

Behzad Karim Khani
HUND WOLF SCHAKAL / DOG WOLF JACKAL

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[pp. 9–24]

BEASTS

It all looked like it was going well. It all looked like victory. Like morality, like decent work. Somewhere, hundreds of miles away, in ochre and clay-coloured barrens of sun-scorched sand and olive-green rivers, the war was drawing to a happy end, if the TV was to be believed – if you were a kid, in other words.

Saam was a kid. And he had two monsters in his life. One of them was the war. The war was the giant that lived behind the mountain. From Tehran's perspective. The flailing giant that blazed bright yellow and orange during the day and phosphorescent white after dark, hurling mortars and grenades. But that was far away. On the streets of Tehran, there was no war. There were no mortars, no tanks, no grenades. As if aggrieved by this fact, the giant would sometimes clamber over the mountain and come down to punish the city-dwellers. That was the part that Saam was aware of, albeit without spotting the parallels with that adventure film set in the desert.

There were some that believed they could sense the giant's coming. Could sense when the bombers, one of which Saam thought Saddam himself must be in, were about to breach the city's airspace. Then the sirens would wail and the city would fall into a brief frenzy, followed by a sort of stupor.

An entire city, almost ten million, taking precautions, doing things they wouldn't be able to do without light, then darkness and silence. The giant breathing over them. Even the traffic, which had just as much of an appetite for victims as the bombs, held its breath.

Word came the next day that the bombs had hit a different part of the city that might as well have been a different country, a different continent, and life went on. After all, the most powerful colossus of all was Tehran itself.

The second monster in Saam's life was Evin Prison. The ogre that had tortured his mother, killed her, then disposed of her.

The prison that people said had had underground connections to Washington and Tel Aviv under the Shah. And which they said lorries departed from at night, laden with torn-out fingernails destined for incineration in crematoriums overseas.

Evin was more tangible. Evin was the monster that slept under his mattress. The monster that didn't need a bed. That could make do with a mattress, a blanket, a cushion, a sheet, a quilt or the carpet. Where it lay awake, breathing with Saam. In the same rhythm at first, then faster, flatter and more hectic until it tore first Saam and then everyone else in the room from their slumber. At last, it would stand up, open the door and leave, go for a stroll, staying out for a few hours at a time, sometimes even until the next night, or the night after that. Like a stray cat feeding on panic.

When they also came for his father, Jamshid, Saam was playing on the roof. In the spot where they would sleep in summer, under an orange and white plastic tarp that was strung up like an awning and weighed down with heavy stones, he had set up a little oasis. Pictures of gliders and sports cars that he had cut out of magazines stuck on the wall, bleached. Colourful coleus ran riot up here well into the autumn, in a deep, sun-drenched violet. Ferns thrived and there was lavender too, even the geraniums his mother had planted, despite him over-watering them. A Winston ashtray he filled with water provided a watering hole for the local lizards. He kept grasshoppers, crickets and beetles in glass jars, poking holes in the lids. Sometimes, he would catch wasps, tie bits of string round their waists and then attach them to the geraniums like balloons.

When they took flight, it looked as if they were trying to rip out the plants. He did the maths and decided that if he had enough wasps, they could carry him away and soar over the neighbourhood with him like the Little Prince. The book his mother had read to him and which he kept safe up here between the dinosaur books that he preferred.

One of the grasshoppers had given up the ghost. Saam lay on his back on the floor, thrust the lifeless body into the air and made it fly loop-the-loops like a toy plane. The grasshopper was just making its descent when there was a knock at the door downstairs. His father was in the courtyard and Saam was able to spy four men standing around him and talking. Then, one of them took Jamshid's crutches and they led him away.

