

THE PROPHET

Khalil was running barefoot amongst the bullrushes, chasing his younger sister as the sun beat down from a cloudless sky. He could hear her giggles and caught an occasional glimpse of her saffron-coloured dress as she darted among the long stalks but he could never quite seem to catch up with her. Something was slowing him down. Something felt like it was dragging him back as underfoot his toes squelched in the wet soil. And then as he looked down for a moment he saw it and froze with horror. A thick spiral of dark green scales wrapped tightly round his ankle and at his knee, staring up at him, a head with firey eyes and a wisp of tongue that gave the thing the appearance of taking delight in his terror. And it was moving. This head was moving, slowly weaving its way around his thigh. Pulling them both closer and closer into its deadly embrace.

“General?”

It was Abdul, Khalil's bodyguard, from the other side of the bedroom door.

“Are you alright, General? I heard a scream.”

Khalil sat up in bed. Wiping the sweat from his face, he noticed Abdul's bearded face peering at him through the doorway. He pulled the silken sheet around himself to cover his nakedness as in his chest he could still feel his heart manically thumping away.

“Just a dream. It was nothing.”

Abdul nodded and as the door closed Khalil lay back on the bed, waiting for his heart to slow and staring in silence at the huge gilt-framed portrait of himself on the far wall.

Of all the seventy-seven portraits he had had commissioned this one was undoubtedly

still his favourite. The artist – a quiet, barely-literate bedouin who had been recommended to him and required only three sittings at the palace – had managed to completely capture the majesty of his younger self.

Things were so different back then. He could still remember that beautiful Spring day when, having just supervised the execution of the old President by firing squad, he was returning to the palace in his open top motorcade with a cool breeze blowing against his face. Seated on either side of him was the chief of police and his new Minister of Security and on the road into the capital he had been quite flabbergasted to see huge crowds of women, young and old, all throwing brightly-coloured flowers into the path of their vehicles, waving their hands and arms, and crying hysterically as they passed. They had all witnessed it.

This love – the love of the people – was like nothing he'd ever quite experienced before; a pure, unadulterated love that was so intoxicating he sensed it could drive a man to the very brink of insanity. And in return for their love, he had promised his people that the revolution would mark a new beginning. He would build them new schools and hospitals, roads and a modern transport system, he would provide jobs and prosperity for everyone along with beautiful parks where the people could relax at weekends. He even promised them a zoo, a zoo with more animals than any other zoo in the world.

It was not that he'd ever intended to renege on these promises, nor had they been empty vows, but shortly after the revolution he'd begun to suspect that he was perhaps less cut out for the minutiae of government than he had been for the drills and exercises of military life. Now there were lots of papers to sign, visiting dignitaries to dine, photographs

to pose for and meetings – endless, endless meetings - with functionaries from some department or other. These little, moustached men, these petty bureaucrats who prattled on about matters which he really had little appetite for. There had been one in particular, a fat, middle-aged man from the Ministry of Public Works, who in his first month sought advice on a newly proposed sewerage system and had peppered him all afternoon with question after question about drainage and sluice gates. After three hours, Khalil had had quite enough. He took out his service revolver, pointed the barrel at the man's temple and, to the gasps of the other officials present, calmly pulled the trigger. If nothing else, it had at least brought the meeting to a swift conclusion.

After that he'd decided on a plan to purge the ministries, to replace the old guard with men of a higher calibre. Men of action who could deliver on his promises to the people. Men who had ambitions greater than being simple pen-pushers. It had been a rather messy business, of course, but killing had never really troubled Khalil too much. He had concluded early on that certain sacrifices had to be made for the revolution but he'd sensed even back then that not everyone had shared this view. And that had perhaps been the start of it: the whispers, the conspiracies, the secret plots to thwart his great ambitions for the nation.

Now he felt slightly peckish. Recently, his disrupted sleep patterns had led to him feeling hungry at odd times of the day and he had taken to sometimes visiting the kitchens late into the night to help himself to dates washed down with sweet mint tea. Pulling on his dressing gown, he made his way outside where Abdul (who he suspected of having been napping) suddenly stood to attention and saluted him.

“You are sure everything is okay, General?”

“I'm a little hungry.”

“I will wake the cook. Get one of the servants to bring you something.”

“No,” said Khalil, waving away the offer, “There is no need for that.”

He made his way down the corridor, past the many empty bedrooms and down the marble staircase where the largest of his portraits still hung, this one portraying him on horseback wielding a sword above his head, charging into battle as the leader of a fearless cavalry brigade. He'd never really been that keen on it. He suspected the artist who had rather nervously unveiled it to him had realised as much too as he had begun profusely apologising as Khalil had stood rather coolly inspecting it.

