

ARASH HEJAZI

Only the Arrow Does Not Die

A NOVEL



Kay Khusro





The old traditions do not always agree on where these lands and cities lay. This map follows the geography of the story told here.

Only the Arrow Does Not Die

English version by the author

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The verse from Firdowsi's *Shahnameh* is translated from the Persian by Arash Hejazi.

The epigraphs from Friedrich Nietzsche are taken from the following public-domain translations: *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and *The Joyful Wisdom*, translated by Thomas Common, and *Beyond Good and Evil*, translated by Helen Zimmern.

This is a work of fiction. Historical, mythological and religious figures, traditions, places and events are imaginatively reinterpreted. All other characters and incidents are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance between fictional characters and actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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To Kai

We heard and saw the world's concealed design,
its good and evil, shadowed and revealed.
Whoever carries wisdom in the mind
must know that joy and grief alike will yield.

We pass. The world is nothing but an inn.
Why burden it with sorrow upon sorrow?
From every side we gather what we can,
then leave it to our enemies tomorrow.

No soul has lingered long beneath the sky.
Each comes at last upon the road of dying.
When age has bent the mane and bowed the back,
the hands close only on the wind's replying.

This day will pass, as every day must pass,
while time counts out the breaths that still remain.
I strove, and bore what hardship life could give,
yet saw no mortal in this world remain.

Kay Khusro, *Firdowsi's Shahnameh*

PART ONE

It is easy to fight an enemy you hate. What is hard is to fight those you love. That is where courage takes on meaning.

ADURA CLOSED THE BOOKLET AND LOOKED AGAIN at its cover. When she had first picked it up from among the dozens of manuscripts that arrived on her desk each day, she had not imagined for a moment that this cheap, faded photocopy, no more than fifty or sixty pages long, would overturn the entire course of her life. For twelve years, that had been her work: to read through stacks of manuscripts, stick on a label saying ‘not fit for the publisher’s plans’, and send them away, or else place them on the left-hand side of her desk, where they would wait until she could return to them with more care and attention. No unsolicited manuscript was supposed to draw her, little by little, into a business she wanted no part in, let alone change her life for ever.

She ran her hand once more over the booklet’s cheap white card cover, and dust came away on her fingers. The title was printed in black. Even the paper was shoddy. The opening lines had caught her attention, but it was the title that stirred her curiosity. She would have leafed through the thing even if it had had nothing to do with the publishing house. Its title was *Kay Khusro and the Secret of the Sacred Grail*.

She searched for the author’s name. Only after turning the booklet over and over did she find it on the last page, beneath the final sentence. She was writing her doctoral thesis at the time, on a subject that overlapped with the booklet’s own: narrative parallels between the myth of Kay Khusro and the legend of King Arthur. She had to submit the final revision to her supervisor in three days. The booklet might contain something useful, something that would help her finish the thesis.

She put her head round the office door and gestured to the secretary, who was typing at speed while speaking into the telephone. A minute or two later, when at last she put the receiver down, the secretary said, 'Yes?'

Adura, who disliked being kept waiting, asked irritably, 'Did you put this booklet on my desk?'

Before the secretary could answer, the telephone rang and she picked it up again. Adura closed the door and sat down at her desk. It hardly mattered. It must have been Esfandiar. She put the booklet on the left-hand side of her desk, to come back to later. Then she thought of calling Ilia, just to hear how he was. He had been gone a week. When they had said goodbye, she had held her son in her arms and, sobbing, told him to take care of himself. Something deep inside her had cried out: *It's over. Now I have only the future.*

Yet in that week she had seen no trace of the future she had waited for all those years, and the absence of it sharpened her longing for her son.

Ilia was the only living part of her past left to her. She still had Bahman's clothes, which for twenty years she had kept hidden in three suitcases on top of the wardrobe, waiting for the day she would give them to Ilia. But Ilia had grown up slight, and his father's clothes had never fitted him.

There was something else too, though she had never been sure whether it was an object or a living thing. It had come down to her from her grandmother: a small cup of emerald-coloured glass, encircled by a design, or perhaps a line of script, a finger's breadth below the rim. Whenever she looked at it, the pattern seemed like a message, a line of writing that wanted to speak.

The telephone rang and brought her back to the world around her. It was Esfandiar, asking her to come by his office.

'I'm coming now,' Adura said.

Five minutes later, she was in the director's office, sitting on the warm, yielding sofa beneath the painting of the Burnt City of Sistan, drinking coffee. They talked at length about work and the publishing house's programme. Esfandiar, in his usual jeans and an expensive but plain T-shirt, the familiar scent of Givenchy cologne clinging to him, looked at her over his frameless spectacles and said, 'If we're going to keep to the programme, you'll have to increase the number of books in your list.'

'How many? And how fast?'

'At least ten books handed over to production by the end of the year.'

Adura's eyes widened. 'I can't conjure ten books out of thin air.'

His frown eased, and he looked at her gently. 'Please do what you can.'

Adura did not argue. She did not want to disappoint him. She only said, 'I'll do what I can.' Then, as she rose from her seat, she changed the subject. 'By the way, that booklet is very interesting.'

'Which booklet?'

'The one you put on my desk. About Kay Khusro...'

The telephone rang. Esfandiar lifted the receiver and shrugged, as if to say he knew nothing about it. Adura was about to leave, but he gestured for her to sit. She sat down again and watched him. With his smooth forehead, square jaw and large black eyes, he was an attractive man, though his habitual frown and absorption in work kept people at a distance. Since Bahman had been killed in the war, he had protected Adura and her son with a force that still unsettled her.

When Esfandiar's call ended, he turned to Adura and smiled. 'And how is our young doctor?'

'Ilia? He's well. He's rented a place in Zahedan with two other students. His classes start in three days.'

'So in the end you didn't use the concession for martyrs' families to get him transferred to Tehran?'

'We didn't want that. He didn't want to profit from his father's death.'

Esfandiar fell silent for a few moments. Adura knew he wanted to change the subject, and knew, too, what would come next. At last he asked, 'Does the loneliness bother you?'

'I'll get used to it,' Adura said too quickly.

Esfandiar picked up a piece of paper with anxious fingers and began writing something. Adura made to rise again, but suddenly he asked, 'In all these years, have I ever failed you?'

Adura looked at him, surprised. 'No. You've always been kind to me and Ilia. What do you mean?'

Without lifting his head from the paper, Esfandiar said, 'When we came under fire, Bahman and I were thrown to the ground. My stomach had been torn open. I thought I was about to die. I was groaning. But Bahman was calm. He didn't say a word. With whatever strength I had left, I dragged myself towards him...'

Adura cut him off. One more word, and she would burst into tears.

'I've told you a hundred times I don't want to know how he died.'

Esfandiar swallowed what he had been about to say. 'Bahman entrusted you to me,' he said, his voice trembling. 'All these years, I felt I owed him a debt. We went to the front together. We were hit together. But he gave his life and I lost only my spleen. You can live without a spleen.'

Adura interrupted him again. 'Instead, you took care of us. Better than my own parents, better than any brother I could have had. Ilia loves you too. Why are you bringing this up again?'

After a heavy silence, Esfandiar lit his cigarette. He took two or three deep drags, enough to fill the room with smoke, and said, 'For the first two or three years, I looked after you because of my promise to Bahman.'

Adura did not answer. She kept her honey-coloured eyes on him. She knew Esfandiar too well. She saw him quickly hide his left hand behind his back, as if to keep her from seeing it tremble. Esfandiar had been born left-handed, but a childhood injury he never spoke of had severed the ligament in his left hand and forced him to become right-handed. Now, whenever he was under a strain he wanted to conceal, his left hand began to shake.

But Adura did not want the conversation to continue.

'I still can't work out who put this booklet on my desk.'

Esfandiar just asked, 'Do you know why I never married?'

