

Baba

By

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ACT I

I: Arrival

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

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10:23am.

The 747 shudders as they begin their descent into Bole International Airport. The remnants of the granola bar Andrea had earlier in the flight wanting to make its second appearance, crawling up her esophagus in all its acidic glory. The pilot is some stuck-up Parisian who is an expert at understatement.

“Light turbulence”, he said.

The seat belt sign above her lights up.

He was a little slow too.

You would think she would be used to this, being a journalist and all. Traveling across the mountains of Afghanistan by jeep in 2010 for that fluff piece on “Life in The Mountains for Refugees,” while front page material was literally blowing up the streets in Kabul.

Then there was the story that got her that Pulitzer. “Fighting Shadows,” she called it. The article was on the state of the War on Terror in the Middle East and was filled with the right amount of action and captivating words to lure readers in.

For Andrea, the words were empty noise. The events that took place over there, no words could truly express.

Not to her.

She remembers vividly the day she got back to the New York Times with the prize in hand. Her editor-in-chief, Chris Langstrum, strolled in, looked it over, then turned to her with his classic, arrogant grin.

“You’ve done us proud, Andrea!” he said, “Your piece will bring readers in by the boat load!”

She wanted so badly to take the prize and slug across the jaw with it, thinking it would give some relief from the pain in her soul.

No more adventures, no more Pulitzers, she promised herself.

Never again.

Six years she spent reporting on domestic news, from the increase in police-related shootings and the troubling housing market, only to find herself called out of “retirement” to get on a plane to Ethiopia.

“All you have to do,” Chris pleaded with her, “is interview some supposed Ethiopian drug lord and write a piece on him, alright”

“Oh, sure,” Andrea sarcastically replied, “interviewing an Ethiopian criminal doesn’t sound life-threatening in the least! Let me just pack my ‘kill me’ shirt I got last week!”

She continued to pace in Chris’ office as she continued.

“Why can’t you send Franklin or Bill, I’m sure they’d jump at the opportunity!”

“They aren’t as experienced as you are.” Chris responded, “Plus, this guy asked for you by name.”

She stopped dead in her tracks.

“He what!?” she exclaimed.

“See for yourself.”

He retrieved a letter from his desk and offered it to her. She hesitated, then, with a sigh of frustration, strolled over and took the letter from him. She looked over it, her eyes acting like a fine-toothed comb as she read every word.

“Some guy just dropped this off at the front desk downstairs,” Chris said.

Her eyes came to the end of the letter. She stared at it for what seemed an eternity before sitting down in one of the plush chairs in front of Chris’ desk. She sat the letter in her lap as she rubbed her head. After a brief moment, she looked up and sighed.

“When do I leave?”

Seventeen hours later, the thought of backing out now has only crossed her mind roughly fourteen or so times. Every inch of her being was telling her this was a bad idea.

Come on, Andrea! It’s just an interview. It’s not like you haven’t done a billion or so before!

She rubs her head.

Yeah, totally have interviewed a power-hungry drug lord before. Piece of cake!

Andrea rolled her eyes.

She glances over to the seat next to her. Its occupant, a Nigerian business man dressed in a sleek black suit and deep red tie, remains composed as his body jolts up and down. His eyes are closed, a droplet of sweat running down his shiny bald head.

Turbulence gets to even the best of us, I guess.

He checks his watch. Nodding to himself, he reaches into his suit pocket, pulls out a bottle of Dramamine. He pops one into his mouth, followed quickly by a swig of water from the bottle tucked in the back of the seat in front of him.

Smart move.

He glances at Andrea and offers the Dramamine to her. She hesitates.

Nah, I really don't-

The familiar taste of acid touches her tongue.

“Sure, why not!” she hastily replies.

She nods her head and offers her hand. He pours one of the tablets in it. She quickly chucks it in her mouth, following it up with a sip from her own water bottle.

The plane’s landing gear hits the tarmac, sending everyone jolting forward and nearly causing Andrea to spew water from her mouth. She hastily swallows the Dramamine and sits back in her seat.

Always love a good plane landing, she says to herself.

Andrea opens the window shade next to her to look outside, squinting for a moment as sunlight flooded in. As her vision returns, she watches a long line of planes waiting for their turn to ascend into the clear, blue sky above. She watches as airport maintenance crews, like ants, rush around the tarmac as blistering heat rises off the ground. The 747 begins taxiing to the main hub, slowly crossing over the open field of concrete. Andrea lets out a sigh of relief and closes the window.

Ten minutes later, she is stalled by the long line for customs. While waiting, she starts scanning the hundreds of faces around her. A young Algerian, a student judging by the University of Algiers logo on his backpack, jamming to the music playing in his large headphones. An Arab couple, husband nervously wrapping his arm around his black-veiled wife as they wait for their turn. Last, but not least, the Nigerian business man, staring at his watch as his left foot impatiently taps the floor repeatedly.

“Next!”

Andrea snaps out of her investigative state and speedily walks to the customs desk, frantically searching for her passport in her satchel. She looks up to be greeted by the smiling face of the Ethiopian customs officer.

“Passport?” he asks in very clear English.

She returns the smile

“Here you are,” she replies, handing him the passport.

The officer takes it and looks it over.

“And what brings you to our beloved Ethiopia, Mrs. Clark? Business or pleasure?”

Andrea’s eye twitches as she winces suddenly.

Clark.

“Business,” she states, glancing at the tan-line around her left middle finger where a ring once rested.

“Excellent,” the officer says, nodding in affirmation as he places it on the security scanner and waits for confirmation. Both Andrea and the officer exchange glances and smiles as the next few seconds turn into what feels like an eternity.

The light on the scanner lights up green and the officer takes the passport, stamps it, and gives it back to her.

“Enjoy your stay.”

“Thank you.”

Andrea quickly stuffs the passport into her satchel and makes her way through the gate. An escalator takes her down to the main concourse.

The aroma of coffee hits her first, followed by the sound of hundreds of voices speaking at once, each in different tongues. People from various nations stroll about the concourse,

greeting one another and even sitting at one of the many tables that pepper the terminal to enjoy a cup of freshly brewed coffee or tea. Andrea has never seen so much hospitality in one place in all her travels.

As she reaches baggage claim, a vibration from her satchel draws her attention. She reaches in and pulls out her smart phone, the name Chris appearing on the screen with a picture of a man burning red with anger. Andrea shakes her head and slides her thumb across the screen, putting the phone to her ear.

“Yes, dearie,” she says with a hint of sass.

“What the heck took you so long!” the man on the other end exclaims.

“Oh, sorry, did I forget to call you when I landed? My bad.”

“Daing it, Andrea, I don’t need any of your crap right now!”

“Fine, get a hold of yourself, Chief.”

“Alright, alright, I’m sorry. It’s just the higher ups won’t get off my back about this story. They want you to get on it as soon as possible before Time or CNN gets a hold of it.”

Andrea arrives at baggage claim and waits with the hundred other travelers for the luggage to arrive.

“Relax, Chris,” she states, “I just got held up in Paris, that’s all. Besides, I’m thinking this guy doesn’t want to come out of the shadows just yet. Thus the reason for all the cloak and dagger shenanigans.”

“Fine, just call me when you get there, if not before, so we know you’re alright.”

Luggage begins to barrel down the ramp and onto the rotating platform. She reaches out and grabs a large, dark brown suitcase and man-handles it until it is sitting upright with its

wheels on the floor. She begins walking toward the far end of the room and into the greeting and pickup area.

“Aw, are you worried about little ole me?”

“Andrea, I swear... do you have any idea who you’re dealing with?”

“I’ve seen worse,” she remarks.

“No, no you haven’t! Iraq was a walk in the park in comparison to this guy. He’s one of the most wanted men in the world! Human trafficking, sex trafficking, drug trafficking, the whole nine yards! He’s a different kind of dangerous, Andrea.”

“Nah, he’s just some dirt bag who wants attention.”

“Whatever, just be very careful. We don’t know what to expect.”

“I will,” she pauses, “Do I get an over the phone kiss or what?”

The call disconnects. She smirks as she continues on to pick up.

There, several individuals are lined up near the exit, each holding pieces of paper with names written in large letters. She scans each of the names until she finds one she recognizes.

Leavensly.

She turns her attention to the man holding the paper, a tall Ethiopian with a shaved head and goatee, dressed in a suit and tie, his deep brown eyes surveying the crowd. Andrea walks over to him. Their eyes meet and a bright smile appears on the man’s face.

“Ms. Leavensly?” he inquires in a soft Nigerian accent.

“Yes?”

“Bongani Akachi, I’m an associate of Baba.”

The two shake hands.

“Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Akachi.”

“The pleasure is all mine, Ms. Leavensly.”

The two remain locked eye to eye and hand in hand, making Andrea slightly uncomfortable. Sure, she had read up on Ethiopian etiquette. It was the execution of it that always clashed with her New Jersey roots. Still, she tries her best, under the circumstances.

“I trust your trip was without trouble?” he asks.

“Only a slight delay in Paris, but nothing too serious.”

“Excellent.”

Bongani releases his hand from Andrea’s.

“May I take your bag for you?”

“Of course,” she replies, handing the suitcase to him.

He takes it and carries it as though it were weightless.

“If you will follow me, our driver is waiting outside.”

He makes his way to the exit, quickly followed by Andrea. Outside, an assortment of vehicles line the road as people greet one another, enter vehicles, and drive away. Bongani waves down a black SUV that pulls up in front of them. As Andrea suspected, the windows on the vehicle are deeply tinted, to the point she cannot even see the driver. Opening the trunk door, Bongani slides the suitcase into the back and nods to the driver, who exits the vehicle, walks around, and opens the passenger side rear door. Bongani shuts the trunk and joins him, offering his hand to Andrea.

“Are you ready to depart, Ms. Leavensly?” he asks.

She nods in affirmation, taking his hand as she enters the vehicle. As soon as she enters, they shut the door behind her. Bongani takes the passenger seat while the driver returns to his. He puts the SUV into “Drive” and slowly inches into the outgoing traffic.

As they leave the airport, Andrea's satchel vibrates. She reaches in and picks up her phone. She looks at it and shakes her head in disbelief.

"Boyfriend?" Bongani asks.

She looks up to see him looking back at her through the rear-view mirror.

"Boss," she replies.

"Ah."

He returns his gaze to the road ahead. Andrea turns her attention to the phone and begins typing a response.

A phone begins to ring. She glances up to see Bongani reaching into the middle compartment. He pulls out an older cell phone, flips it open, and puts it to his ear.

"Greetings, sir," he says in his native Amharic, one of the many languages Andrea forced herself to learn, "Yes, we have retrieved her...no, there were no problems...no, I do not believe so..."