“I could do another. Something better, General,” he kept repeating.

In the end Khalil just smiled, heartily embraced the artist and then later that afternoon ordered the chief of police to have the man arrested and transported to a labour camp where it was suggested the man might find more useful things to do with his hands.

The kitchens in the basement of the palace he now found himself wandering through were completely deserted. In fact, for such a sprawling complex the whole place operated nowadays with few staff. Over the last few years he'd become paranoid about any new faces – about the whispers he heard in the corridors - and lately even his most loyal staff seemed to keep their distance or scurry off as they heard him approach. It was a pity really. At one time the palace had reverberated with great energy: fashion models and movie stars from Paris, London or New York who'd attended his parties where he'd lavished them with the finest champagne and shown off his kalashnikov fashioned from platinum and studded with rubies. And then there had been that other occasion when he'd entertained a troupe of

visiting American oil executives along with various congressmen and bankers. In the day they had signed contracts for a new pipeline and as token of their gratitude they had presented him with with a scimitar of the finest Damascus steel. Then, later that evening, after a grand state banquet, he had awed them with a reading of some poetry he'd composed, receiving a rapturous applause from the head of the delegation, although later on the same man had looked somewhat troubled when Khalil ordered in the young dancing girls and encouraged his guests to dispense with their business suits and take their pleasure.

Standing in the cold room at the back of the kitchen, he couldn't quite remember now what he'd come for. He opened the door to one of the enormous freezers he'd had installed and inside staring back him, eyes still wide open although covered with a powdery frost, was the severed head of his old friend, Aslam. Poor old Aslam. Poor old Aslam now constantly having to live in this permanent winter. Still, at least it meant he could occasionally come down in the middle of the night to visit him, Khalil thought, as he brushed some of the frost off Aslam's frozen cheek.

As young men, the pair of them had enlisted in the same army battalion and after the revolution it was always Aslam that he turned to for advice, Aslam that he promoted to his most trusted positions and Aslam with whom he would share his most secret fears. They had fought together, drunk together and on occasions even shared a bed together. In fact, as a relationship it had endured longer than that with any of Khalil's wives all of whom he had quickly tired of so it was natural that it was Aslam who Khalil trusted with running the regime's secret police force and it was Aslam too who had first told Khalil about man from Djibouti. The special one. The man who they said was a prophet.

Around that time, the great plans Khalil had originally laid down were admittedly beginning to flounder. He'd agreed with Aslam that his purging of the ministries had, in retrospect, been a little rash. Some of the new roads had been built along with a new hospital in the capital but there were still not enough schools and privately people even sniggered when he talked of his great plans for the zoo. In short, the wheels of his great revolution were grinding to a halt.

Out in the desert, the oil was still flowing and the revenue it brought with it still swelling the coffers of the national bank and yet something had changed. Hearts had hardened. There was no joy on the streets any more. No women throwing flowers or waving their hands hysterically in displays of gratitude. Instead there was a lot of complaining and moaning. Secretly, Aslam had told him that in the cafes and mosques there were even whispers that perhaps things had been better under the old President. It was the first time Khalil had begun to doubt the revolution, even begun to doubt himself. What he needed was encouragement from some higher power: a roadmap to his own destiny. What he really needed was a sign.

“When the time comes, you will hear the voice.”

It was not the most satisfactory advice for the five-hundred thousand dollars Khalil had offered the prophet to visit him in his palace. He couldn't help but feel a little short-changed for this brief consultation along with the sack of dried herbs which the man explained needed to be made into tea and consumed just before bedtime. He was even suspecting it might be some scam Aslam had been tricked into and, besides, the man didn't look much like a prophet either. He'd expected some sort of robes but the skinny, dark-

skinned African had shown up wearing khaki pants and a Manchester United shirt and his speech was constantly slurred by the mouthfuls of *khat* he chewed and which had stained his teeth a dirty, lime colour.

“Where will I hear it? Who will speak to me?” he asked, still a little confounded by their meeting.

“I cannot say. But you must also beware –“

A slither of green saliva escaped out of side of the man's mouth and slid across his chin. He cursed as he wiped it away with the sleeve of his shirt.

“Beware of what?”

Khalil was frustrated with the man's casual attitude to prophecy.

“*What* must I beware of?”

The man nodded and then rubbed his nose.

“Beware of the devilish snake that talks. To survive, you must cut it off by the head.”

