

ريما

AMIR

'It's not so much my faith
as it is my faithlessness
regarding my path.'



SANDRA NEKH

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DEDICATION

To Nicolas and Grace, you who inspire.

“The Muslim still prayed even while wounded.”

PROLOGUE

'TO BE is to merely 'suffer' one's fate, do nothing and thereby live, while 'not to be' is to act, 'to take arms' and 'die'; because action means death, Hamlet says, through the writings of Jed Rubenfeld. Generations over recognise that his actions were needed. His choice one hard enough to wreck a man but needed nonetheless. How could he choose 'to be' in fear of disappointing and the fear of death itself? How could an honest man fear death when the alternative was way worse an option even to consider? How could he sit and watch when he had seen colour in an all-so-grey world? Amir chose and will have to live with his choice. He believes he would have still selected this choice if given another chance. Over and over again, he will forever choose this selection; be a man of action because this choice vindicates him.

Amir suddenly shifts his limbs over the edge of the bed, sitting up. He looks around him at his meagre room at the Royal Garissa Guesthouse. A basic room, not a suit for the prideful, neither an excellent assignment for the wealthy. His room is simple; nothing about it stands out. Every time he is in the region, he comes to this place because it reminds him of when he came to Kenya. He stayed in this room when he was smuggled into the country. This was his first experience of a roof over his head after the war. His first knowledge of a space that was his, his first home.

He sits there in the room, brooding over the past and the present. The little light from the Moon that seeps in through the gap over the curtain illuminates the embellishment on his face, a severe scowl. A sleepy moan behind him calls his attention, and he turns

back to see Iyani sleeping peacefully beside him. He grimaces, thinking of the ill fate he has written for her, how he has marked her destiny with abandonment, loneliness, and even death. It would have been easier to let her die; at least then, she would be at peace, forever.

The shadow that looms would not follow her too.

PART 1

AMIR'S THINKING is clear as the two parts of a cameo. He is decisive and ready to go the extra mile. He should be jittery, limbs shaking, cold sweat streaming down his temples... something, anything to prove he is human, but there are no hints of angst. He is hard as stone. He is at Wildwood, a small airstrip located in a district on the outskirts of Nairobi, Kenya, at the regional terminal guests' lounge. Amir counts down the second, in time with the clock's hand. The question of a riddle plays in his head in a loop, part of the reason why he sits so calm.

While he waits, as he stares into space, then he catches a blur of colour gliding before him toward the ticketing counter. He looks up to see a young woman running up to the counter. Her shoes have an exciting clutter that reminds him of hard plastic. He cranes his neck to see her feet and affirms that the shoes do nothing for her comfort. The plastic atrocities shield a tiny pair of feet, and it is those small feet that push him to wonder how old she is.

She leans over the ticketing counter; Amir watches her anxiously try to explain herself to the airline attendant at her service. She is twisted with worry. He catches part of the conversation; she seems to think that her delay may have made her miss her flight.

Amir's lips twitch in an almost smile. If she looks about and pays the slightest attention to the room, she will notice that all eight of the passengers supposed to board the smaller plane —with a twelve-passenger-fit— are in the lounge, waiting.

Amir watches her talk, counting her words against the second hand, reading into her rush and excess of word use. This worry is

further depicted in her body language; her brows are pulled together, her eyes shy of letting a torrent of tears flow. The hand that holds her ticket and travel documentation holds too tightly—folding the documents slightly even as they shake in a slight tremor. Her other hand waves about catching every word with a dire need to elaborate in action. Her tiny feet keep shuffling, going as far as to take small steps side to side in indecisiveness. She is without herself with worry.

The lady at the counter tries to listen patiently finds easing her burden an act of kindness well needed at this moment. She cuts the rumbling young woman off only to ease her into the realisation that she is well within the limits of time since the plane has not yet left. She even does so with a sympathetic smile.

Soon, the woman takes a deep breath; it takes over her whole form. Her shoulders drop as she exhales, slightly upturning her head towards the ceiling, as though thanking her heavens for this little mercy. She then leans heavier on the counter and thanks the attendant.

“Thank you, thank you so much.” As though the attendant had a say in delaying the plane.

The attendant smiles broader, then ushers her to the sitting area, where the other passengers sit. “These are your fellow passengers.” She leans closer to the young woman as she speaks, “They are all bound to board your flight, so don’t worry. Relax.”

The woman turns to sweep a gaze about the room, past Amir and the other passengers, then back to the attendant, “Thank you.”

She says lastly, taking another deep breath, exuding gratitude but visible exhaustion from the short event.

“So, you could get checked in....” The attendee’s voice fades away as Amir cranes his neck—in subtle motion—angling himself as he scans the newest passenger. Shifting restrictedly in daunting discomfort, Amir feels a need to know more about this somewhat fascinating new addition to the roster of travellers. A little old knapsack slings over her left shoulder. It is well-used; the leather is light and rough with cuts and scratches. The colour has worn and the zipper heads unmatched; Amir presumes they have been replaced a few times. This ancient bag scrapes at his arrogant side, and he concludes he is way up there and has way too much. He thinks of his millions stored away in Swiss bonds while a young woman like this wears plastic shoes as though she were a young girl. Even more interesting, she uses a bag that looks older than her, at least a few decades over.

Amir watches her listen and nod attentively. The way she carries herself is invaluable; a simple nod of her head has him writhing within. Her shifting her weight from one foot to the other and back makes him squirm. Her expectation, the promise that she will make her flight, makes her face come alive. He sees the way her eyes light up in delight, and he is left enthralled.

He forgets about the second’s hand.

“You can wait there,” The attendant says as she points in Amir’s general direction.

“Thank you.” The young woman then turns towards the sitting area. Towards Amir.

Surprised by his traction, Amir feels a smile creep on his face as he watches the lady come to him. She sits opposite him but barely notices his presence. He tells himself it is a good thing but soon hates that she does not acknowledge him.

Amir is left to admire her and her winsome ways. She sits too stiffly and is forever stealing glances at the departure gate. Her grip on her little knapsack is too tight. He fears she will burst the stitches of the eyesore. She is too anxious. He feels the need to calm her.

Amir does not understand what pressed him to go to her but in a flash, but he is sitting beside her in a moment. She turns to him, eyes questioning what he is doing.

“First flight?” He asks her with a gentleness in his tone despite his deep voice. She chooses to be courteous, just as he is. She nods at him gracefully. He smiles. “Mine was worse. I had to take a cargo plane.” This earns him a smile.

“Why?”

He sits back. As he is triggered, she is baited. He looks ahead and realises he can see through to the departing planes—though the terminal has no planes yet.

“It was a military extraction, and someone had mercy on a little kid with an angelic face.” She scrunches her face at him, and he laughs. She is very expressive, making ripples course down his insides. “Okay, the truth is... I paid a good price to get my bottom on that plane, and it paid off.”

She turns to him slightly, now more curious. He feels a tug of silent pride. *Works every time!*

“What price and what was your reward?” She asks.

“I got to meet a friend of mine —Karim. I met him here, in Kenya.” He keeps missing that moment when she sits still enough for him to read her expressions. He wants more time. He needs to look into her eyes; he sees them, but he wants to delve deep into a study of those eyes, her brows, and forehead, that nose... that mouth... all her features. He wants to know her reactions so that nothing passes him. He wants them etched into his mind for eternity. But luckily, she is as forthright with her questions and answers as she is expressive.

“The military plane was coming to Kenya?” He nods. “And the price...?”

“A tale for another day.” He evades this line of questions.

She smiles at him. “Was that a line?” she asks him, her eyes dancing with amusement.

He smiles. “If it was, did it work?”

“I don’t know.” She looks away, but he has a feeling it worked. At least, she does not shy away, and she is smiling. From his position, he can see the side of her lip turns up.

“I’m Amir. What’s your name?”

“Iyani.”

“Interesting name.” Now that he thinks about it, she does look like a lady with an exotic name. Her skin is beautifully dark and even-toned. She is of an average to petite build, judging from his

larger frame. Lean but slightly curvy, he believes this is genuinely Kenyan about her body; he has seen these African girls, even when slender, some curves remain. Iyani has the trifecta, the fullness of a generous chest, the bulge of feminine hips, and a sizable apple bottom. He was sure to note this much when she stood at the ticketing counter.

Iyani's hair is in thick dark locks, and it is held up; the excess that should be a ponytail forms a messy bun at the back of her head. He wonders how she would look with her hair out of the tie.

His gaze is lower, about her chin heading down the side of her neck when she turns to him, and he finds himself looking right at her. Amir sees her facial features up-close for the first time. *My... my, when temptation comes... it comes in the purest of forms...* She is a heartbreaker that does not know she is a heartbreaker. His throat bobbles in a swallow. "Where are you from?" He asks her.

"Here, I am Kenyan."

He studies her features and cannot place her. "Iyani...?" he ponders the name. *What's in a name...* here, most times, ancestry. Her name is not 'a first name', as it is not English. He presumes that most Kenyans have English first names. *It has to be her maiden name...* she may like it enough to use it as much as a first name. Again, he presumes; he has a minimal understanding of Iyani and the larger society that she comes from.

"Kikuyu." She says.

"Oh," Iyani is not a Kikuyu name, as far as he can deduce, having lived in Kenya a decade or so a while back. She laughs a little, and

Amir has to adjust himself in his seat. He is a man, after all, belief aside.

“My name is a result of an emotional response.” —she saw his lack of comprehension. Thus her need to explain the origins of her name.

He tells himself that he needs to master his emotions and reactions more with Iyani; he cannot be open like a book; boundaries must be between them. She should not read him this easily. “Do tell!” Amir urges her; he is already amused. He can tell the story behind the name is likely to be comical.

“So,” Her brows come up a second, and Amir is already holding himself from the preamble to heckles of laughter. “My father and a cousin of his went to see my mother in her home because she was the most beautiful woman in the village, and he wanted to ask her out. My mother still lived with her parents at the time. That day, my grandfather was out for work, so my grandmother—a free-spirited traditional brew maker—was the one my father and uncle met when they came home. They asked if my mother could go with them for a day out to the town nearby, and she gave my mother her permission to leave with the visitors... after giving them a tab of traditional brew. Later, they drank, and my father and mother had relations.” She gives him a mischievous but playful wink. “—if you know what I mean— and a few months later, she found out that she was blessed with yours truly,” She raises her hands as if to own her status.

Amir starts to laugh but musters himself when she starts to speak again.

“So, my mother went to my father to break the good news... she said that when she told him, he stood there wide-eyed and frozen, mouth agape.” She mimics this look she describes, and he laughs a little more. “When she was done, he stuttered, yelling at her, ‘liii-iiii-iiiiiiiiiiya-nnnnnnniiii-iiii uk-kkko pregnant?!’”

She starts to laugh, but he fails to connect to the punch line.

“Sorry,” raising her shoulders and hands in a feigned regret, “It loses meaning in translation.”

He nods as his earlier laugh fades down to a smile that slowly disappears as his elation dies. They settle and turn to look ahead at the terminal. They both become aware that a considerable amount of time has passed, and their flight is way overdue.

It has been over an hour, and the hosts and attendants at the waiting lounge have started to avert direct eye contact with the passengers who have begun to show signs of unrest. The lack of information from the airline and mannerisms that illustrate an evading of passengers’ possible queries is beginning to frustrate some of the passengers. Though most appear bored and possibly tired, some are plain irritated. It seems that only Amir and Iyani are the only ones enjoying the wait.

Needing conversation to distract her, Iyani asks Amir, “Where are you from?”

He tells her that he is of Iranian origin, born in Jordan but raised in Sweden. His timely stint in Kenya made passage for him to go to Sweden. Amir shares this with her, his instincts telling him that he can trust her. This is the first time he has spoken about details of his actual life and the façade he adopted. After moving to Sweden, a

better offer came along, presenting itself as a fix-all. He was quick to take it up, and his life changed forever. He forgot the man he was before and became a new man altogether.

Amir feels a little chastened by the truth of his circumstances, as he reveals all to Iyani—in valued proportions, of course.

Another bout of quiet sits between them as Iyani reads into the depth of Amir's disclosure. She steals a glance at his clothes, then at his face, a priced empathy marring her features as she beholds him. A vulnerability takes reigns; she offers something raw in return to balance the scales. Iyani shares a bit of herself with this mysterious but rather pleasant stranger. Iyani reveals that she comes from a problematic background, raised by her father, who passed away only six months earlier. Amir offers his condolences which she accepts graciously. She speaks little of her mother, admitting she knows very little of her. From what he gathers, she has no intentions of getting closer to her mother, even with the woman being her only living parent. This time around, with this conversation—underneath the high ceilings of the handsome tile and artistically flared terminal lounge, while basking in the midmorning sun that shines through the expansive windows of the terminal lounge— Amir and Iyani seek to understand each other. They share plenty of their personal lives. They talk until only silence can reign, contemplation and internalisation taking precedence.

Once in a while, Iyani breaks this silence with a myriad of questions he answers every time. Amir is well travelled, has been about the globe twice over, and seems to have not a foreseeable day when he will lay roots and want to still long enough to throw away

his passport. His experiences juxtapose her ignorance and innocence. So, when she asks, he answers her diligently, seeking to open her world to more. Amir expresses patience with Iyani, and this surprises him. He can be a tad bit intolerant.

‘A tad’ may be undercutting it; he is the quintessential bigot on a good day.

“You endeavour to confuse me,” she exclaims, her eyes wide at him. She sits twisted, facing him despite the forward-facing seats. On the other hand, he sits slightly turned her way. His one leg elegantly crossed over the other.

“No. Never.”

“Then why do you speak in riddles?”

He does not answer.

“So, the D.A. —District Attorney— has power over the President...”

“Yes and no.”

“Fine, I give up,” changing the topic, as she sees no solution to their problem. Her eyes wander and fall on his scarf; the folded edge is tucked under the lapels of his all-black tailored suit jacket. The dwindling edges of the scarf are hanging down the sides of his torso to his waist. The old-style garment is red and white in a structural yet cultural woven design. He looks very stylish; she is fascinated by his reflection of his beliefs through his clothing choices.

“I like your Arafat scarf,” She smiles in pride; she does not think she can be this bold. “It is stunning.” She offers a compliment but

displeases him instead.

"It's a *kuffiyah*," he offers, a little cold in his correction.

"Oh!" she offers contritely, maybe a little hurt. She recoils, and he feels for her.

"Thank you." He amends in a reprieve.

This earns him a smile, and it is a beautiful smile. A few breaths later, she is back to asking questions. "How do you know so much about America?"

Amir finds Iyani has a scholar's curiosity in her air. He enjoys that it intrigues her to learn more. He adores her asking questions and not pretending to know the answers to everything. He loves that she takes correction well and moves on quickly even when offense rears its head. *Innocent... Untouched by the world. Much like a child...*

"I lived there for eight years."

"Did you leave because of the state of things with those of your religion and origin?" she presumes from what he has told her of himself.

This makes him smile, "No. I left because my business there was complete."

"Oh... and what business is it?"

"I am a sales expert," he offers quickly, and she frowns at his career choice.

"You think my job is boring or ordinary?"

She looks away before answering, “No.” She lies, “I just think you can do better!”

Amir uncrosses his legs and turns further into her. “And what else could I be?” He does want to know.

She ponders the question for a moment, “I’ve got it! What about a consultant?” Iyani says ‘consultant’ with a playful wiggle of her shoulders as she waves her hands like she is presenting something grand to him. She looks amused at his reaction to her words and registers he is genuinely surprised.

He feels her answer is not candid enough, “In what area?” he asks.

Iyani calms herself, then shrugs her shoulders at him before looking to the side at the departure gate. She continues, “You seem to have travelled a lot. You must have seen and heard a lot—you know so much—I am sure you could find a way to turn that into money.”

He stays silent, giving it thought. His quiet saddens her; it shows as her face loses the twinkle of excitement. Iyani fears she has offended him again. Amir knows now that she is pretty animated in showing her thoughts; she has proved as much in that last hour or so.

He is about to assure her not to worry about it, but she cuts him off, “I don’t mean to,” she extends a pre-apology.

“Oh no! It’s not you. You just spoke to my inner convictions,” he imposes a smile, which she reciprocates. Hers is sweet and honest... *too pure.*

"How old are you?" Amir asks, suddenly realising he has no idea.

Iyani's face breaks into a cocky grin.

He is pleased that his inquisition has had this effect on her.

"Old enough."

"I need figures, my dear," he presses and is rewarded with a slight blush. He can tell she finds the line of questions titillating. She must get asked her age a lot. She has one of those faces. Full and soft, polite. Her eyes are pools of black, maybe brown. Expressive but also sharp. Too sharp for such a face. Contrasts so unfathomable, yet they lay on the same blessed canvas. She will be the death of him. She has round cheeks and full lips; a quiet beauty spot sits on her upper lip. The bottom needs adoration, for it is coloured in a delicate wash of pink; simply perfect. Her eyes show no crow's feet; her cheeks bare no sign of laughing lines. She must have tasted the fountain of youth, for there is no way to tell her age in any way.

"How old do you think I am?"

He looks into her eyes for a moment, and just as expected, her cheeks flare in a blush. He likes this look on her.

"I can't tell..." and he honestly cannot guess; otherwise, it would be an insult to Allah's creation. He finds himself looking around for her guardian, assuming she is underage.

She watches him and laughs.

"No. My mother is not lurking around in corners waiting on me."

“You are an adult then?”

She nods.

Again, they remain quiet and for a considerable length of time. This time, this silence feels weighty. Amir remembers the importance of time on this day, and he looks at the face of his wristwatch—a Swiss watch gifted to him by his friend Karim just before he left Sweden for America. It was almost noon. They are beyond late. This delay is beyond mere tardiness. Something must have happened... *Is it time?*

On cue, a voice announces the delay through the terminal's intercom. The agent then apologises and proceeds to guide the passengers to the coffee station slash tuckshop for free coffee and snacks as the airline sorts out the snag that is the reason for the delay. They give no specific information on the new departure time, just that it will be soon.

Amir's eyes dart across the floor as a few passengers take up the offer of free food. His deep-set eyes acquire a new coldness as he reads the room. When his eyes circle back to Iyani, she is clutching her bag as she was before. All ease faded; she is back to being the ball of anxiety she had been before when she ran into the terminal. Though chatting helped distract her, the moment reality dawned, all the ease of a good chat, laughter, and shy blushes became a distant memory. He noticed something though, the bag that she holds so tightly in search of comfort is a little too light for a lengthy trip or foreign travel.

Where are you going...? he wonders, after Entebbe in Uganda, that is. This is her first flight, so she has not been where she is going

—she has no store of clothes and necessities in a distant home away from home. It must be a short trip, or... she plans to buy what she needs on the other side. *Are you on the run? Are you meeting someone?* Amir wonders some more.

Iyani is becoming a riddle he wants to solve; he intends to unfurl her world. Know everything about this girl if it's the last thing he will do. Iyani intrigues him. "Where are you going?" He abruptly asks her.

"London. Through Entebbe."

Amir turns further towards her; it must be fate. The route is peculiar enough to engage further interest. It is just his luck to meet someone with the same weird itinerary. "Me too! Well, sort of."

They stare at each other for a quiet moment.

Amir sees her walls fall. She leans forward, closer to him, as her eyes start to shimmer with excitement. She is beginning to see more; tomorrow maybe... a future. Amir raises his hand and circles it about her right upper arm. At first, his hold was barely there, feather-light. A warm presence that makes Iyani take a deep inhale. Ambiguity raids her features as she is unsure of this new attention. His grip tightens, and now her expression changes to sudden dread.

Unexpectedly, Amir pulls her hard against him and then pushes her onto the floor. Her knees and ribs bear the brunt of the impact in the rough landing, almost immediately after Amir comes down, half hiding her beneath him. A commotion erupts at the lounge entrance; frightful yells and screams carry from the outside into the lounge; they hang in the air until an explosion quiets the yelling.

The lounge becomes gravely still... not a soul moves. Not a squeak or murmur. Iyani struggles to look, but Amir wraps his arms about her head, protecting her and ensuring she is secured, her sight limited to the tiled floor and his suit's forearm.

IYANI imagines everyone is on the ground, as she is, waiting on salvation. The quiet lasts all of eight eternal seconds, only to be raptured by ear-splitting gunfire from an automatic rifle. This gunfire resonates from within the lounge, and it slowly creeps in bursts triangulating the location of people by their noises of anguish. Whimpers and cries of pain and mercy can be heard, but they die off —stopping altogether— after a torrent of gunshots wafts to the voices.

Every round of fire tears through Iyani's spirit. Despite being bound in Amir's hold; she quakes with every release. She tries to pull herself out of the handle to run, taking matters in her hands, but he is steadfast in ensuring she goes nowhere.

The tranquility experienced before now vanished; the lounge sounds like hell, exchanges of gunfire and piercing screams devastate her ears. It is far worse than the shrieks of a banshee. Iyani's chest feels tight; she can barely draw a full breath. When she does, the air she needs is polluted by a muddle of different smells; it is thick with choking smoke, gun powder, a ting of iron, fresh blood, and Amir's scent. Dizziness washes over her, and she starts to feel faint. Needing comfort, Iyani squeezes herself smaller, feeling very vulnerable despite Amir's presence beside her. She

pushes her hands over her face as she whimpers, regretting the decision to take this trip altogether.

After what feels like an eternity, eventually, the shooting stops.

“Are you okay?” Amir’s hushed voice registers into Iyani’s ear. Her knees and ribs hurt from the way she landed on the cold tiled floor. Moreover, there is the pressure of her rapid heartbeats against her chest and the tightness of her lungs. She wants to say ‘no’ but hesitates; when she starts to say ‘no,’ the word simply refuses to leave her throat. Her voice is gone, as though expended despite that Iyani never screamed.

AMIR asks again, “Are you okay? Iyani!” Again he gets no reply. Her quiet turns to discreet sobbing, and a pang of regret takes hold of him, tugging at his heartstrings. He moves his forearm and tries to peer at her face; she has hidden her face behind shaking hands. Working his core to balance his weight, he anchors his right arm at the elbow, and he wedges his left hand over one of her wrists, grips it before pulling it out gently but with decisive firmness. She gives in quickly, and he looks through the space at her face. Aware of his actions, she stops sobbing. Her dark eyes open wide —disoriented, they keep darting back and forth. The disorientation in them quickly turns to fear. Her breaths grow uneven as she heaves through every lungful through parted lips. Her exhales waft slightly against his wrist, raising goose pimples and the hair at the nape of Amir’s neck. Her lower lip shivers, pulling his eyes to them; it is moist and very pale. She looks somewhat unwell.

“Iyani...” Amir whispers her name; she shifts her wet eyes to look at Amir but does not answer him. Before he can coax an answer out of her, a new wave of bullets hits, and this time around, it is closer to them than before. Iyani’s hands fold into tight fists, the tension runs through her whole body in shudders. She hides away. Amir covers her with his arms about her as before. She quakes harder, and he lowers himself closer.

The shooting seizes. All Amir hears is the crunch of heavy boots approaching them. The lounge is now deathly quiet and cold. No screams or cries, no gunshots or explosions. Just chilling still. This new quietness heightens the sound of the footfalls coming their way.

“No... no... please, no.” Iyani starts to implore softly. She shakes her head side to side, her body trembling even harder. “Please... no.”

IYANI shuts her eyes tighter, fearing death, forecasting Amir’s inability to protect them both. She feels the futility of being human at the moment—the desolation of mundanity—that familiar feeling of being forsaken by the heavens. The din moves closer until it stops before them, and Iyani’s heart hitches a few seconds.

The shooter stands so close Iyani can smell shoe polish and the smell of dirt off his boots. This new smell tickles the insides of her nose. Nevertheless, she dares not scratch that itch. Staying as still as she can—possibly trying to merge with the floor, maybe dissolve into it—Iyani awaits her fate.

Hers and Amir’s fate.

Amir moves, his hold shifts a little, and Iyani finds herself grabbing at his hand so that he does not go away, leaving her behind. She believes that her hold will keep him to her. She also wants to think that Amir does not want to leave her behind. But then, he fights her hold, raises his torso off her enough for her chest to open up and she can draw a fuller breath. He comes up high enough to be facing the shooter.

Iyani lays immobile, static as a desk. She is willing herself some power of invisibility.

Seconds pass, and nothing happens. Iyani opens her eyes so slightly. Her paralysing fear restricts her view to Amir's wrist, there where his watch sits. She starts to hear the very slight sound of the second's hand as it shifts—this sound is in her head, a congruent phantom created by her need to listen to what is going on above her.

A whole minute passes, and Iyani hears nothing other than the passing hand of the watch. She waits for the piercing assault of bullets as the shooter fires at them, but he does not fire. She waits for him to walk away. He does not. This interim is excruciating, the procrastination an inconvenience—if she is dying, she would like to die presently. She would want it over and done promptly. Funny, she finds being alive at this moment an inconvenience. Another minute passes, and Iyani is now very tempted to look up. She knows, though, the thinness of the line between bravery and stupidity, and she is neither... so, she stays where she lays, underneath Amir's protective canopy.

Iyani wonders if Amir is looking right at the shooter... or worse, conversing with him. *They cannot be... is he...?* She does not know what Amir is doing, and it scares her. With no clear aftermath insight, she has to wait to find out.

She says a silent prayer to God.

IYANI'S grip on Amir's hand is tight. Reinvigorated, she begins to show a strength Amir never thought she could demonstrate; she is such a dainty thing. Over with the games, Amir sends the shooter away with a simple gesture. After a deathly scowl, the man turns away. Soon, his heavy boots mark his departure in a slow and daunting retreat.

Even so, Amir still feels the tension in Iyani, her every muscle tense. He eases off her, kneeling to her side, in this motion, pulling his arm out of her grip. His features are riddled with worry; he places a hand on her shoulder to assure her. When tremors rent her body from his touch, he flips her over, so she faces upwards—at him—so she knows that he and no one else is touching her.

