie has never failed to show me the love of a true mother,” the boy smiled, bowing his head respectfully.

Abbas couldn’t help notice Isa’s eyes starting to water.

“When I was a child, I lost my parents. I never told anyone, but I remember the one who killed them.”

Akbar looked down. Abbas did as well. He was starting to fear he knew where this was going.

“It was Alpha 43,” Isa whispered. “I know it was him.”

The boy’s eyes were fully wet now. Other people were sad as well.

“This was more than fifteen years ago.”

Abbas’s eyes widened in horror. Akbar had stopped being Alpha 43... about 13 years ago.

But then...that meant that....that...Akbar killed Isa’s parents.

“I wanted to find and kill him...” a tear trickled down Isa’s cheek. “I pledged to avenge them.”

Akbar looked down, his eyes lowered with remorse

“I don’t know why I told you this Akbar Uncle,” the boy croaked. “All I know is this. I remember that when I gave up

on ever seeing a day in my life as a free man, you stood in front of us, leading us. Carrying the flag of Islam and bravely leading us into the battle of freedom. You trained me as a warrior. You made me falcon-hunter. And knowing who you are now..." the boy's lip quivered.

Isa's face turned pale, his eyes carrying a lost gaze.

"I understand that you were forced by that cursed device against your own will. The past is in the past, Akbar Uncle. I stand here today before you with open arms. I will follow you to death, Akbar Uncle!" he shouted. "I loved my parents, and I know they agree with me. Your path is the right path. I will not let the enemy deceive me."

Akbar jumped out of his chair, tears were flowing profusely from his eyes. He rushed forward, embracing Isa tightly.

"My brave, brave son, I am so sorry," he whispered. Then as his smile emerged like a sun rising from behind the cloud of tears, he said, "My dear boy, Islam thrives because of brave men like you."

Abbas got out of his chair, moving up to his brother in arms. His eyes were watering. He said nothing. He just wrapped his arms around Akbar and Isa. Nobody said anything, but everyone had tears in their eyes. They were all moved by Isa's words. Abbas sensed a strange pain in his friend's heart, now buried forevermore.

"Ya Zahra," Abbas whispered. "Help us defeat the enemy. Allow us to crush them like we did before."

"Ameen!" everyone shouted.

"Let our battle begin!" Akbar growled. "We will destroy them for coming back to our doorstep. Inshallah!"

27

Plans

“Alright,” Akbar called out. “What do we know?”

Reza started first.

“A man named Amr struck our Night of Heroes ceremony. I find the timing interesting. The Night of Heroes. A time when all of Peaceville would be paying attention. And at the time when Abbas received a medal for killing Alpha 43. Surely, this man is a skilled strategist.”

Everyone nodded. Ruqayya went next.

“Disturbances are occurring all over Peaceville. People are fighting and we have no idea why. Most recently, a brawl broke out at a supermarket. Three people wounded. And a man named Zafar is missing.”

Wham!

Akbar slammed his fist on the table.

“This man is trying to cause a civil war. But he has made a mistake. Violence doesn’t start this early. No. Something is afoot. We must divide our forces. Reza and Ruqayya, find out the reason for the disturbances and put an end to it. The disappearance seems like a good starting point. Find the man who disappeared. No doubt it is all linked.”

The couple glanced at each other nervously for a moment.

“You want us to work together?” Reza asked.

Akbar nodded.

“I know they see you as an Alpha Reza, but Ruqayya cannot

do this alone. She needs your support. Besides, I suspect malicious involvement of our enemies in these disturbances. A city like this doesn't get violent over night. Find out what the enemy is doing that is causing these issues. I am delegating the job of taking care of this to you."

Reza and Ruqayya nodded in acknowledgement. Abbas couldn't help feel a little happy. It was nice to see the pair working together. They were an effective team after all.

"Next," Akbar instructed. "Zahra, Maryam and Salma."

The three ladies bowed their heads respectfully.

"You three have an important job."

Maryam raised a brow.

"Amr already said too much by exposing us to be former Alphas. You three need to take care of this. Remove the doubt that plagues the minds of our people. Find the journalists you can trust...talk to charity, relief organisations. Convince people that Amr is the enemy and the fact that we were Alphas is not important anymore. This is an enemy's plan and they must realise it."

The three ladies bowed their heads respectfully. Abbas's eyes widened partially. Was Akbar splitting the hunters? Without Salma, there was just Abbas and Isa.

"You will be working under Farheen Auntie," Akbar whispered.

Farheen's eyes opened slightly at the mention of her name. She looked down for a moment before nodding in acknowledgement.

Abbas couldn't help notice that Farheen was looking a little reserved. Something was probably on her mind.

"Okay..." Akbar whispered. "That leaves us with the last team. Myself, Murtaza, Abbas, Isa and Jannat. 'With the first two teams responsible for stabilising Peaceville, our job will be to remove the cause of destabilisation. Amr.'"

Abbas's eyes lit up. This was the job he was most interested in. It was going to be hard, no doubt, but he was more than ready for the challenge.

"If any team has any issues, please consult me. Try not to disrupt another team by asking for help."

Abbas felt a rush of energy in his body. Three teams. Three

missions. One enemy.

“Is everyone clear on their role?” Akbar asked.

Abbas eyed everyone. They all seemed charged, a new energy was filling the room.

“Then let’s go,” Akbar whispered. “Inshallah, we will be successful in this endeavour.”

Abbas raised a brow. Had Akbar Uncle forgotten to assign a mission to Ali?

‘Probably not,’ Abbas concluded. ‘Ali Bhai is probably part of our squad.’

“Nara e Takbir!” Reza shouted.

“Allah hu Akbar!” Everyone answered loudly.

“Bismillah,” Akbar whispered. “We are at war.”

A Cup of Tea

It was the afternoon. The wind was weak today, not even moving the strands of grass. The dim light made the sun seem pale today. Aside from that, it was quiet.

Amr took a deep breath, calmly sipping a cup of tea. He watched the trees ahead, thinking carefully about his next move.

After all, he was not dealing with any ordinary opposition. He was facing the best Peaceville had to offer. And in order to succeed in his mission, he needed to ensure that he was at least ten steps ahead.

He needed a fallback for every plan, prepare for any outcome. Unlike his predecessor Alpha 43, Amr had chosen to spend time preparing his moves. And it had taken him almost a year to construct these plans. Now that things were in motion, he would need to be ready.

The people he worked for were powerful, the strongest in the world. Failure was as good as death for him. He could not risk messing up. The League. They were as dangerous as anyone could imagine.

On top of that, Amr knew that his opponents were not to be underestimated. They had defeated Alpha 43, the legendary assassin of all times. Amr had known the great warrior back in his days. By his real name.

“So Asghar,” Amr whispered, eyeing the gravestone before him. “Lets see how powerful your brother Akbar really is. Will

he be deceived or will he see past my traps? Can he prevent the impending doom that casts shadow over this city? I doubt it. Twelve months were spent in developing this plan. It is flawless. And you know the best part, Asghar? The best part is that Akbar will know everything before it happens, and he still won't be able to prevent it."

The Facts

Ruqayya yawned, resting her head against the car door. She winced in discomfort as her head jerked up once more.

“Sorry about that,” Reza whispered.

Ruqayya shrugged.

“It’s not like you can stop it from happening,” she answered.

Reza did not respond. He merely continued staring at the road. Ruqayya watched him, unable to recall how dramatically her life had changed in the last year. She had joined a revolution...lost her brother....gotten married.

‘There’s no way this year could be more eventful,’ she thought to herself.

“Do you remember when we first met?” Ruqayyaa asked her husband curiously.

Reza blinked. His answer was short.

“Yes. You raised a gun my way and were about to shoot me.”

Ruqayya’s lips curled into a grin.

“I couldn’t possibly know you were a spy,” she answered. “You really looked evil back then, you know in the Alpha uniform and all.”

Reza nodded, chuckling at the clothing he wore now, a simple kurta shalwar, hazel brown in colour..

“Times change hmmm,” he stated. “Now we’re working together, trying to find a man who has disappeared.”

That was the main issue on the couple's mind as they drove on. They were the first team. Their mission...ending the sources of violence in the city, and as Akbar had recommended, they were starting with the disappearance of a man named Zafar.

Ruqayya noticed Reza's eyes were narrowed as if he was in deep thought.

"What's on your mind, Reza?" she asked.

Reza looked at his wife.

"I'm just thinking about some research I did on Zafar, you know the man who disappeared."

Ruqayya raised a brow.

"You did research on Zafar," she repeated slowly. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Reza's eyes widened in surprise.

"I...I mean..." he faltered.

Ruqayya narrowed her eyes. Why would he do this?

"Reza, we're a team. We have to work together."

She eyed him warily as he nodded in acknowledgement.

"I know I know...I'm...I guess I'm just used to working alone," Reza remarked.

Ruqayya suppressed her annoyance. She didn't like the fact that Reza was already keeping things from her with regards to the investigation. That was when it happened. A sudden pain struck her head, a mild headache. She placed a hand on her temple, wincing slightly. Ruqayya closed her eyes. What was going on?

She shuddered uncomfortably.

"Ruqayya, Ruqayya," she blinked, hearing Reza's voice.

"Alhamdulillah," Reza sighed in relief. "Are you okay?"

Ruqayya nodded. That had been strange while it lasted.

"Hopefully that won't happen again, Inshallah," Ruqayya prayed silently.

She needed to be at her top game for this mission. As the car went on, she began to appreciate the view. It was beautiful and much different than most normal roads. It had beautiful scenic views on all sides. Another thing was that it was full of surprises, twisting and turning every few seconds.

"Only half hour to go," Reza announced.

Ruqayya yawned. Maybe she should rest while that happened. If the car would stop jumping up and down that is. A sudden thought occurred to her.

“Where are we heading Reza?”

Reza took a deep breath.

“We’re going to meet the woman who reported Zafar’s disappearance,” he stated.

Ruqayya raised a brow.

“I don’t understand,” she stated.

Reza nodded.

“Let me start from the beginning,” he decided. “See, Zafar is the name of a man who has vanished without a trace.”

Ruqayya knew this already but she paid close attention.

“His wife, Farha, reported his disappearance the following evening. According to her complaint, she claims he left for work that day but never came back. She waited the whole night for him...contacted everyone she knew, and then decided to call the authorities.”

Ruqayya narrowed her eyes.

“What do you mean never came back? Didn’t anyone see him?”

Reza sighed.

“I don’t know. That’s why we’re headed there. I’m going to drop you off at Zafar’s home. You’ll speak with Farha and try to find what you can.”

Ruqayya nodded in acknowledgement.

“Where will you go?” she asked.

Reza glanced at her for a moment.

“I will explore a bit elsewhere and see what I can learn.”

Ruqayya had no issues with the plan.

“Seems fine. Let’s do it Inshallah,” she answered.

“Inshallah,” Reza whispered. “I pray we’re not too late. Zafar has a daughter who is barely four to five years old.”

Ruqayya had never seen Reza like this.

“Don’t worry,” she assured. “Allah will help us Inshallah.”

30

Arrival

“Alright,” Reza grinned. “Almost there.”

Ruqayya sighed, raising her head up. She blinked, her eyes dazed from sleeping throughout the drive.

“There’s no way.....that drive... was half hour,” Ruqayya remarked between yawns.

Reza chuckled.

“You’re right. It was actually twenty six minutes,” he answered with a smile on his face as she yawned once more. Surely it wouldn’t hurt to take a few more-

Beep!

“Ay!” Ruqayya squeaked, jumping in her seat.

Reza grinned.

“Are you awake now?” he asked with a smirk.

Ruqayya, now wide awake, shook her head in disapproval. Reza had some nerve slamming the horn like that. No matter what, she would get him back for this.

She might have responded, but something caught her eye.

“Allah, what is going on there?” she gasped.

A bunch of people were gathered together up ahead, tightly packed like a herd of elephants. They were holding signs and waving them wildly. Reza’s eyes narrowed for a moment, before widening in alarm.

“Ruqayya, down now!” he gasped.

Ruqayya blinked, frozen in her spot. What was going on?

“Ruqayya!” Reza hissed.

Ruqayya ducked, leaning down so that her face wasn't visible to outsiders.

Immediately, the ex-Alpha leaned down, so that his face was behind the steering wheel. Ruqayya didn't understand. What happened? Why was Reza getting so agitated? Who were those people. She felt a lurch in her stomach as Reza casually turned the car around, and began driving away from the group of people.

“Reza, what happened?” Ruqayya asked anxiously.

Reza shook his head in disapproval, his eyes glancing back only once.

“Next time I tell you something Ruqayya, please listen to me,” he chided. “Those people were anti-government protesters.”

Ruqayya's eyes widened in alarm. Anti-government? No wonder Reza was so worried. Those people might have gone violent at the sight of Reza, and unfortunately, everyone knew that Ruqayya was married to him. If they saw her, they would have known that Reza was there as well. Reza was only trying to protect her. And himself.

“What now?” Ruqayya asked. “It's not like you can speak to Farha now.”

Reza narrowed his eyes, and Ruqayya knew that his mind was racing with the possible moves they could make.

“You got your gun?” Reza asked abruptly.

Ruqayya nodded.

Reza narrowed his eyes.

“You will speak to Farha. I'll do some investigating in the area. Let's see what I can find. We'll meet up in two hours, Inshallah,” Reza explained. “Be careful and watch yourself.”

Ruqayya nodded once more. As she turned to leave, Reza stopped her.

“Ruqayya,” he stopped awkwardly. “I didn't...I'm sorry for how I reacted where the protesters were.”

Ruqayya raised a brow. She wasn't expecting this.

“It's alright Reza...” she answered.

He shouldn't have felt bad for yelling. She knew he was only trying to protect both himself and her. She wouldn't hold that

against him.

Ruqayya smiled.

“See you in two hours, Inshallah,” she grinned.

Reza nodded with a soft smile on his face.

And with that, Ruqayya opened her door and exited the vehicle. Feeling the reassuring bulge of her pistol, she stepped back. Reza met her gaze one last time before driving on.

“Alright,” Ruqayya whispered, focusing her mind on the matter at hand. “Lets talk to Mrs. Farha.”

31

Mrs. Farha

Ever been to a strange place? A place that gave you goosebumps? Maybe there was some uncanny phenomena about that place. Strange lights...mist...maybe even a strange or creepy person who lived there?

For Ruqayya, she had never seen a place more stranger than this one.

The house was normal in size, but painted electric blue. Some parts of the fence were decayed pieces of wood while others were finely painted. There was the distinct smell of seaweed. Probably due to the buckets of fish in the corner. The yard was empty and the rugs were spread over the grass.

“Why have they laid rugs like this,” Ruqayya’s eyes widened incredulously. “They’ll get spoilt.”

Clearly, Farha was a strange lady. Ruqayya took a deep breath, and with that, she stepped inside. Her eyes spotted an old sign. Ruqayya strained her eyes to read what it said.

‘Zafar and Farha’s home.’

Ruqayya stepped forward.

Squealch!

She continued on, ignoring the weird squelching noise under her shoes with each step. Upon reaching the door, she raised her hand and knocked.

It was an old fashioned door, and Ruqayya couldn’t help note that the dimensions were off. The door did not fit perfectly, as if

someone hadn't cut the bottom part of the door evenly.

'Probably a home-made door,' she wondered.

Which meant that this family was in financial trouble. This may have been the house of a fisherman, but nobody would make their own door if they could afford to buy a new one. Ruqayya sighed impatiently. She could hear pattering from inside, and voices.

Thud!

Ruqayya raised a brow. What was going on? Perhaps a child running up the stairs?

The door creaked open.

"Asalam-" Ruqayya stopped, her eyes widening in surprise.

A man stood there, taller than her.

"Asalamu alaikum," Ruqayya greeted, narrowing her eyes.

The man bowed his head respectfully.

"Walaikum asalam. Can I help you, sister?" he asked kindly.

Ruqayya eyed him warily.

"I'd like to speak with Mrs. Farha, please," she asked.

The man narrowed his eyes.

"Sorry, she's not here right now."

Ruqayya raised a brow. That was odd. Most people would probably not be out and about if their spouse was missing. And who was this man?

The man began to close the door.

"If that's all I-"

"I'm a government officer," Ruqayya interrupted him. "I am here to speak with Mrs. Farha. Tell her I wish to speak with her."

The man couldn't have had a slower reaction. First he blinked, then his eyes widened in alarm as though he was only just starting to understand who Ruqayya was. Next, his face turned red with embarrassment.

"I'm so s-sorry officer," he faltered. "Forgive my foolishness."

His nervousness was visible in his eyes.

"My name is Hamid," he explained. "I'm Farha's older brother. I told you she wasn't here because she asked me to say so. She's running a bit upset and doesn't like meeting with anyone nowadays."

Ruqayya nodded. She was growing tired of Hamid.

“Call your sister please,” she asked for the last time. “I want to speak with her privately.”

The man nodded respectfully and opened the door wide for Ruqayya to enter. As she stepped inside, he strolled into the kitchen.

“Farha,” Ruqayya heard his voice echo. “Someone from the government is here to see you.”

Ruqayya took a deep breath. Reza was counting on her to get as much information as possible. Surely, Farha had some idea, some clue that might indicate something about Zafar’s disappearance. The creaking of footsteps could be clearly heard. Ruqayya forced a kind smile as Farha stepped into the room.

She was a short lady, significantly shorter than Ruqayya. She had beady eyes and a tinge of red could be seen in her eyes.

‘Excessive crying or lack of sleep,’ Ruqayya thought to herself.

“Asalamu alaikum,” Farha muttered in a low voice.

Ruqayya smiled.

“Walaikum asalam. Where’s your daughter?”

Farha’s eyes widened slightly.

“She’s sleeping,” the short lady answered.

Ruqayya nodded, gesturing for the woman to take a seat.

“I want you to know that first of all, the government is searching for your husband everywhere. we have our finest investigators on the job and we do not intend to leave any stone unturned.” Ruqayya assured her. “I’m certain we’ll find Agha Zafar soon Inshallah.”

Farha nodded hesitantly.

“You’re Ruqayya,” she whispered.

Ruqayya refrained from showing any signs of frustration at being recognised.

“Your husband is an Alpha,” Farha scoffed.

Ruqayya did not respond. If this was what Farha was focused on over Zafar’s disappearance, then she needed to seriously evaluate her priorities. Besides, Ruqayya understood more than anyone what it was like to lose someone to the Alphas. Her own beloved brother Naqi was killed by the cruelest of them all, Alpha 43.

“Tell me about Zafar,” Ruqayya ignored her comment. “What happened on the day he vanished?”

Farha looked down, scratching her hand.

“My daughter and I were at the ‘Night of Heroes’ event. Zafar wasn’t. He had to work late. And honestly, I’m glad he did. He didn’t have to see the shame-”

“When did you suspect that something was wrong?” Ruqayya overspoke calmly. Farha needed to focus on Zafar’s disappearance.

Farha shrugged.

“A little after midnight I began to worry. I waited and waited but he wouldn’t show up. That’s when I began contacting his colleagues to find out if they knew where he was.”

Ruqayya raised a brow. This woman was strangely calm for someone whose husband had gone missing. This behaviour was odd.

“Did anything seem different that day?” Ruqayya prompted. “Something different about Mr. Zafar that caught your attention?”

Farha blinked, looking down.

“No,” she breathed.

Ruqayya raised a brow, eyeing Farha suspiciously.

“Nothing happened,” Farha added quietly.

Ruqayya shook her head in disapproval. Either this woman knew nothing about her husband’s disappearance, or she knew everything. But there was something strange in her behaviour.

“Can you tell me anything that might be of use to us?” Ruqayya asked.

Farha shook her head.

“I don’t know anything.”

Ruqayya narrowed her eyes. That was a weird response. Almost defensive. And in all honesty, Ruqayya had never really done this before, so she wasn’t sure what to make of it.

“If that’s all, then please excuse me,” Farha spoke suddenly.

She got up to leave but Ruqayya stopped her.

“You seem to be in an awful hurry to finish this discussion,” she remarked. “What’s the rush?”

Farha blinked.

“I’m just tired. Please find my husband if you can.”

Ruqayya's head tilted slightly in uncertainty. Maybe she was overthinking this? It would be good to check.

"Ok," Ruqayya decided. "But first I'd like to speak with your brother, please."

Farha blinked.

"Who?"

Ruqayya raised a brow.

"You know, Hamid."

Farah coughed.

"Oh, oh I see. Sorry, I have multiple brothers."

As if on cue, a man strolled inside the room. Hamid.

"Sorry, officer," he grinned. "My sister gets us confused sometimes. It's okay Farah, sit."

Farah glanced at Hamid once before assuming her seat once more. On a separate couch, Hamid sat down.

Ruqayya couldn't help notice how composed Hamid was. Maybe he was the reason why Farah was so relaxed. Whatever the case was, it was time to get some answers.

"So, where do you live?" Ruqayya asked, turning to Hamid.

Hamid sighed.

"I live quite far from here actually. I'm a mechanic by profession. I've come here to support Farah."

Ruqayya nodded.

"Do you have any brothers?" she asked.

Hamid narrowed his eyes.

"I do, though none of them are here right now."

Ruqayya raised a brow.

"Farah asked me which brother I'd like to speak to. I assumed that meant multiple brothers were in the house?"

Hamid's eyes widened slightly.

"Oh I see," he chuckled. "Actually Farah didn't know. My younger brother has gone out on some errands at the moment."

Ruqayya looked down. There was something incredibly odd about this household. She couldn't explain what, but Hamid was very well spoken for a humble mechanic, and Farah was exceptionally composed. Even though, as Ruqayya had noted earlier, her eyes were red which meant that she was probably

crying all night, or even sleepless all night. But a composed person wouldn't be crying or sleepless.

She wasn't sure. If only Reza was here. His training and experience would have proven to be invaluable here.

'I should come back here with Reza,' she decided.

She turned to face Farah. It was then when it happened. A sudden dizziness struck her. Ruqayya held a hand over her mouth. She felt like she might throw up.

'What is happening to me?' She thought to herself.

She closed her eyes and it was gone. Her headache, her nausea, all of it. Ruqayya suppressed a shudder, sitting upright.

"I have to go for now," she paused, eyeing Farah and Hamid. "I'll be back sometime after Maghrib. I assume your other brother would be home then as well."

Hamid nodded in acknowledgement.

"Of course," he bowed his head respectfully.

Ruqayya nodded, and with that, she got up to leave.

"Khuda hafiz for now," she sighed. "Inshallah, we'll find Mr. Zafar."

"Inshallah," Hamid answered.

Silence. Ruqayya turned to Farah who had an uncannily lost look in her eyes.

"Oh Inshallah," Farah added.

Ruqayya narrowed her eyes. This woman was very weird. Reza would know how to handle her.

She bowed her head respectfully and began heading to the door. As she left, she couldn't help feel a bit disappointed. She had ultimately learnt nothing of importance. Nothing at all.

'I hope Reza is having better success than me,' she thought to herself.

32

Strategy

“What are we going to do?” Maryam asked.

It was the question in everyone’s mind. The trouble was that nobody really had a definite answer.

In the last four hours since Akbar Uncle had delegated the responsibilities, the second team led by Farheen had decided to draw out an effective plan before attempting to handle their arduous task. The task of helping people move past the fact that Akbar, Murtaza, Reza and Salma were Alphas.

The huge pile of crumpled papers in the corner indicated their progress so far.

“Maybe we can host an event with all the community ladies,” Zahra suggested. “If we could convince them, then they could, in turn, convince their families.”

“We need to open people’s eyes” Farheen added. “We need to remind them who the real enemy is. Just like Abbas did more than a year ago.”

Everyone glanced at Farheen curiously.

“What do you mean?” Zahra asked.

Everyone eyed her as if she had asked something wrong.

“What?” Zahra repeated a little defensively. “Abbas has done a lot of things for the revolution.”

Maryam sighed.

“I remember it well,” she answered. “At the old hay fields, it was the first time the hunters fought together. We killed two

Alphas that night, and brought their bodies before everyone.”

“That night you also tackled me outside a window,” Salma chuckled. “Oh, how it had hurt, landing on the ground directly, with you on top.”

Maryam looked down sheepishly.

“I didn’t know at that time,” she answered with a small grin.

Farheen coughed politely.

“The people,” she croaked. “They cannot be allowed to forget all that Akbar has done for them.”

Maryam raised a brow. Was she imagining it or was Farheen looking a bit down? Her face was slightly pale. Maybe she was feeling ill.

“We should contact the journalists,” Salma suggested. “Media can be used to change how people think. In fact, it is already used to control the masses. It is, undoubtedly, the most effective tool.”

“We’re not trying to control them!” Zahra was defensive. “We’re trying to convince them.”

Maryam’s eyes widened slightly. She flashed her sister a quizzical glance. She had never seen Zahra like this before. Maybe the word control had triggered her. Maryam could understand.

Zahra was the most scarred one of her siblings as far as the Alphas and C-gun went. She, unlike Maryam and Jafar, was old enough to not only remember when their parents had died, but she also knew what was going on at that time. Up until a year ago, Zahra was the only one who shared the burden of knowing that Akbar was an Alpha. No one else knew that.

Farheen narrowed her eyes.

“I like both ideas. So, I think we will do both,” the old lady decided. “Maryam, you will help your sister distribute flyers for the event. And Salma and I will have a word with the press.”

Everyone nodded.

“Inshallah we will win this,” Zahra whispered.

Everyone chimed in together, “Ameen!”

33

Pain

The storm had been unyielding. Hours of howling winds and buckets of snow pelting down from the heavens in a true display of nature's fury. It roared with the ferocity of an angry lion, its icy breath stabbing the lungs of every mortal soul. Had Ilyas known no different, he would have thought that the storm was alive. But, as is the end of all that lives, it too gasped its final breath in the piercing rays of the morning sun. You could see the remains of its wrath, fallen trees and small stretches of snow and ice that shrunk under the blazing ball of fire. Just like everything else in his life, the storm that helped him escape had vanished.

He knew Hafeez had never truly loved him. After all, love was like servitude, an uncontrollable loyalty and a true man only held loyalty to one thing, himself. Hafeez had taught him that. Foolish showering of affections were for boys like Musa. He clenched his fist at the memory.

Despite all that, there was a vacant abyss in his life, tearing his heart apart. He missed the companion who offered him a shoulder and a kind ear after his father's excessive scoldings. He missed the gruff voice that guided him into being a true man. He missed the smirking face that watched the world with eagle eyes, someone who saw his protege on the throne. The man who assured him that he was destined for greatness, who taught him how to stand in life's way and demand from it.

The same man who now lay beneath the ground, with nothing

more than a memory to his name. His uncle was not well-liked amongst the sheep-minded followers of his father but he had given Ilyas more than his own scolding, overbearing father ever had. He may bear his father's blood, but in all manners, he considered himself as his uncle's son. He was the best marksman, most vicious hunter and feared fighter in the tribe.

At least, until Hamza came along.

"Hamza," growled Ilyas, tightly gripping the bag with the strange metal box he had stolen earlier. The scrawny bane of his existence. His uncle hadn't thought much of him, and that very notion was his undoing. Hamza had surprised everyone with his strength. He had defiled the reputable and honourable image of his uncle in the eyes of all the tribe. And the worst was that he got away with it. Everyone had known. Everyone one had seen the eyes of his uncle, the reflection of the demonic claws and fangs growing in his widened irises. The mountain of regret pouring forth as his gut wrenching scream tore through the air, fading into a gurgled choke by the lethal onslaught of those animals.

Ilyas had wanted to turn away but he was frozen. Stuck watching the bravest man he knew kneel to the scythe of Death. Lingering on the image of light vanishing from his uncle's gaze, watching those thrice damned creatures tear out his throat. He could still feel the dread that had gripped his heart. His shoes and clothes still stained with the flecks of his uncle's spilt blood.

"Blood that I will avenge" he growled, clenching his sword tightly.

Watching the distant smoke from his village, no, his *former* village, he whispered to the wind, "I will destroy you Hamza. I will make you grieve the day you set foot in *my home*." His gaze drifted down. "Starting with this mysterious box."

34

Lost Possessions

“Where is it?” Hamza grunted.

The grass seemed to stretch on for miles. It was still damp from the snow of the previous days.

Hamza narrowed his eyes as he studied the area once more. This had been the place where Hafeez and Ilyas had attacked him. This had been the place where he had fought them in the snow storm several days ago. And yet this was where he last remembered his box. He had put it on the floor to fight them.

Where had it gone now? Where could it have disappeared? Surely no animal had taken it. The weather had been violent, but the box was definitely heavy enough to stay put. In addition, Hamza knew from experience that it would not have corroded. He had tried many ways to open it in the last year. But none of them had worked.

Sometimes, Hamza wondered why he had that box? What clue did it contain to his identity? Who was he? Why did he know how to fight so well? Maybe he was an athlete? But he was also greatly knowledgeable in maths, physics, political science and other such subjects? Was he a professor who enjoyed working out in the gym?

Hamza shrugged as he eyed the ground once more. It didn't seem like anything was here. Maybe someone had picked it up? Hamza's heart sank. Most likely Hafeez or Ilyas would have taken it. No. Not Ilyas. Young men typically were not interested in

boxes of this kind. It was more likely that a greedy man like Hafeez had taken it.

Hamza's eyes widened in dismay. Hafeez could have dropped it anywhere. If it fell in the river, he might never find it.

'Think' Hamza thought to himself. 'What would Hafeez do?'

This was a man who would turn a son against his father for his own gain. He was shameless. And greedy. Chances were that he wouldn't let the box go that easily. Maybe he had brought it back with him? Hamza's heart skipped a beat. Maybe it was still there?

He turned in the direction of the tribe, and began jogging. He wanted to get there fast. If his box was there, he would take it and leave this tribe he had been stuck in for so many days. As he went, he couldn't help notice a thin black streak of smoke in the air. Smoke? Was the forest on fire?

Hamza scrambled over to the nearest tree. It was thin. He grabbed hold of it, and began climbing up. Maybe he could get a better view of things from it's height. As he reached the first branch, he winced.

A splinter must have struck him deep. Hamza wrapped his legs around the tree, gripping it tightly as he began examining his hand. It wasn't deep. He could pull it out. Carefully, he did so, before climbing up once more. His eyes darted ahead.

There was no fire. So where was the smoke coming from? Hamza climbed higher, until he was well above the ground. He narrowed his eyes. The fire was coming from the mountains.

'Someone must be staying there,' he thought to himself. 'I should head back to the tribe.'

And with that thought, Hamza began his descent. He needed to find his box. And the only place left was the tribe. If it wasn't there then it had to be with Ilyas.

The Hunt Begins

Abbas felt his heart pound in his chest with adrenaline as he watched everyone around him. Isa was looking pumped. Murtaza had a serious look on his face. Abbas's eyes drifted to Akbar who was deep in thought.

This was the team Abbas wanted to be in. The place where the action was actually happening. Whilst everyone else dealt with not so pressing matters, Abbas's team was going to lead retaliation against the enemy. Abbas narrowed his eyes. He had unfinished business with Amr, and deep down, Abbas could not deny that he was dying for the chance to confront the hooded figure. Face to face. No deception. Just a good old fashioned fist fight.

Abbas was confident he'd win. After all, had he not defeated Alpha 43? What chance did Amr have?

The door swung open, snapping Abbas's train of thought. He turned to see who had entered, frowning immediately. It was Jannat.

She was one person who in Abbas's view, did not deserve to be here after her failure on the Night of Heroes. Abbas couldn't understand how she had the nerve to be here. It was her fault that they were in this mess. She had guaranteed that the system was secure and that no hacker would be able to penetrate it. And yet it happened. What good was she if she couldn't stop the enemy? On top of that, she couldn't even stop Amr from interfering with

the communication link, and as a result, Abbas almost died. He would have been blown to bits by that bomb Amr had planted, had he not figured out Amr's trap in time.

"Akbar Uncle," Jannat began. "I have processed and prepared the data that the Alphas tried to steal."

Abbas's eyes widened slightly.

'At least she can do something right,' he thought to himself.

Finally. This was what they were looking for. After hours spent on drawing up any potential leads. A huge list of suspects ranging from Alphas to members of the revolution, like Kadhim, people who might have some vendetta against Akbar, Murtaza, Reza, Salma or Peaceville in general. They could finally work on more than just conjectures.

"This is the same data that Masud, Yahya and Wahiba tried to steal, right?" Isa asked.

Akbar nodded.

"Let's see what data our enemy was so desperately after."

Jannat nodded, pulling a small USB from her pocket. She plugged it in her computer, before connecting her computer to the projector.

Abbas felt his heart pounding excitedly. If there was a lead on Amr, no doubt it would be here.

The screen flickered a blue and green image. Well not exactly. In all honesty, it was quite strange. There was a streak of greenish yellow colour in the middle, surrounded by blue. There was a red dot hovering over the greenish yellow region. Abbas narrowed his eyes. This picture was strange.

"What is this?" Abbas voiced his confusion.

"It's an island," Murtaza deduced.

Abbas's eyes widened in partial surprise. He had never seen such a view of a land mass before.

"This is satellite imagery," Akbar explained. "Meaning that these pictures were taken by a satellite. And I believe I know this island."

Abbas raised a brow, waiting for Akbar's deduction.

"Given the shape of the land, I'm inclined to believe that this is another island near Peaceville, called Deathville. So named

because it's barren." Akbar added.

Abbas could not believe it. He held his left hand with his right and gave it a tight squeeze. He had never seen outside of Peaceville before.

"Do other people live outside of Peaceville?" Isa asked curiously.

Murtaza placed a hand on Isa's shoulder.

"Why yes my boy," he remarked. "Plenty of people live on the other islands. In fact, this island was normal as well once, before Jumeira took it for her own greed."

Abbas narrowed his eyes, a sudden question entering his mind.

"Why have we not had any interaction with the outside world in the last year?" he asked.

Akbar eyed Murtaza, who took a deep breath.

"My son, Murtaza answered. "Because of the war that continues to rage in the archipelago and at the moment, we are not prepared to face it. Jumeira took extensive measures to hide this island from the rest of the world. She sent Alphas to plunder travelling ships, spreading myths of pirates and bandits. She installed advanced cloaking technology, so satellites do not detect Peaceville as a land mass. There are definitely more such measures that she had taken. So in simple terms, thanks to Jumeira, we're *invisible* to the rest of the world."

Abbas felt strange butterflies in his stomach. Nobody knew that they were here. That was both a powerful and dangerous advantage Peaceville had. It made Abbas wonder for a moment, would Peaceville ever be discovered by the outside world? And if so, how would the war torn archipelago perceive them?

"Is that the only file in the drive," Akbar asked, breaking Abbas's thoughts.

Jannat shook her head.

"No," she answered. "There's also a document. Here, I'm pulling it up right now."

The screen changed to a mix of black and white. A document of some kind. Abbas narrowed his eyes, reading the heading.

"Project CV?" he read, flashing Isa a quizzical glance.

Isa shrugged in response.

"I've never heard of it," he stated.

Abbas began reading it out loud.

Project CV Objective: Ultimate control.

Abbas shuddered uncomfortably. He didn't like the sound of that.

Scientists: Sohail Farukh, Absaar Yousefi, Layla Murtaza

Abbas's eyes widened in surprise. He flashed a glance at Akbar and Murtaza in surprise. His mother was a scientist and Abbas knew that she had worked on the C-gun. But he didn't know that she had worked on other projects as well. How big of a role did she have in the creation of Jumeira's empire? Abbas shuddered. His mother was a pious woman. What happened in the past was in the past.

But Abbas had overlooked something. He wasn't the only one viewing this sensitive information. He heard a gasp on his left. Isa was surprised to see that Abbas's mother was equally involved in the work of Jumeira as Akbar and Murtaza. Abbas ignored Isa's reaction and continued on.

Status: Box missing, Faiza missing

Box missing? What box? What significance did a box have? And Faiza? Was that someone's name? Who was she in that case? Abbas's head was spinning up questions faster than he could process.

"What does that mean?" Jannat thought out loud.

Abbas had no idea. He was quite surprised. Normally his deductive reasoning never failed him, but this document, so far, had provided nothing that shed light on who wanted the data, or Amr, or anything for that matter. He glanced at Akbar, who was looking down, his eyes narrowed and clearly deep in thought.

"Are you okay, Akbar Uncle?" Abbas asked, suddenly bringing the entire attention of the room on the ex-Alpha.

Akbar blinked, looking up at Abbas. Abbas held his gaze, trying to read what Akbar was thinking. But that was in vain. Nobody could read Akbar. And nobody could ever predict what he would do next.

"Jannat," he instructed. "Close the projector, and give me the USB."

Abbas flashed a glance at his father, who seemed equally

confused.

“This information is now classified,” Akbar declared. “Nobody except Murtaza or I will view this.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Akbar was too serious too suddenly. One minute ago he was okay with viewing the data with everyone. Why all of sudden he was being so secretive?

‘Sounds like Akbar Uncle hasn’t shared all of his secrets with us,’ Abbas thought to himself.

Akbar took hold of the USB.

“For now, this meeting is concluded. I need to look into something with Murtaza,” he paused, glancing at Abbas, Isa and Jannat. “You three sit tight and wait until I get back to you.”

“You want us to do nothing?” Isa asked hesitantly.

Akbar shook his head.

“I want you to investigate for any anomalies in the Night of Heroes ceremony. See if you can pick up a lead. There’s no way Amr could pull this off without leaving a few loose ends. Find them before he gets rid of those traces.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes. This felt like that moment when the adult gives a toy to the children to distract them. And Abbas didn’t want to be treated like that. But he knew better than to argue against Akbar’s wisdom.

Akbar gestured respectfully for the trio to leave. Jannat was the first to be on her feet. Abbas blinked and she was at the door, leaving. Abbas then watched Isa stand up. As he reached the door, he glanced back at Abbas.

Abbas got to his feet and slowly moved to the door. Isa left. Abbas extended his hand towards the door but stopped. He turned around to face Akbar. He needed to know something.

“I have a question,” Abbas stated.

Akbar narrowed his eyes.

“Abbas,” Murtaza scolded. “Not now, can’t you see-”

“It’s okay Murtaza,” Akbar answered. “What bothers you, Abbas?”

Abbas took a deep breath.

“Where were you two on the Night of Heroes? I never saw you anywhere.”

Murtaza eyed Akbar.

“Abbas, I won’t lie to you,” he sighed. “But unfortunately, I cannot tell you.”

Well, if that wasn’t suspicious Abbas didn’t know what was. What was Akbar hiding? Where had he gone that night? Was it a coincidence that Ibrahim had also vanished that night? Abbas would have asked more, but he knew that there was no point persisting. Abbas bowed his head respectfully and turned to leave. Just as he reached the door, he heard Akbar call.

“Abbas.”

The young captain stopped, glancing back at Akbar.

“I mean it this time,” Akbar repeated calmly. “All will be told in good time. For now, trust us. Do not dig further into this matter.”

Abbas nodded. And with that, he turned to leave. As he left, his mind was in a whirl.

‘This is all one big puzzle. And I have to piece these random pieces together,’ he thought to himself. ‘I won’t be a pawn in this game.’

Abbas was going to get to the bottom of this entire mystery. Amr, the mysterious data, everything. He wasn’t going to wait for anyone else to work it out.

“I’m taking matters in my own hands now,” Abbas decided.

36

The Market

Fish. A lot of fish. Of every shape and size. There were finned ones that lay as flat as a sheet of paper and bulky masses of marine life that should be in a museum. Some he couldn't recognize amidst a mass of fins and meat. Not exactly Reza's cup of tea but the location was perfect if one wanted to hide in plain sight.

Hulking fishermen meandered around tightly packed stalls, their hands always laden with some menacing looking tool or hook. Thick heavy boots smacked against a roughly paved road of scuffed asphalt slick with pools of salt water. Melting ice dribbled down the corner of ice boxes in murky rivulets whose look had his stomach churning in a nauseating manner. He wasn't very keen on the coppery smell of gutted fish either. The local stall owners were, on the other hand, unbothered and called out their goods with pride and zeal.

The more eager salesmen, in the small form of raggedy sea shanty clothing clad boys ran up to him with boxes of frozen mackerel and sardines like they were candies.

"Salam alaikum, fancy yourself a batch of sardines, sir? Just came in with the morning tide! Fresher than the salt of the sea shore!"

He smiled and shook his head.

"Walaikum asalam. What's your name, boy?"

He gave a toothy grin. "Ahsan, sir. Joinin' me father's business. Belonged to his father before him. Go back generations we do."

Ain't nobody got better catch than us. We would even gut them ourselves if folks like you don't wanna sully that shirt. Mighty nice. Maybe too nice to wear around here. I scrub up pretty nice when I do. My mo—

“I'm guessing you're quite the salesman. Ever considered doing something like that?”

The boy smiled wider than Reza thought. “Mighty kind of you sir, but my family be married to the sea. That include me too, sir. Can't even sleep without the sound of the waves hitting the backyard.”

Reza grinned. This boy was verbose. That was good. It meant that he was more susceptible to letting something slip.

“I guess you must know everyone here,” Reza remarked eyeing one of the fish.

The youth nodded, unaware of how much attention Reza was giving to his movements and facial gestures.

“Not just know, me done business with most of 'em here. Me dad has a lot of partnerships and stuff.”

Reza forced his eyes to widen pretending to be intrigued.

“So, do you know of a fisherman named Zafar?”

The boy shrugged.

“Can't say me have, sir,” he answered. “But me recommend that if anyone would know your friend, it'd be the creepy man.”

Reza raised a brow.

“Which creepy man?” he asked.

The youth's eyes widened, almost as if he was offended that Reza didn't know. But what the boy did next was even weirder. He glanced left and right as if to make sure that no one was listening. Reza narrowed his eyes as the youth leaned in close.

“He's a fearsome fisherman, he is. Lives at the edge of the market. You'll know 'em when you see 'em.”

Reza nodded. His mind was already racing back to when he first entered the area. He didn't recall seeing anyone there with a particularly 'creepy' disposition. So most likely, the child was referring to the other side of the market. The edge opposite to where Reza entered from.

“Very well, lad,” Reza smiled. “Off you go, I’m afraid I’m not looking for any mackerel or sardines today.”

The boy shrugged unabashed, adjusting the open box in his hand. “Suit yourself sir but you’re missing out. Allah hafiz.”

And with a wave he was off calling out his wares to the loitering crowds, weaving in and out of the people much like a small sardine himself.

Reza turned back to his main aim. He had to find this man. This individual who supposedly knew everyone.

Quietly, he began moving ahead. As Reza went, he scanned his surroundings, just like Akbar had taught him. Nothing seemed odd.

Reza raised a brow.

An old man stood by the corner of the street. In his hand, he held a small bucket of fish hooks. A pang of pain struck Reza’s heart. This man was old enough to be Reza’s father, and here he was, working away at a job beyond his physical capability.

Reza couldn’t explain it, but something captivated him about the stall. And he found himself drawn to it. Reza strolled over to the old man.

“Asalamualaikum Uncle,” he greeted kindly.

The old man looked up, coughing.

“Walaikum asalam,” he answered. “How are you, dear boy?”

Reza smiled kindly.

“I am fine Alhamdullillah. I couldn’t help notice the stall. I’d like to purchase some fish hooks from you, please.”

The look on his face would remain in Reza’s head forever. He was overjoyed.

“How much for one?” Reza asked.

The old man named a pitiful price, barely an income worth staying in the market for.

“I will buy the entire bucket,” Reza grinned.

The old man’s eyes lit up.

“My son,” he exclaimed. “Can you afford that much?”

Reza nodded.

“Alhamdullillah. Here,” Reza handed a pouch to the elderly man.

The man managed a weak smile.

“Thank you my boy,” he grinned toothily.

And with that, Reza watched as the elderly man got up and walked away, with a pouch of money three times more than the price he had named to Reza. Reza grinned, recalling the 274th verse of Surah Baqarah,

‘Those who spend their wealth [in Allah ’s way] by night and by day, secretly and publicly - they will have their reward with their Lord. And no fear will there be concerning them, nor will they grieve.’

“That should be more than enough for you to improve your working conditions,” Reza whispered. “Allah, help us all in our times of need Inshallah. Now it’s time I find that *creepy man*.”

The Creepy Man

'It could be worse' Reza consoled himself. He was lugging a large bucket of pointed hooks. He constantly shifted his hands, a wary eye on the menacing and gleaming points. The other was on the crowd, his eyes sweeping across the crowds.

"Hey!" A voice shouted, followed by the cacophony of wood snapping. Everyone was craning their necks to see but kept moving about their business. Many of the stall owners shook their head and continued unperturbed.

"Looks like fighting is quite common here." Gripping his bucket tightly, he slipped into the wave of bodies. Squeezing and maneuvering himself around people, and trying not to impale anyone, he finally made his way to where the sound came from.

A disgruntled fisherman who was gathering the remains of what was probably a wooden crate. The area by his dinghy was littered with small fish as big as Reza's hand, many of them flopping half-heartedly on the slick wood. The man was furiously under his breath and sending glares across the pier. Reza followed his look and knew this was the man the boy was talking about.

Creepy was the best way to describe him. The man was tall, but not as big as the other muscled men roaming the dock. He was lanky but something in the way he sat told Reza that he was stronger than he looked. Mangy, stained clothes hung limply from his slender frame, underneath a thick sleeveless jacket of worn leather. A loose belt was slung around his waist and Reza

almost thought that it was a trick of the light when he noticed an unsheathed knife dangling from it. He was turned away, looking out to sea so Reza didn't know what he looked like.

"Could you hang onto these?" Reza asked a chubby salesman who may have been the only one there, smiling. "I won't be long"

The man nodded and Reza, now free of his burden, approached the pier. Without hesitation he stepped on the wood. As he crossed, he could feel it trembling under his feet from the waves beneath him. He narrowed his eyes, pushing forward.

As he got closer, he noticed the man was perched on the very edge.

"Excuse me." Reza approached him. The man didn't bother to turn. "You there on the pier."

That did get him to turn. Reza almost wished he didn't. His face and hands were red, as though he had spent too long in the sun and even when on land there was the distinct smell of saltwater on his clothes. The man's face was sallow with a thin beard that was so patchy that Reza could see the skin underneath. His nose hooked over a line of a mustache and sat beneath small beady eyes that looked eerily like a fish. Between his chapped lips was a cracked pipe that had seen better days and was bellowing smoke into the air. Whatever it was smelled foul. A limp brown cloth was wrapped around and tied behind his head, holding back oily shoulder length hair. Scars littered every area of his skin. This man looked like he had battled the sea with his bare hands.

"I heard ya the firs' time land lubber." His seamen speak was almost too strong for Reza to understand.

"I just want to ask a few questions."

The man huffed. "Ain't nothin' to stop ya doin' it." he quipped.

Reza narrowed his eyes meeting the fisherman's gaze. He could probably nap the fisherman faster than he could say *Ahoy matey*.

"I'm looking for a man who works in this market. I've been told you know everyone here."

The man frowned. "And why I should tell ya? What's in it for me?"

Reza shrugged, "What do you want?"

The man laughed, it sound more like a guttural wheezing. “He asks what I want!” he chuckled smacking his thigh like someone told him a great joke.

Reza sighed. “Enough playing pirate, is there anything you want in exchange for information?”

The man shrugged his bony shoulders. “Unless ye be growin’ fish and rods in them gardens of yours I don’t think so.”

Reza was about to retort when a thought hit him. A smile formed on his lips. He recalled the 115th verse of Surah Baqarah, *And to Allah belongs the east and the west. So wherever you [might] turn, there is the Face of Allah . Indeed, Allah is all-Encompassing and Knowing.*

Reza had helped the old man merchant, and now Allah as a result, was helping him.

“Wait here,” Reza instructed.

He hurried back to the salesman he met earlier and retrieved his pointy purchase. The fisherman’s eyes widened a little but enough for Reza to know that he was interested.

“Ya think that’s enough?” the man sneered.

Reza smirked. The fisherman was saying one thing, but his tone’s sudden change said something completely different. He needed the supplies.

“I ain’t desperate!” the man growled. “People have far better hooks.”

Reza shrugged. He knew well how he would get his desired answer.

“My expertise isn’t in fishing,” Reza grinned. “I’m not sure if these are the finest in Peaceville, but I understand business.”

He paused.

“You might find the greatest hooks, but I’ll tell you this...no one would be willing to give this much merchandise for free so-”

“Will ya get to the point! I’m tired of ya-” the creepy man stopped. “Wait. Ya sayin free?”

The demeanour of the man had changed. His scowl had transformed into a despicable smile.

“Why’d ya not say before!” he exclaimed reaching out, but Reza was faster.

“Uh uh,” he stopped, holding the bucket back.

The creepy man frowned.

“What ye be asking for?”

Reza suppressed a victorious grin.

“I want to ask about a fisherman who works in the market. Goes by the name Zafar.” Reza asked. “I was wondering..”

As Reza asked his question, he couldn't help notice the sudden change in the creepy man. He was no longer the brave obnoxious sailor, but rather, his eyes were wide with nervousness. He was glancing left and right.

“Is something wrong?” Reza asked.

The creepy man glanced over his shoulder.

“Not safe to discuss this here,” he whispered. “I'll make it quick. Ya didn't hear it from me!”

Reza nodded.

“All I know is that things have been gettin rough around here. And given how we're all boneheaded fishermen, getting rough means bad news.”

Reza narrowed his eyes.

“How bad are we talking?” he asked.

The creepy man sighed.

“I'm talking about gang clashes, groups of fishermen battling it out.”

Reza showed no reaction. But his mind was racing. He was curious. First off, why were the fishermen fighting. Second, how did this relate to Zafar?

“Last night, somethin happened here, in the market,” the creepy man continued. “I was workin' late, cleanin' out me boat. I remember it clearly. Zafar was done his work for the night and was headin' home.”

Reza's eyes lit up. This man had seen Zafar last night!? That was a big clue.

“What exactly happened?” Reza asked. “How did you see him?”

The creepy man grunted in frustration, eyeing Reza's bucket of fishhooks.

“I told you, he was headin home,” the fisherman grumbled. “After that, and I mean about twenty minutes or so later, me heard the strangest noise. It was like a war was happening in the fish market. People were brawling. I barely protected my own merchandise, let alone any other fella.”

Reza narrowed his eyes. One thing didn’t add up.

“Why does the market seem so normal then? Nobody has called the authorities yet.”

The creepy man shrugged.

“They made us take an oath of secrecy. And we cleaned the market before the opening time. Ya know, bad business affects us all, so we wanted the market running as soon as can be.”

Reza took a deep breath.

“Who is they? Who made you swear an oath of secrecy?” he asked.

The creepy man blinked.

“The same people who really own this market. The ones watchin you and me talk right now.”

Reza’s eyes widened in horror. He whirled around, turning to see several fisherman grouped together. They were all wearing red bandanas and were eyeing him whilst discussing something.

“If you’re done asking questions, then will you give em bucket and go already?” the creepy man snapped rudely.

Reza gave him a hard look. “You’re not getting anything until you tell me everything.”

The man uttered a curse word which if Reza said, his grandmother would come back from the grave to smack him. He stood up taller, sizing Reza up. “I be done talkin”

The man dived for the bucket, but Reza was faster. Just as the creepy man got hold of the bucket handle, Reza’s elbow smashed into his stomach. Before the man could scream, his hand clasped over the fisherman’s mouth. With the other hand, Reza wrenched the bucket free.

“Ay,” the man winced as Reza grabbed his head.

“Allah!” Reza growled, smashing his head against the table.

Reza grabbed the bucket and leaned down, next to the groaning fisherman.

“I don’t fear you like some of the other fishermen,” he hissed. “And I don’t care how frustrated you are. If you lay another hand on me you’ll be lucky to walk away with any of the teeth you have left.”

The fisherman scowled but Reza could see he wouldn’t try that again. “Now tell me *everything*.”

The creepy man looked down, swallowing his anger.

“Those red banded men are the biggest fish suppliers here. They have more than twenty stalls with plenty of wealth to go around. I told you everything I know. But given how you not satisfied, let me tell you this. Zafar ain’t dead. He’s in hiding. And I know that if anyone can find him, it’d be ’em red banded men.”

Reza narrowed his eyes.

“Why?” he whispered.

The creepy man groaned.

“I asked a question,” he growled.

The creepy man looked down.

“Zafar is one of ’em,” he explained. “He works for ’em red bandana men. And naturally, they’re his crew. His family if ya will.”

The creepy man sighed.

“That’d be all I know. Now please let me go?”

Reza eyed the man for a moment. He seemed to be telling the truth.

“Okay,” he decided.

He held the bucket out for the creepy man.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

The creepy man grumbled, clearly dissatisfied, but Reza didn’t care. He had what he needed. And finally, he had a good idea of where Zafar had gone. He eyed the red bandana men behind him. Now that Reza was gone, one of the men was next to the creepy man, and the two were talking. Reza couldn’t help notice that the creepy man was agitated.

‘Those red banded men know where Zafar is,’ Reza realised. ‘And now, they know that I’m looking for him.’

Event Planning

“Put the roses over there,” Zahra instructed.

Turning towards the movers, she called out,

“Please align the brown chairs the same way you did the black ones.”

Maryam rolled her eyes, suppressing a grin. Seeing her older sister commit with so much effort towards the event, amused her. See, Maryam knew her sister. She knew her sister well. Casually, she strolled over to Zahra.

“Api,” she sighed. “Do you think this is really going to benefit our goal? I mean, what if the speaker is not convincing?”

Zahra narrowed her eyes.

“Inshallah, she will be. And in any case, it will be beneficial to start speaking out to the ladies.”

She held out a small bouquet of flowers.

“What do you want me to do with these?” Maryam asked curiously.

Zahra smirked.

“Make bouquets like this one from the piles of flowers over there,” she instructed.

Maryam’s eyes widened in horror. There must have been thousands of flowers!

“Since you are so energetic, little sister,” Zahra teased. “I’m sure you won’t mind this small task.”

Maryam groaned.

“But I-”

Zahra narrowed her eyes.

“Yes Api,” Maryam added quickly, grumbling as she began making bunches of flowers.

Zahra nodded with an air of satisfaction. Her mind drifted back to the event. There were still so many jobs that needed to happen. Zahra looked down at the watch, her eyes widening in horror.

“We have so much left to do!” she gasped.

“Everyone, please move as fast as you can!” she called out. “We have only few hours before the event, Inshallah!”

The Publisher

It was quiet. Nothing could be heard except for the occasional ticking of the wall clock, or the scraping of a pen against paper. Of course the noise of the pen was probably affected by the awkward acoustics of the room. Office to be precise, for that's what it was.

The door, a lovely coffee brown in colour, with a hand carved door handle. A smooth chocolate brown coloured carpet crept across the floor, blending in nicely with the door. The walls, white with a tinge of grey, covered with paintings and quotes or verses of the Quran.

The window was blinded by a hand-sown curtain, hazelnut brown in colour. It was quite stunning, evidently implying that whoever designed this room was fond of the colour brown. Even the thin table, positioned in the centre of the room, retained this virtue, it's unique dark brown shade making it stand out.

A man was seated behind this table. His eyes were running over some printed pieces of paper, the next day's newspapers.

"Hmmm," the man thought out loud. "Hmmm...."

The man's gaze was sharp, his eyes trained to pick out the slightest inaccuracy, his ears programmed to detect the slightest change in voice, his nose capable of sniffing out a story from anywhere.

He went by many names. But one was more prominent than any of the others. The publisher.

He was roughly five feet in height, putting him on the shorter

side compared to most men. His eyes were blue, contrasting his brown skin tone. With fully black hair and a thick black beard, this man would probably not stand out in a crowd, if it weren't for his peculiar dressing.

He wore a light blue suit with a banana yellow shirt. A pair of blue sunglasses peeked out from the side of his shirt.

Beep. Beep.

The publisher narrowed his eyes. It was the secretary.

"Yes," the man whispered into his phone.

A woman's voice came through.

"Sir, there's an elderly lady here to see you."

The publisher raised a brow. Elderly lady? Why would some elderly lady come all the way out here to meet him. He shrugged. No point in wondering.

"Send her in," he instructed.

The publisher was stroking his beard. It had been a busy week with all the recent news. He was feeling very tired.

Creak.

The door opened, and the elderly lady stepped in. Leaving the door open, she assumed a seat at the corner of the table, across from the publisher. The publisher did not acknowledge. He merely continued reading the papers before him silently.

"Now, now, Jawad," Farheen addressed him. "Don't tell me you still haven't changed after an entire year to think about what you'd done?"

Jawad narrowed his eyes, still not looking up.

Back in the days of the revolution, Jawad had been a member of the patrol squad, but due to his manipulation of susceptible youths for his own nefarious purpose, he was arrested. After serving his prison sentence, he now, oddly enough, could only find one job. A job related to media. Related to influencing susceptible people's minds.

"What brings you here to my humble company?" Jawad asked drily. "Is Captain Abbas here to arrest me again?"

Farheen chuckled.

"Don't tell me you fear the boy?"

Jawad narrowed his eyes.

“I am the publisher. Why would I fear an army officer with deep military connections, and who took down Alpha 43,” he stated sarcastically.

“Alhamdullillah,” Farheen added. “You know, you could have been a part of this Jawad. Your own lack of Iman failed you, otherwise you would have made a fine soldier.

Jawad suppressed the rising irritation within him. He shook his head in disagreement.

“What brings you here today, Farheen Auntie?” he asked. “Surely you’re not here to preach to me about how what I did was wrong. You have nothing to fear. Ruqayya is married to that Reza now.”

“Alhamdullillah,” Farheen added once more. “They are very happy now Alhamdullillah. Actually, I wasn’t here for anything related to your past.”

Jawad raised a brow. What was she here for then? Why was she bothering him?

“I’m here regarding the future of Peaceville,” Farheen explained.

Jawad tried reading her exceptionally neutral expression for any spoilers but to no avail.

“I want your help Jawad,” Farheen stated unexpectedly.

Jawad’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Wh-what do you mean?” he faltered.

Farheen eyed him warily.

“I understand that the recent events involving Amr have probably given you the greatest opportunity you’ve ever had,” she added. “Your greatest publicity.”

Jawad narrowed his eyes, looking down at the news article he was just proofreading. It was titled, ‘Amr...a hero or a villain?’

“Why are you here, Farheen Auntie?” he asked.

Farheen met Jawad’s gaze.

“I want you to stop publishing anti-government news,” she finally revealed.

Jawad blinked. His head tilted slightly before he burst into an echoing laughter.

“I’m s-sorry,” he muttered between laughs. “H-how do you possibly think you’ll convince me?”

Farheen smirked.

“Inshallah I’ll do it because you haven’t changed,” she answered in a cool tone. “You’re still the same coward you were then, and you’ll back away just like you did then.”

Jawad narrowed his eyes.

“Alright, let’s hear it then,” he decided. “If you convince me, I promise you, I won’t publish anything against Peaceville’s government.”

He dropped his pen on the table to create an effect. Yawning as though he wasn’t interested, he leaned back on his chair.

Farheen took a deep breath.

“Jawad,” she began. “How many meals do you have in a day?”

Jawad shrugged. What was the point of this question?

“Three usually. On busy days maybe two,” he answered.

She nodded.

“And what about water?” she asked. “Do you have clean water?”

Jawad nodded in acknowledgement, unsure of where Farheen was going with this.

“Do you ever stay overtime?” she asked.

Jawad shrugged.

“Every working person does at some point,” he answered.

Farheen sighed.

“Do you ever worry that some assassins will break down your extravagant door and kill you or take you away?” she asked.

Jawad shook his head.

“Yes but-”

“Jawad, Jawad, Jawad,” Farheen overspoke. “Why do you feel this way? It’s because brave men like Akbar, Murtaza and Reza are fighting those threats, not letting them reach your door. Brave women like Salma, Ruqayya and Zahra are fighting the enemy, allowing you to sit in this office comfortably and write ungrateful headlines about them.”

Jawad looked down for a moment.

“Where are you going with this?” he asked.

Farheen smirked.

“We’re both smart enough to know that Amr is no friend of Peaceville.”

Jawad chuckled.

“Anyone who doesn’t is a fool,” he remarked.

Farheen smiled kindly.

“Exactly,” she added. “Whatever aim he’s trying to achieve, is not in our favour.”

Jawad nodded.

“So if he takes us down Jawad,” she grinned. “If he destroys Peaceville’s government, do you think he’ll leave your properties and home untouched?”

Jawad’s eyes widened partially. Farheen nodded.

“I knew you would understand. You’re more than happy with your quiet life,” she added. “I know you don’t want to see the enemy again. So instead of stabbing us, support those who allow you to sleep peacefully at night, support us!”

Jawad narrowed his eyes.

“You can still hate us,” Farheen clarified. “Just don’t help Amr ruin the one thing we all, including you, fought for. Our home.”

Jawad blinked. He wasn’t sure of what to say. He had never even considered the perspective Farheen was bringing up. What if Amr brought the Alphas back? What if everything went back to the ways it once was! No. It couldn’t. It wouldn’t. It mustn’t. Jawad wouldn’t allow it.

“I may hate all of you,” he whispered. “But you have my full support against Amr.”

He ripped the article into pieces.

“None of my news outlets will publish articles against you. In fact we will write in support of the government.”

Farheen nodded.

“You may be a coward, Jawad,” she remarked. “But you’ve always had one strength that has kept you alive.”

Jawad raised a brow. As far as he was concerned, he had many strengths.

“You’re sharp,” Farheen finished. “And that’s why you understand reason. I’m glad we reached an agreement.”

Jawad nodded and with that Farheen headed towards the door. As she went, her mind was focused on the next news office she had to visit. Ever since morning, while Zahra and Maryam hosted the event with the sisters of the community, Salma and Farheen divided the news outlets between the two of them and were visiting them. After all, media was the key. They told the stories, decided who was the good guy and who was the bad guy. Media could definitely help them achieve their goal.

Farheen winced at a sudden pain in her heart. She ignored it and pushed forward.

‘Allah,’ she prayed in her heart. ‘Help us win this battle against Amr, Inshallah.’

An Important Meeting

The caves were feared in this area. Nobody ever dared to go near one. It was considered bad luck. Many who slept within these caves never woke up.

Ilyas narrowed his eyes. Most likely this superstition formed because of the large population of bears that lived here at one point. The caves belonged to the bears. Which was why unwelcome travelers would soon find themselves at the mercy of the bear's powerful claws.

Ilyas eyed the ground warily. Once, he was the son of a chief. Now he had been forced to take refuge in a pitiful place like this. But that didn't matter. One day stories would be told about him. About his chivalry. About his honour. About how he took back what was taken from him.

Ilyas narrowed his eyes. There was a small beetle on the ground. Raising his shoe, he pressed down hard upon it. When he lifted his foot, all that remained was the squished remains of the beetle's corpse.

"Like this beetle, Hamza" he growled. "I will rip you apart."

His gaze drifted over to the box in the corner. Hamza's box. It had yet to open. Despite Ilyas's efforts, it had shown no sign of weakness. This made Ilyas curious. What kind of treasures did Hamza keep within this box? Maybe Hamza knew how to open it?

"I'll get Hamza to open this box," Ilyas hissed. "I'll have

whatever is inside of this.”

His ear pricked. He heard a crack behind him. Someone was coming inside. Most likely the man he was waiting for. But one could never be too careful. It could even be a bear. Ilyas unsheathed his blade, crafted by the finest blacksmith of the tribe.

He glanced at the entrance as a silhouette emerged. It stepped into the light. Ilyas’s lips curled into a smile. It was the man he had awaited. A renowned warrior of the tribe. One who had the power to make a change. This warrior had been very close to his uncle.

Ilyas raised his hands to welcome him, but the warrior took no notice. He merely withdrew his sword.

Ilyas narrowed his eyes. Was that a challenge? Did Ilyas need to earn this warrior’s respect?

Burair placed his sword on the ground. Ilyas’s lips curled into a grin. It wasn’t a challenge. Burair had already made his decision. He would support Ilyas. No matter what the cost. Even if it meant opposing the chief, Ilyas’s father.

His hatred for Hamza was comparable to a raging fire.

“With his troops and my leadership,” Ilyas chuckled. “Hamza will not survive. Today, I will settle this matter once and for all.”

41

A Lead

“Hmm, Musa, check those boxes,” Hamza instructed.

The youth nodded and began searching. Hamza watched him impatiently. He wanted his box back as soon as possible. It was the only clue he had to his identity. The sooner he got it back, the sooner he could leave this tribe. To where? He had no idea. All he knew was that he wanted to leave this place as soon as possible.

Musa turned to face him, the disappointment was clear in his eyes. The box was not there.

Hamza’s eyes surveyed Hafeez’s tent. Just a simple bed made from tawdry animal skin as well as some trophies of beasts hunted slung over the wall. Hafeez had clearly enjoyed his achievements. For his tent was decorated with them.

“If the box isn’t here then it leaves only one possibility,” Hamza declared.

