

THE CASE OF THE BLOOD-STAINED TOWER

Ray Nayler

Called “One of the up-and-coming masters of SF short fiction” by Locus Online, Ray Nayler’s critically acclaimed stories have seen print in *Asimov’s*, *Clarkesworld*, *Analog*, *F&SF*, *Lightspeed*, and *Nightmare*, as well as in many “Best Of” anthologies. For nearly half his life, he has lived and worked outside the United States in the Foreign Service and the Peace Corps, including a stint as Environment, Science, Technology, and Health Officer at the U.S. consulate in Ho Chi Minh City. Ray currently serves as international advisor to the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Ray’s debut novel, *The Mountain in the Sea*, is out now from Farrar, Straus, and Grioux. You can follow Ray on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/raynayler>, on Instagram at <https://www.instagram.com/raynayler> or on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/raynayler>. The author’s latest tale, which is a mystery set in the distant past, looks into . . .

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The two boys had almost crested the hill.

“Keep up,” the first boy said. “I’m telling you: You want to see this. It’s not a eunuch.

It's something else. I saw it for myself."

"We aren't supposed to be here," the second boy said. "What if the other soldiers come back?"

"The battle is over. All that is left are arrows to collect, and this dead soldier. What are you afraid of? Don't you want to see? Keep up!"

The first boy reached the top of the hill—and stopped so sharply his friend ran into him from behind.

The hacked stalks of the harvested field were gold against black earth. Sky reflected in the water filling the hoofprints gouged in the mud. Two men were carrying the body of the soldier away on a stretcher.

For a moment, the boys did not speak. Then the first boy shouted: "Hey! What do you want with that dead soldier? These are my father's fields. That one belongs to us!" He turned to the second boy, grinning at his own audacity.

The men stopped. Carefully, they laid the body down. One of them strode over to the boys.

The man wore a riding cloak of rude homespun cloth, stained, its torn hem heavy with mud. But as he approached, they saw that underneath the cloak was a robe of green silk. And beneath his hood he wore a close-fitting cap, embroidered in gold.

The boys, to their credit, did not turn and run.

"Well," the man said, bending over the first boy, "allow me to tell you what we are going to do with this soldier."

His lean face was burned by the sun. Long lines ran down from a nose like the beak of a hunting bird, creasing the face to the corners of a mouth crooked with irony. His eyes were a strange color that sometimes occurs among people in the mountains—brown at the edges, lightening to amber-green near the pupils, changeable with the weather. My people called this color "sheep eyes," but I have never seen such eyes on a sheep.

"What we are going to do, boys, is take this soldier back to my estate. There, I will lay the body on a table. Using a very sharp blade, I will cut through the skin of the soldier's chest. Then, with a saw, I will hack from here . . ." he jabbed the first boy in the base of the sternum . . . "all the way up to here." He traced a line to the boy's throat. "I will place my hands inside the soldier's chest like *this* . . ." he made a gesture like a man tugging open a stubborn gate ". . . and pull apart the ribcage. Then, using many small, sharp knives, along with other tools you would not understand, I will remove all the body's organs and examine them, one by one."

"Why will you examine them?" the second boy asked.

"A good question," the man said. "I will examine them because they are filled with signs."

"Portents?" the first boy asked. "You are a sorcerer?"

"No," the man said. "Not portents. Signs of the soldier's past. Signs of health or illness, of habit and disease. These signs are not magic—they are the signs Aristotle tells us to seek. The soldier's body will be filled with signs. I will read them, and study them, and I will write down what they mean."

"And then you will bury the body?"

"Absolutely not! I will take the body and I will boil it in a large vat until the flesh falls away from its bones. Then I will take the skeleton, wire its joints together, and hang it in the rooms where I do my work."

"You *are* a sorcerer, then," said the first boy.

"He said he was not a sorcerer, so shut up!" the second boy snapped. "But why, sir, will you do this to the soldier's bones?"

"Because bones," the man said, "are a map. I will be able to read this map and learn many things."

"But what of the soldier's burial?" asked the first boy. "These things you describe are against Allah."

"You said your father owns these fields. Is your father a digger of graves? Am I taking away his business?"

"No."

"Allah is no gravedigger either, so no harm will be done to *his* trade."

With that, the man began to walk back to where his companion was waiting with the stretcher. But the first boy called out to him.

"One more question!"

The man turned.

"What will you do with the organs?" the boy said. "The ones you took from the body? What will you do with them when you are done reading the signs?"

The man grinned, showing a gold-capped tooth in the upper left side of his mouth. "The ones I do not eat myself I will feed to my friend here," he said. "He is from the North, from beyond Alexander's Wall, from the land of Gog and Magog. For his people, human flesh is a great delicacy."

The boys heard no more. They were running down the hill, tripping over their own feet, screaming.