He looks back at Andrea. Their eyes meet as Bongani smiles. She returns it in kind. He turns back around.

"...no, she does not...as you wish...and to you as well, sir...goodbye."

He ends the call and places the phone back in the middle console.

"Who was that?" Andrea asks.

"My employer," he replies, "he wanted to make sure we were able to retrieve you and that you are well."

Bongoni turns to her.

"Are you well, Ms. Leavensly?"

"Yes."

“Good.”

He snaps his finger.

Suddenly, a third man rises from the seat behind Andrea and forcefully places a cloth over her face. Panicked, Andrea screams as she frantically tries to claw at her assailant, but he maintains his grip.

“Do not hurt her, you fool!” Bongani exclaims, “Baba wants her alive and in one piece.”

She kicks at him, but he dodges her attack. Slowly, she begins to feel the effects of the chloroform taking over. Darkness closes in around her as unconsciousness takes hold. She struggles once more to put up a fight, but finds her strength has left her.

The dark overtakes her and she falls into a deep sleep.

II: Captured

Six hours later.

Andrea slowly regains consciousness, cradling her throbbing head as her eyes struggle to open from the blinding white light above. Her hands feel around the small, cloth mattress she finds herself on.

“At least it’s soft,” she thinks to herself, *“softer than most I’ve slept on.”*

She rises from the makeshift bed, squinting to see her surroundings. Her feet touch the cold concrete floor, causing her to jolt. Her eyes open wide from the sudden shock, as though she had placed her foot on a block of ice.

“What the-?”

She glances at her surroundings.

Concrete completely makes up the walls, ceiling, and floor of the room. In the corner, Andrea’s satchel sits atop a humble desk. Lying to her right is her suitcase, which seems to have been untouched by her captors. Next to it rests a pair of sandals. The bright light above her is a singular florescent light bulb. The buzzing of electricity flowing through it rings in her ears.

Her gaze zeroes in on the door across the room. She stands up, taking a deep breath as she places her feet on the floor once more. Satisfied, she quietly creeps her way to the door.

The loud marching of footsteps outside the door stops her dead in her tracks. Her heart begins rapidly pounding against her chest. A droplet of sweat makes its way down her forehead as she stares at the door knob. The steps grow louder, and louder, and louder...

Andrea holds her breath as they stop in front of the door. Fear surges through every morsel of her body as she hears the clicking of a key in the lock. The knob slowly begins to turn. She timidly steps back as the door creaks open.

“Alhamed!”

The door stops. Andrea freezes, recognizing the Arab tongue.

“What do you think you are doing, leaving your post?”

“I was told to check on the prisoner,” replies the voice from the other side of the door.

“By whom?”

The door begins to waiver. Andrea remains still as silence fills the hallway beyond.

More footsteps approach the door and stop.

“You know you are not supposed to leave your post until you are relieved, yes?”

“Yes, but-.”

The door slams and is bolted shut.

“No excuses! Leaving your post could allow for someone to sneak in here and kill us all!

You know this!”

Another pause.

“Go. I will find someone else to see to our guest.”

The two pair of footsteps leave, going in opposite directions.

“And do not let me find you wandering from your post again, or else!”

Andrea waits a moment, listening as their steps fade away. She exhales and breathes a sigh of relief, wiping the sweat from her forehead. She reaches for the door handle.

“Locked,” she says to herself, “What, did you really think it was going to just magically unlock itself? Yeah, nice one, Andrea.”

She walks over to the desk and grabs her satchel, hoping to find her cellphone. Most of its contents are still there, including her tape recorder, notepad, journal, lip balm, and emergency makeup kit. Yet, no cellphone.

“Strike two.”

Suddenly, footsteps march down the hall once more. Without hesitation, Andrea swiftly runs to the bed, prematurely releasing the satchel in mid-dash. It falls, sprawling all her things across the concrete floor. She stops to pick them up, but the footsteps stop at the door and the lock begins to be unbolted. She quickly returns to the bed and sits down as the door opens.

A young man steps into the room, AK-47 in hand, and looks at Andrea. Instantly, she recognizes him.

The Algerian student from the airport customs line!

No longer wearing his student attire, he is now clad in militia gear, including, but not limited to, a combat vest, boots, ripped-up cargo pants, and a belt with AK magazines and a military-grade radio.

Sweat begins to pour down Andrea’s face as the two make eye contact. The Algerian’s stone-cold expression only heightens the tension. He stops just inside the door, turning his attention to the sprawled items on the floor. Eyebrow raised, he returns his gaze to Andrea, who keeps her eyes fixed on him, petrified with fear. He grabs the radio from his belt.

“Our guest is awake,” he says into the radio in his native Berber, “What do you want me to do with her?”

There is a pause.

“Bring her to the inner sanctum,” the voice from the radio replies in Arabic, “Baba would like to see her immediately.”

“Understood.”

He returns the radio to its place on the belt. He walks toward Andrea who squirms further away from him. He stops.

“It is okay,” he states, trying to calm her, “I am not going to hurt you.”

She shakes her head.

“I...don’t speak Algerian,” she says, “or Arabic...whatever the heck it is you’re speaking!”

The Algerian nods in affirmation with a smile.

“I take you to see Baba,” he replies in broken English, “You understand, yes?”

Andrea hesitates as he offers his hand to her.

“It is okay.”

Taking a deep breath, she reaches for his hand as he helps her stand.

“Now, why is-”

Before he can finish, Andrea uses the forward momentum and head butts the Algerian in the jaw, followed by a swift kick to the goods. She quickly runs out the door as he crumbles to the floor in agony.

“Guess all that Judo training was worth it.”

She books it down the dimly lit hallway, adrenaline pumping to every inch of her body. She reaches the end of the hall, takes a quick glance, and darts to the right. She can hear the muffled yelling of the Algerian echoing behind her. She quickens her pace, feeling the strain in her legs.

Suddenly, the voices of several more guards begin to reverberate down the hall in front of her. She stops dead in her tracks and spins around, dashing the other direction. She spots the

Algerian out of the corner of her eye, still holding his jaw as blood trickles down the side of his mouth.

“Hey, STOP!” he exclaims.

Andrea looks back long enough to catch a glimpse of him booking it around the corner, quickly followed by two other guards. She turns her attention to the path ahead. From the bolted doors, to the dim fluorescent lights above, everything looks exactly the same, making it more difficult for her to find an exit. She makes another left and smiles.

Stairs!

“Bingo!”

She dashes up the stairwell, skipping every third step due to her long, athletic legs. She hears the mad pounding of her pursuers not far behind.

At the top of the first level of stairs, Andrea bursts through the door...

“Ah, nuts!”

...only to find herself in the guard’s lounging area. Three tables are set up in the middle of the room with cards and cash on them, four thugs sitting around each. The guards look up, stunned by the sudden intrusion. Some even allow their smokes to fall out of their mouths as they stare at her. Andrea quickly spins around to correct her costly mistake. As she does she spots the Algerian and his crew running swiftly up the stairs. With one swift kick to the face, she sends him and his men tumbling back down like dominoes. She races up the second flight of stairs. Chaos erupts in the room as the men grab their guns and rush after her.

The horde of infuriated guards causes Andrea’s adrenaline to go into overload as she reaches the top of the stairs and bursts through the door. On the other side lies a large, open

courtyard with archways covered with vegetation. A small fountain sits in the middle, spewing water that flows into two large pools, one on each side of the yard.

Andrea has no time to rest as she sees several guards standing in the way of escape. They hastily turn to see what the commotion is all about and yell something she cannot make out. Andrea immediately resumes her mad dash. The horde of angry men pours out of the doorway, pursuing her with guns raised. Her reserve energy kicks in as she tries to reach the door to her left. It gets thrown open and the Algerian, bloody nose and all, strolls out with his fellow goons, AK-47 aimed in her direction. She turns away and tries for the other side of the courtyard, but she is stopped by more guards. She looks around as they begin to surround her, barking orders at her, motioning her to surrender. With all her energy spent, she falls knees-first to the ground, putting her hands behind her head.

“Well, worth a shot,” she thinks to herself.

Andrea closes her eyes as their yelling reverberates through her head.

“What are you dirt bags waiting for!” she exclaims, “Do it!”

Her words are swallowed up in all the chaos.

“Do it!”

Two gunshots echo off the courtyard walls.

“Enough!”

Andrea opens her eyes as the horde of angry guards suddenly parts, showing Bongani with his .44 Magnum pointed to the sky, standing in the middle of the courtyard. He walks through the crowd, returning the pistol to its shoulder holster.

“What is the meaning of this?” he asks in English.

The Algerian steps forward.

“This woman tried to escape, sir, when I was bringing her to see Baba.”

Bongani turns to him, placing his hand on the young man’s chin as he examines the beating Andrea gave him earlier.

“Took a tumble while pursuing her, eh, Nazim?”

Nazim turns his eyes to the ground, uncomfortable with the question. Bongani smiles.

“Go, get yourself fixed up at the infirmary. I will take it from here.”

Nazim nods in affirmation and walks away, gently holding his broken nose as he disappears down the stairs.

“As for the rest of you,” Bongani says in Arabic, returning his attention to the rest of the guards, “Baba has declared that Ms. Leavensly is a guest here and that she is to be treated as such. Anymore incidents like this, and you will all be punished severely. Is that understood?”

The majority of the men affirm with nods, while others answer with mumbling.

“Then, be gone with you, before I change my mind!”

The group disperses, returning to their various posts. Andrea watches them go as she begins to calm. A hand reaches down, and she looks up to see Bongani standing over her.

“Ms. Leavensly, I deeply apologize for this inconvenience-.”

Andrea ignores his kind gesture and slowly stands.

“Oh, thanks, such a gentleman,” she sarcastically remarks.

Bongani smirks as he retracts his hand.

“Are you hurt?” he asks.

“*Hurt!*?”

Andrea glares at him, resisting the urge to throw her fist into his jaw.

“First, you kidnap me! Then, you put me in a cell and expect me to be just a good, little girl and stay there?!”

Bongani’s demeanor remains unchanged.

“If you think I’m just gonna be like one of the girls you capture and sell for some other dirt bag’s pleasure, you are sorely mistaken!”

“Ms. Leavensly, I-.”

“And, another thing,” she continues, “if you think for one second I’m gonna just let you do what you want with me-!”

“*Ms. Leavensly!*”

Andrea stops mid-sentence, dumbfounded by Bongani’s sudden outburst.

“Ms. Leavensly,” he begins, much calmer than before, “you are our guest, not our prisoner. Under these pretenses, you are not to be harmed during your visit here. Yes?”