Saam panicked, unsure whether he should run after them or hide. He chose to hide. He snuck over to the cupboard where his grandmother, who they had called Bibi Joon for so long it had become her name, had packed away their winter things in piles, then opened it and crawled inside. The monster was already there. Waiting. Saam sat down next to him, breathing in time. And then, something happened. Buzzing through the gap in the doors came first a handful, then dozens and finally thousands of bees. Flies, too, and grasshoppers and beetles, swaddling him like a living, humming coat, protecting him like bees protecting their queen. Millions of hearts beating in the cupboard with Saam and the monster and when Bibi Joon, holding Saam's little brother Nima by the hand, entered the courtyard and opened the front door, they disappeared, and so did the monster. Forever.

ACROPOLIS

Jamshid knew the day would come. The day when they would knock at his door. What surprised him was that his arrest was almost civil. No handcuffs, no violence, no obscenities. They even addressed him as ‘sir’. He put it down to his crutches.

The journey in the Jeep they had put him in was long but not very far. From binmen to secret agents, they were all equally irrelevant in the eyes of the true master of the city – the traffic.

They pulled up in front of an extension adjoining a mosque in the west of the city. The house of god was devoid of all majesty, the extension even more so. One of the four men stayed in the car. The other three took him inside. Down a corridor with no light, at the end of which was the room they were bringing him to.

One of the men knocked and shouted, ‘Sarhang! We’ve got him!’ The Sarhang must have been stood just behind the door because it opened immediately.

Farmers, thought Jamshid. Absolutely zero aptitude for power or even the tiniest flair for the dramatic. He entered. The room had a high ceiling. Perhaps fifteen, sixteen feet. The walls were bare, save for the portrait of Khomeini in a plastic gold and blue frame. There was a small window looking onto the side street, through which the mosque cast its green neon light. The chimney from the small metal stove led out onto the same side. The room reeked of petrol. There was a table in the middle. No chairs. Not even for the Sarhang. Jamshid knew the man. He wasn’t sure where he knew him from, or when, but he knew him.

The Sarhang greeted him and Jamshid greeted him back.

‘Been up on the roof recently? During the bombings?’

‘Once or twice, yes.’

The Sarhang sighed melodramatically.

‘So that’s what we have in the way of pleasure these days. Climbing onto the roof at night and looking on as Saddam wipes us out. *New Year’s Eve*,’ he added in English, with a thick accent, and laughed. ‘And now we’re trying to shoot the rockets

down with anti-aircraft guns.’ He let the sentence sink in. ‘Anti-aircraft guns that we can’t even hit their aircraft with. Did you know that?’

Jamshid nodded. Of course he knew. It was the talk of the town. It was precisely why families were standing on their roofs and looking up at the lights.

‘Have you ever wondered what actually became of those tanks of yours?’ The tanks! Anyone who knew about the tanks must also know which way Jamshid leans.

‘My tanks? What tanks?’

‘You are Mr Ariapoor, are you not? Jamshid Agha!’

‘Yes.’

‘Then you know exactly what tanks I mean. The tanks you stole from the Shah’s soldiers. Jamshid, please, you were our hero.’ Then the Sarhang uttered those two words that left no more room for ambiguity, for pretence.

‘El Comandante!’

And then it dawned on him. Seven or eight years ago, the Sarhang had still been under Jamshid’s command, hunched over the tarmac, digging holes for the checkpoints with a shovel and pickaxe until his hands erupted in coin-sized blisters which he bandaged up before going back to digging with a bloody, festering dressing. Crying from pain and emotion. All entirely unnecessary as Jamshid had simply forgotten to send someone to relieve him. Back then, Jamshid had given the more menial jobs to the religious boys from the neighbourhood.

Jamshid was a Marxist. A Leninist. And he was part of a guerrilla unit that was nearly one-hundred strong in his neighbourhood, setting up checkpoints and occupying important transport routes. Jamshid had served in one of the tank regiments. He knew the soldiers who were now deserting, one barracks after the next, taking not just their weapons with them, but also the keys to the barracks, to the weapons and ammunition depots. Just two months before the end of the Revolution, a convoy of six military Jeeps and two Chieftains with three dozen red flag-waving fighters pulled up to Jamshid’s checkpoint like a military parade. In the hatch of the tank, their G3’s on their backs, their berets askew, their jet black locks

in the wind, a smile on their full lips and their fingers forming the V for Victory sat Jamshid and his childhood friend Reza. And from that moment on, Jamshid became known to the locals as ‘El Comandante’ – after Che.