He eyed Musa. They both knew what he was about to say. Ilyas. Ilyas must have taken the box. Hamza narrowed his eyes. He had no idea where Ilyas could have gone. He had been exiled for releasing the leopards on Hamza. It had only been a day since then. Ilyas certainly wouldn’t have been able to leave the region. But twenty four hours meant that he could be anywhere.

Hamza narrowed his eyes. Yes, Ilyas could be anywhere. But some places were more likely than others. He looked down.

‘Where would he go?’ he asked himself.

Hamza sighed. Ilyas would need to have access to a source of water. Even if he had a waterskin of some kind, he would need to have the ability to refill the waterskin. Aside from that, he would need to be able to build a fire probably. But the forest grass was damp, so he wouldn't be able to make it in the forest.

"Musa," Hamza asked casually. "Where would someone have access to fresh water and the resources to build a fire?"

Musa met Hamza's gaze with curiosity in his eyes. It was as though he wanted to ask why Hamza had a sudden interest in such things.

"Musa," Hamza sighed. "I think I might have a lead on the box. But for me to find it, you have to answer my question."

Musa pulled out a knife and began carving on the floor. Hamza moved up beside the youth, watching as he carved. As Musa wrote it, Hamza read it out loud.

"Two...Places," Hamza narrowed his eyes. "Either the canyon or the... mountains!"

Hamza's eyes widened as he realised it.

"I saw smoke coming from one of the mountains earlier today!" Hamza exclaimed. "That was most likely Ilyas!"

Hamza smirked.

"Musa" he whispered. "Get your hammer".

42

Deductions

Wham!

Abbas growled, smashing his left fist into the punchbag. It swung back gathering momentum. Abbas narrowed his eyes. As the punchbag swung down at him, he leapt towards the left, before barging forward shoulder-slammng the bag. It creaked in pain. Immediately, he dealt the bag three powerful punches before lunging at the bag with a skull-cracking kick. The bag swung away weakly, as if it was exhausted.

Abbas took a deep breath, wiping the sweat off of his forehead. He was tired from the last hour of training. And in all truth, Abbas was not really in the mindset of training. Other pressing matters had dominated his mind. Just a few days ago, his life was normal. He was happy and there was nothing to worry about.

Now he couldn't help recall the uncomfortable emotions he had experienced back in the days of the revolution. The parts of the story which weren't that great to relive.

And the worst part was that things were only getting more confusing. Every time it seemed like Abbas was in charge of the situation, some new obstacle would knock him off his feet.

"I need answers," Abbas realised.

He wouldn't know what to do, until he knew what was going on. It really was that simple. Abbas took a deep breath. He hadn't done this in a while.

"Okay," he whispered to himself. "Lay out what you know."

What was the first odd event that took place? Akbar's abrupt confiscation of the data? That had certainly been uncanny, but by no means was it the first event. The cyber attack of Amr had happened before it. Was that it? Was the cyber attack the first odd event to take place?

Ali's words echoed in his mind.

"We've seen Alpha attacks. Many. But this is the first time the Alphas came back to the iron fortress. They tried to steal something. I have a bad feeling about this."

The Alpha attack certainly did happen before everything else. It was also odd, considering how the scarce supply of escaped Alphas had shown next to no activity. Ali was right. Now that Abbas thought about it, this incident was pretty weird.

Abbas swiped away at a fly buzzing near his face.

"Okay," he sighed. "What happened that night?"

Four Alphas. Four.

"The night of the first revolution meeting, Jumeira deemed three Alphas sufficient to deal with the threat. If someone sent four Alphas, that means they were taking no chances. They needed that data."

He recalled Masud's words... *I still don't trust our benefactors*

Someone had sent these four Alphas. Someone who convinced all four of them to come back to the iron fortress, of all places. Abbas narrowed his eyes. These benefactors had sent Salma as well. Surely they did not know who she was, or they would have never done such a thing. So these benefactors were most likely not from Peaceville, or at least they had not been in Peaceville since the revolution?

Abbas sighed in relief. He was making progress. He now knew the enemy was not from Peaceville.

"Okay," Abbas continued, his heart pounding excitedly. "What happened next?"

A sudden question popped into Abbas's mind as he remembered Murtaza's words.

Because of the war that continues to rage on in the archipelago, Jumeira took extensive measures to hide this island from the rest of the world. She sent Alphas to plunder travelling ships, spreading

myths of pirates and bandits. She installed advanced cloaking technology, so satellites do not detect Peaceville as a land mass. There are definitely more such measures that she had taken. So in simple terms, thanks to Jumeira, we're invisible to the rest of the world.

'If we're invisible,' Abbas pondered. "Then how do they know about the Alphas. Have we possibly been discovered?"

Abbas looked down. If Akbar had doubts of their discovery, he would have been more tense. But he wasn't. Abbas knew any deduction he made would definitely apply to Akbar and Murtaza first. But neither seemed to have any issues with regards to their *cloaking*, so Abbas doubted that these benefactors had by chance, stumbled across the Alphas. No.

That led to the second possibility. These people already knew about Peaceville and the Alphas. Abbas's eyes widened partially. This was huge, for it implied that these benefactors were already connected to Peaceville? Perhaps they were connected to Jumeira? If that was the case, were they connected to Akbar, or Abbas, for that matter?

Abbas shuddered uncomfortably. There was no point in asking such questions which were no better than speculations. Abbas stroked his beard lightly. Here's what he knew for certain.

Whoever these benefactors were, they were connected to Peaceville, but they themselves were not from Peaceville.

'There's nothing more to gain from this,' Abbas concluded. 'Now, to the next incident.'

The cyber attack. Amr hacked the presentation. Abbas knew Amr needed to be close to the venue that day. He had led Abbas the wrong way to ensure a lead over Abbas while escaping.

'So, any strange thing I can recall?' Abbas thought to himself.

Nothing seemed particularly off on the way. Everything had been smooth. Hadn't it? A sudden thought occurred to Abbas.

'The construction truck?' he wondered.

It had blocked the entire road for no particular reason. Abbas narrowed his eyes, trying to strain his memory. Why had they brought so much manpower and equipment to deal with one broken light?

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Was he overthinking this? Honestly, he wasn't sure. It seemed trivial, and yet Abbas could not think of one good reason as to why the construction workers would deem it appropriate to do something like that. Abbas took a deep breath. What if the construction truck was actually the place Amr broadcasted from? The workers had seemed quite obnoxious as well.

"This will need investigating," Abbas decided and continued, "Alright, what do we have so far?"

Abbas knew that the benefactors who sent the Alphas and tried to steal the data were not from Peaceville or in Peaceville right now. But they were connected to Peaceville somehow, although Peaceville was cut off from the rest of the world. How they were connected, Abbas had no idea. All he knew was that these people were desperately after some data. Data that was connected to Abbas's mother.

'Her name was listed in the team of scientists for that project.'

Also, Akbar had gotten strangely defensive about confiscating the data. So, either he knew something, or he was connected to this as well. Or both.

Abbas sighed. Why did everything always lead back to Akbar?

Abbas took a deep breath. There were so many directions to explore in this mystery. He wasn't sure where to start. Deep down, he knew one thing for sure.

"Allah," he whispered. "I will get to the bottom of this. Or die trying."

43

Discussions

“And then I left,” Ruqayya finished. “So now, I wish to go back with you, so you can help me figure out if Farah is hiding something from us.”

Reza narrowed his eyes and Ruqayya could tell that his mind was racing like a train.

“See, the issue is,” Reza paused. “I’m on another trail as well. And I’m convinced that it’ll lead to Zafar.”

Ruqayya raised a brow.

“You mean the fishermen with red bandanas?” she asked.

Reza nodded.

“My dear, these fishermen have a very tribal mentality. If Zafar was in trouble, the lengths to which they would go to protect him would know no bounds.”

Ruqayya was skeptical. She was more confident about her own lead. She couldn’t explain it to Reza, but there was just something so strange about Farah’s behaviour. From the way she was completely unconcerned with her husband’s disappearance. To the point where she kept ‘zoning out’ of their conversation. Ruqayya didn’t understand Farah’s behaviour.

Reza sighed.

“I think for now,” he explained, “we will continue to follow our own leads. From what I have understood so far, I suspect that Zafar is hiding.”

Ruqayya’s eyes widened slightly.

“Hiding?” she asked.

Reza nodded.

“His wife’s lack of concern,” he explained. “Defensiveness of the red bandana fishherman, like they are protecting something...”

“Or someone,” Ruqayya finished.

Reza nodded.

“Why don’t you try this?” he recommended. “Ask Farah if she’s had any contact with her husband recently, and push some words on her.”

Ruqayya raised a brow.

“Let me give you an example. I’ll pretend to be the interrogator, and you be Farah. You will ask her like this,” Reza simulated in a suddenly serious tone. “Farah, have you had any contact with your husband recently?”

Ruqayya blinked.

“No,” she answered confidently.

Reza narrowed his eyes, meeting Ruqayya’s gaze with an unsettling harshness.

“He hasn’t sent you a message? A letter, perhaps?”

Ruqayya shook her head.

“See the thing is...” Reza whispered sternly. “We suspect that Zafar has gone into hiding, and if that’s the case, usually people will leave a clue for their loved ones, letting them know not to worry...the same way you’re not worried right now.”

Ruqayya recoiled in surprise, clapping her hands together.

“You’re too good at this” she complimented. “I reckon anyone lying would give way.”

Reza shrugged with pretend helplessness.

“What can I say? Alhamdulillah,” he smiled.

Ruqayya grinned back. That was when it happened. A sudden pain struck her head, not unlike the one at Farah’s house. Ruqayya felt dizziness in her head. She closed her eyes, groaning slightly in discomfort. And then it was gone. The pain vanished.

“Ruqayya?” Reza asked, the concern was visible in his eyes. “Are you okay?”

Ruqayya nodded.

“Oh yes, Alhamdulillah. I’ve just been having some headaches lately. But I’m sure it’s nothing, Inshallah.”

Reza sighed in relief.

“Okay,” he decided and continued, “So, go again, and this time put some pressure on Farah. No need to be understanding if she’s hiding the truth from us. And talk to her alone. Without her brothers. It’s easier to break someone’s confidence when they are alone.”

Ruqayya nodded.

“In the past,” Reza explained. “Jumeira used to steal children from their parents because it was a lot easier to influence the kids without their parents around.”

Ruqayya blinked, her eyes widening in horror. That sounded awful. What kind of monster did that? Why did Ruqayya ask that? She already knew the answer.

Only a monster who wanted *ultimate control* of the world would do something like that.

“Bismillah,” Reza whispered. “Hopefully if all works out today, then I believe we will, Inshallah, discover where Zafar is hiding, and how he is connected to the disturbances here. We’ll be able to complete our task, Inshallah.”

Midnight

It was dark. Just an ordinary night like any other. The fish market was empty, except for a few pesky felines, nipping away at a trash bin. They must have been hungry. And the fish market had their favourite food. Fish. So what if it was only scraps, at least they didn't have to catch the fish themselves.

"Shoo," Reza hissed at a cat trying to move up next to his shoes.

It was clawing at his leg, as if it was some kind of fish.

"Shoo!" Reza repeated but the tiny demon would not obey.

The cat snarled, causing Reza to narrow his eyes.

"Okay," he smirked, lifting his foot.

"Raaaar!" The cat squealed as Reza's foot slammed into it's side, sending it tumbling across the sidewalk.

Reza suppressed a chuckle at the cat's angry hissing as it darted off. He took a deep breath, glancing back. Still no sign of anyone. Reza narrowed his eyes. He was sure that the red bandana fishermen had taken precautions against him. So if no one was watching the parameter of the market, it meant that they wanted him to come through without facing any opposition.

'An ambush,' Reza grinned. "Let's see what they have set up for me."

Carefully, Reza began to tread forward. His eyes were scanning the empty fish stalls as fast as his mind was computing the possible places of ambush.

“Don’t overthink this,” Reza reminded himself. “These guys are fishermen.”

Most fishermen weren’t very bright. So Reza expected a simple ambush relying heavily on the brute strength of the fishermen. And if he had to pick a location they would think of, it would most likely be the stalls they owned, or their ships.

Reza took a deep breath.

“That’s where they’re waiting for me,” he whispered.

He stealthily made his way into the stalls, towards the area owned by the red bandana fishermen. As he went, his mind wandered back to Ruqayya. She would be investigating her lead. His left hand withdrew an all too familiar 1636 revolver, his favourite firearm model.

Crack.

Reza grinned. He was heading in the right direction. He now had a follower. But Reza didn’t want to risk entering into a kill zone. It’d be better to fight on his own terms. Reza closed his eyes, concentrating.

“Will you man up and face me?” he called out. “Or will you keep hiding?”

There was silence. Then a chuckle. And the sound of footstep, no footsteps. From different directions. They were nine by his count.”

Reza opened his eyes, not surprised by what he saw. Nine fishermen, each wearing a red bandana. Armed with chains and hooks.

“Egh,” Reza smirked. “If you bring nasty weapons to the fight, the fight becomes nasty.”

The fishermen all growled, the viciousness clear on their faces. “Okay,” Reza shrugged. “Your choice.”

He eyed his attackers cautiously. Reza narrowed his eyes. From his experience, the first man brave enough to attack would be someone behind him. Because it exposed a vulnerability. The men in front of him would not expect a direct assault.

A growl sounded from behind Reza. Reza’s eyes widened, he ducked diving forward as a blade struck where he had been moments earlier.

Wham!

Reza smashed a fist into one of the fishermen in front of him. Another, shorter one, swung a chain, but Reza caught it, driving his elbow in exchange. The second fisherman collapsed unconscious.

Reza ducked, swinging a powerful leg at the third. This man also collapsed as well. He chuckled turning to face the remaining six, now close together like sheep. A sign of fear.

“I’m not here to fight!” Reza called out.

The six fishermen eyed each other suspiciously.

“Why do ya think we’d buy that excuse for a surrender?” One of the bolder ones asked.

Reza sighed.

“My name is Reza, and I’m here on behalf of the government to find a missing fisherman. And resolve the source of dispute in this area.”

The fisherman who had spoken earlier stepped forward. Reza narrowed his eyes. This man was older than the others, and carried a different knife. A handmade blade. A true seaman.

“You must be the leader of these brave men,” Reza guessed.

The man narrowed his eyes.

“I know Zafar is hiding,” Reza whispered. “But I need to find him for his family. His wife reported his disappearance. Tell me where he is.”

The leader of the fisherman hissed.

“I’ve seen em deceptive lads before. How do me know you ain’t one of em?” he demanded once more.

Reza narrowed his eyes.

“Because I clearly don’t mean to cause you any harm,” he explained. “I just want to speak with him. Please, his wife Farah is not well. She reported the disappearance herself.”

The leader of the group narrowed his eyes.

“Me, I seen many a trap around here,” he whispered. “But you don’t seem like ’em. Especially since ya don’t even know what me look like.”

Reza’s eyes widened for the first time.

“Zafar?” he exclaimed. The leader of the group nodded.
“That’d be me. And we’d best speak in private.”

Zafar

“Ya know you takin a huge risk bein here?” the fisherman remarked, placing a steaming cup of hot chocolate on the table.

Reza eyed the man incredulously. He was surprisingly calm for someone missing, just like Farah. Reza narrowed his eyes. He didn't believe in coincidence.

“Your wife knows you're here, doesn't she?” Reza deduced.

Zafar nodded, scratching his beard.

It had been ten minutes since Reza had found Zafar. Now they were seated in his ship's cabin.

“Farah filed 'em report before I told her,” Zafar explained. “Once me told her, she said it was too late. Authorities knew.”

Reza raised a brow. Things were finally starting to make sense. Why the red bandana people were so defensive about Zafar? He was their leader. But Reza recalled the creepy man's words.

They made us take an oath of secrecy. And we cleaned the market before the opening time. Ya know, bad business affects us all, so we wanted the market running as soon as can be.

“Why did you not want us to know?” Reza asked curiously. “What were you hiding?”

Zafar sighed.

“Generally a seaman has to be strong enough, to settle 'em troubles that attack his ship.”

Reza narrowed his eyes.

“Why don’t I start from the beginning,” Zafar sighed. “Ya see, lot of fightin been going on recently.”

Reza nodded, paying close attention.

“We don’t understand why fighting started, or where it came from until last night.”

Reza raised a brow. Last night had been the Night of Heroes.

“I was on me way home, when I saw a fire in the market,” Zafar twitched at his beard. “And when I came to see what was happenin, I saw the unimaginable. Some group of strangers attacking me fellow fishermen. They were so violent. I managed to hear one of them speaking to another.”

Reza listened carefully, not surprised by what followed.

“They said, ‘Man, Amr paid us good for this job, did he not?’ and I thought, who is this guy? One of ’em anti-fishermen people?”

“And since you heard that Amr had hired them, you needed to be silenced”

Zafar nodded.

“So there is no fight between the fishermen?” Reza asked.

Zafar nodded once more.

Reza whispered a silent thanks to his creator. This was it. Mystery solved.

Amr hired a group of gangsters, maybe even brought them into Peaceville to cause trouble in the fish market. And Zafar overheard them speaking so they tried to kill him. Zafar went into hiding. Farah got worried and called the authorities and then Zafar told her that he was hiding so they went quiet. That all seemed fair.

“We’ll take care of the gang,” Reza whispered. “I’ll send the coordinates to the department and they’ll send an army squadron to chase them out.”

He wiped a fly from his face.

“I must hand it to you sir,” Reza remarked. “Your crew is very loyal.”

Zafar grinned toothily.

“They were once me Baba’s crew. Now they mine. I give me life for them and they for mine.”

Reza nodded.

“And Farah must have been relieved to know that you were safe. Just out of curiosity, does Hamid know?”

Zafar raised a brow.

“Who?” he asked.

Reza smiled kindly.

“You know, Farah’s older brother.”

The mug slipped from Zafar’s hands shattering on the floor. Reza might have looked down or reacted if he wasn’t confused by the horror on Zafar’s face.

“Farah no have an older brother!” Zafar revealed. “Farah has no siblings at all!”

Reza froze. His eyes widened in confusion. What? What was Zafar talking about? Farah didn’t have an older brother. But hadn’t Ruqayya clearly said she...Oh no.

“Ruqayya just went there,” Reza gasped. “She’s in danger!”

Zafar jumped to his feet.

Reza’s eyes filled with fire.

“Come on Zafar!” he growled. “We have to get to your house now!”

A Race against Time

Reza floored the accelerator, his heart pounding.

“Come on!” he shouted in frustration.

Reza struggled to calm himself. He wouldn’t gain anything by panicking.

“We’re almost there,” Zafar whispered. “Just one minute, Inshallah.”

Reza nodded.

‘Allah,’ he prayed. “Let us not be too late.”

The ex-Alpha’s eyes darted left and right, fury burning his heart.

How could he have been so foolish? How did he not see that Hamid was not Farah’s brother.

“I should have known,” Reza scolded himself.

Akbar would have never made such a mistake. He would have picked up the anomaly. If only he had gone along with Ruqayya....

“Turn right!” Zafar shouted.

Reza nodded, swerving the wheel towards right.

“Okay,” Zafar whispered. “Just a two blocks down be me home.”

Reza’s eyes widened. He pressed the brakes.

“Argh!” Zafar exclaimed as the cars screeched to a stop. Best to leave the noise making car a bit away from the house to not give themselves away. Reza whipped open his seat belt.

“Lets crush ’em!” Zafar spat, but Reza stopped him.

“Zafar,” Reza whispered, placing a hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorry, but I can’t take you in the field with me.”

Zafar’s eyes widened but he was too late. Reza lifted his hand. a small sleep dart was embedded in Zafar’s arm. The fisherman’s eyes drooped.

“B-but...”

Zafar’s eyes were shut and he slumped down unconscious against the car seat, fast asleep.

“I’m sorry,” Reza repeated. “I promise Inshallah your family will be safe.”

And with that, Reza pulled open his car door. He narrowed his eyes as he shut the door behind him. There was an unsettling emptiness in the dark streets ahead. All lights were shut except for a house two blocks down. Zafar’s house.

Reza whipped out two 1636 revolvers and began moving forward, into the dark streets. As he disappeared into the darkness, one thought dominated his mind above all others.

“You messed with the wrong man...Hamid.’

Infiltration

Reza narrowed his eyes, watching the house carefully. He knew it was a trap. Every part of him was against going in. But he didn't care. He went in. Cautiously...subtly....sticking in the shadows. As far as he was concerned, the greatest danger in this area was himself. He didn't fear anything or anyone else.

Reza crept cautiously. Eyes alert. Poised with the expectation of an ambush from anywhere. The hunt was afoot. And he was the hunter.

Reza scanned the front yard of the house. No sign of movement. Only the hushed rustling of the grass under the darkness of the night. Reza grinned. There was just one light in the lawn, barely illuminating any area. A sign of financial trouble.

He leaned down, picking up a small pebble.

“Bismillah,” he whispered, tossing it in the front yard.

Reza closed his eyes and heard for a few seconds. He sighed in relief.

“No motion sensors,” he realised.

There was a blur and Reza was at the front door. Now Reza could have used the window, but that was, in his opinion, even more predictable than the front door. It was interestingly enough, reverse psychology.

Most intruders would; believing the front door to be too obvious, always choose an alternative entrance such as a back door or window. Not many would expect the front door. He took

a deep breath, reaching out. As his fingers touched the door, it creaked open.

Reza narrowed his eyes, ignoring the fears filling his heart. He needed to focus. He recited the 200th verse of surah Al A'raf from the holy Quran silently in his heart,

And if an evil suggestion comes to you from Satan, then seek refuge in Allah . Indeed, He is Hearing and Knowing.

Reza treaded cautiously as he moved inside, armed with his two revolvers. The first thing he encountered was the strange smell of grass. And Reza found himself in the living room. Though it wasn't much of a living room anymore. The couches were torn and tattered. Reza's grip over the guns tightened. Something about Hamid's style felt...familiar. The door open, the lack of traps, it hinted at a level of arrogance. But a different kind.

Creak.

Reza's eyes widened. Someone was on the stairs, and was coming fast. Careful not to make noise, Reza watched the stairs for a minute, but nobody came. He narrowed his eyes, stepping forward. His guns were ready to shoot at the slightest sign of movement. Where was everyone? Ruqayya had come for the interrogation. Unless they shut off all the downstairs lights and decided to speak upstairs, something was wrong.

Reza's knuckles were now white as he reached the base of the stairs.

"Where are you Ruqayya? Where did you get stuck this time?" he whispered.

Swiftly, Reza slithered up the stairs. As he reached halfway, he peeked but saw no one. Step by step he went until he reached the very top of the stairs. Reza stopped abruptly, his eyes widening slightly. All the lights were off. All but one. That room's door was shut.

Creak.

Reza's eyes widened. Someone was behind him. A fury entered his heart, not unlike that of a tiger.

Wham!

Reza swung a powerful kick back, striking his pursuer. He shot an open hand, grabbing his opponent by the throat. The

short man grumbled. He lashed away but Reza ignored him.

“Hamid!” Reza growled, smashing the man against the wall. It dented. “I will tear you apart!”

There was a blur as Reza rammed him once more, following with three incredibly fatal punches.

“Ah!” the short man squealed as Reza swung an elbow at his knee.

Crack.

It was broken. Reza dived at him, smashing a punch in the imposter’s stomach. The man groaned, collapsing where he stood. Reza smirked. His ears pricked. He could hear a muffled call.

“Ruqayya I’m here!” he shouted.

The ex-Alpha darted towards the door, whose light was on. He pulled at the handle, but the door wouldn’t budge.

“It’s locked,” Reza realised, narrowing his eyes. “Not for long.”

Wham!

The door collapsed, crippled at Reza’s powerful punch.

“Bismillah,” Reza whispered stepping inside.

There was a strange air in this room. A dusty one. But the lights were on and...

“Ruqayya!” Reza exclaimed.

She was tied up and gagged against a chair. Beside her were two more. One to which another woman was tied, presumably Farah. The third chair had a little girl tied up.

‘Zafar’s daughter!’ Reza recognised.

Ruqayya looked up weakly, her eyes lit up.

“Rrza!” she cried, her voice muffled by the gag. “RRza!”

Reza smiled, moving up to his wife.

“Alhamdulillah I have you now Ruqayya,” he grinned. “Don’t worry, you’re safe, uh, stay still Ruqayya you’re making it hard to untie you!”

She was shaking her head violently...no urgently. Was she trying to say something?

“Nnnn,” she screamed. Screamed?

A sudden surge of pain struck Reza from behind.

“Argh!” Reza growled.

Someone had struck him from behind. Ruqayya's pained cry was muffled by her gag as a cunning laughter filled the room.

Reza whirled around, swinging his fist.

Wham!

His hand struck something. The laughter stopped, replaced by a furious yowl.

Reza narrowed his eyes as he turned to face his opponent. His vision blurred. Wait? Already? Was his assailant's dagger drugged? Reza pulled it out, ignoring the minor pain as he grabbed a tight hold over it.

"Welcome Reza," his opponent chuckled lifting his leg sleeve slightly.

Reza narrowed his eyes. Hamid was an Alpha. Another Alpha.

"I will rip you apart!" Reza spat.

Hamid chuckled.

"In a minute you'll be fast asleep, traitor!"

Reza ignored the numbness in his left hand, a sudden truth dawning on him. Hamid was wasting time.

"Ya Allah!" Reza growled, charging forward.

Hamid ducked swinging a fist but Reza caught it. He raised the dagger, but Hamid was faster, kicking it out of his hand.

Wham!

Reza slapped Hamid with a powerful kick in the face, hauling him off his feet. Rage filled his heart.

"Allah!" he roared, bringing Hamid crashing to the ground.

He raised a fist, but Hamid jumped forward, driving an elbow in his stomach. He grabbed hold of Reza's neck, trying to snap it, but Reza turned, delivering a crushing punch to his knee. The Alpha staggered back.

"It's been a while since I had a worthy opponent?" he smirked.

Reza blinked, trying to keep his focus. His body was starting to stiffen up a little, and he was starting to feel a little drained from the bleeding of his wound.

Hamid lunged forward. Reza raised his arm to deflect the incoming kick but his numb arm wasn't moving fast enough.

Wham!

Reza staggered back, ducking as the assassin followed through with a lethal punch aimed for his neck.

“Allah hu Akbar!” Reza shouted, diving for the Alpha’s knees.

Before the assassin could react, he pulled, knocking Hamid off his feet.

“Argh!” Hamid growled.

Reza leapt on top of him.

“I will kill you!” He spat.

Reza brought his fist crashing down on Hamid.

“Argh!” Hamid snarled, trying to knock Reza off.

But Reza didn’t move. He had him now.

“Allah!” Reza roared bringing his fist crashing down on Hamid once more. And again. And again. And again. With each punch, Hamid’s resistance weakened until he finally collapsed dead. A sigh of relief escaped Reza. He let go, staggering towards Ruqayya. He could feel his consciousness slipping away.

“Must f-free R-ruqayya,” he garbled.

He ignored, moving up to Ruqayya. Raising the blade, he cut her free. That was when it happened. The knife slipped from his numb hands as he collapsed upon the wooden floor.

“Reza!” Ruqayya gasped rushing forward.

Reza groaned, holding his side painfully. The Alpha’s blow had struck Reza deep.

“Keep your eyes open, Reza!” Ruqayya cried. “I can’t lose you too!”

Reza’s hand opened partially.

“Can I hold your hand?” he whispered weakly.

Ruqayya’s lip quivered, tears filled her eyes as she took hold. Reza felt her hand and smiled.

“I told...you....ships...was better lead than here,” he whispered.

Ruqayya shook her head.

“I...found Zafar,” he whispered. “He’s asleep....in our...c-ca”

Reza’s eyes closed as he drifted into unconsciousness.

Flying Solo

It was a busy day in the office. Articles were being stamped and approved as the editors and journalists worked round the clock to ensure information reached the people on time.

Firuza's lips curled into a smile. Her article was going to wreck the competition. She just needed it approved by her new boss, Nadir. He was a short-tempered, short man, but she was quite confident she could convince him.

She closed her eyes, imagining the publicity she would get from this. She could almost taste it.

"Ah," she sighed. "I am just that good."

Her eyes drifted to a watch, a sad smile formed on her face. When she was young, her mother had given her one. But she lost it. It made her very sad. After all, this was her mother's last possession. But her sister Asiya had gifted an identical one to her.

"Dear Asiya," she whispered, eyeing the watch. "I will make us both famous. One day, everyone will know our names."

There was a loud knock.

"Miss Firuza, the boss will see you now."

Firuza took a deep breath.

"Here we go," she sighed.

Confidence. That would be key. And presentation. That would also be essential.

She stepped inside the room, eyeing the desk. A short man, with gray hair and blue eyes stood behind the desk.

“Sir,” she began. “I-”

“I will not publish this Firuza,” he overspoke. “How could you write something like this?”

Firuza narrowed her eyes.

“Sir, this is the truth.”

Nadir shook his head.

“You are dragging the name of one of the biggest heroes of the revolution into the dirt,” he growled. “I cannot condone such writing against the government.”

Firuza shook her head in disbelief.

“You were telling me just yesterday that this was our opportunity. Now-”

“Things changed,” Nadir overspoke. “I changed. You need to stop chasing publicity Firuza, and start being a real journalist. Tell the truth!”

Firuza took a deep breath.

“I never shied away from telling the facts,” she hissed. “Even if you don’t publish this, I will find a way.”

Nadir shook his head.

“You won’t Firuza. You never will. I don’t know about your old boss, but I certainly don’t appreciate what you are doing. It’s fitna (sedition).”

Firuza clenched her fist.

“Why did you really call me here?”

“There’s no way I can publish this,” Nadir sighed.

Firuza looked down.

“In that case, have a good day sir,” she spat. “I won’t let this opportunity Amr gave us slip..”

She turned, making her way out.

“If you leave,” Nadir threatened. “You won’t be able to come back. No company will hire you!”

Firuza looked back. Sometimes legends had to do dangerous things, but the reward was always sweet.

“Farewell, sir,” she answered sarcastically.

And with that, Firuza left. As she went out, there was a struggle to control the fire in her heart. She would become a journalist stronger than anyone had ever seen. She would be famous beyond compare. Nothing would stop her. She eyed the watch her sister had given her.

“I will control my path from now on,” she hissed.

Completion

“And light showers are expected tonight. That concludes the weather report for this evening.”

Farheen listened intently. Beside her, Zahra, Salma and Maryam were also discussing something.

“Girls, please focus,” Farheen chided.

They all stopped, turning to face the television. The headlines were about to come. It would tell them the results of their struggle.

“A huge reduction in civil conflicts. Many people are still conflicted over the information leakage at the Night of Heroes ceremony, but there is less anger in the city and more uncertainty. For now things are quiet but you can be sure that if anything happens, you will be the first one to know. This is Haq news.”

Farheen turned to the other three girls.

Salma clapped her hands together.

“Alhamdullillah,” she congratulated. “This is our success!”

Maryam and Zahra nodded as well.

“High five for the dream team!” Maryam chuckled.

They had done it.

“Maryam, give the report to our general. Let him know that we carried out our duty.”

Farheen instructed her.

Maryam nodded, narrowing her eyes slightly. Was she imagining it? Or was Farheen looking somewhat pale today?

Farheen stood up. All three girls stood up as well in respect. Farheen thanked them.

Salma bowed her head respectfully. After bidding farewell, she turned to leave. A moment later she was followed by Zahra and Maryam. Farheen took a deep breath, as she whispered a silent prayer of thanks to her creator.

“Allah,” she whispered. “Keep us strong against the enemies who have come to our door. Let us emerge victorious over them one last time. Ya Zahra!”

Underwater

Hamza wiped away the beads of sweat on his forehead. His stamina was strong enough to endure, but even then, climbing this mountain was as good as a high intensity workout.

Abruptly he looked down, noticing a strange green plant. It had flowers but its leaves were shaped like a moth's wing. Hamza leaned down to smell it.

Wham!

Hamza gasped as a force rammed him backwards. With a thud, he landed on the ground. Hamza raised his fists poised to fight.

"Musa? What are you doing?"

The youth eyed him warily, sighing in relief. Hamza raised a brow as Musa pointed to the flower and began holding his throat as though he was suffocating.

"Is the flower...poisonous?" he asked curiously.

Musa nodded. He began to trace letters with a stick on the rock,

It's called the 'the butterflies curse'. It's poison is incurable. And it gives off poison vapours.

Hamza's eyes widened in horror. Thankfully he hadn't smelled it.

"Thanks Musa," he whispered. "I owe you a life."

Musa shrugged casually, flashing him an ear to ear grin. He gestured for Hamza to advance on, a mischievous smile was

forming on his face. Hamza felt a strange sense of dread.

“Aye!” Hamza chided as they reached the edge of the cliff.

He had particularly instructed Musa to take them through the fastest route, but this was not what he had in mind. The cliff must have been at least a hundred feet off the ground. It overshadowed the canyon that allowed entry to the mountains.

Musa’s lips curled into a smile. He began moving his elbows back and forth like a bird, maybe a duck. No. A chicken! Hamza narrowed his eyes.

“I’m not scared of heights, Musa,” Hamza declared, though he still felt a swooping in his stomach when he looked down.

Musa smirked, bowing his head respectfully. Raising his hands, he slammed them off the ground. Hamza’s eyes widened in horror.

“Musa don’t-”

Musa sped off to the edge of the cliff. Hamza froze as the youth jumped off the edge.

“Musa!” Hamza exclaimed as he ran to the edge.

Hamza stopped at the edge. Why couldn’t he see him? Where was he hiding? Why would he do such a thing. Hamza looked down. His eyes widened in amazement, his lips curled into an excited smile.

There was water down below. Musa jumped because of that. Why though, Hamza had no idea. Maybe he wanted to jump. Hamza wasn’t sure.

“Here goes nothing,” Hamza shuddered.

He closed his eyes for a moment taking a deep breath. He was about to jump a hundred feet. He knew how to dive professionally. Of course how, he didn’t know. Maybe he enjoyed swimming in his previous life. Hamza took a deep breath.

“Bismillah?” he shivered. “Argh!”

Hamza charged forward. He felt the ground crumble as his speed increased. He wrestled the horror in his heart as he reached the edge of the cliff. Hamza unconsciously slowed down, but that was a mistake. He tripped, slipping over the edge.

Hamza screamed. He was falling straight down. His voice fell in his throat as his stomach cringed. The wind slapped him as he sliced through it. Hamza blinked in horror. The water was

coming fast. Hamza positioned himself as he was trained to do so back when...when...

Wham!

The water slapped him hard as he plunged into the cold blue. Hamza held his breath as he drifted deeper and deeper. When the water would stop him, he would start treading back up. His eyes widened in surprise. His feet were on the sandy surface. This meant that the lake wasn't that deep. Musa just wanted him to come here. But why? Ilyas was definitely not here.

Hamza knew he couldn't hold his breath for very long. Maybe thirty seconds. Still he couldn't deny how beautiful it was at the bottom. With the lukewarm water massaging his arms. The sun's rays pierced deep in this water making it easy to see. He narrowed his eyes. There was a glare up ahead. Most likely Musa.

Hamza began swimming forward. There was no significant current in the water. That probably meant that it was disconnected from any sea or ocean.

Hamza started to tread harder as he neared the glare. It must have been Musa's hammer. Musa was waiting for him. Upon reaching there, his eyes widened in surprise. There was a chasm down below. Musa tapped his arm, before swimming inside. Hamza swallowed nervously. He couldn't hold his breath much longer. Was it wise to trust Musa?

'I'll go as far as I can,' Hamza decided. 'If it's too dangerous then I'll turn back.'

Slowly, Hamza began swimming inside. The moment he entered, he felt a slight current, which began dragging him forward. Hamza's eyes widened in confusion as he tried to swim against the water but to no avail. The water dragged him along the dark passage.

Hamza thrashed violently, panic was filling his body. He was being sucked in! He reached out for the rocks, but the water had reduced friction. His heart pounded violently as the water pulled him further until he saw a light ahead. Then it began spreading, illuminating the water he was in. No. He was leaving the dark tunnel, entering into a new body of water.

Hamza kicked himself. He needed air. He put all his strength

into his strokes as he broke the surface of the water.

“Agh!” he coughed. “Musa!”

The youth was ahead, treading his way to what Hamza noticed for the first time, was the edge of a mountain. Of course! The mountain had a portion underwater. This was the shortest way to enter!

“Note to self,” Hamza sputtered as he observed his surroundings. “Never trust Musa’s shortcuts.”

The Mountain Caves

“Keep going,” Hamza reassured himself. “Don’t look down.”

Only air separated him from the lake below as he advanced up the mountain. Hamza glanced to his right, feeling slightly irritated. He wasn’t used to being behind others. He knew well how to climb and was good at it too. Despite that, Musa seemed to have nearly no difficulty compared to him. The youth was adeptly scaling the rocky surfaces, giving Hamza the impression that he did this often.

It took them almost twenty minutes before the first cave came in sight. Musa climbed inside. Hamza was inside a few moments later. For a moment, neither said anything. Hamza coughed at the haze as his eyes adjusted to the reduced light. It was a small cave. Not very high. If Hamza stood on his toes, he might hit the roof.

“There’s no way he could stay here,” Hamza whispered. “Let’s go to the next one”.

Musa nodded. He sat down.

Hamza narrowed his eyes. Musa was panting. His lips curled into a smile.

“So Musa, feeling tired already?” he chuckled.

Musa shook his head in disapproval, flexing his right arm proudly. Hamza ruffled his hair kindly.

“You’re a good kid,” he whispered.

For a moment neither said anything. Musa looked up at

Hamza, meeting his gaze. Hamza's eyes widened in surprise. Musa was crying.

"Musa, are you alright?" he asked.

Musa took a deep breath. Pulling out a small knife he began scraping it in a weird way off the cave floor. No. He was writing something. Hamza began to read it,

When I was very little, my father and brother died saving me. They were killed by the crocodiles.

Hamza felt a strange pity in his heart. Musa was a brave young man. He fought with chivalry and was exceptionally skilled. He hadn't let his disability prevent him from being the best.

But something else was bothering Hamza. Why was Musa sharing this with him? Why was the young man opening his heart to Hamza?

He awkwardly pulled his hand away from Musa's head. Hamza did not want Musa to have any expectations from him. He would leave the tribe at the first chance he got. It wasn't like he planned on taking anyone with him.

Hamza sighed.

"Look Musa," he began. "I am very sorry for you, but.."

Hamza stopped himself. What was he doing? How could he do that to the young man? No. He couldn't. He would find a way to get rid of Musa. But he wouldn't hurt his feelings. Musa didn't deserve that. Musa had jumped into the leopards pit during the honour duel to help him. Musa had been supporting him this entire time.

"I think we should check the other caves first," Hamza finished.

Musa raised a brow. He eyed Hamza as though searching for a give away, but Hamza was experienced in this regard.

"Lets get climbing," he instructed.

Hamza advanced towards the edge, gripping hold of the rock for the second cliff. As he went, he noticed Musa's eyes light up. The youth looked at him excitedly. Hamza raised a brow, before narrowing his eyes. Was Musa challenging him to a race? He looked up to see the next cave several meters up above.

He knew he was a good climber but there was no doubt that Musa would be faster. He was lighter and more experienced after

all. Still, Hamza would give his best shot. He narrowed his eyes. Towards the right, the mountain was less steep. If he made it there, it would be easier and faster for him. He might be able to beat Musa.

Musa raised three fingers. He brought the first one down. Hamza relaxed his shoulders. He needed to be agile. Musa brought the second one down. Hamza took a deep breath, careful to not eye his target. He didn't want to disclose it from before. Musa brought down the third.

In a flash, the youth began climbing up. Hamza swung himself towards right, landing his footing close enough to the right side area. He looked up. Musa was already one third through.

"Let's go!" Hamza chuckled, scrambling his way up the less steep area. Rock by rock, he moved up, resisting the urge to glance towards Musa, about whom he was certain that he must have crossed the half mark by now.

"Alright," Hamza growled as he reached the half mark. Looking up, he could see that Musa was almost there.

Hamza ignored the dismay as he jumped up, swinging himself to the next boulder. By the time he reached the top, he was expecting to see Musa there. But Musa wasn't there.

"Where is he?" Hamza wondered.

Crack.

Hamza whirled around to see Musa, lying down against the bedrock. He yawned, eyeing Hamza with a satisfied smirk.

"Okay, okay," Hamza admitted. "You win. Now take me to the cave."

Musa smiled, leading Hamza towards the cave. This one was bigger. Much bigger. And as Hamza entered, he noticed that it led further into the cave.

Musa waved for Hamza's attention.

"What is it Musa?" he asked.

Musa pulled out his knife once more but Hamza stopped him.

"I understand sign language Musa," he explained. "You don't need to keep writing everything."

Musa's eyes widened in surprise. Hamza suppressed a grin. The youth had only just realised that Hamza could understand

everything he had said.

Musa raised his hands, moving them so as to communicate what he wanted to say to Hamza.

From here, this cave connects to most of the others through tunnels. They were created by gold miners. From here, we can check all the caves.

Relief filled Hamza's heart. He didn't need to do any more climbing for today. He took a deep breath, pausing to take in his surroundings. This cave was empty as well. Though it was a little different. Unlike the previous cave, this one narrowed first before tapering outwards.

"Let's explore them," Hamza instructed.

Musa nodded withdrawing his hammer. Hamza raised a brow. Why was Musa taking out his hammer?

"Musa, what's wrong?" he asked.

Musa pointed to the floor. Hamza looked down, his eyes widening in surprise as he noticed it for the first time. There were scratch marks on the floor. Large ones.

"Bears," Hamza deduced. "Huh, we should take precautions then. I'll go first."

Musa shook his head in disapproval, but Hamza ignored it. Musa might be faster, but Hamza definitely held a better shot against a bear. Eyeing Musa's hammer, he held out his hand expectantly. Musa's eyes widened in surprise. He jumped back in horror. Hamza rolled his eyes.

"Musa give me the hammer," he insisted.

Musa shuddered as though Hamza had just thrown him off a mountain. Then abruptly his lips curled into a smile. Hamza eyed him in disbelief as the youth withdrew a small dagger, holding it out for Hamza.

"Will you give me this against a bear?" Hamza chided.

Musa nodded. He pointed to Hamza's arms.

"No, no, I assure you," Hamza scoffed. "My arms are not strong enough for a bear."

Musa chuckled, before trotting into the darkness ahead.

"Boys," Hamza remarked, following inside after him.

He was about to call after the youth when his ears pricked.

He narrowed his eyes. He could hear a strange noise up ahead. It was making him uncomfortable. He clenched his dagger's handle tightly. What was going on? Why did the noise sound almost like ticking? He could hear Musa breathing up ahead. But then again...

Hamza looked up. He heard a clatter from up ahead. And footsteps. Musa was coming back. Hamza eyed him curiously. He held something up at Hamza excitedly. Hamza froze. His eyes widened in horror. It was a grenade. And it was making a small ticking sound.

The Hunt

“Musa, give me that!” he growled, snatching it from the youth. In a flash, he hurled it ahead, shoving Musa down simultaneously.

Boom!

A loud explosion shattered through the rocks. Hamza coughed, covering his eyes from the huge dust haze. The sound of boulders colliding could still be heard for the minutes that followed.

Hamza looked up at last.

“Musa,” he sputtered. “Are you okay? Musa?”

Hamza glanced around curiously. Musa was behind him, lying on the ground. He stirred. Before getting up and giving Hamza a thumbs up. He rubbed his eyes.

Hamza narrowed his eyes. How did a grenade get here? They weren't common around here. They couldn't be. Musa, being part of the chief's family did not know what the grenade was. Correction. He probably knew what a grenade was. Most likely, he didn't know what they looked like.

But if Musa didn't know what it was, most likely they weren't common here. Hamza clenched his fist. There was a stranger in these lands. Maybe the beast that had been killing the flocks of the tribe. And this 'beast' must have set parameter alarms in the caves. Musa probably tripped the grenade without realising it.

“Musa,” Hamza growled. “Which way is the next cave?”

Musa coughed, pointing upwards.

“Of course,” Hamza shook his head in disapproval. “I’ll see just how much climbing I have to do today.”

With a deep breath, he headed over to the exit of the cave. As he went he couldn’t help think about how he recognised the grenade for what it was. How he knew what it was.

‘It doesn’t mean anything,’ Hamza thought to himself. ‘Maybe I saw a picture of it before’.

Hamza sighed as he reached the end of the cave. From here he would climb out and then up. He reached out for the rocky edge and began climbing out of the cave. There was a small clatter from above. Hamza looked up.

He froze, his eyes widening in horror. There was a man there, dressed in black army styled gear. He was holding a powerful pistol.

“Don’t move a muscle,” the man growled.

Hamza stilled instantly, his mind racing for a means of escape. Maybe he could try swinging back into the cave and-

Boom!

The gunman shot his gun to the sky, frightening a pigeon to death.

“Don’t think about escaping,” the gunman growled. “I’ve killed many before you.”

Hamza eyed him warily. He wasn’t sure of what to do. This man was confident. There was no doubt that he would shoot Hamza without any hesitation. Which left Hamza with two options. One was jumping at the gunman. But that risked getting shot and even if Hamza was successful, he would get impaled by the mountain fall. The second option was to jump into the water. But he would certainly get shot before then. No. Neither of the two options would work.

“What do you want from me?” Hamza asked to buy time.

The gunman narrowed his eyes.

“There’s something familiar about you,” he whispered.

Hamza raised a brow. What did the gunman mean? Did he know Hamza? Hamza studied him for a moment. He eyed the man carefully, noticing a small scar on the man’s face, near his eye.

Hamza shuddered. He could hear voices in his head.

We're going to crash! Hamza coughed. There was a sudden chill in his body. He looked left, his eyes widening in surprise. It was the gunman! Kumail! That was his name. "Kumail!" Hamza shouted. "You'll kill us all" Kumail shook his head. "Just give me the box," he shouted back. Hamza eyed him in anger. He wasn't going to give what he had been entrusted with. "This is the only one left from the Sada e Haq," Hamza growled. "The others are all lost. I won't ever give it to you!" CRACK. Hamza's eyes widened in horror. There was a loud 'Boom' as the vehicle rumbled in the wind and everything went black.

Hamza's hands weakened as he slipped and fell into the dark waters below.

The News

Beep.....Beep.....Beep.....

“His vitals have improved,” the doctor explained. “You brought him here right on time.”

Ruqayya sighed in relief, whispering a silent prayer of gratitude to her creator.

Reza blinked.

“I told you,” he muttered, getting up. “I’m fine Alham-”

Ruqayya placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Uh uh,” she whispered. “Doctor said that you need rest. So you’re going to rest.”

Reza grumbled.

“I don’t want to,” he complained, almost sounding like a child.

Ruqayya shook her head in disapproval.

“Reza,” she chided.

Reza sighed, grumbling away like a cranky child.

“You scared me so badly,” Ruqayya whispered.

Reza shook his head.

“You scared me more,” he remarked casually, as if it was her fault. “I’m here because of you.”

Ruqayya smiled. “Reza there’s something I need to tell you.”

Reza raised a brow as she took his hand in her own.

“When I married you, so many months ago,” she whispered.

“We both set out to fill that hole of a huge loss in our hearts.

Recently, I've been having these headaches. I never realised it before but..."

Reza blinked. What was she getting at?

Ruqayya looked down...shyly? What was wrong with her? Why was she being so...strange?

Ruqayya looked into his eyes.

"Alhamdullillah," she whispered. "You're going to be a father, Reza."

Reza froze. All functions ceased. He blinked. What did she just say?

"I'm s-sorry," he stammered. "Wh-what did you just say?"

Ruqayya smiled once more.

"I said," Ruqayya repeated, her lips curling into a grin. "Allah has blessed us with a-"

"Alhamdullillah!" Reza exclaimed, his eyes watering.

Ruqayya's eyes were filled with tears of joy as Reza celebrated.

"Inshallah I'm going to be a baba!"

Ruqayya smiled, holding Reza's hand.

"Get me out of this hospital bed," Reza chuckled. "I'm fine now, Alhamdullillah!"

Report

Silence. No noise was to be heard except for the sound of papers. Akbar narrowed his eyes as he read through the information. There had to be a lead here. There had to be.

A sudden knock sounded from the door. Akbar looked up, his hand instinctively hovering over his blade.

The door creaked open to a most welcome sight. Reza and Ruqayya. Akbar narrowed his eyes. Reza was leaning on Ruqayya.

“Asalamualaikum,” the couple greeted Akbar.

Akbar bowed his head respectfully in response.

“Are you alright, Reza?” Akbar asked.

Reza’s ear to ear grin contradicted his heavy breathing.

“Alhamdullillah,” he answered.

Ruqayya looked down.

“We’re here to inform you,” Reza began. “Our mission is complete, Alhamdullillah.”

Akbar nodded.

“And?”

Reza eyed Ruqayya.

“Amr planted a gang in the fish market to cause disturbances. The fisherman banded together to fight them. These clashes were the reports of disturbances we were hearing about.”

Akbar nodded. It made sense. The enemy was trying to capitalise on the instability caused by Amr’s cyber attack.

“Zafar overheard the gangsters talking about how Amr employed them, so they tried silencing him and he went into hiding. But it’s all good now, Alhamdulillah. Zafar has been reunited with his family. The order in the fisherman market has been restored. With their leader ‘Hamid’ dead, they’ve gone cold foot and fled.”

Akbar nodded.

“Standard behaviour,” he added. “The loss of a leader cast them in disarray and they have now scattered and fled. I’ll send a squad to make sure they’ve really left though.”

Reza nodded.

“The other news I had for you...”

He glanced at Ruqayya who nodded.

Akbar raised a brow. What had happened?

“We need a favour from you,” Ruqayya smiled.

Akbar eyed the couple. Why were they acting so strangely.

“We will not be able to return to duty for a bit,” Reza explained, his lips curling into a smile. “Because Ruqayya and I are about to become parents, Inshallah.”

Akbar blinked. For a moment, he froze. Then his eyes widened. Then his lips curled into a huge grin. And he turned to Reza.

“Say that again?” Akbar whispered.

Ruqayya giggled, glancing at Reza and how similar the reaction was. But before Reza could repeat himself, Akbar dived in, hauling Reza off of his feet.

“Ay Mashallah!” he congratulated.

“Akbar Bhai!” Reza gasped, unable to breathe.

Akbar let go.

“Sadiq!” Akbar called out.

The door creaked open and an old man stepped inside.

“Yes sir,” he answered.

“Distribute sweets and Sherbet in the entire city today! Open stalls. Today, Allah has given us great joy, so we will give to the people as well. Let no man sleep hungry tonight. Distribute samosas, gulab jaman and other such treats amongst everyone.”

Sadiq nodded, and turned to leave. With him gone, Akbar turned to Ruqayya with tears in his eyes.

“I’m so happy for you, my girl,” he whispered. “I pray that if your child is a boy, he be a brave and faithful warrior. A pillar of support. And if your child is a girl, then she be like a star, illuminating her home with love and affection. Inshallah, your family will always be happy.”

Reza and Ruqayya bowed their heads respectfully.

“Ameen,” they answered.

The Search for Answers

“Are you sure this is a good idea, Abbas?” Isa asked as they strolled down the muddy pathway.

Abbas shook his head in disapproval. This was the third time his friend was bringing this up. Abbas nodded confidently.

“I need to get to the bottom of this,” he whispered. “And I’m certain that the answers lie here somewhere.”

It had been about an hour since they had set off for their destination. A highly classified prison. One of the darkest places in Peaceville. A place where the worst of the Alphas were kept. The ones who were closest to Jumeira. This was called the Zaqqum prison.

Abbas had only been here once before, and that too, with Akbar Uncle. This was the first time he was coming here alone. Well, not exactly alone. Isa had sportingly volunteered to join him.

Even Abbas was feeling a bit nervous coming here. But what choice did he have. The man who could answer his questions was here. The recently added inmate, Masud.

The aim was simple. Abbas just wanted to have a conversation. Figure out who Masud’s benefactors were. Abbas wasn’t entirely sure how he would do it. Should he be honest? Or maybe not?

Alphas were clever and getting information out of one would, no doubt, be an arduous task. But Abbas was more than up for it. He had already faced challenges in his life that most young men

of his age couldn't even imagine. He would find a solution to this as well. Deep down, Abbas was hoping it would yield some kind of lead. Something that could put them on the track to finding Amr.

"We're almost there," Isa remarked, kicking a pebble. "Once we cross this forest, we'll find the tunnel that leads to the prison."

Abbas nodded in acknowledgement. He was glad to have his friend by his side. With a deep breath, they turned off the muddy road path and began strolling towards the trees.

"Keep a sharp eye on your surroundings to make sure that we are not followed," Abbas advised, glancing over his shoulder once.

The duo entered into the trees.

"Ay," Isa winced, at a protruding branch pinching away at his arm. "Keep a sharp watch for branches as well!"

As the two strolled through the vegetation, the strong smell of pine cones was dominant in the air. Abbas's mind returned back to the matter at hand.

The data Masud and the other Alphas tried to steal, was confiscated by Akbar. Abbas narrowed his eyes suppressing his frustration. He could not deny he was more than curious to know what was on that drive. And deep down, he was partially disappointed that Akbar didn't trust him to know the contents of the drive.

Abbas sighed as a streak of blue caught his attention from ahead. A lake.

"Left turn from here, I believe?" he whispered.

Isa nodded. The two glanced back once more, before turning left.

Abbas narrowed his eyes as he was processing his thoughts. There was no way he could get his hands on the data. And by no means he could ask his mother why her name was in the list of scientists in that document. He could also never deduce anything from the words in the document,

Status: Box missing, Faiza missing

All he knew was this. The objective was not in his favour, as he recalled from the data,

Objective: Ultimate control

‘It’s best to focus on what more I can learn,’ Abbas reflected.

That was why he was here. If he could speak with Masud, he might learn something about the benefactors who hired the four Alphas. He might even learn something about Amr.

“We’re here,” Isa whispered, breaking Abbas’s train of thought.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. It seemed like the middle of nowhere. A normal part of the forest. Birds tweeting away from the tall trees, blades of grass swishing and swaying back and forth. That was the idea. Only if someone knew precisely where the prison was, would they be able to enter it.

Isa grinned.

“Shall we?” he asked with a smirk.

Abbas nodded, narrowing his eyes. There were two trees ahead. On one of them was a mark. A slash. Carved by Akbar to mark the area’s importance.

Abbas glanced at the trees nearby.

“No owls,” he remarked.

Isa nodded.

“It’s not windy or raining either,” he added to Abbas’s statement. “Check the ground.”

Abbas felt the ground. It was moist and soft. This meant that today, they would use the south entrance to the facility.

This was a critical piece of information, for depending on the day, only one of the four entrances were open. The other three were sealed with instant death traps awaiting anyone who tried to use them. It was an ingenious security measure, since there was no way to know which entrance to use in advance. No pattern to indicate. The only one who knew was the one who decided the entrance to be used that day. And that person was known as the warden.

He had chosen signs to indicate the entrance. If there were owls in the trees, then the north entrance was to be used. If the wind was heavy, the west entrance was the way to go. If it was raining, the east entrance was the correct one. But if none of those conditions were met, the ground being moist or wet meant that the south entrance was to be used that day.

Abbas and Isa advanced on. As they went, each boy rolled up

his sleeves. It was going to get wet very quickly. No one would normally wander beyond the dense forest line, but if they did, they would find a small well.

“You first, Isa,” he whispered.

Isa flashed Abbas a hesitant glance.

“Here we go,” he breathed. “Bismillah”

Isa jumped into the well!

Any normal person seeing this would wonder why on earth Abbas wasn’t worried. They’d be even more confused as to why he was counting.

“Sixteen...seventeen...eighteen,” he whispered.

“Twenty eight....twenty nine....thirty!”

Abbas sighed, looking over his shoulder once.

“Ya Allah!” Abbas whispered.

He jumped over the edge, into the well!

Abbas made no noise as he plunged into the darkness of the cold water. He kept his heart beat calm, not trying to stay afloat. He needed to sink quickly as fast as possible.

Deeper and deeper, he felt his body drown as he struggled to keep himself from panicking. Keeping himself from resisting the water. He couldn’t go back. He had to reach the bottom.

He remembered the verse 153 of Surah Baqarah in his head repeatedly.

O you who have believed, seek help through patience and prayer. Indeed, Allah is with the patient.

‘Come on,’ Abbas pushed himself.

His feet could still feel nothing but water. Where was it? He couldn’t hold his breath forever. Had he-

Abbas’s eyes widened, relief started filling his heart as his feet scraped against the stone floor. He had done it. And he was now thirty feet underground.

Abbas reached out, feeling the edge of the wall. It was rough.

He placed his foot against the edge of the circumference he was in and pressed it against the wall. He lifted his foot.

CLICK.

A hatch above his head moved so as to cut off the well’s water from Abbas. A section of the edge opened up into a open

area underground, allowing Abbas and remaining water out into a small swimming pool.

Abbas sputtered as he pulled himself out of the pool. He wasn't fond of the south entrance. But at least it wasn't like the north entrance which involved fire.

Abbas sighed in relief as he pressed the red reset button on the wall next to the hatch. The edge moved back into its place. It was flawless. Only one person could enter at a time. The fake well led to the entry, and the swimming pool pumped water back into the well when its water was below the thirty feet minimum depth.

"Well ,well," he heard a voice behind him. "I certainly didn't expect a visit from you sir!"

Abbas whirled around, his eyes widening partially.

"Dawud," he panted, wiping the water from his face.

Dawud clapped his hands together as Abbas walked up to him.

"Asalamualaikum Sir," he grinned, his arms widening.

Abbas embraced him warmly.

"Walaikum asalam," Abbas answered.

Dawud stepped back, bowing his head respectfully.

More than a year ago, during the revolution, Dawud had been Abbas's student. One of his best. He was a sincere youth and in all honesty, Abbas was surprised that Dawud was part of the guards for such a high security prison. That was before Abbas saw the other measures in place.

Isa was also standing on the side, waiting for Abbas to come.

"Lets go, then," Abbas whispered as there wasn't too much time and Abbas wanted to get to the bottom of all this, as soon as possible.

56

Zaqqum

The tunnel was crude but well made. The walls were lined with concrete holding thousands of pounds of soil above him. Thin lines of fluorescent lights cast a soft white light on them as they followed Dawud. It was an eerily innocent entrance to a place with such a menacing reputation. Elephant sized guards in armour were standing by the door. Within their hands, they carried huge, loaded guns.

They gave Abbas and Dawud a curt nod as the two passed by them. Abbas nodded back, starting to realise how serious measures were taken in this prison. The prison, most people in Peaceville didn't even know of. Zaqqum. The darkest part of Peaceville.

"How did such a place exist for so long and no one ever knew about it?" Abbas wondered out loud.

Dawud turned back to look at Abbas. "You haven't heard?"

Abbas shook his head. Dawud took a breath.

"They used to use this place for those who resisted and didn't want to become Alphas. They were kept separately so they didn't 'corrupt' other test subjects"

"How do you know that?"

"Leftover research papers." Dawud grimaced. "Those who didn't become soldiers, became *experiments*. Reading those could cause nightmares."

That did little to ease Abbas's increasing feeling of discomfort.

If anything, it set him more on edge. He could almost see the Alphas giant gear ridden forms dragging in helpless men, women and children, their screams lost in the miles of tunnels that surrounded them. He shook his head to dispel the thought, but the white walls and wiped floors felt so much more tainted than before.

It was also cold. Not the kind of freezing nipping in winter or the pinching sensation in rain. This was an unsettling chill that sunk deep in the bones. Abbas could almost feel a haze of malevolence in the air.

He narrowed his eyes. There was a man, unlike any he had ever seen. He was massive and his head was only centimetres from the ceiling. He was as wide as all of them combined.

‘He makes Akbar Uncle look normal sized!’ Abbas watched incredulously.

His body looked as though it had been chiselled from stone, as if he used cars for dumbbells. He stood rigid and attentively. A thick beard peppered with white covered half of his face and his harsh eyes were set in skin covered with scars.

“Abbas, he is the warden.” Isa introduced.

Turning back to the warden, he said,

“And sir, he is my good friend, Captain Abbas. You probably know him?”

The warden nodded.

“Why, who wouldn’t know the great Captain Abbas Murtaza?” he grinned.

Abbas bowed his head respectfully, shaking the warden’s hand in a tight grip.

“My name is Tariq.” the warden replied simply after greeting him. “I heard you wish to speak with an inmate who arrived recently.”

Abbas nodded in acknowledgement.

“Yes, his name is Masud,” he explained.

Tariq narrowed his eyes.

“Very well,” he decided. “Follow me.”

Tariq glanced at one of the guards. The guard nodded, pulling out a small glow stick.

“Seriously,” Isa remarked.

Tariq nodded.

“It’s the only way to navigate the dark tunnels,” he explained. “Only two guards, one on either end of the path can give a glow stick. Once activated, the stick will only stay lit long enough to complete the journey across the tunnels from one side to the other.”

Abbas’s eyes widened in amazement.

“So if you didn’t know the exact route,” Abbas added. “Then you’ll get lost for good in the tunnels.”

Tariq nodded in the affirmative.

“We have no choice but to take such measures. Our prisoners are of the highest security threat.”

Each boy took a glow stick from the guard. First Isa, then Dawud and finally Abbas. Upon receiving his, Abbas couldn’t help notice how small the area of illumination of the glow stick was. Maybe as long as a thirty centimetres by his estimate.

“Bismillah hir rahman nir raheem,” Tariq began.

He led them down, into a tunnel. The boys followed closely, Dawud was right beside the warden, while Abbas and Isa followed behind.

“So,” Isa remarked as they moved, quietly so that only Abbas would hear. “What do you make of the big guy?”

Abbas watched Tariq for a moment, narrowing his eyes.

“I pity anyone that gets on his bad side,” Abbas answered.

Isa shook his head.

“I don’t mean that. It’s just...I feel like I would remember such a guy if I saw him in the revolution,” Isa whispered. “Have you ever seen him before?”

Abbas didn’t need to strain his memory to answer Isa’s question. He knew for sure that he had never seen someone like him before. And suddenly, he too shared Isa’s curiosity. Where had this guy been during the revolution time? Abbas knew everyone in Peaceville, and after one year, knew even those who were not in the revolution. So in all fairness, him not knowing someone was quite peculiar.

Isa narrowed his eyes.

“Tariq Bhai?” he started.

Abbas listened carefully as Tariq’s response came.

“Yes Isa.”

“What unit were you part of in the revolution?” Isa asked curiously.

Tariq shrugged.

“I was part of the spy network, away from base.”

Abbas and Isa eyed each other.

They continued to walk. As the group went on, Abbas found his patience wearing thin. It felt like they were going in circles. After every tunnel, lay another tunnel and then another and then another... With so many twists and turns Abbas was starting to think that escaping could do no good if one had to navigate this maze, only to wind up in the hands of those elephant sized guards at the entrance.

‘Even the sharpest mind could not figure this out,’ Abbas realised.

Another few minutes passed. By this point, Abbas had managed to think of every way a person could fail to escape the tunnel. Glow stick dying out, tunnel cave-in etc.

“I wonder if we’ll ever get out,” Isa pretended to yawn.

Tariq chuckled.

“Perfect timing, Isa,” he whispered

Abbas looked past Tariq, his eyes lighting up. There was a torch at the end of this tunnel. Was this the last tunnel?

“This is it,” Isa whispered, nudging Abbas.

Abbas nodded. Again, here too, they found a matching set of guards to the ones at the entrance. They too were covered in bullet proof armour and were wearing all kinds of advanced night vision equipment.

As the group passed, some of the guards bowed their heads respectfully or saluted. Abbas answered with a salute in return. And with that, they moved on, leaving the guards behind.

Abbas had been in many prisons before. Usually they were noisy and chaotic with most people eating, yelling or fighting. This one was quiet. Too quiet. Not a sound save their boots against the floor.

‘Where are all the prisoners?’ he thought to himself.

Isa leaned in close to Abbas.

“Aren’t these measures a bit extreme, even for Alphas?” he whispered.

Abbas shook his head. “These aren’t normal Alphas.”

Isa frowned. “What do you mean?”

Abbas looked down.

“Most Alphas were controlled against their will using the c-gun or c-chip, yes?” he explained. “These Alphas were, after Alpha 43 and Alpha 31, the closest to Jumeira. Each prisoner here is one of the Alphas with the highest kill counts.”

“They have one more commonality,” Tariq added.

Abbas raised a brow.

“Like all Alphas, they started by wearing a c-chip against their will. But what made these Alphas different was what followed. Eventually at some point in time, each of these Alphas had their c-chips removed, and continued as Alphas without being under any control or influence.”

