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Forward

The old bastard sent word for her to come at once.

Yasi strode quickly out of the dusty wadi where the goat herd was grazing, climbed hand over hand up the rocky cliff side and then trotted to the front of the old man's tent. She squatted down in the sand with her head lowered, and waited, panting. The sun baked her body, the black wool abaya covering her from head to foot intensifying the sweltering desert heat. Closing her eyes against the searing dryness she fought off the drowsy feeling of lightheadedness.

She heard footsteps, lifted her head and saw a young boy get into a pickup truck and drive away. As he left she took note that the tribe's water tanker was still parked where it had been the day she had arrived, almost three weeks earlier. It was probably close to empty now, and would soon be replaced with a new one.

The old man stepped through the tent flap and slashed at Yasi's head with his horsewhip, addressing her coarsely.

"Daughter of whores, you are to read this paper I will give to you. You will read it now, in front of me and then I will burn it. I have been told it is terrible and justified news for you and I hope it tears your heart from your body."

He threw a folded newspaper at her, hitting her hard in the face. She picked it up from the hard packed ground with filthy hands and squinted at the front page, her eyes tearing from the sun's glare. A photo of a smiling middle aged couple came into focus. The man was proudly holding up some kind of a plaque while a beautiful woman looked lovingly back at him.

Her heart stopped and she inhaled sharply. It was her mother and father! She tried to refocus her eyes. What were they doing? She scanned the large print at the top of the paper, the Arabic headline searing its message into her brain:

'PUBLISHER and wife found dead in downtown Detroit. Random murders now total 12!'

Air rushed from her body and she seemed to sink into the ground a little, leaning forward slightly. She was reading the front page of her father's

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newspaper 'Sadeek', published in Dearborn, Michigan five days ago. Her eyes devoured the words of the article faster than her brain could interpret them. The newspaper story didn't seem to make any sense. She read it again, forcing herself to slow down, making an effort to comprehend. The hair on the back of her neck began to prickle as a dot of white hot fear began to grow in her gut. The paper said her parents were dead. Murdered. How? Why? She forced herself to read the accompanying article once more, carefully.

“the bodies of two wealthy Dearborn citizens were found in their late model Cadillac in a drug infested neighborhood close to the Rouge Steel Plant. Adel al Amar and his wife, Suhair were found on Sunday morning during a routine traffic patrol. They appeared to have been severely beaten and shot to death by an unknown assailant or assailants sometime late on Saturday night. Their car had been set on fire and they had been badly burned. Police said that robbery was probably the motive and no suspects have been identified at this time. Police are canvassing the neighborhood for possible witnesses. Mr. Amar was the publisher of the Arab/English newspaper, 'Sadeek', which means friend in Arabic.”

My God! Her mother and father were dead. They had been murdered, while she was kept prisoner in this God forsaken place. She had not been there to help them, and now she would never see them again. Her heart hammered heavily in her chest as tears began to sting the corners of her eyes. She blinked once, throwing off the emotion, gripping the paper in a viselike hold. As she struggled to control her breathing, she tried to make sense of what she had just read, and then noticed a handwritten note taped to the bottom of the front page. Written in perfect English cursive was a message addressed to her:

"Yasmina, my pet. It was not a random murder. It was me. They suffered before they died, as will you. This is only my first installment of pain to you."

She understood now. She knew who it was. "God damn him."

She forced herself to remain motionless on her knees, fighting against the urge to get up and run. Her past Agency training materialized, its sing song rhetoric reciting musically in her head.

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"Control. Show no emotion. Give the enemy nothing. Stay calm. Center within."

Her emotions went to war with her reasoning. She wanted to scream and cry, to howl at the sky with grief and anger, to claw at the ugly old man's face, but she couldn't. Agency recitations continued in her head.

"You are the control. Show the enemy nothing."

The old Bedouin was peering at her with expectation, his toothless mouth parted in smiling anticipation. She finished staring at the paper and purposely looked up at him with flat, emotionless eyes. Disappointed with her calmness, he snatched the newspaper out of her hands and stomped angrily back towards his tent, lifting the entrance flap so that she could see him drop it into the fire. She remained still and stared straight ahead. He came back out of the tent and cuffed her. "Get back to the goats immediately. Get back to work, you filthy bitch."