‘You’re...’

‘Ali. Muhammad Raleigh they used to call me. Because I would ride my brother’s little bike everywhere. Remember? Most people thought I was a bit thick. Maybe they had a point. How would I know?’ He smiled a loyal smile.

‘Of course. You ... you disappeared, sir– Ali.’

‘Yes, went to the front. Operation Daybreak, One and Two. Piece of shrapnel hit me in the shoulder during my second deployment, so I had to leave our brothers high and dry for the third offensive, sadly. God took my brother, the one whose bike I used to ride, martyred him. He was less kind to me. I got to serve again, Daybreak Four and Five.’

‘May his soul rest in peace.’

The Sarhang’s expression froze. At the same time, something seemed to be bothering him.

‘About your tanks. Did you ever wonder where they wound up?’

‘Honestly ... no.’

‘I did. A lot, in fact. Our troops got ambushed in their own backyard just under a week ago. Some of the soldiers have deserted. All sorts of military gear’s been looted. Tanks included. Obviously, I don’t know if they were yours but it got me thinking about them again. The irony, you know?’

Jamshid nodded. He knew.

‘The Monafeghin might be using their tanks to fight against us at this very moment. Funny, isn’t it? A lone partisan like you can capture them from the hands of one of the most powerful armies, while we, the country’s official armed forces, can’t even get our tanks to the front through our own territory.’

Jamshid nodded. That was a good way of summing it up. There was a reason you lads were never allowed to do anything more than dig holes and fill sand bags,

he thought before replying, 'I wasn't alone. We had a lot of luck during that operation as well.'

The Sarhang looked at Jamshid and then, quite out of the blue, asked him what had happened to his moustache. Like any other Iranian communist, Jamshid had always had a thick walrus moustache. Blossoming into mutton chops during the hippie years. Cut shorter during military service. Combined with three-day stubble during the months of Revolution. Nestled in an otherwise flawlessly shaved face under the reign of the bushy beards – to ensure there would be no misunderstandings – and a little longer, out of defiance. Long enough to touch his bottom lip, something the Islamic purity code prohibited. And now, with his thoughts focused on fleeing to Europe, trimmed as much as his honour would allow. Jamshid was a respectable man. His gait was that of a man who had turned pride into dignity. A gait that told people he hadn't changed since the attack and that gave him a certain something, even before the G3 and the tanks, something that made the local women either lower their gaze or open their chadors a fraction. He came from a part of the city where men swore by their walrus moustaches. And now here he was, being questioned about his facial hair. By Muhammad Raleigh who couldn't even stand to attention.

Jamshid looked at the Sarhang through dark eyes.

'Trimmed it,' he replied. 'I wear my parting differently now as well. But you didn't bring me here to talk haircuts.'

'No, we didn't. Not to talk about tanks either,' he answered quickly, as if he wanted to apologise.

'You know, in these chaotic times, tanks aren't the only things winding up in places they don't belong.'

He opened the drawer, took out a passport and pushed it towards Jamshid.

'Is this your passport?'

It was his passport. His photo. His false name. Homayoon Kashani. The passport he had taken out a mortgage on the house for and which should have been issued over three weeks ago.

He shook his head.

‘It says Homayoon Kashani. I’m Jamshid Ariapoor ... you know my name.’

‘The photo bears quite a resemblance to you.’

Jamshid took another look.

‘I guess. I’m better looking.’

Suddenly, the Sarhang burst out laughing. His wonderfully naïve Muhammad Raleigh laugh took the sting out of everything in the room that sort to emphasise power, military rank and brutality.

‘Alright. I don’t want to waste your time. This passport was found with thirty other forgeries during a raid. I saw the photo and pocketed it.’