Adura was already on her feet and moving towards the door when she said, 'I'll go and ask the others who put it on my desk.'

WHEN HE COMES TO, HE IS LYING face down. A large cockroach moves calmly back and forth across the floor.

He is still dazed. The stale air sickens him. All he can feel is the fierce pain in his back, beneath the left side of his ribcage. His mind gives him nothing. No answer, no cause. He has long been used to remembering nothing. He tries to move, but pain shoots through his lower back and he lies still. The creak of the door and the approaching footsteps give him a brief hope that he may at last discover what has happened to him. This time he does not move. He keeps his head down and moans.

A woman's hoarse voice reaches him. She sounds about fifty.

'God help you. I hope it was worth doing this to yourself for a few miserable coins?'

'I'm in pain,' he says.

As though she has not heard him, the woman introduces herself.

'I'm Nurse Malaki.'

He feels the light touch of her hand on his back, then hears her again.

'I need to take your pulse and temperature.'

There is mockery in her voice, or perhaps he only imagines it. Careful not to strain the muscles in his back, he turns his head halfway. A plump hand slips the cold thermometer into his mouth. It tastes of iron. Then the same hand takes his wrist gently and presses two fingers to his pulse. The touch of her soft, ageing skin calms him.

When at last she removes the thermometer, he presses his face into the rough pillowcase and waits for some sound from her. When none comes, he opens his mouth.

'Have you gone? I'm thirsty.'

Her voice answers. 'You can't have anything for twenty-four hours.'

'Are you trying to kill me?'

The nurse laughs. 'It wouldn't be the first time in this hospital. But death is in the hands of the Angel of Death. We're only the instruments. I'm going. Press the bell if you need anything.'

Before she leaves, she puts a cone-shaped object into his hand.

'Wait.'

After all the long years he has survived, this time he cannot bear to be left alone.

'How long do I have to stay face down?'

'As long as you can bear the pain. The sooner you get up, the better.'

‘Help me turn over.’

Nurse Malaki’s bright, carrying voice comes back to him. ‘Not this soon.’

He shouts, or thinks he shouts, ‘If you don’t turn me over, I’ll bite my tongue off.’

‘I wouldn’t put it past you,’ the nurse says crossly. ‘Provided someone paid you for it, of course. Which they won’t.’

But she seems unwilling to find out whether he means it. She takes him beneath the left arm.

‘One... two... three... together.’

With almost superhuman strength, she rolls him onto his side in a single movement. Pain twists through his back and his sight goes black.

When he opens his eyes, a plump woman in a navy-blue gown and headscarf is sitting in the chair beside his bed. Her face is older than her voice. She stares at him with large eyes.

At last she smiles.

‘If you hadn’t made such a racket, we’d have given you painkillers first.’ She rises to go. ‘I’ll come back in half an hour and give you the injection.’

Terror seizes him again.

‘Please, don’t go. I don’t want to be alone.’

The nurse sits down again.

‘Love, there’s a twenty-five-year-old boy in the next room. No kidneys left, infection in his blood, and he isn’t responding to the medicine. Do you know what that means?’

‘He’s going to die?’

‘He may not last till morning.’

The man scratches his head and, for the first time, lets his gaze travel around the room. There are two other beds, both empty. It is night, and there is no curtain at the window.

‘I have to check on him every ten minutes. This place is full of people who need me. Unlike you, it isn’t their own fault.’

He says nothing. The nurse shifts in her chair. Yet she seems in no hurry to leave.

She narrows her eyes and meets his gaze.

‘Tell me something. Why did you sell your kidney? How much did you get? Was it worth it?’

He grimaces.

‘Shouldn’t you be checking on that boy who’s dying?’

She glances at her watch.

‘Four minutes yet. So? Was it worth it?’

He fixes his eyes on the ceiling. ‘What difference does it make to you?’

‘I’d like to know.’

‘I don’t know how much they paid. I don’t care either. You people are strange, you know.’

The nurse’s eyes widen. ‘How?’

‘If I’d come here and donated my kidney, this room would be full of flowers. Full of people telling me what a noble, generous man I was. You wouldn’t be asking whether it was worth it. But because money changed hands, you look at me as though I’ve committed a crime. The money didn’t even come to me.’

‘What do you mean, it didn’t?’

‘Ask the man who won my kidney in a gamble.’

There is no mockery left in her gaze now. No kindness either. She half rises from the chair, but he goes on.

‘I don’t know how much the creditor got for it. I signed a paper, that’s all. Gave him power of attorney to sell my kidney and take the money. One day they came and threw me onto an operating table, and now I’m here. I think the buyer paid the hospital bill too. I don’t know.’

Nurse Malaki slowly straightens, gives him one last look, then leaves.

IT WAS FIVE TO TEN. ADURA WAITED in the faculty corridor until the hour, then knocked on her professor's door. Dr Mahtash was fanatical about punctuality. Adura had worked until five that morning, and afterwards sleep had been impossible. Even so, she was pleased with herself. She had finished typing the dissertation and added several new arguments that she was certain would startle her supervisor.

Dr Mahtash, wearing her small reading glasses, leafed through the dissertation, occasionally making a note in pencil on the pad beside her. At last she looked at Adura over the top of her glasses.

'Interesting.'

A trace of a smile appeared on Adura's face. Dr Mahtash did not allow it to remain there.

'Unfortunately,' she said, 'it is also unscholarly, unsupported and full of references to non-academic texts.'

Adura had expected this, but she still hoped she might persuade her professor to consider the deeper arguments in the dissertation. She opened her mouth to defend herself, but Dr Mahtash removed her glasses, which meant there was no chance she would look at those pages again.

'I didn't expect this from you, my dear,' Dr Mahtash said. 'Your master's dissertation was exceptional...'

Adura tried once more to speak. A sharp movement of the professor's hand silenced her.

'You know my standards. Who is this Mr Za'ir whom you cite so often? I have never heard of him.'

'I don't know him either.'

'What are his academic credentials?'

She did not wait for an answer. A thin, sarcastic smile crossed her face.

'Apart from your good self, who has cited him?'

'Dr Mahtash, would you like me to bring you his text?'

'This Kay Khusro and the Secret of the Sacred Grail? If I spent my time reading the fantasies and speculations of every amateur writer, I would never get to my own work.'

'But he identifies connections in the Kay Khusro tradition that conventional scholarship has missed. His reconstruction of the Kayan world is worth examining.'

Adura knew at once that she had touched a sore point. For a moment, she hoped her professor had begun to doubt herself. But then Dr Mahtash

said quietly, 'My dear, his work may be respectable at the level of an interested amateur...'

She gathered the pages together and pushed them back towards Adura.

'But you are a doctoral student. You would do better to rely on documented sources and keep away from fantasy.'

Adura picked up her papers and rose.

'Dr Mahtash, this goes back three thousand years. Even with all the archaeological discoveries, there are still enormous gaps in the evidence. We cannot reconstruct the whole story. Interpretation is unavoidable. I'm arguing from patterns in the surviving material, not inventing evidence.'

Her professor's face hardened again.

'A thesis supervised by me has no room for this sort of thing.' She turned the pages of her calendar and wrote something down. 'Rewrite it within a month, remove this nonsense, and I will see you then.'

FOOTSTEPS IN THE CORRIDOR, indistinct voices, doors closing, muffled sounds. They startle him awake. He presses the call button, and a nursing aide dressed in white comes into the room.

‘What’s going on out there?’

‘Visiting time.’

He closes his eyes again. ‘I don’t have visitors. Please shut the door, and if anyone tries to come in, don’t let them. I don’t want to see anyone.’

He has no desire to meet the person who received his kidney, or their family. He turns on the television. A panel is discussing the *Shahnameh*, arguing over whether a particular verse is authentic or a later interpolation. He sneers and changes the channel. On the news, they report that a bomb exploded that morning in a pilgrimage city in Iraq, killing sixty Shia pilgrims.