Isa’s reaction was justified. He had never imagined an Alpha could do such atrocities out of their own free will. But Abbas knew better. He knew that Alpha 43 had never worn the c-chip. That his crimes were entirely from his own free will. Abbas shuddered at the memory of the lethal assassin.

No one said anymore as the little party stopped in front of a door.

It was the strangest one Abbas had ever seen. There was no pin pad, fingerprint scanner or even a handle. Ten large safe locks lined the door’s edge. Usually doors were designed to keep others out, but this one was clearly designed to keep others in. Dawood blocked the view with his body and swiftly turned them back and forth with practiced ease.

Abbas raised an eyebrow, the system was strong but archaic. Tariq must have seen his face, for he stated,

“The Alphas were masters of a variety of skills, including hacking. Beyond this door, no electronics or weapons are allowed. We can’t risk it.”

Abbas blinked as a guard stepped in from nowhere, holding out his hands expectantly.

Isa flashed Abbas an uncertain gaze.

“You’ll get them back,” the guard remarked.

Abbas narrowed his eyes, his hand on his holster.

“You know who I am?” he whispered.

Tariq stepped forward.

“Captain, please,” he stated. “It’s not only for you. The rule goes for everyone, even our general had to give his weapons this morning.”

Abbas froze, his eyes widening in surprise.

“Akbar Uncle was here?” he asked.

Tariq’s eyes widened slightly, and Abbas could see a sudden discomfort in his eyes.

“Well...I-”

“It’s okay,” Abbas overspoke quickly. “If this is the way things are done around here, I’m okay with it.”

Before Tariq could say anymore, Abbas unbuckled his holster and handed it over to the guard.

“That’s all I have,” Abbas remarked casually.

Isa flashed Abbas a quizzical glance, but Abbas ignored it, wondering if his friend would catch on. The guard did a frisk search on Abbas, before gesturing for Abbas to pass through. He watched as Isa removed his chain and pistol and handed them to the guard. A moment later, Isa joined Abbas on the other side.

Tariq unwound the door and pulled it open.

“Follow me.” he instructed.

He began walking forward, Abbas and Isa behind him. As they went, Isa raised a hand, eyeing Abbas and began moving it in a weird way. Abbas narrowed his eyes. It was a simplified sign language. And Isa was asking,

Why did you hide your dagger?

Abbas blinked.

I’ll tell you later, you have your dagger as well, right?

Isa nodded.

Abbas had learnt the hard way to always have a trick up his sleeve. Just in case. Aside from his revolver, Zulfi, Abbas always

carried a knife for hand-to-hand combat situations. And given where they were headed, he would never in a million years go in unarmed.

But something else was on Abbas's mind, Tariq's words echoing in his mind.

It's not only for you. The rule goes for everyone, even our general had to give his weapons this morning.

Akbar was here this morning. And Tariq seemed uncomfortable with Abbas knowing that. Why? Surely there was a reason? Abbas could only think of one.

'Akbar Uncle probably told Tariq not to tell anyone about his visit,' Abbas realised.

Nobody was meant to know that Akbar was here. But that brought up another question. Why? What purpose did Akbar have?

"Bismillah," Isa sighed, snapping Abbas's train of thought.

'I should focus right now,' Abbas thought to himself, turning his attention to the facility once more.

The inside of Zaqqum prison was a place Abbas would never forget. If anything, it looked and felt like hell incarnate. The halls were tall with arched ceilings from which hung large lights. Lining the walls were thick grills with no gap wider than his pinky. Of course what had his attention was what was behind them.

Each cell held a single Alpha. There was a thin mattress, a wall hidden toilet and a blanket.

They were passing a cell when one of the men watched Abbas with unflinching concentration. He stood up and slammed a hand on the bars. Dust flung in the air and the high pitched ring resonated in the hall.

Abbas didn't flinch.

"You're brave." The man sneered with a raspy voice like it hadn't been used in days.

"I have no reason to be afraid." Abbas replied through gritted teeth.

"True. But that's assuming you're safe. That's assuming..." he straightened up. "that these bars can keep you safe. Do you feel safe *Abbas?*"

Abbas showed no reaction at the man knowing his name. The man smiled. It was cold and unsettling but it would take more to rattle Abbas.

“I’d be careful if I were you. You’re not really welcome around here.” He suddenly looked behind Abbas and raised his hands defensively before returning meekly to his mattress. Abbas turned and saw Tariq standing behind him. They both moved forward.

“Who was that?” Abbas asked.

“His name is Harun,” Tariq scowled. “Don’t bother yourself, you’re known to many of the Alphas here. Not all of them, but enough for you to be known.”

Tariq moved back to the front of the group. Abbas called Dawud back.

“I was at one of the cells, the prisoner seemed almost...afraid of Tariq. ”

Dawud nodded. “Every time an Alpha is sent here, Tariq makes sure they know there’s no escape. He’s very ruthless but he makes sure that no one’s out of line. I’m not surprised he’s good at it since Sir Ibrahim personally hand-picked him to run this facility.”

Abbas’s eyes widened slightly. Agha Ibrahim had chosen this man. Interesting. He couldn’t help wonder what connection existed between the noble leader of Peaceville and this overgrown warden.

Abbas opened his mouth to speak but stopped at another sight. A sight that made him stop in his tracks. Across the hall on another wall, was a small woman. She wouldn’t have reached his shoulder. Her petite frame was bound in a myriad of cuffs and chains, some of them snaking past her frame and embedded in the floor and walls. She was chained up like a monster, there was even a chain around her neck. She watched Abbas with large brown eyes, almost pleadingly.

The pity lasted only a moment. Knowing where he was, he could almost see the ice-cold wickedness brewing beneath that ostensibly innocent exterior.

“Everyone calls her Sting.” Dawud mentioned.

“She doesn’t look like an Alpha” Isa commented. He and Tariq

had joined them.

She didn't say anything but gave them a small smile.

"Don't trust looks." Dawud warned. "A year ago, she managed to convince a guard that the chains were hurting her. The poor fool unlocked one hand."

He glared at her, "That beast put three guards in the hospital, one of whom still hasn't woken up."

The woman shrugged, unapologetic. "I mean, if you have a guard that was naive enough to believe me, it would be incredibly foolish of me to not use that."

She turned to Abbas. "And I am not foolish" she hissed.

"And yet, you're here." he replied unflinching.

She did not like that response and gave him ugly sneer, the chains groaning with strain.

"Be careful little boy. It would be sad if you had to eat your words."

"Enough Sana!" Tariq growled so loud that Abbas could feel the vibration in his boots.

"My name is Sting!" she shrieked. Her sneer then melted into an impossibly innocent pout. "You never let me have any fun..."

She was looking at Abbas but she constantly glimpsed at Tariq.

Tariq scoffed. "I won't stoop to your foolish nicknames."

He led them away as a voice called out behind them.

"Boring!" it screamed accusingly, to which Tariq paid no heed and moved forward.

"What was that all about? " Isa asked.

"Her real name is Sana and she... she has a taste for dramatic flair. Let's leave it at that."

He took a breath. "Everything matters when you're dealing with an Alpha. How you talk to them, how you address them, everything. You can't let them feel in control of anything, or they will end up controlling you."

Abbas walked in silence, listening to every word Tariq said. He couldn't help but think back to his own fight with Alpha 43. Tariq was right, the way Alphas controlled people was by making them feel like they were in control of everything. In a way, Tariq's

methods felt extreme, but as he remembered more and more what it was like to face off against an Alpha, he could not deny the necessity of such measures.

“We’re here.” Dawud stopped them, gesturing to one of the cells.

Abbas studied the cell curiously. This cell was much different from the others. For one, there was no sign of life. It was dead. And it was silent. A definite difference from the others. But there was something odd about this cell. Abbas wasn’t sure what, but something made him uncomfortable. He narrowed his eyes. Was it the smell, or the air, or the-

Abbas stopped, his eyes widening in alarm as a sudden realisation struck him.

“Wait a minute!” he gasped. “Where’s Masud?”

Tariq strolled up beside him.

“What do you mea-”

He froze.

“Oh no,” he breathed.

Abbas flashed Isa a quizzical glance as Tariq whirled around and shouted.

“Code 149!” he growled.

Abbas heart pounded in his chest. He moved up next to Isa as a loud alarm bell sounded throughout the prison.

“You’ll have to stay here as a security measure,” Tariq ordered. “We’re going to sweep this entire prison clean until we find that assassin!”

Isa leaned in beside Abbas.

“What do we do?” he asked, his eyes darting between Abbas and the prison ahead.

Abbas had no idea. He kept glancing back and ahead, completely confused by what was going on.

“I’m not sure,” Abbas whispered, unsheathing his knife.

Isa followed suit.

“Look out!” Dawud shouted.

Abbas turned to see a white mist floating through the air, opaque and preventing him from seeing past one meter.

“What’s happening? Isa exclaimed incredulously. “I can’t see a thing.”

Tariq growled.

“Argh!” he shouted barging into the mist.

The moment he disappeared into the fog, his voice drowned out. Abbas shuddered at the chill in his spine. Glancing at Isa, he noted that his friend was no better. Dawud too looked extremely perplexed.

“What is this Dawud?” Abbas asked. “Some kind of defensive measure? Is the prison fitted with fog dispensers?”

Dawud shook his head.

“No,” he whispered. “I’ve never seen something like this befo.”

“Argh!”

A loud scream filled the hall. A man’s. Abbas’s heart skip a beat. Was that Tariq?

“HAhahahahahahahah!”

Abbas narrowed his eyes. What was *that*? Who was that? It sounded like a woman.

Clank!

Abbas’s eyes widened in horror. From the moment he had entered, he had only seen one woman in the entire duration of the visit.

“Isa, Dawud” Abbas growled. “Get back! Something’s not right!”

Clank! Clank! Clank!

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Four clanks.

“Dawud,” Abbas gasped. “How many prisoners do you have here, aside from Masud?”

Dawud glanced back, the horror on his face confirming Abbas’s suspicions. There were four prisoners.

“Allah save us. We gotta run!” Abbas realised, the tension was visible on his face. “The Alphas are free.”

Cat and Mouse

Dawud whirled around.

“Wh-what?” he gasped.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. This wasn't panic time. They needed to get out of here. Every moment they stood here increased the likelihood of imminent death. He turned to Isa and Dawud who were both poised to fight.

Abbas shuddered. He could hear the sounds of scraping from behind the fog. His eyes darted left and right, searching frantically for a hiding place. Where could they go?

“This won't be fun if we kill you boys immediately! You have ten seconds to hide!” came a voice. Sting's. “Ten.....Nine!”

Abbas's eyes widened, his grip over the dagger tightening. Was this a game for her?

“Eight!”

Abbas turned to Dawud.

“Is there any place we can hide?”

Dawud blinked helplessly, his mind clearly too distracted by the horrific predicament.

“Seven!”

Abbas eyed Isa.

“What do we do?” Isa asked.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. The cells were too obvious and will be dead ends. That left two ways. Forward and back. Forward

led to the south entrance, the place they had come from. While backwards led to the north entrance.

“Six!”

Abbas knew that the north entrance was sealed today. That meant-

“Five!”

Abbas narrowed his eyes. There was only one way out.

“Four!”

The fog was starting to clear now. And Abbas was absolutely certain he knew what they needed to do. They needed to do something unpredictable. They needed to charge at the Alphas while the fog was there.

“Three!”

Abbas turned to Isa and Dawud.

“Dawud, get us out of here!” Abbas hissed.

Dawud shuddered. They could hear scraping from up ahead. Barely a few meters. If Alphas stepped out of the fog, they would undoubtedly see the three boys. He felt his heart pound in his chest.

“Dawud!” Abbas growled. “I won’t let them hurt you! Now come on!”

The boy regained his composure. Glancing around himself urgently, he raised a hand, pointing to a tunnel opposite to the mist. He whispered,

“Follow me!”

And darted off.

“Two!” came Sting’s voice.

Abbas flashed Isa a nod and the two darted away after Dawud. As they went, Abbas glanced back to see the fog entirely cleared. And the four shadows stood there. The four notorious Alphas.

“Let’s get them!” Sting laughed venomously.

The trio entered the tunnel. Abbas glanced back. He would like to believe that the Alphas hadn’t seen them. But he was not so delusional.

Abbas sprinted ahead, overtaking Isa.

“Dawud,” he panted. “Where are we going?”

Dawud flashed him an anxious look.

“The only other exit.”

Abbas nodded.

“We can seal it from there,” Dawud coughed at a sudden haze of dust in the air.

Abbas quickened his pace, his blood rushing in his body. They didn’t have a great lead on the Alphas. Any stop would be enough for them to catch up.

Boom!

A bullet came whizzing from behind them, striking Dawud in the back.

“Argh!” the boy squealed, tripping over.

Abbas nearly tripped over him whilst stopping.

“Dawud!” Isa exclaimed.

He groaned weakly, pointing up ahead.

“Go on without me,” he whispered. “The exit is there, and you can seal the door. They won’t be able to-”

Abbas shook his head.

“Forget it, Dawud,” he overspoke. The pattering of feet was getting louder.

Isa nodded.

“We ain’t leaving you behind,” he whispered breathlessly.

Abbas glanced back.

“Isa,” he whispered. “Classic switch maneuver.”

His friend nodded, immediately grabbing Dawud. With a grunt, he began dragging the boy away.

Abbas whipped out his blade suppressing the fear and anxiety in his heart. He wasn’t the boy he once was. He was a man. He clutched the handle of his dagger, beads of sweat were trickling down his cheeks as the pattering from ahead ceased. The Alphas had caught up. As they stepped into the view, Abbas narrowed his eyes.

There was a fifth silhouette present. A man wearing a hood.

“Amr!” Abbas recognised. “I should have known you were behind this!”

Amr chuckled, eyeing the three boys warily.

“We meet at last,” the hooded figure whispered. “Ironically, this may be our final encounter.”

Abbas scoffed.

“We will all die eventually,” Abbas answered. “But be sure of one thing Amr. You’ll die first!”

Amr shared an amused laugh with the Alphas. Abbas felt a rage in his heart. Was Amr mocking him?

“Argh!” Abbas shouted. “Ya Allah!”

He lunged forward, prepared to swing down at Amr, but the hooded figure leapt back, behind the four Alphas.

Wham!

A sudden force heaved Abbas off of his feet, smashing him into the wall.

“Argh!” Abbas screamed.

Harun’s blow had hurt.

“I told you these bars wouldn’t keep you safe!” he spat. “You honestly think-”

“Argh!” Abbas growled, smashing a fist in the Alpha’s chin.

Harun staggered back in surprise. Abbas turned to face the hooded figure once more.

“Come out and face me, Amr!” Abbas growled. “Don’t hide like a coward.”

Abbas expected that to provoke Amr but it didn’t. Amr merely laughed.

“I have no reason to prove myself to you, boy,” he answered. “Now come on Alphas, finish him off.”

He said it so calmly, it took Abbas a moment to gather his focus once more...as the Alphas chuckled, moving forward.

Abbas stood his ground, reciting a small prayer in his heart.

“Ya Allah!” Abbas roared.

Wham!

Abbas smashed his fist into the first Alpha’s face, causing him to stagger backwards in surprise. Abbas would have followed, but another Alpha slammed into him, smashing him against the wall.

“Agh!” Abbas coughed breathlessly, as the Alpha delivered a fatal punch to Abbas’s stomach. Abbas groaned in pain but he wouldn’t give in.

“Ya Allah!” he spat, ramming his knee into the Alpha’s stomach.

The Alpha smirked.

“Is that all you-”

“Argh!” Abbas dived for the assassin’s knees, hauling him off the ground.

“This is what I got!” Abbas roared, ignoring the savage pain from the Alpha’s blow.

He brought the Alpha crashing down upon the ground.

Crack.

The Alpha screamed, before slumping down on the ground, unconscious. His back must have broken.

Wham!

From nowhere, a powerful kick struck his face, driving him back. His vision blurred. His nose began to bleed.

A crack sounded from behind him. Abbas ducked, rolling sideways as Sting’s dagger landed where he had been only moments earlier.

“Isa!” Abbas shouted. “Switch!”

Sting screeched, jumping forward, but Abbas was faster, ducking and retreating.

“You won’t escape me bo-”

Wham!

Sting’s eyes widened in alarm. She sidestepped, retreating as Isa came smashing down where she had been only moments earlier. Dagger in the hand, he snarled at the remaining three Alphas, who were very confused.

This was a maneuver invented by Abbas and Isa. The switch maneuver. While one rests, the other fights. Then they switch. It allowed them to fight a lot longer than they could individually or simultaneously.

Abbas held a hand next to his head, slightly dazed. He got to his feet, his blood rushing as he darted to Dawud.

“Come on!” he whispered urgently, helping Dawud up.

Abbas glanced back once to see Isa swinging violently at the three Alphas, but just like Abbas, he too was not able to deter them. The Alphas were catching up, with Amr right behind them.

Isa growled at all four. Sting snarled, stopping the other three.

“Oh no, no,” she chided eyeing Isa’s dagger. “There can only be one knife warrior in this town, kid...and that’s me!”

Isa smirked, his face sweating as he positioned himself.

“Come,” he challenged. “Let me show you what a real knife warrior can do.”

Sting smirked, her tiny frame overshadowed by Isa’s.

“No one intervenes,” she laughed. “I’ll finish this pathetic boy quickly enough.”

Abbas pulled Dawud further, forcing himself to focus on the door ahead. The sooner he reached there, the sooner he could bring Isa back to safety.

Sting leapt forward like a praying mantis. Isa sidestepped her, swinging a blade but she dodged it.

Wham!

Isa tripped her and she landed with a thud.

“Guess you’re weak from all that prison time,” he chuckled.

The other three Alphas growled, charging forward.

“Oh God!” Isa gasped. “Abbas!”

Abbas dropped Dawud and turned around to see the Alphas advancing simultaneously. Abbas charged forward.

“Argh!” he growled as he jumped, but one of them charged ahead of the others. Before Abbas could react, he barged forward, smashing into Abbas.

“Ah!” Abbas screeched in pain as he landed on the ground. “Ya Allah!”

Abbas’s vision blurred but he fought on, swinging an elbow at the Alpha.

Wham!

Isa’s kick struck the Alpha in the neck and he dropped down, unconscious. Only two to go. Sting and Harun.

“Help Dawud!” Abbas instructed. “I got this!”

Isa nodded and turned to retreat. Abbas narrowed his eyes. He was on his own now.

Harun snarled, swinging a fist but Abbas ducked. Harun’s blow continued, striking another Alpha. That Alpha screeched as Abbas’s shoulder slammed Harun, before grabbing his knees. Harun fell back, crashing onto the rock floor.

Wham!

A powerful kick struck Abbas from behind and he lost his footing, slipping to the ground. The dagger slipped from his hand as a powerful force pinned him.

“Isa, help!” Abbas called out.

The force above him chuckled.

“Unfortunate, it looks like they’ve abandoned you.”

Abbas’s eyes widened in fury.

“Amr!” he growled. “Face me like a man!”

Amr smirked.

“Why would I ever do that?” he laughed.

Abbas winced, as he felt a sudden pain in his back. What was that? Had Amr pinched him?

“You will not get away with this!” Abbas growled.

Amr laughed.

“Who’s going to-”

His sentence was cut short as a storm of bullets filled the air. Abbas closed his eyes using his hands to cover his ears to protect them.

“Argh!” Abbas groaned, the loud bullet sounds were burning his ears. A haze of dust filled the air.

Abbas looked up, his eyes dazed. He could hear the pattering of feet in the distance.

“Keep running Amr!” he growled. “I’ll catch y...”

Abbas blinked a sudden sleepiness attacking him.

“I’ll ca...cach....catch...”

He slumped down unconscious.

The dust settles

It was dark. The night had long corrupted the sky, eating away the warm sun. The wind, weak and incapable of swaying even the smallest leaf. A strange dread filled the air.

Murtaza narrowed his eyes. With a gun in his hand, he glanced back at his squad. Two men, brave and bold.

“Bahadur,” Murtaza instructed. “Go on our right. In the trees. If an enemy is out there, they shouldn’t outflank us.”

Bahadur nodded, and subtle as a snake, slithered away into the darkness.

Ali moved up beside Murtaza.

Murtaza narrowed his eyes.

“I’m going to try moving in,” he explained. “I want you to stay here and keep watch. Make sure nothing comes at me from behind.”

Ali nodded, positioning himself.

Murtaza pulled his pistol out of the holster. Crouching low, he crept towards the well faster than a tarantula. With a deep breath, he peeked inside the well.

“Nothing but darkness,” Murtaza observed.

He was about to go inside, but stopped. He narrowed his eyes. Someone was behind him. Someone skilled enough to not be seen by Ali. Murtaza’s lips curled into a grin. Casually, he got to his feet.

Wham!

In a flash, he spun around, sweeping his assailant off his feet. A young man. Murtaza narrowed his eyes before widening them in surprise.

“Isa!” he recognised.

The boy groaned painfully.

“Wh-” he muttered.

Murtaza narrowed his eyes. Isa was in bad shape. Bruised and battered.

“But no wounds,” he sighed in relief.

He leaned down next to the youth.

“Isa,” he called. “Can you hear me? Follow my finger.”

He held his hand out, keeping just his index finger up. Slowly he moved it from side to side. Isa’s eyes followed weakly. His breathing was slightly irregular. But the eye-tracking was a good sign.

“Isa, what happened?” Murtaza demanded to know. “What are you doing here?”

Isa groaned.

“A..”

Murtaza leaned in closer.

“Aaab...Abbaasss.” he wheezed.

Murtaza’s eyes widened in alarm.

“What about Abbas?” he asked anxiously. “Isa! Isa!”

The boy coughed. His eyes were starting to close.

“S..someone...took...him,” Isa whispered weakly.

His eyes closed. Murtaza’s eyes widened in horror.

“Abbas!” he called out. “Abbas, are you here!”

Murtaza’s eyes darted left and right frantically.

“Ali!” he shouted. “Get Isa to the hospital!”

A silhouette surfaced from the shadows as Ali stepped into the view. Grabbing hold of the boy, he slung him over his shoulder and began moving off towards the nearest hospital.

“Bahadur!” Murtaza shouted. “Get Akbar! We’re combing this entire area until we find Abbas!”

Tales of the Past

Hamza groaned as he turned over. His body felt sore. His head felt funny, like it wasn't on his head or something. "Hamza come on!" came a voice. "We have to go!" Hamza groaned lazily. He opened his eyes to see a girl. She shook her head in disapproval. "Your laziness is only slowing us down." Hamza wriggled to his feet. "It won't happen again," he coughed, stretching his neck. She smiled affectionately. "Let's get going," she whispered. "I'm hungry." Hamza chuckled. The girl turned to face him curiously. "What?" she asked. Hamza giggled as he stated, "You're always hungry!" She shook her head once more. "Little brothers!"

Hamza's eyes snapped open.

"Agh!" he winced as he looked up breathlessly. "Wh-where am I?"

He looked around in confusion. It must have been some kind of cave, since there was no daylight. Only a small fire, which despite it's size was quite warm. Hamza coughed as his eyes adjusted to the reduced light. He could hear breathing on his right.

Glancing in that direction, he noticed Musa, resting comfortably against the wall.

"Musa, are you okay?" Hamza asked.

There was no response, except for the crackling of the fire.

"He's asleep right now, won't be up for a while."

Hamza whirled around, poised to fight. There was a man there in the corner. Upon seeing Hamza's reaction, he raised his hands

in surrender.

“Sorry for spooking you,” he sighed.

Hamza narrowed his eyes. It was the same gunman who had approached him outside the cliff. What was his name...K...K..Kumail! He turned to see the man.

“Kumail,” Hamza said. “Why did you take me on gun point?”

Kumail raised a brow.

“I didn’t recognise you immediately. This was our first mission after all.”

Hamza narrowed his eyes. First mission? What was that supposed to mean? Was Hamza some kind of soldier or spy? Hamza took a deep breath, struggling to control his heart beat. This was the first time he had a clue to his past. But he would have to do this carefully.

“I lost the box,” Hamza whispered.

Kumail’s eyes shot up in alarm.

“What?” he exclaimed. “H-how?”

Why was Kumail reacting like that? Hamza remembered that he wanted it badly. But why? What value did the box hold? He recalled his own statements from the only memory of his past.

This is the only one left from Sada e Haq. The others are all lost. I won’t ever give it to you!

Whatever the Sada e Haq was or were, this box originated from it. It was a one of a kind.

Hamza took a deep breath. He needed answers. Who was he? What was the box? Why was the box with him?

“I haven’t had it for a year,” Hamza lied.

He didn’t trust Kumail fully.

Kumail shook his head in concern.

“That’s not good,” he muttered under his breath. “Ever since that chopper crashed, I’ve been trying to find it,” he whispered. “And I was hoping that if you had survived then you would have had it. But now, everything has backfired.”

Hamza raised a brow.

“What do you mean backfired?” he asked.

Kumail’s face went pale.

“Oh n-nothing really,” he faltered.

Nothing really? Why was he talking like this?

“So you were causing the smoke I saw in the mountains earlier?” he deduced.

Kumail nodded.

“It might have been me, or that group that was here yesterday. A bunch of tribesmen.”

Hamza narrowed his eyes curiously.

“What do you mean tribesmen?”

Kumail shrugged.

“They seemed like a rough crowd. I actually put all those grenades in the tunnels as parameter security.”

Hamza eyed Kumail warily.

“Was a young man leading them?”

Kumail brushed away a fly.

“Not sure if you could call it leading, but yeah, there was a young man at the front of them. They were carrying a lot of weapons and stuff.”

Tribesmen? Weapons? Chances were that the young man was Ilyas. But if it was, then that meant Ilyas had gathered a group of men and marched off, armed to the teeth. Hamza’s heart skipped a beat. He must have been planning an attack. But where? Hamza didn’t know of many significant places. There were the rivers, and maybe...

“Oh no...” Hamza realised. “He’s going to raid the tribe.”

Revenge

It was nothing short of a nightmare. Stories of horrific raids had made their way through the tribes, chilling tales of history told by the elders. The lips moved hesitantly, their haunted eyes, the sole remaining witnesses of the terrible events etched in their past. But hearing tales around the crackling campfires could never hold a candle to standing in the middle of the madness.

It was hard to see. Smoke assaulted his senses and his ears rang with the screams of his former tribesmen. Some of the more familiar voices sent a chill down his spine, but that was quickly quelled as he proudly watched his men tear through the pitiful defenses. Dirt and blood flew in the air, bodies littered the ground and a ravenous fire was licking away at the wooden frames of their homes. Every able hand held a weapon but they could not defend against the demonic looking invaders.

If the cries and screams of death did not stab one's heart with fear, then Ilyas was sure that the sight of his men would. Unlike the tribe warriors, who defended with their pathetic hand-carved weapons, his warriors were laden with armour and weaponry that reeked havoc. But perhaps, if not most terrifying, was the insignia they carried. Each man wore the bloodied skull of a bear, a symbol of the the fiercest animal. They fell upon the tribe like vultures. Bullets tore through the primitive leather armour without mercy or care. Men, women and children fell before them but they did not stop.

Ilyas overlooked the massacre with pride. “Burn it all!” he screamed.

A grunt on his right caught his attention. Two of his men held a weakened old man by his arms. The man’s face was littered with cuts, and one side of his face was painted with blood from a cut above his eyebrow. He was taking short painful breaths, a sure sign of broken ribs. His condition, however, did not quash the burning anger in his aged eyes as he watched a young child who could not have been more than six years old, fall to the ground, a rose of blood blossoming on his still chest. Ilyas smiled with recognition.

“And to think I thought you would leave without saying goodbye.” He smirked. The man’s eyes narrowed as he tugged himself from his captors’ grip. Standing upright, barely reaching Ilyas’s shoulder, he glared at him.

“There is still time, Ilyas, stop what you are doing! These are women and children! They have not wronged you in any way! You and Burair don’t have to do this.” He was shouting by the end but his voice was drowned in the surrounding chaos. Ilyas smiled to himself and shook his head.

“You’re right, there is time,” Ilyas replied, grinning maliciously as the man’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “But your time is up. I will take the leadership, I will take my rightful place and I will show you, my father and every other wretched fool who dared to doubt, what I, Ilyas, can do.”

The man did not cower as Ilyas had hoped, In fact, he came closer. “You do not fear Hamza. You do not fear your father. But you should fear us.”

Ilyas watched him in amusement. “Fear you? I burn your houses, and murder your children in the very land you call home. And I should fear you?”

The man looked up, and had it been any other situation, Ilyas may have cowered. His gaze was vicious, almost mocking him as the man smiled. “You should always fear those who have no one but Allah(swt).”

Ilyas scowled. How dare this man challenged him? The audacity was enough to make him want to set his large beard on

fire. With a hard yank, he grabbed the man's faded garb and pulled him closer. "And a whole lot of good that has done you, you keep your pathetic beliefs to yourself, old man."

With a powerful swish of his hand, he whipped out a curved blade from his belt and buried it deep in the man's chest. With blood pounding in his ears, he felt a new strength fill his body and he enveloped himself in the madness of bloodlust.

"Kill them all!" he shouted and then watched with pleasure as his tribe, his childhood home, was buried under bodies and ash.

61

The Tribe

Hamza sighed as he made his way across the river, ignoring the mutterings of a rather disgruntled Kumail.

“I still don’t understand why we are going through so much effort for a bunch of tribesmen.”

“I didn’t force you to come along.” His reply was met with an annoyed silence but it didn’t bother Hamza.

Hamza still wasn’t used to Kumail’s presence and despite Kumail saving him, he still kept his guard up. His last memory of Kumail was an odd one. Not to mention Kumail’s obsession with the box. It made Hamza uncomfortable. He took a deep breath. The trio needed to focus.

Hearing nothing but the deafening roaring of the rapid waters, the three men focused diligently on crossing the protruding peaks of stepping stones. Once he made it onto the bank and out of the water’s spray, he found it uncomfortably hot. Unfazed, he merely shed his jacket, tying it in a loose knot around his waist, and wasn’t surprised to see Kumail do the same.

He was about to turn back to the forest line when Musa caught his attention. It wasn’t his eager gestures but the urgent and worried expression on his face that had Hamza turning in the direction where he was pointing.

Bellows of smoke were being coughed up from the forest. Hamza and Kumail looked at each other, seeing Kumail’s expression, he felt a stab of worry in his gut.

“That looks like the direction of the tribe,” Kumail remarked. They wasted no more time and raced there as quickly as they could. Hamza was in the lead and he could now smell a hint of smoke. He quickly raised a fist and could hear his companions halt behind him. He opened his fist and traced a circle in the air. Kumail and Musa nodded and began to slink away, disappearing into the treeline. As much as he wanted to go charging in, this could very well be a trap. With a deep breath, he nudged away the foliage.

Bodies. Everywhere. Men, women and children, their handmade clothing dripping with crimson blood. It stained the ground and caked their hands and faces. Young and old, expressions torn between pain and horror, mouths open in hollow screams as they watched the passing men with vacant eyes. Hamza forced down the bile rising in his throat as he turned away from a young woman whose limp arms surrounded a bloodied blanket.

He heard a gasp behind him. He turned and saw Musa running through the wreckage, easily jumping over the mounds of timber that were once homes. He skidded in the dirt and fell to his knees beside a body. It lay slightly away from the others. An old man, his body littered with injuries, the most grievous being the dagger protruding from his chest. Hamza and Kumail watched as Musa held the man close, hiding his face in his chest. They could not see the boy’s face but his shaking shoulders told them enough. Looking away to give him the privacy to mourn, Hamza felt his previous shock ebb away and an unbridled fury take its place.

“Ilyas” he growled, as he tore away his eyes from the horror. “I can’t believe he would do this.”

Kumail shuddered. Musa was still when he suddenly frowned. Laying down the body in his hand, he grabbed the dagger and wrenched it free from the man’s chest. He rolled it over and studied it for a moment. Hamza and Kumail shared a curious look but stood back as Musa jumped up gesturing wildly.

“Musa, wait!” he yelled, snapping the boy out of his silent rant. Musa was breathing deeply but Hamza could see his anger brewing beneath the surface. Laying a gentle hand on Musa’s shoulders, he asked, “Who did it Musa?”

Musa showed him the dagger in his hand. It was ornate, wrapped with well-tanned leather and carved in an elegant curve. The handle ended in a detailed carving of a bear. But what caught Hamza's eye was the beaded insignia dangling from the leather. An insignia he remembered seeing on the chief's robes.

"The Chief?" guessed Hamza.

Musa nodded and then held his arms as though he was rocking a baby.

"A baby? No... a child?" Musa nodded.

"Chief..child...chief child... chief's child?" his face turned red when Musa's meaning finally became clear. "Ilyas. If I understand correctly, this is Ilyas's dagger."

Hamza swallowed in disbelief.

"Ilyas did this?" Kumail asked, disgust evident in his voice. "He killed everyone?"

At Kumail's question, Hamza felt as though a light went off in his head. "Not everyone..." he murmured to himself.

"Search around!" he exclaimed as he turned to his two accompaniments. "Look for the chief!"

They spent a painstaking amount of time combing through the rubble and bodies, lining them respectfully on the side. They did not find the body of the chief, but were more than surprised to find an aged lady. Hearing the fighting outside, she had hidden in her storage chest and couldn't get out when it was buried in the rubble. The poor woman could barely string together a sentence but was able to prove what they had assumed. That Ilyas had attacked his own village. She rambled on about demonic warriors with skulls of blood and hands of flames before breaking down into hysterics and passing out from the exhaustion and trauma.

After checking the entire village, they gathered on a lookout post that oversaw a neighbouring ravine. Kumail and Musa took a seat on either side of Hamza, who gazed into the dipping sun.

"What do you think happened to them?" Kumail asked.

Hamza shook his head. "He's gone. The coward's taken his father with him."

He turned when Musa tapped his shoulder. He gestured to them and to the forest.

Hamza nodded.

“Don’t worry,” he whispered. “We’ll rescue Rizwan.”

He glanced back at the carnage, his heart pounding furiously in his chest.

“Ilyas,” he growled. “I will punish you for this.”

62

Prisoners

Ilyas's lips curled into a smile as he eyed the sword in his hand.

"The finest blade ever carved in this region," he reminded himself.

Once wielded by his great grandfather, who had it forged by the most skilled blacksmith of the region. His great grandfather went on to conquer the lands which became the birth place of the tribe.

"Can you imagine the irony, Baba?" he chuckled. "Our tribe was born on those lands with this blade, and decades later, it is ended by the same blade."

He glowered over the pitiful form of his father, Rizwan. The chief of the tribe. Former chief. Of a tribe that no longer existed.

Rizwan looked up weakly, his face bruised from the tortures he had endured. Ilyas went down to his level.

"You...killed...your..people," he coughed. "You are the most despicable. You...can't...be...my...son"

Ilyas smirked.

"I never felt like your son," he whispered. "But that doesn't matter anymore. Once I put Hamza's head on a spike and parade it on these lands, I will become the true owner of these lands. And I will have avenged my uncle."

Rizwan sputtered, his eyes losing focus as he drifted unconscious. Again. With a hint of frustration, he turned towards his mother, who was tied up on the other side of the cave. Ilyas

moved over to her.

“Mother,” he greeted kindly. “The last dinner you prepared was so delicious. I wanted you to know that I enjoyed it a lot.”

She didn’t respond. There was just a lost gaze in her eyes. For a moment Ilyas thought that she had lost her mind, but then she spoke.

“My Musa will stop you,” Shahida whispered.

Ilyas tilted his head.

“Musa doesn’t even know where you are right now, Mother,” he answered. “But don’t worry, he will.”

Shahida wheezed, her hands quivering with pain as she looked up to meet his gaze.

“You will tell him,” Ilyas whispered. “You will find Hamza and Musa and tell them where I am, and that I will execute my father tomorrow morning.”

“Just like you killed my brother,” she spat.

Ilyad looked down. With a deep breath, he whispered,

“I had to, mother,” he paused. “He mocked me in front of everyone. He said I should be afraid of people like him because he has no protector but Allah. So I had to..”

He let his sentence trail off.

“Now,” he sighed, reaching out for his knife. “Go, tell them.”

His eyes widened in alarm. His dagger was missing.

“Drat,” Ilyas thought to himself.

He shook his head in disapproval as he brushed his sword against the ropes. They slumped down like a dead snake. Shahida got to her feet.

“Go Ami,” he whispered. “Tell them.”

She shook her head in disgust, slowly moving ahead. Ilyas shuddered. He couldn’t help feel a hint of sadness at the sight of her. She was so weak. So frail. He turned away. These thoughts weren’t good for him.

“Your death is near, Hamza,” he whispered. “Soon, I will mount your head on a spear.”

63

In the Boot

It was cold. Snow was blowing furiously. Abbas covered his eyes, unsure where on earth he was. Winter wasn't anywhere near due in Peaceville. He should have been worried but something in his heart told him not to.

Abbas looked down, his ankles were already buried in the white snow. He leaned down, brushing some off.

“SQUACK!”

Abbas looked up. His lips curled into a grin. A small penguin stood there ahead of him, nuzzling itself in the snow. Upon seeing him, it quaked in alarm and fluttered off.

“Silly bird,” Abbas grinned. “I don't mean it any- wait a minute!”

Penguins? What were penguins doing here? Or more correctly, what was he doing here with penguins? Abbas blinked in confusion. Where was he? And why didn't he feel cold at all? He was barely wearing winter-appropriate clothing. Abbas's eyes widened, a sudden thought occurring to him.

“Am I dreaming?” he wondered.

“HELP!”

Abbas's eyes widened. Someone needed help! But who! Wait. He had been here before! He had seen this dream before. It must have been the wolf! But why was he seeing this dream again?

A burst of snow filled the air, blinding Abbas. “Why don't I wake up?” Abbas grumbled, pinching himself. “Yow!” he

exclaimed. "I'm still asleep! So pinching doesn't work!"

The haze of snow cleared. And when it did, Abbas saw something he had never imagined. There before him was a grey patch.

"The wolf!" Abbas exclaimed, recalling his previous dream.

He rushed forward, his heart was sinking. The wolf was dead. It was obvious from its chest which was no longer rising, or from its eyes, where a lost gaze was trapped within.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. There was something written on the ice. A verse of the holy Quran. It read...

"So enter the gates of Hell to abide eternally therein, and how wretched is the residence of the arrogant."

Abbas shuddered, a sudden bump felt in his head.

He blinked.

The area began to fade.

Abbas felt a chill up his spine.

What was going on?

Abbas's eyes shot open. He was wide awake. Not much of a point though. It was dark. And his head was hurting.

"Nnnnn," Abbas grumbled, his eyes widening in surprise. He was gagged. Abbas narrowed his eyes, tugging on his arms. But they were bounded. He was in some kind of box. Well, not exactly a box. There was a soft purring from outside.

Abbas's eyes widened in alarm. He was in a car! In a boot!

'Who dares take me and-'

Wham!

A sudden force jerked him up, his head hit the roof of the boot. Abbas slumped down unconscious once more. As they went the driver and passenger glanced back once.

"Did you hear that Shakeel?" the passenger asked.

The man driving shrugged, a huge gun was strapped around his waist.

"Don't worry Tariq," he chuckled. "Legend or not, that bag of bones is in our boot. And even if he cuts himself loose..."

He placed a hand on the abomination of a gun strapped to his waist, flashing the passenger a meaningful grin.

"We can take care of him..." Shakeel finished.

64

Taken

“Nnnnn!”

Wham!

“Nnnnnnnnn!”

Wham! Wham!

Shakeel flashed Tariq a hesitant glance.

“After you,” Shakeel offered.

Tariq turned to face Shakeel.

“What?” he exclaimed. “I thought you said if he broke free you’d...”

He made a mini gun with his hand.

Shakeel shook his head.

“You’re stronger, Tariq.”

Tariq groaned.

“He’s gonna kick me,” the man grumbled.

“He will. Probably in the face,” Shakeel remarked moving to the side of the car.

He pulled out a small taser.

“Thanks Shakeel,” Tariq remarked. “He’ll probably also threaten me.”

Shakeel shrugged.

“Don’t worry man, I got your back.”

Tariq sighed. It sounded like an angry bull was in the boot. He leaned down and pryed the handle open.

Wham!

Abbas jumped out, like a jack in the box, and swung his foot in Tariq's face.

"Ah!" Tariq screeched, falling back.

Abbas growled.

"Who do you think you are?" he spat. "I am Captain Abbas Mur...Aaah!"

Abbas squealed in pain..not unlike a mouse prodded with a fork, wriggling for a moment before dropping to the ground. Shakeel pulled back his taser, watching him with a sadistic grin.

"And that happened," he remarked casually.

Tariq groaned, his eyes still dazed from the powerful blow he had received.

"Is he...?" Tariq mumbled, massaging his sore face.

Shakeel poked Abbas. No response. His lips curled into a grin.

"Yup," he decided "Let's take him."

Tariq hesitated. Shakeel rolled his eyes.

"Tariq, he's unconscious and you're twice his size."

Tariq grumbled.

"This guy...takes down Alphas. Not to mention he destroyed Alpha 43."

Tariq leaned down, heaving the youth onto his shoulder. As if on cue, Abbas snored, causing Shakeel to chuckle.

"Man, the boss is going to be happy when we bring this prize!" Shakeel speculated.

Tariq shook his head in disapproval.

"Next time," he grumbled. "You take the kick. I'll take the prize."

They were in the middle of nowhere, standing upon a thin field of grass that bordered a hill. As they neared the hill, beyond which was the cove, Shakeel leaned into his walkie talkie and whispered.

"We're here...get everything ready."

A loud ship-horn sounded in the distance.

"Now..." Shakeel remarked, eyeing the unconscious youth. "Let's see why the boss wanted us to nab you so bad."

65

Waking Up

The snow blew heavily, covering the ground in a white quilt of ice. Abbas rolled his eyes. ‘Not this again!’ he thought.

A burst of lightning struck in front of Abbas. Abbas blinked, his eyes widening in confusion. The wolf was before him, only it was just a skeleton. And a verse of the holy Quran was written on the ice. Abbas recognised it as verse 37 of Surah Isra. It read,

“And do not walk upon the earth exultantly. Indeed, you will never tear the earth [apart], and you will never reach the mountains in height.”

Abbas shuddered uncomfortably in the snow. He blinked, his antennae clicking together uncomfortably. Antennae? Abbas’s eyes widened in horror. He turned to the ice, his heart freezing. In the place of his reflection, stood an ant. “Argh!” Abbas screamed.

Abbas’s eyes snapped open. He shuddered, his heart was pounding loudly in his chest. His eyes darted around the room as he felt his head. Abbas felt his face. He sighed in relief. No antennae. No ant features. Nothing. It had only been a dream.

Abbas glanced around himself. His eyes narrowed. He wasn’t in his bedroom. He wasn’t in a hospital. He blinked, surveying his surroundings.

A small room, with light brown walls. No windows. The floor was made of wood...quite peculiar. Abbas glanced around him. How had he gotten here? He was having a bit of difficulty remembering.

He got up.

“Ah” he winced.

Abbas looked back, feeling a strange sense of confusion. His body was cuffed. He blinked, his mind slightly dazed from....from...

Abbas’s eyes widened in alarm.

“The Alphas!” he exclaimed. “Isa! Dawud!”

Abbas had to get out of here. He...he had to help Isa and Dawud. And where on earth was he? Why was the room....tilting?

The door swung open causing Abbas to jump with a start. In came a short man, armed with a gun.

Abbas narrowed his eyes.

“Asalamu alaikum,” the man greeted.

Abbas did not respond, unable to recognise this short man.

“My name’s Shakeel,” the newcomer introduced. “And you should know that responding to a salam greeting is Wajib e faurey. It means that it’s not just wajib, but an immediate wajib. It’s also-”

“Walaikum asalam,” Abbas answered, eyeing the strange man.

Shakeel grinned.

“I want you to know that this is an absolute honour,” he smiled. “To meet the man who took down Alpha 43.”

Abbas glared at him. Was he serious?

“I wish I could say the same,” Abbas answered sarcastically.

“Who are you? Why have you bounded me in chains?”

Shakeel grinned, irritating Abbas further. He remarked,

“We got you pretty good, didn’t we?”

Abbas growled.

“Where are my friends?” he demanded.

Shakeel raised a finger to his lips.

“Big boss wants to be the first one to speak with you. I ain’t gonna spoil any surprises he has planned for you.”

And with that, Shakeel turned to leave. As he left the room, closing the door behind him, one thought dominated Abbas’s mind. He had to get out of here.

“I won’t let Amr use me,” Abbas growled under his own breath.

66

Escape

“Argh,” Abbas pulled. “Come on!”

He tugged with all his strength, but the ropes would not give way. Abbas grumbled in frustration. The person who had tied him had spared no expense. All four of Abbas’s limbs were strapped down to the bed. And the knots were tied with strong rope.

“Okay,” Abbas closed his eyes. “What would Akbar Uncle do?”

Akbar would have never been in this situation to begin with but that was aside the point. Akbar’s greatest strength was that he always found a way out. So what would Akbar do?

Akbar would assess the situation and find the easiest, maybe not so obvious way of solving the problem.

Abbas’s eyes scanned the room. No weapons or sharp edges in sight. And even if they were, it wasn’t like Abbas could use them.

“Come on,” Abbas pushed himself. “Think deeper.”

With his hands, legs, and waist, bounded, his captors believed that they had him pinned. And they were right. They did. But no way would they leave Abbas unattended. Someone would be there. Just to make sure that Abbas did not escape.

“If I can’t loosen my own ropes,” Abbas realised. “Then I’ll just have to get the guard to loosen my ropes instead.”

Abbas took a deep breath, preparing himself. He would have

to put on a convincing act. He closed his eyes for a moment, clearing his mind. He was ready.

“Argh!” Abbas screamed as loud as he could. “Argh! My hand!”

The door swung open and the man from before came in, his eyes wide with alarm.

“Argh!” Abbas screamed. “My hand.”

Shakeel raised a brow.

“My hand is...is...”

Abbas forced his eyes to droop. Gasping once, he slumped down, eyes shut, as if he was unconscious.

‘Come on Shakeel,’ Abbas thought to himself.

Creak.

Shakeel was moving to him. Abbas relaxed himself, staying still. He felt a small prod on his arm.

“I know you’re awake Abbas,” Shakeel whispered. “Do you think you can fool me?”

Abbas didn’t take Shakeel’s clever bait. He remained still.

“Seriously,” Shakeel insisted, but Abbas could detect discomfort in his voice. Then he said the magic words.

“Is he really unconscious? I better check. The boss will get angry if he’s not awake.”

Abbas kept still, his pulse suddenly quickening at a light pressure on his arm. He could hear the sound of cutting and the rope’s force around his left hand was loosening. It was working! Abbas held his breath, waiting for the moment.

He felt Shakeel pick his arm up by the hand.

“Wait..I don’t see any-”

“Hi ya!” Abbas growled, slamming his hand into Shakeel’s throat.

Shakeel gasped, staggering back breathlessly as Abbas turned to his right hand. While Shakeel struggled to recover, Abbas ripped at the ropes with his now free left hand. It took him barely a second to untie the knot on his right hand.

“Hands free,” Abbas checked.

Shakeel coughed, trying to recalibrate. Abbas narrowed his eyes. He didn’t have long. He undid his legs in a flash, before

leaping out of bed. Shakeel's eyes widened in horror. He opened his mouth to speak but-

Wham!

Abbas whopped him on the head, knocking him out.

"You got me pretty good?" Abbas smirked, breathing in relief. "Now I'm gonna bust out of here, Inshallah."

Abbas took a deep breath. First thing he needed was weapons. His eyes landed on the short man he had just knocked out. Shakeel. His lips curled into a grin, eyeing the holster.

"Don't mind if I do," Abbas chuckled, leaning down. He pulled out the pistol.

He narrowed his eyes. Shakeel carried no knives. Just a taser.

"Coward," Abbas breathed.

Holding the taser in his left hand and pistol in his right, he moved up to the door, his heart pounding in his chest. He peeked under the door. A hint of relief entered his gaze. Nobody seemed to be outside. And Abbas couldn't hear anything either.

"Bismillah," he whispered as he opened the door.

It was a dark corridor. Small in size. Just tall enough to stand. Abbas narrowed his eyes as he looked at the end of the door. Was that a way out? He shuddered at the disgusting odour of salt. And seaweed. Wait. Salt? Seaweed? Abbas's eyes widened in alarm. He was on a ship! That explained the tilting floor. They were at sea.

Abbas's heart sunk. How far out were they? And how would he possibly get back home. Abbas narrowed his eyes.

"I'm not giving in," he growled.

A sudden noise filled the air. Abbas's eyes widened in confusion. What was that? It almost sounded like...clapping? The door ahead swung open, and out came a man. A man Abbas would have never expected to see.

Abbas's eyes widened in horror.

"Tariq Bhai?" he exclaimed.

Abbas blinked, taking a step back as it occurred to him. The Alphas breaking out of prison....Abbas and Isa not knowing him.

"Y-you," he faltered. "You betrayed us!"

Tariq narrowed his eyes.

Abbas felt anger fill his heart.

“We trusted you! How could you?!”

He wanted to tear Tariq apart. Limb from limb. Piece by piece.

“Die traitor!” he roared, lifting his gun.

Click.

Abbas’s eyes widened in alarm. The gun was empty. B-but how? Abbas hadn’t fired any shots.

Tariq sighed.

“Abbas, it’s not as you think it is.”

Abbas growled, hurling the gun for Tariq. The big man sidestepped the incoming pistol. It clattered along the ground.

“Abbas, lets just-”

“Argh!” Abbas roared, charging forward.

He wouldn’t believe a word of what Tariq-

Wham!

Abbas slumped down on the ground, unconscious.

Overshadowing him was a man, with a sadistic smile once more.

“Shakeel!” Tariq scolded. “What did I tell you?”

Shakeel shrugged helplessly.

“What?” he defended. “He was creeping me out.”

Tariq shook his head in disapproval.

“Take him to the nest. We’ll deal with him there.”

Campfires

It was dark. The distinct noise of howling wolves could be heard.

Hamza narrowed his eyes as the flame of their campfire dimmed. He picked up a stick and prodded it, causing it to flare a bit. He glanced to his left. A once joyous Musa now sat there, the pain was imprinted on his face. Musa had lost everything. Everyone he loved. Everyone he knew. The poor boy. Hamza was aware that Musa had never spoken since the day he lost his father to a vicious crocodile. He felt a strange pity in his heart, and began stroking Musa's head softly, trying to say without words that he understood how Musa felt. Musa didn't look up, but Hamza could understand that it was making him feel a bit better.

"Musa," Hamza sighed. "I know you have suffered a very heavy loss."

Musa looked up for the first time, meeting Hamza's gaze. His face was sullen and morose. Abruptly, his face hardened. Hamza watched as he withdrew Ilyas's dagger. He took a deep breath. Musa's meaning was clear. He wouldn't feel peace until Ilyas suffered. He wouldn't feel peace until Ilyas died.

"I promise you," Hamza whispered. "You will be the one to kill Ilyas."

Musa looked down. Hamza could only imagine. Musa and Ilyas must have played together as children. Who would have thought that Musa would, one day, take solace in killing his own cousin?

Musa lifted his hands. Hamza narrowed his eyes. Musa was using sign language.

We were never friends. But I never thought he could do this.

Hamza looked down. His own past was still a mystery. He couldn't remember what happened but now knew that the cause of his amnesia had been a chopper crashing somewhere in the forest. He knew that he was some kind of army soldier on a mission with Kumail. And he had a scar on his ankle. An oddly shaped one. Sometimes, he thought it almost resembled a number.

'One day I'll find the answer to my own past as well,' he thought to himself.

As much as Hamza tried to ignore these thoughts, they bit back at him like a poisonous sting. He couldn't forget the other memory he had recalled. His sister. He had a sister. He knew that now. Though her name still evaded him.

Hamza shuddered at the cold. Abruptly, he felt a change in the air. His hand hovered over his knife and quietly, he unsheathed it. Musa grasped hold of his hammer as well.

Maybe it was just him. Or someone was actually there. It could have been Kumail. He had gone hunting earlier. He heard a small crack on his right. His eyes spotted a small squirrel.

"Ah!"

Hamza whirled around to see a woman on the ground. She was quite old and a figure was overshadowing her. Hamza recognised the figure.

"Kumail!" he exclaimed as he neared them. "What are you doing?"

Kumail growled, aiming the barrel of his machine gun in the woman's face. She cowered in fear. Hamza narrowed his eyes before widening them in surprise. He knew the woman.

"Kumail wait!" he shouted, ramming the man off his feet. "This is Ilyas's mother, Shahida. She's not an enemy."

The woman looked up with utter fear in her eyes. For a moment, she froze, before narrowing her eyes in recognition.

"Hamza! Musa!"

She burst into tears. Musa hurried forward, leaning down beside her. The woman buried her face in his arms. Hamza

looked down. He could hear her muffled sobs and breathing.

“Auntie,” he whispered kindly. “Are you alright?”

She didn’t respond. She didn’t look up. All of her attention was on Musa. Hamza narrowed his eyes. How did she find them? Hadn’t Ilyas taken her prisoner? Maybe she escaped? Unlikely, but possible. Alternatively, she may have been released. If she was, then that meant that she carried a message. Most likely she was either baiting them through Musa or she was here to ask for help.

“What message did he give you?” Hamza asked.

The woman looked up for the first time. The shock was visible in her eyes.

“Ilyas,” she swallowed, a ghostly look prevailed in her eyes.

She burst into tears once more. Hamza ignored the frustration building up inside him. He knew this was difficult for her, but this was wasting his time. He gave Musa a meaningful look.

Musa turned towards Shahida and began stroking her back. She looked up, her eyes swollen with tears.

“Ilyas sent a message for you,” she sputtered. “He will..He..”

She coughed, the hesitation in her voice was obvious.

“At sunset, he will take Rizwan to the edge of the sand coves,” she looked down, her lip quivering. “If you’re not there, he will...he..”

She burst into tears burying her face into Musa’s shoulder once more. But she didn’t need to finish her sentence. Hamza knew what she was going to say. He turned to face Kumail.

“Rizwan is an ally,” he whispered. “We have to get him out.”

Kumail raised a brow.

“I don’t see why that’s our problem. We should be looking for the box.”

Hamza narrowed his eyes. Again with the box. The last from Sada e Haq, whatever that was. He didn’t trust Kumail.

“Rizwan might know where the box is,” Hamza sighed. “Now trust me from now on, you fool. There’s a reason why I led the missions and you followed.”

Kumail looked down, no anger visible in his eyes. Why would he tolerate such attitude from Hamza? Was Hamza his superior

officer or something? Hamza pushed these thoughts out of his mind for now. Rizwan needed to be saved first.

He took a deep breath.

He whispered. "I will save Rizwan, but I'm going to need your help."

She shook her head.

"No, no," she stammered. "He has an army. Burair is with him."

Hamza growled. Burair. So he was the traitor. He was the one who had aided Ilyas. Unknowingly, he clenched the grass.

"I will punish them," he assured. "But I need your help."

He ignored Musa's concerned glance. She swallowed nervously.

"What do you need?" she whispered.

Hamza's lips curled into a smile. Glancing back, he smiled, whispering,

"It's a simple plan really."

Everyone followed his gaze to something glistening in the moonlight. A strange plant. Green in colour. With beautiful flowers. Its leaves strangely shaped like a moth's wing.

68

Answers

“Ah,” Abbas groaned.

He yawned, wondering why the back of his head was so sore. Tariq!

Abbas’s eyes snapped wide open. He growled, tugging on his arms but they were bounded. This time with chains.

And Abbas’s entire body was cuffed. Arm, legs, waist...even his neck.

“Tariq!” Abbas roared. “Face me like a man, you traitor!”

No response. Abbas growled, tugging at his chains, but there was no use. After ten minutes of pointless pulling, when his forehead was covered in sweat and he slumped against his chains, exhausted, he heard a voice.

“You really are as fierce as they say you are.”

Abbas wanted to turn and see who said those words but his chains prevented it.

“It’s no surprise you took down Alpha 43.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Breathlessly, he asked,

“Who are you? And why are you keeping me prisoner?”

There was no response.

“I d-deserve to know,” Abbas coughed. “You took me from my h-home to sea and knocked me out twice. Why?”

There was a pattering of feet, and someone stepped in front of Abbas. Tariq. Though at this point Abbas was too exhausted to react.

“I will tell you everything you wish to know Abbas,” Tariq remarked. “But you must promise to not attack me.”

Abbas didn't want to, but he needed answers. And with all the guards on the ship, he would not be able to escape without a dozen bullet wounds.

“I won't if you won't,” Abbas whispered.

Tariq chuckled as he uncuffed Abbas's left arm. Abbas hesitated, his eyes noticing the ten armed gunmen in the corner. Tariq uncuffed Abbas's right arm.

Abbas struggled to suppress the urge to plummet Tariq in the ground.

Click.

Tariq uncuffed the remainder cuffs in the next few seconds.

Abbas stepped away from his chains. As he did, he couldn't help notice the Zulfiqar pendant on Tariq's neck. It had caught Abbas's attention the first time they had met in Zaqqum prison as well.

“Allah!” Abbas exclaimed, his body exhausted and sore from the hard cuffs.

He eyed Tariq who merely grinned.

Abbas had never had a prison warden like this before.

He groaned, massaging his back which was still stinging.

Tariq nodded to the gunmen who turned to leave.

Abbas raised a brow.

“What makes you think I won't hurt you now?” he asked.

Tariq smiled.

“I know you well, Abbas. I haven't attacked you or shown you any aggression, so you won't strike me from behind while I'm unarmed. You're too honorable for that. And since you want answers, you will wait until you get them. Then you will make a break for it. But you won't have to. I'm not going to keep you prisoner.”

Abbas blinked uncomfortably at being read so easily. And he couldn't help feeling a little confused. If Tariq didn't intend to keep him prisoner, then why was he here?

As if on cue, Tariq gestured for Abbas to walk with him.

“Come my boy,” he explained. “Let me show you the truth.”

He began walking ahead. Abbas nodded, his curiosity now overpowering the numbness in his legs.

As Abbas followed, he couldn't help notice the floor tipping once more.

"We could never find a suitable headquarters on land. It's always too easy. Discoverable."

Abbas raised a brow. We?

Tariq stopped abruptly, pressing his hand against the wall. Abbas tilted his head slightly. Was something meant to happen?

Hiss.

Abbas recoiled in confusion as the wall vibrated before splitting in two, revealing a room. The walls were covered in monitors and screens. There was a table in the centre and a man wearing a mask over his face. Abbas shuddered. The man was huge. And he carried an intense gaze.

"In here lies the answers you seek," Tariq whispered. "He will tell you what you wish to know."

Tariq began to step back. Abbas's heart skipped a beat.

"You're not staying?"

Tariq shook his head.

"I am not permitted to enter that room. It lies above my jurisdiction."

Jurisdiction? What exactly were they going to do to Abbas? Abbas narrowed his eyes. He may have been unarmed, but he was no coward.

Abbas took a deep breath.

"Bismillah," he whispered, stepping inside.

The Sada-e-Haq

Abbas was now starting to feel a little better. In the last ten minutes since he had woken up, for the second time, nobody had threatened him or knocked him out. That still didn't stop Abbas from keeping his guard up. He had no idea what was going on. Where he was in the middle of the sea, and most importantly, why was he here?

He eyed the masked man before him, completely perplexed.

"Asalamualaikum Abbas," the man greeted.

Abbas shrugged.

"Walaikum asalam. Who are you?" he asked suspiciously. "I happen to know Amr wears a mask as well.

The masked man sighed, lifting his hand.

"I'm not Amr," he whispered. "I never was. And to prove it, let me show you who I am. You should remember me. We met recently."

The masked man tugged at his mask, yanking it off.

Abbas's eyes widened in confusion.

"B-but...you?"

It was the construction worker! The one from the Night of Heroes whom Abbas had forced to unblock half off the road.

"Wh-what?" Abbas faltered.

The man grinned.

"You were right captain. We should have never brought a construction truck and entire crew to fix one light," he chuckled.

“Trouble is, we didn’t want to vandalise the lights too much. Also none of us actually knew how to fix the light.”

Abbas gaped at him, completely confused.

“My name, in case you forgot, was Mahmud,” the fake construction worker smiled.

Abbas narrowed his eyes, recalling how odd it had seemed to him. A construction worker blocked off the entire road that day to fix one light. A seemingly weak lead but an unexplainable anomaly nevertheless. Because even though Abbas was not in the road services department, he could not imagine why a whole construction crew, of all people, would be out and about to fix one light. One light.

“You made more mistakes,” he whispered. “Like bringing a construction truck for such a job. Normally, road services deal with this.”

Mahmud rolled his eyes.

“In our island, department of construction handles these issues,” he answered defensively.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Our island? Didn’t Abbas just say that road services department handled this issue in Peaceville? Why would Mahmud...Oh. Of course.

“You’re not from Peaceville,” Abbas deduced. “Are you?”

Mahmud looked down.

“No, I’m not. None of my comrades are.”

Wham!

Abbas growled.

“Who are you then, Mahmud?” he hissed. “What are you doing in Peaceville? Why am I here?”

Mahmud nodded once more.

“Okay okay,” he began. Let’s start. Ask me one by one.”

Abbas raised a brow. He had so many questions he wasn’t really sure where to start. Abbas narrowed his eyes, suddenly noticing a small and simple Zulfiqar pendant around Mahmud’s neck. Just like Tariq’s.

“Why do you have a pendant exactly like Tariq’s?” Abbas asked.

Mahmud sighed.

“This is no ordinary pendant. It is a symbol, worn by all members of Sada-e-Haq.”

Sada-e-Haq? Why did every answer open more questions? Abbas shook his head.

“You promised me answers but you only confuse me further,” he complained.

Mahmud sighed. Meeting Abbas’s gaze, he bowed his head slightly.

“They call themselves the League,” he whispered.

Abbas raised a brow. What on earth was he talking about?

“The ones responsible for creating the Alphas. The ones who created the first control technology. It was them.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Akbar said his father Sohail had created the C-gun. Was Mahmud lying?

“These people are a group of individuals richer than anyone could ever imagine. They are powerful. And united by their horrific goal of controlling the archipelago. ”

Abbas tilted his head slightly.

“You’re wrong, unfortunately,” he responded. “Jumeira created the Alphas.”

Mahmud shook his head.

“So you know *Envy*” Mahmud stopped at Abbas’s confused expression. “Forgive me if that sounded odd. I didn’t mean to say that you are afflicted with envy. In reality, the League has code names for their members. *Envy* was Jumeira’s code name. There are others. *Fear, Cunning, Ambition and Anger.*”

A chill entered Abbas’s spine. His eyes widened slightly, Masud’s words echoed in his mind.

“I still don’t trust our....benefactors”

What if those benefactors were the League?

“With *Envy*’s death, there remains-”

“Wait,” Abbas interrupted. “Jumeira’s dead?”

Mahmud nodded.

“The League sent an Alpha to kill her. Once she was gone, General Akbar buried her secretly.”

Abbas faltered.

“Why would Akbar hide this, we wondered?” Mahmud asked.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. In the last year or so that Abbas knew Akbar, he had learnt one critical thing. Akbar always had a reason for everything.

“You’re not from Peaceville,” Abbas answered. “You wouldn’t understand.”

Mahmud shrugged.

“Anyone who has lived here knows that Jumeira is about the most hated person on this island,” Abbas suggested. “People would desecrate her grave in anger. I presume Akbar Uncle did not want to leave his duties as a son unfulfilled whilst preventing community discord over such a sensitive issue.”

Mahmud grinned.

“He’s a good man.”

Abbas nodded in agreement. Akbar had lifted the heaviest burdens for the longest times. He had taken Abbas in, albeit with some resistance initially, and mentored Abbas into becoming a warrior.

A sudden question occurred to Abbas.

“If Jumeira was part of the League, why did they send an Alpha to kill her?”

Mahmud sighed.

“We don’t know for sure, but from our information sources, it seems like Jumeira and the League started this project together, but Jumeira betrayed them. She stole something from them, and based upon whatever she stole, she was able to create the Alphas. She chose this island, as I’m sure you know, to be her base, aiming to bring her goals to fruition here.”

Abbas shuddered. He couldn’t help wonder how many more skeletons in the closet Jumeira had. But something else bothered Abbas. What did Jumeira steal from the League? What enabled her to create the Alphas? How did she get hold of the C-gun?

“From there, she established her empire,” Abbas remarked.

Mahmud nodded, continuing on.

“As for the League, they failed to recover from Jumeira’s betrayal. She never let them enter the island you call Peaceville. But over a year ago, things changed.”

Abbas’s eyes widened. The revolution. Of course. With

Jumeira gone, Peaceville was now an open door of opportunities to the League once more.

“Do we know who is in the League?” Abbas asked.

Mahmud shook his head.