‘Good for Homayoon,’ said Jamshid.

‘Good for Homayoon.’ The Sarhang pushed the passport over to Jamshid.

‘I had you brought here because I thought you might know Homayoon.’

‘I don’t.’ Jamshid pushed the passport away from him again but the Sarhang didn’t touch it.

‘Take it anyway,’ he said.

Jamshid didn’t understand.

‘Maybe you’ll run into him some day.’

Jamshid picked up the document from the table, the document that would change everything. It was perfect. Just as promised. The colour, the material, it was all spot on.

‘You want me to take it?’

The Sarhang nodded.

Jamshid looked at him sceptically and slid the passport into his left jacket pocket very slowly and pointedly.

'I've got one more favour to ask. Tell Homayoon, I know he wants to skip town and that's great. His place isn't here anymore. Tell him, this is the land of the insane now, of the bare-footed. The land of the jinxed who live behind the mountain. Tell him, this is the land of the illiterate now, types who don't understand his books. Never did.' His eyes lit up for a brief moment before he looked away.

Jamshid wanted to protest. But the Sarhang waved a hand at him.

'Alright, alright. I know what Homayoon thinks about us. Tell him that. Tell him he should go to Europe. Champs-Élysées. Buckingham Palace.' He said the names of these places as if they didn't exist. As if he were talking about Atlantis or a planet from a sci-fi film.

'Tell him, he should find a café in Rome, by the Acropolis, where he can sit with his intellectual friends and think happy thoughts.'

Jamshid nodded.

'Is the Acropolis in Rome?' asked the Sarhang.

'In Athens,' replied Jamshid and the Sarhang laughed.

'Athens. Tell him, I hope he has a good time in Athens. And tell him he should talk. A lot. Only, if his friends ever call us thugs and barbarians, he'd do well to think back to this moment. And to tell his friends that he met people here who do have honour. Who are trying to keep their dignity. To protect their mothers from rockets with whatever they have.'

'I'll pass on the message.'

'You know ...' He took a deep breath, spoke a little louder, more formally, which only made him sound less confident. 'Back then, you took one path and we took another. You were the son of the director and now you're here. I was the son of the salt vendor and now I'm here. We ended up on this side of the table and you ended up on the other. Did you ever see that coming?'

Jamshid came from a family of royals, then high nobility, later on feudal lords, later still nothing but simple landowners and then, finally, civil servants. In other

words, a family that had been in constant decline for almost three-hundred years but which exuded not just history but birth-right.

They looked each other in the eyes as Jamshid nodded and the Sarhang stood still. Jamshid's heart was pounding beneath his passport. The Sarhang's beneath his pocket Quran and the passport photo of his brother which he keeps in his vest pocket.

'When you see Homayoon, give him my regards. Tell him, we won't forget his mother's kind nature. God be with you.'

'God be with you, Sarhang,' replied Jamshid. Unsure whether he should make straight for the door or reach out his hand to the Sarhang. The Sarhang straightened himself and his faded uniform and saluted his old commander. Jamshid saluted back. Once he was outside, he realised that saying goodbye to his city was going to be different than expected.

PANOPTICON

After he was banned from leaving the country and from his profession, after his wife was executed, after the attempt on his life, after his comrades disappeared and his friends left the country without saying goodbye, after the mass arrests, the raids on people's homes and the Party warnings, after tracking down smugglers and counterfeiters, nothing could have been more improbable than getting picked up, only to be handed his counterfeit passport. Yet that was exactly what had happened.

He pressed his hand to his jacket pocket. The passport was there. He had it. A dopey lad was sat in front of the phone booths on the other side of the street, changing notes for coins and keeping one toman from each transaction for himself. Jamshid gave him a ten and got nine coins back. He called the only neighbours who had a phone and got through to the lady of the house who sent her son over to his parents to give them the all-clear. Then he decided to walk a few blocks and set off at a hobble.

