

CANDICE CUSHING

AND THE LOST TOMB OF CLEOPATRA



GEORGETTE KAPLAN



PROLOGUE

DUBAI, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

(back when music didn't suck)

THE BURJ AL ARAB WAS the third tallest hotel in the world, and too good for the mainland. A bridge curved off the beach to an artificial island where the mainmast of the building sloped up almost seven hundred feet to the world-famous helipad that had been converted into a tennis court for a recent match between two Grand Slam winners.

If Easy Nevada fell off the building now, it would take almost seventeen seconds for gravity to turn her into a pancake.

This far up, the ground stretched outwards as unreal as a mirage. Nevada wondered if this was how the rich always saw the world. Buildings were models, and the ocean was a painting with speedboats flittering through it like insects, just flecks of white on the endless blue vista of Jumeirah Beach. And people were less than nothing—specks, static, not even visible to the naked eye. Killing one wouldn't even be a conscious act. From here, it would be like swatting a gnat.

Nevada looked over her shoulder as a helicopter approached, its looping curves doing their best to turn the ungainly vehicle into something ergonomic. It mostly succeeded. The Sikorsky S-76C++ rode down to the helipad like a magic carpet. Holding the bowling bag away from her body, she watched the doors slide open and steps unfurl. An Indian man disembarked.

She raised her voice. “Send the chopper back up. I don't know what you're planning on using this for, but I'm guessing you'd rather it be near-mint.”

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The man complied by waving off the helicopter. It took off in a gust of backwash from its rotors. Nevada shifted her weight as the wind tore at her body, and she saw the man stumbling about before he got his footing. He shook his head and ran his hand through his hair, then cracked his neck as the Sikorsky departed. “Easy Nevada? Hi! Big fan! What are you doing on the roof? Was the room not to your liking?”

“It was tops. I just prefer my doors to lock from the inside.”

He was a tall, lanky man, with chocolate-brown hair arranged in a pompadour and a neatly trimmed beard compensating for a rather weak chin. The excessive length of his arms and legs were left exposed by the short white pants and polo shirt he wore, Air Yeezys on his feet and athletic socks crawling up his skinny shins. Nevada could see the power in his limber body. He had a duffel bag slung over one shoulder, and despite its evident weight, lifted it like it was nothing. In his other hand, he held a tennis racquet. Long, jaunty strides carried him across the rooftop to her. When he was close enough, Nevada turned to face him and he stopped in his tracks.

“And the men who picked you up at the airport?” he asked. “Courteous, I trust?”

“Five stars. Just like the guys who picked me up in Belize. In the future, though, I’d prefer a company car to a chauffeur. I kinda like to be in the driver’s seat.”

“Ah, but I’ve noticed you have a few reckless driving citations on your record. We wouldn’t want any harm to come to you before we’ve concluded our business.”

“Don’t worry about me. My last fortune cookie said I was going to die at the age of 92... murdered by a jealous husband.”

“An all too common fate.”

She shrugged. “Eh, didn’t say it was *my* husband. You’re Singh?”

“Akbar Akkad Singh, and it is a true pleasure to meet you.” He came forward, holding out his hand, and Nevada held the bag higher. “Ah. Business before pleasantries. I totally understand. Very good business practice, no chat-chat-chat, let’s talk *money*.”

Bending to one knee, he set down the duffel bag. The zipper rasped open and he spread both sides. Inside was the root of all evil. Enough to need a lot of rubber bands.

“A fair price, and good cardio if you’re planning on lugging this all the way to the nearest bank. I know, I find online banking is just *the worst*.” His voice was light and high-pitched, with a faint, pleasant English accent that Nevada imagined had come straight from Oxford. Overseas education. The jubilant excitement he spoke with, though, would fit in better with a tour guide at Disneyland. Along with the open expressiveness of his face, it gave him a handsome boyishness despite the gray beginning to infiltrate his hair.

“Slide the money over here,” Nevada instructed. “Then take a few steps back.”

Singh gave the bag a heave; it jostled its way over the hissing concrete and came to a stop a few feet from Nevada. She looked at Singh and he backed up, playing with the tennis racquet for lack of anything else to do with his hands.

Nevada checked over the money. There were no tricks that she could see. No newspaper or ones inside the stacks of cash, just hundred-dollar bills from top to bottom. She counted them, stack by stack, and it quickly became obvious that this was more money than she’d ever seen in her life. She should’ve closed the zipper, hefted the bag, and walked, but that much money had its own gravitational pull. She was almost in awe of it. God, she’d won the fucking lottery and she hadn’t even bought a ticket, just stumbled across a souvenir she thought would look cool next to her stereo.

“Love your work, by the way,” Singh said. “I mean, here I was wondering where the hell you’d put my skull. We were all wondering. I was like, *Where is it? Where’d she put it?* Giving it to someone else, putting them up in my own hotel, and picking it up from them when you were ready—that’s classic! All my guys, they thought you had a safety deposit box or that you’d buried it in some geocache, but here it was, *right under* my nose the whole time.”

“Yeah. And then I set a towel on fire and walked out when the fire alarm unlocked the door.”

“That’s alright, we expect the towels to be stolen. And the elevator?” Singh wagged a finger at her. “Guests aren’t supposed to have access to the roof.”

“Swiped an access card off the maid. You aren’t supposed to hold people prisoner in a hotel,” Nevada chided right back. “The routines are posted on the website.”

“Prisoner? In the only seven-star hotel in the world? We let you have all the premium cable channels!”

Nevada closed her eyes and forced herself to review her options. Money didn’t spend unless she could walk away with it. The helicopter might’ve left, but she didn’t doubt Singh had a rogue’s gallery packing the stairwell, ready to chop her to pieces and mail her wherever the postage was cheapest. He might give the order, he might not. But Nevada couldn’t see much of a play besides assuming he wouldn’t. She could always shove that tennis racquet down his throat later.

She set the bowling bag down and gave it a shove down the rooftop. Singh snatched it up the moment it was within reach, slipping and falling to his knees in his exuberance, ripping open the bag without bothering with the zipper. He looked inside, then turned his face heavenward consumed with relish, clutching the bag. “Oh, it’s real. It is *real!* You can just tell—well, maybe not you—I can tell. Do you know what this is, Easy Nevada? Do you have any idea what we *have?*”

“World’s greatest bong?”

Singh looked at her. As open as his gaze was, Nevada had a hard time parsing it. Was he looking at her as a child looked at a new toy, as a player contemplated his next move, or even as a man stared at a beautiful woman? “Fancy a game?”

“This before or after you show me your etchings?”

Singh reached slowly into his pocket, then brought out a remote control. He pressed it and the surface of the helipad irised open. In its place, a tennis court rose into view, the netting taut between them. A second tennis racquet and a tube of balls lay on the ground. Nevada wondered if Singh had planned for this specifically, or if it was one of many outcomes he’d prepared for—and which was more intimidating.

“A nice match!” Singh said, bouncing on his heels, then launching into a series of stretches. All that was missing was a boombox playing YMCA. “Shake off the cobwebs! Get the blood pumping. A little more oxygen to the brain and we can discuss business. It’s the twenty-first century—who wants to talk shop over a lousy game of golf?”

“I thought our business was concluded,” Nevada said.

“Only if you want it to be.”

Nevada eyed the roof access door. Either there was a kill squad waiting down the stairs or there wasn't. She didn't see how it decreased her odds to hear him out. "One game."

Singh set the skull down by the net. Nevada set her money down on the other side. She chopped her racquet back and forth in a few practice swings. Her arm registered no aches or pains, just tendons stretching supplely and muscles flexing smoothly.

Singh served. It was an easy serve, and Nevada returned it with equal ease. Singh barely moved from his sphinxlike waiting to send the ball rebounding back. Nevada only had to move a little more to hit it herself.

In the crisp, frail-seeming air at this height, the sound of the ball being struck was as regular as the ticking of a metronome. It didn't echo, of course, not this high up. Instead, the noise seemed to hang suspended in the air, uninterrupted, not lost in any background noise as it dwindled into nothing. Nevada thought uncomfortably of a soul leaving a body, or a child leaving home...

As if sensing how Nevada's mind had wandered, Singh returned the ball with sudden savagery. It soared past her, out into the dizzying drop that separated this perch from solid ground, and she watched it fall into nonexistence. She remembered stories of how you could drop a penny from the Empire State Building and it could shoot right through a man's skull. If that were true, she wondered what a tennis ball at this height could do. Maybe total a parked car.

"Have you ever read about myths, Easy? All of them have a common factor. Hercules, Achilles, Xena—they're all about immensely powerful beings right here on Earth, capable of amazing feats. And not just one, no, not the monotheism that came when Man stripped his beliefs down to make them smaller and more acceptable. There were whole pantheons. An entire race of gods. And where do you think they all went?"

Nevada held up her hands. "Out for cigarettes and said they'd be right back?"

Singh shrugged and went to get another ball. "Honestly, I don't know either. Fifteen-love." He pointed his racquet at the skull. "That's all that's left of whatever they were. That and eleven more. Proof that every story ever told about gods and goddesses was based in fact."

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He served, fast and harsh, and Nevada broke a sweat for the first time as she returned it. Singh was going harder now. Nevada ricocheted his shots back, but it was like playing against a wall. Wherever she sent the ball, he was there, and the ball only came at her faster and faster.

He'd been toying with her before, and that only made Nevada more incensed. "I know the rich are eccentric," she said, "but wouldn't it be easier for you to get into green coffee extract?"

Singh was a machine, mercilessly hammering the ball back. "I don't care about losing weight, Easy. I care about the future of humanity. According to legend, if all twelve of the skulls are brought together, the man who does it will be granted one wish."

Nevada smashed the ball hard, sending it almost whistling at his face. "Yeah, I can see how you'd want to improve your circumstances."

Singh knocked the ball back in a wide arc over the court. Nevada made a run for it, saw the ball sloping down past the rim of the court, and skidded to a stop before she could reach it. She saw the ball graze the edge before it dropped away into nothingness.

"Thirty-love," Singh said. He already had another ball. "I've been searching for the skulls for years. You, you aren't even *looking* and you find one. That's not coincidence. You are fated for this search."

He bombarded her with his next serve, the ball whistling through the air.

Nevada threw herself across the court. This time it wouldn't get away from her. She was too damn tired of being Singh's straight man as he amused himself.

Coming up to the drop, she got under the ball and snapped her racquet to knock it back past Singh while she teetered on the edge. The fall gaped open underneath her and Nevada felt like laughing. "Try flying coach sometime. The universe will seem a lot more random."

She recovered her balance, taking a step back from the edge to see Singh throwing his racquet down in a fit of pique.

"Enough games!" he shouted, coming to the net. "I want you to find the other eleven skulls. For each one you deliver, I will pay you ten times what's in that bag. Money like that can open doors for you and your son."

Nevada felt her grip tightening on her racquet. "You say one skull is worth ten times what's in that bag to you?"