“All we know is that before Jumeira’s betrayal, they were five in total. We then learnt that one of their members...Cunning, is dead.”

“And now Envy,” Abbas added. “Well...what about the other three?”

Mahmud sighed.

“Unfortunately, we only know that their code names are *Anger, Ambition and Fear*. We know that they are exceptionally wealthy and powerful business people. But that’s about it. We sent an agent amongst them, code named *Hate*, but we lost contact with him somewhere along the way.”

Abbas looked down. It was finally starting to make sense.

Jumeira was part of the League, a group of rich and powerful men and women devoted to the idea of controlling the archipelago. Somewhere down the line, Jumeira betrayed them. Abbas was having difficulty digesting all this information.

A sudden thought occurred to him.

“How do you know all this?” he asked expectantly.

Mahmud took a deep breath.

“Years ago, well before you were born, an organisation was created. Formed from the flames of war, these brave individuals called themselves the Sada-e-Haq, meaning, the voice of truth.”

Abbas paid close attention as Mahmud held his wooden Zulfiqar pendant in his hand.

“As I told you before, this pendant is worn by all members of Sada-e-Haq.”

So that’s why Abbas and Isa were so confused at the sight of Tariq. They were right. He was not from Peaceville. It also explained why Mahmud and Tariq both wore it. But who were the members of Sada-e-Haq?

Mahmud must have read Abbas’s mind, for he added,

“We, Sada-e-Haq have been fighting the League for years, trying to prevent them from achieving their goal.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes.

“What goal?” he asked.

Mahmud met Abbas’s gaze.

“*Ultimate Control.*”

The words triggered something in Abbas’s mind, his eyes widening in realisation as he remembered the classified data.

Project CV

Objective: Ultimate control

Jumeira had been working without rest to make an optimal C-gun. And because of the revolution, she was interrupted. One thing became clear. Jumeira had obviously not finished whatever she had come here for. He recalled Jumeira’s words from when he had first met her during the battle of the iron fortress over a year ago.

“Weaponized humans. Humanity at its full ruthless potential. Akbar is a living proof of this.”

She wanted *Ultimate control*. The League wanted it. And with Jumeira out of the picture, they now had the chance to strike.

“Okay,” Abbas whispered, wincing at his back stinging. “All that makes sense to me. But I have another question. What does the League want from Peaceville?”

After the war, the C-guns were destroyed when found, but a good number of them were unaccounted for. Even if the League had a broken one, they would still be able to reverse engineer it. So why were they still here? And where did Amr fit in all of this?”

“You assume that we have been fighting over some piece of technology?” He chuckled. “No, no.”

Abbas suppressed the discomfort in his heart. Mahmud was now looking very serious.

“We’ve been fighting over something much stronger,” Mahmud whispered. “Something that allowed *Ultimate control* over any group, city, country or even the world. Jumeira tried desperately to recreate this with the C-gun technology, but failed to do so.”

Abbas shuddered. How could someone possibly have *Ultimate control* over an entire population? He didn’t like it. It was wrong. And in the hands of greedy and ambitious souls like Jumeira’s...

Abbas narrowed his eyes. This Islamic organisation had been fighting the League for years.

“How long have you been fighting the League for?” Abbas asked.

Mahmud looked down.

“Let’s just say a long time,” he finished.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. It seemed like Mahmud wanted to say more but he stopped himself.

‘Maybe he doesn’t want me to get overwhelmed,’ Abbas thought to himself.

He was feeling quite overwhelmed already with all this information. A war between two organisations. A battle which had now found it’s way to their door. Caused by the overthrowing of Jumeira’s tyranny in the revolution.

Another important question struck Abbas.

“Why am I here? Why tell me this?”

Mahmud smiled.

“It is time for the Sada-e-Haq to leave the shadows. We need allies. You will introduce us to your talented Akbar Uncle. To your father Murtaza and to your island of Peaceville,” he explained. “So as I promised earlier, you are free to go.”

Abbas froze.

“Wh-what?”

Mahmud nodded.

“Tell Akbar Bhai that we want to meet. Share with him what you’ve seen. We will meet him after Maghrib.”

Abbas hesitated. This felt like a trick.

“How do I know that you’re not lying?” he asked.

Mahmud shrugged.

“You don’t. But I know you will tell Akbar everything. So go...quickly. We’re at Peaceville’s port.”

Abbas blinked, taking a step back. Mahmud nodded. Abbas stepped back once more.

“Bismillah,” Mahmud grinned, placing his hands over his eyes. “Go, I can’t see you. I won’t know where you’re headed.”

Silence. Mahmud opened his eyes with a smile on his face. Abbas was gone, the window blowing through the now open

window.

“You did well, Mahmud,” came a voice, as a hooded figure stepped out from the corner of the room.

“Thanks Sir,” Mahmud remarked, taking a sip from his tea.

“Like you said, he’s good.”

The hooded figure chuckled.

“But he is very young right now. Very young indeed.”

70

Mom

Ilyas took a deep breath as he adjusted his position on the spindly seat. He winced slightly. This chair wasn't actually that comfortable. This is what it had been for. All that bloodshed. The massacre of the tribe he was raised in. The murder of his mom's brother. He smirked.

Musa must have been hurt by that. After all, Ilyas's mother, Shahida, had two older brothers. One was Musa's father. He had died at the hand of some crocodile. The other had been very close to Musa since then. That's why Ilyas killed him.

He shuddered abruptly. That man was his uncle. The brother of his mother. Ilyas sighed. He was an unfortunate casualty of this war. Ilyas gripped his sword tightly.

"If everything works out, then Hamza will die a very painful death."

He closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. His life would become so much better after he would slay his enemies. He opened his eyes.

Crack.

Ilyas looked up, narrowing his eyes.

There was a frog before him. It was staring at him. Ilyas chuckled, pulling out his sword. The frog croaked, almost bored. Ilyas growled. The frog croaked once more.

"Saw me sho ho Kan"

Ilyas's eyes shot up to see Burair, a satisfied look was on

his face. Behind him were several guards. He bowed his head respectfully. Ilyas sheathed his sword, feeling slightly annoyed. He eyed him curiously as Shahida emerged from amongst them, her hands tied.

Ilyas's face lit up.

"Oh my beautiful mother came back," he smiled. "How kind of you."

Shahida did not look up. She merely sighed.

"Well?" Ilyas asked expectantly.

Shahida shivered for a moment.

"It worked," she answered. "They have taken the bait."

Ilyas's lips curled into a grin.

"Now that's my mother speaking," he smiled. "I knew you wouldn't let my father die."

Shahida didn't reply. She merely grunted, her hands now pale.

Ilyas burst into laughter.

"You were standing so tall and proud that Musa would save you. Now look at you. You have sent him to his death!"

He paused.

"Begin preparing dinner, Mother," he instructed. "The last deer you made for me was so delicious, I caught another one, just for you to prepare."

Shahida nodded and turned to leave.

"And Mother?"

Ilyas called out.

She paused, turning to face him.

"Don't try to do anything to save them," he stated dryly.

"I would hate to catch you committing treason."

Shahida felt a new found courage in her heart. She knew that Hamza and Musa were on the way to save them. Turning back, she whispered,

"I don't need to do anything. They're more than strong enough to beat you."

And with that, Shahida headed off. As she went, she struggled to control the pain in her heart. She had raised this...monster. Most parents would want to feel proud of their child. Here, she was ashamed to be associated with him.

Shahida sighed as she entered the section of the kitchen labelled as camp. It was behind the bushes and underneath the dense tree branches to hide the smoke. That also made it very secluded. There were two guards there.

She turned to the guard on her left.

“Do it,” she instructed.

The guard nodded, whipping out a dagger. Before the other guard could react, he drove his blade through the man’s throat. Shahida shuddered as the guard collapsed in a pool of blood. He wheezed painfully, before closing his eyes.

Shahida looked up at the guard.

“What’s the plan, Kumail?” she asked.

Kumail signalled for silence as he dragged the body behind one of the bushes. He wiped his blade off the dead guard’s cloak. Shahida watched him as he did this, careful to glance back every now and then to make sure no one was watching as he cleared the place to erase any trace of the guard.

At last Kumail sighed,

“That’ll buy us some time. Breakfast is going to happen soon. Shortly after everyone has eaten, I’ll send a signal and Hamza will make his move. I’ll bust Rizwan out. You do what you have to do and stay hidden until this is over.”

Shahida nodded hesitantly. From her pocket, she withdrew a small clay container.

“Okay,” she muttered under her breath.

And with that, Kumail headed out. Shahida watched him leave before turning towards the food.

“Allah, help me through this,” she whispered, prying off the valve of the clay container.

71

Trojan Horse

It was dark. Hamza narrowed his eyes, surveying the region ahead. There were guards surrounding the entire area. And Archers. Hamza raised a brow as he noticed one of the regions with only two guards. Maybe there was a hidden battalion?

Hamza began treading towards that region, Musa was close behind. His lips curled into a smile as he realised no additional force was there.

“Ilyas’s mind at it’s finest,” he chuckled.

That was the trap. A region with fewer guards. A bait set to lure the intruders. He turned to Musa, who was smirking as well.

“Well then,” Hamza whispered. “Now we just have to wait for Kumail’s signal.”

Hamza took a deep breath. They were finally here. Finally they were going to confront Ilyas. Hamza had been thinking a lot about this in the last few days. Not to mention his box. A supposed mystery of his past. Something which connected all the dots together.

Kumail knew about it as well. And he was with Hamza before the chopper crashed. Hamza still didn’t understand his memories. But he intended to. He would try tracing his origins and solve the mystery of the box. The last of its kind according to himself. He only knew that it had something to do with the Sada-e-Haq. Whatever that was.

His eyes fell upon Musa. The poor youth. Hamza and him

were really starting to form a connection. But Hamza would have to say goodbye after this. He would bid farewell to them all.

Musa turned to face him abruptly, his eyes strangely calm. He leaned forward, brushing his forehead against Hamza's shoulder. Hamza ruffled his hair, ignoring the strange pain in his heart. He was about to say something, but his eyes caught sight of something in the air. Smoke.

"It's time," Hamza realised. "Enough soldiers have eaten. Let's go."

Without further ado, Hamza whipped out his dagger. Musa heaved his hammer onto his shoulder.

"Attack!" Hamza growled.

He charged forward, ramming one guard in the stomach. The guard slumped down unconscious. The other guard raised his sword but Hamza was faster. He hurled his dagger directly at the guards throat, killing him instantly.

Hamza heard a clank behind him as he pulled out the dagger. Hamza turned to see a displeased Musa.

"What?" Hamza remarked. "You weren't fast enough."

Musa shook his head in disapproval causing Hamza to chuckle.

"Alright, now we wait for them to capture us. Remember, we need to fight a bit before they get us."

Getting captured was necessary since it guaranteed an encounter with Ilyas. After all, they didn't know where Ilyas was. Hamza's lips curled into a smile as he heard the thundering of footsteps from a distance. Ilyas's soldiers were coming.

Saw Mansaw

“Well, well, well,” Ilyas chuckled. “We meet again, Hamza.”

Hamza looked up at Ilyas with a forced glance of disgust. The act had to be convincing. Ilyas could not know about the trap until it was too late.

Burair stood there as well. An ugly smile dominated his face.

His eyes darted across the guards. Where was Kumail?

According to the plan, Hamza and Musa were meant to get captured, so that they could find Ilyas. Shahida would hide after her critical role. Then Kumail would bust them out. But Kumail had yet to show up. What was he waiting for?

“I knew you would come after me for this,” Ilyas smirked.

He leaned down, picking up something. Hamza froze. His eyes widened in alarm. It was the box. Ilyas had been using it as a foot rest! Fury shot through his mind as he watched Ilyas dangle it in one hand before him.

“And just in case you wouldn’t, I killed everyone in the tribe.”

Wham!

Musa smashed his foot off the ground. He tugged against the ropes, yanking the soldiers who were holding on, but they regained their stability quickly enough.

“Now, now,” Ilyas laughed. “I have a special surprise for you Musa. Save your energy. You’re going to need it.”

Hamza narrowed his eyes. He wasn’t liking this. Ilyas was mad. Hamza wasn’t liking how Ilyas was so thrilled. And Kumail.

Where was he? He should have been here by now. He brushed his sleeve against his side, feeling the reassuring hilt of the blade he had concealed. His back up plan.

“Let’s go,” Ilyas whispered.

It was now or never.

“Argh!” Hamza growled, whipping out his blade. He lunged forward yanking the soldiers holding him to the ground. Ilyas’s eyes widened in horror as Hamza rammed him in the stomach, before taking him hostage.

“Drop your weapons!” he roared.

He kept an eye on Musa who sighed with relief.

Ilyas gasped, before chuckling.

“You’re too late, Hamza,” he wheezed.

Hamza dug the edge of the blade against his skin causing him to wince.

“You couldn’t defeat your frail uncle,” he whispered. “What makes you think you can stand against me.”

Ilyas smirked.

“Do it,” he ordered.

Burair nodded, and the guards began advancing left. All of them. They dragged Musa with them.

“Stop!” Hamza growled but they ignored him. “I said stop!”

He turned Ilyas around, holding the knife beside his eye.

“Where are they taking him?” he thundered.

Ilyas began laughing hysterically.

“Every son must follow in his father’s footsteps,” he whispered.

“My father was a chief. And now I am a chief. Musa’s father was eaten by a crocodile. And now...”

He paused, his venomous eyes meeting Hamza’s gaze.

Wham!

Hamza rammed his elbow into Ilyas’s stomach, knocking him to the ground.

“You loved the Saw Mansaw so much, didn’t you?” Ilyas laughed. “Let’s see how well you do this time!”

73

The Pit

“Agh!” Another soldier screamed.

Hamza roared, hauling him off his feet. He rammed his elbow into the soldier’s back, shattering his spine.

He barged forward.

“Musa!” he cried. “Hang on! I’m coming!”

Two more soldiers approached him on the right. One on the left. The first swung his fist, but Hamza ducked, pushing him at the other two soldiers.

He charged forward. Only a few meters to go.

Wham!

A force knocked him off his feet.

Hamza looked up to see Burair, a wicked grin was on his face. The warrior raised his sword, swinging it for his head.

Hamza ducked, smashing his elbow against Burair’s weak knee. Instantly, he shot up his dagger, driving it through Burair’s throat.

Burair coughed, his eyes widened in horror. He wheezed before slumping down in a pool of blood.

“That’s how it’s done,” Hamza spat.

His eyes drifted ahead, a strange dread was filling his heart. There was a pit. Filled with water.

“Musa!” Hamza called out desperately.

No sign. The water swished back and forth. Hamza heard a growl from the water. The crocodile.

“Argh!” he thundered, throwing himself into the pit.

The cold water slapped him in the face as he plunged into it's darkness. Hamza felt a swish of water from behind him. He whirled around, and his heart froze.

Two green eyes glared at him in the water. And they were getting closer. Hamza narrowed his eyes, struggling to control his heart beat. He needed to stay calm. The water was murky, but he could make out a grey streak. Teeth!

Hamza whipped out his leg, swinging it at the snout of the beast. He struck something, causing the beast to wince. It retreated in the murkiness.

Hamza's breath was running low. He kicked upwards, trying to break the water surface.

"Bah!" Hamza coughed as he broke the surface. His lungs expanded as he gasped for air. Hamza heard a growl. He turned to see the crocodile diving away from him. What? Why?

"No," Hamza gasped. "Musa!"

He shot forward, right behind the crocodile but it was faster. It submerged into the water. Hamza's eyes widened in horror. He could make out someone. Musa. The poor youth was pushing the crocodile away by it's jaw.

Hamza swam forward, raising his fist. He grabbed hold of the crocodile. Immediately it whirled it's tail, striking him in the chest.

"Agh!" Hamza screamed, the water was entering his mouth.

He held his chest painfully. He looked up to see Musa swimming free.

Wham!

The wind got knocked out of him as the beast knocked him back, pushing him further into the water. Hamza tried resisting but knew it was futile. The crocodile was too powerful. He felt his strength crumbling. His eyes closed. He could hear voices.

"Hamza! Hamza!" Hamza looked up to see a man. He was slim, but strong. He took Hamza's small form in his lap. Small form? Hamza clinged onto him lovingly. "Asif Uncle! When can we see Ami!". Asif sighed. "In life, things happen. Good things and bad things." Hamza looked up to meet his gaze. Asif's eyes were watered. "Do you see the stars in the sky?" he whispered.

Hamza glanced up at the twinkling spots. "Yes," he answered. Asif sighed. "One of those spots," he paused to ruffle Hamza's hair. "Is your father Wahab. Another one is your sister, Zainab. Well, my boy, you see that shimmering star." Hamza nodded excitedly. He could see it. The star was beautiful. "That star," Asif swallowed. "Is your mother, Faiza Auntie, smiling upon us. She is with your father and sister in the sky." Hamza felt tears in his eyes. He felt weakness in his body. And everything went dark.

Shahida

“Uh,” Hamza moaned weakly. His eyes parted slightly as he tried to make out the blurry flash of colours around him. The crocodile.

Hamza’s eyes shot awake, poised to fight.

“Hamza wait!”

Hamza turned to his right, his eyes widening in alarm.

Rizwan stood there. Beside him, was Musa. They both sighed in relief. Hamza’s eyes darted between the two as he shivered.

“Wh-what’s going on?” he faltered. “I- I-”

Musa rushed into him, arms wide. He squeezed Hamza tightly.

“Aye,” Hamza squealed causing Musa to let go.

He eyed Hamza, the concern was visible in his eyes.

“Are you okay?” Rizwan asked.

Hamza shuddered. And he was cold. The water of the pit hadn’t dried yet, meaning, he hadn’t been unconscious for too long. Ignoring the pain in his ribs, he eyed his surroundings.

Bodies of soldiers were littered over the land. All of them poisoned. Thanks to Shahida.

“Are you okay?” Rizwan asked.

Hamza nodded.

“What happened?” he asked curiously. “I remember fighting a crocodile.”

He did not mention the strange memory he had relived. Who was Asif Uncle? Or Faiza Auntie? How did he know them?

“Kumail freed me,” Rizwan explained. “And then we came here. We found you and Musa. All the soldiers were dead.”

Hamza sighed.

“That was Shahida’s doing.”

Rizwan raised a brow curiously.

“We made poison from that herb,” Hamza explained.

“Butterflies...”

“Butterflies curse?” Rizwan exclaimed.

Hamza nodded.

“Shahida put it in the food made for the soldiers. But tell me, what about the crocodile?”

Rizwan sighed. Glancing at Musa, he gestured towards a particular direction.

Hamza turned, his eyes widening in surprise. The crocodile’s corpse lay there, a branch piercing through it’s mouth and head.

“D-did you do this?” Hamza gasped, glancing at Musa, whose eyes were wet.

Musa nodded. He began moving his hands, to communicate a message with sign language.

I lost my father to such a beast. I couldn’t lose you as well.

Hamza shuddered uncomfortably. There was a strange warmth in his heart for this boy. He was young, and had plenty to learn, but he would definitely land far in life with the right mentor. Affectionately, Hamza ruffled the boy’s hair.

He then looked up, pausing for a moment. Where was Shahida? She should have been here.

“Where’s Shahida?” he asked.

“I’m not sure. I thought she was with you.” Rizwan responded in a concerned tone.

Hamza narrowed his eyes. I told her to hide until it was all over but even she must know by now that everyone is dead. Except Ilyas.”

He added the last part intentionally. Rizwan needed to be aware of Ilyas’s fate in advance. Even if it made him uncomfortable.

“I’ll go and find Shahida,” Hamza explained. “Both of you stay with Ilyas and Kumail. Be a little wary of him.”

Both Musa and Rizwan eyed him curiously but asked no questions.

Hamza took a deep breath as they left. Shahida should have been here by now. Wincing at the minor pain in his chest, he set forward.

Truths

Despite his body's protest, Hamza pushed through the rough terrain. He didn't bother to mask the loud tell-tale crunch of his footsteps on the gravelly path, paying much more attention to the eerily quiet surroundings.

Cupping his hands, Hamza took a big breath of chilly air, "Shahida ji! Shahida ji!"

Thick, green foliage stood almost mockingly in silence. Swivelling around, he kept a whether eye on the tree line for any movement.

"Shahida ji!"

Hamza felt slightly concerned. 'She's an old woman, she can't be going that far.' he consoled himself. Though he quickened his steps.

There was a stillness in the air that made the hair on the back of his neck stand. He kept calling her name but had yet to receive a response. With every passing minute, he was feeling more concerned.

After what felt like hours of walking, with his injury burrowing a hole in his chest, he bent down on his knees, drawing deep breaths and ignoring the sting in his lungs. 'Maybe I've missed her...' he thought.

Hamza rubbed a hand, soothing the pain away and was turning when his foot caught on something on the grass, causing him to stumble violently and nearly onto the gravel.

Reeling from the sudden impact, he quickly settled on his feet and found that a strip of colorful cloth had snagged the tip of his boot. He bent down to unravel it when he noticed the pattern on the cloth. *An extremely familiar pattern.*

With a new burst of energy, he pushed past the trees and dived into the foliage. “Shahida ji!” he called once more as he clambered through the forest.

Crouching low, he scoured the ground, looking for signs of disturbance. He nearly missed it, but then he felt a shot a cold down his spine when he found a patch of dirt gleaming with an unwelcoming sheen. He pressed his fingers to it and, just as he had supposed, they came away red. Not wanting to waste more time, he hurried in that direction.

Hamza could almost hear the clock ticking in his head, pounding in his ears as he found more and more patches hiding in the blanket of leaves that coated the forest floor. He rushed through the forest as fast as he could, unfazed by the branches tearing at his face and hands.

“Shahida ji!” he called out yet again to the silent woods. Bowing down to examine the forest floor, he heard a gasp on his left. Without missing a beat, Hamza swung around with a dagger in hand, glaring at the treeline.

Amidst the ambient sounds of the forest, he almost missed the gentle whisper of his name. His brows furrowed. “Shahida ji?” he asked.

He jumped over a large fallen tree and was surprised to hear a voice behind him. “Over here, Hamza...” it rasped.

He turned and was surprised to see movement from inside the tree. Rushing around, he found an entrance on one of the sides and ducked, making his way into the belly of the fallen floral beast. It was large, enough for him to walk with a crouched back, the sides withered away and flickered with the appearance and disappearance of little insects. But it wasn't the decrepit creation of nature that had his attention, it was the huddled woman, leaning heavily on the wooden side, the long shaft of a wooden arrow buried in her arm. If the pooling blood wasn't concerning enough, her skin was flushed from all colour, her drawing breaths

in short painful rasps.

“Shahida ji, what happened?” Hamza exclaimed. “Are you-”
She stumbled, collapsing against the wooden edge.

“Listen to me,” she wheezed. “I don’t have much time.”

Hamza’s eyes widened in horror. She was dying. But her eyes were red. That couldn’t be because of any mortal wound. She had been poisoned.

“Kumail,” she coughed. “Don’t trust him.”

Hamza froze. What was she saying? Did Kumail do this to her?

“We made a plan within your plan,” she whispered.

Hamza clenched his fist. It all made sense now.

“You both betrayed me, didn’t you? You were trying to save not only Rizwan but also Ilyas from me, weren’t you?”

Shahida coughed blood. Her eyes were drenched with tears.

“I couldn’t just leave Ilyas to die!”

Hamza shook his head in disapproval. He wasn’t feeling any mercy.

“Tell me what happened. I only want the truth.”

Shahida looked down helplessly.

“I was going along with the plan we made,” she stopped, suddenly rasping for air.

Hamza shook his head in disapproval.

“Get to the point!” he scoffed.

Shahida shuddered.

“Kumail proposed to help save Ilyas. He and I gave the soldiers a different poison. One which wouldn’t kill them immediately.”

Hamza glared at her. Musa almost died because of her!

“Kumail managed to save Rizwan and asked him about a box you had.”

Hamza froze. His eyes narrowed.

“When he found out that Ilyas had it, he realised that you didn’t trust him, so he went to save you. But before that...”

Hamza’s eyes widened in horror.

“He ensured that you wouldn’t expose him,” he gasped.

Shahida nodded.

“He poured the butterflies curse over the grass, and when I tried to run, he shot me with an arrow to make it look like I was killed by Ilyas’s men. Hamza. My beloved Musa almost died because of me. Thank Allah, you saved him.”

Hamza shook his head, his chest still hurting from the blow he had received.

“You’re dying,” Hamza whispered. “It wouldn’t have been this way if you had followed my plan. Both you and Kumail will get what you deserve.”

“I understand. And I accept.” Shahida coughed.

In the next minute, he watched as she slowly settled against the tree. Her grip weakened. She began gasping for air. And then, her eyes closed. Never to open again. Hamza sighed. He let his anger control him in that moment. His harshness was...questionable.

Shahida only tried to save her loved ones. But still. Hamza and Musa might have died because of her.

“First Ilyas will pay. Then I’ll bother about everyone else.”

Death Duel

Dirt. Boring and brown. Crusty and unwanted. Yet within it's chasms are hidden the greatest of kings, lying humbly next to the poorest of slaves. It didn't matter who you were when alive, after death all that remains is a body to lie in the ground.

Shahida had been the wife of a chief. She was intelligent, sharp and an expert of poisons. Her most well known quality was the fountain of maternal love that was felt by many more beyond her own blood.

Perhaps, that was why, despite all that had transpired between them, he still felt a pang of loss. It paled in comparison to his companions.

Rizwan was torn. On one hand, he wept few, but meaningful tears reciting praises of his wife and remembering the lifetime they had shared together. On the other hand, he clenched the large boulder that served as a gravestone so hard in anger that he only let go when a rivulet of blood dribbled from his fist. In those moments, he swore revenge and ranted about how he would eliminate the blight of his son from the world with his own two hands.

Kumail hovered close by, paying his respects, giving the relatives more time to grieve. Hamza, with practiced ease, smothered any indication that he knew about Kumail. In fact, Kumail didn't even know that Hamza still had the box. The two of them stood side-by-side, watching the two relatives grieve.

In fact, it was quite strange that there was someone he was more concerned about than the traitor by his side. A young, silent, and aloof man.

Musa was blank. No expression, no tears. Just a plain canvas standing by his uncle. It was nearly invisible, but Hamza could make out the steely cold edge that was buried in his gaze. It held one emotion, promise. A promise of a fiery retribution that only Ilyas's blood could quell. One hand rested by his side and the other was pocketed. Even then, Hamza could tell that it was fingering the slim dagger hidden in the lining of his moist robe.

In fact, he could see Kumail's slight glimpses in Musa's direction, which held hidden trepidation. If, more likely when, Musa found out, there would be no land where Kumail could hide.

He remained alone as they said a final prayer and began to move down the forest path. His movements were deliberate, his expression stoic and his eyes alert. The way he barely held back from trembling with fury reminded Hamza of a smoldering volcano, barely teetering on the cusp of eruption. But Musa was in control. He would wait until he had the perfect opportunity.

Hamza looked up as the first traces of light emerged in the sky. It was time. Minding Kumail at the corner of his eye, he leaned forward, placing a hand on Rizwan's shoulder. The pained man looked up, meeting Hamza's gaze.

"It's time," Hamza whispered. "Ilyas must die."

Rizwan's lips parted slightly. He swallowed, getting to his feet. Hamza expected him to say something, but he didn't. He merely turned and headed off. Far off to the tree where Ilyas was tied.

"Oh dear," Kumail remarked.

Hamza's eyes widened in alarm as Rizwan thundered, "Ilyas!"

Hamza sprinted forward, forcing himself in front of Rizwan. The chief ignored him, however, continuously pushing on.

"Rizwan, listen to me!" Hamza insisted. "We will kill him, but not like this."

Suddenly Rizwan stopped pushing. Hamza met his gaze. Rizwan was staring beyond him. He turned to see where Rizwan

was looking.

Musa stood there. In one hand, he had a hammer. In the other, he held a sword, tinged with blood. Hamza narrowed his eyes. He knew that sword. It was Burair's.

"Musa," Ilyas swallowed. "I had nothing to do with it. Can't you see my pain?"

Musa shook his head.

"Even if you didn't kill her," Rizwan spat. "You killed many others. Our tribe. Our people. You killed her brother. You're as good as her killer."

Ilyas looked down. For a moment, no one said anything. Then Musa extended the sword, nudging the ropes that held Ilyas to the tree. Hamza's eyes widened in alarm as Musa dropped the sword in front of Ilyas. His meaning was clear. He wanted to fight. A fight to the death.

Ilyas narrowed his eyes.

"I will end you now," he whispered. "Even if I can't kill Hamza. Before I die, I swear, I will take your head."

Hamza took a step back. This was Musa's decision. He would respect it.

Musa and Ilyas locked eyes. One armed with a hammer. The other with a sword. There was a change in the air.

"Argh!" Ilyas growled, swinging his blade at Musa. Musa ducked just in time.

Wham!

Musa rammed his shoulder into Ilyas's stomach, causing him to stagger backwards breathlessly. Musa jumped forward, bringing his hammer crashing down. Ilyas deflected it, swinging his blade for Musa's leg. Musa leapt out of the way.

Hamza took a deep breath. He was feeling a strange worry in his heart for Musa. He would be alright. He would win. Of course he would.

Ilyas roared, barging forward. He hurled the blade at Musa like a javelin. The blade sliced through the air, burying itself in Musa's arm.

Hamza's eyes widened in horror as Musa stumbled backwards. Should he intervene? No. Musa had to finish this. But still... As

if on cue, Rizwan gripped his arm.

“Musa must finish this,” he whispered.

Ilyas dived forward, knocking the hammer out of Musa’s hand. Musa fell to the ground, the pain on his face was evident as he tried pulling out the sword. Ilyas hovered over him, tugging out the blade. A red colour emerged on Musa’s sleeve.

“This is it,” Ilyas spat.

He raised his blade, bring it crashing down. Hamza looked away, his eyes suddenly wet. He couldn’t bear watching it. He clenched his fist.

“Hamza,” Rizwan whispered. “Look!”

Hamza’s eyes parted slightly, before widening in amazement.

“What?” Ilyas gasped.

Musa glared at Ilyas, his hands clasped around the blade. He had caught it.

Wham!

Musa smashed his legs into Ilyas’s stomach, knocking him back. He shot his fist in Ilyas’s face, sending him to the ground.

Hamza’s heart calmed down.

Musa scrambled for his hammer, picking it with his good arm. Just as Ilyas was getting to his feet, Musa swung the large weapon, smashing it into Ilyas’s chest.

Ilyas went purple as he screeched in pain.

‘His ribs must be broken,’ Hamza realised.

Musa stood before Ilyas, the anger was burning in his eyes. He shot forward, ramming Ilyas to the ground. Ilyas gasped. He couldn’t get up. It was over. Musa had won. Hamza sighed in relief.

Musa clutched his arm. He stepped back, reaching out for the sword. Hamza watched curiously as he moved towards Rizwan and held out the blade, bowing his head respectfully.

Hamza watched in amazement. Musa was giving the final verdict to Rizwan. Hamza turned to see Rizwan, whose eyes began pouring with tears. What would he say? What verdict would he give?

“Do it,” Rizwan croaked.

Relief filled Hamza's heart as Musa bowed his head respectfully, moving forward to Ilyas. With a deep breath, he raised the blade above Ilyas's head.

"You have done well, father," Ilyas spat. "Siding with your brother's killer."

Rizwan shook his head.

"No Ilyas," he whispered. "Hafeez brought his own death upon him. So did you."

Rizwan looked away as Musa brought the blade down.

Hamza shuddered. Ilyas's head rolled a few centimeters away, blood gushing from his body as it came down on the ground like a demolished building. Musa placed the blade on the ground.

"Forgive me Shahida," Rizwan croaked. "I had no choice."

Hamza turned away. For him, all that mattered was that Ilyas was gone. Dead. He sighed as the burden on his shoulders was finally starting to feel lighter. Now, Hamza could begin his quest of solving his past. And finding the answers to his mysterious box.

The Choice

Farheen sighed. She was waiting outside the door of the one person she was not incredibly inclined to meet.

“Asalaam Alaikum! I’m sorry, do I know you?”

“Walaikum salam. Oh, actually, I was just in the area and I heard you lived nearby. My friend’s granddaughter is a huge fan. I brought these.”

She held out a plastic container. She noticed Firuza’s gaze on the cupcakes and a smile gracing her face. With an embellished thank you she moved aside and invited Farheen in. The old woman mentally cheered, that the grandmother demeanour came in more use than she’d dare claim.

“They’re beautiful!” Firuza snapped a picture. “A humble gift from an adoring fan! The struggle that bridges generations!”

“That’s quite a ... dramatic way of putting it.”

Firuza shrugged, putting the camera and notebook away.

“Perhaps, but that’s what makes news. Drama! Controversy! People live for that!”

As if just noticing her guest from the corner of her eye, she added, “And truth. After all, that’s why we investigate in the first place. Would you like some tea?”

Farheen replied in the affirmative and Firuza left through a side door. Her apartment was very...different. It was quite small but had enough room to comfortably fit a sofa and a desk. There were slivers of wallpaper but they vanished amongst the masses

of picture frames. Each black or gold border encapsulated an article or a heading, all with one common element, a smiling young woman.

“This is a lovely home.” She told Firuza as the girl entered carrying two mugs. That earned her a camera practiced smile.

“What can I say, the struggle may be paved with thorns but it pays well.”

“So I’ve heard. I’ve been told you have quite a following too.”

She grinned. “People want the truth. And I serve the people. But you won’t believe the battles I have pushed through to get to this point. Being a journalist is like swimming with the sharks.”

One quote on the wall caught Farheen’s attention.

“The truth will set you free,” she said aloud.

“Inspiring, isn’t it?” Firuza sighed. “Over the years it has become my *modus operandi*. I toil day and night in the worst and most extenuating circumstances to ensure people are told the facts.”

If Farheen could have rolled her eyes she would have. She had seen many things that she was sure would far surpass Firuza’s definition of *worst and extenuating*.

“It’s admirable, your conviction to the truth,” Farheen clarified. “It has certainly earned you quite a following. What was it...twenty percent of Peaceville?”

“Thirty eight point five” Firuza quipped with a hint of a grin.

“Such fame carries great responsibility.”

“I’m aware.” Firuza tossed the end of her scarf.

Farheen took a long sip of her tea. It was atrocious but she smiled through it. “When I was a girl it wasn’t even possible. I can’t even imagine having so many people listening to every word I say. I would think ten times before saying anything.”

Firuza shrugged. “It’s not a life for many.”

“I have read some of your articles. You have quite a way of explaining a story.”

“That’s right.” Firuza announced triumphantly. “People want a tale and I give them a legend!”

Farheen felt a little exasperated. She wasn’t getting anywhere with this girl.

“Just....be careful my dear.”

Firuzra raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

Farheen shrugged nonchalantly. “You were right. This isn’t a life for everyone. In this struggle of finding the truth, there is a very thin line between what we see and what we want to see. What is the truth and what we want the truth to be. A thin and slippery line.”

Firuzra looked a little peeved and slightly intrigued. “Thank you for the...advice. But I think there’s more that you want to say.”

Farheen had to give her credit. She was sharp.

“Very well. There are people like you, people who have fame and influence, they are not just truth seekers Firuzra dear. You’re the voice that people not only listen to, but they make it a part of their own lives. That goes for the good and the bad.”

“I only speak the truth.”

“True, but not all truths are to be spoken.”

“Was that a threat?”

Farheen gave her her best tired old-woman look. “Even if I wanted to, do I look like someone who could threaten you?”

“People have tried in the past.” Firuzra argued, but she did look slightly conflicted.

“I have seen things my dear. I have lived in times that have scarred generations. But the world we live in now, the struggle we face, is not the one that can be solved by pulling a trigger. This is a war fought on microphones, stages and cameras. There are so many voices trying to tear people apart.” She placed a hand on Firuzra’s knee. “All I ask is that you don’t let your voice be one of them.”

Firuzra hesitated but she replied. “When I took this job, I took it to tell people the truth about what they hear, not what certain people wanted them to hear.”

“And who will tell them what they need to hear? What they should hear?”

Firuzra didn’t reply.

“You will be approached Firuzra. You will be asked to speak. And you will be offered more fame and wealth than you could

ever imagine. But it will also be you who has to make a choice.”

“I cannot deprive people from getting informed about the truth.”

“but it is much more grave, in the sight of Allah, to prevent (people) from the path of Allah (swt) - Surah Baqarah ayat 217.”

Both women were silent. Farheen stood up. “Thank you for the tea. Now I must go.”

She let herself out, leaving a very confused woman on the couch.

Reminiscence

Life is strange. Unpredictable. And sometimes confusing. Many questions come to mind whenever one contemplates on their existence. For example, what is my purpose? Or-

“Who am I?” Hamza whispered under his breath, as he stoked the fire.

The answer had evaded him for more than a year now. Ever since he woke up in the forest, he had wandered desperately, mindlessly almost as though he would never learn the truth.

Sometimes deep down, Hamza was afraid of what the truth held in store for him.

Somehow, he knew how to speak so many languages. He knew how to sign communicate as well. Hamza might have taken solace in the fact that it wouldn't be uncommon to know that many languages. Maybe he was a linguist?

But linguists couldn't take down armed assailants in a matter of moments. That takes training. A specific kind of training. One that certainly justified Hamza's insane amount of strength and fitness. He shuddered uncomfortably. How dangerous was he?

The fire cracked causing Hamza to sigh. He always thought his memories would help fill the crevices of his heart and soul, but the memories he had only deepened them. When he had first met Kumail, he remembered his sister. He couldn't remember her name or anything else about her. Only that she existed. He also

remembered a man whom he had called 'Asif Uncle'.

"The meat's ready."

Hamza turned to see Rizwan. In front of him, was a clay pot containing several portions of meat. Cleaned and skinned. Hamza hauled the pot over the fire, and began adjusting the meat so that the pieces could be cooked properly.

He glanced back towards Rizwan, bowing his head respectfully. The former chief merely blinked before leaving Hamza to his thoughts once more.

'If only he knew the snake Shahida really was,' he contemplated.

Nobody knew of Shahida's confession. Nobody except Hamza. And he certainly did not intend to tell them. Both Rizwan and Musa would be devastated if they found out. For those reasons, Hamza decided to bury it with her.

The meat sizzled as he moved it with the makeshift spoon, trying to ensure that all sides were cooked. His eyes darted to a sudden movement on his left. Hamza narrowed his eyes, his elbow brushing against the reassuring bulge of his dagger. It was Kumail. Kumail. A man whose motives still remained unclear. All Hamza knew was one thing.

Kumail was not his friend. He was not trustworthy. He would sell him out for the box at any moment. But Kumail was the only key to his past. So Hamza would have to be careful. He would have to pretend that he doesn't know the truth. At least until he finds a new lead to his past. Until then, the box has to remain hidden, with only Hamza aware of it's location.

"Hamza," Kumail whispered.

Hamza nodded, before turning to meet Kumail's treacherous gaze. His eyes spoke of deceit. Hamza's lips curled into a smile. Kumail had planned a new game.

"I've been giving it some thought, and I think that we should return the box."

Hamza raised a brow, turning his attention back to the meat.

"Dinner is almost ready," he answered, deliberately ignoring Kumail's statement.

Kumail's eyes widened slightly.

“Hamza, we need to return the box. If we don’t, they’ll come after us.”

Hamza shook his head in disapproval.

“What do you want Kumail?”

Kumail eyed Hamza curiously.

“Agha, is everything alright?” he asked, studying Hamza.

Hamza shrugged.

“The meat isn’t cooking nicely.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Kumail answered.

Hamza sighed.

“Make the arrangements Kumail,” he whispered. “Tell Rizwan to take one of the remaining horses from Ilyas’s army and find a port for us to set sail from.”

Kumail bowed his head respectfully and got up to leave. As he went, Hamza eyed him suspiciously.

“What are you plotting Kumail?” he whispered.

A Secret Meeting

Firuza had been in many situations in the hunt for a good story. Some odd, some hilarious and some dangerous. So it really wasn't the first time she had mustered the courage to meet a stranger in a less frequented part of town. She hummed a little tune, hopping from one foot to the other in an attempt to keep the cold away. She was so far from the town, that she couldn't even hear the sounds of the city traffic, just the low hum of her beat up car's engine. *'This story is bound to get me a new set of wheels'* she surmised, smirking in the dim glow of the cracked headlight.

It was a little road, ridden with potholes and bearing some very heavy cracks. On either side of the road, the sidewalks had disintegrated into rubble mounds of concrete blocks. The road passing over it was quiet, lit up every now and then by the occasionally passing cars. It was wet, the mild rain pooling into filthy, murky puddles. A chilly gale bit at her exposed fingers that shakily gripped a voice recorder and her phone. Beyond the beams of the car headlights, she could see little in the blanketing darkness. But it was not the cold or even the damp surroundings that set her on the edge.

There was an ominous taint in the air, a prickly feeling that set off alarm bells in her observant mind. There was something unsettling and eerie. So much so that she had a hand on the car door handle, ready to jump in at the first sign of danger.

'This story,' she wrinkled her nose at the musty smell. She

could almost smell the camera flashes and anchors.

After the embarrassing debate with that Alpha, what was his name? Yu...Yusuf...No. It was Yunus. She needed redemption. She needed a chance. No matter what. After all, fame demanded work. Something she wasn't afraid to do.

She shuddered abruptly, having the strangest feeling that someone was watching her. Had her contact arrived? Often, he did hold very dramatic entrances.

She stepped away from her car, the cold air immediately freezing her face.

"Hello?" Firuza called out. "Anyone there?"

She wasn't sure of what to do.

"Onward we go," she giggled somewhat nervously.

She was about to move forward when she heard a voice.

"Stay there."

Firuza whirled around. Where had it come from? She narrowed her eyes.

"Greetings Firuza," came the voice again.

Firuza turned around, her eyes widening in amazement. A hooded figure stood there.

"Amr!" she recognised.

Amr bowed his head respectfully.

"Why did you call me here?" Firuza asked. Farheen's words were echoing in her mind.

You will be approached Firuza. You will be asked to speak. And you will be offered more fame and wealth than you could ever imagine. But it will also be you who has to make a choice.....I have seen things my dear. I have lived in times that have scarred generations. But the world we live in now, the struggle we face is not one that can be solved by pulling a trigger. This is a war fought on microphones, stages and cameras. There are so many voices trying to tear people apart. All I ask is that you don't let your voice be one of them.

Amr chuckled.

"Dear Firuza, you are a passionate child, one with a lot of potential. My only aim is to help you reach the heights you so desperately dream of."

Firuza blinked hesitantly.

“You’re no friend of Peaceville, are you?”

Amr grinned.

“Smart girl,” he answered in a cool tone. “I’ve never been a Peaceville’s friend, even though I’ve been here longer than you ever have. And that is because I have far greater dreams. A desire to be the strongest man in the room. Just like you.”

Firuza looked down.

“You can be that mighty and influential celebrity you wish to be, Firuza,” Amr persisted. “Just join our side. We’ll give you stories, and you use them.”

Firuza met Amr’s dark gaze.

“You said you had a story for me,” Firzua whispered.

Amr chuckled.

“I have a story. One which will make you more famous than you can imagine.”

Firuza narrowed her eyes, unable to suppress a little curiosity.

“Spread the word,” Amr grinned. “Tell them that Captain Abbas’s mother Layla was one of the scientists who helped design the C-gun. Tell them that the original designer of the C-gun was General Akbar’s father, Sohail.”

Firuza raised a brow.

“That’s not possible,” she remarked.

The hooded figure chuckled.

“Do as I say, Firuza. It’s true. And you’ll know it’s true because they will try to stop you.”

The hooded figure turned around and began moving away. Firuza narrowed her eyes. Who was this man? How did he know this?

“You won’t lose me that easily,” she whispered.

Carefully, she moved behind the hooded figure, trying to stay silent. The hooded figure rounded the corner. She moved in faster. Not wanting to lose him, she peeked ahead, her eyes widening in confusion. He was gone. Vanished. But how?

“At least I got my story,” she whispered. “Let’s see what it brings.”

The Streets at Night

It was nighttime. The sun had long gone, leaving a shimmering moon in its wake. The skies were fully dark with no trace of stars anywhere. The streets were deserted. An unsettling chill prevailed in the air. In the dark, a shadow could be seen, moving along the streets.

Abbas took a deep breath, glancing back. There was nothing except the a can, clattering lightly due to the wind.

“Alhamdullillah,” Abbas sighed in relief, continuing on.

He was feeling very odd today. His mind was in a whirl. He couldn’t explain it, but he felt like...like he would throw up. His stomach ached, sore from the brawls he had endured.

Abbas shuddered. At the moment he was weaponless. His revolver Zulfi had been given to the guards outside Zaqqum prison. And his knife was lost during the fight with the Alphas. Now he was unarmed and alone, unsure of what to do.

He felt like a child lost in the forest. And all he wanted was to find some grown up whom he would feel safe next to. His mother. His father. Akbar Uncle. Anyone?

Abbas still knew nothing about the fate of Dawud and his best friend, Isa. Amr’s words echoed in his mind,

Unfortunate, it looks like they’ve abandoned you.

Abbas knew that Isa would never abandon him, but maybe Amr didn’t see Dawud and Isa. Maybe Amr thought they had escaped. Inshallah, Abbas hoped they did.

Normally Abbas might have gone looking for them, but today he was exhausted beyond compare. He didn't have the strength to return to Zaqquq prison, every part of him was sore. Also, he knew well that it would be of no use, anyways. He needed to find Akbar Uncle. Akbar Uncle would know what to do.

He glanced back again, making sure no one followed.

Whoosh!

Abbas shivered. He was trying to move steadily in the icy wind.

This entire day, starting with Zaqquq prison had been nothing short of a nightmare.

"Allah," Abbas breathed, glancing back. "All I want is a safe and happy life. Why must I endure this? Have I not fought long enough?"

Abbas took a deep breath. Assuming Tariq had spoken the truth, Abbas had learnt a lot. About this...League? An organisation devoted to the desire of controlling the world.

'With the strangest code name system,' Abbas smiled weakly as he continued on.

Fear. Anger. Ambition. Three individuals whose only aim was to destroy Peaveville. To defeat the Sada-e-Haq and retrieve something that would give them *Ultimate Control*.

It sounded far-fetched the more Abbas thought about it. Nothing short of some fictional story book.

Abbas groaned painfully as his head was spinning. He didn't understand a bit of what was going on. And his back stinging had only worsened.

"Ah," he winced forcing himself. He was almost there. Almost at the bungalow.

Normally, he would have gone home, but his body was very sore and his house happened to be farther away. This bungalow held unforgettable memories for him. It was where he had met his mentor for the first time. The man who had taken him in and treated him as his own.

Abbas stopped. There was a car up ahead. And it was driving. 'Of course it's driving,' Abbas chided himself.

But it might be an enemy. Or maybe-

The car drove by. Abbas sighed in relief, continuing on. In the darkness, his mind couldn't help recalling what it was like to roam around in these lands when they were ruled by Jumeira. By Alphas.

What did she want so badly? What was she so desperate for? Power? Influence? Abbas didn't understand. What kind of person would throw away everything for something so trivial and temporary. Nobody lived forever. No matter how hard one tried, everyone was destined to taste death eventually.

Abbas blinked as he eyed the forest. From this route it was only a few hours. And then...wait. Not hours. Minutes!

Abbas blinked, his eyes dazed slightly. He winced at his back. Why was it giving him so much trouble? Abbas blinked again. He had to keep moving. Akbar's house was not far off.

Abbas stepped forward into the forest, ignoring the pain in his joints.

"Maybe if I could-"

Crack.

Abbas froze. What was that? Where did it come from? Someone. Out in the woods at this hour. Surely, an enemy. Abbas growled as a sudden silhouette emerged from the shadows.

Abbas's eyes widened in horror. How was this possible?

"Amr!" Abbas gasped.

Amr raised his arms.

"Abbas?" he asked confusedly. "Where have you been?"

Abbas growled.

"I-" he panted. "I will kill you!"

Amr stepped back

"Abbas, what's wrong?"

"Argh!" Abbas screamed, fed up of seeing this hooded man. He wanted to kill him. To rip him apart. To bury him here and now.

He leapt forward, swinging his fist but Amr caught it.

"Die!" Abbas spat, punching with his other arm.

Amr ducked.

"Abbas! Calm down!" Amr shouted.

Abbas wouldn't. He couldn't. He had to-

Wham!

The man struck Abbas with a powerful kick, causing Abbas to stagger backwards breathlessly. His body filled with pain and he felt his vision blur, feeling too weak to continue fighting.

Abbas coughed blood.

His eyes drooped and he drifted unconscious.

Bahadur blinked, his mind in utter disarray. He leaned down, casting a shadow over the unconscious youth before him. His eyes widened in disbelief. Why wouldn't they? Captain Abbas had just attacked him.

The Bungalow

Snow. Wind. Ice cracking under his feet.

Abbas rolled his eyes.

'Not this time,' he decided.

He looked down eyeing the ice beneath him. It was crisp. Like a cookie. Abbas reached down, stroking it, a small smile formed on his face.

Wham!

Abbas's eyes shot wide awake. He gasped, blinking as he looked around himself. He was in a room. A small one. The door was open with a small sign on it that read 'Jaja's room'.

"Jaja's? room" Abbas whispered.

Was he dreaming? Or was he actually in Jafar's room. He glanced left and right, noticing some interesting things. Like a small chemistry stand in one corner of the room, or a busted car motor in the other. Abbas grinned. Jafar really had an inventive and talented mind. And from the state of his room, it seemed like he was learning some new disciplines as well, like engineering and robotics.

'You alright?'

Abbas's head shot up, sending a surge of pain in his back.

"Ah," he winced, putting a hand on his aching neck. "Jafar! Don't surprise me like that!"

The youth, now fourteen years old, came up beside Abbas.

"Sorry Bhai," he smiled. "Didn't mean to scare you."

Abbas looked up, meeting the young man's gaze.

"Scare me?" he repeated, eyeing the smirk on Jafar's face.

Jafar chuckled, sitting down beside Abbas.

"Congratulation Bhai," he whispered. "Somehow you always seem to bring yourself in such a battered state that I have to think of new ways of bandaging you up."

Abbas couldn't help smile a bit. More than a year ago, Jafar had healed Abbas's leg. The boy had a gift in medicine, and with Abbas, that gift often came in handy.

"You were in bad shape when we found you," Jafar sighed.

Abbas bit his lip. The mere memory of everything that happened was sending shivers up his spine. A sudden thought occurred to him.

"What do you mean, found you?" Abbas grumbled.

Jafar met his gaze.

"Bahadur Bhai, actually. He brought you here. Though he did seem a bit confused. Akbar Uncle was very worried when he saw you."

Abbas blinked.

"Is anyone aside from us at home?" he asked.

Jafar nodded.

"Maryam api, Zahra Api.. they're both here," he paused. "and Bahadur Bhai and Salma Api, too. Farheen Auntie took Isa back in the morning-"

"What?" Abbas jumped, interrupting him. "Isa was here?"

Jafar nodded.

"He and Dawud, both. But they've returned home now."

Relief flooded Abbas's heart as he whispered,

"Alhamdullillah."

For a moment he said nothing. He was just thankful that those two had escaped.

Jafar reached out for Abbas's arm, but Abbas held it back.

"What?" Jafar asked. "Give me your arm?"

Abbas shook his head.

"The last time we did this, you tried to drug me."

Jafar's lips curled into an amused grin.

“We’ve long past that time Abbas Bhai,” he chuckled.
“Sometimes I laugh when I remember the good old days.”

He took hold of Abbas’s arm, and carefully, began applying some of the cream to Abbas’s bruised forearm.

“Inshallah, you’ll make a full recovery,” Jafar whispered.

Abbas raised a brow. There had been an edge in Jafar’s tone.

“Why would I not?” Abbas asked Jafar.

Jafar’s hand stopped. He looked down.

“Jafar?” Abbas asked with uncertainty.

Jafar looked down. His shifted nervously, and Abbas noticed his fingers twiddling.

“You took a bad hit, Abbas Bhai,” the boy muttered quietly.
“Just be careful for the next few months or so. Your injuries need time to heal.”

Abbas raised a brow, eyeing Jafar carefully. He couldn’t help shake the feeling that Jafar wasn’t being entirely honest with him.

“You will heal, Inshallah,” Jafar added. “Just take it easy.”

Abbas looked down for a moment. Then he glanced up abruptly. He eyed Jafar curiously, for the first time, noticing a small gash on Jafar’s arm.

“Jafar, your arm,” Abbas realised. “Wha-”

“It’s nothing,” Jafar answered quietly.

He got up, but Abbas stopped him.

“What happened?” Abbas asked.

Jafar looked down. The boy seemed genuinely at a loss of words.

“You weren’t the only one who got attacked,” Jafar sighed.

Abbas’s eyes widened in horror. What? What did Jafar mean? Who else was attacked?

“I’ll let you rest,” Jafar sighed, getting to his feet. He was about to leave, but then abruptly paused.

“I almost forgot,” he stated. “Everyone’s out and about, but Layla Auntie is outside helping Zahra Api.”

Abbas’s eyes lit up.

“I’ll be ready in a few minutes,” Abbas answered. “Let her know I’ll be there.”

“Inshallah.”

And with that, Jafar left. Abbas winced as he propped himself up. He certainly felt better. Except for the pain in his back. But he would recover eventually, Inshallah.

“I could have died,” Abbas whispered to himself.

He needed to speak with Akbar. Or his father. Or Reza. Anyone who would know what to do. Wait. Abbas stopped. He couldn’t handle all of this right now. He needed to rest. To gather his strength while things were quiet.

“When Akbar Uncle gets back, I’ll discuss everything with him, Inshallah.”

Loyalties

It was dark. There was silence with a strange dread in the air. The only source of light was a small screen, lit at the front of the room. The screen flickered for a minute before finally connecting. Within the screen, three figures wearing black hoods and masks could be seen. They were silent, and their faces were completely concealed by the mask.

“Well Amr,” one of the hooded figures whispered. “We sent you to destroy Peaceville. What is the status of your mission?”

From the shadows, a hooded figure emerged. He bowed his head respectfully.

“There have been some setbacks, but we have made great progress.”

Amr stopped. He could have sworn he heard one of his masters scoff.

“I have managed to take back the Alphas from Zaqqum prison, but regrettably only two of the four prisoners survived.”

He clapped his hands together as two more shadows stepped out into the screen’s light. Both dressed in black and armed to the teeth. One of them was a man. Tall and wide, with powerful shoulders and an even stronger pistol strapped around his waist.

The other was a woman. Short in height. But by no means any less deadly. She had two knives sheathed. One strapped to each leg.

“Alpha 25 and Alpha 51?” came a voice from the screen.

Sting bowed her head respectfully, alongside Harun.

“It is an honour,” Harun whispered. “To finally meet *the League*.”

One of the shorter of the three men in the screen stood up. Anger.

“Is this your only accomplishment, Amr?” Anger asked calmly.

Amr’s eyes widened in alarm. He shook his head.

“No. I destabilised Peaceville with sensitive information leaks. And even though they mitigated the effects, I have recruited a journalist who will serve us well. She is power hungry and seeks wealth. She will surely be of great use to us.”

Anger glanced back at the other League members, Ambition and Fear. With a sigh, he sat down again. Fear got up and moved closer to the camera.

“How about the search for Faiza? For the box?”

Amr’s eyes widened slightly.

“We haven’t found her yet,” he answered. “But we will. We are combing through the entire island of Peaceville. She can’t hide forever.”

Fear turned, returning to her chair.

Ambition rose from his chair and strolled forward.

“Sana and Harun,” he paused. “It seems like Amr is facing some difficulty. We chose you to be saved amongst all because you were different from the rest. You chose to remove your C-chips and served loyally. As a reward, we saved you.”

Sana and Harun looked down and Amr knew that they were suppressing the urge to deny it. After all, Amr had only unlocked their cells; everything else, they did themselves. But he knew they dare not say this in front of the League. But Amr did not expect what followed.

Sting and Harun both went down on one knee, bowing their heads.

“We renew our pledge to serve the League once more,” they whispered.

Amr narrowed his eyes as they stood up. Ambition chuckled.

“Very well,” he whispered. “See to it that Amr finally yields some results. Or we might have to rethink our decision of having

you three in Peaceville.”

The screen flickered before powering off.

Amr narrowed his eyes. He had already done so much, and yet the void between his physical capability and Alpha 43’s always limited him.

‘I will bring you results,’ Amr growled silently. ‘I will deliver you something even Alpha 43 couldn’t accomplish.’

His eyes fell upon Sting and Harun, who were both heading out of the room. The two Alphas were discussing something. It made Amr slightly uncomfortable. And deep down he couldn’t help wonder if they were intending to play by his rules.

Recharging

“Allah,” Abbas sighed. “I could get used to this.”

It was odd. Abbas had spent the last few days in such tense situations that it felt strangely disorienting to have time to think. To be able to breathe without a storm of bullets raining on him, or a knife swinging for his throat. Why, Abbas couldn’t remember when he had last felt so relaxed.

“Ah,” Abbas winced as he eased himself.

He had still not recovered entirely from his brawl, his back still sore after Amr pounced on him from behind.

Abbas shuddered. Amr was strangely reserved for a villain. Abbas recalled his words,

I have no reason to prove myself to you, boy.

Alpha 43 had always been an enthusiastic fighter, whereas Amr was nothing like that. He was cold. Calculated.

“He probably has no strength in fighting,” Abbas deduced. “That’s why he cowered behind the Alphas. He knew that someone capable of defeating Alpha 43, Alhamdullillah, would also be able to defeat him.”

Abbas smirked. Amr was no warrior. He was a coward. Otherwise, why would he hide behind the Alphas? Alpha 43 never did so.

“Come on,” Abbas muttered. He grabbed on to the bed frame and yanked himself up.

“Agh!” he gasped. Pain flared in his back. “Come on, work with me!”

The smile faded from Abbas’s face, his eyes landing upon his holster, lying on the side table. Empty. Abbas sighed in disappointment.

That entire trip to Zaqum had been nothing short of a disaster. And to top it off, he lost this first and most trusty firearm, “Zulfiqar” or ‘Zulfi’ for short. Akbar had gifted it to Abbas and he felt strangely bare without it, like if he had lost a hand. With everything that happened, there was very little chance that he would get it back.

He snapped out from his thoughts by the door opening.

“Ami?” he whispered in disbelief.

His mother Layla stood there. Before Abbas could say anything, she closed the distance between them. He wrapped his arms around her and buried his face in her head scarf. She was warm and comforting. The smell of roses greeted him. She smelled like home. For the first time in days, Abbas didn’t feel like the famous captain, or Alpha enemy number one. He was just Abbas. A son. Albeit a bruised and battered one. His mother was cupping his face in her hands and whispering thanks to Allah(swt) over and over. When he pulled away, he noticed a tray on the table by the door. Layla followed his gaze and smiled.

She helped him back to the bed and brought the tray over. Abbas felt like a boy. He felt *safe*. He almost didn’t notice her blinking back the tears pooling in her eyes.

“Ami?”

“I’m fine. Here.” She gave him a watery smile, furiously wiping the tears away. In her hands was a bowl of soup.

Abbas could have burst out laughing. Compared to being chased, beaten and everything in between, nothing felt like this. How he wished he could have traded the last few days for moments like this.

“Eat it.” she urged gently. “There are others who want to see you.”

He listened, opening his mouth. It wasn’t until he had a few spoons that Abbas realized just how hungry he was. Each morsel

of the warm broth felt like a mini boost, increasing his strength. He didn't notice his mother's satisfied smile as he drained the bowl to the last drop.

"Now," Layla whispered. "What happened my son? Where had you been?"

She leaned down, pressing a hand against his shoulder. Abbas took a deep breath. Where should he begin? Abbas met her gaze. He didn't want to worry her.

"Let's just say Ami, yesterday was an eventful day."

Layla took a deep breath.

"At least you're safe now," she whispered in relief. "You should rest. Rest well before..."

Layla went silent. Abbas raised a brow.

"Before what?" he asked curiously.

Layla sighed.

"Before Akbar Bhai gets back."

And with that, she left. Abbas's eyes widened partially. Why would he worry about Akbar's arrival? Maybe Akbar wanted to speak with him about something? Probably.

Abbas knew for sure that he needed to talk to Akbar about all that he had learnt. And he had learnt quite a bit.

"Where is Akbar Uncle?" Abbas wondered.

Enemy of my Enemy

It was windy. Very windy. Sounds of silence drowned away in the air currents.

This was a very secluded part of Peaceville. Filled from one end to the other in hilly grounds and desecrated foliage. Nobody lived here. Why would they? This place was not very living-friendly.

In addition, it was a historical place as far as the revolution was concerned. Known as the old hay fields. Famous for being the place where the members of the revolution had gathered for the first time. From here, the fight for freedom had begun.

From the distance, it seemed isolated, so no one would notice a man treading through the tall hay grass. Despite it being during the day, even someone within the fields wouldn't know that he was there. That was how he had been trained after all.

Akbar glanced over his shoulder, careful to make sure that no one was following him. He was here for a very important reason. If he could accomplish the purpose of his visit, he would gain an unimaginable advantage. A man on the inside.

Akbar narrowed his eyes. This opponent, Amr, was far different to Asghar in so many ways. Asghar was a valiant on the battlefield. More dangerous in close combat than anyone. But Amr...Amr was a serpent.

He was calculated. He never endangered himself. Akbar knew this philosophy well.

‘Winning a war without losing any men,’ Akbar thought to himself.

Amr always had a trick up his sleeve. Akbar knew that. And he relied on his mind more than anything. That was why he struck Zaqqum prison. He needed more muscle on his side. Alphas. People who could match Akbar, Reza, Murtaza and Salma.

Akbar took a deep breath as he reached the half point of the field. Soon he would reach his destination.

Amr was tricky. And Akbar knew he was after more than just Peaceville. The data had told him that. His speaking with Layla had told him that. After all, her name was mentioned in the data the Alphas had tried to steal.

‘Allah, please help me emerge victorious once more,’ Akbar whispered as he reached the end of the field.

There was a man there with hands untied. His eyes were closed, a small gravestone was before him.

“I told you,” Akbar whispered. “I honoured your brother before he died.”

The man turned to face Akbar. Akbar sighed.

“I only wish he would have seen the truth before he...” Akbar let his sentence trail off.

The man looked down.

“I have thought long and hard about this,” he whispered. “I never thought I’d say this, but I am willing to accept your deal.”

Relief flooded Akbar’s heart but his face showed none of it. He forced a sympathetic nod.

“You have made the right choice,” he assured.

The man sighed.

“My brother will be avenged.”

Akbar did not react.

“We will deal with that when the time comes.”

The man chuckled.

“You will oppose me when that time arrives.”

Akbar nodded.

“I don’t lie to you. Nor did I do so to your brother,” Akbar paused. “He once took a bullet for me. But times change. We

change. Now we have a common foe. We will sort out our differences once this common foe leaves.”

The man nodded, grasping hold of a clump of mud from his brother’s grave.

“Your code name will be Luqman.”

The man nodded curtly.

“Luqman it is then,” he sighed, eyeing his brother’s grave.

And with that, Akbar bid farewell. As he went, his mind wandered to the second major problem. Abbas.

“Now it’s your turn, my boy,” Akbar whispered.

The Start of a New Trail

It was dawn. The sun was only starting to enter the sky, discolouring the darkness of the night. The icy air of the previous night had thawed. The temperature was finally starting to rise.

Hamza narrowed his eyes. He clenched his fist. His eyes were focused on the target. A wooden branch protruding from the side of the tree. The objective was simple. Snap it.

Hamza anchored one foot on the ground. He then leaned down.

“Here we go,” he whispered under his breath. “Argh!”

Hamza leapt up at the branch, whipping out his leg.

Wham!

He landed with a thud on the ground. Glancing up, he felt a hint of frustration. The branch was still intact.

“Hmm,” Hamza growled.

He jumped again at the tree, this time swinging his elbow.

Wham!

He fell down once more.

“Agh!” Hamza growled in frustration.

The branch was too strong. He heard a sudden crack behind him. Hamza whirled around, ready for an attack. He sighed in relief as he saw Musa.

The youth seemed a little more composed from how he had been the previous day.

“What happened Musa?” Hamza asked.

Musa raised his hands and began using the sign language.

You're not strong enough to do everything alone.

Hamza raised a brow. He watched as Musa moved around him towards the branch. The youth gripped hold of it and pulled it back. He beckoned to Hamza.

Hamza narrowed his eyes. In a flash, he lunged forward, smashing his fist against the branch.

Crack!

He landed with a thud. Turning around, he saw that the branch was broken, it's connection to the tree was splintered.

"Agh," Hamza winced, pulling a thorn out from his own hand.

Musa used sign language once more.

Why do you always try to do everything alone?