Andrea hesitates as he proceeds to walk away, beckoning her to join him. She slowly follows.

“So,” she begins, “if this is a visit, I am able to leave when I choose, right?”

Bongani snickers.

“No, I am afraid not.”

“So, I *am* a prisoner.”

“No, that is not...,” he stops in his tracks, grumbling to himself as he rubs his head in frustration, “Baba wishes you to stay until he is satisfied you can be trusted-.”

“Look here, Bon Bon,” Andrea interjects, “I came here for a story, not to be some pawn in this little game you’re playing!”

Bongani stares at her, eyebrow raised.

“You do not understand, Ms. Leavensly,” he says, “If our enemies knew our location-.”

“Then, your whole operation would be compromised, and you would have to move your entire criminal enterprise somewhere else, blah, blah. You think I haven’t heard this bull before!? Trust me, I don’t really care what happens to you and your precious trafficking ring. In my book, taking you guys out of the picture is just another win for me.”

The two exchange glares. Frustrated, Bongani resumes his angry stroll, Andrea right on his heels.

“Now,” she continues, “you *are* going to let me walk right out of here, unharmed, and drive me back to the airport.”

“I am afraid I cannot do that,” he replies.

“Look here, jerk! I’m not playing around! If you don’t let me out of here, I will contact the UN to toast this place!”

Bongani laughs.

“The UN has no jurisdiction here,” he states, “even if they did, you have no way of communication.”

“*Dang it,*” she thinks to herself, “*so much for that bluff.*”

“Come on, you know it’s not wise to take a Pulitzer prize winning journalist hostage, right!?”

“Not a hostage,” Bongani interjects, correcting her terminology.

“Whatever!”

They stop just shy of a door on the other end of the courtyard guarded by two men with assault rifles.

“Look,” she says, trying to be more diplomatic in her approach, “just let me go and I promise I won’t reveal where you are located. You can even blindfold me, if that’s how you want to play. Just, please, don’t put me under again.”

“Again, I cannot do that.”

“And why is that?”

“Because,” Bongani states, indicating the door, “it is not my decision to make.”

He walks away as Andrea turns her attention to the doorway.

“How do I know this isn’t another one of your tricks?” she inquires.

Bongani stops and turns to her, a smirk gracing his face once more.

“You don’t.”

With that, he departs, leaving Andrea alone with the two guards. She stares awkwardly at the door as they stare at her, eyebrows raised.

“Open, says me?” she sarcastically asks.

The two guards exchange glances.

“Right. American stereotype.”

One guard shakes his head as he opens the door. Andrea takes one last deep breath, and then walks through the doorway. The door closes behind her.

To Andrea’s surprise, the inner sanctum is laid out like that of an ancient temple, altar included. A humble chandelier dangles from the ceiling, dimly lighting the room. There are several candles scattered about, but their wicks have burned out, the streams of smoke still flowing from them. There are no idols, crosses or any other items of worship, which means only one thing to Andrea.

“Great,” she thinks to herself, “this ‘Baba’ probably has a God-complex. That just makes this place even more de-.”

Before she can finish her thought, she stops dead in her tracks as something catches her eye. In the very center of the room, just in front of the altar, an older man, late sixties to early seventies, sits on the floor, legs crossed with hands on his knees and head bowed. Across his body, he wears a long kaftan with blue and green stripes. A large wooden staff lay beside him, within reach of his right hand. He has a head full of curly, gray hair that reaches down to his shoulders. A dirty, beige headscarf is wrapped around his forehead.

As Andrea watches him, he turns his head slightly toward her and smiles. He then rises to his knees and bows to the floor, kissing the ground and mumbling something inaudible. When he finishes, he reaches over and takes the staff in his hand, using it to steady himself as he rises. As he walks toward her, she realizes that the head tie is not around his forehead as she had previously thought, but around his eyes, and for good reason. Just visible around his covered eyes are burn marks and scar tissue. Any other facial scars are either hidden by his hair or well-trimmed beard. At closer examination, she can see a cut on his neck and other scabbed wounds on both arms and hands.

The man, at least a foot taller than Andrea, stops just in front of her

“Ms. Leavensly, I presume?” he asks in a very deep voice.

He offers his hand to her. Andrea hesitates, still taken aback by the situation. She had heard of blind people using echolocation or some other means to see their surroundings, but it is still both a fascinating and terrifying thing to witness.

“Yeah, you’re the one they call ‘Baba’?” she replies half-heartedly, taking his hand.

“It is as you say.”

The two exchange a firm handshake.

“Battle scars?” Andrea asks.

Baba chuckles.

“One man’s scars are another man’s wisdom,” he states.

She stares at him, confused.

“Rrrright,” she replies.

“Come, let us go to what your people call my ‘office’.”

Baba turns and walks toward a door to their left, followed slowly by Andrea. He pushes it open, allowing light to pour into the inner sanctum, almost blinding her. The two step through, and Andrea finds herself on a gorgeous balcony arrayed with beautiful palm trees and vines, looking out across the magnificent African landscape. In the field, she can make out the groups of elephants, giraffes, and zebras that are roaming about. Beside her sits two wicker chairs and a wooden coffee table, an intercom system atop it. Baba leans against the balcony railing, taking a deep breath of the crisp, fresh air.

“Beautiful, is it not?” he asks.

Andrea crosses her arms.

“How do *you* even know what it looks like, since you’re...you know...”

“One does not need eyes to see the beauty around them, my dear.”

He turns and smiles. Andrea does not grace him with one in return.

“Please,” he says, indicating the two chairs, “sit.”

Andrea hesitates for a moment, but relents and takes a seat. Baba slowly makes his way to his and sits.

“I trust,” he continues, “that you have found your accommodations to your liking?”

“*Oh boy,*” Andrea thinks to herself, “*here comes the fun train.*”

“My accommodations?” she begins, “Yeah, sure, my prison cell is *top notch!* And, the service!? *Oh,* it’s great! I have never before, in all my career, had *so* many guards chase me down at one time!? It’s *awesome! Really freakin’ awesome!!*”

Baba gives a hearty laugh.

“*Oh,* you think this is funny, do you?!”

“Forgive me, for I forget that my men are not used to having a guest in our compound,” he states, “They have been on edge as of late due to recent...incidents...and-.”

“*Don’t give me that crap!?*” Andrea interjects, “I came here for a story, not your pitiful excuse of a-!”

Baba puts his hand up and smiles. Andrea stops as he reaches over to the intercom.

“Bongani,” he says in his native Amharic, “bring Ms. Leavensly and I some coffee, please.”

He turns back to Andrea.

“Please, continue.”

“You see!? Like that! If I am going to be here doing a story, then I deserve a little more respect!”

Baba snickers.

“Americans,” he begins, “for some reason, you think that everyone else has to be just like you. You trample over everyone that crosses your path just to get your way. You are no better than the rest of us.”

Andrea begins to reply, but Baba puts his hand up once more.

“You want respect, yes?”

“Yeah,” she replies.

“Then, this is how it must be. *You* will ask *one* question at a time, and I will answer it. Then, I will ask *one* question at a time, and *you* will answer it. This is, as you say, ‘fair’, no?”

“Now, hang on a minute, I’m the jour-!”

“*One* question,” Baba firmly states with a smile.

Andrea grunts in frustration.

“Fine,” she says, “Where do all the men, women, and children you abduct go?”

“All in good time,” he replies.

“That’s not a-!”

“Na, na! Now, it is *my* turn to ask question.”

Andrea rolls her eyes as Baba contemplates his words carefully.

“What happened in Iraq?” he asks.

The question catches Andrea off guard. She snickers, suddenly scratching her hand.

“Even if I was there” she replies, “I wouldn’t tell you.”

“Fair enough. Now, ask another question.”

The scratching intensifies.

“Do you have any affiliation with Al-Qaeda or any other terrorist organizations?”

Baba laughs.

“Ms. Leavensly, for this Pulitzer prize winning journalism you are supposedly praised for, your questions tell me otherwise.”

“Well, usually men are a little more open to a pretty reporter,” she states.

“Ha, then it appears I have an advantage over them,” he remarks, indicating his covered eyes, “But, it is now my turn to ask question.”

“Yeah, that last one was a lucky shot, old man,” she mentally prepares herself, *“I’m ready for you now.”*

“Is there a Mr. Leavensly?”

The question causes Andrea’s heart to skip a beat. She looks away as she itches the finger that once carried her wedding ring.

“Where the heck did that come from?”

“You have not stopped scratching that spot since we started.”

The itching stops. Andrea stares straight at him in shock.

“How did you-?”

“As I said before, Ms. Leavensly, there is more than one way to see.”

Andrea’s stare now turns to a raging glare.

“That’s personal *and* off-limits!” she exclaims.

Baba lets out a hearty laugh.

“Then,” he says, “give me a real challenge! A *good* question.”

Andrea pauses, trying to control her emotions.

“Get a grip on yourself, girl! Get in the zone!”

She closes her eyes for a moment, allowing the journalist in her to take over.

“Why?” she finally asks, slowly opening her eyes, “Why do you do this?”

Baba grins.

“Now, that...*that* is a *good* question.”

The door behind them opens. Andrea turns to see Bongani and Nazim enter, carrying a platter with two delicate tea cups containing the darkest coffee Andrea has ever seen. Bongani places the tray on the table.

“Thank you, my sons.” Baba tells them.

They nod in reply. He takes his cup and begins to slowly sip the dark liquid, but stops, noticing Andrea has not picked up hers.

“Will you not partake, Ms. Leavensly?” he asks.

“How do I know Bon Bon and Rudolph here didn’t poison it?” she replies.

Baba looks in the direction of the two men.

“Bon Bon and Rudolph?” he inquires of them.

“Nothing,” the two reply in unison.

They glare at each other.

“I see,” Baba snickers, “I do believe Nazim has something of yours.”

He motions the Algerian forward. Nazim steps toward Andrea, holding her satchel. As she reaches for it, he hesitates.

“Oh, come now,” she says, “I’m just harmless little girl, aren’t I?”

“More like a wolf in sheep’s clothing.” He replies in Berber.

He tosses her the satchel as Andrea smirks.

“That will be all for now,” Baba states, “You may go.”

The two men turn and leave, shutting the door behind them.

“So,” he continues, “Why do I do what I do?”

He takes another sip of his coffee.

“Where would you like me to start?” he asks.

Andrea reaches into her satchel and pulls out her tape recorder and notepad.

“How about the very beginning?” she smartly replies.

Baba smirks as he takes the cup away from his mouth for a moment.

“Are you sure you will not drink?”

Andrea looks down at her cup.

“Nah, I’m good.”