“Oh yes.”

“Then I’m going to need at least five more bags.”

Singh smiled in agreement—a childish grin—and Nevada pictured a little boy in her head.

Nevada didn’t have a picture of her kid. What she did have was a CT scan. A cross-section of a brain maybe the size of a bocce ball, incomprehensible in its artistic swells and curves, all except for the ghostly white lump. That she could understand. He was her son, and like her he was imperfect, with a fatal flaw she’d passed on in her blood, the single inheritance he’d taken with him to his new family. And now, like a cuckoo’s egg ready to hatch, it swelled and blistered and turned inward. The doctors could irradiate it, but there was no operation, no cure. Unless someone made one. Unless someone paid for one.

Nevada felt unnatural. Didn’t every animal care for its young? Every beast but man. She’d given him up, abandoned him to a better life.

Harry Calhoun. That’s who he was now. And his new family had two mortgages and an empty college fund, trying to keep him alive. God, what a con she’d pulled.

She told herself she was a heartless bitch. And she tried very hard to make that true.

CHAPTER 1

WITHIN THE MUD AND THATCHED roof of a *tukul*, David Pike awoke covered in sweat. It had nothing to do with the nearly hundred-degree heat and everything to do with the evil that had entered the room.

A white man in his mid-forties, Pike still looked nearly every inch the biker he had been before hearing the call to come to Africa. His hulking body was stout, with the solid bulk of a potbelly like a diesel fuel tank doing little to reduce the physicality of his bearlike six-foot-two frame. A long mane of black hair flecked with gray went down to his shoulders, while the many biker tattoos along his arms and neck had long since been crowded out by ones showcasing crosses, Bible verses, and a select few faces of the Ubangi tribes that had become his adopted family. A horseshoe moustache and little-shaven cheeks gave his wide, flat face an uncut appearance, like rock that had been hewn into the rough shape of a man, but no one had finished chiseling out the details.

Blinking blearily, he saw a face beyond the mosquito netting that surrounded his bed. There was something strange about it, some trick of the eye that he couldn't yet sort out through the midnight shadows and moonlight seeping into the room. It wasn't until he wiped his face with his hand that he realized what was wrong. There was no face, only an invisible force pressing through the gossamer net, leaving an imprint of a man's features where none existed.

Pike backed away from it, nearly off his mattress, feeling now what his animal senses had been warning him about when he'd woken. Turning his head the other direction in an instinctive search for a way to flee from

this evil presence, he saw another face there as well, crowding into the mosquito netting. There was another next to it, and another, a legion of faces disturbing the windy sway of the netting. He groped underneath the bed, searching for his flashlight and the Desert Eagle he always kept on hand, when God said, *No. Pray.*

“Something’s in the room with me!” Pike replied. His hand was almost clawing at the dirt floor, trying to find a weapon. God spoke again, not more insistent—how could God be more or less insistent?—but more resonant, more showing of His authority.

Start Praying Now.

Pulling his hand away from the dirt like it’d been bitten, Pike threaded his fingers together and prayed. He prayed for his soul, stained by the violence he had done and the crimes he had committed, for the lives of the children he had taken in at Camp Esau, for an end to the bloody war that had put them in danger and taken away so many of their parents, for all those he had harmed in his days as a lost sheep, and even those he had harmed since, trying to stop them from destroying this holy place and these loving people.

He prayed long into the night, the wind stirring the mosquito net around him.

Finally, he slept, and when he woke, he wondered if it had been a dream. Then he looked at the ground. There was a perfect circle around his bed where the dirt floor was undisturbed. The unbroken boundary of that line fit exactly to the mosquito netting draped around his bed. Outside the circle, every inch of the dirt floor was covered in footsteps.

“What happened, Lord?” he asked, his voice quivering.

Satan Was In This Room Last Night. He Tried To Come For You, But I Would Not Let Him Near.

* * *

The weight of history fell all over the Earth, but perhaps was most keenly felt in the desert, where time itself crushed down the rock until it was pulverized into sand. The monotony was endless, each moment so identical to the next that Candice could’ve been trapped in a single second like an insect in amber and never notice it, never see any difference in the wind scouring the sands or the sun beating down with infinite heat or the

landscape stretching on in its barrenness until it felt like the whole world had become a wasteland. Thought itself was burned and blasted and dried up, even the simple hope of escape, until only the strongest survived, while lesser men were driven mad.

“I cannot believe you,” Candice said.

“Really?” Nevada asked, lowering her sunglasses. “Candice, Sudan is old news. New Sudan now: South Sudan. It’s a new chapter in our lives. Hell, it’s a whole new book! And we’re still doing the ‘wow, Nevada, I can’t believe you’re doing something so shocking and inconsistent with social norms’ thing? Move on, lady. I stopped calling you Candy.”

“Yes, you’ve moved on to ‘sweetie,’ ‘darling,’ ‘doll,’ and ‘brown sugar.’”

“I’m so affectionate,” Nevada said, raising her sunglasses back over her eyes. “I thought you Europeans were into that.”

“Let’s review. When I went to sleep, because I’d been driving the tank we’re on for ten hours straight, I assumed you’d be driving the tank.”

“There are sayings about assumption.”

“Instead, when I wake up, I find that you are *sunbathing*.”

“Oh, that reminds me.” Nevada turned over, prompting an almost instinctive averting of Candice’s eyes. “What’s your damage, sweetheart? I don’t know if you’ve noticed the ratio of melanin between us, but clearly, I need to tan more than you do. Besides, we’re still making good time. Ismail’s driving.”

“Yes, *Ismail’s driving*,” Candice emphasized, arms crossed.

“Yeah, and he’s doing a great job.”

“He’s twelve!”

“And this is a valuable life skill he’s picking up.”

“*How to drive an M60 main battle tank?*”

Nevada turned onto her side. “Well, you’ve got a point there; it is a pretty old model. But I think if he can figure this out, an M1 Abrams shouldn’t be too hard.”

Candice sat down on the turret with a sigh like a zeppelin deflating. “Tell me we’re almost there.”

“Yeah, yeah, any day now. We reach this hunting lodge turned refugee camp that the boss made a big donation to, they put us up, Jacques gets there with the plane, we fly out, more crazy adventures and simmering

sexual tension.” Nevada flopped down onto her belly again. “Hey, there’s some suntan lotion in my bag, could you put another layer on my back?”

“You brought suntan lotion on your tomb raiding—of course you did. I’m not even surprised at this point.”

“See? New chapter, new book.”

“Stop that. You sound like Oprah before she’s had her coffee.” Candice stood again, hovering over Nevada. “And what do you mean, hunting lodge turned refugee camp?”

“You’re in my sun.”

“*Nevada.*”

“*Candice.*” Nevada craned her neck to look up to her. “What, it’s some missionary operation. They’ll even take the kids off our hands—I did ask.”

“*Okay,*” Candice said, sliding out of Nevada’s sunlight.

“What do you mean, ‘okay’?”

“Are you being funny?” Candice asked.

“No, no, you said it in this total *Real Housewives* way like it’s not okay, but you’re going to put up with it. You’re not some Richard Dawkins type, are you?”

“No, I’m not Richard Dawkins. I have a sense of irony. What about you? You’re not some Focus on the Family type?”

“Candice, I’m pretty much a sexy cat burglar. Clearly I’m not the most religious person. But it’s missionaries. Who has a problem with missionaries?”

“Well, the many millions of indigenous peoples around the world who were forced to convert on pain of death.”

“Don’t worry,” Nevada said condescendingly. “I’ll defend you from the big bad youth pastors who don’t want you to swear so much.”

“And a lot of them don’t distribute relief so much as they throw around Bibles and... socks...”

“Candice, we’re doing the missionaries’ position and that’s final.”

Candice simmered for a moment on the pun she’d walked into. “I hate you.”

“But it’s an erotic hate, like James Bond and the villain’s sexy henchwoman.”

“I’m going back inside,” Candice said, pulling the hatch up.

“So you’re really not doing my back?” Nevada called after her.

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The hatch clanged shut.

“Okay, send Uday up, he has strong hands. Candice? *Hello?*”

* * *

It took a few more days of travel, but eventually the unchallenged dominion of the Sahara sands began to combat the plains and low hills of what locals called the *goz*. The two fought like weary, wounded soldiers, with long stretches of gravel and jagged sandstone broken up by guerrilla attacks of wiry grass or thorny scrub, spreading over the gritty soil until it had taken over the horizon. After the sterility of the desert, it should've been a relief, but the weak and crippled attempts at growth only made the surroundings seem more lifeless. Bleached bones and desiccated corpses were the only landmarks, accompanied by dust devils clawing at the burning sands like red-handed murderers displaying their handiwork.

The sun had disappeared behind evening clouds and the heat was bleeding out of the sand like a fire guttering out when the tank came across a mother elephant and her fallen calf. The child was as big as a St. Bernard, but infinitely more ungainly. Like some cobbled together toy, it refused to function, only stirring slightly as its mother pulled at it with her trunk. It was obvious to Candice that the calf was halfway to being another set of bleached bones, but Nevada stopped the tank, got out, and brought it water in an upside-down helmet. The calf only drank sparingly, but Nevada stayed beside it as ardently as its mother, encouraging it to drink more.

The human children filed out to stretch their legs and relieve themselves, while Candice stayed on the tank in some parody of guardianship, keeping one eye on the children to ensure they wouldn't wander off and another on Nevada. Riding in the tank, she felt like she was being shaken apart. The M60 wasn't much more comfortable when it was parked, but Candice appreciated the stillness.

A week ago, she didn't think she had ever seen a tank in real life. Or heard a gun go off. Or seen any blood that hadn't come from someone's nose. She'd been an archaeologist, working on a dig site in Meroe. She'd been more worried about contaminating her findings than losing her life.

Everything had changed so quickly that it hardly seemed real. More like some TV show where someone got bumped on the head and dreamt they were in the Wild West. The government of Sudan had been decapitated in a

terrorist bombing. Another cell of that same terror network, the Khamsin, had come to destroy Candice's dig. Nevada had saved her, then shanghaied her into an expedition inside the tomb her team had uncovered to find a treasure Nevada was set on claiming. There hadn't been any treasure, though. Only a clue to where it had been taken, to be buried in the tomb of Cleopatra herself.

Calling on the resources of Nevada's mysterious employer, they'd finagled their way onto a train evacuating refugees from Khartoum, which had been destroyed midway through the journey. Most of the refugees had been left to hike back to Khartoum and an uncertain fate, while Nevada had used a tank they'd liberated from the Khamsin to drive to safety in South Sudan, taking Candice, the wounded, and the children with her.

Now the plan was to get the refugees to safety and set off on the second leg of this treasure hunt. Candice would find an archaeological treasure trove, with Nevada only taking one small trinket for her trouble.

It felt like she'd sold her soul.