Amir moves closer, placing his hands on her shoulders. He shakes her a little, enough to knock her out of inertness. She raises her hands protectively while staring unseeing at Amir; her eyes are narrow and red from crying. Unexpectedly, her tear-soaked lashes flutter. When they stop, she raises her brows, pulling them together, making her appear so pitiful he has to ask, "Are you okay?"

She starts to speak and mumbles incoherently.

“It’s okay. You will be fine,” he reassures her, letting go of her shoulders. Amir takes her hands gingerly, then pulls her to a sitting position. He shifts, sitting back on his legs. “It will wear off.” She leans further forward, head held low, swinging sideways as though dazed. “You will be okay.” He pulls her upright as she nods feverishly, grabbing at every breath.

He lets go of her hands to place his right on her back and rubs little circles of comfort into her very stiff back. He turns away for a moment, looking past Iyani at the mess of scattered luggage, electrical devices, spilled snacks, bodies, blood, and bullet shells. His face twists in an indecipherable look, with a slight crunch of his nose that disappears as quickly as it comes. When he turns back, Iyani is looking right at him.

They are still this way in a long gaze, enough to chill Amir’s blood. His hand drops from her back. Unable to remain detached, he reacts to the intense stare; his brows knit as he stares down at Iyani with undisguised enthusiasm. *Why did it have to be you...?*

“You knew....” Iyani accuses Amir in a tiny tremulous voice. Her first coherent words to the man that just saved her life.

IN 1998, a steel processing plant was built at the corner of Fifth and Main Street—in the Industrial Area of Nairobi. The plant was set up on an oddly shaped piece of land; though the land had four corners, two opposing edges were pulled in and the other two pulled out, thus giving the property a strangely skewed quadrilateral shape. The source of this property is mainly

responsible for its dimensions. It was sliced off the public property by an overzealous District Commissioner.

In the time since independence, through the 80s, 90s, and early 2000s, this role —of District Commissioner— held power in the administration of District to Division level matters; this was before the newer leadership structure employed in the country of Kenya where Districts became Counties and the role District Commissioner —DC— removed from the rota of leadership. When his decade-long term was coming to an end, the DC —the depraved greed-bot that he was— needed to liquidate his illegitimately acquired assets; this piece of property came to find itself on a catalogue of property listings that required quick sale. It was put on the market for 5.2 Million Kenyan Shillings. Then, this money was enough to build a legacy, a hefty paycheck for a man who believed he deserved every coin of it. The property was purchased by an unnamed businessman at a higher price —primarily because of the anonymity clause that accompanied the contract; both parties needed to stay hidden, a demonstration of the darker layers of shady business in the city of Nairobi. In 1998, this businessman erected a steel plant on the property. They have been making nails since then.

Just over a decade later, they still make nails; 9-inch nails, 6-inch nails, and inch-long nails, to be precise. The plant works ten months a year, January through to April breaks for a month then, comes back into operation June to the last quarter of December. It remains closed in May, October, and part of December. This production facility runs with a workforce of 452 —labourers and management staff. On the property is a 100-foot turret that holds a guard post

that is functional all year round, despite the breaks in business as usual. In addition to the guard tower, on the property are a large warehouse and an L-shaped office block that holds offices, a tea room/cafeteria, a workers' locker-room and bathrooms, a multipurpose storage room, an equipment room—for OHS (Operational Health and Safety) and first-aid solutions. This main warehouse is the base of operations, primarily because it holds the cutting machines and serves as storage for the ginormous steel rolls, which are cut into nails. The warehouse itself is a large iron sheet and steel structure positioned on the eastern wider edge of the property. It has a gently sloping roof with large vents against its roof to blow air in and out of the building, thus reducing staleness.

It is within this structure that three men meet. They are impatient, on edge—forced into a wait by the lateness of one last member.

The first man is tall and skinny, a little too willowy. His most notable feature is his prominent set of teeth—they look as though they are physically spilling out of his mouth. He has pale brown skin and silky but thin light brown hair. His eyes are beady and deeply set over a delicate, straight, high-bridged nose. The other two men have ethnic similarities with the first man, but the two are a little shorter. They have about half an inch in height difference from each other, with the shorter of the two carrying more weight about a slightly rounder generous belly.

Mr. Potbelly walks around in an impatient tally. He is angry. "Where is he?" He asks his peers.

His short mate steals a glance at his loosely fitted watch. This has to be the hundredth time he has done this tonight. It is almost midnight, its mechanical gears shifting beneath the transparent face of the watch where the hands move accurately —seemingly mocking their wait. The timepiece appears expensive, but it is simply a fine replica of an old imperial brand. The wearer of the watch says nothing of the time. He lowers his watch-bearing hand and takes a deep calming breath. He works very hard to maintain his calm temperament, despite the slightest anger showing from his knitted brows.

Muteness prevails, as these men's strain is felt through their heavy but controlled breaths, the rare grants of restricted anger and the pacing of the impatient substantially weighted of the brotherhood.

AN HOUR and a half later, Amir shows. His controlled steps echo in the vastness of the warehouse as he walks up to his brothers. He looks withered and burned out as he drags himself over to them. Amir is out of his suit and scarf from earlier in the day and has on a pair of dark blue jeans, a simple black t-shirt, and a black pair of sneakers.

"Where were you?" the tall one asks brashly as Amir reaches them, naturally finding a space between the tall one and the one with the watch.

"The city is reacting to us. It's gridlocked all over," he lies; he has been sitting in his car the last three hours or so, four streets away assessing faults.

“What the hell was that?” the lesser-framed meatball sparks in anger, his watch shaking against his wrist.

“An attempt at being human. It backfired. It won’t happen again,” Amir answers calmly without hesitation.

His words shock his brothers into a thirty-second stupor, “Well... where is she?” Potbelly asks, breaking the silence.

“I let her go free.”

His audacity, the bravery of his words, something his brothers had not anticipated, “You took an oath and broke it for a *kafir*?!”

“I will get her in due time.”

Refusing to listen to Amir’s words, his tall and skinny brother says, “A *Kafir* is a *Kafir*! There is no midway.” The tall one spits at Amir. Amir stands indifferent to the harsh words and the torrent of spit that hits the side of his face. “You need to decide which side you stand on!”

Amir breathes deeply, seeing through the haze of emotions within him and about him —his brother’s anger and disappointment, their inability to trust the sanity of his decision to save some woman. He notices their refined culture, present in their eloquence; even in an argument, their high expressiveness stands out; despite their crass and harsh tone with Amir, his brothers maintain this acquired state of being. They exude a high-handed status, an illustration of the formal education —of a diamond-encrusted quality.

“Remember your oath. Deal with it.” The man with the replica watch points out.

"I will."

"When?" Tallness asks.

"Soon."

"Today!" Potbelly instructs.

"Yes."

With that, they disperse.

PART 2

THREE DAYS LATER

IYANI'S PLACE is on the fourth floor of a six-story building off the Nairobi-Mombasa highway. The apartment overlooks the road, a twenty-minute drive from the city centre. The building is old but well maintained. It is clean and safe, with no incidences of insecurity in the area.

Her space is a small but cosy shoebox, just right for a young woman of her age and build. The room is dimly lit; her lights are off. The outdoor security light seeps in through the window sheers —just enough light for her to make out things about her home without turning on her bulbs. Around the studio are colourful pieces of her old life —framed pictures of herself and places she found she fancied; a travel log of sorts (all local). Only two frames have other people; one has Iyani standing by another young lady. Her name is Nicole; she is Iyani's best friend. They are smiling broadly at the camera; they seem very happy. The other picture is a framed photograph of her late father. On the glass on the bottom left of the photo is a hand-drawn butterfly.

Displayed on almost all the apartment surfaces —from tabletops to shelves, curtain boxes to window bases— are souvenirs collected over the years, trinkets of cosiness, tiny sculptures of people, structures, and animals, primarily butterflies, birds, and elephants.

Other than her thin bed with bright beddings and loads of pillows, a bookshelf overloaded with books, and a clothes wardrobe, the room holds a desk and a chair. On the desk are her

computer and a few books. This workspace is humble but comfortable enough for study and online work.

A tiny kitchen with a sink and a tabletop burner is at a corner furthest from the door. By the sink is a wooden door leading to a bit of balcony. On another corner is built-in seclusion with another wooden door leading to the bathroom.

Iyani lays unmoving on the bed among her pillows. Her eyes partially closed, staring lifelessly at the ceiling—in a trance of sorts. She feels a sting deep in her spine; it is both a chill and fearful heat that burns deep. This feeling has been with her for three days, and still, she cannot shake it off. Moreover, she feels that she is not okay and something dark is looming over her. The origin of this oddity is clear, though, and it has everything to do with Amir.

That day at the lounge, she told him that she knew he was aware of the attack before it happened, thus insinuating that he was part of them—the terrorists. She was dim enough to tell him this to his face.

Idiot! At 3 a.m., Iyani beats herself for it. Spent but without sleep, she goes through the event, over and over again. Something about that day lingers, beyond the markings of scars—emotional and physical—something of an uncertainty hounds her. She feels as though she forgot something she should remember.

Iyani recalls all the sounds. First quiet, then the frenzy that followed. The commotion by the entrance to the lounge, then the footfalls of people running about. The screams and gunshots haunt, ringing louder than ever in her mind.

The pain in her ribs evokes the memory of Amir pulling her to the ground, the landing when she bruised her middle and her knees. She recollects fear, bone-chilling dread that paralysed her. She remembers Amir by her side. The warmth of his body against the coldness of the tile. She remembers the smells... Amir's scent. The smell of the shooter's boot —polish and dirt. Gunpowder... Smoke. Of all these smells, Amir's scent feels most potent now. It floods about her, sipping out of her memory to waft about her in reality.

Slowly, sleep feels very welcoming.

She shuts her swollen eyes and takes a deep inhale through her nose. Though it feigns a convivial quintessence, Iyani knows the difficulty of sleep these days; it has become an exertion rather than a comfort. Her dreams are unwelcome requiems of the event at the terminal. When she must, after she cannot stay awake anymore and her body gives in to sleep, she is haunted by those demons and wakes violently, sweating balls, breathless and even more tired than she was before she slept.

Weary and on the verge of falling into abysmal oblivion —courtesy of her state— Iyani starts to dream almost instantly. She has the same dream she has had for the last three nights in a row.

Amir pulls her to her feet, then hurriedly feels her up for any injuries. When satisfied, he pulls her towards the door leading to the boarding bay. They hastily walk past a few bodies, pools of blood, and bullet shells. She steps wrongly and slips over a bunch of bullet shells —she has been restricting her line of sight to Amir's bicep as he leads her to avoid looking down; least she sees a dead

body up-close— Amir hangs back, pulls her upright just as her reaching out hand touches the still chest of an airline attendee sending tremors through her. Iyani irks and draws closer to Amir, as does he. Amir pulls her closer to him, securing her quivering body to his side.

He pushes her through the exit without as much as a goodbye. A crowd appears to her right and, it absorbs her, pushing her forward. She looks back, trying to find Amir and for a second catches the top of his head among the swarm of people. A few people move, someone grabs her hand turning her forward-facing, and she loses him. New gunshots are heard further than the lounge. The sound of a finite gunshot wakes her up every time.

As tears slide down the side of her face, she feels the wetness trickle down to her beddings. Needing it to be done, she stares helplessly at the ceiling. Iyani still has a feeling that she has forgotten something.

She replays the dream in her head.

He pulls me to the ground... the shooter comes and fires within the room. He walks up to Amir and me... he walks away... Amir pulls me up... leads me to the boarding door, and pushes me out...

What am I missing?

He pulls me to the ground... She shuts her eyes, visualises it all from beginning to end... I slide then reach out to support myself...

I reached out...

My bag! I have no bag! I left my bag!

Iyani jolts up to sit rigidly on the bed. Her breaths pick up instantly. In her dreams, he held something, each time she was lost in the depth of emotion she, failed to see what her subconscious was trying to tell her.

She left her bag at the terminal; Amir has her bag!

Before, Iyani considered herself remarkably well adjusted and very aware of all that belonged to her. To forget her bag, a singular piece of belonging that holds all her precious things. It is simply unbelievable. The clothes do not matter; she travels light, normally. Just two sets of spare clothes and a pair of sandals. She does not mind losing—but the rest she does! The bag—Amir—has her national identity card, passport, and two debit cards. The pack also has her phone, tablet, and wallet—though she had little money in it since she was hoping to go cashless during most of her trip. The wallet also has a couple of business cards, irrelevant papers, and old receipts.

The bag's most worrying content was her diary, thus her private thoughts, information, and passwords.

He knows my full names, parents' names, even where I am from...

With her diary, it will not be hard to find her. With her social media, he has it all.

“Oh my God... No!” Iyani cries. She flings the pillow in her way across the room as she hurries out of bed only to lose her footing and fall face-first onto the floor. She gets up quickly and rushes to sit at her desk with an already swelling lip. She powers the machine, impatiently waiting on it to boot.

Seconds feel eternal. The room feels a few degrees colder as a chill runs up her spine. The booting lingers on as the laptop finalises some updates.

“Come on...” she whispers, shaking her legs impatiently. “Come on!”

When she finally has her desktop, she rushes to her Facebook. This is her oldest social media account, and she has a lot in there she is wary about. *Photographs... videos... locations!* She goes to the one that worries her the most; a photo with her best friend, Nicole. In the background is her residence’s main gate is labelled ‘Tene Estate’ in the background. She saves herself some time and turns her account private. Then, she goes to her Instagram account. She grinds through her photos and finds so much data she never imagined was risky, but at this moment, dread has her enlightened. She experiences the culmination of a shameful realisation; she is vain and imprudent —how has she felt it okay to lay out her life on social media in this way?

Why has she not seen this before?

She starts to delete content. Soon, she realises she is not fast enough and decides to delete her account altogether.

‘Why do you want to delete your account?’ the computer asks.

‘Because a crazy psycho has my details!’ She types.

In the spirit of enlightenment, she goes back to her Facebook account and deletes her profile. She deletes every social media account in the frenzy; by the time she is done, a thin film of cold sweat runs down her temple.

Iyani gets off the chair, dizzy from the drop in adrenaline as it continues dipping. She moves away from the chair while holding herself up by the edge of the table. She sidesteps the chair and turns about, unsure whether to go to bed on her right or the bathroom to her left. Her dull gaze raises off the ground as she steps forward. A dark form appears striding high and mighty out of the darkest corner of the room —materialising from thin air directly into her line of sight. Blinded by exhaustion, Iyani blinks, hoping that the apparition is part of her imagination.

Her feet rooted to the ground, her breath hitches at her throat. Her frame starts to shake instantly.

The shadow steps forth into the light. It bears a face, and it is Amir's.

Her lips part, and in a flash, Amir caps his hand over half of her face, effectively sealing her mouth. His long cold fingers move, releasing her nostrils so she can breathe through her nose. His other arm braces about her, holding her to him. Caged, she tolerates the weight of his gaze as his clear eyes look right into hers. Unable to scream or call for help, she waits for Amir to release her. Maybe, enlighten her on the purpose of his presence in her home. All the while, Iyani feels rather deflated, she has laid a clean road map to herself, and he has already used it to find her.

IN HIS YOUTH, Amir had walked with his head held low. He had spent nights hunkered over in dark corners, with a balled back hiding from the brutality of the world. He spent his nights in the empty and vast leftover buildings that were once his home, unable

to move on —stuck in limbo in his old town. Left alone... a lost soul —the consequence of war. He spent his days in the nearby town markets, stealing food from vendors and breaking into homes, stealing from those who somehow had their lives back together to fill his hollow tummy. His bared back was scarred with old lashes, beatings from those who had caught him stealing. With such a life, he was thin and gangly, frail and miserably subdued, nothing close to the man he is today.

Despite all this, Amir had been polite and diligent —when given a chance to work. He had wanted more from life; he knew that given his past, and the measure of the boy that he was, he would need to play the impeccable little gent to get the world to shift in his favour, and when it did; the world budged massively.

Through patience, ingenuity, and hard work, Amir had gathered all he needed to live a life that was good, good enough. Quiet, quiet enough for him to be a breath of breeze passing through. And, he had been exactly that, until the day he met Iyani and an uncommon excitement made him want more —that day, if she were not there, he would have faded into the wind. Amir would have stayed invisible and on good terms with his brothers. He and his brothers would have been planning to assemble in Jordan for a celebratory feast to the success of their first undertaking.

Now, his world has shifted on its axis, not in his favour, and the force to blame is Iyani.

“It’s a little too late don’t you think?” he tells her, stepping even closer, making her shiver more. She is soft and weak, subject to quivers, as well as a fool, a sorry thing. She had waited three days to

safeguard herself. Three whole days! He had her in the first six minutes after meeting with his brothers. He had spent the next seventy-five hours debating with himself —to walk away and let his brothers deal with his error or to go to her and let his heart decide what to do next.

He chose the latter. *Who is more irrational, you... or me?*

“A fool...” Amir does not intend to be mean. The truth is, he is a little groggy. The last couple of days and nights have not been good for him. Making choices like this one is not easy, and he did like her... he still does... which explains why every soul within the lounge perished, apart from hers. She reminded him of someone; he could not place a finger on who. Maybe this is the reason why he helped. It could not be simply because he liked her... or could it?

With her in his arms, her face so close to his, he sees Iyani for what she is. This woman has given her heart and soul to fear, the very thing that he has spent years locking away, preparing for the day when his bravery shines bright as the Sun. He ponders and deliberates, building a perception of Iyani, deciding what to do with his scared and pitiful little thing. All the while, he reads, judges, and deliberates, he says and does nothing else —Iyani experiences suspense in a whole new way.

Amir sees the gears in her little head revolving. He can feel her tiny heart thump harder in her chest. Her exhales flutter against the side of the little finger of his gagging hand. He sees the sweat sliding down the side of her face. She closes her eyes tight then opens them to confirm that Amir is truly here with her, and all this is not a dream. Her God keeps his favours as he remains very

present before her. New panic rises; he sees it in the depths of her eyes, soon, she starts to falter.

Her eyes start to flutter. They then roll back, the whites becoming very large. Her neck grows limp, and her knees give in as she starts to pass out. He turns them about and lets her go.

She falls back onto the bed.

THE DARKNESS about Iyani's eyes intensifies as it starts to swallow her; she is suddenly jolted to the side, then Amir's hands let go. She starts to fall back. Only when she lands does she realise that he let her fall on the bed. Everything that was slipping away slowly starts to come back, her beating heart taking precedence.

He is like a panther when he comes over her, caging her in again before she can scramble for freedom. Amir looms over her, settling from a graceful landing.

Cornered, she results in begging, "Don't kill me. I didn't tell anyone."

He looks hurt by her words, a slight moment of weakness. "I would not do that."

She is stunned for two heartbeats —during which she is very still, trying her best not to move so she does not offend him in any way— she lets her mind wander. How would she know that he would not kill her? She does not know this man. For all she knows, everything he said to her at the lounge was a lie, and he is here to finish the job. She takes two calming deep breaths, then asks him why he is in her home.

"I'm here for you." This is all he says.

She starts to shiver harder, and her breaths come fast and heavy. She feels her chest squeeze against him as he refuses to get off her.

"Please..." she starts to beg again when he cuts her off.

"I would never!" he swears, setting weary eyes on her, "I need to take you away."

He is stalling. He is waiting on something.... Someone... "Why?" This time her voice comes breathless; she is ashamed of how weak she sounds.

"My broth...", he clears his throat and chooses his words, "My associates are not pleased with me. They will come for you."

"Why?!" her voice is more erratic now. Her heartbeat and breathing pick up in pace, in response.

"You survived something you were not meant to. Your tide is about to change... And fast. I need to hide you away."

"Amir," she whispers.

He watches her sternly as he tries to read her words before she even utters them.

"You are scaring me." He has to move away. His scent has her dizzy. His words have her flustered. He has to give her room to breathe and take account of her circumstances.

Reading her mind, he lets off, and Iyani scampers to the head of the bed in swiftness she never thought her limbs could muster. She holds herself, squeezing smaller. She observes his fearful eyes.

"I'm sorry," he whispers. He takes a knee on the bottom edge of the bed, "I do not mean to scare you." He starts to speak, raising his hands before him, a sign of good faith.

She raises a hand to signal him to wait, looks to him for pardon. "A moment... I need a moment." Iyani requests as she struggles to catch her breath. Her chest feels tight. Her body is flushed, the temperature has risen, and she is seconds away from passing out.

"Okay." He drops his hands, pulls himself off the bed, even goes ahead to take steps away from the bed. "Okay." He turns about, walks away, and props himself at the sink. He watches quietly as Iyani takes her moment.

AMIR is now seated in Iyani's chair. He has it turned around to face her bed at an angle. His right leg is crossed over the left; his right arm is propped against his thigh. His hand is upholding the side of his face, the index applying slight pressure to his temple in a very subtle massage. Though he appears calm, his gaze consuming Iyani, his insides are cracking with the pressure of indecisiveness. She has become a sore, the reason for the ultimate antipathy against his associates.

In his brothers' accounts, perfidy is the worst of sins, against the self and the collective. For this reason alone, he must take responsibility and deal with the matter in the best way possible. A way that will return honour to his name, resolving his standing with his brothers. Even if it takes time, they will forgive him. Since the beginning, they have been soft on him. He is the youngest and by far the most resourceful of the lot. He is fit and dexterous, deft at

tackling physical tasks and mental challenges. He is smart and with an understanding of the ways of the world. All the above and the man has a nice-looking face too. The brotherhood is lucky to have him, so they treasure their Amir. Simply put, he could dim the Sun and set the Moon ablaze, and his brothers will still find a way to forgive him, thus bringing him back into the fold. Undeniably, despite the mess with Iyani, Amir can go nowhere.

Amir's brain lopes kilometres; his mind is mooching over what to do with Iyani. Given their present circumstance and her unfitting adeptness to grudges of this nature, she has become his greatest liability.

He watches her as though reading a solution on her form. She is calmer now, her posture more relaxed. Her tired body is unable to contain the tension any longer. Amir sees this in the sluggish nature of her movement and her limbs' heaviness. She sits with her back against the headboard, her head holding low. Her legs are spread before her, her knees slightly bent with her hands together in a loose clasp between her thighs. She has been quiet, waiting—thus giving Amir time to ponder his choice while studying her. He watches keenly; her eyes shut slowly, then open a few beats later. She then lazily scoffs at the sheets as though in a silent exculpation with herself. Her head falls lower between her shoulders. Amir's massaging finger stills as his head deeps with Iyani's subconsciously. His eyes gain a new way to scrutiny as they get thinner, and his brows come further together in an intense frown. She dozes off for a couple of seconds, then raises her chin with herculean effort—defying sleep—she opens her eyes, and her gaze falls on Amir.

Amir's hand falls as he too raises his gaze. "Are you okay?" he asks, uncrossing his legs and pushing forward; he rests his forearms on his thighs and lets his hands droop between his knees.

She sighs, "Yes." The lie she tells is befitting of the moment. She regards him rather piteously. "You?"

He laughs, "Ever so thoughtful..." he whispers, mostly to himself, then speaks up. "Yes."

They relapse into an awkward silence. They do not know what to say to each other.

Iyani's eyes wander, and soon, they find his watch. His eyes follow her gaze; soon, they too fall to the timepiece. This is the only thing on him at this moment that she finds familiar—he had it on the day they met. The watch's moving hands mark the passing of time, as they should—as they did the day at the terminal. Time clocks away to the echoes of their quiet breaths until Amir decides to speak out.

Needing a point to begin, he swallows hard and breaks the silence, "I thought I hurt you that day," his voice trails off.

She shakes her head.

He raises his right hand briefly to point to his lip as he calls attention to hers, then lets his hand drop again.

At its mention, Iyani reflexively sucks in her busted lip and winces at the jolt of pain that comes about from the action. She releases it. "A little." Again, with the silence. They sit this way until Iyani breaks it, "Why do you need to take me away?"

"My associates intend for your death." He is brutally honest.

Her reaction is subtle; she barely moves. Her face stays very still as she internalises his words. He reads an involuntary fortitude about her reaction. She wants answers she knows she will hate. Answers that will scare her even more, but she needs to hear the whole truth to feign boldness because she knows she has to be brave to hear him out.

She shows growth by not letting her fear take the reins this time around, “Why do they want me dead?” She asks.

She is clueless.

Ignorance may be bliss, but dang! If Amir could, he would grab her and shake her out for asking this, now, after what she has been through. How naïve could she be not to have figured it out by now? He fears he misjudged her. Maybe she is not the woman he thought she was. But, he could read people well. Perhaps, she barely remembers the day—a lot did happen. *Shock... is she in shock still...?*

He wonders whether she has been watching the news. He had her phone and tablet. He looks about her studio apartment, and sure enough, she has no television. Apart from the laptop—which was updated when she turned it on, it may have been for a while—she has no other way to catch up on the news.

“Have you watched the news in the last three days?” She shakes her head at him. “Social media?” Again, she shakes her head. His right index makes its way to his lips; he runs it over the line between his lips—forth then back, twice—before predicting her response. “You have been locked away from the world for three days.” He answers himself, and she recoils pulling her knees to her chest. She appears surprised by the words, as though she has not

thought about it until now. The sleep in her eyes disappears, and resolve takes its place. "Who are you?" she unexpectedly asks but quickly re-evaluates the question and asks another, "What do you do?"

"I am a consultant." He drops his hand, sits upright —back stiff as a plank.

Her jaw drops, but she catches herself fast. "You lied to me?!"

"No, I recently had a career change."

"How recent?"

"Three days ago," he says. They both recognize her stake in this change.