“I see.”

He takes one last swig of the coffee, then places the cup on the tray.

“Yes, perhaps it would be best to start at the beginning,” he states.

He clasps his hands together in his lap as he looks in Andrea’s direction.

“Very well, I am ready.”

Andrea pauses, taking another deep breath. The tape recorder beeps, quickly followed by the clicking of a pen.

III: Eden

Baba:

In life, many say that our journey on this Earth begins at our birth.

I think differently.

I believe that our story begins when we are thrust into the world unprepared, forced to learn as we press onward through the jungles of life. For me, this was fifty-five years ago near my village in the Ogaden Region of Ethiopia. I was only fifteen years of age at the time.

Yes, I remember it well.

All too well.

“Come on, Gwandi! Keep up!”

I tried my best keep pace with my older brother Chidubem as we climbed up the rocky hillside. Not far below us, we could see our village, teeming with life as the sun began its descent into the east.

“I’m coming, wait up!” I replied in our native Amharic, heavily breathing as every muscle in my body cried out in pain.

Chidubem laughed as he quickened his pace. I followed suit, slowly gaining on him.

“Come on, Chidu!”

My brother looked back at me.

“What? It’s whoever gets to the top first, remember?” Chidubem stated.

As he turned back to the path ahead, he suddenly gasped and came to a full stop, but not before I caught up and slammed into him. We tumbled to the ground, dust filling the air as we struggled to get untangled from each other. As the chaos quieted, Father Emem stood over us.

“You are late,” he stated.

“Sorry, Father Emem,” I apologized, “Mama wanted us to do take care of the oxen before we came.”

Father Emem smiled, offering his hand to us.

“That is alright, my son. Never should a boy neglect the duties of his youth.”

We took his hands as he pulled us to our feet.

“Did you both forget your sticks?” he asked.

We looked at each other and shook our heads in affirmation. Father Emem laughed as he turned and began to walk away, beckoning us to join him.

We followed.

“So, what are we to learn today, Father Emem?” I asked.

“Are you going to show us more fighting moves?” Chidubem excitedly remarked.

“Well, since you both forgot your sticks, I suppose that is no longer an option,” he replied.

We looked at each other, disheartened.

“However, today I wish to show you something else.”

At the crest of the hill, there was a campfire with tattered blankets surrounding it. Father Emem indicated for us to sit. We followed his instruction, taking our places around the fire.

“Why do you think I have taught you to fight?” he asked us.

There was a pause as the we contemplated the question.

“Because of the war?” Chidubem replied.

“No, but it does have something to do with it.”

“Then, what is it?” I inquired.

Father Emem stared into the fire, cradling his staff in his arms.

“I teach you how to fight, not to take life, but to save it.”

We scratched our heads in confusion.

He smiled as he continued, “All life is precious in the sight of God. It is a gift He has bestowed on us so that we may glorify Him through it.”

Chidubem huffed as he rolled his eyes.

“Why must you insist on boring us with religion, Father Emem,” he stated, “We get enough of that from the village elders.”

“Chidu,” I said, “show some respect.”

“I thought you were actually teaching us something practical,” Chidubem continued, “not railing us with more religious nonsense!”

Father Emem snickered as we stared at him.

“I see you need more convincing,” he said.

He pointed to the ground in front of us. Slowly crawling along the rocky landscape, a black scorpion slowly approached us, claws and poisonous tail at the ready. We jolted from our makeshift seats. I backed away as Chidubem rushed forward, raising his foot to stomp on the creature. That is when Father Emem suddenly reached over with his staff and knocked Chidubem’s grounded foot out from under him, causing him to fall flat on his back. He grunted as he hit the ground, holding the back of his head as he slowly rose back to his feet, but not before he saw the scorpion rushing toward him. He quickly crawled away, but found himself against a rock. I was overflowing with laughter at the entire affair as my brother frantically tried to wave the scorpion away. At that moment, Father Emem placed his staff between the scorpion and Chidubem.

“Why are you afraid?” he asked.

“Are you mad!” Chidubem exclaimed, “That thing will kill me!”

“Only because you threatened to kill it.”

My laughter stopped mid-breath as I looked up at Father Emem.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Father Emem smiled as he turned his attention to the scorpion, watching as it slowly climbed onto the staff. He then slowly raised the staff and spun it around until both he and the creature were eye to eye. My brother and I stared in awe as he reached his hand out to the scorpion.

“You see, all creatures sense emotion. If you are aggressive, it will return that aggression. But, if you are a man of peace...”

The scorpion slowly crawled onto his hand without hesitation and rested there. We were stunned at the sight.

“We are meant to be shepherds,” he continued, “caring for all that God has created.”

He patiently lowered his hand to the ground, allowing the scorpion to return to the sand. After a moment, it resumed its creeping across the terrain.

“The same can be said for our fellow man-.”

“Even the ones who mean to kill us?” Chidubem asked.

“Well, we must always do unto others as we would have them do unto us.”

We glanced at each other in confusion.

“You see,” Father Emem began, “if a man came and beat you, what would you do?”

Chidubem raised himself off the ground in haste, brushing dust off his already tattered clothes.

“Well,” he started, “I would find this man and cut off his hands so that he could not hurt anyone else. I may even cut out his tongue for good measure.”

Father Emem looked down for a moment, shaking his head in disapproval.

“What about you, Gwandoya?” he asked.

I looked up at him.

“Well, what would you do?”

“I...” I stuttered, “I don’t...know.”

“It is alright, my son. It is a very difficult question to answer.”

“Not to me,” Chidubem interjected.

I lowered my head, feeling a sense of shame wash over me. Father Emem stared at me for a moment with caring eyes, then looked up toward the fading sunset.

“We best make our way back now, for the day is coming to a close.”

As he rose from the worn blanket, using his staff as leverage, Chidubem walked over to me and playfully shoved me aside.

“I bet I can beat you down the mountain,” he remarked.

“Why must you always make dares, brother,” I replied, “One of these days, it’s going to get you into trouble.”

As we bantered, Father Emem was busy putting out the fire when something to the west caught his eye.

“When have you ever turned down a dare?”

“Only when it is a ridiculous-.”

I stopped mid-sentence, noticing the peculiar look on Father Emem’s face.

“Father Emem,” I asked, “is something wrong?”

Father Emem turned to me and began to open his mouth. The cracking of a gunshot echoed through the air as a bullet tunneled through his skull. I watched, dumfounded, as Father Emem's body fell limp to the ground, his eyes fixed on me as blood poured out from both his mouth and the hole in his head. As he crumbled to the dirt, time itself seemed to stall as my heavy breathing filled the air. All other sounds around me were muffled as the shock of the moment overwhelmed me, trying my best to comprehend it all.

"Gwandi, get up!!"

Time rushed back into motion as Chidubem snapped me out of my trance.

"Come on!" Chidubem exclaimed, "We need to go, now!!"

Bloodcurdling war cries of wild men sent shivers down my spine as I turned to see car lights and torches coming toward us. I quickly scrambled to get up as Chidubem helped me to my feet.

"What about Father Emem?!" I hastily asked.

"Leave him!" Chidubem replied, "We have to get back to the village!"

Automatic gunfire radiated into the sky, followed by shouting and screaming that would have made even the bravest of men cower away in terror. Without a second thought, we sprinted down the hill, leaving our mentor's lifeless corpse to soak in a large puddle of blood. As we raced across the rocky landscape, the roaring of jeep engines and wicked men came ever closer, causing us to quicken their pace.

Still in a daze, I caught my foot on a stone, sending me tumbling down the hillside.

"Gwandoya!?"

Grunts emanated from me with every rock I careened into, finally coming to a full stop at the foot of the hill. Chidubem rushed to my side, frantically trying to pull me to my feet.

“Come on!” Chidubem exclaimed, “get up!”

After a split second, I returned to my senses and jolted to my feet, feverishly turning to see the location of our pursuers.

The screams of women and children immediately drew our attention to the village.

Tension rose as dread began to take hold of us.

“No,” I softly said.

Chidubem dashed past me and toward the village, rage billowing in his eyes.

“Chidu, wait!”

My plea was ignored. I quickly followed after my brother. Gunfire began to fill the air the closer we came to the village. I glanced to my right and saw several jeeps parked just outside of the entrance to our settlement.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see a woman running for her life, dashing out of the village. A single gunshot radiated into the night sky as a bullet cut through her abdomen. I instinctively dove to the ground as I watched her fall to the dirt, frantically trying to crawl away as she cried for help. A tall man dressed in a ragged military uniform, a cigarette sticking out of his filthy mouth, strolled out of our village, a revolver in hand. I watched in horror as the man slowly walked up the woman, placed his foot on her back, and aimed the pistol at her head.

A second shot echoed across the landscape.

I flinched as the woman’s body went limp. The man reached up and took the cigarette from his mouth, allowing smoke to seep out and evaporate into the air. He snickered as he flicked it onto the poor wretch’s corpse and returned to the village. I hesitated for a moment, a flood of emotions rushing through my soul as I remained frozen on the ground. The cries of

terrified villagers intensified as gunfire continued. I slowly rose from the sand and crept my way to the entrance.

“Chidu?” I whispered into the darkness, “where did you go?”

No reply.

I stopped just shy of the entrance.

“Chidu!”

Nothing.

“Chi-!”

A hand reached out from behind me and wrapped around my mouth, yanking me into the shadows.

I struggled against my assailant, trying my best to break free, but the man’s muscular arms remained steadfast.

“Shush! Be still, boy!”

I turned to see that my assailant is only my father, Adegoke. To his left, Chidubem sat kneeling in the corner, his gaze completely focused on the entrance to the village.

“Father!” I exclaimed, “what are you...?”

Father gestured for me to be silent as he pointed toward the village entry. Guarded by two well-armed thugs, a tall man dressed in military attire stepped beyond the village gate, a deep scar cutting across his foggy left eye as he stared into the African night. The screams and gunfire continued to fill the air. The fire from within the village painted the clouds above a dull red.

I watched as the man reached into his front jacket pocket, pulls out a pack of cigarettes, and lights one, sticking it between his teeth.

“Where is Mama?” I whispered to my father.

“I do not know,” he replied, “Father Adonga and I just returned from the hunt when we saw those beasts coming. They must be raiders that snuck across the border.”

“And where is Father Adonga?”

Father hesitates.

“He....”

I look away, a tear escaping my eye.

“Gwandoya, look at me.”

Father turned my head so our eyes met.

“You must be brave, my son,” he said, “Remember Father Emem’s training and all will be-.”

He stopped, his eyes turning away from me. I followed his gaze, a chill of horror moving down my spine as fear rushed over me.