Candice sometimes wished she'd stayed with her first instinct, to drug Nevada and leave her safely behind in the hotel in Khartoum while she went after the treasure... the *find*... herself. But she needed Nevada's street smarts as much as Nevada needed her expertise. And she wanted Nevada to save her kid... assuming he wasn't some con job.

Of course, even if he wasn't, that hardly made things better. You weren't allowed to rob banks just because you donated the money to charity. In Candice's experience, people rarely acted according to justifications anyway; they acted according to their nature. Was the boy Nevada's justification, or an excuse for her to indulge in her nature?

And what's your nature, Candice Cushing? she asked herself. *What is your justification and what is your excuse?*

Something sparked at her eye, almost like a tear. Covering her eyebrows with the chop of her palm, she saw a metallic glimmer on the horizon with a dust storm behind it. Some futile defiance of the sun, rising up to try and blot it out before being sucked away by indifferent winds. In that miasma of torn sands, the metal vehicle gleamed even brighter.

"Easy!" she cried. "We've got company!"

* * *

Nevada looked in Candice's direction, which brought her the sight of the woman standing on the tank's cupola, as if she needed to be any taller, and pointing at the southern horizon. Their destination. Nevada looked that way, and there it was, plain as day. And if there was one thing the Sahara had in stock, it was day.

Nevada took her scope out of her pocket and looked through it.

"What do you see?" Candice called.

Nevada adjusted the scope to bring the scene into focus. "Tour bus." Distantly, Nevada heard the whump of sand compacting as Candice hopped down from the tank.

"Tour bus? What's a tour bus doing in a war zone?"

Nevada replaced the scope in her pocket. "Maybe it's the economy tour." She dropped her hand to the gun in her holster to check that its reassuring weight was still there. It wasn't her own pistol, but a revolver she'd taken off one of the Khamsin on the train—so old that she didn't know the make or model. But it fired.

An unfamiliar weight draped across her shoulders, and she looked up to see the mother elephant, its trunk outstretched to curl around her in some gesture of pachyderm emotion she refused to try to read into. Thankfulness or beseeching or even consoling—God, she didn't want to be one of those people who called a pet their "fur baby." Nevada pushed the trunk away.

"It's tough being a mom," she said, as if she'd know, and walked back to the tank.

She slid her dive knife out of its sheath, checking to make sure it would come out without a hitch, then pushed it back inside. Candice was standing in front of the tank, arms crossed, her strong features set with worry. Nevada emptied her own face of emotion, giving Candice a cheeky grin instead. Candice was a tough cookie and she'd taken more than most, but that was no reason to throw anything at her that she didn't absolutely need to catch.

"Get everyone inside the tank," Nevada said confidently. She took her revolver out and checked the chambers. Five of the six were full, the chamber under the hammer left empty to prevent an accidental discharge. She spun a loaded chamber behind the barrel and holstered the pistol again. "Aim the main gun at the bus. If I do this—" Nevada raised her fist into the air and pumped it in a circle. "Blast 'em."

She was turning to walk out to the approaching tour bus when Candice said, “Wait, stop, what if you forget and do the sign accidentally?”

Nevada held up her fist and circled it in the air again. “How many times do you think I do this in the average day? Do you think I’m going to meet Arsenio Hall?”

“Who?”

Nevada laughed. “This is actually about as irritating as I remember commanding a tank crew was.”

“I’m sorry, the last time you told me to fire a tank’s gun, we blew up a bridge!”

“That worked out well,” Nevada reasoned.

Candice stuck her hands to her hips. “We fell off a speeding train.”

“I remember that as getting to first base with you.”

Candice’s elbows spasmed as she pushed her hands harder into her waist. “I suppose it depends on who landed on top and who landed on bottom.”

“I’m not touching that one,” Nevada said, and started off.

* * *

Nevada walked out to meet the bus and it grew like the atomic monster in some fifties B-movie. She was walking on bony grit that shifted under her with every step and flew away from her strides like its deadness was repulsed by her life. This sand didn’t feel like the good, honest soil of the Mojave she’d grown up with, or even the Arabian Desert. It was more like ashes.

Behind her, she heard the tank’s turret pivoting, the main gun taking aim at the bus. If it came down to it, she didn’t doubt that Candice would choose the refugees inside over anyone outside. *Me included, most likely.*

The bus stopped forty yards away from her. Peeling paint on the sides announced that it was, or once had been, ‘Big Jim’s Safari Tours.’ It was a big, gas-guzzling, diesel thing, snub-nosed, stippled with rust, and pimpled with bullet holes. The Igor of vehicles. Cargo netting had been strung through the windows and over the roof, a camel hump for luggage. The side windows had been plugged up: plywood, scrap metal, even bricks in one place. To make up for the loss of ventilation, the windshield had been taken out entirely, replaced with chicken wire stretched across the front of

the cab like the face mask of a football helmet. Christian rock drooled out of the speakers. Nevada could see a Bible on the dash.

The driver wrestled aside a slab of bullet shield from the driver's side window and pulled his upper body out into open air, seating himself on the bottom of the window panel. He held some sort of machine gun in his lap. Nevada rested her thumb in her belt, near the butt of her pistol.

A passenger worked the lever to open the bus door and stepped out. He had a .45 strapped to his belt, under a white T-shirt with a picture of a fetus on it that read 'BABY.' At least one of the men, Easy judged, was Dinka tribe, the same as Candice's mother. Tall in the elegantly slender way of a Tolkien elf, with starless-night complexions and deep, radiant eyes. Candice definitely took after that side of her family.

The passenger walked out to her. On closer inspection, Nevada could see his shirt had holes along the sleeves. His sandals were a handspan under the cuffs of his too-short jeans, which were themselves wearing thin along the knees. Maybe it was Nevada's imagination, but the sand didn't seem to crunch under him. He stepped over it as lightly as Jesus walking on water.

"I am John Makuei Ladu," he said in a lilting African accent. His English was good, but a bit strange-sounding. His words didn't have a rhythm that Nevada was used to. "I come from the camp. I am here to retrieve you."

"I suppose that makes me here to be retrieved." Nevada glanced at the other man, the one who'd been driving the bus. He wore fatigues, in places more maroon than green or black—splotched with old bloodstains, and she doubted they were his. He had the ritual scarification of the Nuer tribe: beads of scar tissue surrounding his mouth like a second goatee and horizontal *gaar* lines circling his forehead. He was relaxed in a limber sort of way, the machine gun held comfortably in his grip, no nerves, no anxiousness. He didn't expect there to be trouble. At least, not for him. "You have anything more for me to go on than a smile on your face and a song in your heart?"

Ladu looked confused for a moment. His lungs pumped his chest out and then sucked it back in. The sand blew over the hills with a plaintive wail. Nevada felt sweat between her shoulder blades, tingling a path downward like a plucked guitar string.

Shoot him, shoot the guy with the machine gun, get to his body, get his gun...

Nevada tapped her pinky against the butt of her revolver. Doable. Very doable.

“Mr. Pike,” Ladu started again, reverence in his voice, “said he had been given a name by your boss-man. The name is Harry Calhoun.”

Nevada felt a crack go through her poker face. Her deep, even breathing was interrupted by a sudden intake. She listened to the almost hollow, almost echoing moan of the wind.

Okay, she thought, *okay*.

“We’ve got kids in the tank. Some walking wounded, a few old fogeys. You can take them?”

“It is a bus,” Ladu said reasonably. “I must tell you that there are no weapons allowed at Camp Esau.”

Figures. Nevada took out her pistol. Handling the gun between two fingers, she held it up, rolled out the cylinder, and let the bullets tumble onto the shattered ground, rolling into the sands like maggots. “Now it’s a paperweight.”

She went to tell Candice they were getting bumped up to first class.

* * *

They left the tank to continue rotting, as it seemingly had been doing even when they were riding in it. In no time at all, it would be stripped, scavenged, salvaged for parts. One more set of old bones being resurrected in the decay economy of South Sudan.

The bus was just as bone-jarring as the tank had been. The music was worse. The driver pushed the gas pedal all the way down and took them up to a speed that seemed nearly suicidal, as if he was determined to kill the suspension once and for all. Through the chained windshield, Nevada could see the sands finally give way fully to browning vegetation, grass, crops, the traditional flattened savannah of Sub-Saharan Africa. It was the dry season, and the occasional brush of green seemed more like an outbreak of some disease than anything else. Farmers performed stubble burning, sending up clouds of greasy smoke and low, orange flames that bleached the landscape to a further monochrome, making it look like just another variation of the desert they had left.

The wooden stock on the FM Mle1915 CSRG the driver had leaning against his right thigh used the same limited palette. The machine gun

was big enough for Nevada to make it out all the way from the back of the bus. The crescent-shaped magazine straddling the underside could leave no doubt it was the French Chauchat. It probably dated back to World War I. Made the Browning Automatic Rifle look like cutting-edge tech.

Lines of coagulated blood ran like dry riverbeds along the floor.

Candice came down the aisle holding a knapsack full of Camelbak water bottles. She handed them out to the children and wounded and elderly. When she got to Nevada, she sat down beside her, the bag in her lap. Nevada took a bottle out of it. It was customized with some church logo, a crucifix with the sideways figure-8 of the infinity symbol crossing the arms.

Nevada opened the tab on the bottle and sipped from it. The water on the tank had been staid, as dry as water could be and still be water. This was Nirvana in comparison. Or at least Pearl Jam.

“You feeling okay?” Candice asked, digging out a water bottle of her own.

“I’m great,” Nevada said. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“No reason. It’s just been a long coupla days.”

Nevada swiveled in her seat, resting her back against the window and planting her feet against Candice’s thigh. “What about you? Any second thoughts?”

Candice was somber. “Second thoughts, third thoughts, fourth thoughts... nothing serious. If nothing else, we’re doing these kids a favor.”

“My good deed for the decade,” Nevada said, putting her heels up on Candice’s lap.

Candice pushed Nevada’s boots off, and they clunked down against the floor. “Tell me something. Back on the train, when you went after Farouq—was it to save these people or to get the map off him?”

Nevada let one leg dangle off the seat and put her other foot up on the bench, toes saber-rattling at the border of Candice’s ass. “What kind of a question is that? Both. Duh.”

“Duh,” Candice repeated, imitating Nevada’s American accent. She scooted away to the edge of the bench seat.

Nevada pushed her foot out further but didn’t bring it into contact with Candice’s hip. “Yeah. Duh. People do stuff because they get something out of it. They eat to feel good or they don’t eat because thinking of being thin makes them feel good. They even give to charity just to feel good.

Once you realize that and stop feeling *bad* about it, you can stick your nose in the trough and get your fair share, instead of wondering why assholes have all the money.”

“And that’s all that motivates you? Enlightened self-interest?”

“Aww, you called it enlightened.” Nevada smirked. “What else is there?”

“Love, compassion, nobility. Most of human emotions, really.”