"You are a terrorist." She indicates, speaking a little too calmly, and this worries him.

"Your words. I fight for freedom... fought."

They fall silent once more.

"Fought...?"

"Yes, and I'm done, as of three days ago."

"So you want to run away with me,"

"I want to take you away, to protect you because..." *When the hounds descend, and they will, you will not survive this time around.* "I want you safe. You did nothing wrong other than being at the right place at the wrong time." His brows are tight, forming a little double line between them. This is what catches her in the loop. She reads that he feels for her truly. "You are young... With a kind heart, need I say beautiful...." Iyani's cheeks heat up in a blush. She

shifts a little more into the shadows; she is glad the lights are off. She cannot bear for him to see this side of her. But, fate stays away; he senses her blush and smiles. He continues to persuade her, “Adventurous and one of a kind. You deserved to live. I could not let you die then, and I sure as hell will not let you die now. I have given enough to the cause. My path has changed. I left. I am here to take my happiness with you.”

GAI Mwathani... Dear God... A lesser man or woman cries to a power revered for mercy and grace when their world shifts course and they are thrown into turmoil. They call for help from a being so magnanimous *His* scope is rendered unfathomable.

Iyani never looked to religion favourably; she found this system—faith and her convictions—hypocritical for her reasons. It was irrational, reliant on a level of fantasia about achieving its core goals. Part of the reason why she found religion so perverse was the idea that belief exerted inflexible rule over man, rendering partiality a sin in itself; doubt. Seeing that being good and not proclaiming devotion to the acceptance of a savior was not enough to get one to the heavens felt rather rude; seeing that the good book repeated that ‘goodness was good’; and this was one of the traits that would get someone through the gates of heaven.

Iyani chose the prosaic over this enlightened state—where one was faithful and slave to believe. In time she found herself in an awkward place, where she claimed to be finding herself and rather slowly. Every time she tried to make strides, she got deterred by the overt nature of spiritualism, a testament to the loudness of churches

in her country, the obvious show of a declared standing with the heavens in physical representation; the Sunday best phenomena where the use of props, costume, and drama was to the glory of the heavens. She watched and judged people and their shift in behaviour when in certain spaces or before certain people. All this watching and judging, and with such devoted scrutiny. How could she not? Faith played a large role in everything; the world itself—the world she lived in— was a massive stage. From education downright to basic politics, yet religion was to stay isolated. Everyone was acting. Anger and pain somehow did not faze because a God stood before *them*. A shitty life was tolerable because a Savior arrived, gave His life in *their* stead, and thus all is well—a Savior arrived or yet. Or they were waiting... this impending second coming that man may or may not see. That is soon to come, but not too soon. Soon, in God-years—which could be eternal, or not.

So, she judged... and soon enough, she found herself in the grey area, where a church was a no-go zone; a place where swine—the lying bastards that they were— stooped to gold-encrusted pulpits of people's blood, sweat and tears. Religion had become a faithless endeavour to self-gratification.

Though Iyani remains a believer, she claims to carry her God in her heart and appreciates the privilege of a personalised understanding with her God. She concluded that most men became slaves to faith years ago, and she would rather the alternative; faith, slave to man. This way, man lives, thrives, but does not live for religion, and does not thrive because of dedication but hard work and resilience.

Yet, even in the pits of doubt, such a person —Iyani— will call upon ‘what’ she deems powerful enough to handle, ‘it.’ She calls to God — *Gai mwathani*— and in her ancestral tongue. A language she barely understands let, alone speaks —unless she exclaims in slips of overly pronounced ethical emotivism. Why call on God? Because she knows that only *He* can help her now.

Iyani has fallen silent, and for a good reason. *This man has given his life to me! This Islamic man has given his life to me!*

She opens her mouth to speak, but she has no idea what to say. It is a lot to listen to, internalise and give feedback to all in a few minutes.

“Say something....” Amir urges her.

At the moment, Iyani lacks in the ‘deliberative’ element; she bubbles her thoughts pointlessly, “I am not a Muslim. I am Christian... and not the best Christian...” She overthinks it. “The worst at attendance, but I do follow most of the Ten Commandments and read the Bible, on occasion. Even go to church once in a...”

Amir cuts her off by proclaiming just how devout he is in his faith, “I am a Muslim. I read the Koran every day and visit the Mosque twice a day. I live by the teachings of The Prophet Mohammed and praise Allah with every bit of me.

I also believed I had a calling for Jihad for the last six years of my life. When I was going to prove to us much, I met a young woman in a terminal lounge and forgot my cue.” He takes a calming breath and leans forward, which brings them closer. “We had planned this

for years, and I forgot my cue. And, when I was called to follow on my word... my oath, I refused so that I could ensure your survival."

His face creases with penitence. Iyani pushes forward —off the bed's headrest, to her knees. She moves closer to him, with an unexplainable need to comfort him but holds herself back when she realises her forthcoming actions. She still has reservations, though they melt faster than her little head can work it out.

"I have given up a lot to be here at this moment. The details may damage you in ways I never want to.

Iyani, I need you to trust me. Come with me. I promise you protection, love, and adventure. These things I believe you yearn for."

My diary... Gai, ûndathime! God, bless me!

"Come with me." He raises to his feet, stepping sideways to the space over her bed, beside the chair. She moves; sits with her legs over the bottom edge of the bed, looking up at him. "I have a plan." He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a burner phone. He hands it to her. In a bemusement —over his words— she takes the phone. "Call your friend," his gaze shifts to her laptop and then back to her.

"Nicole." She holds the phone, ready to dial. The screen comes alive to a generic green background desktop. The clock here says it is almost 4 a.m. Her eyes fall to the phone as her thumb glides over the tiny dial pad keys to the zero.

"Yes, her. Tell her you are leaving to join the Holy War." He says this with a straight face, all the while standing over her.

Her fingers freeze over the dial pad. She scoffs; his words, knocking the air out of her. She raises her eyes to him. Scepticism is the least of her expressions; her eyes dance with humour, her lips twitch as she restricts a smile. She thinks he is joking. She looks up to him for clarification.

He means every word.

“Am sorry... are you serious?! I cannot tell Nicole that I am leaving to join Holy War!” Iyani’s phone-wielding hand drops to the bed; she then raises her other while verbalising her doubt to Amir. “You do not know this girl; she is... she is.” She shakes her head as though physically organising thoughts in there. She lets go of the phone. “She will not believe me.” Iyani has known Nicole for sixteen years, and this will be their seventeenth; their friendship is more of a sisterhood. They share a strong bond. She loves Nicole to the Moon and back. How could he expect her to lie to her closest friend then leave with him? Iyani shakes her head, adamant about her refusal. She is not going to lie to her friend.

Amir moves closer, bending slightly. He speaks softly, this side of the man she knows too well. “Iyani, I need to keep you safe.” He raises his right hand, placing it on her shoulder. “I need to isolate you from everyone you know so that my people don’t think you are a threat. This is the only way to protect you, your family, and your friends.

We need to cut all ties.” He crouches before her.

His eyes look sincere enough. That little humour Iyani displayed she now regrets; her face is riddled with remorse. Soon dread rides

her. They would come after her friends and family?! Her lips part, but she does not speak. Tears come to her eyes.

“You have to be alone,”

She tilts her head at him, hesitance in her demeanour. She shakes her head slightly, more tears welling in her eyes, blurring him out.

“This is the only way. Think about it; it makes sense. If they see you have no close ties, they will let your people be. It’s for your good.”

“Are you sure?” her voice is reedy, almost non-existent. “They will let my people be.”

“It is our way. We try to raise as few stones as possible. No one will touch your family. I promise you.”

It makes sense. She tells herself as the gears in her head shift. *It’s for my good.*

IN THE HOURS leading up to this moment, Amir had imagined all sorts of scenarios. He had become well acquainted with every single possible reaction Iyani could raise. So, when she considers his request, he is not surprised but very delighted. This little back and forth they had going finally grants Amir his desire —and it is well worth it as she had been so caught up in the moment that she missed the hint of coercion.

Amir smiles, moving his hand off Iyani’s shoulder to the side of her neck, feeling her pulsing heartbeat. He shakes hers with his other hand by way of thanks, then leaves his phone in it. Not a beat

passes, without being told to, Iyani dials her friend's number off the top of her head.

His smile starts to disappear as everything comes to play. His plan is clear —earlier, he had done a little research on her friend.

She is pretty; they are birds of a feather, she and Iyani. Nicole is book smart, an A student, while Iyani is a B student. They are age mates —met back in high school, Nicole was a transfer, and Iyani was her first friend at the new school. Iyani had been cagey about her age, but he now knows she and Nicole are both twenty-seven, about to turn twenty-eight, Nicole in June, and Iyani later in the year in Early November. Nicole is the vocal, more boisterous friend. Being book smart gives her conceited confidence that means she always stands out in a room. She can be quite the chatterbox in the right company. Even if she tries, Nicole can never keep the secret too long. Her blood runs too hot. Soon she will be tempted to tell —to his advantage. People will know of Iyani's resolve in time, thus shun her.

Iyani will be effectively cut off and without much effort.

The dial tone pulls his attention back to Iyani. Her eyes are dried out; new determination reads on her face. She wants to get this over and done with. *Good.*

"Speaker." He whispers.

She puts the phone in speaker mode, holding it up between them.

Nicole picks up almost immediately. "Hello."

“Nicole,” Iyani pleads into the mobile phone with strained vocals.

“Iyani, *Gai!*” God! Since Amir had her phone, she has been troubled, unable to reach her friend. “Where have you been?!” Her voice is lined with worry. “I have come to your place six times now! *Kila* time,” Every time, “no one answers! *Uko?!?*” Where are you?!

Iyani looks up at Amir, “I have been...” she starts, but Amir shakes his head at her, and she bites her tongue. “Nicole... listen. I have something to tell you.”

“I thought you were at Wildwood—”

“Nicole,” Iyani cuts her off but cannot voice the lie. The long silence that follows slowly pushes Amir to impatience. He rolls his free hand’s index finger in a loop. He is motioning her to hasten the call.

“What’s wrong?” Nicole sounds exceedingly vexed.

Amir gives Iyani a firm nod, and she yells it out, “Nicole, I am leaving to join the Holy War.”

There is a long pause, then Nicole suddenly screams, “What?!”

“I am off to join the Holy War,” she declares, sounding a little too well rehearsed and far too rigid. Amir’s eyes are brimming, transposed on her.

“You have got to be joking. As in Al sha...”

Iyani cuts her short, “No. Al Sheridan.”

It always feels like the lesser cousin of a revered beast.

“No. You. Are. Not.” Nicole scolds, sounding more like her mother than her friend. “Have you thought about your mother? Who do you think will be left taking care of her?!”

“Oh my God... Mum....” Iyani whispers as tears come to her eyes again.

“Iyani,” Nicole’s voice shifts, her tone lower than before, less condescending. Amir braces himself, “this will be another thing that she can add to the faults of your late father, her former husband, your genetic match! Yet another thing to hold against you. For eternity!” Iyani’s eyes drop, and the tears slip from the coup.

She is good. Amir gives her that—he can tell; her words affect Iyani’s resolve, but she is not here next to Iyani. He is with Iyani; thus, he has more power.

He reaches beneath her chin and pulls her chin up gently; her gaze rises. Soon, they are looking right into each other’s eyes. He smiles at her. A reassuring smile, one that urges her on, moves his thumb against her neck. He then pulls his hand away to mimic a throat-slicing motion—urging her to end the call.

“I love you,” she whispers before Amir snatches the phone off her grasp and hangs up on Nicole. He straightens up to a standing position and drops the phone on the tiled floor, and smashes it with his foot. He thumps against it repeatedly until it is in pieces.

Iyani’s breath is tight as she watches him. Her eyes are wide; she stares, unable to cry out loud despite the tears that flow down her face. She watches him walk towards the kitchen corner and dispose

of the pieces into the sink. He then turns the faucet on, dousing the remains of the phone.

When he is confident the phone is useless, he shuts the water off and returns to her. He moves hastily, hale and haughty, forgetting that Iyani is hurting. This look on her, and the feel of it very familiar, was a part of his memory.

Quite recently, over the last year or so, Amir had been toying with the idea of adding a new member into their fold. Someone easy, amiable. Someone who lived a quiet life. This person needed to be stable enough to keep a job —had a monthly wage. This individual needed to be average in every way, a person who could easily blend into the masses. A chameleon that was useful but not essential, one that would be easy to discard when the time came. This season saw him meet several prospects, some more prominent than others. These more prominent lot became his teacher's disciples —followers. Amir had the pleasure of ruling over the merits of these men and women's efforts. He had the power to claim and discard prospects. During this time, he learned a great deal about emotions and how to deal with them. This position allowed him to practice interpreting the responsive perspective of catalysed change.

Now, he practices; Iyani is very sensitive, so he must tread lightly. He just took all that she held dear, so he will have to replace all this and offer more. Principally, he should cater to her feeling of being alone. Amir knows he is asking a lot and is relieved she is sacrificing so much. He appreciates this most.

He sees her tears; silent tears stream down her face.

He reads her appearance; her head downcast, she has her hands about herself—one hand about her middle, the other crossing her chest, to hold over her opposite shoulder. She is trying to console herself; she feels alone despite his presence in the rather small room.

He kneels slowly before her, takes her face in his hands, wipes her tears off with his thumbs. “I am with you in this. You are not alone,” he assures her.

She looks up to read his eyes, her tenor shifts; doubt becomes her. She has changed so much since the day at the lounge. She mistrusts so easily. “You are hiding the bad news.” She whispers. She barely knows him and senses he is withholding something. “What is it? Please, don’t lie to me.”

“You have to take a bus to Garissa.” Sheer shock paralyses her face. He adds on the bad news, “This is where we part ways. I will meet you there in a couple of days.” The colour on her face drains. Her eyes grow wild; she starts to shake her head frantically. He fears for her sanity—at this very moment—he fears she has gone unhinged. She brings her hands between them, waving at him in denial.

“Oh, no!” Iyani swears, “I can’t.”

His heart breaks at her reaction. “It’s only for two days. I promise I will be there on the third day,” Amir vows. “I will not leave you there alone. I promise.” He cannot leave Iyani; he will never leave Iyani.

“Garissa... Alone... why? Amir, why can’t you come with me? I... I can’t.” She bubbles, slipping into a blankness.

He grabs her shoulders and shakes her out of her indolent state. "You can, and you will. It's one bus ride. I will meet you there." She shakes her head. "You are a brave girl; you've been so far, alone. You were going to Europe! It will be easy – a simple bus ride.

When you arrive, I want you to rent a room and wait for me." His eyes lock with hers as he adds, "I will come to you, I promise." He leaves her no choice. He lays her path before her and expects her to take it, no questions asked.

Iyani takes a few deep breaths, which should calm her. Instead, she becomes more anxious; she is beginning to hyperventilate. Her heart thumps against her veins. "You are asking too much of me," she mumbles, avoiding his gaze. "I can't do it."

Amir understands that he is pushing too hard; he also realises that he needs the right motivation to convince her to go to Garissa. She will leave but not go to Garissa alone. He pulls closer, bringing her into his arms, embracing her for the first time since they met, steadying her in his stronghold. He bends her will by his hold, ensuring that she feels how much he yearns for her in this embrace. "Iyani," he whispers. Her head locked against his chest, "Your world is not as it was three days ago. Let me protect you. Take you somewhere safe.

In a world of infinite possibilities, you must admit that you are stuck in a loop, sealed away from the larger world.

Take my hand, come with me. Let me break you free."

"I can't go to Garissa alone." She whispers painfully against his chest.

“And I cannot let you die here.” Amir counters, rubbing wide arches on her back —ensuring she feels wholly surrounded by his hug.

“I will stay and wait for you here, in my home.”

He pulls back, scrutinizes her face. Intimidated, she stays very still, restricting her gaze to his chest, “For what? So that Nicole can come and find you? Judge your choices? Ask you about us?

Nicole is amazing; she is a wonderful friend, and I love her for it, but she is not an anchor. You run’ ever running towards a horizon and never reaching your destination. You can deny it all you want—but you want more. You love her, and you should... but the truth is that you want more than your friendship with Nicole.

And your mother.”

“Don’t...”

“Your mother does not want you.”

“Don’t say that...” she looks up at him, her brows coming together in pain.

“Did she come to find you after Wildwood?

No sane mother would live life normally after her only child falls off the grid. She knew you would be there; I went through your messages and saw your call log. Did she even pick when you called?” She tightens her lips, fresh tears coming to her eyes. “She is not your mother. She gave birth to you, Iyani, but she is not *your* mother.

You are your father’s daughter.” He runs a hand over the back of her head, pulling her head to his chest again. She turns to the side,

draws a deep breath as he circled his other hand about her. “My woman is strong and brave. Hardworking, boundless. A butterfly emerged, spreading her wings for the first time.” She snivels as he names her, giving her a name she is fond of —likening her to the thing she loves most on this planet. This he knows because it is written in her diary, Iyani is obsessed with butterflies. “You deserve to be free.” He looks around the walls of her apartment, “This place is too tight. You need space to spread your wings. Let me give you this and so much more.”

“Garissa,” Iyani breathes after what feels like an eternity.

Amir’s heart skips a beat. “Garissa,” he echoes.

IYANI shifts her body, wrapping her hands around Amir’s waist. Tightening their embrace, proximity to the source filled her head with his scent. She shuts her eyes as she swims deeper in the scent of him until she can barely think straight.

He fills her mind with thoughts of him. She starts to see the possible life if she leaves *for* him. She shifts her legs, adjusting herself on the bed, captive to her imagination. All too suddenly, Amir pulls back, making her sit upright —lest she falls forward into him. She opens her eyes, abruptly pulls away from her trance. She remains silent as she watches him wearily. He sits back on his legs; his face attains a formality that washes away her lethargy all too quickly, bringing a frown to her face.

“They are coming here soon. They know who you are and where you are,” she sees how he reads her face, interpreting her varying expressions, appraising the spectrum —from fear to shock then

guilt. For a second, he looks confused, then the slightest of fear, "I may not be able to keep you safe when they arrive. We may die here sooner than later."

"We?" she asks, straightening her back, pulling away from him.

"Yes. I'm not leaving here. I am not leaving you until you board that bus."

Iyani places her hands on his chest and holds them there. She does not know whether to pull him in or push him away. "Why can't you go with me?" she implores, her eyes emphasising her need to know.

"We are over this," he is disappointed by her persistence, turns away, but she follows his gaze. She reaches for the side of his face, placing gentle pressure to pull his look back at her. "Tell me. I need to know."

"You want the truth?" he asks, and she nods. She yearns for it. "I am going to kill my brothers. For us."

Before she can react to the news, he grabs her face and kisses her on her lips. When he pulls back, she is left in the throes of the rawest of passion. It is a brief but fierce kiss. A kiss meant to make her forget everything and remember who let her live. She now knows whose air she breathes. She jerks forward, lands on her knees before him. She wraps her hands about his neck, buries her head into the side of his neck.

"You will come with me." It is not a question; Amir speaks conclusively. It is a declaration.

"Will you come to me?" She mirrors his words in a crafty distortion.

"I swear it. Allah is my witness."

She believes him. "Then yes.

When do I leave?" she pulls back, looks up at his face.

"Now," he responds finitely, sad eyes levied at her as he is sad to have to let her go. "We leave now."

PART 3

THE SUNDAY BEST PHENOMENA solicits a scoff or a roll of the eyes... but Iyani finds Amir's *Kuffiyah* beautiful. Religion is infuriating, but she sees in Amir and his, she can trust. He is absolute as faith is. He is clear about his words, never sheltering his thoughts. So, she chooses to follow Amir to the ends of the world; she chooses more.

IYANI steps forward. Amir leads her on, and she follows quickly. It is about five a.m. The cold burns the insides of her nose, making her nose run. It makes the tip of her nose red and her cheeks flush. The cold brings wrinkles to the ends of her icy fingers, numbing her skin save for little pricks of awareness that pinch at her skin from time to time. Though she feels physically numb beneath the surface, she is alive with sensation. She feels in ways she has not in a long while. She feels the fire of expectation; hope for more, that Amir will come to her—that he will show her the world he promised. She feels jittery, anxious, unaware of how to calm her nerves. The butterflies in her stomach feel like steel-clawed vultures scraping at the walls of her stomach. She feels dread, a fear of the unknown—a fear of Garissa.

Just when it all begins to overwhelm her, she feels Amir's warm body next to her as he squeezes her into his side. Now, she feels sadness further dampens her mood. She recognises that this warmth will soon be gone. They walk the narrow lanes of the Country Bus Station; it is located beside a highway leading East of

Nairobi City Centre. It hosts buses heading to the country away from the Capital. It is old and congested; every turn illustrates shamelessness—beginning with the sting of overuse and neglect. “It will take less than five hours. You should be there long before mid-day,” he states as he guides her through a fleet of buses. They are dwarfed by the large busses that are designated for long-distance travel. Some are already loaded with goods and chattels up to ten feet high—Iyani finds this fascinating and daunting. Unimpressed, Amir focuses on getting Iyani on a bus to Garissa.

Amir is aware of where they are going. He is putting her gullibility on display, laying out her weaknesses for a foreigner. She does not know this side of Nairobi. She has never been here. He leads her expertly through this terminal littered with travellers, luggage, vendors hauling their carts, and men in the harsh but lucrative public transport industry. Men in tout or driver uniforms and others in casual clothes bellow at them, of their destinations and the pricing. Some just bang the sides of their respective buses rudimentarily to gain perspective customers’ attention. Amir evades the touts and fixers who try to sell him tickets to their respective bus companies. He ignores their mongrel pronouncements of a *sheng* of sorts, a localised language forged over years of people from different walks and backgrounds interacting and modifying language to suit themselves. Iyani understands some of it, but she wonders whether Amir understands it.

Someone grabs her forearm, she turns to him, and he blows a kiss at her. The man then remarks on her and Amir, calling him loutish labels. She stops, pulling Amir to stop too. “*Iseme tena!*” Repeat it!

She dares; new heat rolling from her core outwards, her angst quickly replaced by rage. She pulls her arm out of the man's grasp and raises it to slap him but, Amir pulls her away, evading the confrontation. They squeeze through a building crowd as heckles reverberate from behind them.

Drawing in deeper breaths, Iyani follows Amir. Through her displayed anger, she realises that she was projecting. She hates having to leave, going to a place that she fears, and alone; she hates it all. If only she could get a moment to think, to write her strategy. If she could just shut her eyes and make it all go away, return to the moment before all hell broke loose—at the terminal when she and Amir were getting to know each other.

A few more bus fixers come at them—with firm commitment—offer their best prices to go anywhere in Kenya. Amir cuts through the lot; he angles for a particular bus company; the buses in this terminal area are multi-coloured with blacked-out windows. They are branded 'Garissa 9'.

Iyani looks up when Amir stops; they are before a tiny shop with a man inside it. A ticket book can be seen on a small counter within the window. *It is time... he is about to go...*

—She has gone deathly pale. Her grasp of Amir's hand grows tighter. The pressure of everything gnaws at her insides. Though she knows that this is inevitable, and there is nothing she can do about it, she cannot help the way she feels, as though he is about to leave her behind.

Amir buys a ticket in Arabic, maybe Somali. She catches some code-switching to Swahili—a proficient switch back and forth like

he speaks this way, typically. She has never heard him talk anything other than the Queen's English. The pit within grows darker as she affirms that she knows nothing of this man. He orders a single ticket to a window seat in the middle of the bus. He insists that the seat he pays for is on the other side of the bus, not the driver's side. The man hastens the registration process; her ticket bears no name, just a number —26. He gives Amir the slice of paper in exchange for the money for this ticket.

Amir herds her towards the bus. He guides her past the passenger door towards the side of the bus. There is a man arranging luggage in the space beneath the bus. They walk past this man to the back of the bus. When they have some semblance of seclusion, Amir turns to her. He places his hands on her shoulders, gives them a gentle squeeze, then speaks softly, "Rent a room at the Royal Garissa Guesthouse. There should be a few rooms this time of year," He lets that sink. "—nod if you understand me." She nods, then he adds emphatically, "Don't talk to anyone." He gives her *the* old leather bag, her bag that he kept after Wildwood. "Do not misplace this again." She nods again frantically; she is grateful for this kindness. He reaches for the slider to the main pocket, opens the bag, and in there is all her stuff and his scarf —the red and white *Kuffiyah*. He takes it out and adds it to the Muslim-like scarf she is already wearing. "Keep the scarf on at all times. Dress modestly. Don't speak to anyone; if you have to talk, talk as little as possible, in whispers —the more inaudible, the better.

Make sure you blend in."

Iyani reads into his words; he means that no one should remember a young woman traveling by the early morning bus; they

should place a young *Muslim* woman.

He slips his hand into the inner pocket of her bag and widens the gap, "This money is in large denomination, one thousand shilling Kenyan notes, and one hundred dollar bills." He runs a finger over the edge of the wad of notes inside. He then pulls his hand out and closes the bag for her, helping her sling it over her shoulder. Amir then reaches into his pocket and pulls out some neatly folded notes; they are in the colours of money with different values —crisp newly printed money, folded twice over laterally. He discreetly pushes the money into her free hand. She clenches a fist over the cash.

"Smaller denominations in case you need to buy anything hastily." She wonders how long he has been planning this escape. "I will meet you in three days. This is not goodbye." Iyani looks at him and forgets she is playing a role here. "Then why does it feel like goodbye?"

He hugs her close, and she melts in his hold. "It's not."

"Will it be difficult?" she asks him.

"Difficult, *moi*!?" he attempts a joke, even laughing slightly at his own words. She pulls back; her face stays concrete, there is no soothing her. "I will see you in Garissa. Have faith in me."