He closes his eyes again. He does not want to think about what he will do when he is discharged, where he will sleep, what he will eat, or how he has come to this. For years he has tried to erase every trace of his past, to forget his own story. Now he has no choice but to think about the fog-bound future ahead of him, though he knows it will be no different from the past he has forgotten. Perhaps if he twists about and groans enough, Nurse Malaki will take pity on him and speak to the doctor, and they will give him morphine. Morphine brings him dreamless sleep. Without it, all the past he has tried to destroy comes rushing back in dreams.

He opens his eyes. It is five past four. He has slept for about an hour. He picks up the remote to turn the television on again, and then Nurse Malaki comes in. At the sight of the bouquet in her hand, he half rises.

Who would send him flowers? Perhaps the family of the kidney recipient. Perhaps the vampire to whom he lost his kidney. He pushes the thought away and, without a word, gestures for the nurse to put the flowers on the table beside his bed. Since that first night, she has asked him nothing, made no attempt at conversation, not even met his eyes. This time, however, she removes the card from the bouquet and hands it to him.

‘Anyone who turns away other people’s kindness doesn’t deserve to live.’

The movement of her hand stirs the air, and the scent of the white roses drifts towards him. Despite himself, he breathes it in. After several days in that stale, airless room, its freshness pleases him against his will.

He looks at the design on the card. A lotus. He turns it over. The back is blank except for a name and telephone number, written in a woman’s

hurried hand. He recognises neither. They must have mistaken him for someone else. He drops the card on the table beside the bed.

Nurse Malaki is still standing beside him. 'A woman brought them. She was very keen to see you, but apparently you'd told the aide you didn't want to see anyone.'

He nods.

'A respectable lady. Very neat. Very elegant. She said she was a colleague of yours.'

A colleague? He has no colleagues. He has never had one in all his life. He shrugs. As the nurse is leaving, she glances back.

'She was very good-looking.'

ADURA HAD CRIED HERSELF out.

Dr Mahtash had dismissed her master's dissertation with the same certainty, accusing her of forcing a connection between Jamshid and Osiris. The examining committee had disagreed, awarding Adura the highest mark by four votes to one. Afterwards, Dr Mahtash had even praised the work. This time, however, she was Adura's supervisor. Unless Adura could win her over, she would lose another term.

A few minutes earlier, Esfandiar, who always seemed to arrive just when she needed him, had come to her office to see how she was. Adura's tears had started again, and she told him what had happened. Esfandiar listened without interrupting. At last he said only, 'You have two choices. Either write the dissertation the way your supervisor wants and get your mark, or we find this Za'ir and ask him what sources he has for all this.'

They made enquiries about who had put the booklet on Adura's desk. The receptionist said it had arrived by post. She had thought it might interest Adura and had left it there. The envelope had been thrown away, and there had been no letter inside.

Adura went through the booklet again, hoping to find some clue. Each time she opened it, she fell further under its spell. It became an obsession. She set her dissertation aside. Every morning she dealt with two or three tasks at the publishing house, then began to read, and each time it seemed another layer had been lifted from the writing. All the while, despite Esfandiar's apparent indifference, she knew he was waiting in silence. Waiting for the ten books on her list, and for some answer to those veiled expressions of affection.

She wished Esfandiar had been braver. Years ago, if he had taken a step towards her, she might have welcomed it. He was handsome, decent and almost inseparable from the life she had built after Bahman. Yet the secrecy surrounding him had always held her back. However well she knew him, some essential part of him remained closed to her.

Perhaps it was Ilia's absence too, the strain of not seeing him, that had bound her so tightly to the booklet. Perhaps it made the separation from her son easier to bear. At first they had spoken on the telephone for half an hour every night, then every other night. Now ten days had passed without a word from him. She knew he had settled in, and when she had offered once or twice to go to Zahedan and help him and his housemates get organised, Ilia had shown no enthusiasm for the idea.

Had the booklet, then, taken her son's place?

Since Ilia had left, the shape of her life had begun to change. For the first time, she wondered whether she might have lived differently, and whether the choices she and Bahman had made had truly been right.

She had been forced to choose much earlier than most. Their American green cards had arrived a month before the news of Bahman's death at the front. After the funeral, her parents wanted to take her to America. But Adura was pregnant and did not want to go. She wanted her son to grow up in the land for which his father had been killed. She knew Bahman would have wanted that too.

When they met, Adura was seventeen and Bahman twenty-four. Her Islamic Studies teacher had assigned the class a research project on religion. Since her beloved grandmother's death, dying had come to occupy her thoughts. She wanted to know what a person felt in the final breath. As soon as the teacher said they could choose their own subjects, she remembered a conversation she had had with her father two months after Nanny's death.

‘**WHAT MAKES SOMEONE LOVE** a man the way Nanny loved Grandfather, and still refuse to see him for forty years?’

Her dad gave a wry smile.

‘Nanny fought for forty years. At a time when women were counted among the furniture, my mother stood up to your grandfather. She had no one. Nowhere to go. But she left and became homeless, even though she loved him. You saw that yourself in the hospital.’

Adura remembered. It had been more than a year earlier. After a stroke, Grandfather had been admitted to hospital. His second wife had sent word to Adura’s dad that Grandfather had asked for Tahereh, Adura’s Nanny. After forty years.

Nanny had spent those years in a small room near the Shrine of Holy Ma’suma, supporting herself with her crochet. She visited Tehran but refused to live there, laughing that if she died away from Qom, the family might bury her in the wrong place.

Her dad knew better than to mention his father’s name in front of his mother, so he asked Adura to speak to her.

That afternoon, no one else was home. Nanny was sitting cross-legged on the floor as usual, a glass of hot tea beside her. As she smoked her unfiltered cigarette, she ran her hand carefully over the floor, searching, as always, for the tiniest speck of rubbish to drop into her wooden ashtray. Adura sat beside her.

‘Nanny, I bought dried mulberries on the way home. Let’s have some.’

Nanny loved dried mulberries. She watched her granddaughter with pleasure as Adura opened the bag and held it out. Her grandmother eagerly took one, put it in her mouth and followed it with a sip of tea. Then she looked over her glasses at Adura, took another mulberry and said, ‘What is it? Whenever you want something from me, you buy me mulberries. Go on, ask.’

Adura showed her the half-finished piece of crochet. ‘Is it good?’

The old woman took the crochet from her with great seriousness, ran her fingers over it and said, ‘You’ll have to undo ten rows.’

‘What’s wrong with it?’

The old woman laughed. ‘What isn’t wrong with it? Crochet is delicate work.’ She pulled the thread and began undoing the rows.

‘Crochet is a tradition in our family. I learned it from my mother, and she learned it from hers. Now I’m teaching it to you, so that one day you

can teach your daughter. People like buying my work because I put a story into every stitch.'

She picked up the cushion cover she had just finished and spread it out in front of Adura.

'Look. This cushion cover, which would fit inside your fist if you crumpled it up, is my whole story.' She ran her hand over it. 'This flower is your father. From the moment he came, my life changed. I was no longer a new bride. I was a mother. I no longer had the right to put up with your grandfather's blows and insults.'

Adura had been waiting for this.

'Nanny, tell me about Grandfather.'

Nanny shot her a sharp look, but her gaze softened almost at once.

'He wasn't bad at first,' Nanny said. 'He was the man of the house. He had his bakery. Came home every night with his hands full. I was thirteen when they married me to him. Thirteen. I'd never known another man. I put all my hopes in him. Then he gained a little standing, got mixed up in politics, tasted money, and everything rotted. He made my life bitter. Then he took another wife and brought her into my home. Well. That one is between him and God.'

Adura asked quickly, 'Would you be willing to see him?'

Nanny's eyes widened. 'God forbid. Of course not.'