Nevada prodded her foot in Candice’s side. “People do shit because it makes them feel good or they don’t do shit because it makes them feel bad.”

Candice chopped at Nevada’s ankle. “So if Farouq hadn’t had the map, would you have just left those people to die?”

Nevada picked her foot up and rested it on the back of the seat, her legs now spread-eagle. “Are you implying I would’ve felt bad if they died? Because that’s kinda my point.”

“Could you please put your legs together?”

“Now you sound like my mother.” Nevada hopped her other foot up onto the seatback, reclining down with both feet beside Candice’s head.

“How can that possibly be comfortable?”

“I’m doing yoga.”

“You have your head up your ass.”

“I had a swami who could do that once.”

“You did not.”

“Namaste.”

* * *

Nevada and Candice slept in shifts as the bus drove through the night, passing the flaming wrecks of other vehicles and those that had long since cooled. Candice didn’t know what *she* would do if trouble came, besides wake Nevada up, but then, she didn’t even know if Nevada was just in it for the money or not. Hell, she didn’t even know why she was doing this. Archaeological knowledge, minus the artifact Nevada had her eye on, or her career? Or both, like Nevada had said?

Or it doesn’t even matter, because you already told Nevada where to go so you might as well get used to the idea.

Despite telling herself that, Candice’s troubled thoughts let her stay up through the night with ease. Shortly after dawn, they reached their destination.

Camp Esau had started its life as a hunting lodge in colonial times, circular clay buildings with thatch roofs and hardwood floors, the lesser trophies of its occupants decorating the *Out of Africa* surroundings. When the civil war had broken out between the Dinka and the Nuer, it'd been razed to the ground, only to be resurrected in the peaceful lull of South Sudan's new nationhood. When the fighting had resumed, David Pike had converted it into a refugee camp, the lodge now housing a school, a clinic, dormitories, a kitchen, and a library. Tukuls—mud huts ten feet across that could be built in less than a week—had been erected around the lodge for additional housing. Rows of acacia trees—a certain breed that had no leaves, only needle-sharp thorns as long a pencil—grew around the compound, serving as fencing. Outside that was a field of yellow-tipped elephant grass growing waist-high. The bus parked at the edge of the grass. A footpath connected the parking spot to the inner compound.

With the tribesmen hurrying them off the bus, Candice and Nevada found themselves pressed into service as chaperones, Candice staying on the bus to make sure everyone disembarked, and Nevada riding herd on them as they got off,

“Hold up a damn minute, would you? You, back here, now! Stay with the group, ya little monster. Yeah, make a face, it'll freeze like that.”

Candice was trying not to get her hopes up, which of course meant tantalizing herself with all the possibilities civilization had to offer. A hot bath. A hot meal. A toilet with actual toilet paper. And clean clothes—the ones she had on she would quite like to burn. Deodorant—

She was suddenly jerked back several thousand years, to a time when all a person could be was prey. Thoughts of the wider world vanished, eclipsed by an awareness of her immediate surroundings. She could feel air currents breaking against her skin, the pattern of the sunlight as it filtered through the clouds. And she knew something was watching her.

“Nevada,” she said gently.

“I know,” came the terse reply.

Nevada moved between the group and the threat. Candice could almost make it out now. A lion, its tawny fur blending into the wilting grass. It looked bigger than it could possibly be, broken outline sucking up all the shadows and indistinct yellow in its vicinity, drawing that bulk around the

sizzling golden eyes that gave an undeniable reality to the fear taking hold of Candice. Nevada put her hand on the butt of her useless, empty pistol.

Candice backed away, a few steps behind Nevada, saying in hushed tones for everyone in the group to stay together. But the lioness had spent far longer than any of them in this primordial state of kill or be killed. She growled, the sound sizzling the air, making it almost too hot to bear. And she swished her tail, which scythed through the grass around her to give a fearful suggestion of her size and nearness. Something half-seen, present but unknown, there and not there. The fear was almost intimate in how deep it was under Candice's skin. It was in the bones of her legs, pulling at them, trying to get her to run. She kept moving at a snail's pace, slow enough for the wounded and the elderly. They were all one big mass, with Nevada the face, staring right at the lioness.

It growled louder and raked its claws through the earth, big scabs of soil coming up under its paws.

"Don't take that fucking tone with me, slut," Nevada said. She took the gun out of her belt. "You see this? YOU SEE THIS, MOTHERFUCKER? THIS IS LIKE A SPRAY BOTTLE TIMES A MILLION!"

* * *

It was barely a rainy season. Everywhere Pike drove, the grass was brown and brittle, the Ankole-Watusi cattle had ribs and shoulders showing almost as prominent as their upturned horns, and the riverbeds had burnt down nearly into rock. There were so few animals now—certainly none of the herds of prancing gazelles that the *mzunga* had once watched from the terrace outside his second-story office. It seemed like one day soon, there would only be vultures to sit and count the minutes he spent resting.

The Dinka Spear Masters made their sacrifices, called upon their animal spirits and upon Nhialic, the god of the sky, but he only answered the prayers of the vultures.

Their god was asleep on the job. Pike wasn't.

The money that his guests' rich benefactor, Mr. Singh, had offered had seemed like a windfall, but the Sudan had a way of swallowing it all up. They needed more water, more food, more everything to keep the camp running as they waited for the dry season to release its stranglehold and

allow the rains in. And even that would not be enough. Noah's flood would not be enough—but at least it would make this dirty place *clean*.

I Counted Each Star As I Placed It In The Sky And Foresaw The Path Of Every Wind That Would Cover The Earth. I Have Given You Enough.

“But Lord,” Pike replied, “I can't see how we can keep everyone here with not even enough money for half—”

You Are A Worthy Steward, David Pike. You Will Act Wisely With The Gifts I Have Given You. You Will Walk After The Lord Your God. I Shall Roar Like A Lion.

Then he heard it. The throaty, braying bellow of a lion, almost as clear to him as God's voice. And yelling, from outside the entryway to the camp.

Pike left his pen and spreadsheet and went to the gun rack. For a lion, his Sako 85 Kodiak should suffice. It was already loaded with .375 H&H. The Nosler Partition bullets would expand inside the target, like he'd shot his prey with an explosion. Not the kind of doomsday weapon that would take down an elephant or cape buffalo, but just right for four hundred and fifty pounds of predator. It would almost be an even fight. But then, he had the Lord.

* * *

Nevada jabbed the revolver at the lioness for emphasis as she continued to curse her out, calling the animal every name under the sun, even a few in Italian. The lioness was keeping her distance, confused by Nevada's boldness and waiting to see who would break from the herd and be easy pickings. But she was getting impatient. Step by step, the group was getting closer to the safety of the compound, and the lioness couldn't have that.

“FUCK YOUR MOTHER, FUCK YOUR FATHER, AND *THE LION KING* RIPPED OFF JAPANESE ANIME! TELL ME I'M WRONG, COCKSUCKER!”

The lioness roared. A full-on MGM Studios roar. Nevada felt the revolver shaking in her hand. This was usually about the time she would improvise something and pretend it had been the plan all along, but she couldn't think of anything to do except hope that she tasted bad. And she hadn't heard any complaints in a very active dating life.

“Anybody have a spray bottle?” Nevada muttered.

Thunder cracked in a staccato rhythm. A pop, then a millisecond of a bolt-action being racked. Pop, racking, pop, racking. Three goutts of blood burst from the lioness's chest in rapid succession, splashing the stalks of grass around her, and then she went down so quietly she might've been lying down with the lamb. Nevada could only watch in disbelief. She could see the three entry wounds. They were grouped together in a circle no bigger than her fist; hit the lioness right in the heart. It must've been like a miniature freight train hitting her out of nowhere.

"Down?" a gritted voice came from on high. Nevada turned to see a tall man standing on a wood-beamed platform on the second floor of the lodge. He wore layers of leather, khaki, and flannel, with a priest's collar around his neck and a bolt-action rifle in his hand.

Nevada gave the lioness a kick. She kept bleeding and being dead. "Way down."

"You must be Nevada."

"And company," Nevada called up, indicating Candice and the others.

"Come on in—let's get this barbecue kicked off!"

He turned to head back inside, and Nevada started toward the compound again, Candice falling in beside her. She had a hand on the shoulder of one of the children, who was holding his ears after the violence of the gunshots. Either not used to the noise or far too used to it.

"You faced down a lion with an empty gun?" Candice asked.

"Lion didn't know it was empty."

"Uh-huh," Candice said, rolling her eyes. "And who was that? Friend of yours?" She gestured up to where Pike had gone back inside.

"The man in charge."

"How can you tell?"

"Africa's the same as anywhere else. The man with the gun makes the rules. Shall we?"

Candice looked at the hunting lodge, seeing its Victorian trappings, and let out a deep breath. "You know it's literally colonial architecture, right?"

Nevada put an arm around Candice's shoulders. "You must be so much fun at Thanksgiving."

"I'm British."

"Oh, that's right, you're never fun."

“Which of our countries invented *Family Guy*?”

“That’s a low blow.”

On the inside, the compound was more like a village than a refugee camp, its center a bustling town square. A tailor worked on a Singer sewing machine to repair loincloths and robes. Women stripped beans by slapping them against heaps of gunnysacks. Children ran around beating play drums, pushing little clay figurines around on the ground with short sticks. Others were fooling around with gourds filled with water, slapping their bellies after puffing them out.

Candice noticed Nevada’s eyes following them. “They’re playing *luony kou*.”

“He one of those new Star Wars characters? I can’t keep track anymore.”

Candice gave her an admonishing tap. “It’s something they’ll do when they become young men. A competition at cattle camp. Over the summer, the richest men with the most cows try to become fat by only drinking milk from their own cows.” Candice pointed out one of the boys guzzling from his water-filled gourd. “Whoever is fattest at the end gets the girls.”

Nevada shrugged. “Has to be better than *The Bachelor*. But that wasn’t what I was looking at.”

Candice took a closer look at the boy with the gourd. Then she had to look away. Even a glimpse of his lips and ears was almost too much. “Jesus...”

“Not in the slightest.” Pike was coming out of the lodge, ringed by three tribesmen in strangely modern clothing. One had a bandana with a button from the Mitt Romney campaign pinned to it. “The Zuni tribe will swell their ranks by taking in anyone they capture, but first they mark them.” He slapped the back of his hand against the chest of one of his men. “Get everyone to the infirmary, have them checked out. Go tell Francis to cook up a big lunch. After they eat, I want them cleaned up, fresh clothes, and bunks for all of them to sleep in.”

The one with the Romney button asked something in the Rek dialect, and Pike responded in kind before his men hustled off to herd the incoming children with an experienced professionalism. One of them ran back and hugged Nevada, who patted him on the head reluctantly before he let her go.

Pike crossed his arms contemplatively. “And that is exactly why I’m going to put you up in the lodge. Follow me, I’ll show you to your rooms.”