VITAL heat is produced at the heart. This warmth is maintained through every breath of air, the solemnity of spirit and soul. It throbs, the driving force that keeps man alive. It pulses, moving through a heating system of blood vessels, going from the heart to the head, to the fingertips and toes. All this is because this heat —this vital warmth— is needed to drive life itself. With every beat,

this heat pulses about the body... this beat governs man. Without it, the man seizes to be.

The Islamic Golden age saw a period of flourishing in economics, culture, and science. In the 8th to 14th Centuries, Baghdad was burgeoning as a centre of enlightenment and held a valued economic standing. The city hosted a library of scholars—polymaths—who helped shape history, debunking myths and popularised opinions made true by self-exalting scholars of years yonder. Baghdad held vital power, a beating heart that pulsed further than the Arabian Peninsula.

Systematised scholarship at the Grand Library of Baghdad saw the spread of literature and poetry in both Arabic and Persian languages. One of such was the work of the great Abu Ali Sina, popularly known as Avicenna. His brand of being one that Amir favoured. Amir was no medical aficionado, but Avicenna's pronouncements demystifying the works of one as great as Aristotle himself—the father of philosophy—enough to touch Amir in some kind of way.

Avicenna wrote on contemporary medicine, an unbiased production in Arabic literature that recognised Chinese, Galen, Indian and Persian medicine. This was impressive to read. A medical practitioner or not, this production was a giant leap in the rest of the world recognising the man and the region as a whole. What fascinated Amir most was his thesis on the Elements of Cosmology; Abu Ali Sina professed that a physician must undertake four elements of a natural way of life: Earth and Water, and the Light Elements—Air and Fire.

From his perspective, Amir's understanding was that a man must possess these essentials as follows; Earth—a man must be steady. Solid as Earth itself. In a state of rest, never quick to move, thus changing the status quo too quickly. Water—a man should have the ability to become another, assume this new form when the need arises. Such a man is a chameleon, an invisible man visible to those he feels need to see him. Water also claims that a man must bend to absolution and forgiveness, especially his brothers. Air—a man must be light, never dulled enough to forget what matters. His reaction to things values his worth; he should never be overtly fazed. Also, he should be the agent that offers change to others. Fire—a man needs to be in a state of harmony within himself; he should be steady but fluid, assuming the form required to be in the moment. He needed to be a catalyst to change for his brothers, live in the space of providence, never lack. Be hot, but cold. Be good, but be human; allow room for error and learn to forgive himself for mistakes made.

Amir loved the idea of a Library, one that existed in a time when the East was a vast land never known to hold such a place. Sadly, this beating pulse of the region—Baghdad—was destroyed in a 13-day siege in 1258, and thus the library was lost, so was concrete evidence of the works of scholars such as Avicenna.

Avicenna claimed that the body stays in a state of equilibrium and that the beating heart's heat remains equal to that of the brain and other parts of the body...

My brothers and I need to stay on the same plane for this to work.

Amir leaves Iyani on the bus. He walks away but soon finds himself circling back to bring her a bar of chocolate after he remembers food; he has not seen her eat since he laid eyes on her. When he finally walks away, he feels like he leaves a part of himself behind.

When Amir thought of helping Iyani, he had not realised his heart was pulling. She was infatuating, charming, and interesting enough to draw him in. He had hoped to decode the draw, as it were, but fate had other plans; he still did not understand it. It was as though he was high, unable to control himself truly. He knew one thing thus far—to his credit—he acknowledged his sincere feelings for her.

He leaves Iyani behind, but not before reminding himself of the stakes of his mission. A life, his woman's life. One custom made for him... one that distracts him. While Iyani's emotional reactions escalated in her home, Amir struggled with her scent. It was wafting about him like a fog of sweetness, disarming him. Though he did a fine job convincing her to leave, he had a tough job perceiving what was happening right in front of him. The scent was all over her; in her hair, on her skin, on her clothes, the bed—everywhere. The sting of the first time he encountered her scent when he moved closer to her at Wildwood, another moment of weakness, registered in his mind. This woman was the single most dangerous thing to a man like Amir. He knew as much the moment he laid eyes on her—now he wants her all to himself.

Amir is selfish, pleased to keep her away from her family. To him, this union is not self-seeking. He plans to spend eternity with Iyani; he thinks of her as nothing less than his wife to be. He wants

to share his life with her; taking his woman from her home, away from everything she has known, and placing her in a new environment, absorbing her into a new household is not wrong. She must forget the past and build a new life with her new people. Allah created man and woman, brought them together to make a fantastic team for his glory. Allah created man and woman to perfect each other. So, if she is diligent and full of grace, she will be loved dearly if she serves well and bears children. She will be adorned in what he finds beautiful; gold and silk. She will never toil or labour. She will never worry about anything. He will be her anchor, her protector, and if ever she wants to fly, he will be the wings that flap for the skies, hoisting her up.

This is the new beginning in his eyes —not selfish at all; Amir too makes a great deal of sacrifice to see them through this. Iyani will have to bear responsibility for her share of this union. He plans to spend an eternity with her; he just does not know how to do it, seeing that she is a *Kafir*.

Amir watches from the rooftop of a tower a few streets East of the bus station. The sky is turning lighter as the Sun rises further East. The time is perfect; with the rising Sun comes his appeal. He says his prayer as he watches the bus crawl through the overpopulated station as it makes its way out.

'A' oodhu bi kalimaat-illah hil-taammah min sharri ma khalaqa'. I seek refuge in the perfect words of Allah from the evil of that which He has created. "Oh Allah, I ask for your love. And love those who love you. And a love of deeds that brings me close to Your love." He breathes deeply, "Please, watch over her." The bus takes a final

turn, leaving the station. “I will make my way to you.” Amir makes this promise to himself.

Amir does not allow himself to think of Iyani any longer. He pushes her memory away as he loses himself in Iyani’s absence—maybe this was the reason he insisted she move out of the city’s limits. Not only will the distance ensure her safety, but he could let himself run rampant through the city without thinking of her. He turns away, resolute on his decision; Amir restricts his thoughts on the task at hand.

A man with set *modus operandi* rarely changes his ways. An old dog cannot learn new tricks. Easily, Amir walks back into his former life. He accepts the tedium of life in the shadows as readily as wearing an old coat. Walking the streets of Nairobi, he shades his gaze from cameras. He reads ahead, always looking around, ensuring no one follows him. He makes his way to his car, parked West of the City. He catches a familiar face in the crowd skillfully; Amir disappears into a random building. He leaves through a side door, losing his tail. He manages to disappear, appearing a few minutes’ drive South of the city in a car. The car is a rental; he had to ditch his ride for this one. He sits quietly within it at a petrol station’s carwash—he came here to think. He waits in line; they will wash the exterior of the used car as he sits within it, making his plans.

Amir snuffles, his nose tickled by the generic air freshener pad tied to the rear-view mirror. Riding his discomfort, refusing to touch much within the car, he takes time to look at the facts before him; there are three men, who all bear different strengths and pose a unique challenge individually. Going after them, one on one goes

against the odds. If he kills one, the others may find out, track him down. He deduces that they all need to meet their death concurrently. A new challenge presents itself—one against three. Fighting them in hand-to-hand combat would take too long and is a considerable risk. It is not as easy as swinging a bludgeon at their heads. They are smart, and they know him too well—they grew up together, sharing their formative years. To win, Amir would have to find a way to incapacitate his brothers before going for the kill. He has three days to plan and execute a swift takeover of his brothers-in-arms and control of the little-known extremist faction Al Sheridan. There is also the issue of the money stashed away in the West. He supposes that loss of communication will ensure that their financiers are bored therefore redirecting the money elsewhere. The plan is simple; easy enough if done right. Now, all he needs is a pack of loose-leaf tea.

Even if I fall... a faint doubt seizes him. I shall rise again. This pulse will beat yet again. Baghdad rose—becoming an economic and religious centre— after its fall in 1258.

THE BUS to Garissa smells musty and stale. At first, Iyani cannot place the smell, but soon, she identifies it as old goat milk. She crinkles her nose at it but soon becomes accustomed to it.

Iyani's seatmate is an older woman, complete with a fuller figure. She is of Somali ancestry. She takes up most of the seat with her voluptuous proportions, squeezing Iyani against the window. She smells distinctly of herbs and perfume. She is sweet though,

even greeting and smiling at Iyani. Iyani whispers her salutations and smiles back.

The bus takes some time before it leaves, about half an hour. Soon, a lady who is friends with Iyani's seatmate gets onto the bus, and from that moment on, the two friends are caught up in an animated conversation, even though the second lady sits three rows ahead. They deliver in a heavily accented Swahili, a few others in the bus chime in from time to time.

When the bus reaches a comfortable quota, the driver starts the engine and the tout slams the door shut. They start their slow skulk out of the bus station. Adept at his job, the bus driver expertly guides the bus through the crowded station. Shockingly, the two ladies carry their conversation, seemingly unaware of the relatively quiet bus they are in. The Sun is rising when the bus branches off the Thika Super-Highway and begins the long ride North to Garissa.

He said less than five... Iyani cannot get Amir out of her head long enough. Once in a while, his voice echoes in her mind, his face haunts her, the touch of his fingers, the way he holds her, even his kiss. Her fingers make it to her lips. She shuts her eyes and relives it all.

The rattle of the old bus snaps her out of her dream state. She wonders if Amir considered this old thing; it shakes and rumbles with every inch. As they creep along, she imagines it will take much longer to get to Garissa. The bus also poses another challenge; she is tired, drained physically and emotionally; all she wants to do is sleep but is not allowed to. She is startled awake

every time by a noise here and there, sudden laughter, the woman beside her moving. All these work harmoniously to ensure that she does not fall asleep and not for too long if she does. Sometimes, she is lulled by their accented chatter, then the rattling of grinding metal as the bus moves wakes her up. She is coming to find that sleep is more a need than a want; she has been up almost every night since Wildwood, then to add to her restlessness, enter Amir prowling through her life and lugging with him shocking revelations and demands.

She suffers in silence as once more sleep comes heavily on her eyelids. Her head gets foggy as sleep beckons, and then her window rattles, waking her up. She starts to feel a headache beat at her temples, the onset of a migraine. Another bout of sleep comes upon her, and she embraces it. Just when she starts to dream of her arrival, she is jumbled awake as the bus jangles knocking over a pothole or two, raising her to complete alertness. Frustrated, she grabs her hair through the scarf, breathing deeply through her teeth. She wants to scream her heart out but contains herself, barely. Iyani takes a few seconds to ease herself through relaxation breathing. She waits impatiently for the next spell of sleep.

Around the bus, carefree ease settles in. The two ladies' banter sparks more conversations, erupting into yawns of laughter and more. The two ladies' voices are the most pronounced. They spin gossip and half-truths, turning a little raunchy. The other bus passengers are engrossed in their conversations, ignoring the intimate female discussion. A few other travellers are as reserved as Iyani. She sits quietly, dwarfed in every way. She stares out the

window and is soon hypnotised into a sweet sleep by the browns and acacias that mark the road to Garissa.

It is about midday when the bus arrives at a bustling Garissa city. The Sun is overhead and scalding hot. The semi-arid terrain gives the centre a sandy wash that reminds Iyani of a North African film set in Morocco on the outskirts of Casablanca. She finds herself walking right into the city's commercial district, away from the bus station. Clustered here are a marketplace and buildings housing offices, businesses, banks, micro finances, schools, colleges, universities, and Halal eateries. She sees a couple of mosques and a church. There are a few hotels, guesthouses, and inns, but Iyani imagines Amir's would not be dead centre in the city. He is a man who values discretion; his choice would be away from what is centre. The noise about her calls her attention. Quiet —Amir would pick a quiet place, somewhere he can think. Isolated but accessible —Amir would pick a place with a clean line of sight to the way in and out. A crossroad... or maybe a dead end. A place he would see his enemies approach and have options on the way to leave, inconspicuously. He would find somewhere a little more sated, on the outer limits of the city she presumes. A place isolated enough for a man that walks in the shadows.

Trying her best to be subtle, she feeds her eyes; looks about at this new world, alert on the overt differences between the city she knows —Nairobi— and this fringe extent that seems rather phantasmal than real in her mind —Garissa. On short and stoic old buildings, limited to only a couple of floors, she sees billboards advertising numerous services and commodities, much like Nairobi.

She horns in on the familiar one billboard's advertising all so tempting; a phone with service. She wants a phone badly.

Many ethnic Somalis inhabit the city; Iyani has to be very subtle to blend in, calling little or no attention to herself. So, asking for directions on the main street is a no-no; she will have to find a shop or a bank. She will ask for directions from someone whose mobility is limited because they are working a post they cannot leave. She values her options, her eyes darting about the square. She sees a guard walk out through the doors to a bank. Bingo! She walks onto the veranda to a building called the Bajwed. Here, she finds the guard friendly enough. After salutations, she gives him a fake name—Asha—she asks him to direct her to the Royal Garissa Hotel. “Guesthouse?” he asks, and she amends her mistake, “Yes, Royal Garissa Guesthouse. *Niende aje?*” How do I go? She asks in her grammatically lacking Swahili. The man smiles at her and points her deeper into the commercial centre of the town; he mentions something to do with a *Bula*, he loses her, and she is too reserved to ask for clarification. She thanks him and walks away; despite having a general direction, she has little understanding of where exactly she is going.

A giant billboard catches her eye; it is a publication on a solar power plant within the area that serves the grid providing power to the larger Garissa area. *At least they have electricity*; she cannot help but think. Honestly, she never expected much. She always thought of Garissa as marginal—lacking. Now she sees it is a city just like any other in Kenya. The streets are alive in wonder and colour. Iyani would have never thought that this city would come alive in this way. She thought of Garissa as a dead-town. She was wrong; it

is active and operational. Women and men walk about in a most enduring vision, most ladies in an array of elaborate traditional headscarves, *Niqabs*, *Hijabs*, *Khimars*, *Burqas*, *Chadors*, or *Abayas*, and so on. The men mostly in their tunics, robes, and *Bishts* —their traditional head caps. She can feel a rush of adrenalin rise within her as she walks through this crowd of predominantly ethnic Somalis.

Iyani is caught in the masses and loses concentration on what lies before her. She bumps into a man in a *Kuffiyah* much like Amir's and is startled into a stupor when he turns about. For a moment, she thinks he is Amir. She forgets that she has his scarf.

"Oh my God!" she whispers —it slips her mind where she is. It is not Amir. This man's skin is significantly darker; he is Somali, not Arabic. His hair is a little lighter in a *henna* brown, rather than Amir's jet black. "*Pole sana*," I am so sorry; Iyani apologises for confusing him for Amir, rather than for bumping into him. In her muddle, she misses the yells and terms of abuse the man throws at her before walking away. The experience rushes the blood in her veins. She concludes that she must stand out, even in her scarf. Iyani decides that she needs to get off the streets soon. Taking a moment, leaning on a wall to the side of the main road, she takes in Garissa. Her wandering gaze falls on a growing crowd outside a single-floor office block. By the nation's flag hoisted here, she can tell that this is a parastatal office. The people are staring at a spectacle within the centre of the swirling crowd. Curiosity nibbles at her, and her feet move at their own volition towards the group. Once close enough, she sees a grown woman sprawling on the ground; this woman is at least twice Iyani's age. Her dress is dirty,

her scarf falling, revealing locks of silky hair tied in a chignon to the back of her head. A man she presumes is her husband, uncle, or brother stands over her with a stick in hand. The stick is smooth, probably from frequent use. He beats her with it even as an older man with a coloured beard tries to talk him out of it, his mature face taut with tension and a tinge of shame.

Iyani's blood chills in her veins as the woman on the ground turns her gaze at the unforgiving crowd. Her eyes stop at Iyani. She looks right at Iyani as the stick lands again on her thighs, and the woman screams in expressive folkloric cries. Iyani stumbles backwards—almost falling over as she bumps into people. She turns around, walking away. She leaves the woman behind, unable to withstand the abuse, for it is so without her norm, it leaves her disgusted. Her palms sweaty, her throat tight, her gait unsteady, she hurriedly walks away. She seeks to further herself from the group, where she cannot hear the woman's cries anymore. In time, with the distance put between herself and the crowd—the further she walks away—the cries simmer to quieting into a decent strum in her ears. Visibly shaken by what her eyes just beheld, Iyani wants Amir with her. She is scared of being a foreigner in a place without a simple understanding of the customs and practices of the people from the Northern city. While seeing this new world is something she wants to do, she is scared to do it alone. Amir ruined her with his promise. *He said he would come...* It has not been a day, and already she longs for him.

In about an hour, she finds the Royal Garissa Guesthouse. It's a two-level motel of sorts towards the edge of the city. This part of Garissa is calmer, a little less alive, less frightening. The hotel looks

old; it holds a vintage quality to it. It stands resilient to the harsh weather and aloofness of the desert-like existence to one side of it —she may have liked what it represents if she was not so spent.

A YOUNG WOMAN walks through the glass doors of the Royal Garissa Guesthouse, late afternoon. She is taut, anxiety riding her features. She has a single small backpack slinging over one shoulder. Her hands crossed over her chest, hands fisted at her sides. She is squinting from the brightness of the Sun outside and maybe from the gusts of winds out there blowing dust and debris all over. She is sub-Saharan, with dark skin and delicate features.

The woman is dressed modestly, in a long skirt coming down to her ankles, a blouse, and a fitting summer sweater. Her head is wrapped in a scarf. Loose about her neck, with one of its edges falling to her front past her midriff and the other to her back, is a familiar *Kuffiyah*.

The master of the keep, Mohammed —the man who also tends to the reception most afternoons after prayers— recognises her immediately. He has been waiting on her. She is late, understandably so —Garissa can be chaotic for someone new. Amir said she would come, and here she is. She is just as he had been told; a precious tiny woman with soft features and innocent eyes. *Beautiful*.

He gives her eyes time to adjust to the light in the room then greets her. She blinks rapidly, wiping dust off her eyes with the sporadic blinking as she walks up to the reception counter. She whispers back her reply then requests for a room in a very odd way

—no specific requirements or references. “A room, please.”

Mohammed sees Amir’s assertiveness in her words; he taught her well. Mohammed sees that she also wants to hide away as soon as possible. Garissa has already taken away the little strength she had. He begins to feel sorry for her.

Mohammed knows which room she needs, *his* room —Amir’s room. He is not sure she knows which, but he simply nods and reaches back to his collection of keys to get hers. He comes back and hands it to her when he has the key. She receives it with her left and raises a clenched right fist at him over the counter. Ignoring ‘the hand’ she uses to receive her keys, as it is forbidden in his culture to give and receive things with his left hand, he assumes she is ignorant of the matter as it is without her culture. He watches quietly as she raises her other hand and unclenches her fist to reveal money. The notes are creased like they have been pressed in her grasp for some time, but all new and folded in a very distinct way; laterally — twice over. The way Amir folds money. Mohammed knows that Amir gave her this money before sending her off. It is a way to confirm her identity to him —the scarf and the fold of the money she gave him. He sighs as he starts to release the notes from their crumbled state.

She watches him curiously, reading him.

Mohammed ignores her scrutiny though he can almost read her mind; do you know Amir? How can I get in touch with him? Will he be okay? Will he come here? Is it safe here? These could be the questions that plague her right now.

He takes his right amount and gives back the rest. Amir will kill him if he knows that he charged her for the room; he thinks it best not to indulge her in unnecessary conversation in her state. He will deal with Amir when the time comes. “ID, please. I need your name for the log.” He tells her.

She reaches into the backpack, gets her wallet then hands over her identity card. He scans it discreetly then gives it back.

“Welcome. Meals are served at 8 a.m., 2 p.m. and 8 p.m. Do enjoy your stay.”

She murmurs a ‘thank you,’ then scurries away.

Mohammed is left staring at the woman walking away, he has so many questions, but he keeps them all to himself. In time his friend—the closest thing to a brother save for another in the States— will reveal all to him. He needs to be patient.

THE MOMENT Iyani’s feet pass the threshold; she turns around and shuts the door in a panic. She locks the door hastily then moves about quickly to jam the top slat of the only chair in the room under the door-knob. She then rushes to draw the window curtains, leaving the room dark despite being daytime. When Iyani is sure that she is secured in the room, she finds herself moving in reverse until her back touches the room’s back wall. Anchoring on the stone wall behind her in a wall-sit, she slides to the floor, her thigh muscles tightening with this new position. She sits uncomfortably, pulling her knees to her chest. Her mind is unsettled as she tries to justify her choices thus far.

Three days... she tells herself. It would all be worth it in three days. Amir will be here in three days.

After some time has passed, and her ears have cooled from the steam rising after overthinking, she reaches to her side, grabs her bag. She pulls out the chocolate Amir brought back. She has not eaten a decent meal in days, and all she has is the chocolate. She tears through the wrapper and digs in. The flavour sets her glands on fire as the burst of sensation has them overworked. When they settle, she takes one more bite and finds that she can have no more.

Now all she has to do is wait.

I have to be patient.

THE SECOND day comes all too quickly. With the rising Sun comes loneliness. By mid-day, Iyani is the embodiment of a widow. By mid-afternoon, she feels weak with longing. At about three in the afternoon, there is a light knock on the door. Then, a voice calls out to Iyani, "Madam, are you okay?" Though Iyani recognises the voice, it's the man at the reception; she still jolts to her feet and rushes to the door, pressing her foot to the chair to ensure it remains secure. When Iyani is sure the room remains fortified, she moves around the chair and peers through the window at her visitor. He stands there patiently with something in his hands; she cannot see what it is from the angle but is very curious.

"It's me, Mohammed."

Mohammed...

“Amir has called. He says...” At the mention of *his* name, Iyani rips the chair from the door, unlocks it. She peers hopefully at the man. She gazes at him hopefully, her enormous dark eyes dulled with stress. They are sparkling in still tears.

He stammers, afraid to disappoint her, “Um... A... Amir co... called.”

She nods enthusiastically. “Where is he?” She looks over him lest Amir hides behind the bigger man as part of his revelation.

“He is coming, soon, he says.” Her face falls. She sees the plate in his hands. “You did not come down for supper, breakfast, or lunch. I thought I should bring you some food.”

She takes the plate from him. “Thank you.”

With that, he is gone.

Mohammed comes back the next day at about the same time, economical with words, with a gentleman’s gallantry and the usual plate of food. He leaves her a little better than he finds her every day. They have come to learn from each other and now have an air of ease about each other.

Iyani feels she can trust him.

IT IS HERE, finally. Day three is upon Iyani and Mohammed. While Mohammed is at ease in his usual upright and gentle manners, Iyani is anxious more than ever.

She cannot stand still for more than a second and has a smile popping up every other minute. She takes time to shower and hold her hair up. She dresses in fresh clothes and has a twinkle in her

eye. She even makes her way for breakfast —shares a brief, meaningful moment with Mohammed as she passes the reception while on her way to the dining room as he and the morning staff share a brief on the day's schedule. She has a hearty meal but cannot stomach another meal for the rest of the day as her nerves have her wound too tightly. She waits by the door most of the day until she reasons that Amir may arrive later in the day.

Mohammed does not show up with a plate of food and kind words. She reads this as a sign, *today Amir comes to her!* She sits on the bed tentatively, about to jump at the door every other second until she realises he may arrive late in the night. She lays on the bed, strung up on a high of anxiety as the clock strikes 6 p.m. Sleep takes her away only for her to wake at about ten in the evening to footfalls by her door. She stills, listening keenly —hoping it is Amir, but the steps go past her door. The clock strikes midnight when Iyani comes to terms. Amir is not coming.

She weeps into her pillow, unable to reconcile her decision to leave home and the person that she is. She believes that he must have done something to her because her personality alone would never allow such impulsive and irrational decision-making. She fails to see that while Amir played the very willful catalyst, he gave her a choice, and she took it, which means she is here of her own volition. Iyani starts to regret her decision, blames herself for letting him mess up her life. For no reason at all, he lied to her. Amir does not come on the third day or the fourth... or the sixth. Iyani starves herself into a frail state, for a man she barely knows and the hope that he is delayed and not simply a liar.

PART 4

NICOLE HAS BEEN EDGEY for about a week now since Iyani's call. She has been gnawing at the idea that Iyani would willingly participate in Jihad —she was not even Muslim. She also toyed with the idea of a Christian Holy War, which did not sit well with her. It was further farfetched, in her mind, since they were from Kenya and this part of Sub-Saharan East Africa was majority Christian. Such an extreme was more of a North or West African scene. This Holy War that Iyani mentioned could have been Jihadi; this made more sense. Additionally, Iyani would go to no extremes for Christianity; she is the worst Christian. She believed in God, and that was it.

She barely prayed, never went to church. The last time they were in church, they were still in high school. They had attended a few church services during weddings and funerals, and Iyani looked as though she would burst into flames every time they had to. So, she was sure, Iyani would never go to extremes for religion; Islam, Christian, or otherwise.

There was more to this than she was aware.

On Monday, six days after Iyani's revelation, Nicole gets a call from an Ida. After an inquisitive bunter, a back and forth on Iyani's whereabouts and forced small talk on her friendship with Iyani, the woman —an Ida Mahmud— requests to meet with her. She also requests that Iyani's mother accompany her to the meeting.

Nicole heeds to the summon. Needing alone time to clear her head, she sets off to the city centre on foot. Here, she meets up with

Tana, Iyani's estranged mother. They barely say 'hi,' exchanging knowing glances, looks that express each other's sincere feelings for the other—they do not like each other. Soon enough, they begin their walk. The bus stop is a few streets East of where they meet; they are to board one of the public vans headed to Eastleigh, the organisation's location.