'If you hated him, why did you never divorce him? You lived alone for forty years. You were still young then. You could have married again.'

Her grandmother laughed. 'One man like him was enough for seven generations.' But her honey-coloured eyes were not laughing. For a few minutes she said nothing. Then suddenly she spoke again. 'When I think about it, I've never been able to picture any man's face but your grandfather's.'

Adura let the silence gather around what she was about to say.

'Nanny, Grandfather is dying. He wants to see you. Will you go?'

Her grandmother only said, 'What God wills will be.' And she would say no more.

Three days later, when Adura came home from school, Nanny was dressed and waiting.

'Call your father. Tell him to come and take me to the hospital.'

Adura and her dad went into Grandfather's room first. He was lying in bed. Adura's aunt was standing at the head of the bed.

'Yadollah.'

It was her grandmother. She pushed past Adura's dad and aunt and went to the bedside, taking her place at the head of the bed. Everyone watched in silence. Grandfather lay motionless, his eyes closed. Nanny removed the oxygen mask from his face and put her hand on his head.

'Yadollah, get up. Tahereh has come.'

Grandfather's eyelids trembled.

Nanny said, almost laughing, 'After forty years, I come to see you and you choose to sleep?'

His eyes opened. They moved rapidly, without settling. When he saw Nanny, his gaze fixed on her. Nanny stroked his head and smiled. Grandfather looked at her with a question in his eyes, as though searching his memories for some trace of the young wife he had known in this old woman. A tear glittered at the corner of his eye. With difficulty, he opened his dry lips.

'Tahereh...'

Nanny's voice thickened. 'It's me.'

Grandfather murmured something. Nanny bent over him and brought her ear close to his mouth. Adura could not bear it. She stepped forward to hear. In a weak voice, Grandfather asked, 'Why... did you go?'

Nanny pressed his hand. 'Because you broke my heart.'

Her voice was trembling. She bent and kissed his forehead.

'I forgive you, Yadollah.'

The old man gave a faint smile. 'You've grown old, Tahereh.'

Then he closed his eyes and never opened them again.

On the way back from the hospital, Nanny suddenly said, 'He's turned into a damn ghoul himself, then tells me I've grown old!' And she wiped her eyes.

Grandfather died three days after that meeting. Less than a year later, Nanny too was dead. She suffered a heart attack while praying on her mat in her room in Qom, and died there.

When they found her will, they discovered that with the money she had earned from her crochet, she had bought herself a grave in a cemetery near the Shrine. The rest of her money, little as it was, she had given away to a neighbour and to a girl who had no trousseau. She left no

inheritance for her children, except a half-full bag of dried mulberries, an unfinished piece of crochet, her wooden ashtray, her oil lamp and that emerald-coloured cup. She had left them all to Adura.



It was Nanny's death that made Adura choose The Human State of Mind at the Moment of Death as the subject of her school project. She intended to watch twenty patients die and record what happened to them.

For that, she had to find a way into a hospital. No one was going to let a schoolgirl wander through the wards, still less into intensive care, to stand over dying patients with a notebook in her hand. Her father was firmly against the whole idea. He said it would damage her mind. But he also knew his daughter had inherited her grandmother's stubbornness. Once something entered her head, there was no removing it.

That was when Adura thought of Bahman. She had first seen him at her grandmother's burial, a broad-shouldered young man standing apart from the others, watching. After the burial, he came over to her.

'You must be Adura,' he said. 'Tahereh's beloved granddaughter.'

Adura nodded, her eyes full of tears. Bahman did not offer condolences, nor did he put on the mournful face people wear at funerals. He simply wrote his telephone number on a piece of paper and gave it to her.

'I owe Tahereh a debt,' he said. 'I'm studying medicine in Tehran. She told me to look after you. If you ever need anything, call me.'

Adura rang Bahman about her project. A few days later, he called back and said she could go wherever she wished in the hospital for one week, provided he stayed with her at all times.

And so she spent several hours there every afternoon. When the young resident came to meet her in the emergency department, in his white coat with a stethoscope round his neck, she could hardly believe he was a doctor. At two metres tall, with broad shoulders, he looked more like a basketball player. It took her a week to believe he was truly a doctor, and in that same week she fell in love with him.

Bahman, too, was drawn into the subject of her research. By the end of the week, they had recorded seventeen deaths, and the sight of so much dying broke something in Adura. She took to her bed. Bahman came to see her, and when she was well enough, he helped her write the report.

Going through that difficult, harrowing work together bound Adura and Bahman to one another in a strange way. It was as if they had become accomplices in a knowledge few others possessed.

As soon as she graduated, Bahman asked her to marry him. She said yes at once.

Her father believed Adura was too young to marry and that nothing good could come of deciding so quickly. But Adura had already decided.

Excerpt from
Kay Khusro and the Secret of the Sacred Grail

The first guardian of the Cup was Jamshid, king of the golden age and ruler of Iranvij, the primordial homeland of Iranian myth. He ruled over the Arya, the name the old stories give to the ancestors of the many peoples who came later, among them those of Iran and Turan.

Whether Jamshid was a king remembered as myth, or a myth shaped around the memory of a king, can no longer be known. What matters is that the Cup first appears in his story.

The wisdom entrusted to him was written on a small vessel that would pass through history under many names: Jamshid's Cup, Kay Khusro's Cup, the All-Seeing Cup, the Sacred Grail.

Perhaps the same Cup has appeared five times in history. Each time, history has altered course. Each guardian entered the company of the Immortals, and each paid darkly for what had been placed in his keeping.

After Jamshid came Kay Khusro, son of murdered Siyâvash: the king who ended the long war between Iran and Turan, restored blessing to the land, and then withdrew from the world.

In later ages, the memory of the Cup passed westward, changing shape as it went, and it may have survived in the stories of King Solomon, the Last Supper, and the Arthurian Grail.

‘HEKMAT LIBRARY.’

After turning the booklet over for what felt like the thousandth time, Adura noticed a faint stamp on one of the pages. She laid it on the light table and finally managed to make out the name: Hekmat Library.

After some searching, she found the library. It was in the city of Qom.

All day she tried calling the library, but no one answered. That evening she went to Esfandiar’s office. He was absorbed in revising his translation of Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*, three years into a project he had undertaken because he trusted no one else’s Nietzsche.

When Adura came in, he lifted his head from the book. It took him a few moments to return from Nietzsche’s strange world to his office in the publishing house. Then, without asking why she had come, he said abruptly, ‘How’s the new book?’

Adura knew he had asked something, anything, merely to show her that he was still living in this world and not in the ravings of that mad philosopher. For a few moments she looked at him without speaking. That day, in his sky-blue short-sleeved shirt and jeans, he looked ten years younger, and Adura found herself liking him despite herself.

To stop her thoughts from going any further, and to keep herself from falling into a delirium of her own, she asked, ‘Esfandiar, can I borrow your car for a day?’

‘Of course. Nothing serious, I hope.’

‘I want to go to Qom.’

‘Qom? What’s in Qom?’

‘I have something to do.’

‘A pilgrimage?’

‘No. I want to go to a library.’

Esfandiar looked surprised. ‘Have all Tehran’s libraries vanished?’

Adura frowned. ‘Are you interrogating me?’

For a moment he said nothing. Then he said, ‘I’ll take you myself. You haven’t driven in ages. Better not go out on the road.’

‘I don’t want to put you out.’

‘When do you want to go?’

‘Tomorrow.’

They said little on the way to Qom. She slept almost the whole way.

When they reached Qom, Esfandiar used the address to ask a seminarian for directions. The library, it seemed, was somewhere near the shrine. It took them another fifteen minutes to find it.

It looked nothing like one. It was a two-storey house, and beside the doorbell someone had written: *Hekmat Library, Endowment of the Late Mr Borqei*.

Esfandiar pressed the bell. Adura's heart began to thud. It had not occurred to her what she would do if no one answered the door either.