Hamza sighed.

"Trust, Musa. I can't trust many people."

The youth's eyes widened for a moment.

Do you trust me?

Hamza looked down. For a moment he said nothing. He knew Musa was brave and skilled, but trust...

"Yes," he responded at last.

Musa leaned down..no... he was bowing!

"Musa?" Hamza asked with uncertainty. "What are you doing?"

It looked a bit odd in the middle of the conversation.

"He wants you to be his mentor," came a voice.

Hamza turned in surprise to see Rizwan.

'I have to be careful around these tribe people,' he thought to himself.

He eyed Musa hesitantly.

"Why?"

Musa looked up to meet Hamza's gaze.

My whole life, I never thought I would find someone good enough to be my mentor. None of the warriors impressed me. But you're different. I can feel it. There's something intriguing about you.

Hamza shook his head in disbelief. There was nothing special about him. Sure he was good at fighting, and quite knowledgeable,

but still. Something was concerning Hamza. He was a lone wolf. He didn't need Musa. He was going after his past.

But something about the intensity in Musa's eyes burned through Hamza's heart. He almost felt like a big brother to Musa. Hamza took a deep breath. If he did this, he would take care of him.

"Very well, but know this. I intend to leave these lands in pursuit of the answers I need. You cannot ask me questions about where we go, or if I tell you something, you will just have to do it. I may choose to explain you the reasons later on. But that is entirely up to me."

Musa looked down for a moment. He was thinking it over. At last he bowed his head respectfully. He had consented. Hamza turned to Rizwan.

"I know that you may want to stay here, because of Shahida ji," he paused, suppressing the anger that almost came in his voice. "But you would honour me if you joined me."

Rizwan shook his head.

"I buried my heart yesterday," he whispered. "Now, nothing in life holds meaning for me anymore."

Rizwan had a faraway look in his eyes.

"I lost my people. I lost my beloved. And I lost my son."

Hamza shook his head.

"That boy doesn't deserve to carry your name. He dishonoured himself. He betrayed his family."

Rizwan's eyes watered.

"Remember that Shahida ji helped us. She must have loved Ilyas, but she too agreed to stopping him."

Rizwan shuddered. Leaning in close to Rizwan, he whispered.

"My friend, don't look at what you lost. Look at what you are left with. You have me. You have Musa, who still needs you to stand strong."

Rizwan wiped away his tears.

"You're right," he whispered. "I'll-"

Rizwan went silent abruptly. He narrowed his eyes. Hamza turned to see where he was looking. From the distance, a man was approaching on a horse.

“Kumail,” Hamza thought to himself. “Let’s see what bait you’ve come up with this time.”

Plans

It was taking all of Hamza's strength to not strangulate the man who stood before him. He wanted to do it so badly. He wanted to rip him apart.

'Kumail's time will come,' Hamza thought to himself.

He eyed the soldier calmly.

"Did you do as I said?" he asked.

Kumail nodded.

"I found out that there is a ferry several hours away, well beyond the forest, at a small gulf."

Hamza narrowed his eyes.

"And you paid them and everything?" he asked.

Kumail shook his head.

"I don't have money," he answered.

Hamza looked down. He hadn't thought about money.

"You don't need it," Rizwan stated. "I know those sailors. Saved them from pirates once. They would gladly allow me on board."

Hamza looked up, meeting Kumail's dishonest gaze.

"Well, if that's taken care of, when does the boat set off?"

Kumail shrugged.

"Tonight. We should probably set off soon."

Hamza eyed the traitor warily. Wherever he wanted to go, he was in a rush.

"Kumail, are we tight on time?" Hamza asked.

Kumail nodded.

So whoever they were returning the box to wanted it as soon as possible.

“Very well,” Hamza whispered. “I’ll handle the remaining packing. Rizwan, you and Musa bid farewell to your loved ones. We’ll set out in an hour.”

He turned back to Kumail. Whatever the soldier was planning, Hamza would get to the bottom of it.

Lights, Camera...Action!

Firuza took a deep breath, eyeing the lengthy script in her hand.

“Are you okay?” came a voice.

Firuza turned to see her partnering anchor. A young lady like herself.

“Yeah Asma,” Firuza whispered. “I’m good. I- I’ve just had a lot to think about these days.”

Asma smiled sympathetically.

“Did you do what I asked?” Firuza whispered.

Asma glanced left and right before nodding.

“Yes. Though she didn’t want to come.”

Firuza looked down.

Asiya was her younger sister who had a lot more growing up to do. In that time, she needed someone to protect her and care for her. And Firuza trusted no one as much as Asma.

“Have you gotten a threat?” Asma asked abruptly.

Firuza shrugged, forcing a smile.

“I just want to be sure,” she whispered.

“Let’s get moving!” came a loud voice.

Firuza’s eyes widened slightly. It was the producer. That meant...that meant the program was about to start.

Wiping a bead of sweat from her forehead, she moved up in front of the camera, assuming one of the two seats. Asma sat on the other.

“Lights,” the producer called out.

Firuzza took a deep breath. This was it.

“Cameras.”

Firuzza placed the script on the table, her heart pounding in her chest. She knew the repercussions of what was about to happen. Firuzza closed her eyes, holding the watch in her hand. The replica her sister had gifted her after she had lost the original belonging to her mother.

“Action!”

Her eyes opened. She was ready. Firuzza looked up, facing the camera for what would be the last time.

“Bismillah hir rahman nir Raheem,” she began.

“Dear Peaceville...”

Exposed

“Life is strange. Very strange indeed. You all know me as Firuza. An honest and fact finding journalist,” she paused. “But you should know that I have made many mistakes. I’ve distorted truths. Manipulated them to increase my viewership.”

Amr narrowed his eyes.

“What is she doing?” he whispered, eyeing the screen.

“But that all ends today,” Firuza sighed, a sad smile forming on her face. “Because as someone once told me, the struggle we face is not the one that can be solved by pulling a trigger. This is a war fought on microphones, stages and cameras. There are so many voices trying to tear people apart. But my voice will not be one of them.”

Amr’s eyes widened slightly.

“Today, the enemies of Peaceville have slipped up,” Firuza smiled. “They have underestimated me.”

The screen flickered as a video came on the screen. Amr raised a brow. What was this?

The screen was dark, as if she was in a dark room. But there were small dots of light.

Amr’s eyes widened partially. Those seemed like stars.

“Greetings Firuza.”

Amr’s eyes widened in horror. That was his own voice.

“No,” he gasped. “She recorded my meeting with her!”

Amr slammed his hand against the table, pulling out his walkie talkie.

“Shut the broadcast!” he growled. “She’s ruining everything!”

He watched as the video continued on.

I’ve never been Peaceville’s friend, even though I’ve been here longer than you ever have. Because I had far greater dreams. Desire to be the strongest man in the room. Just like you.

“Argh!” Amr growled slamming his hands against the table. “Firuza, I will kill you!”

Everything he said, all of those dialogues, exposed to the public. He couldn’t believe it. The video stopped, now finished.

“As you all can see, the notorious cyber hacker known as Amr is not our friend. He is an enemy. Our enemy. As interested in our well being as the Alphas were.”

Amr snarled.

“You can try all you want, Amr,” she smiled. “You can kill anyone you want. You won’t defeat our government. You won’t defeat our community. Farewell Peaceville. This is the last report I will make in this blessed city. From here, I must disappear. I hope you all heed this warning. May Allah be with you. Khuda Hafiz.”

The screen flickered. Amr shook his head. His team had finally shut the broadcast. But the damage was done.

Amr closed his eyes. What had just happened? Months of planning. Months of assessment. All down the drain. He was ruined. Exposed. The entire Peaceville knew now that he was the enemy.

Amr stopped. Abruptly his lips curled into a smile.

“Well played Akbar. You exposed me,” he chuckled. “But now it’s my turn. I’m going to strike you in a way that you can’t even imagine.”

Departure

“Woah!” Hamza exclaimed as his horse tugged at the reigns.

It was a wild chestnut horse, huge in size, even for horses. He felt it’s mane.

“You are a strong steed,” he remarked. “Shhh”

He leaned against the beast, feeling it’s heart beat.

“We’re both wild my friend,” he whispered. “I only have need of your services for today, and then, I’ll set you free.

Hamza placed a foot in the stirrup, and with a light push, heaved himself onto it’s back. It immediately tugged but Hamza was in a more advantageous position now. He pulled back harshly, bringing the horse to a stop.

“We should get going,” came a voice.

Hamza turned to see Kumail who was eyeing him warily.

Probably trying to locate the box. He must have thought that Hamza would carry the box, but he was wrong. Hamza had hidden the box in Rizwan’s possessions, hoping that even if Kumail searched Hamza’s bag for the box, he wouldn’t find it. And he certainly had no reason to search the others. Hence the box would be safe.

His horse tugged the reigns once more, but Hamza was able to restrain it. He glanced back to see Rizwan by his wife’s grave, crying. Hamza suppressed the annoyance in his heart. If only he knew. That woman had almost costed the life of his nephew trying to save her son. She had gone behind their backs, hatching

a plan with Kumail. Now she was in the grave. Gone. The truth buried with her.

He took a deep breath as Musa approached, riding a white horse, slightly smaller in size. The boy had tied his steel hammer on a buckle slung over his shoulder.

“Is Rizwan ready yet?” Hamza asked.

Musa shook his head, holding up two fingers.

“Okay, two minutes more, no problem.”

But it wasn't two minutes. It was at least ten by Hamza's count. And even though it was getting on his nerves, he said nothing. It seemed like a millennium had passed by the time Rizwan had mounted his steed, a brown horse, and joined up with the other three.

“Bismillah,” he whispered. “I'm ready.”

Hamza bowed his head respectfully.

“Lets go,” he ordered.

And with that, they were off. Off on a new trail. A journey to find Hamza's past. Hamza didn't know what to feel in all honesty. So much had happened in these lands that it felt strange for him to be leaving like this. But that was life.

“Here we go,” Hamza sighed.

The Letters

Wham!

Jafar staggered back in surprise.

“Faster,” Abbas chided. “And go lower on attacks.”

Jafar narrowed his eyes.

“Prepare to-”

Abbas dived forward, lifting him off his feet.

“Aye!” Jafar squealed as Abbas dropped him to the ground.

Abbas rolled his eyes.

“Jafar,” he instructed. “No talk in the battlefield.”

Jafar raised a brow.

“Sorry Abbas Bhai,” he answered. “I was just messing around.”

Abbas grinned. Jafar’s head tilted slightly. Why was he-

“Aye!” Jafar exclaimed once more as Abbas pulled him off his feet. “Not fair!”

“I told you already!” Abbas chuckled. “No talking!”

He let go and Jafar landed with a thud. Turning to Maryam, he asked,

“How would you rate that takedown?”

Maryam blinked. She eyed Abbas curiously.

“You call that a takedown?” she smiled.

Abbas raised a brow. Did she honestly think she could do better?

He bowed his head respectfully, moving back.

“Show me then,” Abbas challenged.

Maryam got to her feet, moving up to Jafar, her younger brother.

“Jafar, I’m sorry about this,” Maryam whispered.

Jafar raised a brow.

“Why-”

Wham!

Maryam ducked, swinging her foot. Before Jafar knew it, her foot caught his leg, sweeping him off his feet. He landed with a thud.

“Ow,” Jafar remarked getting to his feet.

Abbas smirked.

“A classic takedown,” he whispered. “I would have expected something more advanced of an ex-hunter. Anyway,” Abbas continued, “Let me show you a real takedown. One that I’ve used on Alpha 43, Alhamdulillah.”

Maryam raised a brow, seemingly uninterested. But Abbas could see the trace of defeat in her eyes. Of course she would be. Nobody had greater stories or battle scars in Peaceville compared to Abbas. He turned to face Jafar.

“So I’m-” Abbas stopped, his eyes widening. Where was Jafar?

Abbas glanced ahead, his eyes widening in amusement.

Jafar had long fled while he was distracted, now on the topmost branch of a huge oak tree.

“Jafar!” Maryam chided. “Get down from there!”

The youth shook his head.

“Never,” he begged. “You two will keep doing takedowns.”

Abbas chuckled.

“Okay,” he called out. “We promise. No more takedowns.”

Jafar blinked, eyeing Abbas and Maryam suspiciously.

Maryam nodded, raising her hands to surrender. Abbas shook his head. He never surrendered. Never yielded. That wasn’t his style.

Jafar narrowed his eyes.

“What’s to stop me from just staying up here?”

Maryam growled under her breath,

“I can get up there, you know!” she challenged.

Before Jafar could react, she darted towards the tree Jafar was on, and began climbing it.

Abbas chuckled, feeling a sudden dryness in his throat.

‘I should get some water,’ Abbas realised, wiping a bead of sweat in his forehead.

He waved Maryam and Jafar goodbye and taking a deep breath, began heading to the bungalow.

As he went, he couldn’t help feel a little disappointed. He thought that some mild physical activity with Jafar would help. But it hadn’t at all. His back was feeling a little numb, even when lifting Jafar, who was pretty light weight.

Abbas shook his head. He was fine. He always got better. Alpha 43 had done far worse to him. Hadn’t Abbas always recovered from that?

As Abbas reached the bungalow door, he shrugged away his concerns.

“I’ll be fine Inshallah,” he muttered under his breath.

With a grin, Abbas pushed the door open. He stepped inside, moving to the kitchen where Zahra was cooking. The mouth-watering aroma of nihari teased his nostrils. In the corner of the kitchen, on the slab, babbling away, was a little baby boy. Hurr. Zahra’s son.

Abbas grinned at the baby. It stopped, blinking.

“Salamunalaikum little-”

“Waaaaa!” Hur screamed.

Abbas recoiled in surprise. What had he done to-

“Waaaaa!”

-deserve such treatment.

Zahra looked up, flashing Abbas an apologetic glance. She rushed over to the overly spoiled little tyke.

“Mmmmma,” he drooled trying to hug Zahra.

Zahra lifted him off the slab and he went silent.

Abbas rolled his eyes. He glanced around, a sudden realisation dawning upon him.

“Zahra Api, where’s Ali Bhai?”

Zahra shrugged.

“He’s been occupied with work recently,” she explained.

Abbas understood. Ever since the meeting and assignment of jobs when Akbar split everyone into four teams to deal with Amr, Abbas had not encountered Ali. Or seen him for that matter. Where was he working that they hadn't met even once. It was odd. Especially given how Abbas remembered that Ali wasn't assigned to any team.

'He probably has some secret assignment from Akbar Uncle,' Abbas realised.

Nothing of his concern. Abbas glanced at the stove.

"Zahra Api, that smells delicious" Abbas remarked, picking up a bottle of water.

He turned to the cabinet for glasses and mugs.

"I'm making fresh garlic naan as well, Inshallah," Zahra grinned as Abbas drunk his water.

Oooh. Fresh garlic naan and nihari. Now that was a treat. But there was more. Mithai like gulab jaman, and even fries and pakoras.

"Zahra Api, has something happened?" Abbas asked curiously. Zahra blinked.

"What do you mean?" she answered. "Isn't it obvious- oh my. Didn't anyone tell you?"

Abbas narrowed his eyes.

"Tell me what?" he asked, now thoroughly confused.

Zahra grinned jovially.

"Reza Bhai and Ruqayya will be blessed with a child, Inshallah."

Abbas blinked. What did Zahra just say?

"Could you please repeat that please?"

Zahra smiled kindly.

"Inshallah, Ruqayya will be a mother. Inshallah."

The glass almost slipped out of his hand. He staggered back. What? Abbas's heart skipped several beats, but deep down, a warm glow entered his heart. His lips curled into an involuntary grin.

"Ruqayya Api?" he repeated.

Zahra nodded.

Abbas held a hand against his head, sizzling over to the couch. He slumped down upon it, crashing on the tufty pillow surface.

After all these months of struggle, Abbas had never felt a happiness quite like this. At least not since he had learnt that his parents were actually alive. Ruqayya Api. His Ruqayya Api. She was going to have a family, Inshallah.

Abbas sighed. His eyes widened.

“When did you find out?” he asked.

Zahra shrugged.

“Akbar Uncle told me,” she answered.

Abbas got to his feet, and began strolling back. As he went, his mind fizzled once more. He didn’t know what to think. Ruqayya was..

“Abbas!”

His train of thought was snapped. He blinked, looking up in surprise to see Maryam and Jafar at the door.

“We need you here,” Maryam called.

Abbas raised a brow, strolling up to the two siblings. Before even saying anything, he knew something was afoot. The two had done it again, hadn’t they?

“Jafar challenged me again,” Maryam explained. “He believes that his stealth ability is better than mine.”

Abbas glanced between Jafar and Maryam.

“He’s right,” Abbas smirked.

Maryam’s eyes widened with betrayal as Jafar chuckled away wholeheartedly.

“Thank you Abbas,” Maryam answered. “But thankfully this decision is not up to you. It is on whether you can find us.”

Abbas shook his head in disapproval. Really, again?

“Both of you will hide and you want me to find you,” Abbas guessed. “Right?”

Maryam narrowed her eyes.

“Close your eyes,” she added. “Count to ten. Whoever you find first, loses.”

Abbas sighed, placing his hands over his head.

“One...two...”

“Allah, Allah,” Abbas remarked at the tenth seconds. “Okay, here I come!”

Abbas's eyes opened. His wolf like glance was immediately surveying the ground, for track marks. His eyes widened, before narrowing.

Aware of the wetness of the ground, Jafar had left his shoes at the door. But Maryam hadn't. She had taken hers. But Maryam would never make such an oversight compared to Jafar, so knowing her, Abbas guessed that she had made a false trail.

Creak.

Abbas stopped. His lips curled into a smile as he could make out the faintest gasp. Jafar.

He closed his eyes, listening carefully. There was a small tapping noise...almost like...pattering!

Abbas began moving towards the noise. Like a wolf smelling the scent, he moved ahead. First came Zahra and Ali's room. Abbas stopped, placing his ear against the door. Not a sound to be heard. Abbas moved ahead. Stopping at the next room door. Maryam's. Again silence. Abbas eyed the third door warily. Akbar's door. Not a noise. Abbas narrowed his eyes. He ought to make sure that no one was there. After all, in Jafar's head, such a hiding place would make perfect sense.

Abbas pushed the handle, barging in. His eyes darted around. No one was there. The room was normal. Everything was in place.

"I could've sworn..." Abbas let his sentence trail off.

All he could see was piles of papers. And the shelves were fully maintained. But the window was blowing at the papers.

"Uh oh," Abbas realised, reaching out to close the window. "Better shut the wind before-"

Swoosh!

A gust of cold wind blew inside, knocking one of the piles over.

"Oh come on!" Abbas grumbled, slamming the window shut a little louder than intended.

He shook his head in disapproval, piling up the sheets. It was an irksome task, but eventually after five to ten minutes, Abbas had all the sheets piled up again.

"Alhamdullillah," Abbas sighed in relief.

He turned to leave, when something caught his eye in the corner of the room. A white streak near the fireplace.

“Last one,” Abbas whispered in relief, moving up to the fireplace. He leaned down to pick it up.

“Ah,” Abbas grunted.

The sheet was fine on one side, the top side. On the bottom, it was discoloured by charcoal stains.

Abbas brushed them off with his hand casually, his eyes falling upon the fireplace. It was a nice piece, old and traditional. But grand in it’s own way.

“Akbar Uncle shouldn’t have a fireplace in the room where he keeps his documents,” Abbas muttered under his breath. “Why would he need one?”

A closer look revealed further answers. Burnt, crumpled pulp like pieces of paper poked out from different corners of the ash. Abbas narrowed his eyes. Some of the papers were not burnt fully. Yes, the ink had discoloured. But some parts were still readable.

Abbas reached out for it, yanking at it. The sheet did not budge, a piece of charcoal was stuck over it. Abbas lifted the charcoal and pulled the sheet out. Well, part of a sheet. Sort of the upper half of two pieces. Abbas held it in his hands, eyeing it. He narrowed his eyes.

‘I shouldn’t read this. This is Akbar Uncle’s-”

Abbas stopped, a certain phrase caught his eye.

Greetings Alpha 43,

He blinked. Who sent Akbar this? Who had the nerves to do this?

“Wait a minute,” Abbas realised.

He began reading. It was difficult, but with the rest of the words, he could decipher most of the words.

It has been long. Far, far, too long...

Abbas raised a brow. Was this from some old acquaintance? Abbas narrowed his eyes. He knew well what Akbar had been in the past. And he could only imagine what kind of acquaintances Akbar would have had back then.

You think you are where you belong

But sadly, you’re wrong

The times...

The words here were illegible, a black blotch covered all the sentences.

‘No point in trying to understand what it says,’ Abbas realised. He moved on to the next paragraph.

The night which is to come,

The one where they’ll hear what you’ve done,

And then we’ll see how much they fear,

When the truth becomes crystal clear,

‘What night?’ Abbas blinked.

This didn’t make any sense. What kind of note was this? It seemed more like a spoken word. And who wrote it? The author didn’t seem very friendly. Was Akbar a hated enemy of the sender?

Abbas knew how much Akbar hated his connection to the mantle of Alpha 43. Whoever sent this letter, addressed him this way, solely for this reason. And considering how this letter was in the fire, it seemed like Akbar had not been keen on keeping it. But that was all Abbas could understand. Everything else was singed or discoloured beyond legibility.

Abbas took a deep breath.

“Let’s try this again,” he whispered.

You think you are where you belong.

Abbas scratched his beard lightly.

They could presumably be talking about a location. But that didn’t make sense conceptually. So maybe they were talking about the sides.

But sadly, you’re wrong

This person had addressed Akbar as Alpha 43. This looked like the sender was making an offer, persuading him to return to his past life.

Then came the blotched lines. Abbas didn’t waste any time on them. There was no point in trying to decipher those.

The night which is to come,

It would help if Abbas knew when this letter was sent. But how could Abbas, unless...

Abbas leaned down and pulled out the ash pit. His lips curled into a grin. There was barely any ash.

“This letter was burnt recently,” Abbas deduced. “And I have a suspicion that if Akbar Uncle burnt it, he didn’t want anyone to read it.”

Abbas looked down.

“It’s gotta be one of the recent nigh-”

Abbas stopped. His eyes widened. His heart skipped a beat. He gasped. How could he have missed it? How had he not understood? This line was referring to the Night of Heroes! The ceremony where Amr first surfaced. Abbas read the paragraph again.

The night which is to come,

“The Night of Heroes,” Abbas whispered.

The one where they’ll hear what you’ve done,

“Everyone had learnt that Akbar Uncle was Alpha 43,” Abbas remembered.

And then we’ll see how much they fear,

When the truth becomes crystal clear,

The rest of this torn piece was singed and ruined.

Abbas took a deep breath, trying to process it all. What in Allah’s name had he just stumbled upon?

Akbar had received a letter regarding the Night of Heroes. Abbas’s eyes widened as it dawned on him. He remembered his conversation from when he first spoke to Akbar on the Night of Heroes. Hadn’t Akbar said,

Keep a sharp watch

Abbas looked down, ignoring the howling wind outside the window. He had been very confused at Akbar’s behaviour that night. his manner of speaking. Almost as if...

“He knew in advance,” Abbas realised. “And he never told us.”

Abbas twitched. He couldn’t explain the strange feeling that was starting to surface in his heart. What was it? Betrayal...no. This felt more like hurt. And Abbas could not think of one good reason why Akbar would hide this. Unless...unless he didn’t.

Abbas scratched his beard with a hint of discomfort. Had his father Murtaza known? After all, Akbar may have been secretive, but Abbas knew that Murtaza was very close to Akbar. His best friend and brother in arms. Surely Akbar would have told someone.

Abbas suppressed the minor hints of annoyance in his heart.

“Did they not trust me?” he muttered under his breath, unknowingly a small growl left his mouth.

Abbas turned to the fireplace.

“Let’s see if you are hiding any other secrets..”

He reached out, his hands scurrying like squirrels in between chunks of charcoal trying to find other chits.

“Aha!” Abbas uncovered another small chit. Very small for that matter.

He couldn’t make out much, just a line.

The tree of hell shall burn,

“Tree of hell?” Abbas repeated.

His eyes lit up.

“Zaqqum!” Abbas exclaimed. “This note, it foretold of Zaqqum.”

Which meant that Akbar knew there was a threat on Zaqqum prison! Wait. What had the warden Tariq said?

“Captain please. It’s not only for you. The rule goes for everyone, even our general had to give his weapons this morning.”

Akbar had visited Zaqqum prison, prior to Amr’s attack! Akbar knew it was going to happen! And he never tried to stop it!

Abbas growled.

He, Isa and Dawud almost died in that prison. Why didn’t Akbar warn anyone or take additional precautions?

Abbas turned back to the fireplace. Digging away in disbelief of what he was doing, and what he had found. He searched thoroughly, but found nothing. He was almost about to give up, when he noticed a small chit, stuck to the back of a charcoal.

“Woah,” Abbas remarked.

This was by far the smallest of them all. It only had one line. The second half was devoured by the fire. Abbas read whatever he could make out.

Your young kin shall d.. tonig..

“Die,” Abbas filled in. “And tonight!”

So the line was,

Your young kin shall die tonight

Young kin? Abbas narrowed his eyes. The youngest kin of Akbar was Hurr, Zahra’s son.

“Young,” Abbas noticed suddenly. “Not youngest.”

The note said young kin. Naturally, if the note had been referring to Hurr, it might have used youngest. But it didn’t. It used the word ‘young’. Akbar only had two relatives who could fall under ‘young’ kin category. Maryam and Jafar.

Abbas closed his eyes, imagining himself to be the sender.

‘Who is a better target?’ Abbas thought to himself.

Maryam was a hunter. A trained soldier in the revolution. Going after her was a lot more trickier than Jafar. Jafar was still inexperienced in the field. He’s barely fourteen. A lot easier to target.

Abbas’s eyes shot open as he remembered Jafar’s words,

‘You weren’t the only one who got attacked.’

Jafar had been wounded. A gash. Abbas remembered seeing it.

Wham!

Abbas slammed his hands off the ground. Of course! Jafar was wounded in the attack. Which meant he was attacked.

So Akbar had received the information on every one of Amr’s moves beforehand. And he never told anyone. Abbas blinked in disbelief. How could Akbar do this? How could he not tell them? Was Abbas not worthy of his trust? After everything they had been through, all the struggles they had endured. Did it all mean nothing?

“Abbas!” came a muffled voice. “Where are you?”

Abbas’s eyes widened in alarm. Someone was coming. He searched desperately for a place to-

Creak.

The door swung open as Maryam stepped inside. She narrowed her eyes curiously, shuddering at the cool breeze of the window.

“Someone should keep this window shut,” Maryam grumbled, closing it.

And with that, she left the empty study of Akbar Uncle, not noticing the young man who was now dangling precariously from the window of the study.

Conflict of Interest

“This was a terrible idea,” Abbas shuddered, trying not to look down, the wind blowing in his arms.

Abbas looked down.

“Oh,” he muttered.

Not too high. He could probably land on his feet pretty okay, given that...he was on the ground floor.

Abbas let go of the window, landing with a slight thump, an inevitable smirk escaping his lips. He had been so focused on jumping out, he missed the fact that it was the ground floor.

“A four foot fall by my estimations,” Abbas guessed.

With a cheeky grin, he darted off, leaving the study far behind. His blood was pumping as he rounded the house. The door came in sight. Abbas stopped. What was he doing? His hands were stained in charcoal. He needed to wash this off.

“I have to go home,” Abbas realised. “Inshallah, I’ll decide my next move from there.”

His next move. What a peculiar phrase? Somehow with this new revelation, it felt like a barrier had been created between Abbas and Akbar. Because the truth was that Akbar didn’t trust Abbas. He didn’t think Abbas was ready to read those letters. And Abbas was now seriously reconsidering how necessary was it for him to share everything he had learnt. Everything he had figured out.

Hadn’t Abbas earned his meeting with the Sada-e-Haq? By

fighting off Amr. By slaying Alpha 43 he proved that he was on the right side.

“I’m going to figure this out,” Abbas decided. “No one’s going to decide what piece I’m going to be on the chess board.

Abbas turned around, darting off to his car. Sitting inside, he plugged in the key. The motor roared to life, and Abbas drove off.

The Waterslug

Ferries are really fun way to travel. Unlike boring aircraft, where one has to remain strapped to a tiny chair, waiting for touch down, there's much more to do in a ferry. For one, you don't have to sit down. You have a cabin. For another, you can enjoy the views of the sea and do activities like fishing.

But the ferry that Hamza now stood before, was by far, in all it's entirety, the most ugliest, detestable, despicable little boat ever. It smelled like old, rotten fish.

The sides were covered in quilts of algae, it's mast continuously made creaking noises. On the mast was a dented, rusty iron sign that read, 'the waterslug'.

"Sure looks like a slug," Hamza muttered under his breath.

He eyed the boat, just barely able to hold back his disgust.

"Kumail," he asked. "How long did they say the boat ride was?"

Kumail smirked.

"9 hours if the seas are favourable."

Hamza's blood boiled. Nine hours? Nine full hours here?

'How bad could it possibly be?' Hamza thought sarcastically.

There were two men working by the ship dock. Both thick, and clearly strong. One wore a red hat while the other wore a blue one. Upon seeing the group, the two came rushing forth, bowing respectfully.

"Rizwan tell them what we want."

Rizwan nodded and turned to face them. Hamza watched as the former chief communicated in the local dialect. The two sailors listened patiently. They occasionally grunted, as though in agreement.

Then the red hatted one said something, to which Rizwan seemed a little irritated. Turning to Hamza, he explained.

“They can only spare us one cabin.”

Hamza narrowed his eyes.

“Why?” he asked curiously.

Rizwan shrugged.

“They only have three. One is already rented out to someone. The second is their own. The third one is empty.”

Hamza turned to Musa, who shrugged.

“We’ll manage,” Hamza answered.

Rizwan translated the message.

The sailors smiled and made way, welcoming them into the tiny ship.

“Here goes nothing,” Hamza thought to himself.

With a deep breath, they followed the red hatted sailor up the ladder, to the main deck. As they went, Hamza couldn’t help notice something scurry out from the corner of the boat. Maybe a mouse? He shuddered.

Once everyone was on the deck, the red hatted man pointed to a small hatch. Hamza leaned down, and with a grunt, pushed it up. The red hatted sailor’s eyes widened in surprise. He patted Hamza on the back. Hamza suppressed the urge to roll his eyes.

The group made their way down into the cabin area. Some water had accumulated at the base of the stairs going down.

“Everyone, watch your step,” Hamza instructed.

As they reached the bottom, Hamza winced at the cold sea water. It was not past his ankles, but it was annoying nonetheless.

“Our cabin’s on the left,” Rizwan explained.

Hamza sighed as he treaded through the water. As he went forward, the water decreased. At that moment, Hamza froze. The ship was rocking slightly to the left. Awkwardly, Hamza leaned right, moving towards the door, he turned the handle and stepped inside.

The others began stepping through as well.

Grime, filth, algae and every possible bacteria coated just about every surface. The walls were stained, cheap blue paint peeling off the worn wood and littering the floor in tiny flecks and rogue splinters. The closets were now a bright rusty orange, riddled with cracks. Even the door they opened creaked painfully on its rusty hinges. The soft padding of the chairs and window seat were petri dishes of fluffy fungus and black as a night sky with years of continuous mold growth. Every creak of the floor sent a scurry of tiny clicks through the walls and floors, a clear indication that the vessel was occupied by someone. Slipping their way inside, seeing the neglected surroundings, one fact was evident. No one had been here in a *very* long time.

“Well this is...” Hamza paused. “Delightful.”

There was an awkward murmur of agreement as people began settling in their corners, claiming territory.

Hamza settled on one bed. Musa offered the other to Rizwan. Hamza chuckled as Musa flashed Kumail an irritated glance. Kumail merely shrugged and moved up to the corner, drawing up a dusty pillow, against the wall.

Musa laid his stuff beside Rizwan’s. From it, he withdrew a small sleeping bag, made from animal skin.

Kumail’s eyes lit up in fury as Musa snuggled into it, beside Rizwan’s bed.

Hamza merely smirked.

“Better luck next time Kumail,” he laughed.

How entertaining that was. Kumail, sleeping on the algae-infested floor, while everyone else would be snug as a bug in a rug. Hamza suppressed a grin.

With a deep breath, he closed his eyes, settling his head against the dusty mattress. Time ticked on as he cleared his mind, reflecting on the incidents that happened. So many things.

From the moment that Hamza woke up a year ago on those lands, he had nothing. He was just wandering the woods pointlessly. Now, he was finally answering queries of his past. He knew he had come here by a chopper crash. He knew he was some kind of soldier. And he knew that he had a sister, and there was

a man in his past, Asif Uncle.

There was a loud horn. Hamza's eyes shot awake. How long had he slept?

He felt a queasiness in his stomach. This was it. The boat had set sail. His quest to uncover the secrets of his past had just begun.

Secrets Unfold

It was a quiet afternoon. People, out and about, engaged in their personal endeavours, were moving from place to place. Schools, stores, malls...so many places where jobs needed to be done, and only so much daylight was there.

Abbas stroked his beard lightly, turning the wheel of his car. He had to get home, wash up, change his clothes and get back before anyone noticed him.

“Almost there,” Abbas muttered under his breath, his mind still struggling to accept what it had uncovered.

Akbar knew of the attacks Amr would do. He knew they would happen. He knew what would happen. And yet he never told anyone. Abbas clenched the steering wheel.

Why didn't Akbar tell him? After everything they had been through together, did he still not trust Abbas to be mature enough to handle the truth? It certainly seemed like that.

Abbas shook his head in disapproval as his house came in sight. He needed to focus.

“Once I've washed up and have a change of clothes, I'll head back, Inshallah.”

As Abbas drove, another thought bothered him. What was Amr's motive for doing all this? It seemed like a rather elaborate set of moves to just take down Peaceville. Why did he need the data?

Abbas pulled over the vehicle and got out.

“Bismillah,” he whispered moving along the small yard and reaching the door. He was about to open it when-

“You don’t understand!”

Abbas stopped, his eyes widening slightly. That was Layla’s voice. Muffled by the door but Abbas recognised it nevertheless. She sounded agitated. But who was she talking to?

“Layla you must tell us if you know something!”

Abbas recoiled. That was Murtaza. His father. And he sounded frustrated. Abbas blinked. His parents were having an argument.

Abbas listened curiously. Wait. No. That wasn’t right. His parents were having a discussion that didn’t concern hi-

“Your name is in the data Layla!”

Abbas’s ears pricked. His eyes narrowed all of a sudden. The data? He didn’t remember much from the few lines he had seen before Akbar had confiscated it.

Project CV

Objective: Ultimate control

Scientists: Sohail Farukh, Absaar Yousefi, Layla Murtaza

Status: Box missing, Faiza missing

Abbas leaned in to the door to listen.

“I told you I don’t remember,” Layla’s voice came. “That incident happened years ago.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes. He couldn’t help feel that his mother was not being entirely honest about her ‘foggy memory.’ Did she know something? Abbas suspected she did. And-

Abbas suppressed a growl under his breath. Someone was behind him. Someone stealthy enough to sneak up on him. He tightened his fist.

‘On the count of three,’ Abbas decided silently.

‘Three.....two...one!’

Abbas whirled around, shooting a powerful kick but his opponent caught it. There was a blur as a force swept Abbas off his feet and he landed with a thud.

“Wha-” Abbas growled.

He froze. His eyes widening in confusion. Overshadowing him, in all his glory, was the one person Abbas had been hoping to not

encounter.

“Now what might you be doing here, my boy?” Akbar asked curiously.

Putting the Pieces Together

Abbas had been in tricky situations before. But he hadn't quite been in one like this in a while. Before him stood two people. Two men far taller and stronger than him. Both holding an important status in his life.

One was his father, Murtaza. His face was serious and Abbas couldn't help but look down. It was easier if he showed some emotion. But Abbas didn't know what to think.

On the other hand was his mentor Akbar. The one who had trained him, taught him everything he knew. Akbar's eyes were carrying a hint of anger. Abbas could see it. In the time they had spent together, Abbas had become quite adept at reading Akbar, depending on the scenario.

His mother Layla had already retreated to her room, probably resting.

"Abbas," Akbar began. "What did I tell you?"

Abbas strained his memory.

All will be told in good time. For now, trust us. Do not dig further into this matter.

Abbas looked down.

Murtaza took a deep breath.

"Why were you in Zaqqum prison, Abbas?" he demanded. "What purpose did you have?"

Abbas did not answer.

“Answer us, Abbas,” Akbar pushed. “I want to hear how you disobeyed my direct order.”

Abbas looked up.

“Akbar Uncle, I can-”

Abbas stopped under Akbar’s furious gaze.

“I didn’t mean any harm,” Abbas defended. “I was just trying to catch Amr.”

Akbar growled under his breath.

“I gave you a direct order!” he shouted. “As your elder! Mentor! As your general! And you disobeyed me.”

Abbas recoiled. Akbar had never spoken to him like that. Abbas eyed his father, who seemed more sympathetic.

Murtaza sighed, disappointment was obvious in his eyes.

“You are not meant to know everything that goes on behind the scenes, Abbas,” Murtaz whispered. “For us to achieve optimal functionality, trust is imperative. Trust in us as your elders. As your mentors. Insubordination cannot be tolerated, my son.”

Abbas looked down.

“I accept my fault,” he whispered. “But my efforts were not in vain. I learnt a lot of important information.”

Akbar and Murtaza eyed him curiously. Abbas took a deep breath as he began relating what happened. He told them everything, from the moment he set foot in the prison, to when the prison break happened.

Both men listened carefully as he described his kidnapping and the Sada-e-Haq.

“And that’s pretty much it,” Abbas finished, taking a deep breath.

Akbar and Murtaza eyed each other. Abbas shuddered, wondering if they were still angry?

“It all adds up,” Akbar whispered.

Murtaza nodded in agreement.

“And I think we know where they want us to go,” Abbas’s father added.

What was going on? Abbas had no idea. Abruptly both men turned towards Abbas.

“Go,” they ordered simultaneously.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. After all that he told them, they were still hiding secrets. And of all the people, from him. Abbas sighed, turning to leave. Once he had gone, Murtaza turned to Akbar.

“How did we not see this? All this time the League’s been after the box. That’s why they wanted the data! It’s the only remaining information on the box’s whereabouts.”

Abbas’s ears pricked as he reached the outside of the living room, and all of a sudden he found himself eavesdropping from the hallway.

‘The box?’ Abbas thought to himself. ‘What box?’

Akbar nodded.

“They are trying to take us down, and somehow, they must’ve tracked Faiza here. They know they need her for their plan to work.”

Faiza? Who on earth was Faiza?

Abbas listened carefully.

“See Murtaza, these groups...the League and Sada-e-Haq. They’ve been fighting forever. And if Abbas is correct, that means they have regrouped. Regrouped after i-”

He looked down. Murtaza shook his head.

“My brother,” Murtaza whispered. “Why do you insist on hiding this from me?”

Abbas raised a brow. What were they talking about? A box? Faiza?

“Tell me what happened Akbar,” Murtaza sighed. “I can only help if you tell me.”

Abbas couldn’t help notice how similar his way of speaking was to his father. He suppressed a grin.

“I don’t know all the details,” Akbar whispered, his volume lowering. Abbas strained his ears but couldn’t hear anything. Akbar was speaking too quietly for him to hear.

Abbas sighed in disappointment, returning to Jafar’s room. As he sat down upon the soft mattress, his mind was in an even bigger whirl than before. All this time, the League has been after a box. What box? And why? How could this woman named

Faiza be involved in this.

Abbas narrowed his eyes.

“Lay out everything you know,” he reminded himself.

Four Alphas attacked the iron fortress, attempting to steal data for this *League*. The data was important because it was...in the words of Akbar, the only means of reaching some...box? What this box was and why it was important, Abbas had no clue.

All he knew was that whatever it was, it wasn't good.

“Either the box contains something the League wants,” Abbas deduced. “Or it has something they need to achieve their goals....goals like...Ultimate control!”

Abbas froze. His eyes widened in realisation as he recalled the data.

Project CV

Objective: Ultimate control

Akbar said the data was the only means of reaching this box. And the data, whatever Abbas had seen from it, contained a map of another island. Maybe the map was showing where the box was?

“Or is,” Abbas realised.

And then there was Faiza. Abbas remembered Akbar's words.

They are trying to take us down, and somehow, they must've tracked Faiza here. They know they need her for their plan to work.

Faiza and the box.

“And Peaceville's destruction,” Abbas reminded himself.

That was what the League wanted. Those three things would give them the ultimate control.

“We can't let them have it,” Abbas whispered.

“Have what?”

Abbas's eyes widened in alarm. He whirled around in surprise to see his mother Layla.

“Ami!” Abbas exclaimed a little louder than he intended.

Layla raised a brow.

“Abbas,” she stated.

Abbas blinked, trying to keep as innocent of a face as he could. His mother moved up in front of him. Abbas took a deep breath,

suppressing his tension. There was no way his mother could know that he was eavesdropping.

Layla sighed, placing her hands on Abbas's shoulders. Abbas tried to suppress his hand's fidget. He bowed his head respectfully, noting a softness in his mother's gaze. He also sensed a tinge of seriousness in her tone.

"My strong son. My pillar and support," she whispered. "Have a seat."

She gestured to the bed. Abbas nodded and sat down, his mother joining his side.

Now whether it was his mother or his father, whenever Abbas's parents sat him down in this way, it meant something was definitely wrong.

Layla took a deep breath. Abbas changed his mind. She was looking completely serious.

Abbas suppressed a shudder.

"Ami—"

Layla raised her hand for silence.

"Mashallah," she whispered. "You are a very brave boy."

Abbas raised a brow. He wasn't sure what his mother would talk about.

"Bravery is an admirable trait," Layla explained. "And as a mother, I am very proud of you."

Abbas closed his eyes. This was going to be very bad.

"But..."

Abbas sighed. That was the one dreaded word in a parent-child talk.

"Bravery without wisdom is foolishness," she sighed.

Abbas shook his head.

"Abbas," Layla chided. "I heard what Akbar Bhai said. And I'm wondering, how could you disobey a direct order from your elders and investigate?"

Abbas opened his mouth to speak but his mom stopped him.

"I know you were trying to help, but you must realise something. We, by which I refer to myself, Akbar Bhai, your father and other elders. We have, Alhamdulillah, lived a lot longer than you.

We have experience that you too shall gain with time, Inshallah. Mistakes that you will learn from.”

She paused for a second before continuing,

“Straying from our protection and guidance will land you nowhere,” she sighed.

Abbas looked down. He wanted to refute. But his mother was right. He should have let someone know. But he hadn’t really thought about it at the time.

“Too many things were happening,” Abbas answered.

Layla sighed, her eyes were watering.

“Abbas, you almost died.”

Abbas’s eyes widened, ignoring the stinging in his back. He still hadn’t mentioned it to anyone. It would heal soon enough. And all things considered, Abbas was quite satisfied with how he fared in Zaqqum prison against all the odds. Just one wound.

“I took on a bunch of Alphas on my own,” Abbas answered defensively.

He folded his hands together, rubbing them lightly.

“My son,” Layla chided. “I don’t have to explain you how fortunate you are to be here unscathed.”

Abbas shrugged. He had made calculated moves in Zaqqum. And escaped. Didn’t seem very lucky to him.

“Abbas I know those Alphas,” Layla insisted. “They are very dangerous.”

‘So was Alpha 43,’ Abbas refuted in his head. ‘Look what happened to him.’

Layla took a deep breath.

“Sting, known to us as Sana, is no ordinary Alpha, Abbas,” she revealed. “She was once Akbar’s pupil.”

Abbas’s eyes widened. Akbar’s pupil? So she was like Reza. Except she preferred knives. Of course. Her interest in close combat knife based fighting. It made complete sense!

“She was transferred to Asghar’s tutelage when Akbar left the Alphas,” Layla croaked. “There she learnt from him as well, integrating his techniques into her own, and she earned the highest kill count amongst all female Alphas.”

Abbas blinked.

“Harun,” she stopped.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Layla’s gaze was lost.

“He and your father have an old score to settle. If you see him, you must avoid him at all costs.”

Abbas raised a brow. Why was his mother so worried?

“Harun will want revenge against Murtaza by trying to punish what your father loves most.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes.

“Our family.”

He growled under his breath.

“If he dares touch our family, I will rip him-”

“You will do no such thing!” Layla overspoke.

Abbas looked down.

“Ami,” he whispered. “I will respect your wish. But know that I was able to hold my own against them pretty nicely. Not to mention Alpha 43-”

“Abbas!” Layla scolded. “Harun and Sting were weak from imprisonment. And you were retreating from them as far as I heard. Also, Asghar was much more skilled than you, but his arrogance during fights led to his downfall. Understand. Amr is not like Asghar. Asghar fought through brute strength. Amr fights with wit. I can feel the difference. He’s very sharp. Prefers to win without losing any men.”

Abbas shrugged.

“I thought I was strong enough to handle this,” he whispered.

But now that Abbas reflected, he realised something. Often, whenever he had fought Asghar, he had benefited from Asghar being distracted or angry. It made sense. Amr wasn’t either of those things. He was focused.

“What do I do, Ami?” Abbas asked.

Layla sighed.

“You won’t like my answer.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes, eyeing his mother for a moment before he gaped in confusion.

“You think I should quit?”

Layla shook her head.

“I think you should work on yourself. Otherwise, I fear that each time you lose now, there will be consequences deeper than you can imagine. Each time you face him, you will lose. And I don’t want to see you getting hurt, my son. Life is ruthless beyond compare.”

Abbas swallowed.

“This is where I am needed.”

Layla shook her head in disapproval.

“Inshallah, I pray you overcome your weakness,” she whispered. “Inshallah, you won’t pay the price for your arrogance.”

And with that she got up to leave.

Abbas sighed, eyeing his mother as she exited the room. He couldn’t handle this. He couldn’t. He was improving. Wasn’t he? Why was his mother insisting on this? Abbas didn’t need to train harder. He needed to get a strong lead on Amr.

“I will catch you, Amr,” Abbas muttered under his breath after he had left the room. “I’ll prove to everyone that I can handle this.”

The Seas

“Not fair Api!” Hamza complained. Zainab chuckled. “What do you mean? My pebble clearly went farther than yours.” Hamza shook his head. “I’ll go get our pebbles. I’ll show you how far mine went.” And with that, Hamza entered into the beach’s ice cold water. Slowly, he began making his way forward, deeper in, until he was knee height in water. “Hamza be careful,” he heard his sister call out. “You’re going too deep. Don’t go that far!” But Hamza didn’t heed her warning. He was enjoying the ice cold water. Beside, it wasn’t like their was anything dangerous, the water was only shoulder height now. And he was just a kid. He coughed. His eyes felt dizzy. Hamza chuckled. “I f-feel s-s-so g-good...” He let his sentence trail off. He couldn’t feel his feet. Or anything else for that matter. “Hamza...Hamza! Hamza!” There was a splash in the water as a force tugged him forward, gradually the water was left behind. Hamza sputtered as he felt the warm sand against his body. He shivered uncontrollably. “Are you okay?” Zainab cried, examining him. He merely shuddered. “It’s too cold. The water.” Zainab sighed in relief. “I thought I lost you,” she whispered. “Stay close to me always, Hamza.” She wrapped her arms around him. Hamza took a deep breath. He felt her heartbeat against his own. With a sigh, he rested his eyes.

Hamza awoke with a start.

“Wha-” he coughed. “Where..”

He froze. He was still in the ship. It was rocking back and

forth, calmly. He could feel it.

Hamza got to his feet. Tossing on his coat, he began heading out of the cabin. He couldn't explain why, but he needed some air. He remained silent as he approached the top of the stairs leading to the deck. With a grunt, he propped it up and made his way onto the deck.

It was a perfect night sky. The sea was calm in the background, reflecting the twinkling stars. He noticed the two sailors, one at the wheel, and the other on the mast, probably judging directions.

Hamza walked on to the deck. He coughed, leaning over the edge. Something was making him greatly uncomfortable, and he couldn't explain what. He now knew that his sister's name was Zainab. But where was she? If they were so close as children, where did she go?

"Sea sick?" Hamza heard from behind.

He turned to see someone in the shadows, a few meters behind. Instinctively, his hand drifted over his dagger.

"Don't worry sir, I mean no trouble," came the voice once more.

Hamza narrowed his eyes as a youth stepped out into the dim light of the candles. Hamza eyed him warily. He was well built, and carried a holstered gun. There was a bulge on his left leg, presumably a knife.

"What's your name?" Hamza asked.

The youth smiled.

"My name is Salman. What about you?"

"What are you doing on the ship?" Hamza asked, ignoring his question.

The youth shrugged.

"I'm headed to Azaab city. Just like you."

Hamza nodded. So this guy wasn't any kind of security guard.

"You live in Azaab city?" Hamza asked.

Salman shook his head.

"I actually live in Calmville. But I travel to Azaab city from time to time. Personal business."

Hamza nodded.

"What's your name?" Salman asked.

Hamza sighed.

“Hamza.”

Salman nodded.

“I’m the guy in the other cabin,” he explained. “Heard your group came from Big Jabir-”

“Who?” Hamza overspoke.

Salman chuckled.

“The red hatted sailor, his name’s Big Jabir. The other sailor is called little Jabir. They’re brothers.”

Hamza raised a brow. By no means was the blue hatted sailor any smaller than the red hatted one. Those brothers were certainly a strange group.

“So where are you from Salman?” Hamza asked curiously.

Hamza narrowed his eyes. Abruptly, Salman looked down uncomfortably. He shuddered, and in the moonlight, Hamza saw a tear trickle down his cheek.

“That doesn’t matter anymore.”

And with that he got up and left.

Hamza watched him go.

“Well, he’s a strange man, isn’t he?” he whispered.

Travellers

“Go lower when you attack,” Hamza explained. “It’ll give you more maneuverability, and stability.”

Musa bent his knees further.

“Yes,” Hamza encouraged him. “And when you strike, don’t swing your hammer so wide that your opponent can deflect it easily. If you want a wide swing, wait for your opponent to attack first, and use the wide swing as a counter strike.

Musa nodded.

“Where’d you learn to fight like that?” Salman asked curiously. “I’ve rarely seen one so proficient with deep understanding of fighting techniques and tactics.

Hamza shrugged.

“Experience is my teacher,” he answered.

Salman nodded. He turned, whispering something to big Jabir. Hamza ignored them.

“Alright Musa,” he instructed. “Try the first combo attack.”

Musa nodded, readying himself. Hamza watched him. Big and little Jabir had been nice, allowing them to practice on the deck.

It had been several hours since they had set off. Both Kumail and Rizwan were resting. Musa had insisted on a bit of practice.

Hamza narrowed his eyes as Musa leapt forth, throwing out a random punch for Hamza’s stomach. Hamza deflected it, almost immediately dodging the punch for his chin that followed.

“Yes,” Hamza nodded. “That was good. I think that might have been your best until now.”

Musa smirked, flexing his arms.

“Yes, yes,” Hamza shook his head. “You are very strong.”

Musa stopped. Hamza raised a brow. Why was Musa pointing up?

“Sky?” he asked with uncertainty.

Musa shook his head, pointing up again, this time, his gaze was more meaningful.

“Oh, you mean Allah,” Hamza realised. “Ah yes, Alhamdulillah, you are very strong.”

Hamza shuddered for a moment.

“Let’s take a break,” he sighed. “Be back in twenty minutes for the end of session.”

Musa nodded, bowing his head respectfully before marching off.

Hamza strolled over to the edge of the ship. Overlooking the water, he took a deep breath. He had never really used words like Alhamdulillah or Inshallah. He didn’t know why. Maybe because he felt he was always strong enough to punch his way through everything.

“What’s on your mind?” he heard from behind.

He sighed.

“Nothing much, Salman”.

The youth came up beside him, leaning on the balcony. For a moment, neither said anything. Then abruptly, Salman said something.

“Have you ever been afraid?”

Hamza sighed.

“Everyone is afraid at some point of something or someone.”

Salman shivered in the cold.

“Have you ever done something that you regretted?” he asked curiously. “Something that makes you question that how you’ll be able to live with yourself?”

Hamza looked down.

“I wouldn’t punish myself if I realised my mistake. If I genuinely had a change of heart, then I will consider it as a thing

of past.”

Salman sighed.

“What if someone died because of you?” he whispered, and Hamza couldn’t help notice that Salman’s knuckles were white from gripping onto the edge of the ship.

“Even if it is something as grave as that, I would still have faith in God. I would trust that He would guide me and help me through those difficult times,” he answered. “Remember, *you* have had a change of heart.”

Salman looked up for the first time.

“I don’t agree with you,” he replied. “But Allah does have power over everything.”

Deciding to change the subject, Hamza had a bright idea.

“You want to fight?”

Salman froze.

“What did you say?”

Hamza chuckled.

“You’re a young man. Let’s have a practice match. Let’s see what you got.”

Salman’s lips curled into a smile.

“I warn you, I had a very skilled teacher.”

Hamza shrugged.

“Well it’s good I am not against him then, isn’t it?”

Salman narrowed his eyes. Hamza smirked as the young man entered a fighting stance. Typical for a beginner.

He leapt at Hamza, driving his fist upward, but Hamza was faster. He ducked under Salman’s arm, shoulder pushing the youth lightly.

“You have a technique,” Hamza commented, “But it’s not refined.”

Salman growled, shifting his weight onto his back leg. He would kick. Hamza barged in.

Wham!

Salman’s unexpected punch caught him square in the face.

“And you analyse too much,” Salman commented with a smile.

Hamza narrowed his eyes.

He barged forward, deflecting Salman's kick. Grabbing him round the stomach, he hauled the youth off his feet, before tossing him onto the deck.

"Aye!" Little Jabir called out.

"Saw man shoosha!" Salman called out kindly, probably apologising.

He eyed Hamza in amazement.

"What, you have some scar on your ankle or something?" he chuckled.

Hamza narrowed his eyes.

"Yeah I do, how'd you know?"

Salman chuckled once more.

"Good one," he laughed.

Hamza watched him curiously as he left. Feeling only the tiniest bit uncomfortable.

"I won't occupy you any longer," Salman sighed. "Beside, your student has returned.

Hamza turned to see Musa standing ready.

"That youth is strange," Hamza muttered under his breath. "But anyway. Musa. Let's continue."

Gone Astray

Bang!

Abbas growled in anger, turning back to see the speed breaker he had missed. The third one on that road. With a sigh, he turned the steering wheel lightly, aligning his car with the road marks.

“I’m off my game right now,” Abbas thought to himself as he turned into army headquarters.

Abbas pulled the vehicle to a stop. A guard stepped up.

“Identification please,” he stated.

Abbas reached in his pocket. Wait. Where was his badge? Abbas checked his other pocket. Nothing.

‘I must have forgotten it at the bungalow,’ Abbas realised.

He turned to the guard.

“I don’t have my badge right now-”

“Entry is denied without identification, sir,” the guard overspoke.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Pulling the door open, he stepped out.

“Do you know me?” Abbas whispered intently.

The guard nodded.

“Of course, sir. But policy is-”

Abbas growled under his breath, leaning in close to the soldier.

“Listen well....Shafique,” Abbas whispered, reading the name off his badge. “We can do this the easy way or the hard way.”

Shafique raised a brow.

“But General Akb-”

“I know the rule,” Abbas overspoke. “I am ordering you to ignore it.”

The guard shook his head. Abbas rolled his eyes and strolled forward. Shafique stepped in front.

“I don’t care who you are, captain,” he snarled. “I want to see an ID or I won’t let you in.”

Abbas smirked.

“Tough guy, huh?” he chuckled. “Last warning, Shafique. Get out of my way!”

Shafique shook his head. Abbas suppressed the anger inside him. He didn’t have time for this. He shoved the guard aside.

Wham!

Shafique grabbed Abbas, knocking him back. Abbas landed in the dirt with a thud. Abbas winced, a surge of pain erupted in his back. The other guards chuckled.

Shafique now feeling a bit more confident, stepped forward.

“I will follow the rules, Captain.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes, rage filling inside him. How dare he?

“Very well,” Abbas hissed. “If it’s a fight you want. Step forward...Shafique.”

Abbas stood up, wiping the dirt off his face. It was time to humble this guard. And Shafique seemed to realise it.

“Sir I-”

“Come,” Abbas instructed.

It was too late for forgiveness now.

Shafique backed away.

“Oh, why are you cowering now?” Abbas growled.

Shafique blinked hesitantly.

“I didn’t mean to-”

Wham!

Silence. All the guards went quiet. Abbas lowered his hand, eyeing shafique who was on the ground, a hand on his face covering not just the slap but the humiliation that accompanied it.

Shafique’s eyes widened in horror and suddenly Abbas felt a void within, that was starting to fill with guilt.

Abbas ignored the discomfort inside his own self. He tried to keep the fury in his gaze, inspite of Shafique's eyes watering.

"I th-thought you were a good man," he whispered. "I always taught my son to look up to you."

Abbas's eyes widened as the guard got to his feet. His lip was split, and bleeding slightly. Shafique, cowered back. Abbas looked down. Shafique had only- No. He shouldn't feel guilty. Shafique hit first. He started it. Why couldn't he just listen to Abbas?

Abbas looked down. He shouldn't have hit Shafique. But Shafique had been getting on his nerves.

Creak.

Abbas blinked, looking ahead. The gate was open, with all guards standing well away.

Abbas glanced at them but they all looked away. Abbas sighed, wanting to get out of this situation as soon as possible. Quickly, he returned to his vehicle and drove onward.

A Talk

It was a quiet drive. Akbar sighed, his mind being occupied with so many matters. To top it off, his own trusted soldiers like Abbas were becoming *out of control*. Akbar had no tolerance for that.

He glanced to his right, his best friend was beside him, driving the car. Akbar took a deep breath. Sometimes he felt he could never thank Allah enough for his friend's well being. More than a year ago, Akbar would never forget how he had grieved Murtaza's loss. But his friend had never died. He had endured. Refused to give up information despite extreme torture.

Akbar knew him better than anyone did. He and Murtaza had grown together, side by side, as friends, warriors, and brothers. So Akbar knew well that his friend was agitated right now.

"Murtaza," Akbar sighed. "Have you spoken with Abbas?"

Murtaza looked down.

"Murtaza," Akbar whispered. "The boy is persistent like you were."

Murtaza sighed, his hands tightening on the wheel.

"I never disobeyed my father," he whispered. "Never."

Akbar took a deep breath. Murtaza was right to be angry. Disobedience of parents was by far one of the greatest sins ever mentioned in Quran. Had he not said in Surah Isra's 23rd verse,

And your Lord has decreed that you not worship except Him, and to parents, good treatment. Whether one or both of them reach old age [while] with you, say not to them [so much as], "uff," and

do not repel them but speak to them a noble word.

Parents invest their youth, effort and time in nurturing the next generation. They shower their children with affection and instill in them, essential moral values. They are selfless individuals who will give everything to their children and expect nothing in return.

Akbar eyed Murtaza. Today, he seemed genuinely disappointed with his son. Abbas needed to make things right quickly, because Islam places parents at an extremely high status. This was no joking matter.

Consequences of disobeying them or breaking their heart are dire not only in this world but also in the hereafter.

Akbar narrowed his eyes as the car turned left. In his hand, he held a knife, sharpening it against a small rock.

“He inherited your courage and chivalry. As well as your perseverance,” Akbar answered. “But he forgot your level headedness.”

Murtaza nodded.

“Abbas needs to get a grip on himself. He’s become arrogant over his few achievements. I’ve been asking around and noticing it myself. Did you know he has starting missing Salat ul layl?”

Akbar’s eyes widened slightly.

“He’s too proud of his accomplishments!” Murtaza sighed, a hint of clear displeasure echoed in his voice. “And his arrogance is manifesting other greater sins like disobedience of parents.”

Akbar sheathed his knife, deciding now was a good time.

“My dear friend,” Akbar remarked. “You are correct. But in the months that I have come to know Abbas, I found that he has great potential. He has honour. And he is chivalrous. His mind is sharp and open. He will listen to you. Don’t be too upset.”

Murtaza took a deep breath.

“Very well,” he decided. “I’ll talk to him tonight, once we’re back from our errand, Inshallah.”

“Inshallah,” Akbar muttered to himself, his eyes narrowing. “We’re almost there. I’d say a few minutes.”

Akbar sobered, his wolf like gaze scanning the area ahead.

“When we get there,” Akbar whispered. “If we’re right,

Inshallah, we will have the man behind Sada-e-Haq. The one who sent Tariq and Mahmud. I have a strong suspicion, I know who is behind this.”

Murtaza nodded, pressing the accelerator. The car zoomed ahead, leaving a trail of dust behind it.

The End of the Voyage

Hamza was now feeling the pressure of the journey. In the last eight and a half hours, he had practiced almost twelve different combat techniques with Musa, taken five naps and had several interesting conversations with Salman.

Glancing at Salman, he asked.

“Can you ask Little Jabir how much time is left?”

Salman shrugged.

“I already did. He said a little over an hour.”

Hamza had to swallow down his frustration. Another hour remained.

“You know that soon, the last half hour will be the worst, right?”

Hamza raised a brow. Why would that be?

“We’ll enter the forbidden gulf,” Salman explained. “Don’t tell me you don’t know about the forbidden gulf?”

Hamza shrugged.

“Haven’t you come to Azaab city before?” Salman asked curiously.

Hamza shook his head.

Salman’s eyes widened in horror.

“Are you a tourist?”

Hamza shook his head once more.

“I have personal business there.”

Salman sighed.

“You don’t even know how dangerous of a place you are headed to? I can’t believe it.”

Hamza narrowed his eyes.

“Why is Azaab city so bad?”

Salman’s face was white, his eyes wide in confusion.

“You seriously don’t know! Azaab city? It’s the only city that has no government! No laws! Nothing.”

Hamza froze. No laws. No government. That meant, anyone could do what they want.

Hamza eyed Salman.

“How does it survive?”

Salman chuckled sarcastically.

“Azaab city is run by gangs. Every gang has their territory. The stronger you and your gang are, the better off you will be.”

Hamza wasn’t liking the sound of it. But it added up. Kumail was taking them to the supposed ‘owner’ of the box. It made sense that the ‘owner’ would live somewhere like there.

But this was troubling Hamza. Should he be bringing Musa to such a dangerous place? Probably not. A sudden thought occurred to him.

“What is the forbidden gulf?”

Salman sighed.

“The gang that owns the coast doesn’t allow big boats to dock, or they’ll steal them. So we will most likely go in a rowing boat. Though I have no idea how you’ll get in if you don’t have a gang inside Azaab city. The coast gang wouldn’t come into conflict with you then, to avoid a clash.”

Hamza narrowed his eyes as he noticed Rizwan emerge onto the deck.

“Don’t worry about that,” he whispered. “Anyways, thank you Salman.”

Bowing his head respectfully, he bid farewell to Salman and moved up to Rizwan.

“My friend, you woke up,” he whispered. “Where’s Musa?”

Rizwan nodded.

“Musa is in the room, wrapping up his stuff.”

Hamza felt relief in his heart. Kumail wasn't alone in the room. He wouldn't try to do anything.

"I needed to speak with you," Rizwan whispered.

Hamza raised a brow. Hesitantly, he moved with Rizwan to the side of the boat.

"Yes?" Hamza asked.

Rizwan took a deep breath.

"I've been thinking about how you and..." his eyes watered. "Shahida. How you both came to save me."

Hamza shook his head.

"Don't say things like that my friend-

Rizwan raised his hand for silence.

"When I think about how things happened," he whispered. "It doesn't add up."

Hamza narrowed his eyes.

"My Shahida was a wonderful woman," Rizwan added. "But she wouldn't be able to kill...to ki...to...to kill Ilyas."

The name made Hamza frown.

"What are you saying Rizwan?"

The former chief sighed.

"I know she was meant to poison the men with butterflies curse," he croaked. "But none of the men were poisoned with butterflies curse in the end."

Hamza shrugged.

"Not sure what you want to imply my friend." His tone was dead serious now.

"I think..." Rizwan paused. "Shahida may not have done it."

Hamza swallowed the bitter pill of what he said next.

"I don't know Rizwan. She was a brave woman who loved you a lot. In the end, she was with us in our darkest hour. Let's not taint her reputation now that she's gone."

And with that, Hamza turned to leave. He knew his lie wasn't convincing enough. Rizwan would work it out eventually. And Hamza couldn't help feel a strange sense of dread at what would happen when he learnt the truth.

100

The Forbidden Gulf

“Ho!” Big Jabir shouted.

Hamza looked up, partially startled by the sudden outcry. Glancing at Big Jabir, he saw the sailor pointing somewhere.

He turned to sea a waft of smoke at a distance. Probably another boat.

Hamza shook his head, partially annoyed at being disturbed so violently. He began eyeing the dagger in his hand.