The two men doubled over with laughter. Once they had recovered, the first man wiped his eyes, clapped his friend on the back, and they picked the stretcher up again.

* * *

The soldier carried off the field of battle by these two strange men was not dead. The soldier lay in a fever for days, tended by the man from the land of Gog and Magog—who, if he ever had been an eater of human flesh (and I am still, to this day, uncertain), resisted the temptation. The man, whose name was Knud, was nurse to the soldier, who lay a long time on the very doorstep of death.

What I remember most from those days of my sickness are Knud's pale irises hovering among the tatters of my world.

Finally, I awoke.

I was still in some pain. I always would be. Though it faded, I still feel the blow of that arrow, the angle of the hole it tore through me, accompanied by a numbness in the fingertips of my left arm that comes and goes.

Sitting before me, cross-legged on the floor, drinking tea from a *piala*, was Qadir—the man who told the boys that he would cut my organs from my body and hang my skeleton in his study.

I say his name was Qadir, but in fact he had many names. Some were long and elaborate monikers, spun from Arabic or Persian, more epithet than name, which he wore like gold-embroidered capes on formal occasions. Others were Turkic names specific only to a single situation—like the fine tools of his laboratory, made for one purpose only. But he introduced himself simply as Qadir to me. Let him be Qadir, then, to you who are reading this relation as well.

"Besides your weapons, you carry paper and writing implements. Can you read and write, then?"

No greeting, only this.

"Yes."

"In Persian? In the Turkic, in Arabic?"

"Yes."

"You can read in all of them? And write in all of them?"

"I can."

"And who will come looking for you?"

"No one. To those who knew me as a soldier, I died in battle, struck from my horse

by an arrow. To those who knew me before I was a soldier, I drowned myself in shame and sorrow. I left my cloak folded by the river, and a mournful poem, and drifted in the river's grip until I could no longer stay afloat."

"Like something from a poem, indeed. And how did you hide your secret from the other soldiers?"

"My secret was no harder to hide than the coin purse every soldier manages to conceal upon his person."

Qadir made a sound that could have been approval, or something else.

"I have use for you in my employ."

"I owe you my life."

He made a gesture like the waving off of a fly. "Discard that. I'll not have you agree out of a sense of debt."

"Am I safe here?" I asked.

"From what?"

"From you. From the other man. From other men."

"Should you choose to stay, other men will know you as my scribe. While you lay in a fever here I already sent out rumors of you: I let it be known that Qadir found you looking for work, come by small boat from the Western shore of the Khazar Sea. A poor scribe fleeing one of the beys there. The story will work: it confirms local prejudices. Here they always believe the Khanates of the West do nothing but fight wars against one another and eject their own. Your new name is Bulan."

"Elk."

"Yes. I thought it was suitable."

"Why is that?"

"Well, people are known to fire arrows at elk, for one thing. Now," he gestured at a neatly folded pile beside my bed, "there are your clothes, befitting a scribe. Your sword was lost, but there is your dagger. I have made a new sheath for it, one that can be concealed beneath your clothing, but drawn quickly. Have you used the blade?"

"I have. I have had several occasions to use it."

"Protecting your coin purse?"

"Among other things."

"Good. You must carry it with you always. You will most certainly need it again." He stood up to leave.

"You did not answer my other question. You said I am safe from outsiders. But am I safe from you, and from the other man?"

Qadir smiled—a crooked movement of the mouth I would come to know so well. "I would wager that, of the three of us, *you* are the most dangerous. If you were not, you would not have survived in this world for so long, being who you are. But yes, I assure you Knud and I will not need to be stabbed to death by you for any transgressions."

"Good."

Qadir nodded. "You may find living here offers some freedom. And things of interest with which to occupy your mind. Now please dress: I have been summoned before the local bey, who has begun to fancy himself a sultan. He is distressed by some new occurrence. I will need my scribe with me."

* * *

The bey sat on his raised platform at the end of a hall lit by elaborate but poorly functioning lamps that cast little light. This seemed purposeful: in a glow the color of the carrot-root, his robes looked grander. His face, picked out against shadow, had angles of authority it would lack in daytime.

I can confirm this: I would see him in the daytime some time later—a dissolute and thick-fingered man with a wine stain on the atlas cloth of his tunic, fiddling

with his hems.

"You should live here at court," the bey said to Qadir. "Not an hour's horseback ride from the city, across a ford in the river. You should be here, behind the walls, where it is safe. I fear for you, out there where you can hear the wolves. Out there with the mountains full of bandits at your back, unprotected."

"I have Knud," Qadir said in a joking tone. "Whose appearance is enough to frighten away all but the most determined bandits."

"And now this beardless boy you are calling a scribe."

"He speaks several languages."

"When could he have had the time to learn them?"

"I asked him that myself. He told me it is not a matter of time, but of what one does with it."

"Wise beyond his years."

"Perhaps."