Chidubem, armed with only a quarterstaff, slowly sneaked toward the man and his guards.

“Chidubem!” Father whispered, “what are you doing!? Get back here this instant!”

My brother continued his advance, ignoring our father. He rushes forward, staff at the ready. The sound of footsteps drew one of the guards’ attention, but not before Chidu struck the back of his knees with the stick, knocking him to the ground. The second raised his gun to fire, but he was swiftly dealt with by a blow to the head. Chidubem then turned his attention to the leader, readying for a crippling blow and....

The leader stopped his attack at half swing. My brother stopped dead in his tracks as his eyes met the barrel of the man's Colt .45. The man with the scar smirked as he ripped the stick from Chidubem's hands and tossed it to the side.

He cocked the pistol.

"No!"

Father lunged from my side, barreling toward the leader in a fierce frenzy. He made it within a few yards of him, but not before two other guards rushed out of the village and tackled him to the ground. He screamed in rage as he struggled against them. Chidubem and I watched in horror as our father tried his best to break free. The leader snickered and then bashed the revolver against Chidubem's head, knocking him to the ground.

"Take them." he commanded in Arabic, taking the cigarette from his mouth and tossing it away.

"Gwandoya, run!" Father exclaimed, "Get away from here!"

I hesitated for a moment.

"Run!"

I quickly crawled from the scene. I lifted himself off the ground and turned to run away, but I came to an abrupt halt when another raider ran up to me and knocked me over the head with the stock of his rifle.

Darkness overtook me as I fell into unconsciousness.

Sometime later, I slowly regained consciousness, blinking several times as rays of light penetrated my eyes. I winced at the sudden and sharp pain from the bruise on the back of my head. As I went to reach for it, the realization occurred to me that my hands were tied behind my back and I am on my knees.

My eyes widened with horror as fear exploded throughout my soul. The scene before me was that of a waking nightmare.

All around me, the people of the village, at least those who survived the first batch of slaughtering, had been rounded up and placed around the fire in the village center. Some wore the scars received while attempting to fight back.

To my left and right sat many of the boys I grew up with, all wearing the same face of terror as they frantically glanced at one another. I turned as best I could to look behind me and caught a glimpse of Chidubem kneeling right behind him, his eyes turned to the dirt.

“Chidu,” I whispered to him.

No reply.

I returned to scanning my surroundings, trying to find a way of escape. To my chagrin, all ways out of the village center were heavily guarded by raider thugs with bolt-action rifles.

Something caught my eye.

Off in the corner, a large pile of bodies was stacked against the elders’ communal shack, some of them belonging to people I had known for many years.

My eyes began to tear up.

A revolver went off.

The sudden gunshot caused everyone to flinch as I looked up to find the man with the scarred face standing before us, revolver raised in the air. He stared at the mass of frightened villagers and smirked.

“Cowards,” he said in Amharic so his words were understood, “All of you. It was almost too simple to overpower you. You have become lazy like cattle!”

He paced back and forth, panning the crowd with his one good eye.

“We fight day and night to free you from your Ethiopian overlords, and yet you sit here in your shacks and live out your lives while our blood soaks the very dirt your feet tread upon.”

Shame painted the faces of the villagers as they turned their eyes to one another and the ground. I glanced at the crowd, confused.

“Well, no more!” the man exclaimed, “We will no longer tolerate this insubordination!”
He stepped forward and grabbed one of the boys next to me, lifting him to his feet as he inspected every inch.

“Now, your sons...they will know what it truly means to be a man!”

He forced the boy back to his knees.

“As tribute for our fight, we will take your sons-.”

An outburst of cries for mercy poured out of the crowd, many falling prostrate in the dirt at the man’s feet.

Another gunshot echoed into the air as the people cowered. The man shook his head in frustration.

“This is what I speak of,” he stated.

He strolled over to one of the women lying face down, yanked her up by her hair, and bashed his revolver against her head several times. She cried out in pain with each stroke as she frantically tried to break away from him. He finally stopped and released her, allowing the poor soul to crumble to the ground. Two other women tried to retrieve her, but were met with resistance from two of the merciless thugs.

“No,” the man continued, “I’m afraid a harsh lesson must be learned.”

He nodded to one of his counterparts.

“Bring them.” he ordered.

After a moment of uneasy silence, the blood drenched village elders were herded in by four raiders. The raiders carried two large tires each, along with several gallons of gasoline and bark from palm trees. I looked on in horror as one of the elders, my father, struggled to maintain pace with the others as blood trickled from his mouth.

“Father!” I exclaimed.

I stood and went to run towards him, but was met with a revolver to the face. I fell to the dirt, ignoring my broken nose as I feverishly tried to crawl toward my father. Two guards walked up and dragged me back to my place, throwing me to the ground. The scarred-faced man walked up to me and grinned.

“Endurance,” he remarked, “a good trait to have, boy. You will make a fine warrior.”

I looked away, fighting back tears. He strolled away and turned to the rest of the crowd.

“These men,” he stated, indicating the beaten elders, “represent your weakness and ignorance to our cause.”

He nodded to one of the raiders, who proceeded to forcefully arrange them in a line in front of the boys.

“And, for that, flame shall consume them.”

One after the other, the raiders walked up and placed a tire around each of the elders, tightly pressing it down around their shoulders. The crowd cried out in revulsion, pleading for the elders’ lives to be spared.

“As for your sons,” the man continued, “they will learn what it means to be a strong and mighty warrior who is feared by all. They will earn their place in this land, land that you have polluted with your wretched stench.”

I quickly turned to Chidubem, who continued to stare at the ground, guilt and shame painted on his face.

“Chidu!” I exclaimed, “Do something!”

Chidubem slowly looked up at me, tears dripping down his cheek.

“I...,” he studded, “I can’t.”

I spun around to find the raiders pouring the gasoline over the elders as the wailing of the crowd intensified.

“Father!” I yelled over the people.

“Look away, my son!” Father replied, spewing both blood and the foul liquid from his mouth, “look away!”

One of the raiders smacked him across the face with the stock of his rifle, causing more blood to fly from his lips. As the last drops of gasoline are poured out, the scarred-faced man took a box of matches out of his pocket and lit one.

“You have brought this on yourselves,” he said.

He dropped the match, igniting the flammable liquid. I watched in despair as, one by one, each elder was consumed by fierce flames, their bloodcurdling screams radiating into the night sky. I turned away, closing my eyes as I listened to my father’s agonizing cries. One of the boys to my left vomited, unable to stomach the horrific sight before us.

A shot echoed into the night.

The boy fell limp to the ground, his face landing in the bile. Smoke seeped out of the leader’s revolver as his evil glare landed upon us.

“Cowards flee from death!” he stated, waving the gun at each of us.

He stopped in front of me, a sinister grin painted across his face. He grabbed my head and forced my eyes open, making me watch the brutality.

“True men embrace it,” he stated.

I shuddered, unable to look away from the fiery execution. Tears rolled down my face as the flickering of the flames glistened in my bloodshot eyes, fear radiating through my body. Yet, this fear was not only caused by what I was witnessing, but by what was billowing within the depths of my soul; a feeling I had never felt before.

Rage.

IV: Painful Remembrance

The Present.

Andrea stares intently at Baba as he pauses, a tear escaping from the corner of his eye. He reaches up and slowly wipes it away.

“After that,” he continues, “they loaded up all the boys into trucks like livestock and left the rest of the villagers to fend for themselves. They then drove us across the border in Somalia, raiding other villages along the way.”

He takes one last sip of his coffee.

“Zuberi the Reaper they called him. A fitting name for one who slayed his own people in cold blood and took their children away to become his instruments of death.”

There is a brief moment of silence as Andrea shifts positions in her chair.

“Well,” he begins, “I am afraid I must cut this interview short for today-.”

“I’m sorry, what?” Andrea interjects.

“I am old, Ms. Leavensly,” he replies, “and an old man needs his rest.”

“Are you serious!?”

Baba is taken aback by her sudden outburst.

“Look here, mister!” she states, “I’m not just some servant who answers to your beckon call! I came here for a story, and that is what I intend to get!”

“And you will have your story, Ms. Leavensly,” he says in a calmly manor, “but, patience is a virtue one must never forget.”

“But-!”

“Patience.”

Andrea grumbles to herself as she glares at him. There is an awkward silence as Baba reaches over to the intercom on the table.

“Bongani, please return Ms. Leavensly to her quarters.”

There is a short moment of silent tension as Andrea continues to scowl at the blind old man.

“Why?” she asks.

“Why, what,” he replies, “you must be more specific for this old man to understand, Ms. Leavensly.”

“Why are you just now wanting your story told? Is it a political move? Are you trying to get pity points from the UN, so they’ll let you keep up your insufferable operation or are you just that much of a narcissist?”

Baba lets out a hearty laugh.

“Ah, Ms. Leavensly, your deduction skills are very impressive, and yet, it still amazes me that the truth still evades you.” He leans forward. “Or, perhaps, it is *you* who evades *it*.”

The door behind them opens and Bongani strolls in, straightening his suit.

“Now, if you will excuse me, Ms. Leavensly,” Baba says, “I must retire for the evening. We will resume our interview tomorrow.”

He nods to Bongani.

“If you will follow me, Ms. Leavensly,” Bongani states.

Andrea pauses for a moment, then, reluctantly, stands up and follows him to the door.

“Until tomorrow, Ms. Leavensly,” Baba states.

As Bongani walks through the door, Andrea looks back to see Baba leaning back in his chair, soaking up the last of the evening sun before it vanishes behind the distant mountains. She shakes her head in disapproval as she leaves the patio, the door closing behind her.

Silence dominates the conversation between Andrea and Bongani as they enter the courtyard. Guards patrol around them, keeping a close eye on the journalist.

Bongani snickers.

“It would seem your escapade earlier has made the guards uneasy,” he says.

Andrea does not grace him with a reply.

“Ah, so the American journalist does know how *not* to speak!”

He breaks out into hearty laughter as she gives him a dirty look.

“No,” she begins, “I just-.”

“Ah, she speaks!”

Andrea crosses her arms, furious.

“Just take me to my cell, jerk!” she exclaims, “I’m in no mood for your stupid remarks.”

Bongani shakes his head, still snickering.

“As you wish,” he replies.

The rest of their trek down into the depths of the facility is made without another word spoken.

As they arrive at the door to her cell, Nazim stands guard next to it, still nursing his bandaged nose.

“Well,” Bongani begins with smile on his face, “I take my leave of you.”

He chuckles to himself as he strolls away, leaving the two to glare at each other. As she inches forward, Nazim takes an uneasy step backwards, carefully watching her like a scared little mouse.