It was a fine blade. Long enough to deliver fatal blows.

“Musa has fine taste,” Hamza remarked.

“HO!” came a loud cry.

Hamza almost fell over the balcony this time. He turned, infuriated at Big Jabir who was pointing ahead. He turned to where they were pointing.

“My god?” Hamza gasped.

His eyes couldn’t believe what they were seeing. He rubbed them profusely.

There was a change in the air as they approached the city. Rugged, ravaged streets littered with bullet holes and lined with the hollow carcasses of old townhomes. The walls were cracked and crumbling, the windows boarded up. Hamza could have sworn he saw the glint of a gun barrel through the tiny slits. But then again, it could have been a glimmer off the thousands of glass shards that carpeted the road. They also topped the walls, a clear sign from the owners that visitors were not welcome.

“Where are you taking us, Kumail?” he muttered under his breath.

Quietly, he turned around, and made his way back to the cabins. As he went, he struggled to control the urge to turn the boat. Somewhere in that abomination, was a clue to Hamza’s city.

He pushed open the cabin door, covering his mouth and nose at the odours that welcomed him.

Everyone was almost fully packed. Upon his entry, everyone had stopped, and turned towards him.

“Alright,” Hamza sighed. “We’re here now. Salman told me that we will be going by rowing boat from here with one of the sailors because big boats cannot dock at the ports. Everyone, let’s finish packing up.”

The group got to work, finishing up packing in a matter of minutes. Rizwan even tidied up a bit.

“We should return the room as it was given to us,” he stated.

Hamza smirked but sobered quickly. Rizwan was serious.

“It’s tidy enough Rizwan,” Hamza insisted. “Let’s go.”

The chief shook his head, fixing up the room a little more, before finally nodding with an air of satisfaction.

He turned to Hamza.

“Let’s go.”

And with that, the four of them left the room. First Rizwan, then Musa, then Kumail, and finally Hamza.

Hamza made it a point to always be behind Kumail. He needed to always be in an advantageous position.

On the deck, Big Jabir stood. Beside him was Salman, with a small knapsack over his shoulders.

“This is the last half hour now,” Salman smiled. “Then we go our separate ways.”

Hamza nodded. The passengers got into the rowing boat suspended from the side of the boat by a pulley.

First Kumail got in. Then Hamza, followed by Rizwan and Musa. Salman moved beside Musa. Finally Big Jabir came in.

“HO!” he called out, startling the wits out of Hamza.

“I swear,” Hamza whispered, infuriated. “If he does this one more time...”

Salman chuckled.

“You’ll get used to it,” he answered.

Little Jabir began lowering their boat into the water.

Hamza felt a hint of uneasiness as Big Jabir unhooked the rowing boat, and began peddling the boat forward.

“Here we go,” Hamza sighed.

101

Azaab City

From a distance, the city looked unsafe, but as they approached the dock, Hamza was certain it was unsafe. He didn't feel right. His protective instinct wanted to retreat. His eyes were seeing too many points of vulnerability.

Boom!

Hamza's eyes widened in alarm as he whipped out his revolver. "Stop!" Salman hissed.

Hamza narrowed his eyes as Big Jabir raised his hand, holding up three fingers. Was it some kind of signal? His eyes widened in realisation as a blue light flashed from the shore. It was a password.

"Thanks," Hamza whispered.

Salman shook his head.

"Be careful, this is a rough place."

Hamza couldn't help notice Kumail eyeing him suspiciously. He must have been a bit confused as to why Hamza reacted that way.

"Sorry, I'm just a little on the edge right now," Hamza whispered.

The boat continued on. Hamza's eyes scanned the coast for any potential hiding spots, occasionally glancing at Kumail who seemed to be deep in thought.

Hamza heard Rizwan whisper.

"Ya Allah, protect us on this journey."

'Ameen,' Hamza thought to himself.

He felt a little better.

It took about twenty minutes before they reached near the coast.

“Ho!” Big Jabir grunted, climbing off the boat.

The water was knee deep. He began pushing the boat forward.

Hamza moved off as well, shuddering at the ice cold water that greeted him.

“Let’s do this faster,” Hamza remarked, pushing from behind as well.

In the next few minutes, they brought the boat to the shore.

Hamza shivered for a moment, wiping the beads of sweat from his forehead. He narrowed his eyes.

From the distance, a man was approaching. He was repulsive, almost six feet in size. In his hand was a huge gun.

He opened his mouth to speak.

Hamza’s eyes widened partially. This man had no teeth.

“Hoo Aragah?” he stated.

“Wo ka rawh,” came a voice from behind.

Salman stepped forward.

“Javed.”

The creepy man rasped,

“Salman.”

Salman turned to face the others.

“Let’s go.”

Hamza narrowed his eyes but said nothing. It seemed like Salman was lying about something. He quietly played along, following the young man.

They bid farewell to Big Jabir, before strolling uphill, until the coast and sea were behind them. They continued on until they reached the first street.

Immediately Salman darted off behind a pile of debris. He motioned for the others to follow.

Perplexed, Hamza followed.

“What happened, Salman?” hamza asked.

Salman sighed.

“I told that guard Javed, that you were with me. Otherwise he would have shot you. Please be careful here. Stick to the shadows

while moving. This is where we must part.”

He held out his hand, shaking Hamza’s.

“It was nice meeting you,” Salman remarked.

Hamza nodded. The youth might have been strange, but he seemed good at heart.

“Who knows,” Hamza whispered. “We might meet again some day.”

Salman sighed.

“Who knows?” he whispered.

And with that, Salman turned around and began moving away. Hamza watched him go as he took cover behind a pile of debris, before disappearing from their view.

“Farewell, young man,” Hamza whispered unaware that far away, atop a building that overshadowed the area, was a man. In his hands was a binocular, and he watched Hamza intently.

He held up his receiver.

“Sir,” he whispered. “I can confirm. Hamza has returned.”

Returning to the Archives

It was quiet, except for the small sound of footsteps. People were moving in both directions of the hallway, trying to get their work finished for the day.

Abbas looked down. Even though the incident with the guard happened outside the base, Abbas could tell that the word had spread throughout the fortress. Everyone knew. Everyone was watching him. Judging him.

‘Who are they to judge me?’ Abbas thought to himself. ‘I’ve endured things they can’t even dream of!’

Abbas ignored everyone, continuing on. He was here to see one particular person. Someone whom he was sure would be able to help him. His eyes narrowed as he saw the computer lab. Abbas strolled over and opened the door.

Inside, several individuals were working away on computers. Abbas narrowed his eyes. He was here to meet one particular analyst.

“Let’s see,” Abbas muttered under his breath as he moved along the hallway. “Where are you?”

His eyes searched each cubicle. But there were far too many. As he passed through the swarms of people working away, Abbas was able to hear what some people were saying.

“And they say he slapped Shafique across...”

Abbas's ears pricked. He whirled to see a young man, whispering to another analyst.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Suppressing a growl under his breath, he moved up to them. They didn't even notice him as he neared. Upon reaching, Abbas could hear their conversation.

"I can't believe Captain Abbas would-"

Abbas forced a cough.

One of the analysts turned to Abbas. His eyes widened, face turning pale.

"C-Captain Abbas?" he faltered.

The other analyst whirled around on his revolving chair, gaping. Abbas nodded.

"Stay focused on your work analysts," he whispered.

They both nodded nervously. Abbas suppressed a smirk.

'Not laughing now,' he thought to himself.

With an air of satisfaction, Abbas continued on. As he went, his eyes caught sight of more cubicles, within which these analysts were working away. Whatever miniature jobs they had.

Abbas suppressed a grin. Had any of these analysts even seen the frontier of war in their life. To fight an Alpha eye to eye. Abbas shook his head. He needed to focus. He continued searching. Another few minutes elapsed.

Abbas was starting to get a little frustrated.

'How many analysts work here?' he wondered in amazement.

That was when he caught sight of the analyst he was looking for. He stopped at a cubicle and stepped inside.

"Jannat," he greeted with an obvious edge in his tone. "I've been looking for you."

Jannat blinked.

"Have I done something wrong?" she asked with uncertainty.

Abbas narrowed his eyes.

Glancing around, he sighed.

"Jannat," Abbas whispered loud enough for just her to hear. "I need you to do me a favour. I want you to pull out some data."

Jannat raised a brow.

"I can help you if you give me two hours?"

Abbas narrowed his eyes. He couldn't afford to wait that long. He needed the data now. Akbar or his father could show up and then they'd be wondering why Abbas came here. Then Abbas would be stuck since he normally never came here unless he needed some files. Then Akbar and Murtaza would want to see the files.

Abbas could see the whole scene playing out before him. He took a deep breath. He needed the data now.

"I need anything you can find on 'Operation Dry Grass' in the iron fortress database," he explained. "It's kind of an emergency."

Jannat eyed Abbas warily.

"No it isn't," she whispered. "And I believe that iron fortress data is above your pay grade."

Abbas growled under his breath.

"I decide my own pay grade, Jannat."

She smirked.

"You," she chuckled. "Why on earth would you need the data?"

Abbas clenched his fist.

"Akbar Uncle-"

"Maybe I should call him," Jannat grinned, her hand hovering over the small phone.

Abbas didn't say anything. He wouldn't give her that satisfaction.

She sighed.

"As it is, I have to file a report for every file I withdraw. What would I say for this one? Captain Abbas told me. Do I look as easy as that guard Shafique to you? I've faced Alphas. I don't get intimidated easily."

Abbas raised a brow. Jannat seemed exceptionally aggressive for someone who barely knew him. And she seemed to be enjoying this...provoking style.

"You have an issue with me, Jannat?" Abbas asked.

Jannat shook her head once more.

"No, but I know that you have an issue with me."

Abbas's eyes widened slightly. What? What was she talking about? Why would Abbas have an issue with her? She was

nowhere near important to be on Abbas's list of vendettas.

"I know you've been angry with me," Jannat persisted. "You blame me for Amr's attack on the 'Night of Heroes' ceremony. You blame me for not preventing it."

Abbas had thought she was incapable. That was true. And he did blame her. But that was because she was responsible for software integrity and security. Just like Abbas had been a member of the in-person squad.

"Here's the thing, Abbas," Jannat taunted. "I've been working here a lot longer than you were for this cause. I could have had luxuries and comfort but I chose my path. I served this cause just as much as anyone else and I deserve to be here as much as anyone else. As much as you."

Abbas shrugged.

"Why are you telling me this?" he answered, confused.

Abbas raised a brow.

"Good for you Jannat," he forced a grin. "Enjoy your meaningless contributions."

And with that, Abbas turned to leave. As he went, he couldn't help feel frustrated. If Jannat wouldn't help him, how would he obtain the files on 'operation dead grass'? He sighed in disappointment. Either he had to convince Jannat or-

"Ahem"

Abbas stopped. He glanced left and right.

"Over here."

Abbas looked ahead in surprise to see a young man, roughly Abbas's height with dark brown hair and brown eyes. He wore a brown coat and brown pants and brown shoes.

"Captain Abbas," the man grinned.

Abbas blinked. This man liked brown.

"Do I know you?" he asked curiously.

The young man glanced left and right.

"No," he whispered. "But you should know this..."

From his pocket, he withdrew something, holding it out for only Abbas to see. Abbas froze, his eyes widening in disbelief.

"How is this possible?" Abbas gasped.

In the young man's hand was a small pendant made of wood.
It was in the shape of a Zulfiqar!

The Tech Guy

This is no ordinary pendant. It is a symbol worn by all members of Sada-e-Haq.

Mahmud's words echoed in Abbas's mind. He looked up in disbelief.

"W-who are you?" he faltered, his eyes reflecting his confusion.

The young man grinned once more.

"Call me Nabeel," he whispered. "And we best take this conversation elsewhere."

The young man turned around and began strolling away from Abbas to his cubicle.

Abbas blinked, his eyes widening in surprise. What was this guy doing here? How deep had Sada-e-Haq agents penetrated into Peaceville's government?

Abbas narrowed his eyes and moved forward. He glanced over his shoulder once. Nobody seemed suspicious. The workers were still working. Some jovially. Some quietly. And some, while chatting.

He saw a really thin guy, about the width of a spaghetti noodle. Abbas's head tilted slightly. He was holding a newspaper in front of his skyscraper tall sandwich.

"Ya Allah," Abbas remarked. "What kind of metabolism does this guy have?"

Abbas blinked, pushing these thoughts out of his mind. He needed to focus. He continued on into the cubicle.

“Alright,” Abbas whispered to himself. “I want answers fast.”
Nabeel raised his hands.

“I got everything you need, captain,” he grinned. “Just wait one moment please.”

Nabeel hopped out of his chair and casually moved to the door. Whistling lightly, he closed it.

“Okay!” Nabeel exclaimed, whirling around. “Now we can talk.”

Abbas watched as Nabeel hopped back into his chair. He sighed, frustrated at this point.

“I want answers...Nabeel was it?”

The analyst nodded.

“You work for Sada-e-Haq?” Abbas asked.

Nabeel nodded.

“We have to be everywhere to know what goes on.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes.

“So if you’re an informant, why did you call and expose yourself to me?” he asked.

Nabeel scoffed, spinning his chair.

“Please! I’m no informant!” he shook his head. “I am a *member* of Sada e Haq. Member!”

Abbas raised a brow.

“Oh yeah, what’s the difference?”

“Informants are paid!”

Abbas took a deep breath. This guy was crazy.

“Khudahafiz Nabeel,” he whispered, turning to the door. “I’m gonna-”

“Wait!” Nabeel called. “I can get you the files you need!”

Abbas stopped. Slow as a turtle, he turned, meeting Nabeel’s gaze.

“What do you mean?”

Nabeel smiled cheekily.

“I may have happened to overhear a certain someone’s conversation. And I must admit that if you need files off the record, I’m your guy. The tech guy. Nothing is hidden from me. I can creep through any firewall.”

Abbas eyed Nabeel skeptically.

“Look,” Nabeel defended. “We both know that Jannat is nowhere near capable of the post she’s on. So, why not let me do it for you?”

Abbas chuckled. He was finding this analyst amusing.

“Go ahead,” Abbas offered, noting Nabeel clicking on his keyboard. “I need files from the iron fortress data on ‘Operation Dead Grass’. Maybe some mission reports or -”

“Done!”

Abbas’s eyes widened.

“What?” he gasped.

Nabeel smirked, opening a file on the screen.

Abbas’s eyes widened in confusion.

“H-how did yo-”

“Tech guy!” Nabeel chuckled. “I told you, Alhamdullillah.”

Abbas smiled.

“I’m impressed,” he remarked, moving up to the computer. “Open the files.”

Nabeel turned to the screen. Abbas noted there were three files in total. Nabeel grinned, clicking the first. It was a video file. Abbas folded his arms, watching curiously.

The screen flickered for a moment, before showing a man.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. This man looked evil. Cruel beyond compare. He was thin, his hands knobbly, and had a pelican like neck. A small tuft of hair drooled across his face, forming his moustache. With a hook-shaped nose and dark green eyes, the man looked like half-vampire.

“*Test number two hundred and forty six,*” he sighed “*of project CV.*”

Abbas’s eyes widened in confusion. Project CV? It rung a bell.

“*Let it loose, Absaar,*” came a voice, probably the man making the video.

Abbas remembered it. Project CV was mentioned in the data. With the objective of *ultimate control*. And the name Absaar. Absaar Yousefi had been one of the names in the list of scientists.

Abbas shuddered. The vampire stared into the camera.

The camera turned towards a strange contraption made of glass. Well, most of it was glass. One section built from traditional steel bars held a cat. A mangy and filthy looking one, with red eyes and sharp claws. Separated by a glass tunnel, on the other side was a cage of plastic, imprisoning a mouse. In the middle was empty space, the entire contraption sealed in an airtight container.

Abbas blinked, wondering how this is related to the 'Operation Dead Grass'.

Absaar grinned in an evil manner, withdrawing a small remote-like device from his pocket and clicked the button. BEEP. The door to the mice cage swung wide open.

Abbas blinked. What was this about?

"Move forward," Absaar ordered.

The mouse stepped forward. Then again. Then again. The cat hissed, clawing at it's cage. It snarled, smelling the prey that was wandering to it. But the mouse continued on, ignoring everything. Abbas felt disgusted. This was unnatural.

"Stop!" Absaar instructed.

The mouse stopped, completely still. The video flickered.

"It works!" Absaar's loud screech could be heard. "We've done it. A biological weapon, stronger than anything we've ever known or seen. This virus is going to put the C-gun out of business.

Abbas's ears pricked, his heart skipped a beat. Did he say virus? As in virus, virus? Abbas narrowed his eyes, paying close attention.

"Now the question comes," Absaar chuckled. "How is this any different from a normal virus? And how would this outperform the C-gun? I'll let my friend answer this one.

Another man now stepped into the screen. He was short, and was wearing a white lab coat. He was bald-headed.

"Consider the following scenario," the short man whispered. "A virus spreads in the city. Just like a normal flu in winter. Seemingly harmless, it is airborne, transmitting from host to host. Capable of staying alive on surfaces effectively for up to three weeks, a moment in the same room as an infected host is sufficient exposure time. Nobody will realise the dangers because initially, symptoms resemble nothing more than a common flu. Once

everyone is infected, it will be game over.

Abbas's eyes widened. He didn't like one bit of this. The short man continued on.

"The virus infects the lungs, from where it is pumped out to the bloodstream. The immune system of the body realises nothing until it reaches the brain. And by then, it is too late." the short man paused, a demonically freaky grin forming on his face. "It hijacks the mind of the individual, forcing them to obey the commands given by the virus programme . They are under complete control of the virus. Observe the infected mouse from before which moved to the cat in spite of it's nature.

Abbas recoiled. This was madness! Insanity! How could those scientists design something so horrific? A virus that infects someone like a flu and takes control of them. Like a permanent C-gun, that no one could resist. Considering how the C-gun stood for Control gun and the C-chip stood for Control-chip, Abbas finally understood what project CV stood for.

"Control virus," he growled under his breath.

The video came to an end. Abbas could not help sigh in relief. He shuddered. Was this some kind of game to them?

"Well, it makes sense now," Abbas whispered.

He remembered Mahmud's words,

"You assume that we have been fighting over some piece of technology? No no....We've been fighting over something much stronger. Something that allows Ultimate control over any group, city, country or even the world. Jumeira tried desperately to recreate this with the C-gun technology, but failed to do so."

This virus could do it. It could allow *Ultimate control over the whole world.*

'That's what Amr is after,' Abbas realised. 'The control virus.'

A weapon that can spread faster than a gossip, with no way to stop once it is unleashed. Peaceville would be ruined if this virus was released.

"That sounds bad," Nabeel remarked.

Abbas's eyes widened in surprise. He had completely forgotten about Nabeel.

"I-I'll open the second file," he made an excuse.

Clicking on the second file, he moved away to the corner, scratching his neck. Abbas ignored him, ready for the new information. There was a flash of white emerging on the screen. Abbas narrowed his eyes. It was a document of some kind. A mission report. And on the heading was written,

Operation Dead Grass.

Finishing the Puzzle

Akbar narrowed his eyes as Murtaza turned the car into the gates.

“Yes, this is the place,” Akbar whispered. “It’s where he lives.”

Murtaza nodded. A well chosen location indeed. This place was almost abandoned, and quiet. Serene, but well hidden in the dense foliage. No doubt, snipers were hidden everywhere.

Akbar opened his door, glancing Murtaza’s way.

“From here, on foot,” he whispered. “Follow my lead.”

Murtaza nodded powering off his vehicle. The two ex Alphas got out. They stepped into the foliage. Akbar strolled forward, along the path, his hands were ready for a possible situation. His wolf-like gaze was surveying the area. But for the first time, Akbar only watched the front. For he knew that Murtaza had covered him from the rear. The same way he covered Murtaza.

They moved on for another few minutes like this, cautious and careful. Through the tall vegetation, they waded.

“Almost there,” Akbar whispered.

He heard Murtaza’s grunt of agreement. Another minute passed before they finally reached the end of the foliage. Akbar narrowed his eyes. There was a silhouette. A few meters up ahead. He crouched low, Murtaza following suit.

Akbar slid out his dagger without making a noise. His hand was clenched over the blade as he aimed for his target.

“Akbar Uncle?”

Akbar froze, not moving as the silhouette stepped into the light.

“Ali!” Akbar recognised. “Why are you standing here openly?”

Ali shrugged.

“I’ve been doing the job you assigned me.”

Akbar nodded, eyeing the cottage ahead.

“He has only left his cottage once since yesterday, in a disguise.”

Akbar and Murtaza sighed in relief.

“We’re correct then, Alhamdullillah,” Murtaza whispered.

“Let’s meet our mystery ally.”

The duo stepped out of the trees, advancing forward, to the door of the house. As they went forward, Akbar clapped his hands twice, probably a pre-decided code to stop snipers from taking a shot at them.

The duo reached the door. Akbar sighed, raising his hand to knock. Murtaza knew that the knock would be of a special kind, probably already agreed between the resident of the house and Akbar.

Knock Knock! Knock.....Knock!

Akbar forced a cough.

Knock Knock!

The door swung open and in its shadow, stood a tall man. His eyes narrowed as he watched Akbar and Murtaza.

“Salamunalaikum,” he greeted.

Akbar and Murtaza responded.

“We got your message...Agha Ibrahim,” Akbar grinned.

The Peaceville leader’s eyes widened slightly.

“I’m not sure-”

“Oh, but we think you do,” Murtaza whispered. “From when you disappeared in the ‘Night of Heroes’, to selecting Tariq as a warden for Zaqqum prison.”

Ibrahim narrowed his eyes, withdrawing a small pendant around his neck, hidden behind his shirt. A Zulfiqar made from wood.

“I knew you two could be trusted,” he answered. “Come inside...we have a lot to discuss.”

Ibrahim

It was quiet. The room was dimly lit. Akbar and Murtaza glanced at each other. Before them, was the man with all the answers. Ibrahim. The leader of Peaceville. The Muhafiz.

Ibrahim took a deep breath, placing a tray on the table. Inside were three steaming cups of tea. Small cubes of sugar were placed beside it.

“Bismillah,” Ibrahim offered kindly. “Please help yourself.”

Akbar and Murtaza eyed each other. Both took a cup of tea, watching, as Ibrahim placed two cubes in his tea and dissolved it.

“This is Qahwa,” Ibrahim grinned. “Difficult to find around here, but I managed to bring a supply, Alhamdulillah.”

Akbar and Murtaza, each held their cup, but didn’t sip from it. No offense intended to Ibrahim, but it was more of a precautionary measure. As Alphas, they were taught to never drink, eat or take anything that a potential enemy may have touched. And they still didn’t know whose side Ibrahim was on.

Akbar met Ibrahim’s gaze.

“It’s time, Agha Ibrahim. Tell us what we wish to know,” he whispered.

Ibrahim sighed.

“Where should I begin? You know about the League?”

Akbar and Murtaza nodded.

“We got Abbas’s message.”

Ibrahim nodded.

“I am not the head of Sada-e-Haq, just an amassador. A representative, a-”

“Spy?” Akbar smiled calmly.

Ibrahim grinned.

“You could put it like that,” he took a deep breath. “For years, Sada-e-Haq has fought the League and their aims of ultimate control. I’m sure Abbas told you all about the League and us.”

Akbar and Murtaza nodded.

“Years ago, the League found a way. They made this weapon. A biological one, capable of achieving their horrific aims. They called it the control virus,” Ibrahim whispered.

Murtaza and Akbar sighed.

“We know,” they answered.

Ibrahim’s eyes widened slightly.

“I’m impressed,” he remarked. “You two are really as good as they say you are.”

The Peaceville leader continued on.

“The Sada-e-Haq found it and waged a desperate attack, losing far more members than the League. But they stole all seven...units of this virus.”

Murtaza stopped him.

“What do you mean, units? Are you saying that there are more than one out there?”

Ibrahim shook his head.

“Multiple vials of the virus *were* out there,” he whispered. “I know that Sada-e-Haq threatened the League to use the weapons. They should have destroyed the units but they didn’t. They tried to use them as a threat. To secure them, Sada-e-Haq designed special containers, one per unit. Indestructible and unopenable. This bought the dying embers of Sada-e-Haq some time.”

Akbar stopped him.

“How can something be indestructible?” he criticised.

Ibrahim met Akbar’s gaze.

“The box itself was designed to withstand fire, ice, and any number of bullets. But we knew that no design was perfect, so we took a preventive measure that the league never expected.”

Akbar and Murtaza listened carefully.

“Each box was encoded to open to one of the Sada-e-Haq’s most trusted members. The box could only be opened by that member. In the event where integrity of the box got compromised, it was designed to destroy the contents inside.”

Murtaza eyed Akbar who looked down. He knew what was to follow.

“Now, the league would never accept defeat. They wanted the weapons we had encased in our indestructible boxes, so they sent after the Sada-e-Haq, their greatest weapons. The Alphas.”

“Operation Dead Grass,” Murtaza whispered.

Akbar suppressed the urge to hide, the voices ringing in his head as he remembered.

“It’s...It’s an Alpha. Faiza, get out of here!”

Akbar shuddered, locking away the memory that haunted him. Ibrahim nodded.

“This mission required that the Alphas performed a retaliatory strike. And they did. A successful one. The Alphas uncovered and raided Sada-e-Haq base, destroying everyone and everything. A small group escaped, with an aim to destroy the boxes. Each group destroyed their box and ended up dying in the process. So, this was the end of Sada-e-Haq and the control virus.”

Akbar looked down.

“Except one,” he whispered.

Ibrahim narrowed his eyes.

“Yes,” he whispered. “Regrettably, we recently learnt that one individual had failed to destroy her box in time. Faiza. And now, for the first time in years, we, Sada-e-Haq and the League, have found a lead on her. With the revolution, we have traced her here in Peaceville.”

Akbar’s eyes widened.

“So, the box contains the last vial of the control virus,” he confirmed. “They need Faiza to open the box. And they needed the data to track the whereabouts of the box.”

Ibrahim nodded.

“Our operative, who stole the box escaped in a helicopter, but his chopper crashed. That data has information on the virus. It has maps showing where the chopper crashed. Whoever has it

might be able to find it.”

Akbar and Murtaza eyed each other, the same question came to their minds.

“After we banded together, naming ourselves after that heroic group, we sent an agent to steal the box from the league. An ex Alpha, freed by your revolution. He succeeded in stealing the box and escaping.”

Akbar narrowed his eyes.

“So, where is the issue?” he asked.

Ibrahim sighed.

“We lost communication with him more than a year ago.”

A sudden discomfort emerged in the room.

“Now we understand everything,” Murtaza spoke. “The League, the Sada-e-Haq. It all makes sense now. You left on the Night of Heroes to meet Mahmud, to find Amr and stop him.”

Ibrahim bowed his head respectfully.

“I’m glad you realised,” he answered. “We are on your side. The side of Haq. The side of truth and justice. The side of honour and chivalry.”

Akbar looked down.

“And we have moved past what you did to us, Akbar,” he smiled kindly.

Akbar looked up, his watery eyes widening slightly.

Ibrahim sighed.

“We knew Alpha 43 was the one to retrieve the box in ‘Operation Dead Grass’. The only Alpha who had succeeded in that mission. We thought your brother had done it. But on the Night of Heroes, we realised that it was you. You had wiped out Sada-e-Haq. You retrieved Faiza’s box for the League.”

Akbar narrowed his eyes.

“Why, knowing all this, are you fine allying with me?” he whispered.

Ibrahim grinned.

“We didn’t intend to initially,” Ibrahim admitted. “But then we met a young man. A brilliant and brave young man named Abbas. And when we asked him about you, the way he spoke, the courage he showed and the way he was willing to defend you

was incomprehensible. What he told us about you, your journey after breaking free from C-gun, your motivation, dedication, commitment and the fantastic leadership during the revolution; and last but not the least, the fact that in spite of everything your mother did, you still fulfilled her rights over you, we realised that if we could trust anyone at all, it was you.”

Akbar’s eyes watered a bit more.

“I know it’s too late, Ibrahim,” he whispered. “But I’m sorry for what happened with Sada-e-Haq. I’m sorry I had a role in this.”

Ibrahim closed his eyes.

“It’s alright Akbar Bhai,” he answered. “The past is best left behind. What you have done now, by liberating Peaceville from the League’s control... You have become the first land mass in the archipelago that they do not control. And Inshallah, with your help, we will eradicate them from any corner of the world that they hide in.”

“Inshallah,” Murtaza finished.

Glancing at Akbar, both of them took a sip from their steaming cups of qahwa.

Decisions

Abbas stared at the screen in disbelief. It all made sense now. Akbar's agitation at the data, the desperation of the League and Amr to acquire the box. All of it. This control virus...it was..it was madness.

He turned to Nabeel.

"Close the data," he whispered.

The young man nodded, typing something on his keyboard.

Click. Clackity Clack!

The files vanished. And so did Abbas's mental peace.

"Nabeel," Abbas warned. "Nobody is to know what we saw here. Am I clear?"

The young man nodded.

"I understand," he whispered.

And with that, Abbas turned to leave. As he went, his mind was in a complete whirl. He had solved almost everything. The virus, the box, how Akbar Uncle had finished them off in 'Operation Dead Grass' all those years ago. He was only missing one thing. What was Faiza needed for, but that didn't matter. He knew enough. Now he just needed a lead on Amr.

"I'm not weak, Baba," he snarled. "I'm going to catch Amr."

The Search

Hamza narrowed his eyes. His heart pounded in his chest as he eyed Kumail up ahead.

“Where on earth is this man leading us?”

He motioned for Rizwan and Musa to stay close.

Together, the trio made their way from behind a burnt vehicle. Hamza eyed Kumail cautiously as he paused, pointing up ahead. Hamza peeked ahead.

“Hmm,” he sighed.

There was a group. Roughly five or six men. They were a mix of short and tall. Most were armed with guns except one, who held a knife. But Hamza could see the buckle upon which several grenades were tied.

“They are hit men,” Hamza whispered. “Let’s avoid them.”

Kumail shook his head.

“Why not just take them out?”

Hamza’s eyes widened in horror as Kumail withdrew his pistol.

“Are you mad?” he hissed. “If we fire a gunshot, everyone would know we’re here, and there might be more close by. We go around them.”

Hamza turned around to leave.

Beep.

He froze. He knew that noise well. A mine. He dreadfully glanced down, before watching in surprise. There was no mine

under him. He turned around to see Musa, his eyes wide with worry.

“Musa?” Hamza asked uncertainly.

Musa shook his head. It wasn't him. And Kumail was approaching, so that left...

“Rizwan,” Hamza whispered.

The former chief was frozen. Underneath his foot, a red light was hovering.

“It's gone live,” Kumail gasped. “It'll blow in a minute.”

Almost immediately, he darted ahead leaving them behind.

“Coward,” Hamza muttered under his breath.

He narrowed his eyes, a beat of panic beeped in his heart. Rizwan was here because of him and Hamza wouldn't allow him to die.

“Allah will protect me,” Rizwan whispered.

Hamza ignored his comment, and started analysing the bomb. He took a deep breath.

It was well designed. It's wires were moving across several platforms. Hamza noticed at least twelve. But only one wire needed to be cut. And Hamza knew he could find it. Unless...

“Hey! The scanners say one of the perimeter mines is live. Someone's over there!”

Hamza's eyes widened in horror. They knew. The hit men were coming.

“Musa, fall back!” Hamza ordered.

Musa shook his head.

“Musa, I'll bring Rizwan back, trust me!” he hissed. “But right now, you'll only be a hindrance.”

Musa glanced at Rizwan who nodded.

“Go, my boy,” Rizwan whispered. “That's an order.”

Musa's eyes watered as he moved back, retreating into the shadows.

“Okay,” Hamza whispered. “Don't move Rizwan. Pretend I'm not here. Get them to come close.”

Hamza felt his heart skip a beat as the voices came nearer,

“Hello! Anybody there?”

He jumped back, retreating behind some old debris.

He strained his ears.

“Ah! So you’re the trespasser, little man!”

Hamza peaked over to see five men. The leader was at the front, with both tall men covering the flanks. One short guy was much farther back, to protect the rear. And there was a man next to the leader. He must be the personal body guard.

Hamza wiped the sweat off his forehead, as he glanced at the dagger in his hand.

“They have to have a vulnerability. A weak position. Something, or even someone.”

Hamza narrowed his eyes. If there wasn’t a weak position, perhaps he could make one. He just needed it to be convincing. Yes. That would work.

Quietly, he began climbing his way down.

See the thing was that no group would keep just one perimeter mine. Their was probably more than one. And usually, these mines would be equal space apart.

The distance between the men and the mine that Rizwan was on, was roughly a hundred meters. So on the second entry, he should find one as well.

His heart pounded in his chest. There wasn’t a lot of time.

In the next few seconds, he reached another part of the hundred meter radius.

“Where are you?” Hamza whispered as he scanned the earth. “Wait, why am I doing this? There is an easier way.”

He noticed some debris nearby. And some rocks beside it.

“Let’s go,” Hamza growled, grabbing the first boulder. With one hand, he hurled it across the dirt, bracing himself.

Nothing happened. The boulder merely cascaded against the ground before rolling on ahead. He grabbed the second boulder.

“Let’s go,” he whispered, hurling it.

Beep.

Hamza’s eyes widened-

Boom!

A powerful burst of wind and heat blew him off his feet as the area before him went up in flames.

Crack.

Hamza looked up in horror. One of the buildings pillars had given way. He leapt back just in time, as the pillar collapsed and a huge haze of dirt was sent up in the air.

Hamza sputtered, wiping the dirt from his eyes.

“Mission accomplished,” He coughed, as the sounds of footsteps neared. He had drawn someone away.

Hamza ducked behind the debris, unsheathing his knife as both tall men emerged into the light.

“Good bye,” he smirked.

Wham!

In a flash, he leapt forward, smashing his fist against one’s throat. The other raised his gun but Hamza’s knife had penetrated his throat instantly. Both of them collapsed in a pool of blood.

Hamza brushed the edge of the blade against the arm sleeve of one of his victims.

“Nice guns,” he remarked at their semi automatic weapons.

Hamza took one in his own hands, shuddering almost immediately. It felt natural to be holding such a big gun once more.

“Rizwan needs my help,” Hamza chided himself.

He darted on, towards where Rizwan was. His lips curled into a smile as he neared. The remaining three were spread thin, all watching their surroundings. Hamza opened fire.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

The two guards dropped dead. The only one left was the leader of the group.

Hamza chuckled.

“And then there was one,” he smiled.

The leader raised his hands furiously under the barrel of Hamza’s gun.

“I won’t beg. Just shoot me.”

Hamza shook his head.

“What’s your name?”

The man narrowed his eyes.

“Sadiq,” he answered in the most sarcastic tone.

“Well, man whose name clearly isn’t Sadiq-”

“No, my name is really Sadiq,” the leader answered.

Hamza shook his head in disapproval.

“Well, man whose name is Sadiq, do me a favour and deactivate the mine please, then you can go.”

The leader shook his head.

“Very well,” Hamza sighed. “If you don’t deactivate it, please step on it so that my friend can go.”

The leader’s eyes widened in horror.

“Come on!” Hamza growled.

The leader of the hit men sighed.

“Very well,” he sighed. “Cut the blue wire.”

Hamza nodded to Rizwan who leaned down.

Beep.

The red light disappeared.

“It’s safe to step off,” the leader stated dryly. “But I swear, you will pay for this.”

Hamza watched tensely, a bead of sweat trickling down his cheek. He closed his eyes, bracing himself for the impact, but it never came.

Hamza opened his eyes in surprise.

“I wasn’t bluffing,” Sadiq hissed. “But the next time we meet-”

“You’ll let them pass, won’t you Sadiq?”

Hamza’s eyes widened in surprise as he whirled around to see the newcomer.

It was a young man. He was wearing a black suit. There was huge man next to him, as large as Hamza. Probably a guard.

“S-sir F-Faisal?” Sadiq stammered. “I’ll go, with your permission.”

Faisal nodded with an air of satisfaction as Sadiq turned tail and ran.

“Hamza,” Faisal greeted, arms wide.

Hamza’s eyes widened in confusion.

“Who are you?”

Faisal narrowed his eyes.

“Why, don’t tell me you forgot me?”

Hamza shrugged.

“I don’t know you,” he whispered.

Faisal burst out laughing.

“Why, haven’t you come here to visit me? To return what I gave you.”

Hamza’s heart froze. Was this it?

“You’re-”

“Yes” Faisal smiled. “I’m the one who gave you the box.”

Faisal

Hamza still couldn't accept what was happening. One minute, he was trying to free his friend Rizwan from getting captured. Now he was sitting in a bullet proof land cruiser.

Hamza couldn't believe it. According to Salman's description of how this place worked, ease in such a hell would not be possible.

"I didn't think you could live like this," Hamza whispered. "Isn't Azaab city a lawless land?"

Faisal burst out laughing. It made Hamza feel slightly defensive.

"My my, you are hilarious," Faisal remarked. "Learn one thing Hamza. There are very much rules here."

Hamza raised a brow.

"For example, the biggest fish, gets the lion's share," he stated dryly.

Hamza looked down. Faisal was definitely the biggest fish from the sound of it.

"How long have you known Hamza?" Rizwan asked, as they rounded a bend.

Faisal didn't answer immediately.

"Let's just say, we've known each other for a while."

For the first time, Faisal was eyeing Hamza in a strange way. As though he was studying Hamza. Then abruptly he turned towards his body guard.

“Oh my,” Faisal exclaimed. “I haven’t introduced you till now. This is Qaaf.”

Hamza bowed his head respectfully.

Qaaf didn’t respond. He merely smirked.

Hamza felt a hint of annoyance. Nobody was allowed to behave in that way with him. He eyed the tall man.

“You’ll have to excuse him,” Faisal sighed. “He doesn’t really say much.”

Hamza smirked. He knew this type. Too proud of their own skills.

“I’d love to have a go with him sometime,” Hamza whispered. “Test his metal.”

Faisal gave him a meaningful look.

“Now that’s not necessary. I know who’d win.”

Hamza raised a brow. Why would Faisal say that? He seemed so certain that Hamza would win? Maybe he knew Hamza quite well? Hamza wasn’t sure.

His eyes sharpened as the car slowed down. They were here. The car door opened, and Hamza hopped out almost immediately. Right behind him was Rizwan and Musa. Kumail was going to get out, but Qaaf stopped him.

Hamza narrowed his eyes, turning to Faisal.

“Why did he-”

Faisal raised a hand for silence.

“Kumail and I have some matters to discuss. Right Kumail?”

Kumail eyed Hamza, a strange horror ignited in his eyes. Before he could respond, Qaaf slammed the door shut, and the car drove on, into the warehouse.

“Kumail is our comrade,” Rizwan exclaimed. “Why is he being taken?”

Hamza looked down. There were tanks. Tanks. Actual tanks. And he could see familiar glares of sniper lenses from the distance. This was a miniature fortress. A series of warehouses and buildings stretched from one end to the other.

“There isn’t a problem my friend,” Faisal sighed. “Right Hamza?”

Hamza eyed Faisal. There was something wrong about this young man. Something dodgy. He was being forceful for no reason. But they were in his fortress right now. Hamza nodded.

“There’s nothing to worry about,” he stated.

Faisal grinned.

“Well, that’s splendid. Your rooms are ready. Settle in, and then we’ll have dinner. I need to attend to some matters until then.”

Hamza knew exactly what matters he needed to attend to. But he would dare not say a word.

“Very well,” he whispered.

And with that, the three of them advanced on. As they went, Hamza saw Faisal stroll towards the warehouse. Behind him, was Qaaf. Hamza narrowed his eyes. That was where Kumail was taken only moments ago.

“Well, Kumail,” Hamza thought silently. “What goes around, comes around.”

Punishments

Wham!

Kumail screamed in pain, collapsing on the ground. His nose was bleeding. His eyes were sore. The torture was too much. He coughed, wiping the blood on his face.

“That’ll be enough, Qaaf,” came an all too familiar voice.

Kumail looked up, his eyes widening in alarm.

“Sir Faisal please!” he begged. “Have mercy!”

Faisal’s eyes were burning with disgust. He grasped hold of Kumail’s hair, and yanked him to his feet.

“I can forgive many things, Kumail,” he smiled. “But betrayal!” He roared.

“Betrayal isn’t one of them!”

Wham!

He rammed his elbow straight into Kumail’s face.

The soldier sputtered helplessly. How could he have been so foolish to come back? Of course they knew. Of course they wouldn’t forgive.

“You stole the box from us!” Faisal growled, nodding to Qaaf. “Did you think we would forgive you?”

Kumail’s eyes watered as he saw the rope in Qaaf’s hand.

“You then realised that we would find you eventually, and that your freedom was not as glamorous as you imagined. So you hoped to earn forgiveness by bringing Hamza and the box back.”

Kumail coughed painfully. Qaaf was now standing behind him, preparing the rope.

“You will never be forgiven,” Faisal chuckled. “You will die.”

Kumail took a deep breath.

“I can’t accept my fate,” he spat, the pain obvious in his voice. “But I have no regrets. Go ahead Qaaf.”

Faisal sighed.

“Do it,” he whispered.

Qaaf slapped the rope over his throat. Kumail tried to resist but it was futile. Qaaf was much stronger. He pulled the rope harder, causing Kumail to go pale. Then purple. And then Kumail stopped moving all together, his eyes wide in horror. He was dead.

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Dinner

Hamza eyed the floor with a strange uneasiness in his stomach. For some reason, he couldn't understand what was going on around him. And he hated that. He looked around. The room he was in was extremely comfortable. It had everything one could possibly need. But it made him feel odd.

There was a knock at the door. Hamza advanced forward, unsheathing his knife. He peaked through the peephole. A man stood there. Someone he didn't recognise.

"Yes," Hamza whispered.

The man sighed, in the most bored voice imaginable.

"Sir Faisal asked me to inform you that dinner is ready. Your comrades have already been informed."

Hamza looked down.

"Okay," he answered. "I'm on my way."

Hamza moved away from the door as though it might explode. He didn't know why he was feeling so uncomfortable.

"I'll be careful," Hamza sighed.

Pressing down the handle, he made his way outside. A thought suddenly occurred to him. He had no idea where he was going.

"This way please," came a voice.

Hamza turned to see the butler. He was holding a dirty tray in his hands. "On the left are the elevators. Head to the fifth floor from there."

Hamza nodded respectfully, and began making his way down

the hall. As the butler had said, on his left was a lift. He advanced forward, stepping inside. The doors of the lift closed.

Hamza eyed the floor buttons. They went from one to seven. He knew one was the first floor, where they had entered from. But the other floors...what was on them? Surely it didn't hurt to explore how trustworthy this Sir Faisal was?

He reached out for the button labelled seven, but pulled his hand back. Faisal would be suspicious if he didn't show up to the meal on time. With a sigh, he pressed the button labelled five.

The elevator roared to life, and soon came to a stop. The doors slid open, exposing Hamza to a strong aroma. He narrowed his eyes, holding his breath as he stepped into the floor.

"There you are!"

He turned to see Faisal grinning. Beyond him was a huge table, with a capacity of at least thirty people. Hamza eyed the table cautiously.

He couldn't see any place for snipers, or guards.

As Hamza approached, he got a clearer view of the table and the lavish meals that had been laid.

There were all kinds of cuisines. From fried and scrambled eggs, to hakka chinese and barbeque. The dishes steamed, the expertise with which they had been prepared making each one stand out.

Hamza took a seat, immediately feeling underneath for any wires or bombs. Often, chairs were wired with such mechanisms. But his hands caught nothing. His eyes were scanning for anything suspicious as Faisal joined them.

He gestured for them.

"Please," Faisal whispered.

Hamza narrowed his eyes. Rizwan and Musa eyed him curiously. Faisal's lips curled into a smile.

"Now, don't tell me I have to try everything."

Hamza didn't respond. He wouldn't eat food from someone whom he didn't know.

Faisal sighed.

"Very well. Qaaf, give me a morsel from everything."

Qaaf bowed his head respectfully, before taking Faisal's plate. He began carrying out his order. As he went, Hamza, Rizwan and Musa took food as well.

Faisal started eating, giving Hamza a meaningful look but Hamza didn't care. He would take his precautions.

"I must say Qaaf," Faisal stated, licking his fingers. "This fish is delicious. Just like the fish Hamza used to catch."

Hamza raised a brow.

"You should take me fishing," Faisal chuckled. "Maybe you could teach me. After all, you used to go all the time."

Hamza nodded uncomfortably. Feeling the reassuring bulge of his knife.

At that moment, as if on cue, the elevator door opened. A man in spectacles and a lab coat came rushing forward.

"Sir!" he exclaimed. "Floor 7-"

Faisal raised his hand for silence.

"How dare you interrupt my meal? Fool!" he turned to Qaaf. "Kick this man out!"

The man in spectacles squeaked, rushing towards the elevator as Qaaf neared, rolling up his sleeves.

"Excuse me," Faisal whispered as they stepped into the elevator. "I must attend to this."

And with that, he turned to leave. Hamza was deep in thought. Something was wrong on floor 7. Something that Faisal thought was important. Maybe Faisal had an ulterior motive. Perhaps, on floor 7, Hamza would find the truth of Faisal.

But he couldn't go now. Hamza took a deep breath. The best time would be tonight.

111

Faiza

It was dark. Faiza winced painfully. She felt sore all over. "Allah," she moaned weakly. "Where am I?". Faiza shuddered. With a grunt, she pushed herself up. Her eyes widened in dismay. Where were Wahab and Asif? Where? She winced, afflicted by a mild headache. And grief. It was all gone. All of it. The box. Wahab. Asif. The ground savagely burnt away. But she could smell the blood in the air. That Alpha had done what he had come to do. He had wiped out Sada-e-Haq. There was nothing left. Nothing.

Faiza woke up with a start, her forehead covered in sweat. Her eyes watered. Again it had happened. She had dreamt of it again. Why? Why was she having these nightmares? What was going on?

Faiza coughed. She was getting weaker. And there was no evading it. Soon, death would come to her as well. She took a deep breath, swallowing down the pain as she did.

"Allah," she whispered, a tear in her eyes. "I am afraid of these nightmares. Why are they coming back? Why won't they leave me alone? You have power over all these things. Protect me Ya Rabbi. Let it not be what I suspect. Because if it's true. If there is still a box out there, then we are truly finished."

112

Home

Abbas. I heard what Akbar Bhai said. And I'm wondering, how could you disobey a direct order from your elders and investigate? I know you were trying to help, but you must realise something. We, by which I refer to myself, Akbar Bhai, your father and your other elders. We've Alhamdulillah lived a lot longer than you. We have experience that you too shall gain with time, Inshallah. Mistakes to learn from. Straying from our protection and guidance will land you nowhere."

Abbas shook his head as he drove along the street towards his house. His mother's words echoing at the back of his head. He shrugged it off. Soon he would be there. Back home.

"I think you should work on yourself. Otherwise, I fear each time you lose now, there will be consequences deeper than you can imagine. Each time you face him, you will lose if you don't."

Abbas shuddered. His head was spinning as home came in sight.

"I th-thought you were a good man. I always taught my son to look up to you."

Abbas sighed. He shouldn't have mistreated Shafique that way. Deep down he knew that was wrong. Even if Jannat was awful, Shafique was only doing his job. He hadn't done anything to deserve that.

Abbas took a deep breath as he brought the car to a stop in the driveway. He needed to address the question thumping in his

heart.

“Am I arrogant?” Abbas whispered.

“Abbas! Harun and Sting were weak from imprisonment. And you had been retreating from them as far as I heard. Also, Asghar was much more skilled than you, but his arrogance during fights led to his downfall. Understand. Amr is not like Asghar. Asghar fought through brute strength. Amr fights with wit. I can feel the difference. He’s very sharp. Prefers to win without losing any men.”

Amr was exactly like the previous opponents Abbas had faced. He refused to come out of hiding because he was either a coward, or had no combat capability.

Abbas sighed. He didn’t think he was arrogant. It was just...

“I know I’m right,” Abbas whispered to himself. “They’ll see eventually. Everyone will.”

Abbas got out of the car. He glanced back curiously to see -

“Argh!” Abbas winced, stroking his back once more.

That was odd. His back hadn’t hurt in a while like this. Now the pain had resurfaced.

“I must’ve hurt it pretty bad,” Abbas realised as he recalled Jafar’s words.

“You took a bad hit Abbas Bhai. Just be careful for the next few months or so. Your injuries need time to heal.”

Abbas sighed.

‘Maybe I should rest,’ he thought to himself.

Abbas closed the car door and locked it. Looking down, he started to realise how exhausted he was. As he approached the front door, Abbas reached out. His door was already open. How kind of his mother, she must have...wait. Why was the house door open?

Abbas narrowed his eyes, moving up slowly. His eyes widened in horror as he only just noticed a dent in the door, near the hinges. As if...

“Someone kicked it open!” Abbas gasped. “Oh no. Ami!”

Abbas barged in, his heart freezing. The house was in wreck. Everything was smashed on the ground.

“What happened here?” Abbas panted.

Shelves were ripped open and drawers were splintered across the ground.

Crack.

Abbas's eyes widened in horror as someone stepped inside the room. A man. One whom Abbas knew all too well.

"Harun!" Abbas growled.

The Alpha merely chuckled.

"Well well," he whispered. "I've been waiting for you, Abbas."

113

Moves on the Board

“Where’s my mother!” Abbas roared, clenching his fists.

His blood boiled to the extent that his back pain felt trivial. He wanted to find his mother.

Harun smiled, leaning against the wall casually.

“Now,” he whispered. “Don’t cry...you just got here.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes.

“Argh!” he thundered, charging forward.

Wham!

There was blur as a force rammed into Abbas’s chest. He wheezed breathlessly, slamming hard against the wall. Clutching his chest, he blinked in disbelief. When was Harun that fast? He remembered his mother’s instructions.

“He and your father have an old score to settle. If you see him, you must avoid him at all costs. Harun will want revenge against Murtaza by trying to punish what your father loves most.”

Abbas got to his feet, wiping his split lip.

Harun chuckled cruelly.

“Already bleeding?” he observed. “How on earth did you defeat Alpha 43?”

Abbas snarled.

“Like this!” he retorted.

Abbas lunged forward, swinging a powerful punch but Harun stepped back. Abbas narrowed his eyes.

“Hiya!” he snarled, whipping his foot out. Harun caught it, smirking.

“Always predicta-”

Wham!

Abbas smashed his fist into Harun’s face, causing the Alpha to stagger back in surprise.

“Ooooh,” he laughed. “Tough one. Reminds me of your dreadful father.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes. He needed to get help. And fast. Harun had definitely regained some of his strength since Zaqqum prison. Deep down, Abbas wasn’t sure how much longer he could keep this up. As if on cue, Harun stated dryly,

“Alas, you have no fight with me today,” he whispered. “You’ll be fighting Amr.”

Abbas slammed his hands against the wall he leaned on.

“Where is my mother?” he growled.

Harun shrugged.

“I don’t know...” he sighed. “If only you had been a bit more...responsible. I mean as an army captain, you should have more than your lousy brother protecting her.”

Abbas met Harun’s gaze with utmost fury.

“If you’ve even touched a hair on Haider’s head, I’ll-”

“What,” Harun laughed. “What can you possibly do to me?”

Abbas growled.

“Argh!” he roared, jumping forward.

Harun sidestepped, slapping Abbas on the face, but Abbas simultaneously shoulder slammed the Alpha. They both fell back in opposite directions.

“Abbas,” Harun spat, jumping back to his feet. “I’m simply here to deliver you a message.”

He held out his hand, holding a small chit of paper. Abbas grabbed it.

“Solve this, and you’ll earn the right to face Amr,” Harun explained cruelly. “This clue will take you to him. Once you solve it, you’ll find what you need. Fail, or attempt to get anyone’s help. You die. And so does Haider and Layla. Snipers are aimed at all three of you at all times.”

Abbas's eyes widened in horror.

"So tread carefully," Harun grinned in an evil manner, holding out a map.

His eyes lit up.

"Before I forget," Harun chuckled. "Amr also sent this."

Clank!

Harun dropped two items on the ground. Two things which caused Abbas to suddenly feel uncanny discomfort.

It was his weapons! His firearm revolver Zulfi and his dagger.

Abbas eyed them hesitantly. Could it be a trick? It might be. But then again, Harun, as an Alpha would be confident in his ability to face Abbas. He picked up the weapons in his hand, their familiar grip providing him with solace.

"Wh-why did he-"

"Amr's convinced you'll need them," Harun smirked. "Now hurry, in the next ten minutes, if you can't solve this, he'll kill your brother and mom."

Abbas looked down. He had no choice. Amr was going to kill his family.

"Ten minutes have started," Harun taunted. "I'd hurry if I were you."

114

The First Clue

“You have told me nothing!” Abbas growled.

Harun shrugged.

“You’re wasting time,” he grinned. “When ten minutes are done, you’ll only find your mother and brother’s desecrated bodies!”

Abbas growled under his breath. What could he do? No time to warn his father, or Akbar for that matter.

“Nine minutes!” Harun called out.

Abbas’s eyes widened.

“I’m on my own for this one,” he realised.

Abbas sheathed his dagger and holstered his revolver. With his fidgeting hands, he opened the chit. The first clue.

His eyes widened. It was the photo of a woman. But it was a black and white print. Meaning it was old. But the question still stood.

“You call this a clue?” Abbas growled.

Harun smirked.

“Amr wrote it,” he chuckled. “And you’d best hurry. Because you only have eight minutes to go!”

Abbas eyes widened in horror. Time was running out. He needed to solve this.

‘Hmm,’ Abbas thought quietly, his blood pumping. ‘Think.’

Abbas gave it a closer look. Abbas did not know this woman. But now that he looked closer, he could almost swear there was

something familiar about this woman. But despite that, he had no idea who she was. Her face was a mystery.

Abbas glanced back, the timer read three minutes! Abbas's eyes widened in dismay. He couldn't work this out.

"Allah help me," Abbas whispered desperately. I can't lose her again.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Maybe something was written on the photo. He strolled up to the window.

Boom!

A bullet came whizzing out of nowhere crashing right where Abbas would have been.

Abbas froze.

"What are you doing?" Harun growled.

Abbas turned to face him.

"I'm taking it to the window, to see in the light if something is written on it."

Harun snarled.

"There's nothing written on it."

Abbas narrowed his eyes. He could see that the timer in Harun's hand read one minute.

"Tell Amr, I'll fight him directly. But this riddle makes no sense. Why must I solve this!"

Harun shrugged.

"Solve it."

Abbas threw the photo on the ground.

"There's no time left. I-I'm," Abbas stopped, his eyes watering. "I'll give myself up. Anything. Why does Amr not fight me like a warrior! How much of a coward is he?"

Abbas blinked. The time was up. It was over.

Harun sighed.

"You have to find this person," he explained. "That's all I'll tell you. Find her, for she has the second clue."

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Why was Harun being so helpful? And why was he giving him extra time?

'What does it matter?' Abbas realised. 'I might still be able to save Ami and Haider.'

He glanced down at the photo. Clearly Amr was certain that Abbas knew this woman. Because if he didn't then he would never send such a clue.

"Maybe I'm looking too closely," Abbas realised.

He leaned back a little, eyeing the photo.

'Wait a minute,' Abbas realised. If this photo is black and white, and she's a young woman in this photo, she would naturally be a lot older now.

Abbas turned to Harun.

"I need a marker!" he growled.

Harun nodded, whispering something in his earpiece.

'Probably warning the snipers not to shoot,' Abbas deduced, his heart racing. He had to hurry. Scurrying over to his room, he pulled out a small ballpoint from the drawer and began drawing over the picture. First he drew some signs of aging, like wrinkles, more deeper eyes. As he did so, his eyes lit up. He was suddenly having the strangest suspicion.

"Farheen Auntie?" Abbas gasped.

115

The Second Clue

Wham!

Abbas slammed the door open, running out of the house.

“Only a minute to go Abbas!” Harun’s voice came.

Abbas snarled, whipping out his revolver as he jumped in his car. The engine roared to life.

“Bismillah,” Abbas whispered, pressing the accelerator.

He narrowed his eyes. He needed to reach Farheen Auntie’s as soon as possible. That was where the next clue was. Abbas glanced back. Harun stood there, on the road behind him, strolling calmly along it’s edge. An Alpha, on the loose. He couldn’t allow that.

Abbas whipped out his radio to-

“Boom!”

His radio was shattered to pieces, it’s shrapnel landing everywhere in the car.

“Agh!” Abbas shouted, steering the car back in line. He remembered Harun’s words.

Snipers are aimed at all three of you at all times.

“I don’t have a choice,” Abbas realised. “I have to reach Farheen Auntie’s house and fast.”

Abbas swerved the vehicle towards left. He’d be there soon. Just a right turn and he’d reach her street. She was only a few houses down.

“Allah, let me save my mother and Haider today,” Abbas whispered.

He turned left at the intersection.

‘Oh no,’ Abbas blinked. He stopped the car.

Boom!

Abbas ducked as his window was shattered to pieces. Why were the snipers shooting at him? He was only trying to reverse.

Boom! Boom!

Farheen’s house was back there. Why were they shooting him here?

Abbas narrowed his eyes. He had a sudden hunch on something...

He pressed the accelerator, the car zipped forward. And the firing stopped. Abbas narrowed his eyes. Why would the snipers shoot at him for trying to get the second clue? Unless...

“They don’t know where I’m meant to go,” Abbas realised. “They thought I was trying to double back. Which means that there’s more than meets the eye to this situation. Something isn’t right here.”

First Harun gives him additional time, in addition to offering him help like,

“You have to find this person. That’s all I’ll tell you. Find her, for she has the second clue.”

Almost as if...

“He wanted me to solve the clue,” Abbas deduced. “But why would he want me to meet Farheen Auntie? Or more correctly, what would he gain by knowing that the woman in the photo is her?”

Abbas couldn’t bother about this now. But one thing dawned on him. He now had an edge over Amr. He wouldn’t give the hooded man what he wanted.

He pressed the accelerator, his eyes lighting up. Bahadur’s house was half a mile ahead. And his car wasn’t there.

“They’ll get frustrated when they will realise that Bahadur Bhai’s house isn’t what they were looking for,” Abbas smirked. “And Bahadur Bhai is not at home, so he won’t fall in harm’s way.”

Abbas turned the car into the driveway, and powered off the vehicle. Stepping out, he pulled out his revolver and the knife. Abbas took a deep breath as he reached the house door. He knocked. No answer.

“Alhamdullillah,” Abbas sighed in relief.

No one was home.

Crack.

Abbas’s eyes shot open. Someone was behind him!

“Agrh!” Abbas growled, whirling around.

He narrowed his eyes. A short woman stood there. One whom he knew all too well.

“Sting,” Abbas hissed.

The female Alpha was leaning against his vehicle. Her breathing was a little irregular, as if she had been running before.

‘Waiting for which house I show up at,’ Abbas realised. ‘But she got the wrong one!’

Sting narrowed her eyes.

“Nice work, kid,” she chuckled venomously, drawing two blades.

Abbas tightened his grip over his blade.

“Where’s my mother?” he growled. “Where is she!”

Sting chuckled.

“You poor, poor child. Your mother and brother are with Amr, waiting for you. A certain hooded fellow asked me to gift you this...”

She dropped a piece of parchment on the ground.

Abbas narrowed his eyes.

“You expect me to pick this up.”

She nodded.

“Soon we will be ruling over you all once more. Get used to begging at our feet for scraps,” Sting whispered. “We’re going to-”

Boom!

Sting jumped in surprise. Abbas smirked as she stepped back. He leaned down and picked up the chit.

“I will destroy you all,” Abbas growled. “You won’t evade-”

Sting chuckled ignoring him.

‘Focus!’ Abbas reminded himself as he unfolded the chit.

His mother wasn't safe yet. But Abbas would soon have her and Haider free.

"Alright," Abbas grinned. "Let's see what you have to say, Amr."

He winced at the pain in his back once more.

'No, come on,' Abbas's eyes widened. 'Not now.'

Abbas shrugged it off. He needed to focus. He read the crumpled sheet of paper in his hands.

Greetings Abbas, I trust if you've reached here, then you will wonder why I have forced you to endure this charade, I assure you that it was not without reason

Abbas had figured as much. Amr thought he had deceived Abbas. How wrong he was!

Exactly three minutes from now, You will have nothing left but the dead bodies of Haider and your mother. I await your response...on the Alamdar bridge.

Abbas's eyes widened. He needed to get there as fast as possible. He only had three minutes!

Abbas opened his car door and jumped inside. As the engine roared to life, only one thought dominated his mind.

"I'm coming for you Amr," he growled.

116

The Final Clue

It was dark. And quiet. Too quiet. Abbas took a deep breath closing the car door.

“From here, I go on foot,” Abbas muttered to himself.

Stealthy as a mouse, he crept his way across the road, taking cover behind lamp posts or within the shadows of buildings. Just as he had been taught. As he went, his eyes surveyed the area before him, making sure it was safe.

Abbas took a deep breath, shuddering in the cold. He felt like a wolf roaming the snowy planes in search of his prey. Amr.

Abbas clenched the handle of his revolver, Zulfi, his heart skipping a beat. His eyes narrowed as the bridge entrance came in sight. Abbas’s eyes widened. The bridge was empty. Why? he stopped. Was there some explosive or something. Maybe.

Abbas narrowed his eyes as he continued along the road, into the bridge. His heart skipped a beat, his gaze sharpened. The bridge wasn’t empty. There was a silhouette there. A tall figure, wearing a black hood. Abbas suppressed his hesitation, growling under his breath. It was Amr.

Amr the Assassin

Abbas had waited long for this moment. He had anticipated it for days now. Standing several meters ahead of him was Amr. At least seven feet in height, overshadowing the area around him. His entire face was masked except for his eyes, within which Abbas could see a burning fire. A snake-like cape tapered down his back, blowing back in the wind.

Abbas took a deep breath. He was a lot bigger in person than how Abbas remembered him in Zaqqum. but Abbas had also been too busy to notice.

“Well well,” the hooded figure chuckled. “You finally got here.”

Abbas narrowed his eyes. He drew out a dagger in one hand. With the other, he held his revolver, Zulfi.

“Amr, the assassin,” Abbas growled. “Your time is up. I’m here to put an end to you.”

Abbas leaned down, tightening his grip over his weapons. His eyes were focused on the opponent he was about to take on.

“Who are you?” Abbas spat. “Why do you hate us so much? Did the League send you to destroy us?”

There was a sly hiss. Followed by laughter.

“Bravo boy! You have done well. You know about the League.”

Amr may have had a mask over his face, but Abbas could see the fire in his gaze. Abbas narrowed his eyes.

“I figured it out eventually. Now,” he spat. “Where’s my mother and Haider?”

Amr looked down.

“I’m afraid you just missed them. I let them go.”

Abbas raised a brow.

“I was so sure your anger and arrogance would draw you here. I didn’t need to keep them. You know, prisoners can be expensive.”

Abbas snarled.

“Why should I believe you?”

Amr chuckled.

“You don’t understand, do you? I wanted you. You were my target. Now that you’re here, I don’t need them anymore. And as for leaving them alive, well I might need them in future. Maybe against your father. But for now, I don’t need to conflict with someone as strong as your father.”

Abbas clenched the handle of his blade.

“You have made a grave mistake coming here,” Abbas whispered.

Amr smirked.

“You foolishly played into my hands, Abbas,” he whispered. “Now you will suffer.”

Abbas glared at the assassin.

Amr did not respond. He merely chuckled, withdrawing two pistols of his own.

Abbas growled, his knuckles turning white from how hard he was holding his weapons. He took a deep breath, hearing nothing but the wind and his own heart beat. Then he opened his eyes. He was ready.

“Ya Allah!” Abbas roared, charging forward.

Boom! Boom!

Abbas dropped to the ground as two bullets whizzed over his head. Instantly, he jumped to the side as a wave of bullets struck where he had been only moments earlier.

“Ya Allah!” Abbas roared, pulling his trigger twice. The bullets zipped ahead, but the hooded assassin was faster. He rolled to the side just in time.

Abbas fired again. And again. Amr dropped to the ground.

Wham!

A sudden grey object struck Abbas on his forehead. He staggered backwards. Amr had thrown a stone at him. He was about to react,

Wham!

Amr lunged forward knocking the gun out of Abbas's hand.

Abbas leapt back as it clattered to the ground. He narrowed his eyes.

"That's not fas—"

Wham!

Amr smashed a powerful fist in Abbas's stomach.

Abbas fell to the ground breathlessly. He winced at his back. It was hurting.

Abbas narrowed his eyes.

"I'm going to destroy you, Amr," he sighed.

Amr merely chuckled.

"Argh!" Abbas growled, charging forward.

Wham!