The sky is cloudless, the Sun already hot. The streets are clogged with people on their weekday hustle and bustle. Vehicles, motorbikes, and people run about impatiently, everyone in a hurry to get somewhere. This part of the city is noisy, an auditory and visual eyesore. Unmanaged trash marks every curve—whether a raised curb or the corner of a building, every turn of brick, stone, or steel is adorned with garbage—pitted on the bends is used paper, food wrappings, old food, cloth, and so on. The clutter of an unchecked *matatu* industry, music and advertisements from noisy single-stall shops littering the downtown area, and vibrant human noise would accoster Nicole's ears as she forges on through a narrow street. This street falls into a more prominent street with more people. Nicole turns back, grabs Tana's hand without speaking a word to the woman—she knows that Tana is not used to being in the presence of so many people. Nicole expertly leads the woman on, to their destination.

They board a quiet but old public van—a *matatu*. It is rickety; it feels like the thing will disintegrate into pieces with the proper bump, thus dropping them onto the tarmac. The *matatu* roars laboriously, the smell of oil and exhaust fumes corrupting the air in the vehicle.

Nicole and Tana ride silently. Despite being seated next to each other, none speaks a word to the other. The awkward silence about them is mocked by a mother and daughter seated in the line of seats before them with their recollection of a fond memory often checked by genuine laughter. This brings tears to Nicole's eyes; she turns her gaze, looks out the window at the passing environs of the lesser appreciated limits of Nairobi's Central Business District.

When they arrive in Eastleigh, they are collected by a guide on foot, and soon they arrive at their destination. They are brought to the regional office of a Non-Governmental Organisation, 'Life after Them.' These people say they have information on Iyani's whereabouts, and they wish to share this with her close family and friends who add up to herself and Iyani's disaffected mother, Tana. For this reason alone, Nicole comes. Tana is a rare breed; she is volatile as potassium in water when triggered. Best not to offend her by hiding all this from her.

The organisation's offices are located in the lower limits of Eastleigh, further from the city. This selected location results from foreshadowing, an envisage of an emergent problem; the area hosts a growing number of idol youth. These youths fall into vice easily thus may fall into the powerful jaws of preying radicalisers. With the right incentive, young people are opting for stateless servitude to a higher purpose—because of poverty, idleness, ignorance, and in some cases, an uncanny revulsion of another's belief. This 'uncanny revulsion' being the principle purpose of a growing number of unbelievable massacres the world over, this ungodly charge christened the most essential, 'Holy War.'

Nicole sits in a waiting room —at the organisation, ‘Life after Them.’ She is shaking nervously, feet shuffling restlessly, palms sweating, and armpits leaking profusely. Biting on her inner cheek, she stares daggers at the wall before her.

On every space of this wall —save for an inch-wide border of separation— are posters of amnesty, counselling, and claims of voluntary repatriation of extremism apostates and refugees. This organisation dealt with the mental health of deserters of extremist factions and promised to help such people settle afterwards, leading a ‘normal life.’ After radicalisation, these people would have to be willing to ‘come back from the edge.’

Nicole feels attacked by the number of posters, their position, and their message in huge bold print meant to lure people like her in. Some posters have large mournful images of post-war representation; torn buildings, hurt people, crying children, anything to dredge emotion out of her. All this is arranged in a neat exhibition all over that wall. Mechanically, she raises a shaking hand over her mouth as though physically restraining a verbal reaction from leaving her mouth.

“What have you two demons been up to?!” Iyani’s mother curses from her right.

Nicole bares down as though a switch flips; she swears beneath her breath as new resolve arrests her body. For a few moments, as they enter the second half of the hour in their wait, Nicole forgets she is nervous; her shaking subsides, her hand drops into a fist as resentment arrests her form.

“KARIBU.” Welcome. Ida Mahmud ushers Nicole —Iyani’s best friend— and Tana —Iyani’s mother— into her office. They have been waiting about an hour, and she can see that their angst is working them raw. Their wait has not been intentional, some deliberate undertaking; she has been on a call with the Swiss office on a new case, thus the delay.

The pair seems somewhat nervous, so she smiles at them as they walk forward towards her desk. She blames herself for their emotional state; it is partially her fault for making them wait. She can sound rather impetuous on the phone, not in a wrong way, she believes. This audacity comes from the need to be straight up; shock victims’ family and friends into compliance, enough to nudge them to come and talk with her and the foundation.

Ida stands upright, with her head held high at only five feet tall. She has an intimidating beauty and sharp eyes. She is a woman of Somali descent, with smooth, even-toned light chocolate skin. She is Muslim; has been all her life. She is devoted; she affirms as much by her actions and demeanour. She wears a hijab; today in black to counterbalance her off-white skirt suit. She is educated and confident; her erudite, a significance that plays well for what she does.

Nicole and Tana sit in the chairs before Ida’s desk. They are wound tightly; apprehension sips out their pores.

Ida sits in her chair, brings her hands together before her. She leans forward towards them and begins to speak. “*Karibu.*” Welcome. “Am glad you came. My name is Ida; we spoke on the phone.” Her audience is quiet as they listen. “Time is of the essence,

so I will get right to the point. You both know Iyani,” she raises one hand and points to Nicole, careful to use her whole hand in respect, “Her friend for years.” She turns her hand to Tana, “Her mother.”

“Yes,” Tana affirms as much, nodding frantically as Ida’s hand assumes its previous position on the desk.

Nicole rolls her eyes at Tana’s ‘yes.’

Ida ignores this slip of character. Nevertheless, she is conscious of Nicole’s loathe for Tana. “This foundation has many functions. We work with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, International Organisation for Migration —IOM, Red Cross, Red Crescent movement and a few other humanitarian agencies to assist in human movement over borders, and rehabilitation of youth after radicalisation.”

“Oh my God,” Tana exclaims dramatically, fat tears coming to her eyes. Her chin shaking, she whimpers intensely as though she is seconds from crying.

“Mummy, there is nothing to cry about. From what we can tell, Iyani has not been radicalised yet.”

Tana takes a long calming breath, mustering herself. Nicole levels a judging side gaze at Tana; her mood is lined with a shy arrogance and loads of spite for the woman who birthed her best friend. Unable to continue watching the theatrics unfolding beside her, she turns her gaze back to Ida. The latter is looking at her now, taking in her indifference to Tana’s impending emotional breakdown.

Ida speaks to her, seeing her as the more rational of the pair, grateful that she thought to call them both and not ‘parent over friend’ as most of her associates would. “When was the last time you spoke to Iyani?”

“She called me about a week ago, saying she was going to join *the* Holy War.”

“On her phone?”

“No, a new number. I tried to call later, but it did not go through. Her phone is also off.”

“Was Iyani dating anyone?”

“No, she had a boyfriend about three years ago. Since then, she has been single.” Nicole says, earning herself a stern glance from Tana, to which she claps back, “How would you know?! Eh?! You barely know your daughter.”

Ida’s face morphs into an almost smile; she likes Nicole.

“Why are we here?” Nicole turns back to Ida, takes all that pent-up worry, angst, anger, love for her friend, and hate for her friend’s mother, and throws it at Ida. Thus, solidifying her impression on Ida; Ida wants to hire her. All this fire needs to be put to good use. Nicole speaks her mind. “Iyani is not the type to join some Holy War. She has dreams. These dreams involve sitting secluded in a forest somewhere, writing —about butterflies.

She was working on her first book. She took the trip as a reward for finishing her first draft. The only adventures she takes are as a reward for something. She has a whole bloody diary on what she will do, every trip evenly matched with a goal. If she hadn’t

finished this draft, she would be locked away in her studio, writing or working.

Ida, Iyani is chicken... this is not like her.

She is no terrorist or terrorist affiliate for that matter."

Ida nods, understandably. She hears Nicole. She also believes her. "The call she made to you, did she sound coerced?"

"She sounded scared."

Ida sits back, pulls her hands beyond the table, rests them on her lap. "Your friend is not a radical. But, she is with one as we speak."

"How do you know she is not involved? For all we know, she helped bomb the airline terminal!" Tana yells, raising her voice higher than she should.

The secretary outside Ida's office looks up for a moment.

"Tana..." Ida starts to speak firmly, but her fiery words to Tana dissolve when Nicole speaks.

"How do you know?" Nicole asks, her voice levelled. This young woman had steel in her blood.

"We work together with the NDCI —this is the National Directorate of Criminal Investigations. They analysed her online history and her phone history. Nothing claims that Iyani is involved with the *shooting* at Wildwood. Professionals, people who do this for a living, argued as much. Her case is unique.

We are looking at it as a kidnapping." Nicole gnaws, her teeth clamping down hard at her jaw. Ida looks to her sympathetically, "These numerous bodies are involved because Iyani seems

innocent. In the right place, at the wrong time, thus gaining the attention of the wrong sort. She may seem innocent now, but we have to intervene before this status changes. You understand that?" She asks her question primarily to Nicole, who simply nods. "Such events take time after careful planning before execution. So, we will likely have months, maybe years, before this group does something else.

This is why I called you both." Ida turns to the mother, then leans forward again, resting her left forearm on the desk. Her right-hand moves about, emphasising every word in evocative motion. She speaks clearly, to both of them. "This is a rescue mission. We are here to put our minds together to free Iyani from these men before she is turned into a tool for their needs."

Nicole nods in comprehension. "Why would she leave with these people?" she asks, voicing her thoughts. "She barely knows them."

Ida sits back, her hands crossing at her chest. "A man. She left with a man. The NDCI has photographic and video evidence that Iyani left with a man. He is an unknown; we know nothing about him. All we have are partial images of him. He is smart enough to hide from cameras."

Nicole huffs; Ida reads her mind. "No, he was not the shooter." She draws a long breath, "The shooter was heavier in his middle, Cushitic or of Arabic descent, but with darker skin. We suppose from the North or the East of Africa. They could be Kenyan or not. The thing is, no extremist group—local, regional, or otherwise has claimed the event.

From witnesses and partial images from CCTV that were not destroyed during the incident, we can confirm that Iyani's companion may be in his late thirties to early forties. He is of fair complexion. He is tall and slim but strong.

A few witnesses claimed a man and woman left the lounge alive. They joined the horde running along the corridor adjacent to the boarding bay. The woman fits Iyani's description. Some of these witnesses say that the man had bright coloured eyes, green, blue, or grey. He had long black lashes, thick black eyebrows, and a slight beard. Some said he looked Arabic. We speculate he could be North-African or Middle-Eastern.

But, he was not the shooter." Ida looks to Nicole in assurance.

Nicole is grateful.

"However, we believe that he knew the shooter well enough to ensure Iyani survived his actions within the lounge. Iyani and this man were left alive when everyone else was killed. The structure of this room alone left them no place to hide. It is most likely that the shooter saw them.

With such individuals as the man who shot up the terminal, a single shooter, there is no amount of convincing that Iyani's companion —or Iyani— would have done to ensure their survival unless they knew the shooter.

Iyani may not have, but this man she was with would. Also, he must have had some power to convince the shooter not to kill Iyani."

They talk a while longer; Ida breaks down the information she gets from Nicole. By the time they are done, she has a framework built of Iyani's character. She has a tiny circle, family on an even lesser arch than friends —when she lost her father, she retreated into herself, feeding into this need to study butterflies; escapism.

Before all this, she is —rather was— working a job that claimed most of her life, and in the seclusion of her home, it was an online writing job. She had a personal vendor account and was doing rather well for herself.

Ida concludes that Iyani is a recluse with an unhealthy fascination for butterflies —her search history and hacked accounts confirm as much. A not-so-ethical peep at medical records from a database at the hospital she visited when sick claimed that she has a few butterfly tattoos on her body.

All in all, Ida understands that Iyani became this way after her father died; she was connected to him more than her mother, the loss made her goal-oriented. She was smart enough to attach a reward to each achievable goal, and she was working her way through her dreams this way. This was a new resolve. It started with small things, to get away from her mother's toxicity thus move in with her more independent friend, Nicole —she took a trip to the Maasai Mara after years of trying and finally succeeding. Move out of Nicole's apartment, get her place —a trip to Nyanza. She visited a few places there, and on Lake Victoria, she attended an overnight party on a ship and spent a few nights at the Mikingo Island. Get her savings account to two hundred and fifty thousand —a trip to the lakes of the Rift Valley. Finished the first draft of her book, 'Assuming a Butterfly's Wings' —a trip to Europe, the furthest she

had ever been, all in celebration of her most significant achievement. This was according to Nicole.

Ida's final inference; Iyani was easy to steal away; she was broken and cut off —she had very few societal ties. For such a girl, it was easy to fall through the cracks in a country where so many people disappear without a trace every day. She was easy to forget, an only child with a mother that cared less for her wellbeing. She was lonely and with a void to fill —a father's space.

In the beginning, she was afraid of him. 'Because a crazy psycho has my details!' This was her reason for leaving a social media platform. Then, she grew to trust him, as she would a father. Ida believes that Iyani replaced her father with this man, the man that protected her from death itself. It is *easy* for such a man to ask of her a simple favour,

'Come with me.'

She would accept to follow him because he protected her —maybe claims to protect her still.

Also, she has nothing tying her down. Her friend is essential to her, but she is not an anchor —she chases her dreams alone; she leaves time and time again on her reward trips, on her own. Iyani understands that Nicole can still love her from a distance. And, if *he* threatened 'her person' — Nicole— she would leave with him in a heartbeat.

Ida concludes that this man did not know Iyani; she impressed him when they met. At the terminal lounge. He too did something drastic and unprecedented; he saved Iyani's life.

This man and Iyani could be on the run.

SECONDS turn to minutes which turn to hours, but never the other way around... Amir remembers their days in the compound; four brothers brought together by a need. He had been the youngest and the most emotional of the lot. When he came, he was quiet and cowardly. He always stuck by his older brothers' sides every time their mentor showed up because he was afraid.

He had been the weakest—the frailest. So, they gave him their food even when it came in rations—protein mostly. His brothers felt the need to make this sacrifice because they believed in him. They wanted him to be strong since he needed to prepare for this shared vision, and they were in it together.

He had been the quietest, ominous over a past already written. When he opened up, Amir grew into a different person altogether. He became the most vibrant, a force that seemed uncontrollable. The person he had become excited his brothers; their sacrifice was worth it. They watched him become the strongest, the fastest, and by far, the smartest. He was their ace, and they were proud. Then this happened because his judgment was clouded at the worst of times. Overnight, Amir transformed from being the brotherhood's champion to becoming their black sheep. Tonight he goes to solidify this status, accepting this role.

Taking a single medium-sized gym bag with him, Amir leaves his old model Peugeot 504 parked about three streets down from his brotherhood's den. The car—a temporary asset acquired through simple means—was stolen. It will be cast off soon, thus his

insensitive vehicle treatment. He stealthily walks up the main street of a row of dark old homes that had been empty years save for strays that wander in once in a while. Amir stops before a low-lying rusty metallic gate that he jumps over easily, quietly, not to call attention to his arrival. He creeps through the compound towards an old bungalow, the house built in the early nineties if not the late eighties. The house and its neighbours; remnants —the last of privately-owned residential properties in an area that is slowly developing into the contemporary skyscraper hub of Nairobi city; the Upperhill area. Amir sneaks sideways, back on the old wall of the building made of red adobe brick. He evades low-hanging slacking parts of the roof structure —wood and bits of the grey roof slab— that overspill the house's outer wall in wear and tear. Patchwork on the old structure is evident here and there in contrasting grey cement. These are the markings of care given by a once-loving owner. Still, though, the dwelling looked too worn for additional repair; maybe the reason why the house was not an active home but a den for oddballs. Soon money will change hands, and this old house and its neighbours will be torn down to create room for another skyscraper, another eternal formation with the shelf life of hundreds of years —much better, much more lucrative. This is a better option, whatever way one looks at it.

The chill of the night raises goose pimples on Amir's skin; something about this night has him a little jittery about his plan. For his plan to work, he requires a few private minutes to put in place a few things. He moves along the house's outer wall to the back, wary of windows and any points where the wall has a gap.

Shortly, Amir lets himself into the house through the back door. He opens the hard metal exterior door and pushes through the old mahogany inner door. It creaks with the disturbance, the weight too heavy for the rusty hinges. They should hear him... there is no way he can make his entrance anymore discrete, but this he counts on, needing his entrance marked. It is all part of his plan. He slips through the kitchen and down into a bit of a hallway with a single door that leads to a living space. He steps in and finds more than he had prepared for.

Light from outside sips into the room in strips through louvered windows. It is not enough to illuminate the space but sufficient for Amir to make out the contents of the dimly lit room. Within the room is a single chair and in the chair is a collapsed young woman. The woman's presence wrenches all of Amir's attention, *Iyani...?! A little dumb folded*, Amir stares at the meat suit placed before him; female, same build, skin tone, and hair as Iyani. As she was on the bus, her memory was so fresh in his mind. *It can't be!* Amir falters and takes an involuntary step back as he stares at the girl presented in front of him.

She is not fastened to the chair; there are no ropes in knots tying her down. Even so, she remains on the chair. She raises her head, acknowledging a new person in the room. Her eyes squint tightly as she gazes up at Amir, her face assuming the appearance of a caged bird.

Amir studies this girl's face. Her eyes are swollen nearly shut, and tear stains mark her face. Her cheeks are hollow, and her nose is dainty and red. Her lips are plump, puffy from crying. Her jaw is sharp, and her ears are a little smaller than Iyani's. Her chin is

sharp, almost unnaturally. This is not Iyani. In some light, at some angle, she could look like Iyani, but she is not Iyani. Plus, he distinctly remembers putting her on a bus. He watched the bus fill then leave the station. He remembers her face when he asked her to leave for Garissa; she was sad and withdrawn... unwilling, but still she trusted him and took the bus. He watched the bus leave with his woman.

The woman in the chair looks up at Amir; her sad eyes make him feel for her, maybe because they remind her of Iyani's. She tries to speak, but her voice is gone. Her mouth animates, but not a sound leaves her lips. He wonders how, even with the limited light in the room, he sees no injuries or bruises on this woman; nevertheless, she does appear spent and in need of rest. How is it so? How can she not speak? Unless she is broken in some way.

He scrutinises keenly. It is in her eyes; he must admit that her eyes lack that spark that says 'you are whole'. Amir presumes that his brothers have had this woman for some time, thus had their way with her, a time frame sufficient enough to have such evidence in damage. They worked her to the point where her mind is not her own; they went after her spirit, seeking to kill her essence rather than physically torment her. He knows this because he too is practised in this craft. He also knows that his brothers went after Iyani immediately after the meeting they had at the warehouse; they went ahead and got the wrong girl. An innocent... *a true innocent*.

"We found her," A voice raises from behind him, stepping to his right. "Your *Kafir*." It is Safara, his tallest brother. He dwarfs the brotherhood, with arms and fingers so long they touch the sides of

his knees. Safara's second most unforgettable feature in appearance is his teeth; they are sharp and pointy, as notable as Bram Stoker's Dracula's. Also, they never quite fit in his mouth, his lips never entirely shutting to hide away the choppers, almost like he had an excess in teeth. Sometimes when he dazes, he would glide air through these teeth, making an odd slithering sound that the group found rather hilarious.

Another voice comes from his left. "She is pretty resilient, insistently claiming that she does not know what we are talking about. I wonder what you told her?" Rahim points out. He is the average-sized one and the oldest of Amir's brothers. Fortyish, a man that looks good enough to be remembered, but not necessarily the visual of the party. His eyes always glitter, with an unsaid something. He always looks like a man with secrets that no one will ever know. He is patient, typically. He takes his time to read the layers of the situation before coming to action; Rahim is never in a hurry to make decisions. He is the thinker of the lot.

Subsequently, Hasid —the plumpest brother— steps forth from beyond the girl. Hasid steps out from relative darkness, phantom-like. If he were lean and lanky, as Safara, this would be a daunting image. But he is fat; it is almost laughable seeing him this way. He is the calm one, usually. A very present spirit, sated and *in* the moment. Their leader. Though he looks like a giant teddy bear, sometimes smiles in an innocuous way, he is a beast, never to be mistaken for anything less. There is a reason why he is their leader. "Amir..." he raises his voice; it resonates in the largely empty room. "Seconds turn to minutes which turn to hours, but never the other way around. Brothers can never undo their bond."

Safara walks onward unexpectedly and presses a folded knee into the back of Amir's right leg, making Amir buckle to his knees, his knees crashing into the floor in a painful crunch. Safara then grabs Amir in a choke-hold, restricting his air. "You need to remember," he whispers as he tightens his choke-hold; Amir struggles to free himself. "You made a promise, but the girl sits easy with her friends, living in youthful carelessness. Brother, you lied."

"Is this your *Kafir*?" Hasid asks. His calm demeanour chills Amir into a frozen state; he forgets about breathing. This is not good, not good at all. Amir looks up at Hasid, who stands behind the girl. He squares his gaze on him but says nothing. The girl whimpers at the cold presence behind her, making Amir's eyes turn to her. He wants to tell her to be calm and brave but has no way of doing so. He stares at her. His throat constricts tighter as Safara tightens his hold with every passing second. He starts to think that he may not survive this. His eyes start to water, turning red.

From the corner of his eye, he sees Rahim raise a hand. Safara releases his throat. Amir falls forward and grabs on a lifeline in a struggle.

"Amir, seconds turn to minutes which turn to hours, but never the other way around—" Hasid reiterates while Amir coughs in fits as the air rushes hard into his chest. One hand rubs at his aching neck; the other supports him an inch from the floor. "This is our way. We can never turn back the hands of the clock. How can we? Mmmh?" He asks rhetorically as he steps past their hostage, who now hugs herself about her elbows, solicitous of her state. "We do not hold power. We are merely vessels." He walks forward until he stands in front of Amir, "Little brother," Hasid crouches with great

difficulty, places a hand under Amir's chin. The hand slowly but forcefully guides Amir's face up, making him stretch his neck, consequently turning his gaze upward. His eyes shift to look into his older brother's eyes. A little of Amir's saliva touches Hasid's hand from the side of Amir's mouth. Hasid ignores the wetness as he continues to prod his brother. "Why did you lie? You made a promise. You said you would handle this *Kafir*; then you went into hiding. We are not cowards." He heaves a deep breath which almost topples him over as his crouched state is not a good placement for a man his size.

Amir says nothing; his wet lashes flutter as his eyes shut in defiance.

"Admit it! This is your *Kafir*." Hasid insists on shaking Amir's chin. Amir remains quiet. He opens his eyes, dares to look Hasid in the eye. He would think so, seeing that he was the only one who saw Iyani up-close that day. They found a woman that fit Hasid's description of Iyani. But her face was hidden from him, Amir ensured as much. He did it to protect Iyani.

Amir lets his eyes fall on the girl. She is leaning forward as she waits on their mercy in a silent appeal.

"Admit it!" Safara screams.

Amir says nothing.

Annoyed, Safara knocks hard against the middle of Amir's back, hard enough to force a gust of air out his chest. Hasid moves quickly, letting Amir fall forward flat onto the dirty floor, grabbing at breaths as though he would die any second now. This action

surprised Hasid, Rahim too. It seems they were not to engage Amir physically—in the beginning.

They code-switch into jangles of a highly charged Arabic conversation, Hasid moving to the side, towards Rahim as they speak. For those few emotional minutes, they forget about Amir, who still lays on the ground, heaving breaths like a dying bull.

The girl stares, lost in it all, first at the trio, then Amir. The lost look on her face reminds Amir of the day he put his girl on the bus. Again, he remembers the look she gave him when he said she goes to Garissa alone. He shakes his head and looks at the girl before him to confirm that it is not Iyani.

She is in Garissa, he tells himself, Mohammed will take good care of her.

This girl's mouth animates, and Amir's eyes zero in on the formation of her lips. She is strangely mute despite her will to speak. She tries, again and again, to speak to Amir, but her voice fails her again. It could be physiological, a result of torture, or shock; he tells himself a psychological withdrawal into herself. She is conscious enough to subtly mime to him that they want him to kill her. She swears that she is not Iyani, and she asks for help. Amir watches her lips move, shy of revealing the compelling reality his brothers will not believe, even if it comes from the horse's mouth. He watches her repeat that she is not Iyani from the strained position on the uneven floor. Enough more times and they will believe her. He braces himself, hooks the tip of his right shoe on the rough edge of a hole in the floor. He seeks traction for his other foot

then raises his torso off the ground slightly, assuming the position that precedes a push-up.

Amir makes a decision; this girl will be sacrificed. Innocent or not, every war has its martyrs, and he just found his. Just this once, he tells himself. He knows what he must do and fast. On what seems like his last breath, he charges off the ground past Hasid and leaps onto the woman; at this moment, the fickle fates must reign because he rises like a two-faced Janus—in an instant, a seemingly beaten man turns the hands of fate in his favour. Before the arguing buffoons realise his plan, he is on the woman. The chair that holds her falls backwards; the shift in weight and motion takes them both down with it. “I’m sorry,” Amir whispers in her ear as they transition.

The chair lands in a crack, but something else happens, something that concerns her jaw and his hands. The chair’s cracking sound beats the sound of her jaw breaking. Other than the woman and Amir, no one else knows what he has done. Her eyes are wet, vast and wild; she stares unfocused at points on the peeled ceiling as a new kind of pain washes over her. Muffled cries struggle to escape her mouth without avail. “I will try to give you a life after this,” is all he says as his brothers who have caught up yank him off her.

The woman’s face relaxes as her eyes shut slowly; she passes out just as Safara pulls the chair she is on upright. The others watch as he tries to wake her. Nothing. She is out cold. At this, Safara starts to laugh, his tall frame folding over, his hanging hands almost reaching the ground. He raises suddenly in the second reign of heckles, goes ahead to clap his relatively thin and long fingers as he

laughs. "Well, that is one way to do it." He turns to the woman, pokes at her with his elbow. She does not stir. "She is either dead or out cold."

Hasid almost smiles, but the girl stirs. He is the one who hits Amir this time. Amir barely registers the jab to his gut until the air gushes out of him for the second time this night. He falls to his hands and knees.