Esfandiar studied the old brick house with curiosity.

Irritated, Adura pressed the bell again. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw that Esfandiar had slipped his left hand into his pocket, but she was certain it was trembling.

At last she said, 'They didn't answer the phone. I thought perhaps it was broken.'

Esfandiar stared at her.

Adura pulled a face. 'If you're annoyed, go back to Tehran. I'll manage on my own.'

Esfandiar smiled. 'Come on. Let's go and see the shrine. We'll come back in an hour.'

Adura had not been there for years.

THE DOCTOR FINALLY SIGNS his discharge papers after rattling through what he may and may not eat, what he must and must not do, how dangerous the cold will be for him, and all the other instructions people give when they will not have to live with the consequences.

Which is to say, his troubles are only beginning. For days he has eaten and slept in the hospital without spending a penny. Now he has no idea which way to turn in the wide, indifferent world. As the nurse helps him dress, he asks after Nurse Malaki. She tells him Nurse Malaki has gone on leave for a few days but left him a phone card. She gives it to him. He takes it, surprised, and asks nothing.

With some difficulty, he pulls on his faded, torn jeans, then his black shirt, the one with no collar left, and settles his beloved old green overcoat over his shoulders. When the nurse leaves, he snatches the sugar bowl from the table and empties the cubes into his coat pocket. On his way out, he sees the card from the bouquet lying on the bedside table. He picks it up and looks at it again. Then, almost without thinking, he slips it into his shirt pocket.

The moment he steps into the street, he draws a deep breath. The city's cloudy air is filthier than ever, but after a week shut inside that stale room, any air with the sky above it has a taste. He walks past the pharmacy without even wondering what the prescription would cost. He will have to manage the pain somehow. All he needs is a warm, soft place to lie down for a week, until the wound seals.

After half an hour's walking, his knees begin to give way. A major operation, and a week of nothing but soup. He sits on the step of a house to catch his breath. There is no one he can go to, nowhere he can sleep. For months he has spent one night here, another there, until every door has closed. When his stomach growls, he is pleased with himself for having thought ahead for once. He takes a sugar cube from his pocket, puts it in his mouth and lets it dissolve slowly on his tongue. Rain is coming. He is glad he still has his overcoat, though that is no good sign. It means he will lose that too before long.

The doctor told him to avoid the cold. He did not ask how, because the doctor certainly would not know. He takes another sugar cube from his pocket and puts it into his mouth. The air has a sharp edge, and he must think of something. He stops at a crossroads, looks around and sees a mosque on the other side of the street.

A few people are praying inside. Two old men sit in a corner, reading. He cannot remember when he last set foot in a mosque, even for a funeral. He finds a corner and lies down.

His mind seethes, but no thought will hold. Cold air and the red of evening enter through the prayer-hall window. The stillness gives him no peace. Beneath it he sees only slaughter, one tyranny rising as another falls, and the same terror waiting in every tomorrow. He is not afraid. He is ashamed of being human. And still he cannot die.

He is in a plain of giant ferns and mosses, among swamps thick with carnivorous flowers. The sky is black with enormous birds, their talons sharp as blades. In the depths of the sea, razor-toothed predators coil and thrash, and in the midst of this hell he screams in terror. He flees their bloody battlefield and, covering his ears against the deafening cries, takes refuge in a primeval forest.

Someone nudges his foot. He opens his eyes in terror. He is soaked in cold sweat.

‘Sir. Wake up. You need to go. I’m locking up.’

His knees are drawn up to his belly, his head bowed to his chest and his hands pressed together before his face, his whole body curled like a foetus. Slowly he lowers his legs and sits up. Scratching his head, he looks at the mosque caretaker: a short, gaunt old man, made shorter by the bend in his back, with a thin beard and a skullcap over his shaved head.

He rubs his eyes.

‘They lock mosques at night?’

The old man coughs. His accent is thick. ‘They do, sir. Best be off.’

He chuckles. Then he sets one hand on the floor and hauls himself up with difficulty. The old man backs away in fright, turns and hurries off, his body pitching from side to side.

He supposes the old man may call the police. A night in a cell would at least be warmer than the street but first would come the questions. He has neither the strength to invent a life nor the desire to explain the truth.

TAHEREH IS WANDERING in the wilderness. The wind has risen, and only a red seam of daylight remains. She runs on her small legs. She has lost the way home and cannot remember how she came to be here. She remembers only this: she let go of her mother's hand, and then she was here. Her whole body is trembling. In the half-light she sees only the faces of wolves and demons. It is the eve of Friday, the night when prayers draw nearer to the dead. She feels the ground shift beneath her feet. She screams, shuts her eyes and runs. Then her foot catches on something and she falls.

A tree root, thrust up out of the earth. She does not try to rise. She clings to the tree and begins to cry.

'God, help me.'

A voice answers.

'What do you want, little girl?'

Through her sobs, Tahereh says, 'My mother.'

Then, astonished, she opens her eyes. Is the tree speaking? She raises her head. A woman is standing where the tree had been, and Tahereh has her arms around the woman's legs. Her face is luminous, kind and tired. Wonder almost gives way to joy.

'Lady, who are you?'

In that fierce light, she cannot see the woman's face clearly. She cannot make out the movement of her lips, but she hears her voice.

'Tahereh jan, my little girl. Did you ask God for help?'

Tahereh trembles. 'Are you God?'

She feels the woman smile.

'I am the tree you were holding. I have come in answer to your need.'

The woman stretches out her hand and lifts the child to her feet. Tahereh is no longer afraid. She presses herself against the woman and walks beside her, the woman's arm around her shoulders.

'Tahereh,' she says, 'what do you want?'

'I want to go home.'

The woman stops. Tahereh looks up, and this time she sees her penetrating eyes.

'Tahereh, when you seek refuge in me, do not ask for yourself. Ask for another. I cannot lessen your suffering, but through you another's suffering may be lessened.'

Tahereh does not fully understand. She understands only that she must ask for something on someone else's behalf.

‘My father,’ she says. ‘My father is ill. His eyes are going blind. Heal him.’
 ‘Healing is in God’s hands. Ask for something else.’

‘My mother. My mother wants a son. She has five daughters, but she wants a son.’

The woman takes her arm from Tahereh’s shoulders and draws an emerald-coloured cup from within her robe. She places it in the hand of the little girl.

‘Tahereh, this cup is humanity’s trust, placed in your keeping. For you it will bring only suffering, but it is your duty to guard it until you deliver it into the hands of the one who is waiting.’

Tahereh takes the cup and looks at it. Suddenly, for no reason she can understand, sleep seizes her. She can no longer keep her eyes open.

‘All right, Lady,’ she says. ‘Can I go home now?’

Nanny used to say she was only ten years old when she had that dream. When she woke, she began to scream. Her mother came running and gathered her into her arms, and Tahereh told her what she had seen.

The next day, her father’s eyes, afflicted by trachoma, began to improve. They took Tahereh to a dream interpreter. He said the woman had been Holy Ma’suma, and that Tahereh had received her grace.

Nanny used to say that when she woke from the dream, the emerald-coloured cup was in her hand. Her mother said she must have bought it the day before, when she had gone to the bazaar with her elder sister. But Nanny was certain it was the same cup the woman had given her.



As they entered the courtyard, grief closed around Adura’s heart. For an instant, she thought she saw her grandmother limping across the far side of the shrine precinct. She closed her eyes and drew a deep breath. She thought of the woman who had staked her whole life on her faith in Holy Ma’suma.

In those days, Nanny used to bring Adura here two or three times a year, especially during the summer holidays. In the mornings they would wander through the city, and once the son of Nanny’s landlady had taken them to Jamkaran. Sometimes Nanny’s old landlady told Adura stories.