Inside the lodge, the furnishings were surprisingly palatial. Wicker furniture, animal-skin rugs, big game mounted and stuffed—with heaps of gunnysacks, supply crates, and stacks of ammunition taking up space. Like a social club taken over by revolutionaries.

“Thank you for your help with the lion,” Candice said, her small voice almost swallowed up by the floorboards creaking under their feet and the booming footfalls of Pike’s biker boots.

“Weren’t nothing. But it was a lioness. No mane. And with lions, it’s women who do the hunting.”

“I’ve been to shoe sales like that,” Nevada commented.

“To be honest,” Pike continued, his gravelly voice like a country singer near the end of a tour, “no matter how much your boss paid, I was leaning towards putting you up in one of the tukuls. I sleep there myself. Roughing it a little is nothing compared to what these folks go to. But hearing about how you took care of the lost sheep out there, the least I can do to repay you is put you up in one of the old *mzungu* rooms. We cleared out all the shit, changed the sheets, even did some vacuuming.”

“Oh, no,” Candice said, instantly demurring, “with all the people you have here already, we couldn’t possibly—”

“Take more than one room!” Nevada interrupted quickly. She put an arm around Candice’s waist and pulled her close. “Since it’s just us girls, we can share a bed.” She smiled at Candice. “It’ll be fun. Like having a slumber party.”

Pike led them up a flight of stairs that revolved around a chandelier made of antelope horns. Only half the lightbulbs were lit. “Fine by me. I wish we had so many supplies that we couldn’t spare the space, but that just ain’t so. And speaking of supplies, I’m gonna need your peacemaker.”

“I already gave you guys the bullets,” Nevada protested, getting an elbow from Candice for her trouble.

“I know that, but you can see how our other guests don’t see much of a distinction.” Pike stopped at the top of the stairs, chuckling to himself and running his hand over his facial hair. “You know what they tell me? They know that in America, a man only takes one wife. Figure that makes a lotta women left over. So now they’re worried you’ll—” He made a gun of

his fingers and aimed it at Nevada. "Take 'em away and force 'em to marry you."

"They should talk to my cousin," Nevada said, taking the revolver out and handing it to Pike.

He looked it over. "What is this, the gun that killed Liberty Valance?"
"That's what I said."

Pike pointed to a room at the end of the hall. "You're in there. If you want a hot shower, I suggest you get to it before we get the kids washed off. There's fresh clothes in the drawers—the stuff me and the boys don't have much use for. And we really will be having a barbecue this evening to welcome you newcomers. Not our usual fare, but since we're having company over, why the hell not?"

"What is it?" Candice asked. "Cow? Pig?"

"Elephant," Pike replied.

* * *

The room's opulence reminded Nevada of the Burj al Arab, all those years ago. Funny, how dealing with the criminal and the corrupt tended to land you in high society as much as it did the gutter. She picked her way through the antique furniture, the glass-shrouded candles waiting to be lit, the framed drawings and paintings that had given some long-ago adventurer a taste of England. There was even a Victrola in the corner.

"Don't say I never take you anywhere nice," Nevada said to Candice, going through her pockets to set all the contents out on the dresser. She'd be transferring them all into her clean clothes.

Candice looked out the window. The view of the plains had been replaced by the field of tukuls, now lit from the inside as dusk fell and the occupants started fires. With no chimneys, the smoke seeped up through the thatching, making the huts look disturbingly like they were burning to the ground.

"Four-star accommodations in the middle of a warzone. I don't know whether to be impressed or..." Candice trailed off.

"Be impressed," Nevada said. "Liberal guilt is so two thousand and late."

"Honestly, so long as there's shampoo, spoil me rotten. Any more of this humidity and my hair is going to become a member of Mötley Crüe."

Candice started for the bathroom, only for Nevada to hurriedly slide into a blockade, leaning against the doorframe.

“Hey,” Nevada said, toying with the hem of her tank top, pulling it up over a row of subtly delineated abdominal muscles, which Candice had to raise an eyebrow at. “Here’s a thought. Maybe it’s just that that was a choice glam rock reference, but what if we showered together? Save some water... It is the dry season, after all.”

Candice took hold of Nevada’s shoulder and shoved her to one side of the doorway as she stepped past. “And with lines like that, it’s no wonder. Does this combination of arrogance, obnoxiousness, and sexual aggression normally charm women into paroxysms of lust?”

“I wouldn’t say paroxysms,” Nevada demurred. “Probably because I don’t know what that means. But we do have some unfinished business.” Nevada ran her thumb over her lower lip. “Now that we’ve got the kids in daycare, maybe we should follow up on that kiss. Before the shower, I mean, while we’re already all sweaty and gross.”

“Oh my God,” Candice moaned, walking out of the bathroom.

Nevada followed her, jumping onto the bed with some Baywatch-quality jiggle, if she did say so herself. “I know, I know, ladies don’t sweat, they glisten. Whatever. Honestly, a little musk is a bit of a turn-on.”

“This is not an invitation,” Candice said firmly, throwing open a drawer on the empire dresser. The attached mirror showed her curdling expression. “I realized it’s probably best to have my clothes ready in the bathroom if I don’t want you undressing me with your eyes.”

Nevada turned onto her belly, sashaying her ass from side to side. “You *don’t* want that,” she agreed. “I work much better with my hands.”

With a set of underwear, white peasant blouse, and riding skirt folded in her arms, Candice marched back to the bathroom. Nevada reached out as she passed and grabbed her elbow.

“Hey, hey,” she said sincerely, soothingly, as she looked up at Candice. Candice looked back at her out of the corner of her eye. “If you’re that angry with me, you can be on top.”

Candice wrenched her arm away, growling, and proceeded into the bathroom. Nevada rolled out of bed to pursue her, stopping short at the doorway when Candice turned around to block her path.

GEORGETTE KAPLAN

“I know, I know,” Nevada said, laying a palm flat on the stack of clothes to push it down out of the way of their eye contact. “You’re thinking, ‘That was a really good kiss, but it was with another woman. Does that make me gay?’ No, absolutely not, just bisexual. Everyone’s a bit bisexual. Not me. I’d rather drown in quicksand than use a dick as a handhold...”

“Let me be clear,” Candice replied, drawing herself up to her full height, which almost touched the lintel. “It doesn’t matter to me what your orientation is, or your race, or your gender.”

“You’re very undemanding,” Nevada said. “I like that in a woman.”

“I find you repellant entirely based on your personality. You are the most greedy, narcissistic, destructive, and obnoxious individual I have ever met. If we were the two last women on Earth, I would choose a life of chastity over sex with you.”

Nevada paused for a moment. “You wouldn’t even masturbate?”

Candice swept the door shut with her foot; Nevada had to jump back before it smacked her in the face. A moment later, she heard the shower running. A moment after that, she was knocking on the door.

“Candice,” she whined, “can I at least use the toilet?”

* * *

That night, the lights of the lodge and the tukuls were scant defense against the darkness. It was liquid—Candice felt like she could swim in it—but warm somehow. A fire pit had been lit near the center of the compound. The elephant meat roasted on it, the refugees gathered around. It all reminded Candice of some orgiastic Viking party, but inverted. Solemn and dignified, with portions of meat and vegetables being handed out in silence. Candice took hers: a battered metal plate sectioned into portions, with a fork missing some tines and a spoon made of wood.

Before the fire, several Ubangi performed a dance accompanied only by the sounds of their feet chopping at the ground and their hands slapping their bodies. One of them wore a surgical mask and a white lab coat over his nearly naked body as he went around the onlookers, pretending to examine them.

Up close, the hot coals seemed to throw off a great deal of light, but it dwindled quickly in the face of the infinitely stretching landscape. The ground seemed as flat and monotonous as a sheet of paper—its

featurelessness only defeated by the curvature of the earth, which itself was only a faint suggestion in the moonlight.

Candice turned around to look at the hunting lodge, as if for reassurance it was still there in the lunar sterility of the darkly lacquered world, and saw Nevada emerging. She'd picked out a white chiffon dress that evidently did little against the cold; she scooted up right next to the fire before crouching down beside Candice. She didn't seem to have any idea of how to sit down in it either.

"Was there a pumice stone when you showered?" Nevada asked, wringing a last bit of moisture out of her hair. "Because I couldn't find one. I'm not accusing you of anything, but I went in right after you did."

"I remember," Candice said. "You didn't even wait until I was gone to start undressing."

"What? I'm not ashamed of my body."

"I've seen some of your tattoos; you probably should be."

"You wouldn't say that if you could read Korean."

"I *can* read Korean. And now I know how to operate a Samsung dishwasher. By the way, when someone flushes the toilet while you're taking a shower, it tends to result in cold water."

"It's called a courtesy flush," Nevada announced, "and in my country, it's considered polite."

"Did you have to flush the bog roll too?"

"I didn't, just the toilet paper." Nevada was handed her own plate, contents steaming hot from the spit-roast. "Oh. Thanks! Don't mind if I do—"

Candice reached over to grab her wrist. "Don't."

"What, does it have MSG in it? *Do you know what MSG is?*"

Candice rolled her eyes. "It's Dinka tradition—when you eat an elephant, everyone takes their first bite at the same time."

"So, what, is there a countdown or does someone blow a whistle—"

Nevada broke off. She must've noticed, as Candice had, that everyone was watching Pike, forks in hand, their first bites ready to be taken. And as magnanimous as the host of any feast, Pike looked the guests over, speared a morsel on his fork, and bit down. Everyone else took a bite in unison, including Candice and Nevada. Not having had time to cut her meat,

Nevada ripped it right off the bone. As she chewed, she took out her dive knife and savagely cut the meat into portions.

“Tell me you cleaned that knife,” Candice said.

“I took a shower, didn’t I?”

Pike was on the other side of the fire pit, its sparks dancing across their view of him. Seated on a log, one of the rescued children on his knee, he could’ve been a Boy Scout troop leader making s’mores before bedtime. It was the dark, Candice thought. He looked at home in it. Maybe at peace.

“So, ladies!” he bellowed across the fire, handing the child his plate. “What do you think of my ‘vacation home’ here?”

Candice nodded agreeably. “It’s really something.”

“I would’ve gone with aluminum siding myself,” Nevada said, “but yeah, place is a beaut.”

Pike nodded, the light from the fire playing over his features and reflecting in his eyes. “Yeah. Anyone can look at something, but not everyone can see. Me, I can see. I see this place because I saw it before there was so much as a footprint on this ground. Just a boarded-up house. I came here thinking it would make a good picture for my scrapbook. God, though, God thinks bigger than that. He told me this would be where I honored Him. And I heard Him tell me to build here, but I think what He really wanted me to do was believe. Because this place, it’s really all God’s work. Look at it. No way does this happen without God.”

“Well,” Candice said, in a sort of British exhalation.

“Well?” Nevada asked, halfway prompting and halfway warning.

“Well—” Candice drew out the last vowel into a hum. “I’ve read about what you do, how you carry out operations—protecting people, rescuing people, fighting people you see as your enemies.”