“What?” she asks sarcastically, “don’t want to go for round two?”

Nazim hesitantly laughs, “Only a fool tests a serpent twice.”

He opens the cell door. Andrea slowly enters the room, keeping her eyes fixed on him at all times. He squeamishly smiles as he shuts the door behind her, leaving her alone in the dimly lit cell.

Andrea tosses her satchel on the desk and makes her way to the makeshift bed. She falls onto it and lets out a sigh. She stares at the ceiling, allowing her mind to run through the events of the day.

“What a whirlwind,” she thinks to herself.

Slowly, her eyes begin to close as sleep beckons her. After a few moments of hesitation, she gives into its irresistible call.

As darkness consumes her vision, there is a blissful silence.

“Hahaha!”

Suddenly, a vision of Baba slowly emerges from the shadows.

“Tell me, Ms. Leavensly,” the vision inquires, *“What happened in Iraq?”*

He bursts with laughter as both Nazim and Bongani appear from the darkness, joining him in his amusement. Something begins to drip from Andrea’s hands. She looks down and screams, her eyes filled with dread.

Blood slowly pours down her arms, trickling off her finger tips. She begins to panic, frantically trying to wipe the blood away. A large crimson puddle forms below her and she begins to sink into it.

“No! Please!” she pleads.

Their laughter drowns out her screams. Bloody tears begin to stream down her face as she is swallowed up into the pool, her arm still grasping at the air.

Andrea jolts awake, sweat streaming down her face. She cradles her head in her hands as she weeps softly in the darkness.

The next day.

The door to Andrea’s “cell” slowly creaks open. Nazim pokes his head out from behind it, scanning the room with his hawk-like eyes. Movement in the far corner draws his attention as the door comes to a stop. Andrea, her black hair in disarray and clothes wrinkled, sits curled up against the cool concrete, shivering. He hesitates for a moment, not knowing whether to approach or keep his distance.

“What do you want?” Andrea snaps.

Nazim steps fully into the room.

“Baba has asked to see you,” he replies.

She slowly raises her head, revealing the tear stains marring her face. The two make eye contact, causing Nazim to be on edge.

“Is,” he begins, “...is something...wrong?”

“No, I’m fine,” she replies, wiping her face as she stands to feet.

She firmly strolls over to the small desk, retrieves her satchel, and forcefully pushes past Nazim. He pauses for a moment, and then joins her, shutting the door behind them.

A few minutes later, both Andrea and Nazim emerge from within the compound and stroll into the courtyard. The morning sun's rays crest over the western face of the complex, glistening off the fountain's crystal clear waters. A few guards still patrol the area, making quick glances at the two as they continue past them.

As they reach the Inner Sanctum, Bongani stands at the door to greet them.

"Good Morning, Ms. Leavensly-," he states.

"Save the warm greetings for someone who gives a crap, Bon Bon," Andrea interjects, crossing her arms in frustration, "let's just get this over with, alright!"

Bongani stares at her a moment, not knowing how to respond.

"What!" Andrea exclaims, "you gonna open the door or do I have to bust through you?!"

"My apologies, Ms. Leavensly," Bongani replies, "right this way."

He opens the door as she charges past him. He glances at Nazim, who merely shrugs his shoulders.

"She is worse than a sleepless lioness," Nazim states in his native Berber.

"Tread carefully, oh head of wisdom," Bongani replies in Arabic, "else you become her next meal."

Nazim shakes his head as Bongani snickers. The two enter the Sanctum, the door sealing shut behind them.

Outside, on the Sanctum balcony, Baba stands at the railing, leaning against his staff as he breathes in the fresh air. He tilts his head, listening to all that lay beyond the compound, from

the pack of zebras roaming the plains to the horde of elephants washing themselves by the nearby watering hole.

A smile graces his aged face.

“I am sure, Ms. Leavensly,” he starts, “that, in America, staring is improper.”

He turns around to face Andrea, who stands in front of the doorway leading inside.

“Yeah, well,” she begins, “you called me, remember?”

“So I did. Please, have a seat.”

Andrea quickly walks over and sits in the chair opposite him, rummaging through her satchel to find the tape recorder. Baba starts toward his chair, but hesitates.

“Something troubles you,” he states.

Andrea suddenly stops.

“It’s nothing,” she snaps back, resuming her search.

Baba snickers.

“It is not wise to lie to your elders, especially those who are blind.”

Andrea, frustrated, forcefully sits the satchel in her lap and glares at him.

“Okay, you wanna know what my problem is!?” she exclaims. “My problem is that I’m in a prison with a bunch of thugs who are trigger happy, a creepy Nigerian who clearly knows more than he’s letting on, and a crazy blind man who thinks he’s God’s gift to his people and just wants the whole world to know about it! So, let’s just cut the bull and get right on building that ego of yours, shall we!?”

She snatches the satchel, reaches in, grabs the recorder, and slams it onto the table. Baba remains quiet, the smile still plastered on his face.

There is a brief moment of tense silence between the two.

“Bongani!” Baba calls in Amharic, breaking the silence.

Bongani strolls in, Nazim following right behind.

“Have Ms. Leavensly’s things moved to the guest suite here in the Sanctum. I believe a good night sleep will do her a great service.”

“At once, sir,” Bongani replies.

The two men spin around and exit, leaving Andrea and Baba alone once more.

“What was that about?” Andrea asks.

“I have asked Bongani to move your things to the guest suite,” he replies.

“Look, I don’t want your stinking charity! I just-!”

“Ms. Leavensly, I do not have to see to know when one needs rest. Perhaps we should postpone until you have had adequate-.”

“No!” she exclaims.

There is a pause.

“I’m fine,” Andrea continues, “let’s just get on with it.”

Baba hesitates, but shakes his head in affirmation.

“As you wish,” he replies.

Andrea rummages through her satchel and pulls out her notepad and pen. She takes a deep breath.

“When you are ready,” Baba says.

She stares at him for a moment, then reaches over and clicks the tape recorder on.

V: In The Shadow of Monsters

Baba:

I awakened to darkness, the blindfold around my eyes revealing very little of the environment around me. Both my hands and feet were chained to the exceedingly hot steel floor below. I could feel the skin on the bottom of my feet being burned off, yet, with all my might, I could not move them away. Wincing from the pain, I turned my attention to my other surroundings.

The roar of an engine and the constant vibration of the floor told me that we must have been in a vehicle of sorts, more than likely one of the raiders' many trucks that were parked outside his village when they attacked. I could hear the flapping of the tarp above, the only protection we had between us and the blistering African sun. What light did seep into the back of the truck allowed me to see the silhouettes of my fellow captives, most of them boys just like me.

A horrible thought crossed my mind.

"Chidu?" I whispered to the boy to my right.

No reply.

I turned to my left.

"Chidu?"

"Gwandi?" the boy across from me asked, "Is that you?"

"Chidu!" I exclaimed.

"Sssh!" The boy to my left interjected, "Keep your voice down, or the guard will beat you."

I paused for a moment, trying to look around. I caught sunlight glistening off the barrel of a rifle resting on its owner's shoulder as he stared out into the landscape.

“Where are they taking us?” I asked.

“Does it matter?” Chidubem snapped.

I sensed the anger in my brother’s voice.

“Are you alright?” I inquired.

“I’m fine,” my brother replied.

“Are you sure?”

“I said I’m fine!”

A rifle cocked, sending chills up my spine.

“QUIET!” the guard orders in his Arab tongue.

We remained silent for a few minutes, allowing the sudden tension to drift away.

“Chidu?” I whispered.

“What is it?” he retorted.

“Have you forgotten what Father Emem taught us? Do you not remember that anger only leads to-?”

“Father Emem is dead, Gwandoya! What does it matter!?”

A rifle stock cracked across Chidubem’s face. I covered away as the silhouetted guard grabbed hold of my brother’s shirt and leaned in close.

“Another word from your lips,” he sneered, “and I will spill your guts across the back of this truck. Do you understand!?”

Chidubem replied by spewing blood into his face. The guard recoiled, but not before catching every bit of it.

“You little brat!” he exclaimed.

He set up to throw a punch at the boy. A furious war cry rung out from the driver of the truck, stopping the guard in mid swing. More voices could be heard around and near the truck, along with the revving of several more engines. The guard quickly returned to his place at the front and took a look outside. The truck began to pick up speed, its thundering engine causing my ears to ache and ring.

“Chidu!” I yelled over the deafening sound, “what is going-!”

The truck screeched to a halt, causing all of us to slightly jolt from our seats. I was thrown against the steel bench behind me. I let out a short cry, then bit my lip. I could hear the footsteps of bloodthirsty raiders, screaming to the heavens with their battle cries. I glanced up to see the guard pass by us, unlatching the rear gate of the truck and jumping down out of sight. I turned to my brother.

“Chidu?” I asked, “what is happening?”

Chidubem looked up.

“Another raid,” he replied, a sense of dread filling his voice.

Sweat poured down my forehead as the screams of innocents filled the air, along with sporadic gunfire and bloodcurdling cries of mad men. I could feel my insides tightening as fear and rage collided within me for control.

“Fear and rage are two powerful emotions,” Father Emem once told me, “If left unchecked, they will consume you and make you like the wild beasts.”

I began to use a technique my mentor once taught me, turning my focus from the environment around me to my breathing, inhaling through my nose and exhaling through my mouth in three second intervals. He clasped my hands together and closed my eyes.

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want,” he began to whisper to myself, “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside still waters. He restoreth my soul: He leadeth me in the-.”

“Why do you insist on holding onto a dead man’s teachings?!”

Through my blindfold, I could barely make out Chidubem’s silhouette as my brother remained still as stone, his head bowed.

“Why do you throw them aside so easily?” I replied, “Did you not learn anything during our-?”

“You do not understand, do you!?” Chidubem interjected.

He raised his head. I could feel the burning gaze of my brother’s eyes upon me.

“Where we are going, no faith can save us. No empty lessons have prepared us for this. Even our own father, with all his might and wisdom, fell to these animals. Father Emem was wrong. The only way to stop these men is to kill every last one of them.”

“But,” I responded, “Father Emem said, ‘Fighting fire with fire only makes an even greater-.’”

“Be quiet, both of you,” whispered one of the boys next to me, “do you want to get us all killed?”

Chidubem turned away as I resumed my breathing technique, contemplating my brother’s words.

What if Chidu is right? What if both Father Emem and our own father did not truly prepare us for this? These are not mere animals that can be tamed, these are ruthless men who care for nothing but blood and will stop at nothing to get it!

I bowed my head and began to pray.