She saw herself get to her feet and walk away briskly, heading to the edge of the mesa, a half mile away. So, this was the surprise her enemy had told her that he would deliver to her. The last night in Riyadh, when he discovered she worked for the Agency, he had brutalized her and then ordered the murder of her parents. The bastard had killed her mother and father. He had done to them what he now wanted to do to her. This was supposed to be a display of his omnipotence as well as the power of Al Qaeda. He was showing her that he could not only kill her, but could reach out thousands of miles and kill her family. It was an example of the age old tribal custom of killing all members of an enemy's family, so that none of them could ever exact retribution in the future. She remembered his smug smile as an avalanche of white rage exploded inside of her.

As she began to hyperventilate she tried to manage her breathing by cupping her hands over her mouth, but instead, started to hiccup. She gagged as bile retched up into her throat, her stomach emptying out onto the sand. Her body shook in spasms, as if she had no control of her bodily functions. She felt like a million pieces of shattered glass flying off in all directions, disintegrating from within.

"Oh, God of all men, Damn him to everlasting Hell", she prayed out loud.

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The rage grew and roiled throughout her, causing her to lose track of her surroundings. She entered the recesses of her mind, not caring where she was or what time it was, suddenly oblivious to the day's heat as well as her need for water. Her inner mind remained focused on her enemy's face and his voice. The agony trapped within her howled with injustice that he was still breathing after he had tortured and murdered her innocent parents. His life was an offense to her and to all living things. Hate wasn't a complex enough word for what she felt, and her mind created a vision of the future.

She'd nail him after getting out of this stinking hellhole, and when she had taken him prisoner, she would make sure all the useful information about Al Qaeda was sucked from his brain. The drugs the Agency used could invade his memory and alter his mind, rendering him incompetent, but she wouldn't allow that to happen. She would make certain the technicians kept him mentally aware as they tore information from his cells. As she planned her revenge she made herself a promise. She would be the main architect of his death. She would personally be the instrument, and would resolutely work towards that goal until it was accomplished. Not only would he be exterminated, but the payback he would receive would be far worse than anything his sick mind could imagine. As a bonus, she promised herself that he would suffer before he died. There would be no opportunity for him to escape final justice. He would be conscious of every second of his impending doom, feel every tremor of fear, and scream her name as he took his last breath. But, in order to stay alive and pay the bastard back, she had to control the future by acting now. She took her inner rage and began to turn it, sharpening her focus. Resolution hardened, and her thoughts solidified. Her body stopped shaking. In a few seconds she was sure of what she had to do.

Reaching the edge of the mesa, Yasi pushed a large round boulder off the ledge and watched it crash into the ground twenty feet below, shattering a formation of black mica on the desert floor like a glass window pane. It would do. A piece of mica is more lethal than a box cutter. Desert rock shards constantly shred the rugged truck tires of even the most experienced long distance drivers. Razor sharp, they are prevalent throughout the region. Truckers who supply Bedouin camps complain that their desert trips are often filled with delays once they must drive off-road. The water tankers repeatedly arrive with cut tires, and new tires must be put on before they can return. Drivers always carry two, and sometimes three additional tires on top of their trucks to insure their return home.

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During the past weeks while she herded the goats, Yasi picked up small pieces of the mica, feeling its razor sharp edges as she mentally catalogued it for future use. Today, when she crashed a large granite boulder down onto the mica bed, dozens of deadly shards broke loose.

The tribe's goat herd had wandered into the next series of sand gullies, and paid no attention to the crash. They were busy chewing on the tough salt bushes that lined the wadi, scavenging for blades of grass. Armallah, the Bedouin woman who was minding them however, did hear the noise, looked up and saw Yasi standing on the top of the cliff.

As she raced down the cliff face towards the pile of newly created mica shards, Yasi saw the abaya clad woman begin to march quickly towards her. The old man had ordered her to return to the herd immediately, and she had not done so, and she knew the woman would now try to punish her. Reaching the bottom of the cliff, she stooped down quickly and appeared to tug at her long robe. As she pretended to adjust her abaya, Yasi cut the loose hanging end of her rawhide wrist thong off with a mica shard. She then wound it tightly around the blunt end of another twelve inch long razor edged piece of mica she had picked up, creating a lethal stone dagger.