“My enemies?” Pike asked.

Candice coughed. “I...” She prodded at her meat with her fork. “I just hear about this war and the things each side does, and it’s hard for me to believe God is on anyone’s side.”

Pike smiled disarmingly. “God is on the children’s side.”

Nevada patted Candice on the shoulder. “I think what Candice means to say—”

“Means to say,” Pike interrupted. “I hear that a lot. People mean to say a lot of things. Mostly how complicated this place is. It’s like ‘hey, even how

I'm talking about it is complicated.' But I think to God, it must be simple. There are people who are doing something about this place and those who aren't. What do you think God means to say to them?"

"I'm sure I wouldn't know," Candice replied.

"I would." Pike sounded completely sure of himself. The kind of certainty people in love used when they talked about being together forever. He fixed Nevada with his fire-lit stare. "Do you believe in God?"

"Still flipping the coin. Ask me in a year."

"Oh, we won't be keeping you that long. I'm told your plane will be here in the morning. Hope you enjoy a good night's sleep before you're on your way."

"I sleep like a baby."

"Clean conscience?"

Nevada inclined her head slightly. "Clean sheets."

A boy came up to her holding sand in his hand, and he pretended to sneeze as he blew it over Nevada's plate. "Why'd you stop eating?" he cried. "Why aren't you eating?"

Pike rose to his feet. "Ezekiel!" he bellowed. "That was very rude!"

Ezekiel ran off, laughing to himself. After a gesture from Pike, one of the men brought her a new plate.

"Kids," Nevada grunted as she took it. "Like it's not bad enough we have to use childproof caps."

* * *

The fire went out, and refugees dispersed to the smoking tukuls and darkened dormitories. The night was more profound for Candice in their shared bedroom, looking out at the darkness. She could see lights moving in the fields behind the lodge, pinprick fires that could've been as distant as the stars. Her mother had told her about that. The Dinka would dig a hole before a termite mound and burn a bundle of dried grass to draw them out with the light. When the termites came out, a flow of them like water from a sprung leak, they would be swept into the hole with a broom and burnt to death. Then they could be eaten. A traditional dish that Candice had never tasted. She was torn between revulsion and curiosity, not only not knowing what to feel, but not knowing which she *should* feel.

She crossed her arms and watched the fires illuminate termite mounds as tall as a man.

“So like, that was weird, right?” Nevada asked, her mouth full of toothpaste. The bathroom door was open. Candice turned to face her and sat on the windowsill. “The whole ‘oh, hey, black guys, just look at me, the white boy, I’ll tell you when to eat’ *thang*. I mean, I’m not really all that PC...”

“I hadn’t noticed,” Candice said.

“Sarcasm is right down there with puns and *Saturday Night Live* recurring characters as a source of humor,” Nevada informed.

“I had no idea,” Candice replied sarcastically.

Nevada spat out her toothpaste. “I don’t know, it felt real... Professor Challenger and his native bearers.” She poured herself a shot of mouthwash.

“It’s an ego trip,” Candice said. “It’s not acceptable to be the Great White Hunter anymore, so people see how socially conscious they can be. The most charitable, the most good, the most—” Nevada gargled. “—African.”

Nevada spat. “Well, he’s saved more kids than I have. Can’t complain about that.”

“I’m not. Everyone indulges their ego in some form. As long as it’s done in moderation. But he’s acting like some kind of chieftain. It’s a warning sign...”

Nevada leaned down to rinse her mouth in the tap water, spat, took another mouthful, swallowed, then came up cracking her neck. “And I thought I was the cynical one.”

“How cynical can you be? You’re white.”

“What? Who told you?” Nevada came to the open doorway and hooked her fingers on the lintel, showing off her arms as she hung down. “Look how big my arms are. Candice, look how strong I am. I’m so strong...”

Candice chuckled. “You know, I think if you grew a social conscience, you might be very much like Mr. Pike. Doing the right thing for... God knows what reason.”

“Oh, I’d love to,” Nevada said. “But where’s the money in it?”

Candice shook her head as she crossed to the bed. “You really are incomprehensible. If you’re so greedy, why’d you become an archaeologist in the first place? It’s not exactly a growth industry.”

“To meet women.” Nevada shrugged. “Working so far.”

Candice sat on the foot of the bed. “I suppose that brings us to the sleeping arrangements.”

“Yes, the offer to top me still stands.”

Candice groaned and fell back onto the mattress. “I’m just going to sleep in the bathtub.”

Nevada flopped onto the bed next to her. Candice was hard-pressed to ignore the taut ripple that went through her body, outlined as it was by her dress and distinct lack of bra. It felt sourly medieval to give Easy a pass on her crass flirtations simply because she wasn’t *horrible* to look at.

“No, no, I won’t hear of it,” Nevada said. “We’re on the same team. And when you’re part of my team, you’re part of me. I’m not going to let you spend a week sleeping in a *tank* just to put you in a bathtub the moment we reach civilization.”

“So you’re going to sleep in the bathtub?”

Nevada eyed her blankly. “I might’ve oversold the team spirit thing. Look...” She turned onto her belly and crawled up the bed to grab one of the many pillows. She slapped it down in the middle of the mattress. “This is a wall. My side, your side. I swear I will not so much as look at anything happening on your side of the bed.” She turned onto her flank, facing away from the dividing pillow. “See? I’ll pretend you don’t exist until you’ve had your ten hours of sleep. Scout’s honor.”

“You were a Girl Scout?”

Nevada looked over her shoulder at Candice. “No, but I wore the uniform very well.”

“I don’t want to know.”

“What? I was legal.”

“Can’t know, *cannot know*—”

Nevada sprang up to sit cross-legged on the mattress, showing impressive flexibility—which also made Candice feel bad about finding her shenanigans even somewhat funny. *If she weren’t such a pervert, I’d halfway think she was doing it all to get a laugh out of me.*

Nevada clapped her hands. “So. Deal or no deal?”

Candice sighed and crawled up her side of the bed. “What is it with you Americans and walls?”

GEORGETTE KAPLAN

“What?” Nevada asked theatrically, rolling onto her side again. “Did someone speak to me? I thought I heard something... Grandmama? Is that you? Have you come back to tell me where the family gold is hidden?”

Candice rolled herself under the covers. “*Goodnight, Nevada.*”

“What’s that, nana? You were *murdered?*”

CHAPTER 2

NEVADA FELT ARMS LOOPING AROUND her sleeping body, warm flesh pressed against her from neck to thigh in a way that couldn't be accidental, could only be someone craving the nearness of her, of being on her, being inside her. A leg, a firm thigh, ran across her lap. *Crystal*, she thought, turning her head and feeling sweet-smelling hair brush against her face. *Tiffany? Amber? Charity? Capri? Yeah, definitely, definitely—I need to meet more college graduates.*

She opened her eyes and saw Candice draped across the pillow, which now looked like the Berlin Wall after David Hasselhoff got through with it. Wearing only a blouse and panties, Candice had managed to entangle herself in both the sheets and Nevada, ending up under one arm with her face nestled in Nevada's neck. She could feel the steady thrum of breathing, swelling out Candice's chest against her torso and then tickling down her pulse with a syrupy warmth that flittered through her body and pooled right by her groin.

The blouse was ruffled as well, twisted up somewhere around Candice's sternum, showing a long expanse of bare back all the way to her cotton panties, which contrasted in lots of interesting ways with the skin above and below and through. Candice had the coloration of a thundercloud, one that could bring either rain or lightning—Nevada wanted to run her hand over the straight, supple muscles of her lower back and find out which it would be.

She just needed to think of a good one-liner to make it official—either rearrange this little tableau with far less clothes or at least prove how witty

she was—when Candice murmured in her sleep. She would probably be mortified to find that she'd thrown herself at Nevada like this, even unintentionally. And even if she didn't blame Nevada for the whole thing, it'd probably be one more thing bothering her about this whole situation. She'd brood even more, she'd angst even more—she might even find herself distracted while they were in actual physical danger, and Nevada knew how life-threatening that could be.

On the other hand, it would be very funny.

Sighing, Nevada gently sidled away, practically limbo-ing down the mattress until she slipped off the edge and left Candice wrapped around the pillow. Candice actually moaned slightly, tightening her grip on the pillow as if trying to find out what had happened to the warmer cushioning she'd been enjoying. Nevada spared one last look, then left Candice to hog the covers by her lonesome. At least this meant she'd have first shot at the shower.

She was rinsing her face at the sink when Candice came to, sputtering from giving mouth-to-mouth to her pillow. She rubbed her eyes as Nevada poked her head out of the bathroom.

“Morning, sunshine. Breakfast?”

Candice snorted. “Uh... if there's anyone I could believe could conjure up a bagel with cream cheese...”

“Sorry, I actually meant me. But we do have Pop-Tarts, if you like them cold.”

Candice got out of bed, wrapping the comforter around herself and most especially around her bare legs. She trudged to the pantry Nevada had indicated. “No frosting. They make Pop-Tarts that way?”

Nevada shrugged. “Maybe it's just a thing here. Like... sushi-flavored chips.”

“Stop. I already want to vomit.”

Nevada came out of the bathroom, toweling off her hair. “Toss me one. Any carbs in a storm.”

Candice did. Nevada took off the foil wrapping and nibbled on one. “Nn. It's like a strawberry sandwich with graham cracker bread.”

Candice opened her own pack. “I had the strangest dream. I was back in Sudan. I was digging again. The ground was hard, but it—turned to sand after I hit it. I'd run my hands through the sand after I dug it up, like I was

panning for gold. I didn't *touch* anything, but I felt this... history. Like I was connected to everyone who had ever walked on that sand. It was warm. The sand. It felt like it had a beating heart." She took a big bite from the Pop-Tart and seemed on the verge of gagging. "Yeah. Come up with any good jokes about us sleeping together?"

"Nah. Too easy."

"I know, right?"

"I could probably joke about it more if you played hard to get." Nevada ducked a flying Pop-Tart. "Don't waste almost-food."

"We'll be on your *Magic Carpet* in a few hours. I assume there'll be an in-flight meal."

"*The Flying Carpet*. And yeah, it has a microwave. TV dinners. We'll get you set up."

"Good. I think my appetite for organic food will be *nil* for the foreseeable. Hot water, on the other hand..." Candice started for the bathroom.

"Left you some," Nevada promised. "I'll be checking in with the home office. You might wanna scrub behind your ears and all. First impressions."

Candice turned to face her. "Start without me. I'm beginning to think this is one of those instances where the less I know the better."

"That might be for the best," Nevada said. "Enjoy your shower."

"I'm never going to not enjoy a shower again."

"Let me know if you drop the soap."

Candice firmly shut the door.

* * *

They just wouldn't listen.