The Shrine of Holy Ma’suma had always consoled her. So many people came to visit the tomb of a woman about whom they knew almost

nothing, except that she had been the sister of Imam Reza, the eighth Shia Imam, and had fallen ill in Qom and died.

Adura left Esfandiar and entered the women's section of the shrine. Seven or eight women, young and old, were sitting here and there on the floor, reading the Qur'an or pilgrimage prayers. The space beside the metal lattice enclosing the tomb was almost empty. She went quietly forward and laid her hand on the grille.

Adura sometimes wondered whether the sanctity of the place was older than the shrine itself, whether Ma'suma had inherited something from the vanished temple of the Persian goddess Anahita.

Tears rose in her eyes. She had no religious faith at all, yet she wanted to weep. She pressed her forehead gently to the bars of the grille and sobbed without sound, as she had done when her grandmother, tears gathering in her own eyes, told her for the thousandth time the story of Siyâvash.

Nanny had never told it as myth. She told it as though she had seen it happen. The young prince in the palace of his father, Kay Kâvus, beautiful, grave and so pure-hearted that even his enemies trusted him. Soudabeh, the king's wife, burning with desire for him. Siyâvash refusing her. Then the lie. Soudabeh accused him before the king, and Kay Kâvus doubted his own son. So they prepared the trial by fire. Siyâvash rode into the blaze with his horse Nightshade, and the flames, which devour all falsehood, passed over him harmlessly as water.

'Remember this,' Nanny used to say, tapping Adura's hand with one hard finger. 'Sometimes innocence is proved, and still nothing is saved.'

After that, the prince could no longer remain in his father's house. He went to war against Turan, defeated its army and accepted peace. When Kay Kâvus ordered him to kill the Turanian hostages and break his word, Siyâvash refused again. He chose exile over dishonour and crossed the River Vah into Turan, the enemy realm.

There, Afrasiab, king of Turan and hereditary enemy of the Kays, first received him with honour. Piran, the wise Turanian nobleman, protected him. Siyâvash married into that world, and Farangis, Afrasiab's own daughter, carried his child. For a while, it seemed possible that a man wronged by Iran might make peace with Turan, and that two bloodlines exhausted by hatred might finally rest.

But suspicion entered Afrasiab's heart. Garsivaz, his brother, fed it. Siyâvash, who had survived the fire, was taken without justice and killed

in a foreign land, and Farangis, still carrying his unborn son, was left between mourning and terror.

That unborn child was Kay Khusro.

Perhaps everything had begun with that story. Adura's love of epic and myth, and her love for Siyâvash's son, who was not merely his avenger but his return, his answer, his unfinished breath given body once more. Kay Khusro had helped Adura keep despair at bay. He had helped her believe that Siyâvash had not died for nothing. Yet Nanny had never really told her Kay Khusro's story. Only Siyâvash's. Only the wound. Adura had gone in search of the rest herself.

'Adura jan, welcome.'

She felt her grandmother's hand stroking her hair. Nanny had found freedom, but at a terrible price. She had lost everything, and yet she had always smiled, as she was smiling now, standing beside Adura and looking at her. Those strong wrists that could open, with a single turn, jars no man in the house could loosen. The oval face and honey-coloured eyes. The famous mole on her left cheek, which Adura had inherited too. And the bent back that, according to her father, had once belonged to a tall, straight body...



This time, the library door opened from inside. They pushed it and went in. Esfandiar looked around.

'It looks like anything but a library.'

He was right. It looked more like a house. A narrow entrance hall with a coat stand and shoe rack, two or three doors opening off it, and at the far end a staircase leading to the second floor. Only the smell of books gave the place away, that pleasant smell which, for those who live among books, is a kind of private code. Not everyone loves the smell of old paper.

A pair of legs appeared first, descending the stairs as the sound of footsteps carried along the corri-dor. Then the rest of him came into view. He was thirty-six or thirty-seven, dressed in a long linen shirt that fell to the knees of his loose white trousers. He was bald, but his beard hung to his chest, so thick that his face seemed lost in it. When he saw them, he came towards them smiling.

'Hello,' he said in a Baluchi accent. 'Can I help?'

'We thought this was a library,' Esfandiar said.

At the word library, the bearded man's face opened with delight.

'Of course it's a library. Though you're the first people to come here in six months.'

He held out his hand to Esfandiar.

'I'm Ali. Welcome.'

Esfandiar shook his hand, introduced himself and Adura, and gave him his card. Ali glanced at it and slipped it into his pocket. Then Esfandiar said, 'My colleague has come from Tehran because of your library.'

Ali looked her over with curiosity, as though he could not reconcile her immaculate appearance with the errand that had brought her there. Something stirred in his eyes, then vanished when he lowered his gaze.

'We tried calling before we came,' Esfandiar said, 'but your telephone seems to be out of order.'

Their host gestured to the right.

'Come through to the sitting room. I'll be with you in a moment.'

He went ahead and opened the door.

'You've come a long way. Sit down and rest. I'll bring tea.'

The room had rugs, fine armchairs and two small lamps. Pictures crowded the walls, and on a small table beside one of the chairs stood a sculpture Adura knew well: Mithra, the ancient Iranian god of covenant and light, slaying the bull. Esfandiar sat down. Adura moved slowly around the room. An old astrolabe hung on the wall opposite the window.

Ali spoke behind her.

'At least seven hundred years old. It goes back to the Crusades.'

Adura turned. He was setting the tea tray on the table.

'Do you know,' she said, 'the poet Nizami says Alexander the Great fashioned the astrolabe after Kay Khusro's All-Seeing Cup?'

'That's one theory,' Ali said. 'Please, sit.'

Adura sat, drank her tea and waited.

Silence gathered in the room.

Their host looked at her. 'So, what can I do for you?'

Adura took the booklet from her bag and placed it in front of him. When Ali saw it, he smiled but said nothing.

'Your library stamp is inside,' Adura said.

Out of politeness, he picked it up, leafed through it quickly and put it back on the table.

‘Did you send it to us?’

After a brief silence, he said, ‘Yes.’

‘There was no address. No covering letter.’

‘No.’

Esfandiar, left outside the exchange, stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray and tried to enter the conversation.

‘Did you write it?’

Adura’s heart began to race.

Ali laughed. ‘No. But I thought someone at your publishing house ought to read it.’

‘Where can I find the author?’ Adura asked.

Instead of answering, Ali turned to Esfandiar and began talking about publishing. Adura remained silent for a couple of minutes, but then she could bear it no longer.

‘How did this booklet come into your hands?’

Both men fell silent. Adura stood and put her hands on her hips.

‘You sent me this booklet so that I would read it. Why?’

Ali smiled. ‘I thought you might want to publish it.’

‘Fine. Then I need to speak to the author. Presumably he knows you sent it to me and is waiting to hear from us.’

Ali raised one eyebrow.

‘Actually... no. He doesn’t know. And I don’t know where he is either. I knew until a few months ago, but then he vanished.’

Esfandiar looked at him in surprise. ‘And that was when you suddenly decided to send his writings to a publisher?’

Ali shifted uneasily. He glanced at Adura, then said at last, ‘They were left with me in trust. Or rather, I kept asking questions until he answered. I wrote down what he told me.’

He looked away.

‘When he was leaving, I asked what I should do with it. He told me to do whatever I wanted with the booklet.’

For a moment, he seemed to be listening again to that answer.

‘I waited for a while,’ he said. ‘Then I decided to send it to a publisher that worked in this field. You could do whatever you liked with it.’

Adura said nothing. She looked at Esfandiar.

‘The longer this goes on,’ Esfandiar said, ‘the more I want to read this booklet.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Adura said. ‘He was close enough to you for you to write all this down, but you know nothing about him?’

Ali twisted his mouth. ‘It isn’t quite like that. I know a great deal about him. But it isn’t right to discuss someone else’s private affairs.’