Amr barged forward, knocking Abbas to the ground. Abbas gasped for air, painfully, watching as Amr whipped out a knife. He brought it crashing down at Abbas's head.

"Ya Allah!" Abbas spat, catching his blade. He yanked the blade out of Amr's hand, driving it into Amr's leg.

"Argh!" Amr squealed.

Abbas got to his feet.

"Agh!" he roared, ramming a shoulder into Amr's stomach, immediately, slamming his elbow into Amr's chin. Amr staggered back in surprise.

"Hmm," he remarked. "Not bad for your age."

Abbas growled.

"I—"

Wham!

Abbas's eyes widened in horror as Amr dived for his knees, knocking him off his feet. Abbas countered with an elbow, but Amr caught it. He smashed a fist in Abbas's face.

"Ah," Abbas winced.

His back was now hurting badly. But he didn't care. Amr wasn't going to win this. He would pay for what he did.

“Die!” Abbas growled, grabbing a mound of dirt. He hurled at Amr, who ducked, shielding himself using his hood. But Abbas had his chance.

Wham!

Abbas lunged forward, smashing his knee into Amr’s back, immediately driving a fist which Amr lifted his left arm to deflect. Amr winced. Abbas raised a brow. Amr was hurt on his left arm.

Amr swung a fist, but Abbas deflected it, countering with several punches at Amr. Amr blocked the first two but missed the remainder.

“Haha!” Amr laughed.

Abbas’s eyes widened. Was he laughing?

Abbas punched again.

“Hahaha,” Amr chuckled. “Keep it up, little boy! I like the energy.”

Abbas roared in frustration, kicking Amr’s stomach.

Amr didn’t even budge. He just laughed.

“You’re weak! Just like Naqi!”

Abbas eyed Amr in hatred. Why was none of his punches hurting Amr?

“You try to be someone you’re not,” Amr laughed

Wham!

He slapped Abbas, knocking the youth backwards.

Abbas coughed blood. Every bone in his body was hurting. Especially his head and back. Abbas felt himself lose control. Amr was mocking him. Amr would die. He widened his eyes, ignoring his pain in his body.

“Die!” Abbas growled, charging at the hooded figure.

“But the worst part about you...” Amr paused.

Abbas swung a punch, but Amr ducked, smashing a powerful fist into Abbas’s back.

“Argh!” Abbas screamed.

A storm of pain struck his back. It burned like a bolt of electricity, ripping up his spine to his neck and head. Abbas’s vision blurred. His eyes watered as he felt himself lose his footing, and he slumped to the ground.

Abbas squirmed in pain. He wriggled, the pain was worse than a thousand bullets blasting through his body.

“You’re arrogant! You should have listened to your elders. Your parents. Your beloved Akbar Uncle. Thank you Abbas. Oh thank you! You have given me a great victory over Akbar tonight.”

Abbas groaned painfully, trying to move but he couldn’t. His back just hurt too much.

“Oh, does it hurt?” Amr smiled cruelly. “Let me help.”

He placed a foot on Abbas’s back, and began pressing down.

“AAAAARGH!” Abbas screamed, crying. He sobbed, unable to control the crushing pain.

Amr let go.

“I must confess,” Amr sighed. “I thought you’d be smarter. You solved everything for me Abbas. I have finally discovered who Faiza is. ”

Abbas’s vision blurred. His body screeched with hurt, and his eyes drooped. He could feel his consciousness slipping away. But he couldn’t help grin. Amr was wrong.

“You think I don’t know the house you stopped at was officer Bahadur’s!”

Abbas’s eyes widened in horror.

“I planted a device in your car that was transmitting your audio to me,” Amr smirked. “I know you were going to the house of Farheen Auntie!

‘What have I done?’ Abbas cried, his eyes drooping again.

Amr chuckled.

“It’s a shame, you know,” he whispered, withdrawing a gun. “I hoped you would be a worthy opponent. You will-”

Wham!

Amr flew back three meters as a growl sounded. Abbas tried to see what had happened. It seemed like...almost like..

“You made a mistake revealing yourself like this, Amr!” Akbar growled.

Amr narrowed his eyes.

“Akbar! Did you enjoy my little letters?” he spat.

Akbar growled under his breath.

“Inshallah, I will tear you apart tonight.”

Amr sighed.

“Very well,” he whispered. “I see that you wish to suffer the same fate.”

There was a moment of silence. Akbar stood there still, eyes narrowed. Any moment now. Any-

“Argh!” Amr growled jumping forward.

Wham!

Akbar lunged forward, knocking the hooded assassin to the ground. Amr got up, his eyes wide in confusion. Akbar took a deep breath.

“Die!” Amr spat, swinging a fist, but Akbar was faster. He caught the punch mid air and slammed his shoulder into Amr’s chest, knocking the hooded figure to the ground once more.

“Ya Zahra!” Akbar roared bringing his foot crashing down.

Amr rolled out of way just in time, but a blur flashed.

“Argh!” Amr screamed, a dagger sunk deep in his arm. He staggered back painfully, pulling out the knife. It fell from his hand with a *Clank*.

Akbar growled.

“Going so soon?” he spat.

Amr winced at his wound.

“Let me go...or Abbas dies. You can’t save him and capture me.”

The smile faded from Akbar’s face. He glanced back at the youth sprawled on the ground, unconscious and bleeding.

“Abbas!” Akbar shouted. “Abbas!”

No response. Akbar turned back.

“Amr you-”

Akbar’s eyes widened. Amr was gone. Vanished without a trace into the darkness.

“No,” Akbar growled. “No!”

Akbar slammed his hand on the ground in frustration.

“Run all you want, Amr!” he shouted. “You won’t win this battle!”

He turned towards the unconscious youth before him.

“We’ll stop you eventually, Amr,” he spat.

118

Sneaking Around

It was midnight. The lights were out, for the most part. Except for the guards who patrolled the halls.

Hamza took a deep breath. He had been waiting patiently until now for this moment. The chance to see what was on floor 7.

He leaned forward, placing an ear against the door. No one was there. Quietly, he pushed down the handle and stepped outside.

“Oy!” came a voice from behind.

He turned to see a guard approaching.

“Why are you-”

Wham!

Hamza punched the guard in the face, knocking him out.

“Too slow,” Hamza chuckled.

But the smile left his face very quickly. He was already seen. He wouldn’t get much time.

Hamza advanced along the hall, his heart pounding as the elevator came up on his left. The doors slid open. Hamza leapt back quickly, ducking behind the corner as a large husky guard came into the hallway.

“Drat,” Hamza thought.

Fighting this guy was no issue, but it would make too much noise. Hamza needed a quick take down. Maybe a neck strike.

As the guard neared. Hamza clenched his fist.

‘Almost there,’ Hamza thought. ‘Just a little more...and... now!’

He leapt up, smashing his fist into the guard’s temple. He collapsed on the ground.

Hamza’s blood was rushing as he leapt into the elevator.

“Whew!” he sighed. “Let’s go.”

He got to his feet, eyeing the panel of buttons. His hand hovered over the button labelled seven.

“Lets see what’s here,” he whispered, pressing his hand against the button.

A familiar queasiness entered his stomach as the elevator climbed up. He would learn whether this Faisal was trustworthy or not. He would learn the truth of Faisal. Hamza sighed as the elevator reached floor seven. The doors slid open.

Hamza froze, his eyes widening in horror. Qaaf stood there! In his hand, was a huge rifle aimed at the door!”

119

Floor 7

“Argh!” Hamza growled, whipping his knife at the man.

Qaaf ducked, evading the knife. He was only distracted for a second. But that was plenty of time for Hamza.

Wham!

Hamza rammed him in the stomach, instantly smashing his knee into the man’s back.

Qaaf squealed in pain, whipping out a blade.

“Come on!” Hamza growled.

Qaaf shot forward, swiping for Hamza’s face but Hamza ducked just in time. He threw his elbow at Qaaf’s throat, knocking him to the ground.

“Agh!” Hamza roared, bringing his foot crashing down upon Qaaf, who just managed to roll away in time.

“Bravo!”

Hamza froze. He whirled around to see Faisal. Hamza’s heart sank.

“You may not remember your past, because...” Faisal paused. “You never went fishing Hamza. Still, you are a sharp knife... dear Alpha.”

“Drat” Hamza thought to himself.

Faisal had caught him like a mouse. Effortlessly. He had tricked Hamza. The entire thing was an act. The mention of floor 7. It was a bait.

“You still-”

Wham!

He grabbed Faisal by the throat, ramming him against the wall.

Faisal's face turned red. He was struggling to breathe.

"D-don't kill me, H-Hamza," the young man wheezed.

"Y-you'll r-regret it."

Hamza narrowed his eyes.

"I know you have forgotten everything after the chopper crash," he coughed. "Don't do this. I can help you remember!"

At the corner of his eye, he noticed Qaaf nearing.

"Your mother's alive!" he cried. "I can take you to her!"

Hamza froze. His eyes widened. His heart skipped a beat.

What had Faisal just said?

Hamza narrowed his eyes.

"How can you possibly do that?"

He released the pressure from Faisal's throat.

"Your father's name is Wahab," Faisal wheezed. "And your mother, I know where she is. But you'll have to do me a favour first."

Hamza frowned.

"I have questions," he whispered. "And I want answers. Now."

Faisal nodded.

"Come with me," he sighed. "I will answer everything I can. Then you'll understand."

He nodded to Qaaf, but Hamza shook his head.

"I don't want him."

Faisal chuckled.

"He's my protection."

Hamza smirked.

"If I wanted you dead, him being there wouldn't make a difference".

Faisal burst out laughing.

"I am starting to like you Hamza," he whispered. "You are a confident man. That's good. Just make sure it doesn't get the better of you."

He clapped his hands together. All of a sudden, from every direction, men dressed in black and armed to the teeth, emerged.

From behind boxes, from within the boxes even! Almost a hundred.

Hamza's eyes widened as they surrounded him.

"And remember," Faisal paused. "If I meant you harm, then you would not get close enough to threaten me. Don't ever choke me again."

Hamza raised a brow. The young man was good.

"Let's go," Hamza declared.

Faisal nodded, motioning for Qaaf to stay still. Qaaf nodded, before bowing his head respectfully.

The two entered the elevator.

Faisal began pressing multiple buttons together.

First four, then seven, next five and finally one.

The elevator beeped three times, to which Faisal shouted out, "9354!"

The elevator beeped and then it happened. The loud humming of an engine emerged as Hamza felt queasy in his stomach. They were going down. And fast.

"Allah," Hamza muttered under his breath, remembering how Rizwan found peace in hard times. "Grant me strength."

The elevator engine hummed for another second, before disappearing entirely. The doors slid open, exposing a strange room.

"After you," Faisal smiled.

Hamza narrowed his eyes. This was all making him uncomfortable. But what choice did he have? Ready for even the slightest movement, he stepped into the room. But nothing happened.

Faisal chuckled as he strolled in.

"Now, I have something to show you."

He clapped his hands together.

Almost immediately two men entered the room dressed in black. They carried something into the room. It was a body bag.

"As I told you earlier," Faisal whispered. "We are on the same side."

Faisal peeled off the cover slightly, so as to expose the face of the one who had passed. Hamza's eyes widened in horror.

“Kumail!” he gasped.

120

Answers

Hamza's eyes were glued to Kumail's body. He couldn't bring himself to look away. The traitor was dead. Gone. Just as he'd killed Shahida.

"I want answers," Hamza whispered, clenching his fist.

He was getting tired of all of the games. Faisal would answer his questions now.

Faisal moved deeper into the room, towards a screen on the wall.

"Well Hamza," he sighed. "What do you wish to know?"

Hamza looked down. This was it. Which question should he start with? Maybe he should ask about the box? No. There was something that took precedence.

"Who am I?" Hamza asked awkwardly.

Faisal smiled. He pointed to Hamza's leg.

"Lift your leg sleeve slightly," he instructed.

Hamza did so, revealing a strange scar.

"Who do you think you are?" Faisal asked.

Hamza looked down. Many times he had thought about this. He had thought maybe some kind of army soldier. But his skillset encompassed things that weren't in normal soldiers, like his wide variety of knowledge and languages.

"I am some kind of soldier," Hamza asserted.

Faisal shook his head.

“You are not just a soldier. You are a one of a kind soldier,” he revealed. “You are, what we call an Alpha. A top notch soldier trained across all kinds of academic fields and taught wide varieties of languages. You were trained your whole life.”

Hamza’s eyes widened partially. This didn’t make any sense.

“You were mentored by Alpha 16, and you became Alpha 49”

Hamza’s eyes widened as he realised his scar was shaped like a 49. Was Faisal saying the truth? Was he really an elite soldier.

“You were trained in a special facility called the iron fortress,” Faisal revealed. “Managed by a woman named Jumeira.”

Hamza blinked. The name rung a bell.

Faisal paused.

“All was good, until the enemy found the base,” he sighed. “The enemy destroyed our facility and Jumeira is dead now.”

Hamza took a deep breath. This was a lot to take in one go.

“They established their own state, which they call Peaceville,” Faisal scoffed. “But we will *regain control* of what was once ours.”

Hamza narrowed his eyes.

“That’s where you come in Hamza. The box you have contains something we need. You were responsible for safeguarding it but this traitor,” he pointed to Kumail’s body. “This traitor tried to steal the box, maybe hoping that he could sell it on the black market. But you went after him and stopped him. Realising that only we knew of it’s value and fearing our wrath, he tried to earn forgiveness by bringing you and the box back.”

Hamza looked down.

“So I wasn’t bad, right?”

He didn’t know why he asked such a childish question.

Faisal nodded.

“You only punished the bad. Now, are you convinced of my friendship?”

Hamza looked down.

“Not yet,” he confessed.

Faisal nodded once more.

“Very well,” Faisal answered. “You will be, eventually. In the meanwhile, consider my offer. Do you want to help me, and in return, I’ll help you meet your mother.”

Hamza shook his head.

“Don’t decide immediately,” Faisal sighed. “Think about it. Tomorrow, at breakfast, you can let me know of your decision.”

121

Nighttime Contemplations

Even though it was late, Hamza was wide awake. He was unable to sleep with the weight of choice on his mind. Hamza had never been in a tighter situation. He was trapped with a simple question to answer. How far would he go for his past?

He looked down at the scar on his ankle. The mark of an Alpha. He had always known that he wasn't ordinary. His skills were not normal. His strength was not normal. He had already found many answers, but he needed to know more.

He eyed the box in his hand.

“Why do you hold so much value for Faisal? What do you contain?”

Hamza narrowed his eyes.

Faisal would, no doubt, ask him to do something dangerous. And if Hamza went, Musa and Rizwan would be with him. He was not only responsible for his own safety now, but theirs as well.

But his mother! His actual mother! She was alive! Hamza couldn't lose such an opportunity. If he didn't, he might never find her again. Besides, how bad could the mission be? Hamza would be strong enough to punch his way through it. He could protect Rizwan and Musa.

Hamza took a deep breath. Deep down, it had never really been a choice. It had only been a question of how much time did

he need to justify his decision. He was certain of which option he would pick. No matter the mission, he would accept it.

122

Broken

It was cold. The wind was blowing violently. Abbas groaned.

“Where am I?” he whispered weakly.

He glanced around himself, coughing, as he tried to get out from the heavy snowfall. He tried to move. But he couldn't. His body was sore beyond compare.

Abbas's entire world was black. He groaned a little, every single muscle was screaming with pain. There was a soft beeping echoing in his ear.

He tried to open his eyes but they felt like lead. Finally, he managed to crack them open but instantly regretted it.

He was in a white walled room. The distinct smell of sanitizer and soap told him exactly where he was.

The hospital. Well, that's great.

Looking around, he noticed the room was fairly bare. White walls stretching between heavily scuffed, cheap tiles and a grey ceiling. His only companions were an annoyingly high pitched heart monitor and an IV line, the tube leading to his left hand.

Slowly, trying to block out the stiffness and protest from his muscles, he tried to clench his fingers. He was a little disappointed when they only wiggled in place.

“Agh!” he gasped as a surge of pain flared in his back. Not wanting to agitate it more, he resigned in his place.

Apparently he didn't need to wait long. A face peeked through the door, flinging it open when they saw him awake.

“Ah Abbas. Alhamdullillah you’re awake. Good to see you with us.”

Abbas greeted the man and tried to push himself up. It was a mistake. A painful stabbing sensation tore through his spine, forcing a gasp past his lips.

“Don’t move!” the doctor insisted.

Abbas had no other choice but to listen. Even as the doctor helped him adjust his position, he could feel his nerves tingling.

Once the doctor was sure that his patient was in no pain, he was about to ask Abbas something when two figures called his name from the door.

For the first time since he woke up, Abbas smiled. His brother was incessantly asking questions and his mother fawned over him, tears spilling unashamedly down her eyes. Somewhere in the midst of the commotion, his doctor had vanished.

‘Probably felt like he was intruding their privacy.’

“Layla. Haider,” the two of them froze.

Abbas wasn’t sure the heart monitor was working properly. It didn’t show his heart plunging into his stomach at the sound of Akbar’s voice. Or how it froze seeing his stoic face.

“Could you give us a moment?” They each gave Abbas a final hug, his mother lingering a moment longer before they left.

Akbar closed the door behind them. Abbas braced himself. He would take it. Whatever Akbar said.

But it never came. He stood by the door, watching Abbas with eyes that told him nothing. Somehow, this felt worse. Abbas almost wished that he would lash out.

“I’m sorry...” Abbas blurted out, the words spilling from his mouth before he could stop them. “I should have listened to y-”

“Amr got away.”

Abbas felt like someone slapped him. Akbar took a step forward and leaned on the wall.

“H-How...” Abbas was at a loss for words. His mouth opened and closed uselessly.

“I had him. I was about to bring him in. But now he’s lost to the winds. Because I had a choice to make between you and him.”

The statement was said without any hint of a taunt or venom. But it might as well have been slathered in it.

Abbas wished for nothing more than the bed to swallow him whole.

“People warned me. That you weren’t ready. That you were too young. I disagreed. I staked my word on it. That you were strong enough, brave enough, smart enough. I guess I was wrong.”

Akbar’s voice was lacking any emotion but each statement drove a knife through Abbas’s heart.

“So here’s what will happen. You’re going to tell me everything you know. Everything you did behind my back, behind Murtaza’s back.” Abbas wanted to bury himself and never resurface. Akbar was speaking to him like he was a child.

And so Abbas did.

He started where it had begun. The letters in Akbar’s fire place. Akbar listened patiently, not saying a word as Abbas explained how he had figured out that the letters had been warnings. How from there, he had eavesdropped on Akbar and Murtaza’s discussion and heard them mention ‘Operation Dead Grass’. As Abbas spoke, he tried to read Akbar’s emotions but couldn’t see anything. No warmth. No hate. Just a dead gaze.

Abbas then mentioned the analyst part, how Jannat had refused to help and how Nabeel had offered him everything. How Nabeel had retrieved the files and how he was a member of Sada-e-Haq. Akbar looked up at that part, but said nothing.

Abbas continued. He then explained how he had come home to find his mother and brother missing with Harun waiting for him. The trail of clues he had followed including the picture of Farheen Auntie, to reach the bridge. Abbas shuddered. The bridge where Amr had been waiting for him.

“And then I passed out,” Abbas finished. “Next thing I know, I wake up here.”

He felt thirst scrape at his throat. Akbar had let him ramble through all the details without interruption. As the seconds passed, Abbas’s worries were slowly mounting. Even now his mentor’s face was looking down, not meeting his eyes.

Akbar pushed himself off the wall in a single smooth motion.

“You’re not the boy I trained. You’re not the kid who suffered day after day to earn his rank in the front line. The one who fought against Khalid, Alpha 43, and Jumeira. *You* can’t even fight against yourself.”

Abbas didn’t agree with that.

“I’ll prove it you! Put me at the bottom rank! I’ll earn my way back!” Abbas begged him. But Akbar’s face was unrelenting. If anything he looked a little sad.

“There is nothing left to prove Abbas, you couldn’t even if you wanted to.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your legs Abbas. You’re...paralyzed.”

Abbas frowned. He waited for Akbar to laugh. To smile. To shout out that it was some joke, a big bad joke. But it never came.

“No...no...” Abbas threw the blankets aside and tried to stand.

He gritted his teeth as his torso twisted, the pain tearing into his spine. But his legs didn’t move. Abbas felt the blood rush to his head as he tried again. He caught himself on the rail right before he would have hit the floor. His legs hadn’t budged. He couldn’t lift his legs, couldn’t bend his knee. He couldn’t even wiggle his toe.

“Your father couldn’t bear to come. To think that this was the same boy he nearly died for. That his wife nearly died for. And you threw everything away. Their sacrifice. Their love. None of it mattered to you.”

Abbas looked up at Akbar, his eyes begging. He didn’t care about the tears flowing down his cheeks like a river.

Akbar did not smile or frown. He looked at Abbas’s broken form as the boy slowly crumbled, begging him to help.

The man at the door was shaking his head in pity. “I’m sorry Abbas, there’s nothing I can do. You ruined everything. You played into his hands like a child.”

He wasn’t even halfway out the door when Abbas yelled. He screamed. He begged. He growled. But Akbar didn’t respond. He just left, shutting the door behind him. Akbar placed a hand on his chest, taking a deep breath. His eyes were red. He closed

his eyes, ignoring the pain.

“The battle isn’t over,” Akbar whispered, glancing at a man who was leaning against the wall.

And with that Akbar began walking away.

Murtaza watched him go in an almost morbid fascination through the sheen of tears streaming down his own cheeks and soaking his beard as he was forced to endure his son’s anguished cries. Akbar had sealed himself emotionally. His heart not willing to move past Abbas’s mistakes. Murtaza himself wasn’t sure. Part of him wanted to break the door down and take Abbas in his arms, soothing his pain. But Murtaza suppressed it. Murtaza knew it was the right thing to do. Amr was still out there. While it tore him apart, he turned and left, following after Akbar. No good would come from their idling. There was nothing he could do for Abbas now.

123

Imposters

Tick...Tock...Tick...Tock.

A small wall clock suspended by a chain hung on the wall. It was grey in colour, contrasting the mold infested surface it was blinded to. The whole room suffered from the greenish blue substance, and the smell was awful.

Amr winced, pressing his hand against his bandaged wound.

“Argh! Akbar,” he growled. “Never misses his target.”

Amr narrowed his eyes. Akbar was never meant to be there. But he was. That could only mean one thing.

Amr sighed, leaning forward as the door creaked open. All three Alphas stepped inside. First Harun, then Masud and finally Sting.

“Why did you send for us?” Harun whispered.

Amr nodded slightly, straightening up.

“You all know who I am, right?” Amr asked.

All three Alphas nodded.

“Good good,” Amr sighed. “And you know the powers I represent?”

Again they nodded.

Amr forced a grin.

“Excellent,” he whispered. “Excellent indeed.”

Amr stepped out of his chair.

“Do you all recall that we saved you from Zaqqum prison?” he asked, studying everyone’s body language.

The Alphas nodded.

“Where are you going with this, Amr?” Sting spat annoyingly. “We cannot spend all day here!”

Amr took a deep breath. Now for the hard part.

“Only four people knew of the plan,” he whispered, withdrawing a small revolver.

“I knew,” Amr chuckled, loading one bullet in. “Harun knew.”

Amr loaded another bullet.

“Masud knew,” Amr added, loading a third bullet. “and finally, Sting.”

Amr loaded a fourth bullet.

Click.

It was ready to fire. The Alphas were glancing amongst each other, realising that they were too far to disarm Amr by hand.

“So, who wants to tell me?” Amr snarled. “How did Akbar find out?”

The Alphas were silent. As expected.

Amr grinned. He faced the revolver to the sky.

Boom!

The Alphas recoiled as the bullet went whizzing into the roof.

“What is the meaning of this?” Masud snarled.

“I know that I didn’t tell anyone,” Amr chuckled sadistically, ignoring Masud’s statement.

He eyed all three Alphas.

“Give me a reason Harun, why should I believe you?”

Harun growled under his breath.

“I have a score to settle with Murtaza,” he whispered. ‘I would never save his offspring.’

Boom!

Another bullet went whizzing into the roof.

“I know that,” Amr grinned. “So you can come on my side.”

Harun stepped away from Sting and Masud, withdrawing a pistol of his own.

“This is madness!” Masud growled.

Amr shrugged.

“You seem to be on edge, Masud?” the hooded figure remarked casually.

Masud glanced at Sting.

“I didn’t do it,” he whispered.

Amr nodded.

“And Sting?” he asked.

Sting smirked.

“Do I look like a traitor to you?” she snarled.

Amr smiled.

“Reza was one of the greatest Alphas. Even Alpha 43 couldn’t see past him,” Amr whispered. “So I’m sorry Sting. You’re going to need a better reason than that.”

Amr leaned back on his chair.

“What do you say, Harun?” he asked calmly. “Whose bullet goes to the roof?”

Harun had been a silent observer until now. Eyeing the other two Alphas, he remarked,

“I don’t believe either of them would betray us.”

Boom!

A bullet went whizzing to the roof.

“Step aside Sting,” Amr whispered.

Masud’s eyes shot up.

“Wai-”

Boom!

The bullet struck Masud in his chest and he slumped down on the ground in a pool of blood.

“Wha-” Harun gasped.

Sting’s eyes widened.

“Why did you shoot him?” she growled.

Amr snarled.

“I always wondered where was he when I broke you all out of Zaqqum prison? How could he have escaped such a cell?”

Masud wheezed painfully.

“Akbar had visited Zaqqum earlier that morning. I’m presuming he took you out of the jail, Masud?”

Masud glared at Amr.

“What did he promise you?” Amr challenged. “Freedom?”

Sting stepped in front.

“This is crazy!” she hissed. “Masud is-”

“Abbas reached the Alamdar bridge as planned!” Amr overspoke, eyeing sting. “You were the only one who could have given him the clue with that information. So you Sting, couldn’t possibly have had the chance to warn Akbar. And Harun and I didn’t do it, so....”

The other two Alphas glared at Masud.

“So you betrayed us,” Sting growled.

Wham!

Harun grabbed the bleeding Alpha and slammed him into the wall.

“Agh,” Masud winced, coughing once more.

“I w-won’t be y-your....” he panted. “or the l-League’s slave. I w-will be a f-free man.”

Amr sighed.

“Alas Masud,” he whispered. “You chose the wrong side.”

He pulled out a small dagger.

“Allah forgive my sins,” Masud repented.

There was a blur and Masud slumped down on the ground, dead, a knife having struck him in the chest. Amr, Sting and Harun overshadowed his dead body.

“The price of treachery is death,” Sting spat.

Harun nodded, both Alphas turning to Amr.

“What now?” Harun whispered.

Amr grinned.

“Now, we take the last piece of the puzzle. Faiza.”

Cleaning out the Filth

Akbar narrowed his eyes. In his hand was a large dagger, sharp enough to cut through a bear. He twirled it softly in his hand, his eyes observing the ground. Before him stood two individuals. Two people, both of whom were standing quietly. Both were nervous.

On the left stood Jannat, her eyes swollen from crying. Her lips quivered as she continued to stare down. Akbar noted her breathing was irregular. She was very nervous.

On the other side was a young man. He too was nervous, looking down awkwardly. Akbar had asked around regarding this young man, finding out that his name was Nabeel. One of the best analysts in the Peaceville government.

Akbar sighed, “Jannat. Nabeel. Do you know why you are brought here?”

Both shook their heads. Of course they did. The standard reaction to a direct question was immediate denial.

“Amr is our enemy,” Akbar began. “And he has been striking at us relentlessly, like a snake in a hole. Whenever we turn, the snake strikes us. And I’ve been wondering that this snake seems to have astronomical accuracy with timing. He always knows where and how we are vulnerable.”

Both Jannat and Nabeel looked up, their eyes wide with horror.

“Yes,” Akbar sighed. “Unfortunately, the recent events have made me all but certain. One of you is a traitor.”

Jannat shook her head.

“I would never betray!” Nabeel exclaimed. “My mother-”

Akbar raised his hand for silence.

“There is strong evidence against each of you.”

He turned to Jannat.

“Jannat, you served the revolution faithfully behind enemy lines under Reza’s guidance,” he started. “But you weren’t able to prevent Amr from infiltrating a system that was guaranteed secure by you.”

Jannat gasped.

“I would never betray!” she cried. “Abbas came to me seeking files on Operation Dead..grain or something! I refused. I knew you had classified those files as restricted.”

Nabeel looked down in a guilty manner.

“Nabeel,” Akbar whispered.

The youth nodded.

“I understand you’re an informant for Sada-e-Haq.”

Nabeel shook his head, withdrawing a small wooden pendant shaped like a Zulfiqar.

“I am a member,” he whispered. “Informants get paid.”

Akbar narrowed his eyes like a wolf, causing Nabeel to cower slightly.

“Why did you give Abbas those files? How did you obtain them?”

Nabeel shrugged.

“I like a good challenge. In my free time, I sometimes play around with the system. Try to see if I can break it. I’m just an academic enthusiast, nothing malicious.”

Akbar nodded.

“As expected,” he whispered. “Both of you have compelling arguments.”

Jannat and Nabeel glanced at each other nervously.

“I don’t have time for this,” Akbar whispered, withdrawing another knife. “I’m just going to make an offer once.”

Jannat and Nabeel eyed him, both frightened.

“I will allow you to live,” Akbar sighed. “If you confess right now.”

Neither said anything. Akbar growled under his breath.

“Very well,” he decided. “In that case, both of you must die.”

“What!” Jannat and Nabeel exclaimed simultaneously.

Jannat recoiled in horror.

“Akbar Uncle, it’s not me!” she begged.

Nabeel broke down.

“I have never betrayed anyone!” he sobbed.

Wham!

Akbar slammed his hand on the table. Both Jannat and Nabeel went quiet.

“I’m giving you each five seconds,” he whispered.

First he turned to Jannat.

“Five,”

She shook her head in disbelief.

“Four!” Akbar growled.

Tears streamed down her cheeks.

“Three!” Akbar snarled, turning to Nabeel.

“Two!” Nabeel’s eyes darted left and right in nervousness.

“One!” Akbar chuckled cruelly. “Last chance!”

“Zero!”

Silence. Akbar eyed both of them. They were still quiet.

“Akbar Uncle,” Jannat repeated.

Akbar shook his head.

“Sorry Jannat,” he whispered.

There was a blur as a dagger zipped through the air, striking Jannat directly.

Her eyes widened in horror and she slumped down unconscious.

Akbar turned to a horrified Nabeel. Raising his knife, he aimed-

“Okay!” Nabeel screamed.

Akbar stopped. His eyes narrowed.

The young man dropped to his knees in defeat.

“I did it!” Nabeel spat. “I betrayed. Please don’t kill me! I planted a computer virus in the system for the Night of Heroes, I hijacked the channels for Amr’s broadcasts. I tapped into the telephone lines for your offices.”

Akbar narrowed his eyes, shaking his head in disgust.

“You’re a coward, Nabeel,” he sighed. “A coward. You never worked for Sada-e-Haq, did you? That pendant was just a fabrication.”

Nabeel nodded, holding the Zulfiqar pendant in his hand.

“What did they bait you with?” Akbar asked.

Nabeel’s lip quivered as he spoke.

“I’m not from Peaceville. I always worked for Amr.”

Akbar narrowed his eyes. So, he was an enemy entirely.

“I’m glad I trusted my gut on this one, Alhamdulillah,” the ex Alpha remarked.

Nabeel raised a brow. What did Akbar mean?

“I knew you were a traitor!” a voice sounded on his right.

Nabeel froze, turning to see Jannat! Alive!

“Wha-?” he faltered. ‘H-how is this possible!’

She pulled the dagger out, tapping it against her arm.

Clank. Clank.

Nabeel’s eyes widened in horror, before narrowing in fury. She was wearing body armour!

“You tricked me!” Nabeel snarled at Akbar. “You knew it was me all along.”

Akbar smirked.

“Jannat is the best analyst we have in Peaceville,” he grinned.

“Even when the Alphas reigned in this land, she never betrayed Reza. She would never betray our cause.”

Nabeel hissed as Akbar clapped his hands together. The door creaked open and in came two soldiers. Dawud and Yasir.

“Take him away!” Akbar ordered.

The two soldiers nodded. As they reached, Nabeel snarled. Akbar and Jannat watched as he pushed Yasir.

“I won’t go to-”

Wham!

Dawud smashed a fist in his face, knocking him out cold. Fast asleep, Nabeel resisted no more as Dawud and Yasir dragged him away. Upon leaving, Jannat turned to Akbar.

“Akbar Uncle,” she whispered. “I owe you an apology.”

Akbar raised a brow curiously.

“I always doubted if I was good enough to be in this team,” she whispered. “I can’t hold a gun, I can’t fight, sometimes I can’t do my own job perfectly.”

Akbar listened quietly.

“I wanted to thank you, because you made me realise that instead of blaming the world for my shortcomings, I should improve myself. I must try to do the best I can and as long as Allah knows my efforts, I will be content.”

Akbar smiled kindly.

“I am glad you figured it out Jannat,” he whispered.

“Now...return to your duty. We need our best analyst on the job.”

Jannat grinned, bowing her head respectfully as she left.

Akbar took a deep breath. He had no doubt Amr would wonder how on earth Akbar had found Abbas in time. He would definitely be asking around. And while Masud was sharp, Akbar knew he was definitely no Reza. Amr would probably catch him soon, assuming he hadn’t already caught him.

“Allah Allah,” Akbar whispered. “The traitors are out of the game. Now it’s time to solve the last puzzle piece. Faiza.”

125

Breakfast

The first thing Hamza felt when he woke up was silken sheets. They were cold against his skin but it felt as though he was lying on clouds. Like the rest of the room, it too spoke of the extravagant lifestyle Faisal lead. That alone set Hamza a little on edge. As enjoyable as it was, people who lived such lives, especially in a city like this one, usually didn't achieve it the honest way. He slid out and quickly set back the sheets. As he was getting dressed, Hamza couldn't help but think about yesterday's conversation with Faisal.

Did he really have a choice? His mother. She was in Azaab city. And she was the key to unlocking the answers he so desperately sought. The truth about his father and his past. But on the other hand, Faisal was not a man to be taken lightly. One does not simply gain wealth and status like his in Azaab city. He knew what Hamza was capable of, and more importantly, he knew how vital this information was to him. The price would not be light. While Hamza did not doubt his own abilities, it did not abate the concern he felt.

His torn emotions had not yet settled, even as he entered the breakfast room. Musa and Rizwan were watching with wary eyes as Hamza sat into a chair and helped himself to the spread. They were not privy to what had been said, but clearly it had affected Hamza. He did not meet their eyes and was clearly lost in his own thoughts. Rizwan tried and failed to subtly make contact but

before he could retry, the door swung open and Faisal strutted into the room. He gave the three men a decent nod and settled to have breakfast. Once the last piece of toast was devoured, the two men were politely but firmly escorted from the room. Hamza gave them a reassuring look and so they left without fuss but not without concern.

Once the door was shut, Faisal turned to Hamza and in a very placating tone, asked him, "I hope the accommodation was to your and your friends' liking?" At Hamza's nod, he continued. "Then I trust you had a chance to reconsider my offer. Have you come to a conclusion?"

The tone was as smooth as any snake-oiled salesman but the scarier part was how sincere he sounded, Hamza would have to take anything he said or did with a grain of salt.

It was nothing more than a game of chess. Moves were made. Pieces were lost. Victories were made. And Hamza didn't plan on losing.

"I have." Hamza's voice echoed impressively in the small space. At his reply, Faisal set aside the napkin in his hand and turned to fully face Hamza.

"I see, and what have you decided?"

The tensions was palpable but Hamza had a decision. It had been egging his mind since Faisal made the offer and he could see no better alternative.

"I accept."

If Faisal was pleased, then he didn't show it. He merely rose with Hamza and grasped his hand in a firm handshake.

"Pleasure doing business with you Hamza."

126

Departure

Hamza never had many belongings beyond the clothes on his back. He eyed the few garments he now owned, neatly and comfortably nestled inside a canvas satchel bag. Amongst his organized assortment of clothes was the mysterious box. Hamza now wanted it in the safest place possible. With himself. And in addition a shiny silver gun that Faisal had given him was placed. It was semi automatic. Powerful enough to rip through a beast. Hamza couldn't resist lifting it up and giving it a closer look. It was not a cheap model and somehow it felt comforting. The gun had a familiar grasp.

A prompt knock roused him from his thoughts.

"Come in!" he called, placing the gun in his holster. A butler walked in and promptly reported that his transport was ready. Hamza nodded, zipping up the bag. Shouldering his small burden, he followed the butler out of the room and down the elaborate halls. After a dizzying number of twists and turns, they finally made it to where Rizwan and Musa were waiting. Both were holding bags just like Hamza's.

"Ready to go?" he asked. Both nodded though Hamza could see apprehension on their faces. "What's wrong?"

"Well.." signed Musa. *"We're ready to follow you where ever you'll go. But we are worried about Faisal."*

"What Musa means is..." Rizwan looked around before he leaned in. "We're not sure if we can trust Faisal."

Hamza raised his hand cautiously.

There are ears everywhere he signed.

"I know. But we'll be alright" Hamza assured them.

"Inshallah," Rizwan whispered, sending an awkward chill up Hamza's spine.

He didn't have a chance to say anything more as a familiar large physique made its way down the hall towards him. Qaaf was trudging his way towards them, his menacing frame towering over Musa and Rizwan. On his face was a nasty snarl, clearly aimed at Hamza.

He motioned for them to come, and turned without waiting for a response.

"Well, he's going to miss us, especially you Hamza." Musa signed, a smirk forming on his face.

Hamza felt a warm ray of happiness in his heart. Musa was finally starting to recover from the loss of Shahida. Though Rizwan still showed signs of deterioration, Hamza nodded, resisting the urge to ruffle Musa's hair playfully. He never wanted to show a potential weakness before anyone like Faisal or Qaaf.

The way to the roof was less confusing and soon enough the four of them were standing out in the cool air. From the top of the elaborate base they could see the entire city and it was not a typical view.

Black. The city was black. Burnt carcasses of former homes. Blackened car frames. Streets overflowing with litter and shattered glass. Desolation and devastation was evident.

"Don't stand too close." came a smooth voice from behind them. "Unless you want to be the target practice for the snipers."

"Snipers?" Hamza chuckled.

They turned to find Faisal standing behind Qaaf who was wearing an eerily sinister sneer. Suddenly he pressed a finger to his ear and then leaned down to whisper to Faisal.

"There he goes again" scoffed Rizwan.

Nodding to dismiss Qaaf, Faisal stepped forward. He gave Hamza a meaningful look. He wanted to say something privately.

Hamza glanced at Musa and Rizwan. Catching his eye, they both understood and moved slightly back. Hamza advanced

toward Faisal who was standing near the edge of the building.

“What?” Hamza whispered.

Faisal took a deep breath.

“This mission is of critical importance Hamza.”

Hamza nodded.

“I need this box more than anything. Just remember what happened to Kumail can happen to anyone.”

Hamza narrowed his eyes. His lips curled into a smile.

“Ah,” he sighed. “You know, seventeen snipers aren’t enough to cover your entire helipad and base.”

Faisal’s eyes widened in confusion.

“How-”

“Three in the building on the right, two in the building on the left. Five on the roof of the building directly before us. You have seven snipers on the ground. That’s too many. Ground snipers have limited scope and are too vulnerable. Consider moving them to optimise performance.”

Hamza met Faisal’s gaze which was completely lost. Hamza chuckled.

“Don’t threaten me, Faisal,” he whispered.

Faisal nodded.

“You are definitely the right man for the job,” the young man answered, partially confused. “I hope you and I can be allies in the future.”

Hamza shrugged. And with that, they moved back to the group.

“Gentlemen, your ride,” Faisal gestured.

As though on a cue, a huge whirl erupted from beyond the wall of the house and a helicopter came into view. Hamza ducked instinctively as it passed over and landed smoothly on the helipad.

A few men jumped out and escorted Hamza, Musa and Rizwan to the helicopter, the giant propelling flinging waves of dirt and dust into the air. Once they got buckled in, Hamza felt his seat vibrate.

As the vibrations increased, he felt a familiar flop in his stomach as the helicopter wrenched free of the ground. Slowly, the house grew smaller, Faisal and Qaaf grew miniscule. As they

shrunk out of view, Hamza couldn't help but feel an uneasy churn in his stomach.

Had he made the right choice?

Reports and Updates

The room was dark. A palpable tension prevailed in the air. Amr narrowed his eyes as the screen flickered. Three masked figures cloaked in white stood before him. Amr bowed his head respectfully.

“Amr,” the first masked figure whispered. “Is what we hear true?”

Amr nodded, his lips curling into a sly grin.

“I found Faiza,” the hooded assassin remarked. “She’s still alive.”

One of the cloaked figures in the screen stood up.

“How are you so certain?” she asked.

Amr suppressed a chuckle.

“I know that if the revolution were to happen, Faiza would never shy away from committing herself to such a cause. And if she did, then the other revolutionaries would know her. So I used one of them to lead me to her home.”

The League glanced amongst each other.

“We have acquired information. The box. It has miraculously resurfaced.”

Amr’s eyes widened.

“Where?” he asked.

The League did not respond.

Amr bowed his head.

“My apologies,” he whispered. “I am only glad to hear that *Project CV* is going to reach fruition.”

Amr narrowed his eyes.

“We have sent the box to you,” One of the League members whispered. “We expect you to open the box and retrieve the vial.”

Amr nodded.

“Soon we will have the box, and Faiza” he said with an evil grin, “The control virus will bring about the destruction of Peaceville and with it, we will achieve *Ultimate Control*. Nobody will stop us. Peaceville will fall.”

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Reflections

Beep.....Beep...Beep...

Abbas turned over uncomfortably. His eyes were shut entirely, voices ringing inside his head.

You're not the boy I trained.

Abbas took a deep breath, Akbar's disappointment imprinted in his mind.

You're not the kid who suffered day after day to earn his rank in the front line. The one who fought against Khalid, against Alpha 43, against Jumeira. You can't even fight against yourself.

'I am,' Abbas cried.

He looked down at his legs, his heart still in disbelief.

"Ah," Abbas sighed, reaching down and pinching his knee.

His eyes watered. He felt nothing. Absolutely nothing.

"Allah!" Abbas cried. "I'm sorry for what I've done. I should have heeded my parent's advice."

He finally understood the mysterious dreams of the wolf he had. *He was* the wolf. The mighty warrior, crippled by his own arrogance. Of course Amr would be a skilled fighter, would the League have sent him against the likes of Akbar otherwise?

Abbas closed his eyes, trying to get some sleep. He had failed. And his failure had let everyone down. Including his parents.

"Your father couldn't bear to come. To think this was the same boy he nearly died for. That his wife nearly died for. And

you threw everything away. Their sacrifice. Their love. None of it mattered to you."

Abbas closed his eyes. He couldn't bear the burden of his mistakes. His back wasn't the only thing Amr had destroyed. Amr had broken Abbas's drive. His heart. The strength that made him who he was.

'Once was,' Abbas sighed.

He had become arrogant. He had become full of pride over his achievements. Worse, he disrespected others. Abbas had looked down on people like Jannat and Shafique, and for what? Abbas closed his eyes, trying to forget, hoping that he would wake up from this nightmare. That he'd be back in bed. In his blanket. His mother making breakfast downstairs and his father speaking with Akbar in the living room. His brother Haider running around the place.

He focused on the beeps of a neighbouring device.

Beep!

'One,' Abbas counted.

Beep!

'Two,' Abbas noted.

Beep!

'Three,' Abbas yawned.

The beeps starting getting fainter and fainter. And Abbas felt a strange shuddering in his heart. His pain starting fading away. *And he suddenly felt lighter, like he was floating through the air or something. The clouds so incredibly large and fluffy like cotton. But they were shaped more like sheep-*

His eyes shot open. He gasped, sighing in relief. He was back in the hospital room. No clouds. No sheep. Just the dull sluggishness of the hospital.

Abbas was still for a moment.

"What have I done?" he cried, burying his face in his hands. "I ruined everything."

Abbas's guilt burnt him worse than any pain he had ever felt. He continued to stare at the window.

Creak.

The door swung open and in came a woman. Abbas sighed.

It was Ruqayya. In her hands were two bags of food. How did Abbas know? The aroma of Nihari had suddenly filled the room.

“Salamunalaikum Api,” he whispered.

Ruqayya smiled kindly.

“Walaikum asalam. How’s my brother doing today?”

Abbas didn’t respond. He just looked down.

“I brought food if you’d-” she stopped.

Abbas was thankful, but he wasn’t in the mood right now.

“I remember this emotion very well,” she sighed, placing the bags down on a table.

Abbas looked up, meeting her lost gaze.

“The feeling of pain. Guilt. Regret. Believing that if you were stronger, you might have prevented this.”

Abbas raised a brow. Where was she going with this.

“When I shut myself off from the world, a brave young boy came to me. When I cried, begging the ground to swallow me up, he supported me. Encouraged me to stand up and fight,” she whispered. “You.”

Abbas shook his head.

“That was different, Api,” he whispered.

Ruqayya took a deep breath.

“Abbas, the journey to Allah(swt) begins with repentance,” she whispered. “You can’t just give up like this.”

Abbas closed his eyes, trying to forget that moment when Amr had struck his back.

“It’s too late,” Abbas was remorse.

Ruqayya smiled, causing Abbas to raise his brow.

“You know something Abbas,” she whispered. “When Naqi Bhai and I were really little, our father forbid us from leaving our home. And by home I mean a caved-in house, reduced to rubble.”

Abbas listened, unsure of where she was going with this.

“Naqi Bhai was always mischievous. And one day, when he was around your age, he took me outside for an adventure.”

Abbas blinked. Naqi Bhai was one of the most responsible people he had ever known.

“My father found out and got infuriated,” Ruqyya shuddered, a sad smile forming on her face. “I wish we had paid heed to his

scolding that night.”

Abbas’s eyes widened slightly. He remembered how angry Akbar had been- Abbas stopped. It was too painful to think of Akbar Uncle.

“We, being the foolish youths we were, decided to go the following day again, but this time we were seen.”

Abbas’s heart skipped a beat.

“Our father died that day Abbas,” Ruqayya swallowed. “Fighting off an Alpha so we could live. Before he died, he told Naqi Bhai to look after me, not unlike what Naqi Bhai told you.”

Abbas’s heart sank. How did Ruqayya and Naqi live with themselves after such an atrocious error? Their father had died!

“We all make mistakes Abbas. It’s not right, and there are always consequences,” Ruqayya whispered. “Yes, you messed up. Yes, you got yourself paralyzed. Yes, Amr has struck us badly. But the fight isn’t over. Islam calls us to defend humanity, truth, honour, and justice. Where will you stand when that call comes?”

Abbas’s eyes widened. It felt like someone had wedged a hole in his overshadowing clouds of gloom.

“Say it with me,” she whispered. “Ya Zahra!”

Abbas closed his eyes.

“Ya Zahra!” he whispered.

Ruqayya repeated herself.

“Come on! Pour the burden of your heart in our esteemed mother Bibi Fatima Zahra! Confide your troubles. She will help you! Ya Zahra!”

Abbas remembered his journey. How he had washed up on the shores of Peaceville, not remembering anything. How he had emerged, like a fire from there. Facing the challenges with no one but Allah to rely on.

“Ya Zahra!” Abbas repeated, louder this time. “Ya Zahra!”

He shuddered, opening his eyes.

“I will not give up!” Abbas spoke in a bold voice. “I repent for what I’ve done. And I will pick up my arms once more, Inshallah.”

Ruqayya beamed, her eyes reflecting a genuine happiness.

“It is time to rise,” Abbas whispered.

He pushed himself up, his legs still unmoved. Abbas sighed.

“The journey to Allah starts with repentance. And repentance includes making ammendments,” Abbas whispered.

Turning to Ruqayya he stated, “Ruqayya Api, I’m gonna need your help.”

The Jump

The chopper may have been high tech, but that didn't reduce the turbulence of the flight. Especially, as they approached the island. It was quite bumpy. Hamza looked down. He was quite confident at jumping, especially, given how they would jump into water. It would be easier.

"Why water?" Rizwan asked curiously.

The soldier before them chuckled.

"The city has strong anti-aircraft technology but lacks adequate resources in monitoring their waters. This particular area is a blind spot in their system."

Hamza raised a brow.

"How do you guys know that?"

The soldier chuckled.

"We designed it."

Hamza narrowed his eyes as the soldier lifted his hand for attention.

"Our operative awaits down below," he explained.

Hamza nodded, giving a reassuring glance to Rizwan and Musa.

"We're ready!" Hamza called out.

The chopper door opened, unleashing an unfathomable burst of cold wind. Hamza expected this though, since he had done this before. He gestured for Rizwan and Musa to go first. The former chief hovered at the entrance. Hesitating only a moment

before jumping. Instantly after, Musa jumped, a smirk on his face. Hamza took a deep breath and jumped.

He couldn't explain what happened in those five seconds but it was very strange indeed. The pressure and wind currents tossed him like a paper bag as he shot down, penetrating the cold water almost immediately.

He kicked up, breaking the water surface with a deep breath.

Hamza noticed Rizwan and Musa on his left. Hamza sighed in relief as he swam towards them. They were roughly a few meters away. He kicked hard, his ears pricking abruptly. There was a sound of a motor in the distance. Hamza withdrew his pistol, ready to shoot, as a motor boat came into sight. A man was aboard it.

"Apples?" the man chuckled.

Hamza did not respond. He merely met his gaze.

"Pears?" the man asked uncertainly.

Hamza still didn't reply.

"What's your name, son?" the man asked.

Hamza narrowed his eyes.

"I have none. I am merely a lost page in the dark depths..."

"Of history," the man finished.

"I am Alpha 51," he explained, extending a hand. "But you can call me Harun."

Hamza narrowed his eyes. If Faisal was correct, then this man was also a super, one-of-a-kind soldier like him.

Hamza shook his head, climbing aboard the boat himself. He didn't need help. Rizwan and Musa were on board in the next few moments.

The motor roared to life as the boat sped off towards the shore.

As they went, Hamza glanced back. The chopper was leaving.

'No going back now,' Hamza realised.

Harun steered the wheel ahead. Casually, he glanced back and whispered,

"Welcome to Peacville."

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The Last Piece of the Puzzle

Farheen took a deep breath, watching the handle of the door before her. She didn't know why she was here, but it seemed important. Akbar had sent a squadron of soldiers to call her, led by Bahadur. Farheen respected precautions. Especially given that Isa was not with her.

She sighed. Normally, Isa accompanied her wherever she went. However earlier today, Ruqayya had come asking for his help in a matter related to Abbas.

Farheen looked down. She had been greatly pained to hear about the poor boy.

"Allah," she whispered. "Help Abbas in his difficulties. He may have made a mistake, but deep inside, his heart is one of gold."

With a sigh, she pressed down the handle of the door and stepped inside.

The room was simple. A normal desk and a few shelves storing books. Behind the oak wood table, sat Akbar. Farheen felt a numbness in her body as she greeted the man before her.

"Asalamu alaikum Akbar."

Akbar bowed his head respectfully.

"Walaikum asalam. I'm glad you came."

Farheen looked down, nodding slightly.

Akbar folded his hands and Farheen could tell that he was troubled by something. She also knew that Akbar was a strong man so if something bothered him, it must be a serious matter. But how did it concern her?

“Amr is here to find someone,” Akbar began, looking down.

Farheen raised a brow.

“We’ve been trying to find her, because as it turns out, she’s the only one who can open this.”

Akbar clapped his hands together as the wall on the right lit up, the projector casting an image. The image of a box.

Farheen turned pale, swallowing.

“Wh-what is that?”

Akbar took a deep breath.

“I’m not sure how to say this Farheen Auntie,” he began. “Or should I say *Faiza* Auntie.”

Farheen recoiled, her eyes widening in horror.

“P-please excuse me G-General,” she faltered, turning to leave.

Akbar stood up.

“Farheen Auntie please!” he insisted. “I brought you here because you are in serious danger! This box is still out there!”

Farheen stopped, turning in confusion.

“Wh-what?” she gasped. “Tha-that’s not p-possible! I don’t understand”

Akbar shook his head.

“Oh but I think you do,” he whispered. “After all, we were both there that night.”

Boom!

Akbar’s eyes narrowed at the rise of smoke in the distance.

“Come on!” he ordered, whipping out his blade, a 43 on it’s hilt.

Behind him were his soldiers, armed and ready.

He sprinted through the trees, eyes sharp and unafraid. Nothing was more dangerous in this forest than him. And nothing would stop him from completing his mission.

He could smell the smoke coming downwind. And hushed voices.

Akbar stopped abruptly, whirling around at his men.

“Standard divide and conquer maneuver,” he whispered.

The soldiers nodded, breaking off into the darkness, to outflank the enemy. They would drive the enemy into a kill zone. Akbar.

Akbar chuckled cruelly. He loved surprising his prey. Maybe an aerial assault.

Akbar reached out, feeling the tree. It was rough surfaced. The next moment, he had scaled the tree, with a dagger in hand, overshadowing the enemy. Three targets, two men and a woman. He narrowed his eyes at the pile of ash in one place. The older man was by it, celebrating.

“They’ve destroyed a box,” Akbar realised.

And yet the woman seemed tense. Probably because of the item she hid in her hand. The last box.

Akbar closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. It was time to strike.

“Which way do I-” Faiza stopped as her eyes widened in horror. “Wahab! Look out!”

Wahab whirled around as a huge shadow emerged from the bushes behind him. A small glint in his hand. A knife. Upon its hilt, the number 43 was inscribed.

“It’s...It’s an Alpha. Faiza! get out of here!” Wahab shouted, lifting his gun.

Faiza stumbled back in horror, as a sudden surge of pain struck her from behind, and everything went dark.

Akbar took a deep breath, eyeing the elderly lady now seated before him. Akbar relaxed his gaze. Farheen was now starting to calm down a little once more.

“I don’t....” Farheen stopped, a lost look visible in her eyes.

“I thought it was gone...that maybe someone cracked it open or destroyed it.”

Akbar shook his head.

“We need to figure out what happened, so that we know what is to come,” Akbar whispered. “I have all the pieces now Alhamdulillah, except one. Yours. So, let’s finish this puzzle together.”

Farheen looked down, her eyes reflecting the disbelief of the moment she was in.

“I know that there is an evil organisation that is devoted to controlling the world,” Akbar began. “I know Sada-e-Haq is an organisation devoted to fighting them.”

“Was an organisation,” Farheen corrected.

Akbar shook his head.

“Sada-e-Haq still lives,” he explained. “Only new faces and leaders. But its fire has endured.”

Farheen’s eyes widened slightly.

“I know that years ago, three scientists created a lethal weapon of *Ultimate control* called the control virus,” Akbar paused, taking a deep breath. “Sada-e-Haq launched a fatal strike on the League, destroying the plans of the virus and killed a key scientist, *Absaar Yousefi*. I know this because I was then deployed to lead the retaliatory strike. I know that Sada-e-Haq designed seven containers to store the seven units, initially intending to use their existence as a threat, but when their defeat was all but certain, they decided to destroy it. I know that six of the boxes were destroyed.”

Farheen blinked.

“You pretty much have it all figured out,” she remarked, her eyes reflecting the discomfort she was feeling. “Why do you need me?”

Akbar narrowed his eyes.

“There were seven boxes. Six were destroyed. You’re the only person who can tell me what happened to the seventh box.”

Farheen sighed. She looked down, placing one hand over the other.

“My husband Wahab and I had set off, two boxes in our possession. We had a simple mission,” Farheen explained.

“Destroy them. Accompanying us was Asif. His mother had been martyred during a previous conflict so I watched over him.”

Her lips curled into a sad smile.

“I remember clearly now. Wahab never liked Asif, but accepted him on my insistence,” Farheen took a deep breath. “We went to the forest, where we destroyed the first box. The one belonging to Wahab. There was one more, however. Mine.”

Farheen took a deep breath, her eyes clouding.

“That was when you arrived,” she whispered. “I figured that out on the Night of Heroes when we learnt that you were once....”

Farheen stopped.

Akbar remain quiet.

“How’d you know it was Alpha 43 that night?” he asked.

Farheen sighed.

“You used a dagger. No guns,” she whispered. “Only one Alpha ever did that.”

Farheen continued on.

“I don’t know what happened to me,” she whispered. “I got knocked out before the confrontation happened.”

Akbar nodded.

“I have a foggy memory of what happened that night. And from what I saw in our records,” he answered. “You were never our prisoner. So someone saved you that night. And I know that my squad would never do such a thing. They were the cruelest of cruel. They would about help you as much as any Alpha would. That would explain how you’re still alive.”

Akbar stroked his beard slightly,

“I know that I retrieved a box. My report would have told the League that. But one thing doesn’t add up. How do they know that the box is your box? Only you and two others knew that.”

Farheen looked down, her eyes narrowing. Abruptly her head shot up, eyes widening in confusion.

“N-no,” she stammered. “Asif and Wahab were both great men.”

Akbar sighed.

“There is no way the puzzle fits otherwise, Faiza Auntie,” Akbar sighed. “Either Asif betrayed you, or Wahab. There isn’t another way the events could have happened. When I hunted for boxes in the forest, I only found your group. Does that not seem odd to you?”

Farheen looked down.

“But I looked after Asif. He was only 18, far too young to betray. And Wahab was my husband. How could he possibly betray me?”

Akbar sighed.

“We can’t know who did it, but that detail is no longer relevant,” he whispered. “The chances that the one who betrayed you is still alive, is negligible. So-”

“I’m still alive Akbar,” Farheen overspoke. “And Wahab was roughly the same age as me. Asif was younger. It is perfectly possible that they survived.”

Akbar narrowed his eyes. Farheen had a valid point. It was possible that the one who betrayed was still alive. But that didn’t matter, since speculation was the best they could manage, and speculation was pointless.

“We need to plan our next move,” Akbar decided.

Farheen met his gaze curiously.

“Allow me to explain,” Akbar started. “Amr came here with the objective of giving our enemies *Ultimate control* of Peaceville. That is his goal. He plans on doing this...”

“Allah Allah,” Farheen gasped. “He’s trying to get the control virus!”

Akbar nodded.

“Faiza Auntie,” he sighed. “We’ve looked all over the island for you. And now that we have you, we know what Amr’s next move is. He’s going to come for you.”

Farheen looked down her eyes widening.

“Why bring me here? He, no doubt, has informants who’ll tell him.”

Akbar nodded.

“It doesn’t change anything. Amr already knows you are the one he needs,” he whispered. “And he’ll go to any extent to reach you.”

Farheen raised a brow.

“I should stay here then,” she whispered. “The army base would be safe, no?”

Akbar shook his head.

“I don’t know how far Amr’s men have penetrated our system, and I am not going to take chances. Anyone can be an agent. Recently, we learnt that one of our top analysts was his agent.”

Farheen shook her head in disbelief. This was too much to handle.

“We’re going to take you somewhere far away from here,” Akbar assured. “A place where only the most trusted will guard you. Inshallah, you’ll be safe there.”

Akbar sensed her discomfort. She was concerned for the events that were yet to come.

“I’ll be managing your protection personally,” he assured.

Farheen closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. For a moment, she said nothing. Faiza opened her eyes, with determination in her gaze.

“Let’s go,” she whispered.

Making Amends

“Thanks for all the help Isa,” Abbas remarked.

His best friend smiled kindly, pushing the wheelchair. Abbas looked away. He could see the sadness in his friend’s heart. Obviously Isa had been hurt with the news of Abbas. Just like Abbas.

But Abbas would not give in. He had made a mistake, and paid dearly for it. There was no changing that. But that didn’t mean Abbas would give in. He would keep pushing, get stronger, and do whatever was in his capability.

“Left from here,” Isa remarked, turning the wheelchair. “We should be reaching any moment now. It’s the seventh house on the right.”

Abbas held on, his stomach fluttering a little. He had still not adjusted to the wheelchair.

As they continued on, his eyes scanned for houses.

“House 1,” he whispered. “House 2.”

Abbas’s eyes widened slightly. The third house was quite big, significantly larger than the other two. But that had only been a prelude.

The next four houses were much larger.

And then came the seventh. It was the largest, as good as a mansion.

A beautiful fountain was constructed in the center of the front lawn, surrounded by lush grass and large varieties of flowers. The

exterior wall's were adorned with banners of "Ya Zahra!". Abbas couldn't believe what he was seeing.

There were humble stalls giving away food, loads of it, packed in containers. For free!

"I didn't know he was this rich?" Isa marvelled as they reached the door.

Instantly, Abbas felt his heart freeze. At the door, bidding farewell to a couple was the man he had come to see. Abbas swallowed. He was suddenly feeling a lot more nervous than before. He remembered Ruqayya, and closed his eyes.

'We didn't come all this way to turn around,' Abbas thought to himself. 'Ya Zahra.'

"Shafique Bhai!" Abbas called out. "Shafique Bhai!"

The man's head shot up, glancing Abbas's way. His eyes widened in alarm.

"C-Captain," he faltered stepping forward. "Wh-what brings you here? I'm really sorry if I did something to offend you but I am asking you, if you could please just--"

Abbas's eyes watered as he saw the guard humbly apologising for doing nothing wrong. His guilt bit at him. And Abbas was, in all honesty, not entirely sure what he should say.

'I should tell him the truth,' Abbas whispered. 'What I genuinely feel.'

"I..am...sorry," Abbas spoke, meeting the guard's gaze. He went silent. "I uh, want you to know that what I did to you earlier was completely wrong. You were right. The rules are there for all of us to follow. Including me. I see that now. I wanted to apologise to you for treating you so wrongfully. I hope you can forgive me."

Shafique went silent. His eyes watered.

"Follow me please," he whispered.

Shafique turned around and began walking towards his front door.

Isa pushed softly behind, leading Abbas to the front door. It took a bit of creative thinking at this stage, lifting first Abbas in, and then the wheelchair afterwards. But after one minute, both were through.

“Ah,” Abbas sighed in relief as he sat down on his chair once more.

That was when it happened. A slight pain in his head, like a mild headache. Abbas groaned for a moment. Then it vanished, as quickly as it appeared. Abbas blinked. Isa was still rolling the wheelchair forward, turning into a room. Shafique stood there. An elderly lady was beside him.

“She is my mother,” Shafique introduced.

The old lady smiled kindly.

“Well, it’s a pleasure,” she whispered. “I have been meaning to speak to you...Captain Abbas.”

Shafique bowed his head respectfully, sitting down on the ground next to her chair.

Abbas was starting to feel a little worried. He braced himself for the justified hurl of anger and insults heading his way. But nothing came. Instead, the old lady held out a small tray of sweets towards Abbas.

Abbas looked down. Why were they treating him so kindly?

“I’ve been waiting for quite some time,” she chuckled. “Please, try one.”

Abbas didn’t want to offend the old lady. He held out his hand and took two, passing one to Isa.

Isa grumbled, probably at not being able to make his own choice of sweet. But he accepted Abbas’s option.

Abbas eyed the small candy in his hand.

“What’s the matter, my son?” she asked kindly.

Abbas looked down.

“I mistreated your son. I don’t understand why are you treating me with with kindness?”

The elderly lady smiled kindly.

“Abbas,” she answered. “We treat all our guests with with kindness and respect.”

He looked down, unable to ignore the guilt in his heart.

“Once one repents,” she whispered. “Allah is happy with them. Who are we to hold a grudge?”

Abbas’s eyes watered.

“I gave five sons for the revolution,” she smiled, her eyes watering slightly. “Five martyrs. Each of my boys brilliant in his own way. Three of them were martyred in the battle of the old hay fields. One of them killed by Alpha 43. He had been a member of Ruqayya’s patrol squad.”

Abbas’s eyes widened. Naqi had been martyred in that attack from Alpha 43 as well.

“The fifth one fell martyr in the conquering of the iron fortress.”

Abbas turned to Shafique who was looking down, eyeing him incredulously. Who would have known? Shafique had given five brothers to the cause. And he still believed in it. That was remarkable.

He looked up, meeting her gaze.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispered.

She bowed her head respectfully.

“I didn’t tell you this for you to get sad, or upset. But more as a reflective exercise.”

She smiled reassuringly, wiping the tears from her eyes.

“As elders, we are responsible for helping the youth. When Shafique told me what happened, I realised that you needed our help. You needed to see Shafique in this aspect. The other side of him. He is well off, and has sacrificed five brothers for this cause. He bought this house, solely to be able to host majalis and milaads. But he works as a guard.” She whispered softly. “He loves serving his cause of truth. Just like you. Just like anyone in the revolution.”

Abbas took a deep breath.

“Let me give you an example,” she whispered. “In an Islamic centre, a scholar gives lectures. Some people cook, some people clean. Some people help with finances. Some people manage. But in the eyes of Allah, as long as you are doing the best in accordance with your capability, Allah views all of these jobs as great services to the mosque. I remember a story I used to tell my sons when they were little.”