After that Khalil lost all patience. With their meeting over, he half entertained the idea of taking the money back and having Aslam dispose of the man somewhere out in the desert but something in the back in of his mind warned him off, something more than mere superstition. Perhaps he would at least try what the man said with the herbs too although to make sure it wasn't a plot he would insist on one of the kitchen staff consuming it first.

Later that night as he lay restlessly in bed he heard it. It was a little muffled to begin with but he could distinguish it clearly enough. A high-pitched singing-like sound – a beautiful melody, in fact – but the sound was also accompanied by a stirring sensation in his loins, a feeling of enormous virile power throbbing deep inside him and a sensuous rush like

he'd experienced in that moment when he'd seen the women waving and throwing flowers in front of his motorcade. Casting away the sheet for a moment, he looked down and was surprised to discover that his penis was completely erect. It was so stiff it was uncomfortable and what's more it seemed to be throbbing. As his hand reached down to caress it, he stared at the swollen, orb-like tip and then he heard it. It was not muffled at all now. It was quite clear. And it was talking to him in the most beautiful, most poetic Arabic. He could scarcely believe it – his penis was actually calling to him and it was about to tell him the most wonderful things, the most fascinating revelations.

For months after Khalil retreated from his public duties. In the day he would sleep and in the evenings he would prepare the potion and then spend up to eight hours in ecstatic conversation with his penis. He was amazed at how knowledgeable it was. He spent whole nights quizzing it about the most esoteric aspects of sufism or the military strategies of the Persian kings or the history of the Achaemenid Empire and would never tire of the answers. They would discuss the subtle differences between Abbasid and Sassanid architecture and how his plans for the zoo were modelled on the great Moorish palace at Alhambra; he even read some of his poetic works to his phallus along with political speeches he planned on delivering, sometimes enquiring on how they could be revised or improved.

It was his penis too who later warned him about the great plot being hatched behind his back. He could scarcely believe it at first but he knew – as in all things - his penis was right. It had never been less than an oasis of truth in the great desert of lies and distrust that surrounded him. But, oh, the disappointment... oh the great sadness to hear that it was his oldest and most trusted friend, Aslam, at the centre of it all, that Aslam was talking to the

filthy Americans who had poisoned his mind, that he was planning to sell out the people and the great revolution just to get his greedy little hands on all the oil money. Why did his most trusted circle always have to disappoint him? Why was it always those with whom he shared his most intimate secrets that turned out to be the greatest snakes of all?

He would have to be careful though, his penis warned.

“Keep a sharp blade in your bed chamber at all times,” it advised. “When the time comes, it is here that you will cut the snake off by its head.”

Khalil took to keeping the scimitar, his beloved gift from the oil men, on his bedside table. He had had the blade sharpened especially. For days and days he waited.

The rather curious thing Khalil realised now, as he stared back at Aslam's severed head, was how time had also been frozen for Aslam. Captured on his face in perpetuity (as if it were some cryogenic Kodak moment) was the look of complete incredulity and bewilderment Aslam had when, in his bed chamber, Khalil had suddenly leapt upon him and wrestled him to the floor. Then, as Abdul had rushed in and held him down, Khalil had brought the scimitar's sharpened blade down on Aslam's neck and the whole floor of the chamber had within seconds been flooded in thick, sticky blood. It was gruesome and yet gratifying to hold the head in his hands afterwards, to dangle it by the hair and stare deep into those treacherous eyes.

“Oh Aslam! How had it all come to this?” he pondered.

Then, leaning over, he now placed a delicate kiss on Aslam's frozen cheek before closing the freezer door and wandering back through the kitchens.

He was halfway back up the staircase carrying a bowl of dates when he heard the footsteps from below. From outside he could hear the call to prayer as dawn broke across the capital and yet he still felt bleary-eyed from another restless night. In the corridor he was surprised to see that Adul was no longer on guard outside his bed chamber and assumed his most trusted bodyguard had gone to relieve himself.

He wandered into his room, slipped off his dressing gown and drew the curtains and then stared out across the deserted palace courtyard and beyond to the skyscape of the capital with its beautiful minarets silhouetted against the rising sun. It was then he noticed them. Two figures lurking in the shadows below. Two men in combat fatigues carrying assault rifles accompanied by the distant crackle of automatic fire and somewhere the distinctive hum of a helicopter buzzing in the dawn sky.

Suddenly, he panicked. He picked up the scimitar that lay next to his bed but his mind was a mass of confusion. He had followed his instructions to the letter. And then it finally dawned upon him as he stared down at the mass of wiry, pubic hair below his navel and the limp organ that dangled so innocently between his legs.

He closed his eyes, held his breath and, with his heart still pounding, raised the blade high above his head.

Word count: 3058