The small streams running along the streets came from the Alborz mountains to the north of Tehran. Meltwater, clear, cold and full of power, trickled down from the rich north to the south below, where it fizzled out. Fattened up with filth for mile after mile, the streams eventually emptied their guts at the feet of the residents down in Javadiyeh, Amiriyeh, Simetri and Gomrok, where they languished, as if to make a point.

By the side of the road was a woman who kept shouting that she wasn't afraid. Of what, she kept to herself. A few streets over, a toothless pensioner had set up a stall where he sold books by the kilo. Jamshid came to a stop, propping himself up on his crutches, and lit a cigarette. A kilo cost one of two prices. You could pick the books out yourself or, for a lower price, you could let the stall owner blindly grab a few titles for you. Like buying fruit. Like apples or oranges. Jamshid had spent the past few nights incinerating large chunks of his book collection and he would be leaving Iran in a matter of weeks, maybe even days. And yet he found himself

searching for his wallet anyway. Nothing summed up the state of his country better than this image, he thought. He counted out his money, walked up to the stall and bought two kilos of books. 'I'll take two,' he said. The man placed a small stack on the scales. Two kilos and three-hundred grams. He waved off the extras and called it an even two.

He was still a ways away from home but Jamshid knew that soon enough he wouldn't be seeing these streets ever again and decided to say his goodbyes on foot. Everything he would do in the coming weeks, it would likely be for the last, second-to-last, third-to-last time. He would never see the dopey lad again, or the woman shouting at her fear. He would never buy two kilos of books again. Wonder what sort of headcases they've got on the Champs-Élysées?

It was late by the time he reached Javadiyeh. In the gutter at his feet, the sludge was drying in the slant of the evening sun, forming a crust on the cigarette butts, plastic slip-ons, food scraps, shopping bags and a deflated football that a child a few miles upstream must have cried after. The mouths of the passers-by had fewer and fewer teeth. There were more children out in the streets than he could count, even though it was steadily getting later. Hanging from lobes their mothers had pierced with simple sewing needles, the girls wore wire or bits of string in place of earrings. The chador were getting stricter, and the faces too. The people here stressed a different stress, sweated a different sweat. He was in the south now. And drained.

He hailed a taxi, explained to the driver that he didn't have any money on him and would have to grab some from home, then climbed in.

He passed by the Cinema Casablanca where he worked nights as a projectionist now that he wasn't allowed to teach at the school anymore. Sitting in the hot projector room, changing over the reels and reading the Russian classics or García Márquez. He passed by the café where he would do calligraphy during the day, selling it for a pittance to people from the neighbourhood who admired him for what he had once been or pitied him for what was left of it.

Past the billboards and street signs his mother would point to on their walks with her henna-painted hands, as her face plucked up the courage to decipher the writing, her lips trembling with concentration. She read the way others solved crosswords. She defeated the words by reading them. 'Meh-ran T-ai-lors' didn't communicate anything, 'Ba-har B-ri-dal St-ore' nothing, 'Gom-rok Squ-are' nothing. Revolution nothing, dictatorship nothing, Darwin nothing, black holes nothing, Death to the Shah! nothing, communism nothing. Sometimes, he thought it was a shame her heaven didn't exist. She would have fit right in.

He passed by men who were called Rhino Ali, Double-Dick Mahmood, Seven-Fingered Jaafar or Mohsen the Animal. The slaughterhouse, too. Just as north and south separated rich from poor, the slaughterhouse separated poverty from misery. North of the slaughterhouse, they mixed their concrete the way they cut heroin. Down south, the houses were made of mud. Down south, people didn't even bother cutting it anymore. Up north, the dry days were perhaps unpleasant on the nose; down south nothing was more terrifying than two days of rain. From the third day, the downpour became fate, like an unpaid heroin dealer, which there were more than plenty of both north and south of the slaughterhouse.