Abbas listened curiously.

“There was once two poor men. One named Shajeeh. The other named Naseem. Shajeeh used to stay overtime in the center,

sweeping floors. He would often brag about how exhausted he was cleaning the carpeted ground.”

Abbas looked down. In this story, he was Shajeeh.

“He often criticised Naseem for not contributing,” Shafique’s mother continued. “But then it happened one day.”

Abbas raised a brow.

“Naseem passed away,” she whispered. “And when he did, the truth became apparent. Every night, Naseem would visit the mosque when no one was there. He would clean out each part of the center. Bathrooms, Kitchens, everything, dispose off the trash. Cook and marinate meat for upcoming events etc. He did just as much work as Shajeeh did, but he never bragged.”

Abbas sighed.

“So the main idea is-”

He stopped abruptly, a sudden headache striking him like a pinch on his head.

“Ah,” he winced.

The headache vanished. Abbas blinked, his eyes widening in confusion. What had just happened?

“Oh sorry,” Abbas apologised, remembering where he was.

“I am grateful for your time Auntie. I understand. Allah gives us tawfiq to do the right thing. And he gives us the choice to do it. We stay humble, remembering that Allah enabled us with the power to achieve what we have in life.”

The woman nodded kindly.

Abbas grinned.

“Thank you so much,” he whispered. “You have clarified something for me today.”

She bowed her head respectfully.

“Just remember us in your duas. You are a brave and bold young man. Never forget who you are.”

Abbas smiled and bid the family farewell. As Isa drove him in his wheelchair away, he grinned. A heavy burden was now off his shoulders. They turned to leave. As they went, Isa leaned beside Abbas.

“Any other stops?” he asked.

Abbas nodded.

“One more...then we head home Inshallah,” he whispered.

Fixing Grudges

Jannat was sitting on the front step of her door, a small armour plate was in her hand. Dented after Akbar had thrown a dagger at it. She remembered what he had told her earlier.

Don't worry, Inshallah it'll be fine. The armour was built to withstand bullets. A dagger will do nothing.

Jannat had expected it to do nothing, but it turned out to be a lot worse. Despite not getting wounded, she still had to take the full impact of Akbar's throw. And a powerful throw was that.

'I pity the man who stands against Akbar Uncle,' she whispered.

A sudden sound caught her attention. A knock. Looking up, she saw Isa, supporting a wheel chair. Her eyes widened in surprise. It was Abbas! What was he doing here?

'Probably here to say something nasty,' she thought.

Jannat got up moving towards the two boys at the front of her yard.

"Asalamualaikum," Abbas greeted.

Jannat sighed.

"Walaikum asalam," she answered coldly. "Why are you here?"

Abbas took a deep breath, looking down.

"I'm here to make things right," he explained.

Jannat raised a brow curiously. What was he here for?

"I said some things that weren't fair," he started. "I was inconsiderate. I know that you tried your best to make sure that

the cyber hack didn't happen. I know you take your job seriously and that you're more than qualified to do it."

He paused, meeting Jannat's perplexed gaze.

"I'm sorry for how I treated you Jannat," he whispered. "I hope you can forgive me."

Jannat looked down, not saying anything for a moment. She was stunned. Caught off guard. But after a few seconds, her cold and neutral expression broke, replaced by a grin.

"It's alright Abbas. I forgive you," she whispered. "I appreciate your coming here."

Abbas bowed his head respectfully and with that he and Isa bid farewell. As they left, Jannat heard Abbas instruct Isa,

"Alright my friend, one last stop."

The Plan of Attack

“Alright,” Harun began. “The target is to track down a woman named Faiza. We need to find her as soon as possible,” the Alpha explained.

Hamza eyed the bullet proof van encasing the area around them. In the room, they certainly had a strange crowd for an army.

There was Hamza and Harun. Followed by a tiny woman who called herself...Stung, was it? Musa was next, hammer slung over his shoulder and Rizwan, sword sheathed and strapped around his waist. In addition, there was a hooded figure. He sat in the corner quietly, sharpening a dagger. Hamza narrowed his eyes.

“Who is that guy?” he overspoke.

Harun blinked, glancing at the hooded figure.

“He’s not someone you need to bother yourself with,” he whispered.

Hamza didn’t agree with Harun’s answer.

“As I was saying,” Harun continued. “The mission-”

“We’re going on an extremely dangerous mission,” Hamza interrupted, ignoring Harun’s glare. “I want to know who I’m working with. Who’s the hooded guy?”

Harun growled.

Scratch.

The hooded figure stopped Harun, getting to his feet. He chuckled, strolling up beside Hamza.

“I’m here to make sure that the job gets done,” he whispered.

Hamza narrowed his eyes. He didn’t get good vibes from this guy.

“Word came from Faisal,” Amr whispered. “You’re in this to find your mother. Ask too many questions and you might lose out on her as well.”

Hamza clenched his fist. Was that a threat? Normally Hamza would smash such a person to pulp. But this time was different. His mother was on the line. He wasn’t going to risk losing her.

“Very well,” Hamza whispered. “But once this is all over, I’m going to rip that hood off your head.”

Amr chuckled.

“Once we’re done,” he whispered. “You’re welcome to try.”

Hamza turned back to the discussion at hand.

“The target goes by the name Farheen,” Harun continued. “An elderly woman. Currently staying in the house of Peaceville’s general, Akbar Sohail.”

Hamza nodded. This would be tricky. A general’s house would be well guarded. And no doubt it would make them the most wanted criminals, if their faces were seen. If.

“This is tricky now,” the hooded figure cautioned. “General Akbar is extremely dangerous. He is a lethal combatant. In fact, he is actually an ex Alpha.”

“Why are we doing this?” Rizwan asked, his eyes confused. “Is the woman we seek a criminal?”

Hamza bit his lip. He had forgotten about Rizwan and Musa. He turned towards them.

“Look Rizwan,” Hamza smiled kindly. “My friend, we need to solve this matter for me to learn about my past. Who am I? I need answers. And this is a simple deal for that.”

Rizwan shook his head, taking a step back. Hamza’s eyes noticed the hooded figure’s hand drifting to his pocket. He had some kind of firearm.

Hamza narrowed his eyes, leaning over to the masked man.

“If you try shooting them, my knife will rip through your stomach. Clear?”

The hooded man stilled at the small force of Hamza’s dagger

brushing against his back. The hooded man's hand returned back to where he was before. Hamza nodded.

"I'm glad to see that you're reasonable," he whispered before turning to Rizwan.

"Trust me on this, Rizwan, I-

"You're conflicting with the chief of these lands. How can you be so sure?"

Hamza shook his head.

"I am strong enough to bring anyone down, my friend."

"Alhamdulillah," Rizwan whispered. "But let me tell you this much. Musa and I were your companions on this journey. We always did what was right. We never intended to get into this kind of business. I don't know what you intend to do, but I don't trust these people one bit."

Hamza was running out of patience. He didn't have time for this.

"I want you to please listen Rizwan-

"I already lost my Shahida," the former chief mourned.

"I don't want to lose anyone else."

Hamza sighed. Why was Rizwan making this so difficult?

"Do you not trust me?" Hamza sighed.

Rizwan shook his head.

"Let's just go Hamza. Leave this. You can find out your past with Allah's help. You don't need these people."

He pulled open the door handle but before he could move forward, Hamza moved in front. Rizwan's eyes widened in surprise.

"Move out of the way," Rizwan asked.

Hamza narrowed his eyes. Rizwan met his gaze.

"Please Rizwan," he whispered. "My mother is all I have."

Rizwan looked down.

"I don't agree with this Hamza," he whispered. "Even if you do their bidding, what makes you think they will honour the agreement?"

Hamza opened his mouth, but words failed him.

"I h-have to try," he faltered. "Rizwan. I have a chance of finding my mother."

Rizwan shook his head.

“Rizwan please,” Hamza insisted. “Didn’t I stay to help you with Ilyas?”

Rizwan eyed Musa uncomfortably.

“I don’t agree with this,” Rizwan muttered under his breath. “But...I will help you this last time.”

Hamza sighed in relief.

“In that case,” Harun continued. “Here’s the plan...”

The Final Apology

The bungalow was currently the most secure place in Peaceville. Though no one would know it. The security was hidden, to avoid drawing too much attention. More than forty snipers had been positioned. Three battalions of trained soldiers were on standby. The gardener, the window cleaner, the disguised beggar across the road. Even within the trees surrounding the plot. Soldiers were concealed everywhere.

Abbas took a deep breath, watching from the window as soldiers worked away, digging additional ditches and covering them with grass in case the enemy came with a high speed, all out vehicle based attack. In the case of an infantry heavy attack, additional traps had been planted, masked in the fields along with dozens of hidden squadrons.

Even Sada-e-Haq had volunteered to cover some sectors of the forest, serving as an alarm system in those parts.

Abbas took a deep breath. He was running out of time. Evening was upon them, and yet one final apology was yet to be made. The most important one of them all. Without this one, his efforts meant nothing. Abbas sighed. This was the trickiest of them all. For this time, Abbas would be apologising to the people whom he had let down the most amongst everyone.

He eyed the door of the room before him, reaching out for the handle. Abbas hesitated.

“It’s okay,” Isa whispered. “You got this brother.”

Abbas nodded. He reached out for the door, ignoring the mild headache in his head.

Knock. Knock.

The door creaked open.

“Come in,” came a voice.

Abbas took a deep breath as Isa pushed his chair forward, inside the room. He suppressed a shudder as his eyes fell upon Akbar and Murtaza.

Isa settled his wheelchair to a stop and whispered once more, “You got this.”

He turned to leave.

Abbas sighed, eyeing both men before him.

“Asalamu alaikum,” he greeted.

Abbas whispered Bismillah in his heart.

“I wasn’t aware you’d been discharged from the hospital?” Akbar asked, his eyes colder than stone.

Abbas sighed, wincing at his headache. It was suddenly flaring up a bit. He ignored it. Now was...not...the time.

“I l-left...the hospital,” Abbas whispered weakly, gripping the arm rests of his wheelchair. “I...needed to talk to you.”

Akbar and Murtaza flashed each other a glance.

“Abbas,” Murtaza asked. “Are you okay? You seem pale.”

Abbas coughed.

“I’m...fine Alh-alhamdullillah,” he panted. “I apologised to Shafique and Jannat.”

Abbas’s heart hurt. He felt his vision blur.

“I kn-know....I made a m-mistake,” he rasped, his face paling. “I’m sorry.”

Abbas’s eyes watered, his vision now blurring entirely.

“Abbas,” Akbar spoke. “Calm dow-”

“Argh!” Abbas coughed blood on his arms.

“I’m sorry!” he cried. “For-forgi..”

Abbas pushed himself upright.

“Please forgi-”

Abbas coughed, convulsing slightly. “I-”

He clutched his heart, falling forward.

“Abbas!” Murtaza gasped, diving forward.

He caught the boy just in time.

“I’m sorry,” Abbas rasped painfully, his eyes closing as he heard his name being shouted desperately trying to keep him awake. But it didn’t work. Abbas slumped down unconscious in his fathers arms.

135

The Medic

“Lie him down straight on the bed!” Murtaza shouted at the soldiers carrying Abbas. They set him down gently on the bed.

“Jafar!” Akbar shouted. “Get here now!”

Abbas’s body twisted and turned, his eyes shut. He seemed to be in a battle with his own self, only he was unconscious.

“Jafar!”

“Yes Akbar Uncle!” came the response as Jafar came darting in, with a bag in his hand.

He froze, his eyes widening in horror.

“Abbas Bhai?” he exclaimed.

Wham!

Akbar clapped his hands.

“Come on Jafar! Quickly!”

Jafar was well trained in herbs and medicine. And he got to work straight away, unzipping his bag and pulling out two latex gloves. Abbas’s body wriggled further, as the young captain screeched in pain.

“I can’t examine him if he’s moving like that,” Jafar whispered.

Layla stepped forward, placing a hand on his forehead. She glanced at Murtaza, tears filled in her eyes.

“He’s burning!” she gasped.

She sighed, about to lift her hand.

“Layla, don’t move your hand!” Akbar exclaimed.

Layla glanced down, her eyes widened. Abbas had stilled. He was no longer moving. He, somehow, sensed Layla's motherly presence.

Jafar eyed Abbas carefully, a bead of sweat trickled down his cheek.

"Pale face....."

He leaned down, opening one of Abbas's closed eyes.

"Reddened eyes," Jafar remarked, a hint of worry in his tone. "That's odd"

"What's odd?" Layla asked, her background was in science only.

Jafar lifted Abbas's arm sleeve up, to reveal patches of blue along his skin.

"Bruising?" Jafar noticed. "Abbas Bhai is having some kind of massive internal bleeding. But those are signs of-"

"Poison," Murtaza and Akbar gasped simultaneously.

The room went silent in disbelief.

"Allah," Isa whispered. "How is this possible? Who would've poisoned Abbas?"

Akbar narrowed his eyes. He knew only one person interested in doing such a thing. Amr. But there were other considerations. For example, how and when did he do it? Murtaza leaned in close to Akbar.

"Remember how after Zaqqum prison, Abbas had attacked Bahadur," he whispered.

Akbar nodded, his eyes sharpening. His friend was onto something.

"Abbas had said Amr had pounced on him right before he was taken by Sada-e-Haq," Akbar deduced. "Amr must have poisoned him then!"

Murtaza sighed, facing the wall.

"This isn't your fault, Murtaza," Akbar chided, embracing his friend.

Murtaza's eyes watered.

"He came to me in spite of all the pain, just to get my forgiveness."

Akbar looked down.

“Perhaps he really has realised his mistake” he whispered.

Akbar placed a hand on Murtaza’s shoulder.

“I’ve got it!” Jafar exclaimed, rummaging through his bag. “I know which poison he used. And Ahamdullillah, I believe I have the antidote!”

Akbar and Murtaza watched as the boy brought out a small pouch of vials.

“Let’s see,” his hand fidgeted. “Blasted hands, I-”

“Jafar, which vial is it!” Layla demanded.

“The fourth one!” he exclaimed.

Layla propped out the fourth vial from the bunch, popping off the lid.

“Bismillah hir rahman nir raheem. Ya Shafi, ya Kafi!”

She poured the contents of the tube in Abbas’s mouth.

Everyone stayed silent, not saying a word as Layla lifted her hand off Abbas. He stayed still.

“Alhamdullillah,” Layla sighed in relief.

Jafar sighed, rubbing the tears in his eyes. Akbar smiled, as he embraced the boy. It must have been very intimidating for him to keep his nerves calm.

“He should wake up pretty soon, Inshallah, maybe in the next few hours or so,” Jafar finished.

Layla embraced Abbas’s body, whispering a silent prayer.

Haider joined her as everyone begun to leave, giving them some privacy.

Akbar eyed Murtaza.

“You can stay if you want Murtaza,” he whispered. “Your family needs you right now.”

Murtaza looked down.

“It’s alright my friend,” he whispered. “Protect this part of the house, and keep your family close by so you may be at ease.”

Murtaza nodded.

“Thank you Akbar,” he whispered.

Akbar grinned.

“Don’t worry about it,” he answered. “I’ll rest at ease knowing this end is covered by your watchful eye.”

With that, Akbar turned to leave. Preparing himself within. For now, he needed to change his mindset, his lethal instincts needed to awaken once more.

Akbar unsheathed his daggers, his huge and sharp blades through which the mantle of Alpha 43 had been built.

“Ya Zahra,” he whispered. “It’s time to fight.”

136

Infiltration

In the dark night sky, Hamza eyed the ground. It seemed empty. But he was nowhere near foolish enough to believe that. He was well aware that Akbar knew what he was doing. So he needed to be at the top of his game.

“Hey, hood guy,” Hamza whispered into his walkie talkie. “I need you to draw out any snipers. Swerve the vehicle on the driveway, and keep them busy for only a minute. That’ll be enough time.”

The walkie talkie cracked.

“Okay,” came the hooded guy’s response.

Hamza took a deep breath, eyeing Musa and Rizwan. Both were ready for the battle. There was also that woman...Stang was it? And Harun.

The five member team was armed to the teeth, ready to move in. They were, after all, the main group.

Hamza closed his eyes. Focus. Focus. Farheen. Farheen was the target. He held the box tightly in his hand.

The sudden loud roar of an engine filled the air as a van came zipping through the grass, speeding ahead. Almost immediately, bullets came whizzing out of nowhere. The van steered sharply, moving away towards the trees before a stream of bullets came pouring. The van turned once more, now trying to get out of the area, but just as it reached the end, a bullet struck it’s tires, crippling it. The vehicle pulled to a stop as cries of ‘Freeze!’ and

‘Don’t move!’ could be heard.

What none of these men noticed were the five shadows who had sneaked away amidst the chaos. Hamza’s lips curled into a smile. This was too easy. He had expected worse.

“Let’s go,” Hamza grinned.

He pulled out his powerful gun, ramming it’s edge against the window. But the window wouldn’t break. Hamza narrowed his eyes. There were added layers. Smart. But the problem with glass was that no matter how thick it was, some things couldn’t be helped.

He screwed on a silencer to his gun, and aimed for one particular part of the window. With a deep breath, he began firing repeatedly.

It cracked, and the focused bullets chipped away until finally the window broke. Hamza then turned to another part of the window, and pressed the trigger.

Click.

The gun was empty. He narrowed his eyes, reloading it. The next moment he emptied the entire cartridge with silent bullets chipping another part of the window.

“Argh!” Hamza growled, ramming the end of his gun against the remaining weakened glass. It opened a passage inside.

“Too easy,” Hamza chuckled as he placed one foot in the bungalow. And then the other.

His heart pounded in his chest. He was in. His teammates would come through any minute. In the meanwhile though, Hamza was one step closer to his mother. Now, he just needed to find Farheen. But at that moment, he froze. How he hadn’t noticed it before, he had no idea, but there was an all too familiar pressure at the back of his head.

“This is going to hurt,” came a bold voice.

Hamza sighed. He was trapped. General Akbar had caught him.

137

Furniture Fallout

Hamza took a deep breath.

“Lower the gun, and I won’t hurt you,” he whispered.

Akbar chuckled loudly. It didn’t surprise Hamza. All of his opponents always laughed first and cried later.

Wham!

He shot a powerful kick backwards, striking Akbar’s rock hard stomach. Akbar grunted as Hamza kicked the gun out of his hands. Hamza smirked.

“You were-”

“Argh!” Akbar roared, hauling Hamza off his feet.

Before he could react, Akbar brought him crashing down on the wooden floor. He smashed his fist against Hamza, sending him flying back against the wall.

“Ah,” Hamza winced, rolling back.

This man was strong. But not strong enough.

Hamza barged forward, ramming a fist at Akbar’s face but Akbar caught it. He instantly, smashed his elbow against Hamza’s head.

Hamza coughed painfully. His nose was bleeding and his vision became blurry.

Bang!”

He could hear the sounds of the bullets and explosions outside as their own troops were coming into conflict.

“Keep fighting,” Akbar chuckled. “It’s time I humble you.”

He charged forward, ramming Hamza into the wall. Hamza threw several punches in response, but Akbar was undeterred as he smashed his knee into Hamza's back sending pain up Hamza's spine.

"Argh!" Hamza screamed.

He ducked, just evading another punch that had dented the wall. How strong was this guy?

"This isn't over," Hamza spat. "My name isn't Hamza if I don't make you pay for this."

He pulled a smoke pellet from his pocket, hurling it at the General.

Akbar leapt back in time as a cloud of smoke filled the area.

When it cleared, there was not just Hamza there anymore. There was a total of five individuals before him. A swordsman. A youth. Harun, Sting and finally, Hamza.

Akbar chuckled.

"Predictable," Akbar remarked.

The doors of all the rooms ahead burst open. Hamza's eyes widened as a bunch of individuals emerged from the rooms, joining Akbar's side. Armed and ready to fight.

"Hamza," the swordsman whispered. "We should-"

Hamza growled. He hadn't come here to stop now. Narrowing his eyes and clenching the handle of his daggers, he shouted,

"Attack!"

138

Brawl

Wham!

Hamza ducked as grey blur zipped past his head. A chain.

“Musa!” Hamza ordered.

The boy nodded, disengaging to confront the chain thrower. Isa growled.

“Ya Allah!” he roared, whipping out his dagger, Malakul Maut.

Musa smirked. Isa jumped forward, swinging the blade for Musa’s leg, but Musa jumped back. Isa swung a powerful punch but Musa ducked. Isa whipped out a fatal kick but Musa caught it.

Bang!

Musa swung his hammer, smashing it into Isa’s stomach.

Isa’s eyes widened as he gasped for air, staggering backwards.

Musa narrowed his eyes, jumping high up, he brought his weapon crashing down but Isa was faster. He leapt back, so the hammer met nothing but air, instantly lunging forward.

“Argh!” Isa growled, ramming Musa in the wall.

Musa winced, narrowing his eyes. Isa ducked as a hammer zipped past his head, Musa jumped at him and they went tumbling in a pile.

On the other side of the room, Rizwan was swinging his blade madly at two men. Ali and Bahadur.

“Hiya! Hiiiya! Argh!” he growled.

Maryam ducked behind the table, as two knives whizzed over her head.

Sting chuckled, turning back to Zahra and Salma.

“Come on girls,” she laughed.

Salma growled, diving forward with a punch.

Wham!

She kicked Salma in the stomach, ducking under her punch.

Wham!

Salma staggered back breathlessly at Sting’s blow.

“Did you think you could-”

Her eyes widened. Immediately, she ducked.

Clank!

Zahra’s hand whizzed over her head, clenched over a cooking pot.

“Dishonourable coming from behind,” Sting chuckled. “No?”

She jumped at Zahra, smashing her elbows at the woman. Zahra fell back.

“Come on girls,” Sting chuckled. “You can do better than that!”

Fights raged on in the room.

Crack.

Akbar turned to see the window cracked as another enemy soldier tried to make it through the window.

“I’m getting in!” the soldier laughed. “I’m-”

Boom!

The soldier went silent.

“Reza,” Akbar shouted. “Keep them out of the house!”

There was a grunt of acknowledgement from outside, the sound of metal clashing metal filling the air. The growls and ferocity, getting louder outside. Peacevillian soldiers conflicting with the invaders.

Akbar turned to face the last two. Hamza and Harun.

“Two on one!” Hamza chuckled.

Akbar chuckled, sending a chill down Hamza’s spine. Why was this guy not scared at all? And how was he so strong? Well, didn’t matter now. He was alo-

Hamza stopped, his eyes widening.

“Oh no,” he gasped. “Duck!”

Hamza dropped to the ground but Harun had misheard.

Wham!

A force rammed Harun into the wall. Harun roared, lashing out like a wild animal, he pushed his assailant back.

“I got him,” Murtaza panted. “Take the last guy.”

Akbar nodded and turned to face Hamza.

“Ya Zahra!” he roared, lunging forward.

Unmasked

Boom!

Argh!

Die!

Layla shuddered uncomfortably, stroking her son Abbas's head. The explosions outside were getting louder. She prayed for her loved ones, and the side of truth to emerge victorious.

Across from her, she saw Farheen, deep in thought.

"Allah will help us," Layla consoled. "Don't worry, Inshallah."

Farheen shuddered uncomfortably.

"These people have not given up after years," she whispered. "They won't give up. Not until I'm dead or that box is destroyed."

Layla couldn't disagree. The enemy was literally in their homes, trying so desperately to acquire the last vial of the control virus. Locked away in a box only Farheen could unlock.

"I can tell something else is on your mind," Layla asked.

Farheen looked down.

"That night when Akbar attacked us, successfully retrieving just one box," Farheen paused. "We were destroying many boxes. How do the enemies know that the box is mine?" she whispered.

Layla raised a brow as another explosion sounded from outside.

"Did they find the box with you?" she asked Farheen.

Farheen shook her head.

"That's aside from the point. My group had been destroying two boxes that night. My husband Wahab's box. And my own.

Wahab and Asif had been the only ones that night who- ”

Wham!

The door was crashed into.

Farheen and Layla jumped, their eyes widening in horror. In the doorway, stood a hooded figure.

“Amr!” Layla gasped.

The hooded figure chuckled, eyeing Abbas unconscious.

“Oh my,” he whispered. “Such a poor young lad, missing out on the fight.”

Layla snarled, stepping in front.

“Leave them alone!” Farheen growled.

Amr eyed her.

“Well I never,” he gasped. “Faiza. After all these years. I thought I’d never find you.”

Farheen clenched her fist.

“Who are you?” she spat.

Amr chuckled, withdrawing a small box.

Farheen went pale at the sight of it.

“No,” she gasped. “No!”

Amr nodded.

“You didn’t forget this little trinket, did you?” he chuckled. “We brought it all the way here for you.”

Farheen stepped back in disbelief.

“You know what I want from you. I’ll leave without causing any harm once you do it,” he growled. “Open the box Faiza. I will not ask again.”

Farheen’s eyes narrowed. She shook her head.

Amr whipped out a gun, aiming it for Layla’s face.

“I will shoot Abbas and his mother!” Amr spat. “Open it!”

Farheen glanced at Amr. How could he do this? He was a monster. She turned to the bed, eyeing the empty mattress. She couldn’t possibly- Wait. Empty?

“You will obey me, Faiza,” Amr chuckled. “I will-”

“Hiya!” A sudden force rammed into Amr, knocking him out of the room. Layla’s eyes widened in confusion. It was Abbas!

“He’s standing on his own feet!” Layla gasped.

Surely Abbas was standing on his own feet, in all his glory. How was this possible?

“Hey Amr,” Abbas smirked. “Missed me?”

Amr narrowed his eyes.

“Looks like the poison finally wore off,” he whispered.

Layla’s eyes widened as the truth dawned on her. Abbas had never been paralysed, Alhamdulillah. The poison had been causing it. And Jafar had given him the antidote.

Amr growled, lunging forward.

Wham!

Abbas dived up, smashing his knee into Amr. The hooded figure gasped for air, still caught off guard from Abbas’s wake up.

Amr snarled.

“I’ll-”

Abbas charged forward, ramming Amr into the wall. Amr snarled, swinging a fist but Abbas ducked. Diving forward, he grabbed Amr’s mask and pulled it off.

Farheen froze. Her eyes widened in horror. No. it couldn’t be.

“Asif?” she gasped. “B-but you died?”

Asif growled under his breath.

“Sorry to disappoint,” he whispered. “But I never worked for you or Sada-e-Haq.”

Farheen’s eyes widened in disbelief.

“You were the League’s informant?” she gasped. “How could you? Your mother died for Sada-e-Haq.”

Asif chuckled.

“I did so much for the League, telling them about Sada-e-Haq’s base. But they couldn’t even catch you guys.”

Farheen’s eyes reflected her confusion.

“Y-you let my children die, didn’t you? Hamza and Zainab?”

Amr sighed, seemingly bored with the conversation at this point.

“You betrayed us!” Farheen screamed. “How could you! We trusted you! I trusted you!”

Asif shook his head in disapproval, wearing his hood once more.

“I am truly a monster,” he sighed, picking up the box.

Abbas narrowed his eyes.

“You are not leaving with that box, Amr,” he whispered.

Amr narrowed his eyes, his face abruptly breaking into a grin.

“On my own,” he chuckled. “Of course not.”

Abbas’s eyes widened in alarm as someone rammed him from the left. Abbas grabbed his assailant ramming him head-first into the wall.

“Aye!” His assailant screeched, staggering backwards. He retreated next to Amr.

“You can’t take us both on,” Amr hissed.

Abbas sighed.

“I don’t need to win. I just have to buy a minute or two.”

Amr glanced towards left, his eyes widened in alarm.

“We’re out of time Hamza,” Amr whispered to the assailant.

“It’s time to finish this.”

Hamza nodded, about to lunge forward, but Amr grabbed him from behind. Immediately he whipped out a blade, holding it to Hamza’s throat.

Hamza snarled.

“Wha-”

“Faiza, this man here is your son,” Asif growled. “I will slit his throat if you don’t’ open the box now!”

The Control Virus

“Hey!” Hamza growled. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Amr growled, pressing the cold blade against Hamza’s throat.

Hamza stilled, his eyes widening in confusion.

“I’m sorry Hamza,” Amr whispered. “But this is where our paths part. I needed you here, in case your mother Farheen was unwilling to open the box.”

Faiza and Layla blinked. Abbas’s hand drifting down to...

“Hands up, Abbas!” Amr growled, pressing the knife closer. “I will use this!”

Farheen’s eyes met Hamza’s and suddenly his heart sank. He knew her. He could almost swear it. Her eyes were watering with maternal love.

“Ami?” he whispered.

“My s-son?” Farheen cried.

Amr pressed the knife, forcing Hamza to wince.

“Okay stop!” Farheen gasped. “I-I’ll do it.”

Layla and Abbas eyed Farheen in horror.

“I have no choice,” Farheen felt helpless, her eyes were not leaving Hamza.

She shuddered, trembling and crying as she reached out for the box. She held it, placing her hand on the top right and left corners. Almost immediately, the box beeped and.... *CLICK*.

Amr’s eyes lit up as Farheen placed the box before him. The hooded figure leaned down, his heart pounding at the unlocked

box. He opened the lid, his eyes narrowed, forming a cruel smile on his face. He had done it. The contents of the box lay before him.

Amr leaned down, pulling out a small test tube. Within it was a small purple liquid. The control virus.

“Yes!” Amr growled. “I’ve-”

Wham!

Hamza smashed his elbow in Amr’s face causing the hooded figure to stagger back, vial still in his hand.

“I will tear you apart!” Hamza roared, whipping out his blade.

Amr smirked.

“Too late for that Hamza!”

He whipped out a grenade, hurling it their way.

Hamza’s eyes widened in horror.

“No!” Farheen screamed pushing him out of the way.

It clattered on the ground-

Boom!

Hamza coughed. A haze of dust filled in the air. It was up for a moment covering the area. Hamza tried to open his eyes but he could see nothing.

When the cloud cleared, Amr was gone, along with Sting and Harun. The soldiers outside had ceased attacking.

“They got the virus!” Murtaza exclaimed.

Akbar growled, slamming his hand off the table in frustration. Hamza’s eyes widened slightly, suddenly realising it was just him, Musa and Rizwan with all of these strangers.

As if on cue, Akbar glanced his way. He narrowed his eyes, drawing a knife. Hamza took a step back.

“Akbar wait!” Farheen hobbled in between them. Her eyes watered, and Hamza couldn’t help freeze up a bit as she cupped his face in her hands.

“My son,” she whispered with a tearful smile. “He has returned.”

Negotiations

“You’re making a mistake!” Hamza shouted in vain, his hands tightly bound with rope. “I didn’t know what the box had. I swear! I only wanted to find my mother.”

Akbar ignored him, tying his firearm around his waist. Abbas stood beside him, observing carefully. It had been exactly three minutes since Amr had escaped with the control virus. Amr, revealed to be Asif, being the great strategist he was, had planned the perfect escape. All of his soldiers were running away in opposite directions away from the bungalow allowing him to sneak away, unnoticed.

“To avoid attracting attention, Amr will not be accompanied by a strong force,” Murtaza deduced. “We need to mobilise troops and go after him!”

There were murmurs of agreement.

“But we have no idea where he is heading,” Maryam grunted, wincing at her wounded arm. “How can we find him?”

The room went silent.

“I might be of assistance,” came a voice.

Everyone turned to see Hamza, a smirk formed on his face.

“What do you know of Amr’s whereabouts?” Akbar demanded.

Hamza shrugged helplessly.

Akbar narrowed his eyes. He raised his hand but Farheen stopped him.

“Please Akbar Bhai,” she whispered. “He doesn’t know who’s on which side. Let me tell him the truth.”

Hamza narrowed his eyes as Akbar stepped back, allowing Farheen to move close. He shuddered as she leaned down. “You really do take after your father, Wahab.”

Hamza watched her with intrigue. The woman he had been looking all over for. His mother.

“I don’t understand” he whispered.

Farheen sighed.

“Oh my dear son,” she whispered. “Let me explain. Wahab and I were in so much trouble. We had no choice.”

Hamza blinked, his eyes widening slightly. Somehow, even though he never trusted people quickly, this elderly woman seemed strangely sincere.

“We had to keep you away from us,” she revealed. “The Alphas were hunting us relentlessly. We had to make this decision to stay away from you. After all, we would bear each other’s deaths, endure it if needed. But if they caught one of you, we feared they would be able to break us.”

Hamza’s eyes watered.

“We entrusted you to Asif.”

Hamza’s eyes widened in horror. The hooded man?

“He told us that the Alphas got you though. W-we were heart broken,” Farheen cried. “We found Zainab’s body. But not yours.”

Hamza’s heart sank, a tear trickled down his cheek.

She looked down.

“I should have suspected that....that young man was vile...” Farheen stopped. “The night we were on an important mission. Disposing of the box, we were attacked. That night I believed both Asif and Wahab had fallen. But today, Asif has revealed himself to be alive and well.”

Hamza looked down. He couldn’t believe it. This man...Asif. He had taken not just his sister, but his father as well.

“But Allah has brought you back to me,” she whispered tearfully, her lips curling into a motherly smile. “Now you-”

“There’s a blind spot,” Hamza revealed, his face was serious.

“Near one of your borders. Your security systems don’t cover that area. That’s how we entered. Amr can only escape undetected through there.”

Akbar narrowed his eyes.

“Can you show us?”

Hamza looked down. The last year of his life had been confusing beyond compare. From waking up in the forest and wandering like a mindless creature to the tribe, to Ilyas and Azaab city. Winding up here. He took a deep breath, looking up to meet Akbar’s gaze.

“Yes,” he whispered.

142

Escape

“Fire up the motor thrusters!” Asif growled.

He took a deep breath. He wouldn’t take his victory breath until he had escaped. He knew Hamza was aware of the blind spot and would no doubt, share it with Akbar. They were running out of time. Even though they had entered the water vessel safely, it would take a few minutes for the engines to warm up and gain enough propulsion.

And Asif wanted to leave this place behind more than anything.

He eyed the vial in his hands, the purple liquid within it.

“All this planning for you,” he whispered. “Such a powerful little monster.”

He handed it to Sting who placed it in a briefcase and sealed it.

“We got it,” Harun remarked. “Now all we-”

Boom!

The metallic ground of the vessel shook violently.

“What was that?” Harun gasped.

Asif narrowed his eyes, donning his hood once more.

“They’re here,” he growled.

143

Bullets

“Ya Zahra!” Reza shouted.

Their unanimous cries echoed as they fired upon the enemy vessel.

“Bring down that submarine!” Reza growled.

The huge steely vessel was almost fully powered up. There wasn't much time. Once the submarine entered the water, it was game over. Nobody would be able to catch them.

Slogans were heard as people fired at the metallic vessel and the few protective squads Amr had placed as precautions.

“Ya Allah!” the soldiers cried pushing forward. They were getting closer.

“Crack that vessel!” Reza growled.

Reza stopped, his eyes narrowing. There was a strange noise...almost like whistling.

Reza's eyes widened in alarm.

“Take cover!” he shouted as a missile came whizzing past him, exploding into a burst of fire.

“Keep going!” Reza growled. “The hatch is still open!”

144

The Sea

“Yes!” Asif growled in satisfaction.

The submarine was almost at full power, and the Peacevillians were nowhere near the submarine.

“Keep firing,” He shouted.

Sting pressed down on the controls once more. Another missile went whizzing at the armies.

On the other side, Harun was frantically firing up the motors.

“How much time?” Asif growled.

Harun grinned.

“Not long Amr. Any moment now.”

Asif closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. This was it. The moment he had been waiting for. It was silent. Serene. And finally...Wait. Silent? Why was it silent? Had the Peacevillians stopped firing?

“We’re good to go!” Harun shouted.

“Go! Go! Go!” Sting shouted.

The submarine vibrated, shaking uncontrollably as it descended into the waters.

Asif sighed in relief. They were safe now. Nobody could stop them. They had won.

Beep! Beep! Beep!

Asif’s eyes widened as the screens before him flashed red.

“What happened?” he asked.

Sting narrowed her eyes.

“Intruders.”

Asif growled. They were not out of the woods yet. Some soldiers had gotten on board. That’s why the firing had stopped. And Asif suspected he knew exactly who was on board.

“Okay Akbar,” he hissed. “You asked for it.”

145

Aboard

“Woah!” Abbas exclaimed. “That was some takeoff.”

He leaned down against his friend Isa’s shoulder.

“Yes,” Akbar whispered. “But we’re now on Asif’s turf. So we have to move accordingly.”

Murtaza nodded in agreement.

“Asif could have any kind of traps or challenges,” he whispered. “We have to find the cockpit.”

Abbas eyed the strange young man next to his father. Hamza. Somehow he too had managed to get in the submarine before they began descending.

“I have seen this submarine before,” Hamza remarked. “I can’t remember when, but I think, in one of the past missions I was aboard one of these. It’s got two sections before the cockpit.”

Abbas glanced at Akbar and Murtaza.

“What’s our plan?” he whispered.

Akbar grimaced.

“Fight through each section and take the cockpit.”

Murtaza, Isa, Abbas and Hamza all nodded.

“Bismillah” Abbas whispered, silently thanking Allah in his heart as they started moving.

His paralysis had turned out to be merely an effect of the poison. Nothing serious. This was his second chance.

Abbas cleared his mind. Focusing only on the task at hand.

“Ya Zahra,” Abbas breathed as they reached the first door.

It was bolted shut with reinforced steel.

“I can try hacking the door?” Murtaza suggested.

Wham!

The door dented as Hamza smashed his fist against it.

“Isa with me,” Abbas instructed.

His friend nodded.

“Argh!” they shouted jumping at the door together, simultaneously striking it.

The door groaned. But endured.

Akbar caught Murtaza’s eye, and Abbas could tell they were thinking the same thing.

“Get out of the way,” Murtaza instructed.

Isa, Abbas and Hamza cleared back.

Boom!

Akbar and Murtaza shoulder smashed into the door and it broke, collapsing on the ground like a banana peel.

“Nice,” Hamza remarked.

The three charged in after Akbar and Murtaza, almost immediately stopping.

Abbas’s eyes widened. There were dozens of soldiers standing there, poised to fight.

Abbas narrowed his eyes. All of their guns were holstered.

“Guns away,” Akbar instructed. “We can’t risk a firefight damaging the submarine.”

Abbas sighed, his lips curling into a grin. It was time to fight.

Dozens of men armed to the teeth eyed them. Abbas glanced at Isa who smirked.

“Let’s do this,” his friend whispered.

“Attack!” Akbar growled.

146

Beatdown

Wham!

Abbas staggered back in surprise, ducking as three blades whizzed over his head.

“Hiya!” Abbas thundered, smashing his elbow in the first soldier’s neck. The soldier dropped unconscious.

Turning to face the other two, he snarled,
“Who’s next?”

The two soldiers glanced at each other.

“Die!” they screamed together, swinging their blades.

Abbas leapt back, crashing into another soldier, he tripped.

“Aye!” Abbas exclaimed landing down.

The two soldiers charged at him.

“Ya Zahra!” Abbas shouted, hurling his knife at the first.

It struck the soldier square in the chest. The second soldier stopped, hurling his knife for Abbas, but Abbas rolled sideways as it clattered on the ground.

“Thank you,” Abbas remarked, grabbing it.

He threw it back at the second soldier, ending him as well.

Abbas growled, ducking as a knife whizzed over his head.

“Argh!” he snarled grabbing the thrower’s throat.

Crack.

This soldier dropped dead as well.

Abbas glanced left and right.

Murtaza was choking two men simultaneously, Akbar covering his back, slicing through the soldiers with his daggers.

Isa was busy smashing a fist into one soldier's face, instantly leaping back from an incoming blade. Hamza was with him, destroying this huge guy with a powerful kicking combination.

Wham!

A sudden force rammed him from behind.

"Argh!" Abbas growled.

Someone had grabbed him from behind, ramming him into a wall.

"Down boy!" the soldier chuckled. "I—"

"Argh!" Abbas roared, whipping out his leg.

His kick struck the soldier in the stomach.

"Aye!" the soldier squealed retreating.

Abbas snarled, barging forward. The soldier swung a fist but Abbas was faster, ducking and shoulder slamming the soldier, who dropped down unconscious.

Abbas turned around.

"Who's next?" he spat.

He froze. His eyes widening in dismay.

Before him stood a soldier at least twice his size. His built was like an elephant.

"I'm going to pound you into the ground, short boy!" he spat.

Abbas narrowed his eyes.

"We'll see about that," he growled, jumping forward. "Hiya!"

Abbas smashed a fist in the man's stomach. He didn't budge. He merely laughed.

Abbas hissed. He may have been bigger, but everyone was vulnerable to this one.

"Ya Zahra!" Abbas growled, ducking at the guard's enormous punch.

He brought his foot crashing down on the soldier's toes.

"Aye!" the soldier winced, jumping on his feet like a ballerina.

Abbas dived for his knees, but the soldier was faster.

Wham!

He slapped Abbas, knocking him back.

The giant raised a fist.

“Hiya!” A sudden force rammed into him from behind. Hamza. The ex Alpha grabbed the soldier’s ears and yanked them back.

Abbas shot forward, smashing his fists simultaneously in the soldier’s neck. He staggered back in surprise before slumping down unconscious.

Abbas took a deep breath. He was growing quite tired of this.

“These guys keep coming!” Isa shouted, hauling a soldier off his feet.

With a ferocious howl, he brought the soldier crashing down on the ground.

Crack.

He was dead.

Abbas glanced ahead. The pile of bodies was huge, and the soldiers were still incoming from both sides.

“I’ll hold them off!” Hamza shouted. “You guys go on ahead!”

Abbas turned to Akbar who narrowed his eyes for a moment.

“Very well,” he whispered. “Hamza fall back. Everyone else with me!”

They all fell in single file with Akbar in the lead, followed by Murtaza. Then Abbas. Then Isa.

Abbas whispered a silent prayer in his heart.

“Allah, help us win today,” he whispered.

147

The Greater Good

“Come on quickly!” Murtaza shouted.

The group rushed forward. Abbas and Isa first. Then Murtaza. Then Akbar.

“Get them!” one of the soldiers shouted. But they were too late.

Akbar slammed the door shut to sector 2 and rolled up the valve, locking it.

There were loud noises, from the other side, the door shaking from the pressure.

“That won’t hold,” Abbas cautioned.

Akbar met his gaze.

“It only has to hold long enough,” he whispered.

From the distance they could see Hamza fighting furiously, holding his ground just fine.

“Let’s go,” Akbar whispered. “We’ll come back for him once we’re done.”

The group turned around, stopping immediately. Abbas’s eyes widened, before narrowing in determination. There were two individuals up ahead. Sting and Harun.

“So they caught Masud,” Akbar muttered under his breath.

Murtaza growled.

“Harun!” he shouted.

The Alpha stopped, turning to face Abbas’s father.

“Murtaza,” he snarled.

Akbar growled under his breath.

“Argh!” he charged forward.

Abbas’s eyes widened in alarm.

Click.

A hatch opened up beside Sting up ahead. And she jumped inside. Harun hesitated.

“You can’t beat them all, Harun!” Sting’s voice came. “Come on!”

Harun snarled.

“Until we meet again...Murtaza.”

He jumped inside and the hatch was shut.

Boom!

Abbas’s eyes widened in confusion.

“What was that?” Isa gasped.

Akbar narrowed his eyes.

“An escape pod,” he whispered.

Abbas raised a brow. Why would Harun and Sting abandon the ship?

Static.

Abbas winced turning to the others who were equally confused.

“My my,” came a voice. “What have we here?”

Abbas growled under his breath, clenching his fists. That was Asif’s voice.

“I am tired of all of these games,” Asif hissed, each word laced with venom. “My own soldiers have abandoned me. So here I will make my last stand.”

Beep!

“You hear that beeping sound,” Asif chuckled. “That marked the start of a five minute self destruct sequence!”

Abbas’s eyes widened in horror. He glanced at Murtaza and Akbar.

“Come, get the virus!” Asif challenged.

And the audio finished.

Abbas’s heart skipped a beat. This guy was mad!

“He’s admitted defeat,” Akbar deduced. “He knows without Sting and Harun he cannot win. And we have this section now. He can’t use the pods. So he wants to take us all down with him.”

Isa tapped the wall lightly around the place where the hatch had opened, moving across until he hit something hollow. The wall was split, revealing a small escape pod. Probably one of the many in the event of abandoning the ship.

Murtaza took a deep breath.

“You know Akbar,” he whispered. “There’s a way-”

Akbar growled.

“No Murtaza,” he overspoke. “If anyone-”

“I can finish this!” Murtaza insisted. “We don’t have to play this Asif’s way!”

Abbas eyed Murtaza. What was his father talking about?

“I’m not leaving you here!” Akbar growled.

Abbas’s ears pricked, his eyes widening in horror at what his father was suggesting. He was going to stay back while everyone else ejected in the pod?

“Why can’t we all go in the pod?” Isa asked.

Akbar shook his head.

“Because Asif would just take the next pod and escape the submarine as well,” he whispered. “One of us would have to stay behind to make sure he can’t escape.”

Murtaza narrowed his eyes.

“It should be one of us,” he whispered.

Akbar and Murtaza both stood by the hatch eyeing each other.

“Abbas and Isa go inside,” Akbar ordered.

Both boys hesitated.

“Now,” Akbar repeated.

Isa looked down, stepping inside.

Abbas followed, moving up next to Murtaza and Akbar who stood beside the hatch.

“Now Murtaza, I think-”

Wham!

A sudden force rammed into both men as they fell inside the escape pod.

Abbas stood outside the hatch, his eyes watering.

“Abbas what are you doing!” Isa gasped.

Abbas looked down. Eyeing Akbar, he smiled sadly.

“You were right Akbar Uncle. I’m not the boy I once was,” he whispered. “I let you down.”

Akbar turned over, his eyes widening in horror.

“I’m sorry Akbar Uncle,” he whispered. “But I can’t let you or Baba die. Your lives are essential for our cause.”

Murtaza coughed, getting up.

“Tell Ami and Haider, I love them,” Abbas sighed, slamming the hatch shut.

“No!” Akbar shouted, jumping to his feet. “No Abbas-”

Beep.

The hatch was locked and the pod was vibrating, ready to eject.

“No!” Murtaza thundered, rushing at it but-

Boom!

A violent force knocked them off their feet as the pod ejected from the submarine.

Murtaza buried his head in his hands.

“Abbas,” he cried. “My boy, what have you done?”

Last Stand

Abbas took a deep breath, placing a hand on the hatch.

“Fiamaanallah,” Abbas whispered.

Abbas turned towards the door ahead. The last door. The final hurdle. Behind this door was Amr. Behind this door was the enemy. Abbas smiled. Somehow knowing the inevitability of his death made him all the braver. And his body would be lost. Scattered to the winds. But that was okay. He was doing this for Allah(swt). He didn’t need any more recognition.

He closed his eyes, the weight of his actions making him shudder.

“It’s time to become a martyr,” Abbas whispered. “Ya Zahra. Help me finish this last fight.”

Abbas opened his eyes. He was ready.

Reaching out for the valve, he turned it open. The door creaked open and Abbas stepped inside.

“Well, well,” came a voice. “I certainly didn’t expect this.”

Abbas blinked, narrowing his eyes at the man who stood before him. Asif.

“It ends here, Asif,” Abbas whispered. “I can’t let you do this.”

Asif chuckled cruelly.

“Clearly you forgot our last encounter!”

Abbas sighed, narrowing his eyes at the four minutes that were left in the self destruct sequence. Four minutes. That’s how long

Abbas had to fight for.

“Bismillah,” Abbas whispered.

Asif growled.

“Argh!” he snarled, lunging forward.

Abbas leapt back, just missing Asif’s fist. Asif roared, barging at Abbas.

Wham!

He rammed Abbas into the wall. Abbas gasped for air, his eyes landing on the clock. Five seconds had passed.

“Ya Zahra!” Abbas snarled, smashing his elbow in Asif’s face.

Asif swung a fist but Abbas dived, grabbing Asif’s knees, he yanked the hooded assassin off his feet. Asif landed with a thud.

“Agh!” Asif screeched.

Abbas grabbed his legs, dragging him across the floor.

Wham!

Asif slammed a foot in Abbas’s face, causing him to stagger backwards breathlessly.

“Nice boy,” he chuckled. “I like the energy.”

Abbas stopped, narrowing his eyes. It was time to change the things a little.

Asif got to his feet.

“But deep down you know you’re nothing but a weak and miserable boy.”

Abbas did not respond. He stayed calm, keeping his nerves together. Asif was going to break first.

“You made a mistake by coming here,” Asif taunted.

Abbas sighed.

“90 seconds before we both blow up to pulp,” he whispered.

The smirk faded from Asif’s face and Abbas could see a hint of uneasiness. But Abbas didn’t budge. He would not attack first. Not this time.

Amr narrowed his eyes.

“Argh!” he shouted, charging at Abbas.

Abbas took a deep breath, calming himself.

Asif lunged at him, but Abbas sidestepped, swinging his elbow for Asif’s head.

Asif caught his elbow. Abbas lifted his other arm, showing a vulnerability. And Asif fell for it.

He shot a punch at Abbas's stomach but Abbas caught his fist, twisting his arm.

"Argh!" Asif screamed.

Wham!

Abbas whipped a powerful kick in his stomach, knocking him to the ground

Clank!

A small object clattered away from him landing on the ground. A vial, containing purple liquid.

"The control virus!" Abbas exclaimed.

Abbas darted for it, picking it up.

Asif grunted, clutching his arm painfully.

"Y-you!" Asif snarled. "You will not stop me!"

Wham!

Asif lunged forward, ramming into Abbas.

Wham!

He smashed a fist in Abbas's face.

"Agh!" Abbas winced.

Asif grabbed him by the waist, slamming him against the ground.

"Argh!" Abbas growled, whipping his feet out together.

They struck Asif square in the chest, sending him flying away.

"Hiya!" Abbas roared, shoulder slamming Asif.

"Take that!" Abbas shouted, stomping his foot down on Amr's ankle.

Crack!

"Argh!" Asif screeched, clutching his broken foot.

Abbas breathed. The final strike.

"Ya Zahra!" he growled, shooting forward.

Asif swung at fist, but Abbas caught it, wrenching it out and twisting it fully. Asif screamed with pain as Abbas grabbed him, hauling the hooded assassin off his feet.

"Ya Allah!"

Abbas smashed Asif on the ground with full velocity.

Asif's screams rung through the submarine, his back was damaged.

Abbas overshadowed him, the vial was in his hand.

"You lose, Asif," he whispered.

Asif coughed blood. Clutching his wounded arm, he laughed, "Did I?"

Abbas narrowed his eyes. Why was Asif laughing?

Beep! Beep!

Abbas whirled around. The self destruct timer read two minutes. And it was headed for...Peaceville! Abbas's eyes widened in horror.

"If this submarine blows, Akbar Uncle, Baba and anyone who came here to fight will get incinerated!"

Abbas rushed for the controls. His eyes scanned the buttons desperately.

'Come on!' he thought. 'Which one turns the submarine.'

He was running out of time!

"Ya Allah, Bismillah!" Abbas whispered.

His eyes lit up. There was a lever in the right. That must have been it. Abbas grabbed hold and yanked it back. He watched as the submarine began turning around on the GPS screen before him.

"Alhamdullillah," Abbas sighed in relief. "We won!"

Boom!

Abbas gasped, his eyes widening at the surge of pain that struck his back. He coughed, his vision blurred. His body felt sore all over.

"Wh-" Abbas slipped off his feet, landing with a thud.

He glanced back in confusion to see Asif, on the ground, with a gun in his hand.

"I-" Asif coughed. "I won't die alone."

He raised the gun at Abbas who sighed, lips curling into a smile.

"Asalamualaika ya Aba abdillah," Abbas whispered.

He recited the Kalma in his heart as Asif aimed for him. Abbas didn't really care. Nor did he ever think he would be so relaxed at the sight of death. For deep down, Abbas felt happy. He had

accomplished his mission. He had gotten his father and Akbar safe. He had gotten his brother in arms, Isa, safe. And he had, with Allah's help, foiled the League's plan. They would never get the control virus.

"Die," Asif sneered weakly. "You will—"

Wham!

A force struck Asif, the gun slipped from his hand as it cascaded away into the dark. Abbas looked up, wondering who his rescuer was. His eyes widened in surprise.

"Hamza Bhai?" Abbas coughed.

Hamza rushed over to Abbas's side.

"Abbas!" he gasped.

Abbas groaned weakly,

"Come on Abbas," Hamza whispered.

Abbas shook his head.

"The mission isn't over, Abbas!" Hamza shouted.

He scooped Abbas's arm over his shoulder and delicately lifted him to his feet.

"Agh!" Abbas coughed blood.

Hamza leaned him over the stool, placing a gun in his hand.

"Hold this," he whispered.

Hamza moved up to Asif.

Wham! Wham! Wham!

He grabbed Asif by the collar smashing fist after fist.

"You threatened my mother!" he growled. "You got my sister killed! You got my father killed!"

Hamza narrowed his eyes.

"I see Abbas broke one arm," he spat. "Let me finish the set!"

Hamza grabbed Asif by the throat, heaving him off his feet. Asif coughed, trying to lash out but it was all in vain. Hamza's iron grip was not to be broken.

"No!" Asif wheezed. "No!"

Asif's face went pale. He then turned blue, by which his resistance weakened entirely. Then his face turned purple. Asif coughed, and finally stopped moving. But Hamza continued. He kept on going until at last, Asif's eyes closed. His movement ceased, his pulse flat-lined.

Hamza dropped Asif on the ground. Taking a deep breath, he glanced back at Abbas who sighed in relief. Asif was dead, the fear of death imprinted in his eyes.

Abbas took a deep breath. It was over. He glanced at the self destruct timer, now showing just showing thirty seconds.

Hamza sighed placing a hand on Abbas's shoulder.

"Thanks," Abbas whispered.

Hamza grinned.

"No problem. We got twenty four seconds. An escape pod is across the room."

Abbas coughed blood.

"I won't make it," he whispered, his lips curling into a smile. "But might as well give it a try."

Abbas placed a hand over Hamza's shoulder.

"Let's go," Hamza whispered.

The self destruct sequence was now at fifteen seconds and counting.

149

Watching the Sea

It was quiet, everyone watching the calm sea from the distance, waiting. Hoping. Praying.

“Maybe they got out,” Murtaza whispered. “Maybe they escaped.”

Akbar looked down.

“There’s barely any ti-”

Boom!

A huge burst of water erupted in the air, rising tens of meters high.

Murtaza’s knees gave way, his heart was sinking. His eyes watered, unable to accept what had happened.

Akbar was beside him, a single tear trickled down his cheek.

“H-he,” Akbar breathed. “He saved us.”

Murtaza didn’t care. How he wish it could have been him. He should have been faster. He should have saved his son. How would he face Layla now, and tell her that their amazing son was gone.

“Allah,” Murtaza whispered. “I give my pardons to Abbas in this world and the hereafter.”

150

Funerals

One week later...

Many hands had rubbed the dirt. Many lips had whispered condolences. But there were fewer hearts that were in more agony than the man at the foot of the grave. Akbar didn't look up at the tombstone. He couldn't bear it. To see it, to be forced to believe it. To face the fact that Abbas was gone.

The funeral had finished an hour ago, so he, Layla and Murtaza were alone in the cemetery. Alone, with Abbas. Who was now another tombstone, just one of the many, all lined up in neat rows. The grave was simple, white marble. Pure, just like Abbas. He didn't even bother to wipe the tears that flooded down his cheeks.

On the other side was a similar tombstone, with the name 'Hamza' written on it. An elderly lady was mourning next to it.

"My dear Abbas," Akbar's voice choked. His tongue felt like glue, his croaky and groggy voice echoing in the quiet cemetery.

"S-So many people came today." he sniffed. Akbar thought he must have looked mad, talking to a tombstone, but somewhere in his heart, he could feel that Abbas was listening.

"I guess you were more popular than you thought, my boy," he gave the dirt at the foot of the grave a watery smile, one hand idly fidgeting with the grass.

"You..." Akbar paused, the pained smile still on his face. He tried to fight it but he could feel a wave of pain building in his chest. With as much strength as he could muster, he looked up.

But there was no laughing face staring back. There was only stone. Cold. Hard. Stone. Etched into the stone was Abbas's name. In black, colourless, lifeless letters. Akbar's hand unconsciously dug into the dirt beside his, clenching the soil in a painful grip. Abbas's body had not been found. His parents were deprived of even bidding farewell to him.

Tears clouded his vision. His voice choked. Hammers of anger swung wildly in his head. They had to pay. They had to suffer. *He* would make them suffer.

One by one, faces flashed in front of him. Naqi, Abbas, Hamza... Young faces, happy faces, faces belonging to people. People who had lives and loved ones. He had lost too many people, too many brave *momineen*.

"I heard the news right now."

Akbar turned to see Ibrahim. He was wearing a simple black Kurta shalwar.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

Akbar bowed his head respectfully.

"Thank you Ibrahim," he whispered.

The Peaceville leader sighed.

"*They are* brave boys."

Akbar looked at him.

"Yes they *were*," he choked.

Ibrahim shook his head, pointing up ahead.

Akbar glanced ahead. His eyes narrowed slightly. Several meters ahead, two men were standing there, tall and strong.

Akbar's eyes widened in confusion. No. It couldn't be!

"Abbas?" Akbar exclaimed incredulously.

The young man walked forward, a smile was on his face.

"Missed me?" he grinned.

There was a moment of silence.

"Abbas!" Akbar embraced the boy tightly, his eyes wet with tears.

He let go as Layla and Murtaza hugged him next. They cried in disbelief.

"Now now," Abbas smiled. "You didn't cry this much at my funeral!"

Layla smiled tearfully, tightening her hug.

“You scared me you awful...”

She let go, Murtaza and Akbar were standing there.

On the side, Farheen was holding her son’s hands in disbelief. Hamza grinned.

“Salams Ami,” he whispered, kissing her hand.

Farheen wiped her eyes embracing her son.

“Wait till you boys come back home, we’ll celebrate and spread the...” Farheen stopped. “What’s wrong?”

Abbas and Hamza eyed each other, sighing. Each withdrew a small wooden pendant, shaped like a Zulfiqar.

“We have something to tell you,” Abbas began. “If you allow us, we will not be returning home.”

All four adults recoiled in confusion.

Ibrahim stepped forward.

“When Abbas and Hamza ejected, they had been within blast radius of the submarine, and so their pod got a bad hit. We found them and Alhamdulillah pulled them to the shore. Everyone was gone.”

Akbar’s eyes widened and Abbas was certain that he knew what was to come.

“Everyone thinks these two are dead,” Ibrahim whispered. “Including the enemy.”

Farheen’s eyes widened.

“No!” she gasped. “I just got my son, I won’t let him go!”

Hamza sighed, holding her hands.

“Ami,” he whispered. “The enemy will never stop coming.”

“Once it was Alpha 43,” Abbas stated. “Today it was Amr. Tomorrow, who knows who it’ll be?”

Ibrahim continued.

“This is an opportunity of a lifetime to take the offensive on the enemy,” he explained. “And with everyone thinking that these exceptionally talented young men are dead...”

Akbar sighed.

“Why them?” he asked.

Ibrahim looked down.

“Any agents we sent have been caught. But these two are dead. No one will suspect or expect them.”

Layla shook her head.

“I don’t want to say goodbye,” she whispered.

Abbas smiled.

“Ah Ami,” he answered kindly. “It’s not goodbye. It’s just a short separation. We will meet again. I promise. Hamza Bhai and I will return one day, Inshallah.”

Akbar looked down.

“They’re right,” he whispered. “They will be the perfect team to lead the fight.”

Farheen took Hamza’s hand in her own.

“You will come back to me, Hamza. Promise me,” she whispered.

Hamza held his mother’s hand.

“My beautiful mother,” he smiled. “I swear I will return, Inshallah.”

Abbas nodded.

“Inshallah,” he whispered.

The young man kissed his mother and father’s hand. He then embraced Akbar. As he did, Akbar whispered,

“You’re right Abbas. You’re no longer the boy you once were,” he smiled. “You’re stronger. And I couldn’t be more proud of you.”

Abbas beamed.

Layla took Abbas’s hand, placing her ring inside.

“Whenever you feel alone or scared,” she whispered.

“Remember you’re never alone.”

She closed his fingers around the ring.

“Fiamanullah my son, may Allah light your way.”

151

The Evaluation

The room was dark. A dim candle wrestled the gloom around it, barely illuminating the surrounding area. Despite the light, one would never notice the three shadows concealed in the darkness. The League.

“It seems we underestimated Peaceville,” Fear whispered.

“They have foiled our plan, yet again,” Ambition sighed.

Anger clenched his fist.

“That youth Abbas is gone now,” he whispered. “But Peaceville is still standing strong. It has now become our top priority.”

“They may have won the battle,” Fear muttered.

“But they will not win the war,” Ambition finished.

152

Setting Sail

It was a quiet day. The sea was bright blue, like a sapphire, reflecting the sun light. Strong winds, blowing. It was a good day to set sail.

Abbas stood there, his trusted revolver Zulfi was in one hand and his knife in the other.

“Ya Allah,” he whispered. “Help us in this upcoming endeavor.”

“Ameen,” Hamza whispered.

Before them stood Ibrahim. In his hand was a bag filled with maps, long distance radios and other such useful travelling equipment.

“Where are we headed?” Abbas asked.

Ibrahim took a deep breath.

“Calmville. That’s where the enemy’s last trace was seen. Your mission is to infiltrate and eradicate their presence. Ruin their presence and foothold there. Gather information. Inshallah, you will be the first successful squad to come back home from this mission.”

“Inshallah,” Abbas whispered, eyeing the small boat behind them.

They bid farewell and got on board.

Sitting calmly on deck, Abbas took a deep breath as the boat set sail. He glanced back at the only land he had ever known as home. The land where his family and friends were. The land

where he had grown. Became a warrior.

Now he was leaving. Going to take the offensive to the enemies.
Not let them hurt Peaceville any further.

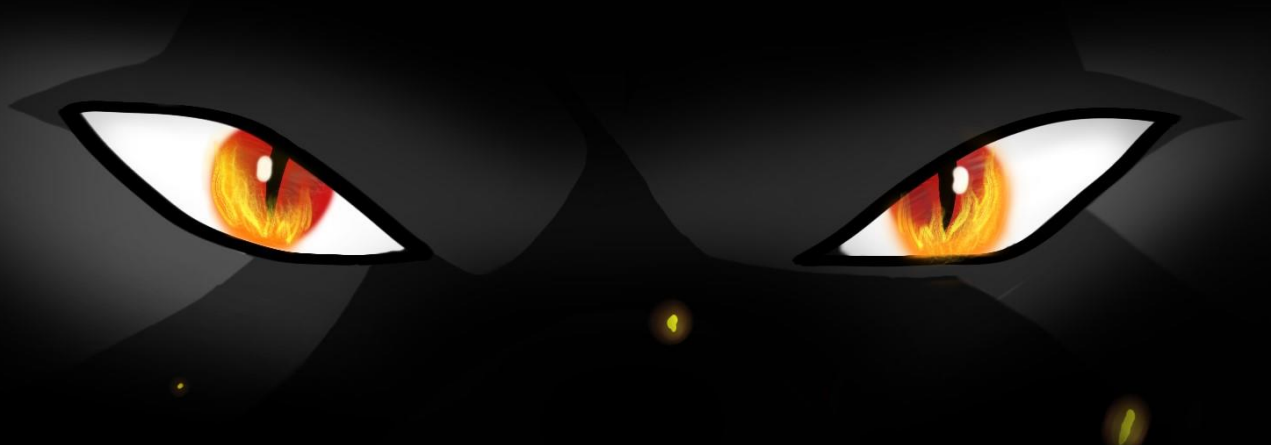
“You ready wolf-hunter,” Hamza chuckled.

Abbas sighed.

“Yes. I think I am, *Bear-hunter*.”

As the boat sailed on, Peaceville grew smaller. Abbas
whispered a silent prayer for success in his heart. This was it.
The dawn of a new era.

“Ya Zahra,” Abbas whispered.



Success comes at a price.

While the city of Peaceville revels in its newfound freedom, Abbas and his friends attain a sliver of solace to heal from their loss. Friends and family, treachery and deception, all has passed. Hailed as heroes across the land, they enjoy a life without fear and danger.

Alas it was not to last. A new threat emerges from the past, reeling its ugly head with one aim: Ultimate Control.

In the sequel to the action-packed Out of Control, our heroes are thrown into a web of plots and schemes that plan to destroy all they have accomplished.

Abbas will have to lock horns with the enemies once more, to protect everything and everyone he loves.

**Will he be strong enough to defeat the dangers that lie in wait?
Only time will tell.**



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