“Where have you been, you stinking slut?” Armallah screamed as she approached. Yasi knew as soon as they were closer, the woman would reach out and try to yank at the leather thong that had been, up until a moment ago, tightly tied around her right wrist. She would then use it to pull her down to the ground. Once Yasi was forced down onto her knees, Armallah would methodically beat her until she grew tired of inflicting the blows. Yasi watched her quickly close the distance between them with angry strides. A huge, ugly woman with broken teeth and mottled skin, she had made it her mission to be the young American's torturer. She was the only unmarried sister of the old Bedouin, and family tradition dictated that without a husband to provide for her she must remain with her brother's family. His wives treated her as a destitute outcast. Berated for her laziness, she was the most despised female in a family run by women who had no status themselves. Illiterate and frightened of anything Western, the Bedouin's two old wives were disgusted by the sight of their female American captive. They gladly gave the responsibility of being her jailer to Armallah and wanted nothing to do with the American, except to collect the bounty on her life when the time came.

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At first, Armallah's sadistic and brutal beatings had nearly broken the American, but Yasi quickly learned to curl her body into a tight ball so that her captor landed most of the force of the camel whip on her back, instead of her face and head. Over the weeks the welts bled and swelled and then abated into hard, wide ridges of scar tissue.

The place where the two women met was below the level of the mesa where the Bedouin camp was set up, out of sight of the tents. Armallah reached Yasi and without a word, grabbed for her right wrist thong preparing to pull down viciously on it. Abruptly, she stopped moving. Her head snapped upwards, "Eowww!" she cried. Her huge mouth opened and closed. "What has stung me?" Seemingly confused, she stared down at her bloody right palm with a puzzled expression, trying to understand what had just happened. Yasi quickly sidestepped behind her and with a sudden motion yanked the woman's head viciously to one side while she expertly slit her throat. At the exact moment Armallah realized her right hand had been sliced in two, she was gargling in her own blood.

Yasi felt no emotion as she looked down at her dying torturer struggling to breathe. Armallah started to kick her legs out one at a time, rolling her huge body back and forth, a seeming mountain of black wool. Flecks of blood frothed from her nose and mouth, her hands and arms flailing uselessly at her sides, as she made small grunting sounds. She stared sightlessly at the blazing sun. Shifting attention from her victim, Yasi took the dagger into her left hand and quickly began to dig out the rest of the raw hide that had been permanently knotted around her right wrist. It had embedded itself almost a half inch into her flesh. She saw the wound would take time to heal, but that it wasn't dangerous. Armallah died as Yasi stood over her rewinding the remains of her bloody wrist strap around the hilt of the newly made dagger, knotting it tightly into place. Glancing up at the sun she judged it to be at least a half hour before the noon prayer. There was still enough time. She took off at a slow trot and headed up the cliff to the old man's tent.

She knew the old Bedouin would pray alone at Noon. Muslim women are forbidden to pray in the same place as men and so his two wives would either pray by themselves, or just ignore prayer time and continue their chores. If he was devout, he would prostrate himself facing toward Mecca

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and recite his prayers. If he wasn't, he would be asleep. Either way, his wives would not come to his tent to serve the noon meal until he summoned them. She made her way to the back side of the men's tent and easily cut through the woven goat hair fabric wall. As she peered into the dimness of the interior, she gave her eyes time to adjust to the darkness. The old man was asleep on the carpet strewn floor, lying on his back and snoring loudly. She carefully widened the cloth slit and slid silently through.

The viselike grip crushing down on his mouth and nose caused the old man to jump awake with pain and try to call out. He struggled to sit up, but his body was pinned to the floor. The head and face above him was swathed in a black wool headdress and only his attacker's eyes could be seen. They were as black as night and glinted with what looked like amusement. He heard a whispering voice, clear and unmistakably female, breathe into his face. The voice spoke to him in his own dialect of the Sharourah, spewing out the age old curse of the Bedouin

"Son of a dog whose whore of a bitch mother gave him birth. What you have wanted to do to me and to my kind I will now do to you. You are a dead man. You and your seed will be scoured from this earth. Your livestock will die, and the earth will be salted so that no part of you or the swine that are a part of you can survive."