As Jamshid climbed out of the car at the end of the alley, he could smell the incense his father lit in the evenings. In the kitchen, the bright halogen light was shining behind the silhouette of his mother. Nima and Saam were stood in front of the iron door to their house with a hose, washing the muck from the street into the gutter. Behind them the bullet holes from the shooting which their grandfather had plastered over the very next day. Eight shots they had fired at Jamshid, only hitting him in the leg.

There were prosthetics but for him a prosthetic was like a wig. A charade. Jamshid didn't wear one. He wouldn't let his mother shorten his trousers on the side that was now missing a leg either. He folded them and held the leg in place with a safety pin, as if he was expecting his missing leg to grow back at some point. He had

bought three pairs of shoes since the attempt on his life. He wore the right ones and put the left ones away for safe keeping.

It was good that they were leaving, he thought. The passport would get them to Istanbul. There, he would dial a number and someone would take care of them. Someone who would know, perhaps already knew, what their next stop was. Which route they would have to take, which country would accept them. Sweden, the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia or Germany. He didn't have a preference, personally. He wasn't running towards anything, he was running away.

[pp. 224–231]

VITAMIN C

The countertop was made of granite and CAN was playing as Nima walked in.

Hey you!

You're losing ...

You're losing ...

You're losing your vitamin C!

The previous tenant, who wanted to run a club here, had never come by to pick up the sound system after going bankrupt because it turns out every little doesn't help. Dave cut hair here, on a black terrazzo floor that would never be danced on again. On a terrazzo floor to a phenomenal backing track.

Perched in a Victorian cage was a canary bird. The light fell through the golden bars of the cage onto the equally golden pineapple lamp that was sat on the counter. In the middle of the room was a golden dance pole – another relic from its previous life. There was cherry wood panelling on the ceiling and in the corners where it joined the wall because bass doesn't do ninety-degree angles. There was just a single barber chair.

Dave was waving Mel off. Mel was one of the 'it' girls which this city birthed and buried on a weekly basis. She and Nima had been together for a while, until one day they weren't. He would hold the door open for her, carry her bag, and in the mornings he would buy her the priciest coffee in Europe because the till at the café he lived above, overwhelmed with her special requests, always spat out the same exorbitantly high total. Three or four months this went on. And there was something to her, something he couldn't put his finger on but which allowed him to sniff past

the anorexically sour breath that came out of her until the wee hours when she would give in to her shrinking physiology and nibble on something.

But then, seemingly overnight, they stopped calling each other and he would have needed something to talk about, an ‘Oh, by the way ...’ if he were going to dial her number. Later, he would tell himself she should take it as a compliment. It was something of a get-out.

She decided to give him a hug, something between being polite, steering clear and lying. It was a gift. It didn’t cost anything. Then she tottered outside. Through the glass door, she gestured at Nima ‘*Call me*’ and Nima did the same back. She climbed into a coupé that couldn’t possibly have been hers and started it up accordingly.

‘She filled out,’ Nima remarked.

‘She sleeps nights now.’

Dave embraced him, let go, held his face in his hands and smiled at him, probably the same way he smiled at little kids.

‘How you doing, baby? You look good.’

‘How are you doing?’

‘Life’s good, baby.’ Dave gave a long nod – he was someone who took time with his nods – as he continued to stare into Nima’s eyes. ‘Life’s good,’ he repeated, before pointing at the sound system. ‘Wanna listen to something else? Bit of gangsta rap?’ he asked. With his silver-black hair, he reminded Nima of the man from the *Davidoff* advert or, more accurately, an average of all the *Davidoff* men.

‘Nah. Leave it. It’s chill.’ Nima ignored the dig and sat down in the barber chair, in Mel’s second-hand warmth.

‘So? Undercut up to here?’ He ran his index fingers along Nima’s temples and smiled his *Davidoff* smile again.