“Father Emem. I do not know if you can hear me, but, I am at a loss. I have always listened to all you have taught me and kept it in my heart, but I am at conflict with myself. I feel rage piercing my heart, wanting to consume my soul. Fear is racing through my body, and I cannot control it. Help me to understand! I need to know the way. I feel as though all of what you have taught me has not prepared me for this and I am left to the mercy of these beasts.”

A tear graced my cheek.

“God in Heaven, if Father Emem is with You, please let him help me. I am in the midst of a great darkness and have no light to show me the way. If not, then will You help me to understand why men can be so...evil. Is not man part of Your Creation? Father Emem had always told me that You are always good. So, how can you allow such vile people to roam Your lands and slaughter their fellow man? Help me understand Your ways, Almighty Father! I cannot-!”

I stopped. A strange scent made its way into the back of the truck. I sniffed the air, coming to regret my decision, for the smell was an all too familiar one.

Burning flesh.

Fear choked me as I began to breath rapidly, trying my best not to vomit. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the boy to my right rocking back and forth, whimpering in terror. I glanced up at Chidubem, but found him still unmoved.

Movement to my left caught my eye. A tall figure climbed up into the back of the truck and stood before us, followed by two others carrying rifles. From the outline of a beret perched on his head and a revolver in his hand, I could only guess that this was the same scarred-faced man, Zuberi, who made me watch my father burn alive. His thundering voice confirmed my suspicions.

“My children!” Zuberi stated, strolling toward the front of the truck, “Listen! Do you hear that? That is the sound of a hundred weak and lazy souls seeing with their own eyes the might of true sons of Somalia. Because of their insolence, they are being punished and shown a traitor’s fate. And the scent you smell? That is of their souls being burned out of them so that we may feed on them and become stronger.”

Anger boiled in my soul, but I tried my best to resist it.

“Breathe it in!” the scarred-faced man continued, “let the taste of fire rest on your tongue and the smell of flesh radiate through your nostrils, for this is the first step to becoming a true son of Somalia.”

The boy to my right could not take it anymore and vomited, spewing bile all across the truck bed. Zuberi stopped mid stroll and spun around.

His revolver went off.

Blood splattered across my face as the boy’s upper body fell on my lap. He froze, biting my lip.

“This boy was not worthy,” Zuberi said, “Learn from his mistake.”

I watched as he slowly turned to the other side of the truck. My eyes widened with horror as his sights seemed to rest upon Chidubem.

“Is this him?” the man asks his escorts.

One of them nodded in affirmation.

“Take him and put him with the others.”

The two guards reached down and restrained Chidubem, unlocking his chain. He did not fight back. I snapped and lunged forward as far as he could.

“Let him go, you beasts!” I exclaimed, “I’ll kill you if touch him, I swear on my father’s bones, I will!”

A hand grabbed my neck and thrust me back. I tried to resist, but the man was too strong and forced me against the back of the bench. The two guards carried Chidubem to the back of the truck and tossed him out. I could hear a tussle ensue, but it quickly fell silent. The two guards jumped back into the truck.

My blindfold was removed, and I found myself face to face with Zuberi. The vile man reached into his pocket with his free hand, pulled out a cigarette, and put it in his mouth. One of the two guards stepped forward with a lighter and lit the smoke for him. I watched as the tobacco and paper sizzled and burned. Zuberi took the cigarette out of his mouth for a split second and blew foul smoke into my face. I gagged on it, gasping for breath as his grip on my neck tightened.

“So, that was your brother, eh?” Zuberi asked.

I did not grace him with a reply.

“Well, do not worry. Where he is going, you all will be joining him. Very soon.”

He released me, and, without a second thought, pulled his revolver from its holster and bashed it against my skull. I fell unconscious, the burning anger within me quenched in mere seconds.

It was sometime later that I was jolted awake by two guards tossing me out of the truck, sending my body crashing to the dirt below. Firm hands grabbed hold of my arms as I was forced to my feet. A rifle stock dug into my back, forcing me forward. The darkness of night prevented me from making out most of my surroundings as the blindfold continued to cover his eyes. However, straight ahead, there was a massive bonfire with many silhouetted figures sitting

around it. As we got closer, I could hear the beating of drums and the war cries of many blood-thirsty raiders.

I was pushed into the center of the horde of monsters and forced to my knees. A lone figure strutted forward and kneeled down to me.

The blindfold was ripped off my head, and, once again, I found myself eye to eye with Zuberi.

“We meet again, little cub,” the scarred-faced man said, “Welcome to your new home.”

I glanced around and saw the horror that surrounded me.

Large pikes with human skulls painted red with blood sitting atop them created a barrier around the bonfire. Many raiders, more than I could count, stood just outside the barricade, chanting a very eerie and menacing phrase in their Arab tongue. What made the scene even more frightening for me was that most of these warriors were around my age, snarling and frothing at the mouth as they glared at me.

Zuberi stepped away from me and addressed the rabble.

“My brothers and sons!” he boasted, “For many years, we have fought and bled for our nation, seeking to reclaim the land that is rightfully ours! Yet, those we have tried to liberate from their overlords have grown as lazy as their own cattle! And so, as our blood soaks into the land, they continue to sit in their villages and allow the vile West to wipe what is left of our great nation from the face of Africa. Have they forgotten what these ‘civil’ people did to our ancestors? Have they forgotten the thousands of our people they enslaved and stole from our land?”

The crowd lifted up chants of rage.

“Well, they will soon learn the error of their ways! For we are the true sons of Somalia and we will take back our lands!”

Cries of affirmation rose from the rabble.

“But, before that is to begin, we must see if our new recruits are worthy to join our mighty brotherhood!”

He gestured to his left.

“Bring in our first recruit!”

The crowd roared as they parted for two guards dragging a boy between them. They thrust him to the ground and ripped off his blindfold. My eyes widened.

“Chidu!” I exclaimed.

Chidubem remained as still as stone, his eyes shut and head bowed. Zuberi grinned.

“Just as we are, these brothers are inseparable!” he continued, “However, a strong warrior must be willing and able to throw aside blood ties to achieve greatness.”

He nodded to one of the guards next to me. The guard unsheathed his machete, sliced my bindings off, and imbedded the blade in the ground in front of me. The same was done with Chidubem.

“A true warrior shows no mercy! If his brother is unwilling to kill, he must be discarded and thrown to the fire!”

The guards backed away from both of us.

“Show no mercy!” Zuberi commanded.

The crowd resumed their intimidating chant as I stared at the blade before me. I glanced up at my brother, who had already retrieved his machete and was walking toward me.

“Chidu!” I cried out to him, “What are you doing!? What did they do to you!?”

There was no answer as Chidubem's eyes burned with anger.

Something was very wrong, I thought to myself.

"Chidu! You are scaring me! I'm your brother! We are family!?"

A bloodcurdling war cry emanated from my brother as he madly rushed toward me. Out of instinct, I ducked and rolled to the side, just missing him by a few inches. I quickly recovered in time to dodge Chidubem's blade.

"Chidu! Come to your senses! This is not you!?"

My plea was once again ignored as he lunged at me, launching a flurry of attacks. I tried to keep enough distance between us, but my luck ran out as the last stroke found its mark, slicing across my chest. I let out an agonizing scream, but had no time to care for the wound as my brother charged forward again. I ducked just before the blade found my neck and kicked Chidu's feet out from under him. He collapsed to the dirt, but not before swinging his machete at me, finding his mark as the blade slashed my calf. I cried out as I limped away from him, leaving a bloody trail in my wake.

My vision suddenly became blurry. Perhaps it was the blood loss or even the sudden physical stress I was enduring, I thought.

No, this was something else.

I stumbled to the ground, spewing blood and bile onto the dirt as I gripped the gash on my chest. My heart pounded against my chest. I could feel something deep within my soul rising to the surface as sweat poured down my face. I gritted my teeth, my hands shaking uncontrollably.

Then, the pain in my chest and leg vanished.

I glared at the dirt, an overwhelming surge of rage burning in my eyes.

I could hear my brother slowly rising from the dirt. He let out a battle cry and dashed toward me. He got closer and closer...

I stepped to the side and tripped him, sending him tumbling to the dirt. The machete flew from his hand and fell to the ground. Without hesitation, I quickly grabbed it and charged at my brother. Chidubem, stunned by the sudden outburst, tried to jump to his feet, but I forced him back to the ground. He struggled against me as I tried to push the blade into Chidubem's abdomen.

All fell still, and, for a moment, we stared into each other's eyes. I could see the fear fill Chidubem's eyes as my burning glare pierced his soul. A tear graced his cheek as he suddenly stopped resisting. A minute more, and, perhaps, he would still be alive.

Alas, this was not to be.

The machete plunged into my brother. He let out an agonizing cry as I repeatedly stabbed him, the sound of bones breaking as the blade moved up into his chest, smashing through his rib cage. Blood splattered onto me as I continued my relentless onslaught, bloodcurdling screams leaving my mouth. The chanting around us came to a stop, replaced with the sound of metal cutting through flesh.

With the last of his strength, my brother raised his hand and placed it on my shoulder.

"Gw...Gwandi..."

I instantly came to my senses, coming to a stop mid-swing. My eyes met his as the life faded from my brother's eyes. The fiery rage within me vanished as all returned to normal.

Almost normal.

I suddenly became aware of what I had done, my hands trembling with fear. I threw the wretched and bloodied machete to the side and grabbed hold of Chidubem's lifeless body.

“Chidu!” he exclaimed, tears gushing from my eyes as a flood of emotions rushed over me, “Chidu, I am sorry! Forgive me! I did not...oh, God in Heaven, please...!”

I shook my brother’s body, thinking I could bring him back somehow.

“No, please! Come back! Do not leave me here, brother! Please, do not leave me!”

I cried to the heavens.

“What have I done, Chidu!? What have I done!?”

I cradled the body as I weeped uncontrollably. Zuberi slowly approached him, followed by the guards, their weapons at the ready. He knelt down in front of me and smiled.

“So, you are the stronger brother after all,” he stated.

I remained fixated on my brother’s cold, dead eyes.

“Kill me,” Gwandoya replied, unable to swallow the pain.

Zuberi’s grin grew wider as I ripped my shirt from my chest and placed myself in front of the guards.

“Kill me!” I exclaimed, “Kill me!!”

Zuberi waved off the guards and turned my head so our eyes met.

“No,” he said, “the only death you will find here is on the field of battle.”

I stared at him, nothing but emptiness in my spirit.

“Welcome to the brotherhood, son of Somalia.”

VI: Of Kings and Men

The Present.

Andrea remains as stern as stone as Baba turns his head out toward the African landscape.