Pike had taken the bus to a nearby village for supplies, and to check to see if any refugees had found their way there who needed to be relocated to Camp Esau. As his men brought in bundles of firewood, the doctor checked over the ailments of the villagers. Most of it was minor, treatable with antibiotics or Aspirin, but one boy was too sick to even be moved. With Pike and a few of his men as bodyguards, the doctor went to look him over. Parasites. So many that you could see them under the skin, like boils that wouldn't stand still.

He would need intensive treatment, immediate hospitalization back at the compound. The father, Jacob Lol Gatkuoth, wouldn't hear of it. He

kept babbling and shaking his head and waving his arms, and all Pike could think was how you tried to be a Good Samaritan, but so many people didn't want to be helped.

God didn't say anything. He didn't have to.

"Get the crate," he told John Ladu. Another of his men went with Ladu; it was a two-man job.

Pike walked in front of the father. He ducked his head and lowered his voice, his words audible only within their shared space. He could've been taking confession. "Have you read the Bible, Jacob?"

Jacob was cowed by Pike's nearness, the muscular frame that towered over him and loomed on either side of his slender body. He only shook his head.

"That's okay," Pike said. "That's honest. Not many people have. Truth be told, there is a shitload of Bible and people only have so much time. That's why there's people like me. Reverends. We chop it down, we space it out, we let you... digest it. Like a meal—we cook it for you. You know what one of my favorite meals is? My signature dish? Matthew, Chapter 18. 'And Jesus said Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.'"

Ladu and the other man came back. They carried a footlocker between them. It rattled as they walked.

"Do you know what a millstone is, Jacob?" Pike asked.

The footlocker fell to the floor with a thump that rattled the walls.

"It's part of a mill," Pike said. "Like a windmill. After a farmer harvests his grain, he takes it to a windmill. He places the grain on the bedstone, which is one of the two kinds of millstones. The other kind is the runner stone. That's above the bedstone."

Ladu opened the footlocker. The sound of the lid cantilevering down to the floor was far less violent than the first impact, but no less loud.

"It gets complicated from there—gears and stuff—but the gist of it is, the water or the wind turns a wheel, the wheel turns the runner stone,

and the runner grinds against the bedstone to crush anything between the two. It breaks the grain down into flour. So if you want a lot of flour, and you want it crushed down really fine, you need two big, heavy rocks. You can get technical about it, but that's really what we're talking about. A big, heavy rock around someone's neck."

Ladu and another of the men grabbed Jacob's arms, holding him in place and forcing his head down.

Pike walked to the footlocker. His steps were deafening. "A large millstone would be about a ton and a half. Now this..." Pike reached into the footlocker and brought up a length of chain. "Chain... is about fifty pounds. Sixty-six of these around your neck would be like a millstone. And even that would be better than if you caused a little child to stumble."

He was putting the third chain around Jacob's neck when Alexander Tongan came to get him. "Reverend Dave, it's the women. Nevada is calling someone."

Pike gave a nod. "Route it through here." He eyed Ladu. "Keep our friend Jacob down there. Let him feel the weight of his decision for a while."

Outside, the sun beat down on him. He'd trained himself not to feel it, but his pale skin responded instinctively. Sweat swamped his drying clothes. They said Africa was the birthplace of humanity—the Garden of Eden. Maybe that was why it felt like it was so close to hell.

One of his men brought him a tablet. It showed a split screen of two video feeds, Nevada on one side and the other a shaking view of a luxurious bathroom. A bearskin bathmat lay across industrially monochrome black and white tiles, while pop art wallpaper overlooked a Victoria and Albert bathtub.

"I've always thought of porcelain as the poor man's marble." The man's voice came from behind the camera, accent sliding between Indian birth and British education. "That's why in *my* remodel, the toilet is Saint Laurent marble. *Whaaaaat?* And the wastebasket you put your toilet paper rolls in? It's by John fucking Brauer."

"That's nice," Nevada said. "New medication working out for you? But really, I have a plane to catch—"

"Hold on, hold on, look at this!" The camera swiveled, aiming at a mirror. Pike recognized the reflection of the man holding the phone. Dubai billionaire Akbar Akkad Singh. "Why have a mirror over the sink when the

entire wall can be a mirror? You can check out your knees, your belly, your shoes, all the stuff you just had to wonder about before—now you know! Oh, I'm sorry..." The camera jostled as Singh evidently sat on the toilet, then aimed it back at himself. "What was your thing?"

"The Twitter version? Went to Sudan, it blew up. I killed a bunch of people but they were all bad. Crashed a train, stole a tank, now I'm in South Sudan. Jacques is giving me a ride to the Ennedi Plateau."

Singh's face grew slightly more serious. "Oh, is that where my skull is?"

"That and maybe Cleopatra's tomb, not that you care."

"Who's Cleopatra?" Singh replied.

"I need you to pull some strings, make sure no one asks questions about the flight plan. People around here have this thing called no-fly zones."

Singh sighed heavily. "Well, maybe we'll get lucky and there'll be an elected official in Africa who's open to bribery." He laughed. "It's funny because the vast majority of them are corrupt. Oh, I'm in a good mood, so I'll do it. Look at this antique stool I picked up." The camera swung around to showcase it. "It used to belong to Denise Richards, and before that, James Garfield. Things got *crazy* bidding for that. Some ninja set eBay to increase his bid five bucks every time I bid on it. I spent like twenty seconds just before it sold going higher and higher, like 'Is this gonna be enough, is this gonna be enough?' Anyway, it came with a free checkerboard, if you need one of those."

"I'm good."

"Alright then, go get that bread. From me. For doing my bidding."

"Sure thing," Nevada said, and the transmission ended.

Pike took a comb from his back pocket and ran it through his facial hair, thinking. He was still thinking when John Ladu tapped him on the shoulder. "Reverend, Mr. Jacob has reconsidered. He'd like us to treat his son."

"I thought he might." Pike handed the tablet to Ladu. "God works in mysterious ways."

* * *

The airstrip was a simple slash of bare earth, like a well-trod footpath for giants, set next to the dimple of a dried watering hole. Candice supposed it was for navigational reasons. Now the pool only had muddy waters,

with a ragged bunch of flamingos sputtering around in it. She and Nevada watched them circle and jab at each other. They squawked dismally and picked at the ankle-deep water.

“You know,” Nevada said, “Africa is *nothing* like *The Lion King*.”

Candice scanned the horizon. Still no sign of the plane, and it’d been an hour since Pike’s men had driven them out here. “Don’t start.”

“I’m just saying.”

“This is the cradle of humanity. The birthplace of mankind. You don’t have any observations other than comparing it to a children’s cartoon?”

Nevada coughed. “I was wondering why so many people were missing teeth, but I didn’t want to be rude.”

“It’s a tradition. People remove their lower six and two upper front teeth.”

“So why haven’t you had them out?”

“I just like eating popcorn too much.” Candice cracked a kink out of her neck. “It used to be so that they could still eat if they caught lockjaw. Now no one gets lockjaw—but people think it’s cute. If a girl still has her teeth, they’ll think she’s a bad egg. No one will marry her.”

“I had my wisdom teeth taken out,” Nevada said. “Think that’d do anything for them?”

An insectile humming filled the air and Candice held her hand over her eyes to block out the sun as she scanned the horizon. A Grumman G-111 Albatross flew overhead. With the unlikely grace of a fat clown, it turned in an artful pirouette, cutting speed as its noise crested into a reassuringly diesel sound, like some old tugboat come to rescue a stranded ship. With more ballet, it dropped its landing gear and made its approach, growing into a big-bellied troll of a plane. It came down on the runway, jumped, skipped, and then its wheels caught hold of the surface and seemed to hold it down, the plane’s momentum whining slower and slower.

“Shame,” Nevada said, “You know Laurence Fishburne’s gaptooth? I was about to do a whole bit on that making him a sex symbol.”

Candice patted her sympathetically on the shoulder. “Maybe we’ll get lucky and find you an open-mic night.”

With Nevada leading the way, they walked up to the Albatross as it taxied to a stop, now revealing nose art like a sailor’s tattoo. *The Flying Carpet*. Left of the fuselage, a hatch opened and the pilot, Jacques, dropped

down a ladder. He had evidently shaved and bathed since Candice had last seen him in Khartoum, but you wouldn't have been able to tell by the scruffy facial hair or the rumpled suit he sported. The Frenchman gave healthy skepticism to the notion of his home country's sophistication, although perhaps not intentionally.

"Madame, mademoiselle, how you wound me!" He clapped his hands together, then clasped them to his heart still joined. "While I have slaved away on your behalf, thinking only of how I may more humbly serve you, you two have done nothing but become more lovely! Look at you! Visions of ravishment! While poor Jacques, he works fingers into bone. But oh, I forgive you. How can a mortal man stay angry when he sees proof there is still *la poésie* in this world of computers and... James Corden?"

Candice found herself smiling. "I am actually glad to see you, Jacques."

"Yeah, he grows on you," Nevada said. "Well, our Uber's here. Shall we?"

"*Ma chère*, please!" Jacques gasped. "Do not speak the German in the presence of my other lady love!" He blew a kiss to his plane's nose art—a tastefully offensive portrait of a belly dancer on a Persian rug—while holding out his other hand to help Candice onboard. She took it and was fairly yanked inside. For all his mannerisms, the Gaul had a firm grip.

On the inside, *The Flying Carpet* had the cramped but cozy spacing of an RV. Enough to put every airline Candice had ever flown to shame, but the luxury didn't edge into snobbery. She could've enjoyed a very nice flight stretched out in one of the bunks, except that every available surface was covered in potted plants. They sported leaves, branches, and flowers that made the Albatross's interior look like a greenhouse, with only a barely visible path leading back to the aircraft's bathroom.

Nevada came onboard, gratefully sucking in the plane's air-conditioned cool. "Hey, Jacques, not to cost you the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval or anything, but when's the last time you vacuumed?"

"*Mon amie*," Jacques said ruefully, "this is a warzone we fly through, no? What could these people need more than a lovely flower, a fragrant rose, a bouquet of posies? And what could be more French than to provide that?"

"I don't know... Cheese?"

Candice reached into one of the pots, plucking a heat-sealed plastic baggie out of the soil. It was full of white powder. "What's this?"

“Sugar!” Jacques declared as Nevada took the baggie from her. “Everyone knows that sugar keeps a plant healthy and growing, like a woman’s love, like a father’s approval!”

Nevada ripped a hole in the baggie, raised it to her nose, and snorted some of its contents. A tremor went through her. “Good sugar,” she wheezed.

Candice snatched the baggie away. “Is this drug smuggling? Are we drug smugglers now?”

“He’s a drug smuggler,” Nevada said. “I’m pretty sure you’re only an accomplice. Maybe a moll.”

In grabbing it from Nevada, Candice had gotten some of the powder on her hand. She frantically brushed it off. “I cannot believe you people!”

“*Ma choupette*, helping Easy on her quest is my solemn duty, my great privilege, my purpose in life—” Jacques hung his head. “But, alas, it does not pay the bills.”