Nima pulled his head free of Dave’s touch. From his trouser pocket, he pulled out a photo he had torn out of a fashion magazine and poked it out from under the cape. It was a photo of a man in his early twenties who looked as lifeless as he did

expressionless, and who had probably pored over the magazine for hours after it came out, wondering how he, a man with slouched shoulders and clumsily plucked eyebrows, had made it into a glossy mag and whether maybe, actually, everything he thought he knew about beauty was wrong.

Dave looked at the picture. He didn't know where to start.

'Nima, baby. This guy's white. You two ain't exactly alike.'

'I'm white.' Now it was Nima's turn to provoke.

Dave, who could tell what Nima was getting at, laughed. 'Know what I love most about you?'

He didn't. All Nima knew was that now it was going to take longer.

'You're an enigma. Like how you'll just hang around on a bridge blowing bubbles and trying to hit the cars below like a little kid.' Dave was one of those types who could say a thing like that in a way that was flattering.

'What you getting at? Man thinks I'm naïve, yeah?'

'No, baby. Not naïve. Zen. You're zen. I still ain't figured out how, but you are, you're zen.'

'Like you, innit? With your yoga and all that kombucha-moonwater shit? That kind of zen?'

Dave placed both hands on Nima's shoulders and looked him in the eyes in the mirror. He wasn't joshing around anymore.

'No. Not kombucha-moonwater zen. More like, I-ain't-exactly-from-these-ends zen. You do what you do, only somehow what you do ain't got anything to do with you. You just do it. Like this haircut. You're asking for it, but you don't want it!'

'I do.'

'You don't.'

'Swear down.'

'Swear up, swear down. No, baby. You don't want the haircut. You don't really want anything at all. You're just wondering if getting the haircut would actually

do anything, if it would make a difference somehow or if this really is it.’ Dave gestured at the room but meant the universe. ‘You don’t actually want things to be different. You just wanna know, what if? Deep down, that’s your whole mindset, your mantra. What if?’

Nima felt they should get back to talking about hair. ‘Listen, I don’t wanna look like this G, you feel me? I just want his haircut. You’re here telling me it’s for white people, I’m telling you I am white. I’m Persian. Aryan. Bruv, my surname’s Ariapoor. I ain’t gotta explain it to you.’

‘Easy, white boy! Easy. I know. You, me, us, we’re all white. Aryan. Our great-great-grand-whatevers invented whiteness. Ain’t nobody trying to take that away from you. Thing is, though, we might have invented it, but we were never that good at it. I mean, look at this guy. He’s Danish, Swedish, English, something like that. White-white.’

And on it dragged. Nima eventually gave in to a ‘Trust me!’, even if he did respond with a ‘Trust that I do not trust you’. And while Dave cut his hair, he scanned the floor for Mel’s hair but couldn’t find any and it occurred to him that he had never seen any hair on the floor here. Not even the hair Dave was cutting off him right now seemed to find its way down there.

There was some on the cape, on his face and on the back of his neck. But not on the floor. Not a single strand.

‘How come there’s never no hair on the floor here?’

‘There is.’

It didn’t take Dave long. After half an hour, Nima looked roughly as if he had shaved or combed his hair.

‘I-ain’t-exactly-from-these-ends zen, yeah?’ he asked as he stood up. Tracing a semi-circle with his foot, he again went looking for hair on the floor but, again, found none and looked over at Dave questioningly.

Dave blew him an invisible bubble, straightened his shirt, brushed a few hairs from his shoulder and said, 'There's some hair look.' Then, he took out an envelope from the drawer under the mirror and gave it to Nima. 'Six. Right?'

'Only if you got it.'

'Count it again.'

'Maybe I do trust you after all,' replied Nima, opening the envelope, taking out a fifty, placing it on the counter beneath the pineapple and pocketing the envelope.

'Catch you later?'

'For sure.'