"But even this company cannot be enough. You could have conversation, here in the city. Access to my libraries without having to ride hours out of your way."

"I could not live," Qadir said, "without my gardens. Or my laboratories, or my observatory."

"Or your privacy," he said with a glance in my direction.

Qadir ignored the innuendo. "The accrual of knowledge demands time, and space. Here at court you would trip over my instruments and wince at the smells of my investigations—"

The bey waved a hand, cutting through the banter. When he spoke again, it was in a flat tone, without friendliness.

"The city lives in terror. There was recently a kidnapping. One of the daughters of a merchant, taken while she was washing dresses with one of her maids, near the shore of the Khazar Sea. I ignored it, suspecting it was something arranged—a lover her father would not have approved of, spiriting her off. The typical thing."

"Was it not?"

"No. Last night whoever took her threw her from the minaret of the Great Mosque."

* * *

Night, now. The unlit alleys of the city were so narrow in places that the pitch torch Knud carried lit the walls brightly on both sides of the passage. The bey had ordered a curfew. The streets were quiet, though as we entered the square before the Great Mosque a drunken laugh echoed.

The Great Mosque had two minarets, but only one was complete: the other ended in a stump crowned by scaffolding.

"You do not like the city," said Qadir.

"I do not. There are too many places where one can be attacked. Timber and mud-brick and wattle conceal all kinds of subterfuge. We fought, once, in a city. It was worse than any other battle."

"You prefer the open spaces."

"One can see further."

Thus far Knud had said nothing, and I was becoming certain that he did not speak any of our tongues. Now he said, in good Persian, "I prefer the open spaces as well."

"There," Qadir said, pointing at something just beyond the circle of torchlight, near the base of the completed minaret.

A dark stain on the flagstones. It had been scrubbed at—one could see the smears the brush had made in an attempt to clear away the blood—but it was still visible.

The minaret towered before us, very close.

I heard Qadir muttering something, and opened my mouth to speak, but Knud silenced me with a tap on the shoulder. Qadir began to pace—first away from the

minaret, then toward it. Several times he stopped and looked upward, then walked to a new position, all the while muttering to himself, his fingers twitching and flexing.

I was reminded of a madman I had once seen at a crossroads, his jerky motions as he approached our train of mounted soldiers.

Qadir stopped his muttering. "Wake the caretaker of the mosque, Knud."

* * *

We stood just outside the doors of the great mosque. The caretaker was an old man with the lilt of Samarqand drifting in his voice. He held himself erect before us, smoothing his quilted, mended coat. Trying to regain his dignity after being woken by Knud's pounding at the door.

"I was told, sirs, that someone would come. But no one can stay awake all night. I am ready to answer your questions."

"You are the only one here?"

"I am. I await your questions."

"I have none, yet. Unlock the door to the minaret."

The caretaker returned with an iron loop of keys. Some were two handspans in length, others were smaller than the bones of a sparrow. This was his mosque, indeed. None would know it so well.

He also carried a clay double-wicked lamp. "That torch will be no good in there, sirs. The stairs are winding, the way is tight. The pitch will blind and choke you."

"The minaret is always secured, thus? The door is always locked? Who else carries a key? The muezzin?"

"I unlock the door for the muezzin."

"You are always here?"

"I have no family, sir. The great mosque is my home. I saw the last tile fitted in its dome. It has been my home for nearly my whole life."

"And yet someone was thrown from the minaret, and you do not know how?"

"That night . . ."

Qadir silenced him with a hand. "Afterward. I'll not have the signs tainted. First, the traces left upon the physical world. Then men's shape-shifting tales of what was—or what they believe was." Qadir took the lamp, then turned to Knud and said something in a language I had never heard in my life.

Knud nodded. The old caretaker glanced at him in fear.

"Tea," Qadir said. "I promised him you would make him tea. He is addicted to the stuff. It may be what keeps him here, so far from his home. Surely there is a warm brazier somewhere in this place."

Knud grinned. The torch and lamplight danced across a fence of chipped and battered teeth, gapped by a missing incisor.

Indeed, the stairs of the minaret were tight. Qadir went first. He proceeded with such slowness that I thought something was wrong. Much of the lamplight was blocked by his body, and I crept upward in darkness, catching the occasional glimpse of Qadir ahead of me, wiping a hand over a step or examining the wall, his face at times so close to the lamp I thought it would burn his beard. We made our way up with agonizing slowness.

At one point, Qadir paused and laughed.

"What is it?" I asked, impatient for anything that would break the monotony.

"I was just imagining the poor caretaker, drinking tea in terrified silence with Knud."

I was too tired to laugh, though the image was a good one. As I let my mind drift I imagined it as a painted scene—the giant man with the *piala* of tea between his finger and thumb, cross-legged on a carpet across from the wide-eyed old caretaker. An illustration from an epic story.