‘In any case,’ Esfandiar said, ‘if we decide to publish the book, we’ll have to find the author and sign a contract with him.’

‘Wait a moment,’ Ali said.

He left the room and returned a minute or two later with a notebook. Leafing through it, he said, ‘Write down this number. It’s the last one I have for him, but he hasn’t been there for months. His landlady is a hag. Every time I mention his name, she starts cursing him and tells me nothing. Maybe you’ll get more out of her.’

Then, hesitantly, he said, ‘The sooner you find him, the better. A lot of people are looking for him.’

Adura shrugged. ‘Why didn’t you tell the police?’

‘Everyone would rather keep the police out of it.’

On the way back to Tehran, they stopped at the cemetery so that Adura could visit her grandmother’s grave for the first time in years. She washed the stone and, following a custom Nanny had loved, scattered over the grave a little wheat they had bought on the way. Nanny used to say that when the ants came and carried off the grains, the reward reached the dead. Esfandiar stood apart, leaving Adura alone with her grandmother. She waited until the ants appeared, one by one. Then she walked quietly back to him.

‘Let’s go.’

As he changed gear, Esfandiar asked, ‘Are you going to call now?’

Adura thought for a moment.

‘I don’t know. Perhaps it doesn’t matter any more. Dr Mahtash may have been right. They’re amateurs. One man writes down another man’s delirium, then sends it off to a publisher. None of it helps my dissertation.’

Esfandiar said nothing. Perhaps he saw the defeat in her face, because he tried to change the subject.

‘What made you want to visit your grandmother after all these years?’

Adura hesitated.

'I've been thinking about her a lot lately. I thought if I went to her grave and spoke to her, she might answer. But it was no use. My grandmother isn't in that cemetery.'

Esfandiar turned to look at her, startled.

'She isn't? Where is she?'

'I saw her in the shrine. In that blue cotton dress of hers, the one that covered her from neck to ankle, with her black chador and her feet knotted with corns.'

HE WALKS WITH HIS collar turned up, the buttons of his overcoat fastened, his back hunched against the cold. He longs for sleep. Perhaps if he tires his body enough, it will save him from the nightmare. A few hours of untroubled sleep would be a great mercy. In the hospital, with morphine, he slept through several nights. Now there is no morphine, and the moment he closes his eyes, the monsters return. He must exhaust himself. He must walk until he can no longer stand, until every joint in his body begs for sleep.

The streets are dark and almost empty. Everyone else is inside the sleep he envies. How do they manage it so easily? Perhaps they have accepted the nightmare. Perhaps it is no longer a nightmare at all, only a sweet dream laid over tired minds. One by one, the lit windows go dark, but his body still does not ask for sleep. His eyes are tired. His body is not. He wants the sleep of the dead.

Then he sees firelight at the far end of a ruin. He does not hesitate. He walks towards it. Flames lick from a rusted metal barrel punched full of holes, and beside it a shadow crouches beneath a blanket.

He goes closer. The shadow pays him no attention, but keeps taking things from a tin and putting them into its mouth.

‘Can I sit here?’

The shadow turns its head. Firelight falls across its face, and he sees a broken old man who has not shaved or cut his hair for a long time. The old man laughs.

‘Not my fire. Not my ruin.’

He sits beside the barrel and holds his hands towards the flames.

‘Help yourself,’ the old man says. ‘Supper.’

His stomach has been growling for hours. He turns with sudden interest to see what the old man calls supper. From the sack beside him, the old man brings out several half-empty tins, scraps of mouldy bread and one or two lengths of marrow bone. He lays them out before him.

‘There. Chef’s special.’

He inspects the feast without much appetite. The old man laughs.

‘All good for you, don’t worry. Found it in the bins outside the rich houses in the north of town.’

He tries to silence his stomach and forget the food. The old man tosses the empty tin aside, picks up a bone and strikes it hard against his palm to loosen the marrow.

'People throw away the good things now and eat the bad.'

He stares at the homeless old man in astonishment.

At last, the old man fixes his gaze on the stranger's face.

'If you could choose anything right now, what would you eat?'

The answer comes before he can think. 'Fresh clotted cream.'

The old man smiles and places the bread in his palm.

'Eat, young man. Eat. You're ill. Anyone can see that. You look half dead. Eat and stay alive, and one day you can have clotted cream again. Die, and that will be the end of clotted cream for ever.'

He cannot remember deciding to put the bread into his mouth. Once he grows used to the taste of mould, all the hunger in the world falls on him. He starts eating whatever lies within reach, greedily, helplessly.

The old man spreads his torn blanket beside the fire.

'I've only got two blankets. One under me, one over me. Put that overcoat underneath you. I'll put mine over you.'

They lie down beside the fire. For the first time in a long while, he feels something like peace.

'I was in a bad way,' he says. 'Thank you for letting me stay.'

'The earth, the sky, the fire, all of it belongs to the universe,' the old man says. 'Who am I to turn anyone out of the universe?'

He looks up at the sky. The clouds have gone, and unlike most nights, the pollution does not hide the stars. At last he is free, if this can be called freedom. He has no money to sustain it, and no one else to share it with. What is freedom worth like this? How long is he supposed to endure it alone?

He turns to the old man.

'How did you end up here?'

'I'm a doctor. I left this city thirty-eight years ago and came back the night before last.'

He falls silent for a moment.

'I came to see a woman I once loved. The woman I left so I could go in search of the meaning of death.'

Silence. He does not want to break it, but the old man goes on.

'I saw her tonight. I was still in love with her.'

He gives a short laugh without amusement.

'Worst of all, I realised those thirty-eight years hadn't been worth it.'

'They weren't worth it?' he asks quietly.

‘Well,’ the old man says, ‘that’s a little unfair. I did learn a few things. Only yesterday, while I was sweeping a street for no reason but my own pleasure, I helped a bewildered woman stop waiting and go to the one who was waiting for her.’

Then he turns the question back on him.

‘What about you? Tell me about yourself, then.’

‘There isn’t much to tell. A handful of scattered memories I’d rather not remember. I’ve done a bit of everything. More than anything, I loved architecture. For a few years, I worked at an engineering firm, designing building façades. Then I lost the job. I’m out of work now.’

The old man laughs.

‘Sleep now. Soon, you’ll have to make a serious decision and pay for it. So while you still can, don’t give a damn about anything.’

The man tries to keep quiet and sleep. But a question has been lodged in his mind for a long time, and suddenly he feels that this old man may be the one person who can answer it.

‘What should I do?’

‘People lack many things,’ the old man says. ‘But they have a few. Look and see what you have. Usually it’s more than enough. Until you know what you’ve got, you won’t know where to go.’

After several minutes of silence, the man asks again, despairing.

‘But what should I do?’

And, exactly as he expects, the only answer is snoring.

ADURA STOOD IN THE alley with a long-handled broom and a bucket of water. At the far end, the streetlamps of the main road cut into the thick darkness of midnight. As on every other night, she was afraid the neighbours might see her in their light. Yet beneath a cloudy, starless sky, she would not have been able to see the ground beneath her feet.

If anyone saw her and asked what she was doing, she would have no answer. What could she say? That she had surrendered herself to an old superstition, one of the means by which Nanny had defeated life? But there seemed little glory now in scorning superstition. She wanted only to carry out her grandmother's instruction.

All these years, she had allowed no one the chance to pity her. Now she needed someone to pity her enough to show her a way. She needed counsel from someone alive, but not from anyone as lost in life's trap as she was. She wanted someone whose word she would not doubt, and such a person was hard to find. Doubt was part of Adura's very substance.

Forty nights ago, Adura took out the half-finished tablecloth, one of the few things Nanny had left behind, and began to finish it. At first, she thought she had forgotten how to work the hook. But as soon as she took Nanny's tablecloth in her hands, the old skill returned. Then she remembered Nanny saying that she put a story into every stitch, and it occurred to Adura that the story in this tablecloth would have to belong to both of them, because Nanny had worked one half and left the other to her.