TIME

Saam had frequently borrowed books from Alf. Now, he was carrying the television, which he had saved up a year's kitchen salary for, over to Alf and taking some of Alf's book collection back to his cell. He was using every free minute he had to read. Alf was a fan of crime fiction. He enjoyed the old stories of Sam Spade, Philip Marlowe, Mike Hammer. The ones with savage cops that were barely on the level and detectives who were 'keeping the streets clean'. Pigs who called themselves 'pigs' and their badges a 'piece of shrapnel', and who answered questions like 'Killed anyone today, captain?' with 'Not yet' – but the day was still young, of course. Who could tell instinctively when 'something don't smell right' and who had no need for all that red tape like arrest warrants or search warrants if someone had crook 'written all over them'.

They quoted the characters from these paperbacks and bit by bit they adopted the language of the hardboiled heroes, too, calling each another *Captain*, talking in gravelly, Jack Daniel's voices and throwing around phrases from their books and magazines as soon as they saw each other. The day Jamal turned up in the dining room was no different.

Saam found Alf in line and opened immediately with a 'Good day, Captain.'

'If you say so,' Alf shot back with a smoker's voice. And it was true, there was nothing good about this day.

There were potatoes, beans and an I-can't-believe-it's-meat sauce that neither Saam nor Alf touched. There was rarely anything for him in the dining room apart from sides or pre-packaged stuff. He bought cheese, fruits and fresh vegetables from the canteen, sometimes tinned tuna. Apart from that, he got packages sent to him with tea, protein powders, brown sugar, vitamin tablets and mineral concentrates. Alf's version of eating healthy had something esoteric to it, but also neurotic. He filtered his water with activated charcoal and crystals, drank ginseng and matcha tea,

avoided sugar and white bread. He didn't eat meat, eggs or milk and only used butter very occasionally. Saam had borrowed a few tricks from him.

They sat down at the Russian table, like always, their backs to the wall and their eyes on the other diners, as three figures broke away from the line for the serving hatch and headed in their direction. Two of them Saam recognised immediately. A couple of Lebanese hardmen that it was best not to have any grief with. One of them had even attacked a guard once. As they got closer, he recognised the third one, too. It was Jamal.

Saam hadn't seen him since the punch-up. He looked dreadful. Even at this distance. There was no way he could look at himself in a mirror and not want revenge.

Even though Saam and Alf ate at the Russian table, they couldn't expect any solidarity from the Slavs. No-one was going to get into a war with the Arabs on Saam's account.

The three came to a stop by their table. The one on the left had a mighty tank tattooed on his neck, underneath which his carotid was pulsating; the one on the right was a beast, almost six-and-a-half feet tall, with a huge beard. Jamal took a step forward and smiled. 'Remember me?'

His only way out was through. Saam stood up, put on his most couldn't-care-less face, dulled his eyes like Scarface in the movies and said, 'Habibi! You look like shit.' He grinned.

Playing it close the chest, Jamal just took a step closer so that they were stood brow to brow.

'Where's your Marwan now?'

Saam kept his cool. 'I don't need no Marwan for you. Didn't need him then either.' He knew there wouldn't be any trouble here in the dining hall. Too many guards. Plus, they'd clear the hall, lunch would be cancelled and the wrath of the entire prison would be unleashed on one man. If you wanted to do someone in, you had to catch him in a hallway or in his cell – and there were cameras in the hallways.

Jamal knew that and wasn't going to be provoked. 'Marwan works for me now. Lot of changes on the outside.' He tried to force his mouth into a grin but the rest of his face wouldn't co-operate. His teeth were grinding against one another, his jaw bone was pushing against his cheeks from the inside, as if it wanted to come out and take care of the problem itself, and there was rage burning in his eyes.

Saam acted unimpressed. 'Is it? And what now?'

'Now, there's gonna be a few changes round here,' he hissed.

Then they split. Alf, who always got at least a little chuckle out of all the street talk, cut a potato in two and asked, 'You know that street rat, Captain?'

'I know him. Whether or not I like him's another matter.'

'Small-timer, I reckon. Shit for brains, eh? Yeah, know the type all too well.'

'Someone's gotta take out the trash round here,' said Saam.

'From your lips to God's ears.'

'If only he had ears.'