And perhaps that was what I finally was a part of, I thought. An epic story—that something greater than myself that I had been seeking when I fled from my cage into the endless world.

We crept forward slowly, Qadir saying nothing more until we had emerged onto the narrow balcony of the minaret.

Qadir had not climbed the staircase, I thought. He had *read* it, as one reads a scroll.

It had taken so long I almost expected it to be dawn when we emerged, but it was still deepest night, moonless and pierced everywhere with stars.

“Yes,” Qadir said, after a few moments. “Here.”

I looked where he indicated, at the railing of the circular balcony of the tower. The stain was black in the moonlight, spread as wide as my forearm on the decorative brickwork, trailing down the side of the tower. Qadir placed one hand on either side of it and looked down. I also looked out—but there was nothing under the cloak of stars to be seen except the canted shadows of the city rooftops. Here and there, an ember of light burned in that dark chaos of mud brick, as if fallen through a grate to die beneath the stove. Our own lamp, high above the city, would be the most visible thing that night, hanging among the stars like one of them.

“And what did you see inside, on the stairs?” I asked.

“Nothing.”

“But we lingered on those steps for so long!”

“It takes a very long time to see nothing,” Qadir replied. “Indeed, it can be the most difficult thing of all to see.”

* * *

“It is important that you tell me everything you observed in those moments, just as you perceived them. I want you to take a moment. Order the events in your mind—even small and incidental things.”

We sat, the four of us, in the hall of the great mosque, beneath the dome, with only the light of a few lamps and the dim glow of the brazier. Above us, in the dark, the dome would be like a sky. I had heard of it—a piece of singular mathematical perfection, the pattern of its tiled lines radiating outward. A snatch of poetry came to me. In my strange state, emptied by the days of fever, jostled by the journey on horseback into the city, mystified by events around me, my mind brought the lines up as if they were my own . . .

* * *

Great calendar dome, one tiled star for each rise
of lapis night in this dark planet's year.

A swallow makes a circuit of its size

Brushes wing-tips against the hours of the day

Twelve night-closed by mosaic-lidded eye,

Twelve open to the bluer tiles of sky.

* * *

The dome's curve was hidden in darkness above us, though I could feel its presence there, a vast shield against a greater vastness.

Knud said, in a voice as soothing as a Rhages mother comforting her child, “Go on, friend.”

The caretaker shifted in his quilted robe and began.

“I was inside, cleaning up orange peels and walnut shells. There had been a meeting of imams, here on cushions in the corner, not so far from where we are sitting.”

“Of imams?”

“Yes. Well, of religious men. Perhaps not all of them imams. They had tea, with oranges and walnuts one of them had brought from east of here, as a gift. They were discussing the Hadiths collected by a father of one of them. But by the time we speak

of, they had left, retiring just before curfew to their caravanserai. I was sweeping up what they had left behind. No matter what men discuss, what they discard is much the same.”

A philosopher, I thought. Or at least a man who says what he thinks a philosopher might say.

“And then?”

“I heard a strange sound from outside. The doors of the mosque were shut, so the sound was muffled, but there was a vibration that passed through the earth—as if a sack of something had been dropped from a great height.”

“Why do you say a sack of something?” Qadir asked.

“Because if it were stones or some other hard thing, it would make a crashing sound. But this was a thud, like a sack of flour dropped to the ground. Only larger, heavy enough to vibrate through the earth to me here.”

“You heard nothing preceding that sound? No cries, no sound of a struggle?”

“No, nothing.”

“And where were your keys?”

“In fact I had them with me, because once I had swept up the imams’ trash, I was going to lock the main door.”

“It was unlocked?”

“It was barred, but if you do not lock it as well, it can be shaken. This sometimes happens at night when someone wants to enter, and it makes a terrible sound. So I lock it as well.”

I found myself looking toward the door, off in the shadows. Imagining someone rattling it now, in this cavernous space.

“But you had not yet?” Qadir asked.

“I had not, and that is why when I heard the thud, the door rattled as well. And I suppose it is good that it did.”

“Why is that?”

“Because if the door had not rattled, I would not have opened it to be sure no one was outside. And if I had not opened it, I would not have seen her there, and she would have lain in the square before the mosque like that all night, found by stray dogs or rats. At least this way—”

“Yes, I understand. But let us not get away from that moment. You opened the door then?”

“I unbarred the door and opened it.”

“And what did you see?”

“I saw a shape, upon the stones. Close to the base of the minaret. At first I thought . . . at first, I thought something—stones, or something else—had fallen from the minaret. But then I saw it was shaped like a person. And because the door to the minaret was locked, I knew it must be some drunk, staggered out from one of the taverns and collapsed here. It was dark—there was no moon—and I had been inside, in the lamplight, and it took a moment for my eyes to penetrate the darkness. When I saw the blood on the stones I ran to the body, and . . .”