And then she remembered the night her grandmother woke her after midnight, the last time Adura ever saw her.

'My dear little one, my girl. I'm leaving early tomorrow morning. I thought you might be asleep and I wouldn't see you.'

'Why so early?'

'I want to be in Qom tomorrow. There are things I have to do, and I'm afraid I may not get to them in time.'

The silence that followed was unlike any of her other silences.

'Then why don't you say anything, Nanny?'

'I will. You see... my heart tells me I may not see you again. So I wanted to give you some advice.'

'Oh, Nanny, don't say that. Why are you like this tonight?'

The same tired, wrinkled smile made her face beautiful, though Adura knew it had not been there in the years when she had first left everything behind and begun her austere life.

‘It’s probably only a passing feeling.’

She stroked her granddaughter’s straight chestnut hair.

‘If one day you need something no one can give you, sprinkle water and sweep your alley for forty nights while you wait for Holy Khidr, and recite this prayer. They say he found the water of life, my child. That is why he wears green. Time passes over him and cannot take him. He comes to those who have lost the road, though not always as himself.’

Adura laughed. ‘I thought you were going to leave me your fortune.’

Adura had seldom seen her grandmother without that wrinkled smile.

‘My fortune, such as it is, is yours. Who do I have but you? And that green cup I have held in trust, keep it with you until its owner comes.’

Then she added, ‘My mother taught me how to call Holy Khidr, just as she taught me to crochet, and her mother taught her. They say that one day a daughter of our line will have to call on him. Every generation of women in our family has learnt this prayer.’

As she was leaving the room, Adura called after her. ‘Nanny, why have you never called him yourself?’

With the same smile, she said, ‘Because I never had a need, my child.’

There was no one in the alley. Adura tried not to look towards the far end. It was a long alley, and sweeping it from end to end would take nearly an hour. During the first few nights she had been deeply ashamed, but it was too late now. She had to see this one thing through.

She took the broom by the handle and plunged it into the bucket. Then she shook it above her head. As the drops struck the ground, the smell of wet dust rose into the air, and a pleasant sweetness took hold of her. What a scent. The night breeze caught it and carried it away. She dragged the wet broom over the ground, and once more her senses found the peace they had lost. Under her breath, she recited the prayer Nanny had taught her.

‘Grant us refuge, grant us refuge, O Tender One. Grant us refuge, grant us refuge, O Bountiful One. Grant us refuge, grant us refuge, O Judge. Grant us refuge, grant us refuge, O Glorified One. Grant us refuge, from the trials of time, the cruelty of people, and the tyranny of rulers...’

Then she set to work with fierce patience.

At first, it had been difficult to overcome her own resistance. But the stubbornness itself soothed her. With a little persistence, her pride too was swept away with the dust of the alley. She grew used to the work, and the

novelty soon wore off for the neighbours. Nothing could keep her from sweeping the alley at midnight. It gave her pleasure to quench the thirst of the broken, parched asphalt. Sometimes she told herself she should have become a street sweeper from the beginning, and laughed. There was a reason she had fallen in love with the smell of wet dust.

That night, for the last time, she sprinkled water and swept the alley. She did not know what she expected. Hoofbeats, a green-clad rider, a luminous old man, the smell of water rising suddenly from dust. Nanny had said Holy Khidr had drunk from the water of life. Death had passed him by. Perhaps that was why he could appear in any age, to anyone who no longer knew the road. She did not know whether he would come that night or the next morning, whether she should wait for him in the alley or whether he would knock at her door. Whatever happened, she had no doubt he would come. Nanny was never wrong.

Morning light struck her eyes. An old street sweeper was sweeping the alley.

Had Nanny tricked her?

She felt foolish. Ashamed, she glanced at the passers-by. She put her weight on the broom handle and stood up. Her back had stiffened, and she had to stretch at the side of the alley.

When the old sweeper saw her, he said, 'Morning, madam. Why were you sleeping here?'

She wanted to say, Because I spent last night doing your job for free. But as always, like a respectable, well-brought-up woman, she smiled.

'I was waiting for someone. I fell asleep.'

The sweeper, who handled the broom far more skilfully than Adura, said, 'Ah, waiting's a bad business. I know it well. But it gets you nowhere. If I were you, I'd go and take a good hot shower, have a proper breakfast, put everything else aside and sleep for an hour or two.'

Adura laughed. She put her hand into her coat pocket and held out a two-thousand-toman note. The sweeper took it and pressed it to his eyes.

'Maybe the one you're waiting for is waiting for you somewhere.'

And as he swept his way down the alley, he murmured:

'Come, cupbearer, bring Kay Khusro's cup,
whose light gives darkened eyes new sight;
fill it high with honeyed wine,
and serve this age's Khusro tonight.'

A FLY SETTLES ON his face and jerks him awake. When he opens his eyes, sunlight strikes them. The sky is clear and blue, with no trace of yesterday's heavy clouds. Slowly, he sits up and looks around for the old man, but he has gone. He scratches his head, gets to his feet and limps away. Against all expectation, the night's sleep has neither cramped his muscles nor sharpened the pain in his body. It is as though he has not dreamt at all.

He crosses the street. Today will be like yesterday, he thinks. He will take to the streets, walk until midnight, find some ruin to hide in, and somehow make it through till morning. Now he knows the way.

He thinks of the old man. Perhaps he is mad, but Za'ir likes him. *Look and see what you have*, he had said. *Usually it's more than enough. Until you know what you've got, you won't know where to go.*

What do I have?

One kidney and a whole world of freedom. My beloved overcoat, and whatever is in its pockets. That is all.

What he has is enough only to carry him a little closer to the grave. He empties his pockets. An empty wallet, a handful of sugar cubes, the card from the flowers, and the telephone card Nurse Malaki gave him.

The telephone card. The only thing he has that might be worth money. Could he sell it? There is supposed to be credit on it, but he has no idea how much remains. It costs nothing to find out. He walks to the nearest public telephone and slips the card into the machine. A few seconds pass. The display lights up.

Almost nothing.

How generous of Nurse Malaki. The card is enough for two or three calls at most. But to whom? Who is there for him to call?

He takes the card from the flowers out of his pocket and looks at the small, hurried handwriting, the few digits written there. A telephone number. Perhaps someone is at the other end, someone who sent him flowers and wanted to make him happy. Who? It does not matter. After all this time, he wants someone to talk to. More than that, he wants shelter.

He reads the number and begins to dial.

The line rings, but no one answers.

He is about to remove the card when he thinks, One more time. If no one answers, I'll hang up.

Excerpt from
Kay Khusro and the Secret of the Sacred Grail

I killed my grandfather. The old man who had always loved me. Not one of you reproached me. You praised me. But that old man's shadow follows me for ever.

I destroyed the woman I loved. I made her homeless. I killed her husband. I did it for what I called a great ideal, the union of a people. All of you cheered in my honour.

I let my brother be killed. He was my shield and shelter, my own blood. You pitied me, but no one blamed me. It was an accident. War burns green wood and dry alike. No one can stand in the way of fate.

I killed my mother's brother. Before I could even sit a horse, he carried me in the saddle. He taught me the art of war. But he wanted to defend his father's life, and he stood between me and victory. How you rejoiced when I cast him down in his own blood, the hero who could have thrown every one of you flat on your backs.

I killed the only true friend I ever had. Because he wanted to defend his tribe, and the age of tribes was over. We had to build a nation.

I killed them all, and with every killing you praised me more. I am tired of you now. All of you. I do not die. I am condemned to live. Go, live your lives. My father tried to bind the tribes together with love, and gave his life for it. I raised vengeance as my banner, and a nation came into being.

Was it worth it?

Go. You are fortunate, because you pass away. I remain, because I am Kay Khusro.

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