"Why won't you heed to your own words. Are you broken?!" Hasid asks.

Amir thinks, almost laughing to himself, yes, *I am broken... In so many ways and it all started with one singular being.* He grovels then his face turns an alarming crimson in the strain as a sudden crump has him unable to draw a breath. Another hit comes by a boot sliding across his face, it flips him over, and he falls on his back. He coils his body smaller for comfort but barely enjoys it when he is yanked upwards by his hair to a kneeling position. Rahim arranges for him to face the woman again. It almost feels like *déjàvu*, his disorientation from the blows has him seeing double. This time when he looks at the girl, he sees Iyani. His *Kafir*. He comes alive in minutes.

In time, Amir's outburst simmers into a submissive state of festering rage. His brothers stand over him; they all remain very still in their wait. Seconds turn to minutes which turn to a third of an hour as they wait for the woman to rise from her slumber.

Safara digs trenches behind the woman as he paces. Rahim and Hasid wait patiently behind Amir, who is beginning to get charged again; he is a tattered soul lost in delusions of his own.

Furthermore, the girl will wake soon. When she does, they will realise what he has done.

In a moment of awareness, he remembers he had a plan. It has been a while, though looking at his watch is impossible; he suspects it is about time his earlier preparations come to pass. It is about time for his next move, *any second now...* Like clockwork, only moments later, a loud blast echoes from outside and rattles the old house's walls, windows, and doors. The impact displaces loose dust and bits of the house. His brothers get caught in the commotion, and Amir finally has his moment; he gets off the ground and begins to stand. His brothers gather quickly, Rahim and Hasid turn to him about to attack. Still, Amir raises his hands in surrender as he slowly straightens out his aching body to full height; he calls out in an almost humorous entreaty, "Wait!"

Despite his words, they pull their weapons.

Safara grabs hold of the woman's hair and angles her head back as he places the sharp tip of a switchblade on her neck, right on her pulsing artery. Amir shakes his raised hands, insistent on his surrender. He tries for peaceful talk over full-on vehemence; now, he would rather speak to them than fight; it is not yet time.

"Wait, the Canary is here."

"Lies!" Rahim yells as he pokes his gun at Amir's side.

"Would I lie to you?" None of them says a thing; he continues to create the most extended rap sheet of lies in the group. Amir bends forward, suddenly seized by a dizzy spell; he shakes his head to ward it off then raises to full height again. He crafts his following words, stealing glances at his brothers to his sides and being ever

aware of the blade on the woman's neck. In the comprehension of distrust between himself and his brothers, Amir falls in the clutches of a voice from within, "Okay, fine. That was a lie. I rigged an explosive to distract you," Amir admits.

"What are you playing at?" Hasid asks, his firearm lowering to his side.

"I have a gift." He starts to drop his right hand, and Rahim conjures a strong demonic-like sound denoting refusal. "Relax, it's just a gift." Amir moves cautiously and reaches into his pants' right cheek back pocket. A warning comes from Safara, "Do anything I don't like, and I will cut her." Amir nods at Safara as he pulls a bag of tea from his back pocket then raises it slowly at his brothers.

Rahim scoffs; Safara cannot help but giggle. He drops his blade.

"Gold, the way we like it." Amir raises the bag and ushers it to both sides for approval.

"You want to talk?" Hasid asks. Amir nods. "Now," Hasid walks about Amir, coming into his direct line of sight. He raises his gun, waving it about the four upper corners of the room, "After all this!" he seems shocked by Amir's gesture.

"You told me, if ever I needed to talk, you would listen." Amir truly has nothing to bargain, but he is willing to try, "Am asking for a sit-down, brother to brother, let's talk." He looks to Safara, turns to Rahim, then back to Hasid. "Let's talk."

"Not about this." Hasid speaks truthfully, though he looks ready to listen to Amir.

Safara speaks up, "I don't trust you anymore 'Mir." Amir nods, hooding his gaze against his closest brother, the one he feels once understood him the most—the one he now disappoints the most. "But, I will let you speak; you deserve a chance at speaking your heart," Safara adds unexpectedly.

Amir bites the inside of his lower lip as a pang of guilt grips his chest. "Thank you," Amir whispers as he turns his gaze away from Safara.

"Open the bag, slowly," Rahim speaks, and the four erupt into an argument in Arabic, the quarrel concerning the opening of the bag. They hold sacred respect for a bag of tea; tea took the honorary place of a totem that represented their little-known group. This happened when they realised they always met over a freshly brewed teapot. Tainting this sacred tradition is low, gravely disrespectful.

After some time, Amir agrees to open the bag with great displeasure exuded on his face. He pulls a handful of the fine granules of Kenya's best tea and shows them to his brothers one side at a time. "Happy now?" he asks Rahim.

"Only if we sit and—" Safara starts to speak, but Amir sees his chance. He moves fast, turns about, throwing the grains of raw tea in his hand at Rahim and Hasid's faces. They are caught unprepared, the granules entering their eyes, and they erupt in cries of pain while they grab and rub over their faces and eyes. To ensure his plan goes accordingly, Amir had the tea laced with chilli. He had no intention of having tea and talking with his brothers.

A second, much smaller explosion erupts behind the house, rattling it again, and Amir has about a split second to act again. He lunges at Safara over the woman and grabs at the knife —Safara cares so much he was caught in a stupor when Amir acted, he does not see the attack coming— by the time he realises the ploy, Amir is already onto him and using Safara's knife in hand to gut him.

"I'm sorry," Amir breathes regrettably as he and Safara fall back.

Amir pulls the blade out of Safara's body as he shakily raises over him. Blade in hand, Amir looks down at Safara, his dying body twitching uncontrollably as a fountain of blood bubbles out of his gut. As life gushes out of him, Safara's eyes rise; he levies eyes on his brother, etching this memory deep in Amir's head to haunt him forever. Amir's lips part as he draws laboured breaths through his teeth. Tears come to his eyes as he steps off, taking two tentative steps back until his side touches the chair with the woman in it. This brings his head back in the fight; he turns about, quickly aims, then flings the bloody blade at Hasid. It goes right through his eye between splayed fingers. Hasid falls stiff as a plank, instantly dead. By this time, blind bullets and the grants of one pained man fill the space; Rahim starts to scream insults and threats at Amir. Ignoring his brother's voice, Amir grabs the unconscious woman across his chest and starts to run towards the house's front door.

"Amirrrrrr!" Rahim yells, spraying bullets across the room.

THE DEVIL or a demon is near; a strange silence settles over the house. Amir and the woman are outside the main door. Amir sits with his back resting on the outer front wall of the house; his ears

strain to listen to the slightest of sounds. He is keen on motion sounds from within the house; he needs to know where Rahim is to prepare for his final conquest.

Amir holds the woman with her head to his right shoulder, her body against his torso, her legs over his left. Seeking a more comfortable position, he shifts his dominant hand, bracing tightly behind the woman's head, putting her face to the side of his neck. His other hand secures her limp body close to his chest, his palm resting on the side of her thigh. He holds her protectively, shielding her with his body; she became his to have the moment he saw Iyani's face in the place of hers.

A stray cat moves in a bush before Amir; his eyes dart that way fast. The cat jumps, scuttling away quickly, sensing the tension in the air. The anticipation of an impending threat has him alert, the hair at the back of his neck taut in anticipation. He knows that Rahim is still alive, and his eyes clear now; Rahim is at his best and angry. Amir is also aware that he has no weapon to use against Rahim, and no words will work on his most rational brother after what just ensured.

He tries for a peep but finds it is more challenging with the woman in his hands. He swears beneath his breath, opting to stay very still, waiting it out. One way or another, presently or later, Rahim and himself will meet; he will have to face his brother. Later would be swell, Amir is not deluded; he knows that with the load on him, and the injuries he sustained from the beating he received already, it would be problematic to take on Rahim in hand to hand combat. He sits there brooding, stuck in a place of indecisiveness, listening, waiting for nothing in particular.

The odds seem against him this round.

The silence overwhelms until the woman's final breath marks it. He feels it against his neck, a warm final breath that leaves him chilled. He shakes her body, moving her face from the arc of his neck. His eyes find her face; her eyes are shut, her face the most peaceful it has been since he laid eyes on her. He shakes her again, hoping to rouse her from her inertness. Her limbs move, but she remains lifeless. He shakes her once more, going as far as to whisper, "Wake up." Nothing. "Iyani...?!" he whispers breathlessly, forcing himself to his knees and cradling her in his arms. He runs a hand on the side of her face, feeling the dislocated jaw —his own doing. A stinging pain goes through him, "Iya...ni..." His voice quivers as he pulls her closer, hugging her to his chest.

"So she is your *Kafir*," Rahim scoffs as he steps through the door.

Amir does not look up; he rocks back and forth with the woman's lifeless body, whispering the only name he can, Iyani.

"We were not sure," Rahim tells him as he moves to stand by the door frame right over Amir. Rahim watches him weep quietly; there is a slight look of empathy on his face, slighter than a feather's edge. It comes and goes quickly, emphasising its departure when he raises his gun at Amir's head. "Your time has come." With these finite words, Rahim pulls the trigger.

PART 5

AMIR STANDS AT THE GATES of a mosque he frequents in Parklands Nairobi. He walks through the gates with an unsteady gait; he is weak and disoriented. He has a bag of supplies and evidence he needs to dispose of. He is not in the mental state to cater to the act himself.

Tulip, the local groundskeeper, sees Amir from the mosque doors and rushes to him. Tulip's march is arduous —laborious because one of his legs is shorter than the other due to several surgeries to try and get a disabled man walking again. Moreover, this man, who was once brain dead a whole four and a half minutes, was left with limited brain functionality. He is a man well into his forties reduced to having the brain capacity of a ten-year-old boy. He also spasms, his tics coming on when he is emotional —indecisiveness, fear and confusion, his most cruel promoters.

Even with psychological and physiological limitations, Tulip rushes to Amir's aid. They have met before, here at the mosque. Amir comes here every time he is in the region. Unlike others who talk at him or down at him, Amir talks with Tulip. He brings Tulip gifts —clothes, shoes, books, and supplies. The last time he came, he brought Tulip a book on gardening; Tulip now has a whole wing of gardenias growing by the mosque library. Amir is pleasant to him, one of the very few. Safe to say, they are friends. Theirs is an odd pairing, seeing as Tulip is unique.

The moment Tulip is close enough to read Amir's disposition, he starts to involuntarily tick, bringing his right hand to the side of his

face. His nerves rattled, his mental state thrown to chaos, he finds himself reacting, he says the first thing that comes to his mind, "You should seek penance."

Disoriented and with clouded vision, Amir's senses are dim. He can barely hear Tulip as he falls forward, bringing the bag down with him.

With no one else to help, Tulip controls his condition. He steps forward courageously, puts Amir's free hand over his shoulder. He helps Amir to his feet, leads Amir towards the mosque in a slow crawl, careful of Amir's sensitivities. Though he helps, he does restate that Amir should seek penance. He says the words repeatedly until finally, Amir hears him.

"Allah knows what I have done," Amir whispers, shaking his head to clear the fog. He disagrees with Tulip; he has no intention to seek Allah, let alone penance. He sees no need for atonement. "My actions are justifiable. I seek to protect innocents, equal to the protection of the whole of humanity."

Tulip stops, his gaze sweeps up and down Amir. His clothes are marked with dried blood; he looks beaten and bruised with minor cuts here and there. Tulip fails to see any other path. "Still..." he says, brows knitted with worry, "You should seek penance." Then proceeds to help Amir to his quarters at the mosque's back. There, in the humble single room living place with a temporal cot for a bed, a shelf of books and souvenirs—most of which were gifts from Amir—a mat for prayers and a single stool for his Koran, Tulip repeats the words when Amir is bathed and somewhat presentable. Tulip offers to pray with him for his atonement. But only after he

bubbles into a sympathetic cry, repeating over and over that Amir is sick, and he should pray, presently. This is after he sees Amir's wounds after the bath. Amir insists that all he needs is rest. Tulip insists passionately that he should pray. "The Muslim still prayed even while wounded," he adds. Amir agrees if only to shut the man up.

This penance he seeks takes true sacrifice. Amir gives up his time with Iyani as payment for his penance. This would not have been enough to anyone else, but to Amir, this is everything. The way he feels for Iyani, he cannot even describe. It is as though she is cut out of him, a missing puzzle piece. Time away from her is punishment enough. He can never speak the words, but it shows in his behaviour; even a simpleton like Tulip can see, the man is in pain.

THE PAST

The experimental

"CAN my brother come with me? I cannot leave without Karim."

"The question you should ask is, would he?" The boy is left tongue-tied. Honestly, he does not know whether Karim wants to come to his promised home. "Tell me about your brother."

"He is kind... and very hardworking. He volunteers in the kitchen; he also works with the teacher at school. He is 'learning'; he wants to be a teacher. Karim is my best friend. And Mohammed, but he lives here. His family owns a motel. So he would not come."

"I see what you did there." the man says, his tone lined with a slight tinge of humour.

"Karim is funny and has so many stories. You would like him. He also studies the Koran a lot. He says it centres him." the boy twists his mouth, "whatever that means."

"Where is he from?" the man asks, all humour gone.

"He is from Ethiopia, towards the East."

"How did he end up here?"

"His Father is Somali. He stole Karim from his mother. They lived in Somalia somewhere until the soldiers took him away and brought him here."

"Is that all?"

"That is all he has told me. He hates to talk about it." The boy says, shrugging his shoulders. "So, can he come?"

"No, every man has a path. This is your path, yours alone." The man speaks finitely, displaying the more complex limits of his character.

"But, I can't leave him behind... he has been... he is my family."

"And when you journey on the earth, there is no blame on you if you shorten the prayer," the man speaks with the tenor of a philosopher, shutting the boy's complaints. "Do you believe this to be your home?" he asks the boy. The boy shakes his head sadly side to side, his fire dulled, his mood dampened. "If you fear that those who disbelieve will give you trouble. Surely the disbelievers are an open enemy to you." *Ṣalāt al-Khauf*, he finishes quoting the holy.

"So, I am to ignore my brother for belief?"

“No. Blood is valuable. Loyalty-based blood, even more valuable. You are to remember that you and he are believers on different paths. To disbelieve on your part is to disvalue the thing that drives you. If your brother loves you, then he will love you in your belief; he will join you or accept you as you are.”

“Why is your name Sindra?” the boy asks suddenly, making the man laugh genuinely, meticulously; like every sound he makes is crafted to have a specific purpose. Sharp and precise. His laugh is like cutting edge —fascinating.

“I am a syndrome of change.” That is all he says.

PRESENT-DAY

DAYS pass and through prayers with Tulip and guidance from the Imam at the mosque, Amir discerns a line that he feels speaks of his trials.

‘... Unless it is retaliation.’

Amir takes up another day of prayer. He has been fasting with unconditional dedication. He waits for a sign, and today, he finally gets it. As though a little bit of mercy is granted, he remembers his reason for purging the world of a kind of indignity he knows too well. This reason has a delicate face, a good heart and oozes of innocence. This reason is safe because he undertook such terrible actions. He accepts his little mercy and receives just a flicker of memories from the past.

“Amir...”

He hears her whisper to him,

"Amir..."

He remembers those lips as they called his name.

"You are scaring me."

Amir gets off his knees and stands up too fast. He staggers a little as he tries to compose himself. His friend, Tulip, comes to help steady him, and they catch the attention of the Imam. He looks at Amir as though he is infirm, taking deliberate steps towards the two who wear guilt on their faces.

"Amir," the Imam inquires, "What do you see?"

Amir turns to the Imam, "I see a memory."

"Then you have your answer." The Imam affirms with a tinge of superiority in his voice. "You should leave here, now." The Imam gives them a slight bow and walks away.

Tulip smiles broadly, happy that he has been helpful —Amir is well enough to leave. He beams at his friend, leads him away towards the door. Amir follows Tulip, letting him lead as he is so pleased.

With a clear conscience, Amir starts to think of his future —he had plans. He is hopeful that the future will be good. He looks to its beginning, and he knows exactly where he should go. Additionally, Amir knows the 'why', the reason he changed his mind.

Iyani, she is Sindra.

Iyani is a syndrome of change.

A WHOLE HUMAN, an existing living being reduced to a series of implied suggestions characterising a particular deviation. An identifiable pattern... Amir was changing, his mind evolving, and finding more to life than the teachings he had received on the way to Al Shera'. He wanted to live outside the cult, meet people, spend time away from the duty of purifying the world. He wants to make memories outside his family, away from his brothers and the places they called home. He was hoping... willing to see tomorrow. His heart is open; he is eager to accept the unbelievable.

'THE BREATH and the heart are warmer than the blood. The muscles and the flesh are warmer than the skin but colder than the heart.'

Her breath hits Amir's skin, and goose pimples rise from the point of contact. His muscles tighten, his feet rooting to the ground. He reaches for his woman...

Amir wakes up; his eyes pop open in a single flail.

The private plane taxis on the airport runway. He lowers his gaze, looks outside the tiny window of the private plane at the aridity of Garissa. Eyes squinting from the light outside. Amir smiles slightly, a tight smile that feels foreign on his face. His eyes twinkle as he watches the airport environs glide sideways with the passing plane. He opens his eyes wider, and they are darker than when he was in Nairobi; so dark they look like a different man's eyes altogether. He adjusts the cuffs of his dress shirt and arranges his collar in preparation to step off the plane; Garissa hits like a furnace when you walk off a plane; he mentally prepares himself

for the adjustment. The plane comes to a stop, and Amir takes a deep, reassuring breath.

He smiles again.

She will touch me kindly... his smile fades slowly but still wound my heart.

AMIR rushes into his friend's hotel; his gait is light; his heels barely touch the ground. He finds Mohammed in his usual place at the reception counter; Mohammed looks up to keenly inspect his friend. Though sharply dressed and slinging a summer suit coat over his arm, he looks off without a *Kuffiyah*. Somehow, Mohammed is not fazed by his bruises.

This look is new.

Mohammed figures that this too is a different Amir; he had to change to find a place for himself in a world that he thought had cast him away. Though he has healing bruises and cuts on his face, he looks good. He looks hopeful.

Amir takes a moment to greet his friend then asks him where Iyani is.

Mohammed eyes his friend like a father would his slightly ill-behaved son, "You are late!"

"Unforgivable, I know."

Mohammed does not tell him a thing about Iyani. Instead, he leans forward over the counter to whisper his words right into Amir's ears. Amir bends a little to supply the ear. "Is it done?"

Amir straightens up and nods, his eyes shining with a freedom Mohammed appreciates. Mohammed lets out a deep breath as though all this while he has been holding it in. He gives Amir a respectable nod as his face lights up with a broad smile. "The package?"

"At the airport. It's a Haener double-door fridge with a water dispenser. It will be delivered to the store, room 26."

"You did well, brother. I am proud of you."

Amir elates, basking in the glory.

Done with business, Mohammed reveals Iyani's condition, "She is restless and worried. You should not have been late."

"Unavoidable, I assure you," Amir says, laying his coat on the counter. He taps twice on the wood before rushing out. He knows exactly where to find his woman.

As Amir walks up the steps that lead to the hallway that will eventually take him to Iyani, he feels time slowing down to allow him a breath or two. It feels like he has been running since the last time he laid eyes on her. He recalls her scent and inhales deeply. He smiles. His steps become less hasty as he makes the landing. He turns and takes the corridor. He remembers her smile, and it makes him smile wider; his eyes twinkle in sheer joy. He remembers her lips, and he is running again.

"Iyani!" Amir calls out as he gets to the door; before he knows it, his fist is banging on the door.

IYANI sits up in a rush. She thinks she has heard her name. She is about to lay back on the bed dizzy from dehydration and lack of a proper diet, then banging begins. Without knowing how she gathers the strength, she is off the bed and retreating backwards slowly, afraid that she has been found out.

The banging stops. The silence that follows is deathly eerie. Iyani stares at the door as she waits. She breathes raggedly as she eyes the door. Fear slowly creeps in. A shiver runs through her. She brings her hands around herself.

“Iyani, it’s me.”

“*Amir,*” she whispers as she stumbles backwards.

“Iyani... Open this door.”

She wills herself to run to the door and let him in, but her limbs feel like jelly. She leans on the wall for support for a few minutes while she conjures the strength and willpower to move. She finally propels herself towards the door just as it falls open —she was too caught up to hear him tinker with the lock.

Amir walks in like a force, taking up all the air in the room.

His eyes are black...

He picks her up in an embrace, her feet dangling off the ground as he holds her to himself, so tightly, as though he wants to take back her days of worry. Amir wills his strength to show her how much he missed her, but she lays numb in his arms. “I’m a little late.” He tells her.

She is unresponsive a minute longer until his words spark that underlying rage that is more ancestral than merely her own. *A little*

late?! Iyani edges out of his hands fitfully, and he is forced to let her go. As she lands in one swift motion, Amir learns the difference between his woman and any other woman, this one bites. Iyani swings her right arm and lands a sharp slap across Amir's face.

The slap stings—it is written all over his face— as though her little hand was granted an extraordinary power by the heavens to punish him. Amir turns to her harshly.

She feels a tightness in her chest. It is threatening to shut the business down in that part of her. He stills, but barely. Iyani steps back. —She saw it! At that moment, when she slapped him, he almost forgot himself; Amir nearly struck her back—

As though reading her thoughts, he steps forward. His face still stern, the mark of her slap a warm crimson colouring across his face.

Iyani steps back, a new fear of the man rising within. She is stunned that she hit him —she never thought she could beat anyone, let alone the man she thought she loved— but has he not wrecked her with his delay, his delay that almost cost her so much more than she has already lost.

Amir stops approaching and stares angrily at Iyani. He looks like a man about to grab her, place her over his knee and paddle her soft bottom for the disrespect she has displayed. Gears turn in his head, and Iyani has to wait for him to react. Soon, as though a decision has been made, he looks away; when his eyes return to her, they are softer. “Are you done?” he asks her sternly, and she nods.

Iyani is afraid that her reaction may have been a little too much. She takes deeper breaths to summon her courage. “I thought you

were not coming.”

“I was delayed.”

“I thought you had lied.”

“I said I would come.”

She falls silent, her features change drastically, her eyes turn to hurt. Tears start to form in her eyes. She hoods her gaze against him, her guilt growing by the second.

“Now, now... I know.” he approaches gingerly at first. When she does not step away from him, he grabs her tightly. This time she is responsive; she raises her hands and holds him closer. They leave no space for doubt to crawl in between them. Finally, they are free.

AMIR and his brothers kneel in the rain as harsh winter winds beat their bodies. They sit in the rain because Sindra says so. Sindra says ‘breathe’... and they breathe. Sindra says ‘stop’, and life itself would stop. So, this is nothing. Though the rain cuts, its blades slicing down like fury from the heavens, the boys take it for soon they will be men, and this will be nothing but a memory because they will have conquered one more element.

Sindra yells scripture and passage, guiding them through the pain, making their blood surge through their veins as they master the numbness. “Embrace this cold; let this water wash upon you for it might purify you.”

A young Amir’s breaths flow hardly in shallow bursts, guided by the tremors that wrecked him. He is beginning to feel dizzy. He raises his numb fingers, barely feeling them as he tries to brush the

water off his face to clear his eyes. He blinks furiously at the rainwater is soon hanging on his long lashes again, some entering his eyes. His whole form is shaking so hard his bones are rattling as the thunder roars. He looks to his sturdier brothers, braving this rain, kneeling with their spines arched against the elements. He assesses himself; he is sitting back on his legs, curved over, letting his weakness have the better of him. He turns his head to the side and looks upon his lanky brother, who smiles at him, revealing his significant teeth. Soon, he is laughing as though the cold does not touch him. He slaps Amir's back lightly, laughing off the way Amir almost tips over. He then grabs Amir by his forearm and pulls him closer to his side.

Amir savours the connection, snuggling into the fold of his brother's side.

"Do not worry, little brother. You will grow to be big and strong." Safara then looks forward to Sindra. Sindra assesses his boys. He watches, pacing back and forth, a large dark umbrella in hand, an even darker aura floating about him. Amir's lanky brother speaks again, "He is right, you know. The heavens send down the rain to purify us. 'We send down purifying water from the sky.'" He quotes the holy, "This is *a* most sacred gift, a blessed ablution, a correction of the condition of impurity." He says, then laughs again; this time, his laughter touches Amir, who smiles sadly.

"But it is so cold," Amir confesses. "I fear my bones will rattle out of my skin." His teeth clutter uncontrollably.

"Endure it, little brother. This is how you become a man."

Amir looks up at Sindra. Through the rain, he sees their teacher. He sees the man behind the dark cloud. Sindra is the most honest person Amir knows; he promised a family. A home... that he did give.

IT HAS BEEN the worst of days; both Amir and Iyani have been pushed beyond limits they never knew they could endure. Whilst regret, anxiety, worry, and lovesickness threatened Iyani's well-being, Amir faced his demons. Eventually, they lived through their trials to find themselves in each other's arms again.

Amir comes fortified, maybe by the zeal of newness, the idea of having his Iyani by his side every moment of every day, and the reality of having no strings—individual or universal in the name of a greater good—hanging over his head. He comes with high and strong walls, a man ready for his new beginning. His walls seem properly forged; he appears genuinely prepared for this new page of his life. But, his walls are built of paper-thin. Paper that crumples. Paper that burns. A form that is not everlasting.

Amir's walls crumple as soon as newness gains acclimatisation. He gives in to the embers of regret, and his strength falters after that — days following his arrival. The week had taken a toll. Though he has atoned for his actions, he wants to let it all go by sleeping through it. All he does is sleep, hiding away from his past. He wants to dream of nothing, just lay there and forget everything, on the condition that he sleeps with Iyani, so she can watch over him as he rests.