“Let’s have this discussion in the air,” Nevada said, pulling up the ladder from the hatch. “I’m going to feel really silly if someone shoots us with an RPG while we’re discussing the manifest.”

Jacques fell into lockstep with her, shutting up the hatch with a resounding clang. “*Mieux vaut prévenir que guérir.*”

* * *

With Candice trailing behind, they left the cargo compartment and went to the cockpit, which was thankfully less verdant. Jacques took up the pilot’s seat and Nevada the co-pilot’s. There were two additional seats behind those of the flight crew, and Candice sat herself behind Nevada.

“Guys, c’mon, this is the stuff they teach you in second grade. I’m sure there are a lot of people smuggling drugs around here, but if a lot of people were jumping off a bridge, would you jump off too?”

“British women,” Jacques mused with fond resentment while putting his headset on. “They say they have the stiff upper lip, but oh, how those stiff lips move when they have something to say!”

He shoved the fuel mixture knob in, pushed the throttle inward, and otherwise brought *The Flying Carpet* from its idling rest to a full-throated roar of activity.

“Just for the record, I’m a Sudanese immigrant, so at least use the right national stereotype when you want to condescend to me,” Candice said bitterly.

Nevada turned to look at Candice as she put on her own headphones. “It’s going to be kinda hard to hear with the props going,” she yelled over the sound of twin engines revving up. “You’re gonna want to use the microphone on the headset. Cuts down on the—you get it.” She faced forward again.

“Where’s my headset?” Candice looked around. “I don’t see another headset.”

“That’s too bad,” Nevada said, switching hers on and putting it on Jacques’s channel as she turned back to face front. “So how’s your week been?”

They sped down the runway, eating up the same dust Jacques had kicked up on his approach. The flock of flamingos buzzed away from their sputtering, hiccupping horsepower. It made Nevada feel like she was back in Florida.

“Very nice,” Jacques answered her. “Katy Perry released a new single. I think it’s *très magnifique*.”

“Oh, we should play it later.”

“*Oui*.” Jacques pulled back on the yoke, starting their take-off. “And the woman? You have, ah, conquered her yet?”

“Shut up, it’s not even like that.” Nevada looked back at Candice, who was gesturing somewhat wildly. Nevada gave her a thumbs up.

Inside the vacuum-sealed echo chamber of the cans, the din of the propellers was locked out, leaving only Nevada’s own thoughts and Jacques’s radio-transmitted voice. Without the headphones, vocal conversation was as impossible as a scientific debate with an anti-vaxxer.

“Oh, ho ho!” Jacques laughed. “But how you would like it to be, *n’est-ce pas?*”

“Shut up,” Nevada said again. “Go surrender to something. Did you get my shopping done?”

“*Oui, oui*, I put it by the, how you say, *latrine*. Butch was happy to help.”

Nevada smiled humorlessly, refraining from pointing out that latrine was how *he* say. “Was he now?”

Jacques hedged as *The Flying Carpet's* climb continued, pitching Nevada's digestive system all out of whack—not to mention her eardrums. She should've stayed up later. A good yawn would've come in really handy right about now.

"He may have expressed some *dismay* that you lost his Wilson Combat Sentinel XL when he gave it to you as a gift."

"I didn't lose it!" Nevada said defensively. "I know exactly where it is—approximately. I found the *HMS Endeavour*, I think I can find his stupid—forget it, how's he doing?"

Jacques hedged some more, shrugging as eloquently as he would order wine. "He looked good. He's doing some, ah, ponytail sort of thing with his hair. I don't know, maybe it's the style now. But at least it's not dyed!"

"Small favors," Nevada muttered. She looked back at Candice, who was now ignoring her except to direct a backwards peace sign her way. Nevada smiled at her, turning away before Candice could see.

Jacques noticed the interplay, which Nevada noticed in turn as the Frenchman devoted excessive care to making some final adjustments on his instruments. "So now, if there is nothing going on between the two of you, then you would hardly mind if I..."

"*Casse-toi*," Nevada told him, taking off her headset.

Jacques leveled *The Flying Carpet* off and throttled back the engines, settling them down to a comfortable amount of thrust now that they had reached cruising altitude. The din inside the cockpit dropped off considerably.

Candice was quick to take advantage of that. "Is that duct tape?" she asked, pointing upward.

"Don't be ridiculous," Nevada said. "What kind of operation do you think we're running here? It's electrical tape."

* * *

There was an expanse the size of a walk-in closet in the back of the Albatross; it adjoined the bathroom and the minibar and contained a Pelican case the size of a footlocker. Nevada got down on her knees, threw the latches, and opened it up with a hissing breakage of the airtight seal. Inside, laid precisely into scalpel-cut Kaizen foam, was a CZ Shadow 2 and a CZ Scorpion with an integral suppressor giving the barrel a blunt

symmetry, several magazines for both rifle and pistol, and boxes of the 9MM ammunition both guns took. Nevada picked them up, verified they were empty, and did a few quick dry-fire exercises. The action was crisp and clean on both. She wouldn't expect anything less of a craftsman's tools.

Candice appeared in the doorway. There was a tall sunflower planted beside her and she gave it a desultory sniff as she watched Nevada.

"We've done more good than bad," Nevada said, not facing Candice, but letting the words ricochet back to her. She reached down the sides of the Pelican case, found a catch, and slid open a drawer. Inside, for perhaps the first time in his life, Butch had folded clothes. "Saved some kids, put money into a refugee camp. Don't go all Nancy Reagan on me now."

She picked out a reject pile of clothes for Candice. A cotton button-front shirt and boot cut twill pants from Columbia Sportswear, along with a vented Booney hat. Then, for herself, a short-sleeved work shirt, khaki cargo pants, and a *keffiyeh*. The sun hat just wasn't cute enough for her. An M-1951 field jacket would give her some protection from low-flying bullets. There was also a set of boxer briefs. They said BUTCH UNICORN on one side and had a picture of a rhino on the other. No way she was letting Candice wear those.

"Get changed," Nevada said, sliding Candice's pile over to her with a set of briefs on top. "We're nine hundred some miles from Ennedi, we're going at about a hundred and twenty-four miles an hour, so by my calculations—math is hard."

Candice didn't pick up the clothes. "It's not like we're traveling dogooders. We left people to die in Sudan. Okay, fine, there was nothing we could do, but—I don't think we made it better."

Nevada opened a package of 9MM Parabellum ammo and started loading it into a magazine. "'Officer, I swear, South Sudan was like that when we got here.' We're not making anything worse here. How can we?"

"You have two guns."

"And we're going to Chad!" Nevada loaded the magazine into the Shadow 2, racking a bullet into the chamber and making sure the safety was on before setting the pistol down. "So if anything, we're making South Sudan less dangerous."

Candice stooped down to pick up the clothes. “What do you think we are, though? Survivors? Tourists? Mercenaries? How would you describe us?”

Nevada was loading another magazine for the Scorpion. When she spoke, her voice was as low and steely as the sound of bullets sliding into place. “You’re an archaeologist. I’m a businesswoman. I’m doing a job; you’re consulting. It is not my problem that the job takes us into bad neighborhoods. What is my problem is making sure we’re both alive to enjoy the fruits of our labor.” Nevada loaded the Scorpion, racked a bullet up into the chamber, and set the rifle aside. “That problem I am handling. If a plumber gets called into the Bronx, it’s not his job to bring up literacy rates. He fixes the toilet and he goes.”

“What if that’s not enough?”

Nevada stood and faced Candice. For a moment, Nevada almost felt sorry for her. To be so beautiful and to know nothing about the world... maybe one led to the other. “You can’t change the past. So why spend time there?”

“Is that what you tell yourself?” Candice asked, and Nevada thought of tiny feet kicking the inside of her womb—angry at her even before she gave him away.

“I don’t *have to* tell myself that anymore. Here.” She picked up a denim jacket and added it to the pile in Candice’s arms. “Sheepskin lining. The desert gets cold at night. And Ennedi is in the middle of the Sahara.”

* * *

Pike’s truck rolled back toward Camp Esau, the frayed tire treads scratching like blunt fingernails on the burnt-out landscape. They barely raised a murmur of dust. In the relative cool of the afternoon, the children were taking a break from their studies, and as the truck came in, they ran over to greet it. Pike sat in the back, playing tail-gunner, but as they began to pass the horde of children, he stowed his rifle and instead came up with a soccer ball he had managed to get his hands on. He threw it out to the mob, starting an animated game that took up half their number. The truck came to a stop and Pike got out. The rest of the children had recently finished an English lesson and were eager to try half-formed knock-knock jokes on

him. Pike gamely added ‘who?’ to each of their set-ups as he pushed the boy he’d taken from Jacob Lol Gatkuoth in a wheelchair.

Inside the compound, he immediately noticed the tension. His men with guns in their hands instead of on their straps. People hiding in their tukuls despite it being the middle of the day. Noises strangely muted, like there was a lion in the center of the village and no one wanted to draw its attention.

He delivered the boy to the infirmary, where Ladu started giving the doctor the patient’s background. Neither bothered talking to Pike. They knew he had other problems. A nurse pointed to an acacia tree growing between two tukuls. The tall, thin trunk opened up like an umbrella into widespread branches, the skeletal twigs holding a green hint of leaves. Weaverbirds nested there by the dozen, their spherical nests hanging from drooping branches like Christmas ornaments.

A man sat in the shade, his heavy head sagging, his white robes splattered with the shadows of the branches looming over him. He looked not so much relaxed as like he had fallen from one of those delicately suspended weavings and was now cracked against the ground.

He made no move to get up as Pike approached.

“All are welcome here, brother,” Pike said, coming to a stop just outside the shade. If the man attacked, Pike doubted he could cross the distance before Pike drew. “But we’d like to know who we’re welcoming.”

“Names are unimportant,” the man said. “A conceit of men who seek immortality apart from Heaven. What’s truly important is how a man serves God.”

“Here’s where I ask how you serve God.”

The man shifted his weight and turned his head to the side, making himself more comfortable—seemingly bored. “Two women came this way. One black, one white. They killed Farouq al-Jabbar, the son of my lord. He wishes them brought to justice.”

“Justice,” Pike repeated. “Did he use that exact word?”

“We know they’re not here. Tell us where they went.”

“Leaving aside why I would tell you that, why would they tell *me* in the first place?”

“Not all things are told. Some are overheard.”

Pike shook his head. “I wouldn’t know where they are.”

“Perhaps you’re forgetting.”

“Perhaps.”

“There are good reasons to remember.” The man took a pouch from his belt, setting it down on the scorched grass. One pull of the cord revealed the gleaming gold nuggets inside. “And other reasons. Some men serve God as messengers. Others as the message.”

God didn’t say anything to Pike. Nothing at all.

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CANDICE CUSHING AND
THE LOST TOMB OF
CLEOPATRA

BY GEORGETTE KAPLAN

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