“You see,” he continues, “Zuberi was known for making his ‘soldiers’ drink a particular substance that he called ‘Blood of Somalia’. It was a mixture of several poisonous berries found next to nearby rivers that, when ingested, would cause the victim to surge into an uncontrollable rage, making them the perfect soldier for his blood-thirsty crusade. Unbeknownst to me at the time, he had already poisoned my brother with it, along with coating my brother’s blade. All I needed was one cut and I turned into one of those...monsters...for a brief time. I did not know then that he would only be the first of many to die by my hands.”

He begins to choke up. Andrea smirks.

“You think I’m naïve enough to believe this bull?” she remarks.

Baba glances at her.

“Believe what you will, Ms. Leavensly. I know what I have done, and, despite what you may think, I live with the guilt of those actions. I cannot dream at night without their butchered faces haunting me.”

Though he is blind, Andrea can still feel his covered eyes gazing upon her.

“Have you not regretted something in your past so much that it keeps you awake at night, Ms. Leavensly?” he asks her.

Her heart skips a beat, but she does not.

“That is not the point,” she snaps, “you are just trying to justify your actions and make yourself look like a martyr.”

Baba sits back in his chair, a frown upon his face. The two remain still for a very tense moment.

Then, he stands to his feet.

“Come with me,” he commands.

He proceeds to leave the balcony as Andrea glares at him. She sighs and reluctantly follows him out.

A few minutes later, after navigating the maze of hallways and stairwells within the complex, the two enter what appears to be a recreational area, equipped with soccer goals and a large sitting area. A group of guards, including Nazim, are in the middle of playing a game, laughing and yelling as they kick the black and white checkered ball around the court. In the sitting area, Bongani is reclining as he intently reads a book.

“What do you see?” Baba asks.

“Well,” Andrea begins, “I see a bunch of your goons trying to look civilized while playing soccer, including that kid who’s been my-.”

“Nazim,” Baba interjects.

“Rrrright. And then there’s Bon Bon over there, reading the crap out of probably some ‘How to Talk to Women for Dummies’ book.”

Baba chuckles.

“Ah, yes. Bongani,” he begins, “Did you know that before I found him Bongani was a mercenary-for-hire?”

Andrea snickers.

“Is that the best you can come up with?” she retorts.

“And Nazim,” he continues, “he used to be a part of a terrorist cell in Morocco before I found him.”

A short yelp attracts her attention. Andrea looks over to see Nazim on the ground, gripping his already broken nose as the ball rolls away from him, the other guards bursting with laughter.

Andrea smirks.

“You find this amusing?” Baba inquires.

“Yeah, I do,” she replies, “The fact that you are really trying to look like the big, bad wolf is hilarious. This whole thing is just a big circus filled with clowns trying to be lions-.”

“Then, perhaps,” he interrupts, “I should tell you about Bongani’s time in Iraq.”

Andrea’s heart skips another beat. A lump begins to rise in her throat, but she swallows, forcing it back down.

“Alas,” Baba continues, “my body calls for sleep. We will continue in the morning.”

“Sure,” Andrea replies.

“I will show you to your new quarters.”

As the two begin to leave, Andrea glances back at Bongani, a sense of dread filling her soul. She turns away and follows Baba out of the room.

The next morning.

A burning breeze crosses Andrea’s face. She opens her eyes to find herself in the middle of the desert, the arid environment stretching out for miles. Droplets of sweat rush down her

forehead as she stands to her feet. She shields her eyes from the blazing sunlight as she scans the horizon, searching for signs of life.

“Hello!” she yells.

No answer.

The scorching sand beneath her feet begins to burn her skin. She winces from the pain.

“Hello!?”

Again, no reply.

She sets her sights on a general direction and proceeds to hike through the sand. She can feel the blazing sun wreaking havoc on her skin, sizzling it to a crisp.

She looks to the sky.

A flock of hungry vultures stalk her from above, waiting for their opportunity to attack.

She returns her gaze forward and suddenly stops.

Before her stands Nazim, his eyes staring at her with a sinister grin plastered on his face.

“Why do you run?” he asks.

Andrea takes a step back and turns around to find Bongani standing behind her.

“Why do you try to escape that which is inescapable?” Bongani inquires.

Andrea’s heart begins to beat rapidly as fear courses through her body.

“Shut up!” she exclaims, “Leave me alone!”

“What are you so afraid of?”

“Go away! It’s none of your business!”

She spins around and is this time stopped by Baba.

“What happened in Iraq, Ms. Leavensly?” he asks.

“I said-!”

“The truth cannot be hidden forever.”

He begins to laugh maniacally, followed swiftly by Bongani and Nazim. Andrea stares at them with frightened eyes.

“You...you can't know!” she states, “How could you!?”

“We know all,” Baba replies.

Bloodcurdling cawing reigns down from above. Andrea glances up just enough to see the horde of vultures descending upon her. She hunkers down, placing her hands over her head as they dive onto her, tearing flesh from her back and arms. She lets out an agonizing scream as she tries to wave them off, ripping through the air with her hands. It is hopeless as the vultures swarm and clasp onto her, their beaks digging into her flesh. She collapses to the ground as the horde of birds begin to block out the sun. She can faintly hear the laughter of the three men amongst the blood thirsty cries from the vicious birds.

Suddenly, the birds dissipate, revealing Andrea's torn body. Pieces of flesh dangle from her back and arms as she slowly glances up.

Standing over her is a tall, pale man cloaked by a dark-gray robe, his eyes shadowed by the hood over his head. She reaches a hand out to him.

“Hhhhelp me,” she pleads with him.

The man remains stoic, his cloak blowing in the sweltering breeze.

“Wwwhat do you wwant from me?” Andrea asks.

Suddenly, the man lifts his hand and points away from her. Andrea follows his hand and turns her head. Her eyes widen with horror.

Not but a few feet away a young boy sits on a small rock, gazing at her with innocent eyes. Like her, his flesh has been torn away from his body, pieces still attached to muscle.

Andrea lets out an excruciating cry.

Andrea bursts from the silk covers of the queen-sized bed, drenched from head to toe in sweat. She cradles her head in her hands, tears rolling down her face. Every inch of her body shakes uncontrollably as she sobs.

“Another bad dream?”

Andrea jolts up to see Baba sitting in the chair beside her.

“What the-!”

“Please, forgive me. I did not mean to-.”

“What, watch me while I sleep!” she exclaims, “Get out!”

“I come and go as I please, Ms. Leavensly,” Baba interjects.

“Yeah, but that doesn’t give you the right to-!”

She lets out a frustrated sigh.

“What does it matter?” she says, “you’ll just come up with some flippin’ proverb or somethin’ that, in your mind, allows you to do whatever the heck you want.”

Baba bows his head as he leans forward.

“One that is tormented by waking nightmares casts a long shadow,” he says.

“There it is,” she replies, looking away as she wipes the tears from her eyes.

“Tell me, Ms. Leavensly,” he continues, “what is it that casts this shadow over you?”

She turns to him.

“Why the heck would I ever tell you?”

“Well, have I not shared much of my past with you?”

“So?” Andrea retorts, “That doesn’t give you any leverage over me! Besides, for all I know, you’ve just made up most of it so you can sound like the martyr in all o’ this!”

“Ms. Leavensly, I assure-.”

“You know what!? *I’m sick of it!* Sick of this little game you’re playing, you sadistic old man!”

Baba grips his staff tighter, his face turning red.

“I’ve done my research,” Andrea continues, “You are directly responsible for the Johannesburg Massacre of ‘83 and the disappearance of hundreds of woman and children all across Africa and the Middle East. God knows where they’ve ended up now because of you! And, to top that-!”

“*Enough!*”

Baba’s sudden outburst stuns Andrea.

“Do you not know how heavily that weighs on me!” he exclaims, “Do you think that I am such a monster that I do not feel guilt for my actions! I am not a bad man! *I-!*”

Baba breaks down, allowing the staff to fall to the floor. He cradles his head in his hands as he sobs uncontrollably.

“You do not understand, Ms. Leavensly,” he says through the tears, “These lands are cruel and soaked in the blood of countless innocents. I am saving as many as I can from a gruesome fate.”

“By selling them to the highest bidder.” Andrea interrupts.

“That’s not what-!?”

Baba looks up and sighs.

“Perhaps you are right, Ms. Leavensly,” he states, “perhaps I am a monster.”

There is a brief moment of silence.

Then, Baba smirks, grabbing the staff from the floor and rising from his chair.

“Come with me,” he tells Andrea.

She looks at him as he strolls to the door.

“Where are we going this time, eh?” she inquires.

He turns to her and smiles.

“I think it is time we both had some fresh air.”

With that, he leaves. Andrea stares at the open door, puzzled. Without another moment of hesitation, she steps out of bed, slips on her sandals, and quickly follows after him, snatching her satchel on the way out.

As she steps out of the bedroom, she catches a glimpse of Bongani leaning against the wall to her right.

“A word of wisdom, Ms. Leavensly,” he states.

“Oh, and what great wisdom would that be, Bon Bon?” she retorts.

Bongani smirks as he approaches her.

“Perception is a very powerful tool,” he continues, “However, if influenced too much by outside forces, it can blind one from the truth.”

“And your point?”

He chuckles.

“You are the journalist, Ms. Leavensly. You tell me.”

The two stare at one another for a moment. Bongani lets out a hearty laugh as he walks past her.

“This way, if you please,” he says, beckoning her to join him.

Reluctantly, she follows, retrieving a hair band from her satchel.

After traversing the maze of corridors and stairwells, the two exit the large complex and arrive at the makeshift front gate, where Baba, now joined by Nazim, is waiting next to one of many jeeps.

“Are you ready, Ms. Leavensly?” Baba inquires.

“Where are we going,” she asks.

“As I said, out for some fresh air. I believe it will do us both good.”

“How do I know you won’t just kill me as soon as we are out of sight of your complex?”

Baba grins.

“If that were the case, I would have had you killed long before we ever met, Ms. Leavensly.”

He chuckles. Bongani and Nazim follow suit, making Andrea slightly uneasy.

“Come, the day is just beginning.”

The three men step into the jeep. Andrea hesitates for a moment.

“Great,” she thinks to herself, “Now I’m gonna be stuck out in the African desert with a bunch of human traffickers. What could possibly go wrong?”

She lets out a frustrated sigh and half-heartedly enters the vehicle.

The front gate slides open as Nazim places the car in “Drive”. The engine roars as the jeep accelerates forward, rushing past the guard post. Andrea takes one last glance behind her at the compound as the gate closes behind them. Dust trails as the jeep descends into the African landscape. The morning sun creeps above the mountains, heralding the coming of a new day.

A new day, indeed.