None of us pushed him to continue. In the light of the lamps, his mouth opened and shut. I thought of a carp drowning on a bank. I thought of the dead girl on the stones.

“I must have gone a bit mad,” the man said. “I think it was the terrible way she looked. . . She looked as if she had been trampled by an elephant. She was . . .”

He did not finish that sentence. After a while, Qadir said: “You told us you must have gone a bit mad. Why did you say that?”

The caretaker wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his quilted robe.

“Tell us,” Qadir said. “We will not think you are mad. We have seen many things.”

“I heard a sound in the sky. The strangest sound. Like an old building’s timbers

groaning, or like the sound a ship makes when it is at dock, and a wave hits it. And when I looked up, I saw . . . nothing."

"Nothing," Qadir repeated, when the man did not continue.

"Yes. Nothing. I saw a coin of *nothing*, blotting out the stars. And it moved, like a black moon in the sky. And I swear that I heard voices in the air."

"What did they say?" I demanded. I realized I was leaning forward, my muscles tensed, my face now close to his. Knud lay a hand on my shoulder.

"I do not know. It was far-off, just whispers . . . and in a language I have never heard. It was the language, I think, of the peri."

* * *

We wound through the streets of the city. None of us spoke. We carried no torch. It was the time of night now where no one but the oldest, the loneliest, or those to whom some terrible tragedy has befallen are awake.

The city had settled and cooled in its dust. As we cut through the marketplace a breeze lifted the torn and mended awnings of the stalls, carrying the smell of old blood from the butchers' chopping stumps, the rot of unsaleable vegetables discarded after the day's haggling was done.

In an alley where the walls leaned so drunkenly it seemed the roofs of the houses would touch and blot out the stars, I heard a man singing softly, and the coo of a baby woken in its sleep, and being soothed—a coo not unlike the sound, here and there in a yard behind mud brick and wattle, of a dove-cote.

Qadir knocked gently at the most anonymous of doors. After what seemed a long time—long enough for a person to dress and climb a flight of stairs, though not long enough for him to wake first before doing so—the door opened.

The face at the door was a woman's, her cheeks and chin and forehead tattooed so thickly that her features peered through the ink as if through the gaps in a mask. She carried a single-wicked lamp of brass. After so long in the labyrinth streets under only starlight, its glow was like a small sun.

We followed her into a narrow passage, down a short flight of stairs that led into a basement walled in stone.

Upon a table at the basement's center lay objects I cannot, as I write this, name. Many were of metals I had not seen before. Some clicked and spoke in the half-darkness to themselves in rhythms as even as a dancer's shells or a musician's drum. But most lay silent and unknowable to me in the light of the lamp the woman set down among them.

"Have you added anything new, of late, to your collection?" Qadir asked her.

"Nothing of interest in a good while," she said. "Only these, brought to me by a boy who found them on the shore of the Khazar Sea." She rounded the table and plucked from it a small cylinder, smaller than the fingers that held it. The object was of no substance I had ever seen—not gold, or silver, not iron or bronze, though polished bronze was what its color was closest to. The cylinder ended in a hump of lead. "Five of them."

"And do they fit any of the devices from your collection?"

"They do not."

Qadir plucked the cylinder from her and studied it in the lamp's light. "Nor from mine. When were they found?"

"They were brought to me the day before yesterday."

"And the boy brought you nothing else?"

"Nothing of value."

"That is different from nothing."

"He brought me a handful of sand."

"Sand?"

"Yes. He found it scattered near the bolts."

Bolts—the word evoked crossbows. I had seen one, once, carried by a Greek mercenary accompanying a caravan of traders. But these were not bolts such as he used.

“Sand.”

“Yes. Of no special type.”

“But different enough that he brought you a handful of it.”

“And not different enough for me to keep it.”

“Send for me, if you are brought anything new or strange. Or even if you hear an odd tale.”

“You think I was mistaken, not taking the boy’s sand.”

“Not mistaken. But I would have liked to see it.”

As we left, the woman leaned in close to me, and ran the palm of her hand across the side of my face. “Your mask,” she said, “is so much cleverer than mine. It is made of nothing at all, yet I am sure that few can see beyond it.”

Outside, the city was waking, turning from the depth of night to early morning, though the sky was still dark and filled with stars. A few figures were in the streets, hurrying through the cold, early chores of lighting stoves, collecting still-warm eggs from acrid, protesting chicken coops. When we reached our horses, stabled near the city gates, I stopped Qadir.

“I do not understand what was in that place. Who that woman was. Any of it.”