For the third day now, Amir sleeps with Iyani. They sleep on the same bed. He is very aware of the distance between them; he suspects that she is aware of this concern. They are both wary of how far they can go and not offend the other. They are also unwilling to, lest the other say 'that's enough.' So, they lay on the bed, with enough space for a third person between them. They face each other and share in the silence. Seconds later, sleep takes them both.

Amir speaks in his sleep of mosques and tulips; later, he mentions tea leaves and the embers of a raging flame. Iyani replies in her sleep that she will get him some the next day, some tea and flowers —tulips. She tells him they will light a fire and enjoy the tea after his evening prayers at the mosque. Then, they are both carried deeper into the lands hereafter —for sleep is cousins with death after all.

Amir comes alive to the echoes of his brother's cries. They call to his tainted soul from some level of hell. He burns hot, as though he burns with them. Then, there is the memory of the girl, the blameless, the one thing that he cannot take back. The pain he caused her. Her senseless death.

"No..." Amir moans, turning his head sharply, *"No! I atoned for this. You will not have me!"* He speaks in a half-dream-like state.

AMIR'S final words to Safara were, 'I am sorry.'

Rahim's final words to Amir were, 'Your time has come.' Then, Rahim pulled the trigger, the trigger to a gun whose barrel was

pointed at the back of Amir's head. Amir heard the click of a bullet refusing to leave its chamber, and he knew his time had not come.

The gun did not fire!

Why would Allah hold steel —defy physics itself, against a vengeful man's determination— unless *He* saw more in this man *He* wished to save.

AMIR'S subconscious continues to replay the night...

WHEN the bullet refused to come out, Amir looked up, ran a gaze along the gun's barrel to see the look of sheer shock on Rahim's face. Rahim dared to defy Allah's will with renewed resolve and pulled the trigger again. Over and over again, and still, the bullet refused to leave its chamber. Stepping forward from his previous position pitched on the door frame, Rahim jerked the gun at Amir as he pulled the trigger and still, the tool refused to work. Rahim gawked, disbelieving.

"Die! Cowardice heathen! Die!" he yelled at Amir, tugging relentlessly at the trigger. Still, the gun refused to fire. Frustrated, Rahim threw the weapon at Amir. It struck him across his left cheekbone, drawing blood and nudging his face sideways, incidentally raising Amir into action. The haze cleared; he pushed the corpse to the side, stood up, slowly turning to Rahim. Daunted, Rahim took shaky steps back. Amir took two steps forward, matching Rahim's. "You will pay for this, Amir. You will pay for this!" He said no more because Amir broke Rahim's neck in about six seconds.

What had him in a loop was what he did next; he took teeth and ground down fingerprints and footprints. He dismembered bodies leaving the *Kafir's* and Safara's whole. He set the house ablaze and walked out a man ready for his fresh start.

'TO BE is to merely 'suffer' one's fate, do nothing and thereby live, while 'not to be' is to act, 'to take arms' and 'die'; because action means death, Hamlet says, through the writings of Jed Rubenfeld. Generations over recognise that his actions were needed. His choice one hard enough to wreck a man but needed nonetheless. How could he choose 'to be' in fear of disappointing and the fear of death itself? How could an honest man fear death when the alternative was way worse an option even to consider? How could he sit and watch when he had seen colour in an all-so-grey world? Amir chose and will have to live with his choice. He believes he would have still selected this choice if given another chance. Over and over again, he will forever choose this selection; be a man of action because this choice vindicates him.

Amir suddenly shifts his limbs over the edge of the bed, sitting up. He looks around him at his meagre room at the Royal Garissa Guesthouse. A basic room, not a suit for the prideful, neither an excellent assignment for the wealthy. His room is simple; nothing about it stands out. Every time he is in the region, he comes to this place because it reminds him of when he came to Kenya. He stayed in this room when he was smuggled into the country. This was his first experience of a roof over his head after the war. His first knowledge of a space that was his, his first home.

He sits there in the room, brooding over the past and the present. The little light from the Moon that seeps in through the gap over the curtain illuminates the embellishment on his face, a severe scowl. A sleepy moan behind him calls his attention, and he turns back to see Iyani sleeping peacefully beside him. He grimaces, thinking of the ill fate he has written for her, how he has marked her destiny with abandonment, loneliness, and even death. It would have been easier to let her die; at least then, she would be at peace, forever.

The shadow that looms would not follow her too.

He reaches for his phone on the bedside table. "Hello," the call is received in the initial few seconds from the first dial tone. "Amir?" The distance between him and his receiver is millions of miles marked in a not-so-subtle burst of static, the line breaking now and then. His recipient is in America.

"Karim," Amir speaks softly, longing in his voice. He misses his friend.

"Amir... Are you okay?" Karim asks, sensing his turmoil even as the long connection plays the delaying mania.

"Do you remember our childhood?" Nostalgia, an initial sign of depression.

"Yes, you were quite the unmanageable kid." Karim laughs.

Amir remembers moments of their lives in Kakuma, a refugee camp in Kenya —after being hosted at the guesthouse for a relatively long hiatus— he was trafficked into the centre. This was

where he met his friend Karim. Amir barely smiles at the reminiscence.

When the silence returns more extreme than before, Karim wonders why he called, "What's going on?"

Amir heaves. "This Jihad we fight..."

"You fight..." Karim amends unapologetically.

"I fought... I... I may not have strength in me anymore." Amir can feel his friend shift; he can almost see the eagerness on Karim's face to hear his reason for changing his heart.

"Is it a lack of faith?"

"No, my faith is not shaken. It's not so much my faith as it is my faithlessness regarding my path," he sighs, then speaks lower, "I found true innocence."

Karim shuffles for comfort, "Then you are witness to humanity itself," he comments, amusement riding his voice. "What defines this innocence?" he asks. Amir hears Karim's chair creek over the line. He must be at the university already; he teaches Social Sciences; East African Culture and Tradition at a state university.

"I can't describe it." Amir confesses, "Something... it surrounds her, like an aura."

"Am I hearing this right? You desert your course for love?"

"No... it is not *for* love. She... things are changing within me... the way I see her... she... I can see her this way because I am not the same man."

“Allah be blessed...!” Karim’s voice trails off when he hears Amir’s following words.

“She is a *Kafir!*” It comes across as a tangent hiss.

The chair creaks again, and Amir assumes that Karim has rocketed off his seat. Karim sees beyond the moment and asks, “Amir, this is...” Static fills the line, “Amir, how.... you pla... to leave?”

The line is suddenly cold. Amir goes quiet, save for his breaths.

“Amir!” Karim’s voice becomes frantic.

IYANI wakes up to a one-sided phone conversation. She has heard snippets of it while in a dream state, but she cannot tell what was real and what was not. Awake now, her eyes are still shut; she is sure that Amir is talking to someone on the phone about her. She lies very still, curious about his actual thoughts on her and their situation.

“I am afraid I am not strong enough,” Amir says; he sounds off, weak. Unlike himself. She opens her eyes, looks up at him. He sits facing away from her. He is hunched over, his form leaning forward as he sulks. “I have brought darkness into her life. How can she pick me when all I do is take from her, hurt her? How can I expect her to start over with the likes of me?!”

Iyani is awake now. She sits up, turns to him. He puts multiple things in his mouth; she hears a familiar sound, the crunch of pills. She knows this sound well; last year, she had the H-Pylori bacteria and had to take several medication kits —antibiotics, probiotics and

painkillers— for about a month. She is confident that Amir just took multiple pills at once. She feels the girdle holding her together snap, “Amir,” she speaks up, jumping out of bed and kneeling before him. “What are you doing?” She looks to the bedside table; there are empty strips of a bunch of medication and some white powder spilt on the table. She runs a hand over the pill strips, reading their writings, tranquillisers, and a few painkillers. “What did you do?! Amir, what did you do?!”

He stands up, almost running through her in the motion.

Something drops to the ground. A chain with a coin-like pendant. It was rudimentarily crafted, as though it had been made a long time ago, an heirloom. Iyani grabs it. She too, stands, rushing to try to hold him up as he can barely stand upright on his own. He staggers to the side, bringing her along. His grip on the phone loosens and it drops out of his hold. Iyani barely snatches it in time.

“Amir... Amir!” Tears prick her eyes as her concern falls back on Amir.

“Hello... who’s there, Amir!” a twittered voice speaks firmly through the line.

Iyani raises the phone to her ear, “Hello, help me. Please,” she cries into the receiver.

“Who is th... t’s going on?” the static becomes severe.

“Iyani... Amir, he... I think he tried to kill himself!”

Amir loses balance entirely and lunges forward into her. Before controlling their movement, she finds herself pushed into the opposing wall; the air is knocked out of her lungs. Amir’s phone

falls out of her hand. Clutching at every breath, she fails to see him pull a little dagger from a harness in his belt. When she finally sees the blade, she freezes. He takes a few steps backwards, swaying from side to side. She holds up her hands, one with the pendant still in its hold, trying to predict Amir's subsequent actions. She forgets the man on the line altogether.

Iyani looks up at Amir, and she sees that even he has no idea why he drew the knife. Maybe he wants to harm her... she sees his eyes wander, searching her form. She cannot control the tears anymore; they slip uncontrollably down her cheeks. Maybe he wants to harm himself some more. She may want to say she does not care, but that would be lying. "Amir, what does your God say about suicide?! Huh?! Mine hates it! You will burn in hell for this!

It will help if you vomit it out before it absorbs into your body. Please!" She goes for his knife and grabs it by the blade without much thought. He is so distraught he does not see her hold on the knife; he pulls back. The knife cuts through her palm, freeing itself and Amir from her looming presence. She should have felt the cut but her thoughts on this broken man have her numb. Lucky for her, the chain in hand helped to protect her palm from a much deeper wound.

He slumps his shoulders, steps into her space again, rests his forehead on hers. His lashes hood his glassy eyes from her. "I did this... now you suffer my fate with me..." Regret tears through him.

Would he rather she died, that he never rescued her? She does not say it out loud, but she thinks it. "Shhh. It's okay." She assures him. With her good hand, she reaches for his knife; when she has a

good hold on the blade —careful of its sharp edge— she yanks it out of his hand and throws it across the room. Physically drained, he offers no more fight. Her hands grab his shoulders. She maneuvers her neck and angles upward such that her eyes find his. His pupils are large; they take up most of his eyes, she can barely see any iris.

She touches his face then sweeps back his hair to get a clear view of his eyes. “Jesus, Amir! You are burning up!” Feverishly. “You need to puke that stuff, now!” He twists away, and she steps forward into his space.

“No... Mohammed will... handle it.” He slurs at her then walks through her in a dizzy spell pushing her into the bathroom. Thankfully, he gains stability before she slumps into the wall of the limited shower space.

“Amir, look at me! Amir!” She speaks authoritatively, all courtesy gone. She needs to act fast before things move from bad to worse. If he passes out, she is doomed as retching may choke him.

He starts to fall back towards the toilet bowl. She grabs his forearms; they turn in an almost choreographed semicircle within the narrow area. She begins to panic when he pushes through her, suddenly turning wildly, needing an escape. Iyani suffers for her panic when her back hits the shower faucet behind her; her wince and slight groan of pain make him stop. They stare at each other in an overthrow; seconds pass until Amir whispers, “I’m sorry.” His voice is raspy with emotion, his eyes laced in the glint of unshed tears.

Despite the pain in her back, Iyani finds a stroke of genius; *cold water*. She nods frantically, reaches behind her and turns on the

faucet. First, the shower spits some warm dirty brown water on them; the coloured water marks his white shirt in the dirt before a cold burst of clean water washes over them.

After a daunting number of seconds pass, she speaks to him when she believes she can try again because Amir is alert enough. “What are you afraid of? Why do you need to be strong enough?” she asks him. “Am here; it’s not just you; there are two of us in this. *We*,” she emphasises, “are in this together. *We*, for fucks sake!” She swears, and he smiles sadly; this is the first time he has heard her curse, “We are in this together.” Tears come down her face as she speaks.

“Am afraid I am not strong enough to let go of the past. I am afraid I may not be strong enough to take care of you.”

“No...” she whispers, wiping the water out of his face, giving him a chance of really seeing her face without the water curtaining his eyes. “I have you. You are enough.” She shivers —though she has been out of the shower flow, she has been close enough to get soaked. Her clothes cling to her body. Another spasm goes through her, reminding her to rush things. “You need to puke, now.” She tells him.

He looks down at her for a long, troubling minute, then grabs her shoulders and leans low —hunched over like he is in physical pain. Amir induces a purge. Soon, he is expunging all his stomach contents. He pukes so many pills Iyani stares mutely at the mess at their feet. She watches the pills wash off with the drain, some pills too large for the holes on the drain. When there is nothing but dry

heaves wrecking his body, she guides him to stand in the cold water to help cool down his fever.

Within minutes he is lucid; he now faces the worst guilt trip of his life. Amir chooses not to talk. He stands there facing Iyani—head downcast—wishing he could rewind the hands of time.

Feeling his regret, she moves closer to him, slides her hands over his shoulders and about his neck. When her body lines up with his whole front, Amir wraps his hands around her waist and holds her to him. They stay like this a while, letting the water wash down their worries.

Just when all seems well enough to let bygones be bygones, the main door to the room bursts open. Mohammed runs in barefoot, dressed only in his pyjama bottoms, yelling Amir's name. He scrambles to a halt when he sees Amir and Iyani in the shower, clothed but dripping head to toe. "He's okay," Iyani assures him, shutting off the water, feeling a slight unease for wasting so much water. "He's okay." Mohammed does not move, nor does he say a word. He takes time to read the room, bathroom too. He sees the pills stuck in the drain, "All of it?" he asks Iyani, she nods at him. Despite her assurance, Mohammed's worry does not dissipate; he still walks upright to the door to the bathroom— and lays a comforting hand over Amir's shoulder.

AMIR and Iyani lay on the bed in their wet clothes. Their heads are at the foot of the bed, their feet towards the headboard. Amir is on Iyani's left, his whole length on the bed, his feet resting on the headboard. Iyani has one leg folded at the knee in a triangle with

her foot at her inner thigh, the other hanging over the side of the bed. Her good hand is in his, between their heads. Her injured right hand on her stomach, bandaged after some first aid. They stare at the ceiling, lost in their private thoughts, experiencing an emotional surge. They both have a lot to say but cannot find the words.

They idle into the second hour, dawn comes, and the mosque down the street from the guesthouse publicises the morning invocations. Amir knows he should get up and pray, but he feels languid, exceedingly tired—at a molecular level. Iyani's eyes flutter as though she streams out of a wide-eyed nap or a daydream. He senses her alertness and turns his head to face her. "Travel with me." She scoffs unwillingly, "I read your diary." She bites down her lower lip, her brows knit in contempt; it is shallow, though; she understands why he would read her diary. "I know you want to travel. Would it be so bad if you did it with me?"

She turns her head to him. "Not on these terms."

"Why not? Where else would you rather be? In Nairobi, assuming the position of the less exciting friend or trying to get your mother to notice you enough to care for you?"

I only offer what I know you want.

Or would you rather be dead and buried six feet under, or maybe burnt to ashes... gone too soon."

"Stop."

"Addis awaits us to the North-East, not 1400 kilometres away. I know you want to see the ruins of..." his voice trails off when she turns her face away. His will to convince her dies when he hears

her snuffle as she cries quietly. His chest constricts. She pushes her arm over her face to hide from him and starts to weep like a child. Amir knows that this is his fault; she lived a quiet and safe life until she met him. In a day, he took her calm life away.

He reaches for the wrist to the hand that plays a visor and pulls her to him. Her hanging foot comes over the other, and he turns to hold her close. "I'm sorry. I know you have given a lot for me, and I am grateful; it hurts me to ask for more."

When the tears stop flowing, she speaks. "You have black eyes."

"I wore contacts earlier." That is all he says about it, but he reads her concerns. They know little of each other. It would be irresponsible for her to leave the country with him when she knew nothing of him, let alone the colour of his eyes, "What I did was give us time, an eternity. We have the rest of our lives to get to know each other.

I need you to have faith in me. I will give you a better life; I will atone for all I have taken. I promise you; I will make you happy.

You need to trust me, plus I will feed you." He says, answering to one of her most appreciated avowals according to her diary—every place she went, she ate the local's delight, she was slowly building a broad base of reference for her tremendously big pallet. This was part of her zeal for travel.

She laughs a little; it is guttural, comes out all wretched, thus sounding wrong. Soon she is crying again. This makes him smile at her.

"You know I never cried this much before you. You did this to me," Iyani says, between sobs.

"If crying were wrong, then Allah would have marked it forbidden," he says with a smile.

Iyani is content with his words. Her sobs simmer to just breaths, which soon even out as she falls asleep. He kisses her forehead and says a prayer to Allah. Amir asks for guidance and prays for acceptance. He also begs for forgiveness. At this moment, he puts down his armour for a new start and awaits the next chapter of his life with enthusiasm. He hopes it will be as kind, gentle and pure as Iyani.

Amir sleeps soon after.

THEY sleep all day. Iyani wakes late evening to a still sleeping Amir. She is disoriented and in need of balance, some sense of home; she untangles herself from him and reaches for his phone. She knows she cannot contact her family. She knows that all ties were cut when she called Nicole, but she needs to conciliate; sink into something familiar. Something to remind her that the world remains the same.

She unlocks the phone by taking his index finger and placing it on the fingerprint sensor on the side of Amir's phone. She goes straight to the phone's search engine. She types in her most favourite thing in the world.

NICOLE has been volunteering at 'Life After Them'. She comes twice a week, Friday afternoon and Saturday. It helps to come here; she feels that she is contributing and not a mere bystander to the tragedy surrounding her best friend's disappearance. In the main workroom of the organisation, she and other volunteers vet posters meant to be put up in local universities, sensitising students, faculty and staff on fanaticism among the youth. The prints have been laid out on tables at the centre of the room. Nicole and four other volunteers walk about the room critiquing posters in a silent examination.

The side door to the room opens. Ida walks in, makes a beeline to Nicole. By the looks of her body language, she has something urgent but private to share; Ida is taut, potent with news. "Hey, may I have a word," she speaks impatiently to Nicole.

"Sure."

"In my office, won't be too long." Two volunteers eye Nicole willfully.

"Okay."

A few minutes later, Nicole is sitting in the guest chair in Ida's office, the same one she sat the first time she met Ida.

"It is too early to tell you this, but I believe we found her," Ida reveals.

"You found Iyani?" Nicole whispers.

"I think it's her. The police say it's a long shot. The NDCI thinks I may be right. I think it's an accurate assumption."

"Well, tell me." Nicole leans forward, Ida too.

“She searched for a butterfly online.”

“Anyone can search for a butterfly online.”

“But, very few can search for the *Haetera Piera*; the Amber Phantom Butterfly.” Ida’s eyes twinkle with excitement.

Nicole’s head ticks to the side in acknowledgement. Ida turns her laptop so that Nicole can see the screen. She has a search page already opened; there are writings on a rare butterfly, it’s local according to sightings and its pedigree; phylum, class and order. The page’s side is a picture of the butterfly; it was gorgeous, delicate with two white-rimmed dark eyes towards the outer edges of its translucent butterfly wings. “This was last night—” Ida speaks softly. “At 11.47 p.m.”

Nicole pulls the laptop closer in languid motion, all her attention on the image of the butterfly; she dares to hope.

“She searched for this one butterfly and, by its scientific name, stayed on a few minutes, then left the site. She searched for nothing else.

It is a very discrete search, straight to the point —like a desire that needs fulfilment. She wanted something safe, familiar. Something that brought her calm eased her out. She could have searched for butterflies, but she searched for this one —a rare butterfly, sighted at dawn. Its appearance, translucent. It disappears easily into any background.

I believe she is likening herself to this butterfly.

Iyani may need to be invisible, trying to blend into a place she does not belong. She may want to make her companion happy by

doing so. Or, she may already feel invisible. Alone or in company.”

“How?” Nicole asks, turning to Ida.

Nicole looks lost, the details seeming too heavy. Though the question is vague, Ida answers. “We identified patterns in Iyani’s life, thanks to you most, things that Iyani would circle back to. One of these is butterflies. We monitored searches throughout the country. We divided the searches into blocks of six hours, later breaking down these blocks when the need arose. Yesterday evening alone, there were about three hundred fifty-six thousand, four hundred and sixty-eight searches with the word ‘butterfly’ between 6 p.m. and midnight. Most of these were tattoo design-related... others on theory, stories, books, film, art... It was too wide a search, so we narrowed it on butterfly species.

She was studying butterflies, liked them enough to get tattoos of the animal. She would have known species of butterflies, even zeroed in on her favourites.

We flagged precise searches, checked backgrounds on the logged accounts. Sixty-seven stood out in this time slot —6 p.m. to midnight. We did backgrounds on the owners of these accounts, cleared all save for three that were not signed into, one of which was encrypted.

We took into account the type of butterfly, its attributes and mannerisms. We read the patterns, added the emotional factor, and there she was.” Ida glances briefly at the butterfly image on her computer. “I believe we found Iyani.”

“Where is she?”

“Garissa.”

“Was it her phone?”

“I don’t believe Iyani has had a phone since the incident at Wildwood. Her companion would not let her keep one for security purposes, maybe even to control her.

His reins on her are tight. He was watching or had someone watching her.”

“He is forcing her to stay hidden?” Nicole asks.

“That or she could be doing it on her own.”

“Why now? Why surface now? What has changed in the last week?”

“A brutal double murder in Upperhill. The NDCI could not identify the remains, but a brawl was evidence.

Also, there is a missing girl about Iyani’s build. She is a little younger than Iyani. Social media posts are claiming she disappeared the night after Wildwood. She was an engineering student at a local university. That day, she was at Wildwood briefly to bid a friend goodbye.”

“Oh my God, this is good—” Nicole exclaims, “Oh, no—” she negates her statement all too quickly, “This is bad. Really, bad.”

“I called a friend, he works for an NGO in the States, they have a private military unit in the region, they have impunity and can work over borders. We work with them sometimes on such matters. See, the local police lack finesse.” Ida speaks carefully, scrutinising every reaction on Nicole’s face. “With permission from the NDCI, we can extract Iyani and leave the rest to them.

The team is coming down from Djibouti.”

Nicole is at a loss for words. She turns her gaze back to the laptop screen.

“Beautiful —is she not.” Ida comments.

“Yes. Very.” This is all Nicole says.

A few hours, later a company of soldiers in all black gear walk into the workroom of a remote outpost in rural Nanyuki town, Northward of Nairobi. On the ground are a private airstrip, three large hangars and a utility block for the flying community who use the airstrip. Nicole and Ida —the only civilians privy to be present— and two NDCI officers in plain clothes.

The soldiers walk in like gods, all tall save for one, his skin a warm caramel tone. He looks Polynesian. The team has two black men, one black woman, the rest Caucasian men. The closer they get, the larger they appear. Their boots crunch hard against the floor as they walk over, stopping just before the file of four. Nicole’s heart beats so hard she steps back, hands clasped to her sides, all instincts telling her to run.

One of the men steps forth, their leader. He is black, with firm dark eyes and an unkempt beard. He is by far the largest of the group. His stature; that of a training man — his shoulders span an unnervingly wide width, his upper arms looking like fused boulders, his thighs thick as a wrestler’s. Then, this man raises a huge hand and shakes hands with the NDCI officers and Ida. He glances over at Nicole, then returns his eyes to Ida, smiling. It is a haughty smile, as though they have been friends for years.

“She has been with these people for over two weeks. She is young, inexperienced. She could be reticent, scared, or confused. She likes butterflies and is calculative—a goal-getter. A little bit reclusive, so be very careful.”

“Yes, mam.” The man gives her a reassuring, firm nod then turns to the officers. They speak in security jargon that goes over Nicole’s head. She turns to look at the rest of the team, taking another step back, almost as though she wants to duck behind Ida and hide; they have the mien of a troop of assassins. They are intimidating as hell. Any average person would be scared. Her eyes meet with the Polynesian one. He gives her a wink, and she averts her gaze quickly.

This makes him smile.

SOMETIMES a soldier’s vision is heavily limited in a vignette by the rubber rim of a tactical mask. Occasionally, the breath of a soldier fogs the inside of his tactical mask; it is annoying and very distracting. Panther hates these things, but sometimes Voss—their Tactical Commander—insists on it, and he and the rest of the team must comply. Rather irate and edgy from the nature of their mission, Panther breathes deeply, his exhale growl-like—reason everyone calls him Panther. He takes steady breaths as he inches forward in a singular advancement with his comrades towards his target. They move in a file; he follows Voss, then Rider and Lil—the only woman in their unit today. His breaths echo within his mask, the lilt to their advancement as the rest of the team placed strategically about the guesthouse watch them go.

“The Cannery is here!” his comrade rumbles from behind him, and he chuckles, taking a little of the tension away.

“Head in the game, Rider.” Their leader Voss speaks from the front of the pack.

Panther laughs. His mask moves a little in the motion, and he has to adjust it as they continue to progress forward in deliberate steps. Following his leader’s advance, they go up the stairs, then take the turn onto the floor with the room in question, ‘Room 6’. Panther swallows hard, a little anxious; he does not like such missions, with too many moving parts. In addition to their previous dossier, there was an alert on an odd smelling smoke coming out a room at the Royal Garissa Guesthouse, the establishment elected to call it in, and the NDCI’s national division; the DCI requested the local police not to intervene until The Cannery has their ‘man’. The manager said that he would ensure the area is not touched in the wait, which was two hours ago —his team was held back by bureaucratic procedures and jurisdictional sanctions. They were able to bypass this only after calling in a huge favour with one in the country’s leadership ranks to be cleared. As if the nature of the mission was not daunting enough —this time involving a young woman, possibly others hidden away by this faction— the situation degenerated with the smoking room.