“No, you would not.” Qadir knelt, and drew a cross in the dirt with the silver butt of his horse whip. “These are the trade roads as you think of them.” He traced the vertical line. “Down from the north, from the land of the Rus, even from beyond that land, perhaps, to the lands of Gog and Magog, the wall of Alexander and the white wastes beyond. Or up from the south, from beyond the Persian kingdoms, beyond even Egypt and the cataracts of the Nile.” He traced the horizontal line. “Or from the West, beyond the Greek lands, where the Franks rule in their castles. Or from the East, beyond the driest deserts, from whence the silk comes, and the orange seed. And at the center of this cross are our cities, gathering all of the goods and stories and knowledge in from all directions. Sorting and trading, buying and selling, learning from all. Yes?”

I nodded.

“But *that* is not the world. *This* is the world.”

Qadir drew line after line in the earth, until there was no cross, but the hundred spokes of a wheel.

“The roads,” he said, “lead in from places you cannot imagine. They lead in from lands your mind cannot scope. The cross you know, connecting north and south and east and west, is that of the roads most traveled—but there are other roads. A thousand roads. Ten thousand roads. More. Perhaps there are as many roads as there are stars above us.”

“And why have I never heard of this?”

“You have,” Qadir said. “You simply were not aware. Tales of the marvelous, news of the strange—you have heard them since your earliest childhood days. And just now you stood in a room with a woman who walked out of the desert from a place further away than you can imagine. Further not only in the distance a person can walk, but in a distance of time. Many generations lie between her world and ours. And you did not know it.”

“But *you* know.”

“Yes. It is my job to know. To find out, to learn. And sometimes, to keep others from knowing.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Qadir said, “that the things on that table are not of this world. And they are not *for* it, either. I have seen what they can do, and they are monstrous.”

"But you work for the bey. You must deliver what you find to him."

"No," Qadir said. "Not always."

* * *

I woke the next morning hardly remembering the long ride back to Qadir's estate. I woke suddenly and completely, staring up at the timbers of my room's ceiling. I had been dreaming—just before it faded in the light I caught the ragged fringes of the dream: I had been standing on the flagstones of the mosque's great courtyard. And around me, pomegranates rained from the sky, shattering on the stones.

The walls of Qadir's estate were of ramped and pounded earth. They were old, topped with the crenellations of a fortress. They surrounded the main house, which had a fired brick first floor and a mud brick and timber second story, compassed by shady porches. Several smaller structures were scattered around an orchard and gardens. A stream ran through it all, and here and there among the mulberry, pomegranate, and persimmon trees there were tended beds of herbs. There was a small pavilion of wood, near a pool over which a willow tree bent.

A miniature, well-tended paradise.

We had returned late, and I had only slept a few hours. Despite this, and despite the pain in my shoulder, I was beginning to feel something I had not felt in a very long time: rested. Perhaps even safe.

I heard a creak of wood and saw Knud, bringing out a platter and setting it on a low table beneath the eaves of the house. He beckoned to me.

Eggs, bread fresh from the tandir, black tea with milk.

"Where is Qadir?" I asked.

"Gone gathering rumors."

"He did not say where?"

"He asked me to keep an eye on the wind."

"On the wind?"

Knud nodded. "Yes. To let him know if it changed directions. He cannot always feel it, he said, in the city."

"So he has gone to the city?"

"I suppose so," Knud said. "Though I should know better than to suppose. If there is one thing I have come to learn in my time with Qadir, it is that nothing should be supposed."

"But what would he be searching for there? We just came from there."

"There is a city of night," Knud said, "and a city of daylight. He is searching the daylight city now. He will be having tea with traders at the caravanserais, rubbing shoulders at the markets, lingering with the imam after prayers."

In the morning sunlight of the garden I saw that Knud was older than I had thought him to be, with the bird-print of squint-lines stamped beside his eyes. In the grooves of them his skin was whiter than any I have seen, as if it had been painted. I noticed other things: the tip of his left ear was missing, and one of his irises was larger than the other. Under both eyes he had the crescent-moon scars that come from when a person is struck in the face and their own bones break the skin beneath the eye sockets—scars I had seen on many an old soldier.

"The bread is good," I said. "I have not seen the woman who bakes it for you, but you should pass her my compliments."

Knud grinned. "You are looking at *her*. And you of all people—*boy*—should know better than to think a man cannot bake bread, or tend a garden. Or that a woman cannot make the Parthian shot and plant an arrow in her pursuer's chest from horseback."

"It is a lovely garden," I said once the shame had passed.

"Thank you," Knud replied. "I make a fine marmalade from the persimmons. We can have some with tea, later."

“Knud tells me the wind has not changed. It blows steadily eastward.”

I had been asleep. I struggled to sit up, to rise upward through some unpleasant dream I was grateful to awake from. Its fragments were cold and formed of ugly feelings—pursuit, loss, and the shapeless voids that take the place of people you once cared about, when your mind can produce their faces no longer.

In the light of the lamp casting a circle out into the darkness, I saw a man I had never seen before: a mountain tribesman, eyes blacked with kohl, bearded to the cheekbones beneath a head wrapping of rough woolen homespun.

But he spoke with Qadir’s voice. “Up, now. Knud and I are waiting. Your new sword is on your horse—and a bow I have bought for you. Of the western style. I hope you will know how to use it.”

He saw that I did not move from under the covers.

“Up, now,” he repeated, turning away and closing the door.

Once I had mounted my horse the three of us moved through the dark, my own horse following Qadir’s and Knud’s. We did not take the road that led to the city from the mountain pass, but instead followed an eastern track that zagged through the foothills. The horses moved at their own pace.

“Two stories,” said Qadir suddenly, just as the rocking motion of my horse had begun to lull me into the stupor of night travel, the space between sleeping and wakefulness every cavalryman on a forced march knows well.

“Two stories. The first, from the maid of the girl who was taken. They were washing dresses in a stream, at the edge of a copse of trees, not far from the Khazar Sea’s shore. I imagine the scene—bright sunlight, the air filled with the dander of the poplar tree, the silver of the trembling leaves. The maid saw—she says she saw—a man, clad in gray clothes of no kind she had ever lain eyes on. He came from the trees, gestured up into the air, and there was an explosion. A great roar, as if he had become a beast. And then she saw a true beast—she saw a massive-tusked elephant rising up behind the trees, its burning eyes upon her. She saw its great tusks, the enormous head as it pushed up through the poplars, its feet raised to trample. She heard it groan and shove its great body against the trees. And she ran. And at no time, until it was too late, did she think of her mistress, who she never saw again.”

Qadir paused, as if waiting for one of us to speak. All he got was a low, noncommittal sound from Knud, barely audible above the creaking of our horses’ tack.

“The second story: This one from a caravan that has just come in from Merv. They say a day ago they saw two men, clothed all in gray, wandering in the foothills east of here. When they waved to them, the men fled. A caravan guard broke off and pursued them on horseback, and one of the men turned suddenly upon him, and pointed an object that made such a terrible sound that every camel in the caravan went wild, bolting out into the flatlands, biting at one another in their terror.”

“But no war elephant,” Knud said.

“If there was one, they did not see it. They were too busy trying to bring their beasts of burden under control. Quiet, now.”

Qadir’s horse had come to a stop. I saw that he was pointing. Then, in the distance, I saw the strangest scene I had ever laid eyes upon in my life. I barely had time to take in its details before Qadir plunged forward at a gallop.

“Stay close to me,” Knud said, drawing from under his riding cloak an instrument like one of the things I had seen on the table in that strange woman’s basement.

Ahead of us, there was a struggle I could not understand. A great basket was suspended in the air beneath the rounded body of . . . yes. Tusks—and there, its feet raised to trample. An elephant. But in the air. And now I saw—no. It was not an elephant. The tusks were painted upon something. A circular shape. Down below the basket, men

were shouting. Five or six of them. Four men on horseback circled a man clinging to a rope, several feet off the ground, and another man standing in the basket itself.

And then Knud pointed the thing in his hand into the air.

The explosion was the loudest thing I have ever heard. The flash that accompanied it opened a door in the night to day beyond, painting the sun on my eyes. My ear that had been closest to the thing in Knud's hand could hear nothing. My other ear heard things as if they were at a great distance. The whiteness of the flash remained on my eyes as if burned there.

In my confusion I fell from my horse, striking the ground and rolling, covering my face in both my hands.

The sound came a second and a third time. Then there was silence, though my damaged ears rang with their own sound.

I lowered my hands and opened my eyes. The night was a red blur, such as one sees when emerging from darkness into bright sun. Would I ever see normally again? Would I hear, as I once had?

"It is over," a voice said.

But with my damaged ears, I could not identify the voice, or even where it was. Did it belong to the blurry figure near me? And was this Qadir speaking to me? Or Knud? Or someone else? Had we won? Or lost?

"It is over."

It was Knud, still on his horse. He leaned down from his saddle and helped me to my feet. "They have scattered. But we were too late. I am sorry—I should have warned you I would use the instrument. You were not prepared. Now I remember the first time I saw and heard it used. It is a thing of terror."

Yes. A thing of terror. Through the smear of red the flash had left on my eyes, I saw the raiders fleeing on their horses. Qadir was standing over a shape lying on the earth. I pulled myself up and went to him.

Knud joined us. The shape was a man, crumpled in the dirt. He wore a fitted jacket and pants of fine woolen material, with the gentlest of repeating squares patterned through them. His shoes were of an immaculate make that ended just above the ankle painfully. The man was as blond as a mountain tribesman. His dead face staring up at the sky was scattered with freckles across nose and cheeks, the still-damp orbs of his eyes filled with stars. An arrow jutted from his chest.

"But the other one got away," I said.

Knud shook his head. The instrument—the terrible weapon—was back beneath his riding cloak.