He remembers the look on her friend’s face in Nanyuki when they went over to receive their brief —he had winked at her, and she recoiled. She had looked too young, much younger than the dossier had claimed. He remembers Ida’s description of the missing woman, ‘young, inexperienced, reticent; scared or confused. A reclusive...’ all traits that indicate susceptibility to radicalisation.

Also, there is the unknown factor; he finds every mission has a hidden layer that they find on the ground during the mission, this unidentified something that is never in the dossier. The truth is these missions are never what they seem; they go in expecting one thing and always find another.

His heart thunders boldly in his chest as they walk down the hallway to Room 6. His gaze darts a moment to catch on-lookers across the court in the other rooms of the hotel. "Bloody hell!" he mutters harshly as he proceeds. He hates when people watch him, especially civilian eyes. At least none of them has cameras.

Cannery doesn't pay me enough for this!

When at the door, he follows Voss past it, Rider and Lil staying on the other side of the door. They lean onto the wall, listening for any signs of life. The smoke had ceased coming out of the room. With their masks, they could not smell anything beyond their breaths. Voss raises a fisted hand, bangs twice on the door. He gives Panther a sharp nod, his cue to holla, "This is Private Military Company, The Cannery. Is there anyone in there?" he calls out, identifying them. He is careful to accentuate his pronunciation. Voss bangs on the door once more; not a squeak comes from within the room. Panther calls out again, "PMC; The Cannery here, is there anyone in there?"

Still more silence. Voss shakes his head at his comrades. "Knock it down, Panther," Voss says, letting the soldier pass.

Panther turns to the door, pulls back to the railing behind him, then kicks at the door, stomping a boot at the key area. The door falls open in a shameful display of pitiable security.

The team of four rush in with weapons hot to find two dead bodies charred to mostly ashes on the bed.

“Wow!” Rider’s reaction thunders in the tiny room. Lost for a moment, they stare at the charred forms. The soldier looks on as his mate secures the rest of the room then joins him again. They look at the burnt figures.

“Voss, it’s empty apart from these two,” Panther reports. The soldiers stand in a file curving about the bed, looking over the gory visual.

A fifth soldier walks in without a mask; he is tall, Caucasian. His tag is marked JA, “People swarming, you may wanna rush this.” He says, stopping two steps into the room, stills a couple of seconds to stare at the bed, then turns to Voss. With a nonchalant expression on his face, JA deduces what they cannot because of their masks, then walks out. “Smells chemical.”

Almost immediately, the team all remove their masks. Panther is the gladdest to relieve himself of his mask; he wrinkles his nose at the stench in the room. “Smells foul Voss, definitely chemical!”

Rider points to the larger remnants, “Looks about right... male 6-feet plus.” He moves his finger about, “Medium lean physique and a female—” Turning to Voss. “Doubt we can get any DNA from this, but we will bag it, just in case.”

Lil turns away, looking about the room, calls out to the team, “Check this out,” She points at the surface on the table where there are a few pills, traces of white powder and pill pellets that go into capsules.

“They went out on the wings of glory.” Rider comments, walking over to study the table. “Looks like they had a party before they died.”

Voss remains quiet, his scowl levied at everything and everyone. This case is difficult, anyway one looks at it; it is bigger than expected.

A new man walks in carrying a DSLR camera hanging about his neck; in his hand is a case, the lower bottom edge suspiciously labelled ‘Vacuum’. It’s a high-value vacuum-equipped evidence bag. This man is their forensics expert; everyone calls him Pup—as in ‘Puppy’. The man loves puppies. Also, he is the visual of the cutest puppy at the grisliest of scenes. He stays at the lab most of the time, but once in a while, Pup does some fieldwork. He likes to take visual documentation of some scenes and says it helps with the breakdown after that. Pup, walks about the scene, coughs at the stench, looking at the source of the foul smell nauseatingly. Funny, this man has the weakest consistency, yet he works in forensics, how poetic. He hands Rider the case. Rider pushes his rifle to the side—letting it hang on the harness like a sling bag as he receives the case, proceeds to open it up. He pulls a special-looking shiny plastic forensics bag. “Hunter?” He asks Pup.

“With the owner,” Pup goes on to update the team as he plugs his nose, wears a pair of gloves and a surgical mask over his mouth and nose in the most elaborate of ways making Rider and Panther smile at his charm. Soon, he begins to take quick pictures of the room as Rider unfurls his equipment. “They heard nothing,” Pup reports as he moves about the bed. The team steps back, giving him room to work. “They saw nothing,” He moves his face and camera

closer to the bed, zooming closer to individual bits and pieces. "They know nothing." His voice is accented in an Eastern European inflection that makes the report thus much more intriguing. Voss scoffs like he does not believe it. "If they did, then they are tight-lipped.

They were murdered. No...?" Pup asks. No one answers him.

Lil's voice comes up, "The door was unlocked, no signs of struggle. Only form of conflict I see was with the pills.... A moment of weakness. They did not go out on the blades of glory," she throws a glance at Rider. "These two," she points at the remains on the bed, "They may have been asleep when this happened or already dead. We were to find these remains..." she waves her hand over the bed. "They may have..." her voice fades when she spots something peeking from the bottom edge of the bed. She walks over, bends and pulls Iyani's bag into view. She raises it at the team, her eyes roaming over the little backpack. "She left her bag." Lil walks over towards Voss, her steps and the camera's shutter are the only sounds in the room. Curious, the rest of the team save for Pup walk over; he just points the camera her way, takes a few frames then goes back to the remains. Panther, Voss, and Rider watch as Lil opens the bag wide, showing the bag's contents to the rest of the team. Iyani's passport and ID, diary, phone, and tablet are in there. Additionally, a wad of money in crisp unused notes, Kenyan and US Dollars are in a side pocket. No wallet.

"What are you thinking?" Voss asks, sensing Lil is withholding something.

“DOA, as in they were dead when they came here.” She reads the team’s scepticism; they were sure that she searched for the Amber Phantom Butterfly by its scientific name, *Haetera Piera*. “Nothing is left...” she glances over at the bed, “If any, damaged to a molecular level. I can bet you all I have; this is not Iyani and her companion. She turns to Rider, “That thing works?” she asks.

“Best equipment we ever got. We can collect the remains as they are, down to a speck. We can bring it back to the lab as it is and analyse it there.”

“Will we find anything?” Voss asks.

“A lot, but little concerning Iyani,” Lil takes out Iyani’s diary then hands the bag to Voss; she flips through the diary. “My guess, they are in the wind. This was a perfectly crafted decoy; this is the missing girl from Nairobi and one of the men from the group. The group may have disagreed, gone separate ways... but they knew of Iyani; they went out of their way to find her and found this girl instead. Used her to talk to our unidentified man.” She flips the pages slower and then turns the pages one at a time. “Iyani is...” Lil looks conflicted, “the girl died in her stead, by accident.” She profiled Iyani’s character by looking through her diary; the team let her process it all, “She wants more... She saw more for herself.” Lil looks up at Voss, “She and her companion may be beyond the border by now. My best guess is they went North; Ethiopia is not too far. It’s pretty too, and she likes to travel to pretty places. She turns the diary holds it open paged at the team; there were magazine cut-outs on a miniature vision board collage of places. “This girl wants to see the world,” Lil thinks out loud, “... assuming she was not coerced, he managed to convince her to go with him;

he would offer her the world as she wants it.” Lil turns the book around, then flips back a couple of pages, “She likes the Arabic aesthetic,” She points at the pages. Iyani had a butterfly drawing, but on its wings were writings and illustrations that looked Arabic. Lil’s eyes dart to the side, and she notices the shapes on the side and top margins of the diary for the first time; these are also Arabic-inspired illustrations. “These came printed on the book, meaning she made the purchase, before meeting Amir. If she were to travel, with an unrestricted passport, she would want to go to such countries first, “She would go to Ethiopia, because it is close, and it’s pretty; it’s colourful —feeding this aesthetic. Egypt would be next because they are not being chased, so they will be unhurried in their need to feed her eyes. They will travel through the African North... Morocco. Or East, to the Middle East.”

“A runaway.” Panther retorts. “What a waste.”

The team takes a brief moment of silence before Voss wriggles a finger at his team. “Wrap this up, send it to Nanyuki. Find me a trail of love birds.” He looks to the bed then the rest of the room, “There’s nothing for us here.”

“Yes, sir.” Rider hollers as he approaches the bed opens his bag; it flaps in two this a joined middle. He places the top flap over the remains; it falls over like cloth would, folding over the curves of the remains. He presses on something on the conjoined section, and the bag sucks in, pressing down against the bed.

Lil puts the diary back into the bag as she watches Rider. Panther walks up. Together they work their techy post-modern gear, packing up the crime scene. Panther grabs one end of the bag and

Rider the other. They lift it off the bed; it rises with the fragments and the sheet too. Lil is a little impressed, just a little. The men flip the bag in the air, "Raise the flap," Rider requests Lil. She steps forth, flips the flap over the bedsheet. "Hold this," Rider tells her, and she replaces him, holding up the bag. Rider then proceeds to close off the edges of the bag by running his hand over the seal. He presses a nudge on Panther's left edge of the bag, and the whole contraption starts to vibrate slightly as it sucks into itself to be thin as the sheet, with raised impressions of the remains. "It's mechanical," Lil says, examining the equipment in her hands. "Neat."

"Lay it on the bed." Panther and Lil lay the bag on the bed. Rider rolls the bag like it is a sausage roll.

Lil looks like she is about to burst an artery, "Wait, won't that—"

"It's vacuum-sealed; nothing will happen to the remains."

Panther assures her because Rider is laughing.

"Where did we get this?" Lil asks.

"It's experimental, a kid in some Nigerian Technological University created it, it's amazing tech that may never see the light of day because it failed to pass some level on the stages of implementation, but..." he looks to Voss, "Boss got ways." Rider says with a massive grin on his face.

"Real neat," Lil remarks dotingly.

"Let's go, let's go!" Voss says. The team walks out, Lil with Iyani's bag and Rider lugging the evidence. They leave the bed stripped of sheets and protective covering. Voss runs one final look

at the room before he leaves. He is kind enough to close the door after.

EPILOGUE

A YOUNG woman with a slight figure and even ebony skin walks through the ruined walls of the Philae temple in Aswan, Egypt. She walks with a skip in her step as the wind blows through the ruins, ruffling her sundress. She marvels at the remains of the temple, lost in the beauty of the structure before her —she had seen this temple in books and on images over the internet. She was fascinated before; now, she is vivified. She is living the dream, seeing things she never thought she would see with her own eyes. She raises her hand, touches the stone of a half-tumbled-down pillar. It is rough, making the sensation of it feel one she may never forget.

A FEW PACES back, her companion follows. He is a tall, leanly built man with pale Eastern skin, dark shiny locks of thick hair and even darker, deeply set eyes. He stalks after his woman in a languid, somewhat lazy gait. On his face is the shadow of a smile. It has become a constant he can barely diminish long enough because the thing that makes him smile this way —not the Roman emperor Trajan's creation— but his companion, the woman walking before him in the pretty free-flowing sundress. He smiles because she smiles. He laughs a little because she stares at the stone dreamily, as though she sees the soul of this structure, reading into its past. He is grateful for this woman. Before Allah, he gave himself wholly to her because she made him happy. He wonders if she is happy, after all, they have been through, is she really happy? She says she is, but he knows that the past is not that easy to forget. Just as this monument is beautiful, eternally relevant, it is still partly ruined.

He looks to his woman; her skin glows like that of a bronze statue in the Sun, this radiance she emits dictated by the old hues about her, that brown wash of desert stone. Surrounded by Trajan's pillars, the Sun feeds his collection of memories. In this light, in every light, day or night, morning or evening, he sees no flaws; he can only be grateful for her magnificence. She took all of him, his religion, virtues, and demons —what flaws him, the fear of the past.

He watches his treasure; her nappy hair steals a glance at the world from under her lilac silk headscarf. The blood in his veins strums, jarring him forward. She turns to the side, and he catches her profile. She is smiling. She turns entirely at him, walks backwards. *That smile...* she giggles when their eyes meet. *That laugh...* She must be happy. *Iyani is happy.* "Hey," he calls out to her, "watch where you are going."

She steps slower, carefully. "We have little daylight left; I want to be in Cairo by nightfall," she calls out to him as she stops walking back.

His smile broadens; he has sugar in his eyes —nothing she says will turn him off her. "I like you like this, on the verge of a great discovery." He mocks her. This makes her chuckle.

She shrugs her shoulders at him playfully, "I think they found it all... But," she has an expressive glint in her eyes. "I sure do enjoy playing catch-up." Her face turns serious a moment. "Thank you for all this; it's amazing."

"I am glad you like it," he steps closer, "Ima." He calls her by her new name, half her new name —When Iyani converted, she became

Na'ima. It takes her a few seconds until she smiles at the mention of her name; she is still not used to it.

"Yes... Sharif." She calls him by his new name. He smiles, taking her hands and bringing them to his lips. He likes this new name on her lips.

"SHARIF and Na'ima Ali Rajab," Panther says over his communication device, "She does embody a Na'ima. So what's the plan here?" Panther raises his camera and steals a frame of the happy couple. It has been a month, and finally, The Cannery has eyes on the 'lovebirds' as Amir and Iyani came to be known. He turns to the horizon; there lay the makings of Aswan, past the waters of the old Aswan Dam. He raises his camera, snaps at that too. He then looks up to the sky, raises his camera and snaps at the sky. Panther then winks at the sky as he lowers the camera.

"Don't make me drop a—" Rider's voice rings in his ear.

"Rider!" Voss pulls the reins on his team, "I guess we will continue watching them." He answers Panther, "Lil says it takes twenty-one days to kill a habit; it's been a month. Mr. Rajab seems very content with his new life. Let's wait; he could be an asset,"

"Or a liability." Rider retorts.

"I guess time will tell." Voss says finitely, "Panther, how do you like life in Cairo?"

"Love it, very much."

“Good, your visa will be extended. Keep your eyes on them; let’s see how long Amir stays with Sharif.”

He may be a changed man after all.” Panther voices the unsaid. He recognises that they could not have captured the assailants who shot up Wildwood without Amir. That is the truth.

“Hunter, please lower your rifle,” Panther says, turning and walking towards the love birds, placing himself between the scope and its target. “Copy that.” A new voice rings in his ear.

IYANI

SANDRA NEKH

EXCERPT OF IYANI

THE NEW SETUP is rather utilitarian within the hanger enough to hold space for a smaller helicopter and a small jet. Since LAT; Life After Them, the five side rooms to the hanger have earned purpose. Two rooms have been left for hanger operations. The middle room has been converted to a small lounge with a coffee station, including cabinets, a sink, and a tabletop burner -Ida had plumbing installed, making the area feel like a tiny kitchenette. There is a bar fridge that serves the hanger, and Panther found that it is always stocked with sweet drinks and yoghurt. No food; he was informed that a lady from a nearby village brings rather decent home-cooked food twice a day; this is the standard frequency of eating meals at the hanger. It was going to be a tough run. The room next to the lounge is LAT's central operation, and the corner room that is the smallest of them all is Ida's office.

The above space, which used to be a balcony, has been converted into sleeping rooms, enough to host six adults in shared studio-style apartments; however, only two were operational, and Ida was still working on the other two. There is a slight gallery to the wall opposing the offices. Here, LAT and other organisations that use the hanger have artefacts hanging around. There is a bar and bar stools, and to the side there is a small coffee table with seats, a public resting space.

Panther had to admit that LAT's presence at the airstrip added life to the place. The major operations run from the other two hangers were largely miniscule, and if ever rather brief since the

installation of the Nanyuki Airport the month before leaving this one largely to LAT and Cannery functions.

Panther studies the hanger, until his attention falls on Nicole. She is standing at the bar, perusing through an innumerable amount of paperwork scattered all over the bar. Something is different about her; Panther noticed it the first time he came in. When he came to the hanger, he was busy with Cannery postoperative reporting and a live call with the local NDCI contact. He was unable to speak to her let alone say hello, but now that he has a moment, he is hoping to spend some time with her. It is rather puzzling to find a different woman altogether. Her face, her demeanour... something about her reverberates with need. A primal feeling lingers within him, a need to know what happened in the days after they left for Garissa.

Ida walks up to Panther. Her light treads and her sent notify him of her approach. She forgoes hello to find Panther's line of sight. She hisses slightly, sucking in air through her teeth when she observes that his gaze is squared on Nicole. Her petite stature parks on his side, leaning on his side arm slightly. She tilts her head at Nicole inquisitively.

Without turning to her, he asks, "Do you see what I see?"

"I don't. Enlighten me. What should I be seeing?"

"She is different. A different person all together," an unguarded laugh floats from Ida's lips. An elegant laugh that exudes control and erudite restraint. The contracted cleaner across the hanger turns around, realising that it is Ida who laughed looks away quickly, reserved, afraid to intrude. Nicole does not react to the laugh.

"I think you are mistaken. That is my girl, she has that precious nose that is just so cute." Ida says as she scrunches her nose as she says 'so cute'. Her amusement fades fast as she turns to Panther, "You are reaching. Don't put ideas in my mind about my staff, especially that one. She is my newest and most reliable.

Do not taint my diamond any further." She eludes speaking about Iyani.

Panther studies her unyielding face for a few seconds. He could have chosen to walk away, let bygones be, but he tells her what he sees. "When I met Nicole, I met a woman terrified of losing her best friend. Despite this fear, she exuded a strong sense of individuality.

She looks withered, small." He squares his stance, "Frail." Reading understanding in her wise eyes, he continues, "That is a woman scared shitless and I want to know what." He lets those words sit quietly between them a beat. "Something's up."

Ida assesses his face, and maybe she tries to read a lie in his words. Good thing, he does not lie, and he would not lie, especially about this. "How long will your stay be?"

"Cairo is quiet as a tomb. The Middle East is loud, very loud. I am waiting for Voss' word."

"May I leave it to you; my attention is elsewhere. I am swamped. If I never noticed a change in her, I may not be the best person for that task." Panther gives her a single curt nod. In her eyes, Panther can see that it is settled. She is not going to linger on the matter. "Why did I leave the pulse of Nairobi again?" Ida asks, her head upturning in surrender to a comical reprieve, all her warmth returning, making Panther smile.

“Here you get to have access to mobility.” He reminded her.

Ida rights herself. “Yes. More impact. Thank you for that. I needed that reminder.”

“How’s everything in Eastleigh?”

“Good, could be better. The team needs time to adjust to this office’s existence. I work between here and there. I am working on having Nicole stay here full time.” At the mention of Nicole, Panther darts a side gaze at her, and she is still engrossed in the work, unaware of them or the larger world around her. When his gaze returns to Ida, she says, “This will leave the Eastleigh office as my main work station. I’m too old to keep jetting across Kenya every other day.”

Panther smiles respectfully, “In time.”

She smiles back, a tight-lipped smile revealing nothing. She juts her jaw at Nicole and walks away. She turns back briefly. “Oh, I almost forgot, Liko,” she calls him by his government name.

“Remove that monstrosity you parked at my office window. It reeks of old oil and does nothing for my view.” She is talking about an old track that he was planning to restore during his indefinite stay in Kenya.

“You got it.” She raised a warning finger before strolling back to her new office at the hanger’s corner.

Panther cannot help but like this woman, Ida. Her charm is flawless.

A few seconds later, Panther approaches Nicole, her gaze fixed on the infinite files before her. She does not hear him, and only until he stands next to her does she look up in his direction. She

blunders and steps back, much like she had when he met her the first time, months back. He did not dally with the insignificant.

“You are scared.”

She steals breaths before replying, “Ah, Panther?” she asks with resounding uncertainty. From her lips, the name Panther sounds ridiculous.

“Liko. Name’s Liko.” He gives her his government name, hoping for her trust. They had met twice before, although they had never been introduced. She probably learned the name through Ida.

“Is it over? Did you discover more,” her voice cracks, “about Iyani?”

He shakes his head, his brow crinkles in a severe frown as his gaze shifts over her face. Her sad terrified eyes, the slight tremors of her lower lip, and the papers in her hand. She lays them down on the bar, as if reading his observation from his face. She turns to him, “Will they pay for what they did to her?” There is no fight in her voice. She does not wish for them to suffer or be hurt in any way. She does not wish for retribution; she just wants it over. The resounding defeat in her voice makes Panther want to tell her the truth. He now knows that no one told her that Iyani was alive and well, going by a different identity, Na’ima, the wife of Sharif Ali Rajab. Months later, she is still waiting for additional information about the people who took her best friend. She gave her life to this, helping them find Iyani, helping them help people like Iyani if only so she could be a partisan player, not a bystander, and no one told her the truth, not even Ida.

“Nicole, we...” He stops himself, maybe it is best that she does not know. He does not lie, but he sure as hell omits

information that he feels requires discretion. She leans forward, eagerly waiting for his words, trying to read his reply from his face.

"You are scared," he avoids the inquisition. She reeked of fear and the subtle hints of a sweet perfume. "What's going on?"

She steals those initial breaths, building up the courage to tell him, "I found a crow. In the bin behind the back door," she points to the back of the warehouse, "the recycling bin." She lowers her hand. His eyes ask, so she answers, "It was dead but not dead either." His eyes gained intense curiosity, "It was dead." She clarifies, "But *alived* though some wooden contraption."

He stares at her intently, not quite understanding her. "When was this?"

"An hour ago, it's still there, I think."

"Why did you not tell anyone?"

"I needed to find something." Panther is beginning to understand why she is riffling through paper work. Maybe she is not so different from the woman he thought she was.

Using the backdoor to the hanger, Panther strides towards the said bin, Nicole follows a few paces later. Panther notes with reverence that only LAT recycled, so only they use the bin. He could not see Ida using the bin, so maybe only Nicole used the bin.

He walks up to the bin and pulls open the top, laying it against the wall of the warehouse. He is countered by the smell of a dead wet bird, a dead crow.

On the back wall of the bin, a few inches from the top edge of the bin, the dead crow hangs. Its core is bolted to the wall. Its spread wings are braced in bloody wooden stilts and attached to other formations linked to the bin cover. His keen eye assesses that care

has been taken to ensure that the contraption is an exquisite masterpiece of artistry and engineering. He also notes that this part is new to Nicole; she never opened the bin wholly or stuck around long enough to discover more. She must have shut the bin and ran. His frown grows. The wind-up motion brings the dead bird to life in a horrific display of demonic puppetry. They watch in horror as the bird's mouth opens and closes, its wings moving slightly up and down. The movement starts fast but slows gradually as the kinetic motion dies down by the second. The sound produced is a sickening concavity of mechanical and natural sounds. Someone is playing very sick games. The bird's movements slow down until the wind up is over. When it stops moving, all that can be heard is the hollow sound of the wind blowing through the two hangers and the silence of their taken breaths.

And when the fucking crow starts to belt out a caw while clicking in a new faster countdown, Nicole lets out a sharp scream, jumping at Panther. He barely catches her, as the ticking accelerates much faster, much like a bomb. Panther grabs Nicole and tries to pull her back to safety when the bin explodes into smithereens, throwing them at the wall of the next hanger while raining down dead bird meat, feathers, plastic chunks, and paper.

Panther bounces to his fours, his burly form helping with the collusion. "Nicole," calls out to her, her limb body lying in an awkward position; legs up against the wall, neck craned, head tilted to the side. Her weight resting on her shoulders. He quickly moves her, and almost immediately she comes alive. Shaken and breathless, her eyes keep moving as she tries to understand what just happened. He comforts her, placing his hand on her shoulder

and squeezing as they kneel before each other. He assesses her. She could be hurt worse. She has cuts and abrasions on her face and arms. There are no signs of further injury. His other hand moves to the side of her face, and something clicks inside him. "What were you looking for, inside, within all the paperwork?" Panther asks, slightly winded.

"Crows."

Panther can hear Ida and the cleaner behind Nicole fussing, but all he can focus on is Nicole and the secrets she has been keeping

"Tell me everything!"

TO BE CONTINUED...

NOTE FROM AUTHOR

REMEMBER we are one people under the Sun. As of 2021, we were **7.9 billion people, individually diverse** in every way possible, **but still wholesomely human**. Do think about that every time you think less of diversity.

Thank you for reading this novel. I loved writing this story; I hope you enjoyed reading it. I endeavour to entertain and maybe educate simply... I hope so. I look forward to hearing from you. I will reply to any pressing queries through email and social media.

I have the following people to thank for the work they put in to ensure the success of this project. My first readers are Shiro Njuguna, Kenzia Masibo, and Dan Kamau. Special thanks to Grace Nyutu, Nicholas and Hassan. My editor Makena Kuria, love you. I had two additional final editors Adrian Long and Ramadhan Mwenda, you are my heart.

I am eternally grateful to my family and friends. You make me strive for better... *Nawapenda sana*. All thanks and praise to the good Lord for the will and energy to write.

Live and love,

Sandra Nekh.

Remember, **reproduction of this text in any media beyond this is strictly forbidden.**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SANDRA NEKH invented the smile. She says that she dreamt of this formation after a night of karaoke and drinks, specifically after downing about a thousand glasses of strawberry cocktails... and here we are; humans that smile. She has a pet dragon called Sir. She sings with birds every morning —she has an angelic voice! She once wrote a practice composition about a dream that became her first novel. They are breathtakingly odd, engulfing, ethereal and will leave you thirsting for more —she is a romantic with a liking for thrillers.

Nekh is a great teller of tales; she was given this power by her great grandmother, Nekhonga —the old soul she is named after. Witness the Nekhonga Effect in her work; book lovers say it is an unfathomable kind of genius.

You can visit her online on www.sandranekh.com.

ALSO WRITTEN BY AUTHOR

- Ophelia
- Dissociate Series;
 - Dissociate Nalia's Resolve
 - True Nairobi
 - Red Nairobi
 - Silent Nairobi
 - The Last Chapter