"No. I saw the arrow the raiders fired catch him in the throat." Knud pointed into the sky, his finger tracing a circle of darkness that cut away the stars . . .

I saw a coin of nothing, blotting out the stars. And it moved, like a black moon in the sky. And I heard . . . I swear that I heard voices in the air.

"He is dying up there, too far for us to reach him. Or already dead. I hope that it goes quickly for him."

"But they were raiders themselves."

"No," Qadir said. "They were not raiders. They were simply lost men, and desperate. Why they took the girl with them, we will never know. Perhaps she even insisted on coming." He looked at me. "Perhaps, once she recovered from the shock, she used the opportunity to run away from a worse fate."

"You think she went with them willingly?"

"Yes. And I do not think she was pushed from the basket of that machine. I believe she was leaning over to gaze at the city below, and fell."

"How can you be certain of that?"

"I am certain of nothing. I have only a feeling, and the few signs the world leaves

for my interpretation.”

He was bent down over the dead man, and was methodically searching through his pockets. From one of them he drew an object of the finest paper, neatly folded, and began to spread it out to its full size.

* * *

The bey clutched the paper in his hands. In the lamplight of his audience chamber, his face glowed like that of a young boy. It was hard to remember that this was a man who had ordered his own brothers strangled, and who owned more people than I had ever befriended in my short life.

The bey pointed at the picture. I could not see it from where I knelt, but I knew it well: the two men in their strange clothes, each with a hand up in a gesture that might have been hello, or celebration, or a farewell—and behind them the great elephant-painted machine, its basket hovering in the air, secured by ropes to pegs in the ground. The writing on the paper was alien to me. I would say that the scribe who drew it and copied out the foreign alphabet—much like the Latin, but forming words none of us could read—had an immaculate hand, but Qadir had told me that morning that the image had been made by another machine, which takes up an impression from a plate and transfers it to a paper. He showed me a small model of one in his workshop, taking it down from a shelf that held dozens of models of things strange to my eye.

“Extraordinary,” the bey said. “And what do these words say?”

“I cannot read them for certain, but they seem to be in a language related to Latin. If I am correct, though, one short passage may be a very corrupted version of the phrase, *levior aere*—lighter than air.”

“But nothing is lighter than air,” the bey said, turning the paper in his hands upside down as if something might fall out of the men’s inked pockets.

“Not so, honorable one,” said Qadir. “The Chinese have long used floating lanterns to signal to their troops. I read this in the manuscript of one of the Arab travelers, who witnessed it himself. It appears that they use a small fire at the base of the lantern to heat the air—and though I am still unsure of the mechanism, this lightens it and carries the lantern up into the sky.”

“I have not heard of this.”

“So far as I know, the manuscript exists in only one copy, that which is in my library. I could send it to you.”

“No need. But the flight of a lantern—that is something I would like to see.”

“I am experimenting with the construction of a model and will come to you when it is finished.”

The bey nodded. “And this?” He clutched the paper in his hands possessively.

“The paper is yours.” I saw the flash of reluctance in Qadir’s eyes. “I only regret we could not bring you the machine itself. Perhaps, once it comes down from the sky, rumors will bring news of it to us.”

“Tales of the marvelous,” the bey said, “and news of the strange. I thank you for this gift and look forward to seeing your impossible model of how fire causes flight.”

* * *

We were silent for most of the ride back to our home. Finally, as we forded a stream, I spoke:

“He never asked about the girl.”

“No,” Qadir said.

“He cared nothing for her at all. All he was interested in was gifts and toys.”

“Yes,” Qadir said. “But you care for her. And I care for her. And Knud cares for her. And the custodian of the mosque cared for her, keeping her from the stray dogs and the rats.”

"A terrible way to die," I said. "Falling like that, from a basket suspended in the air. She must have been so afraid."

"Yes," Qadir said. "She must have been terrified. But just before that, I imagine her leaning out from the basket, and gazing down upon the city, at the lamplight glow sewn into the cloth of land, the undulation of roofs, the great shadow-dome of the mosque. I think it was wonderful. She soared up out of her own life, briefly, and into another. And that is something."

Knud scoffed. "I'll keep my feet on the ground."

"We'll see about that," Qadir said. "None of us can know what strange things wait on the road before us."

I raised my head and looked at the path our horses trod, winding into the foothills until it disappeared from sight. Continuing, unseen, out to our home. And past our home. I looked up at the mountains, their saw-edges dusted white in the distance.

Yes. She had gone with the travelers of her own accord. She had stepped into that basket in a moment of mad courage, rising up out of her own life and into another. I was certain of it.

I thought of myself at that river, years ago, washing the blood from my hands. Taking up the stolen clothes of the man I had killed. Taking up the stolen sword, hacking off my braid, watching it drift like a dark snake down the river.

It was true, what Qadir said. None of us can know what strange things wait on the road before us.