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THEOTOKOS

Damascus, a long time ago

The hand hangs in the Al Marjeh square.

It is light and sways easily in the wind. Its colour has changed from the translucent pink of human flesh to an earthy brown, ready to rejoin the dust. Men and women come to the square to see the hand, but they are not satisfied. When it is people who hang, in all their length and width, they are easy to see, easy to forget. But this hand is much too small for that; you have to squint to see it properly against the poor winter sun. Afterwards, it comes to you at night, this hand without a body. It wags a finger at you in reproach, in judgement. You wake up covered in sweat the colour of brown earth.

Two days earlier

Barada is almost dry, more a rocky path than a river, and the few remaining fish greet the new day with their bellies turned up to the sky.

The rich are sleeping in their beds carved out of heavy wood, under their covers of furs and wools. The poor are starting fires, mixing flour with water for the first bread of the day, gathering animals onto the cart to be taken to the market and sold before dusk.

The City of Jasmine has seven gates. By the Gate of the Orchards, huddled beside the narrow houses, the lepers hold up their crusty hands to beg for food or coins. In one of these houses, where in winter the roof leaks, is where Yuhanna sets up his easel after prayer.

Under the thin yellow light of the candle he puts his brush to the canvas, almost touching it, then puts it down again. The brush makes no sound as it moves through the air, two, three times like this, in hesitation. The night has left Yuhanna pale, sucked his cheeks deeper into his face.

He lifts the brush again. A sliver of colour meets the canvas at last, but it is not right. Not good enough to paint the Virgin's precious face. He might start with the child, Yuhanna thinks. The child will be easier to paint, Godly or not.

#

In a cellar, deep beneath the dusty floors of a house, a veiled servant delivers a letter to a man whose fingers are black with years of ink.

"Is it Yuhanna's, for certain?" the man wants to know.

The servant nods.

The man takes the letter, examines the handwriting under the light of the candle. Finally, he picks up his feather, dips it in ink, and starts to practice.

#

‘Bring him to me!’ bellows the Caliph dressed in blue silk. Blue is the colour of the morning. Blue brings calm to the soul and peace to the land. Under his waistcoat, the Caliph is wrapped in one hundred feet of a belt cloth the colour of blood. Inside the cloth, there lies a dagger.

‘Bring him to me!’ he yells into the air, as if the air itself can deliver the wanted man to his court.

The servant maids scatter off like bugs under a bright light. Their eyes are downcast, their feet bound. They carry trays with soap and jasmine water, the remains of the Caliph’s morning cleansing.

For the third time, the Caliph screams: ‘Bring me the man!’

When all of his servants disappear at last, he sits down. The chair creaks under his weight. He is not a big man but today tiredness and news of betrayal make him heavy.

He looks at his guest, a lord from afar, who goes by the name of Lion.

‘Speak again. He, who writes this....you are sure it is Yuhanna?’ the Caliph says. His eyes are slits of suspicion.

‘It is him. You have the letter,’ Lion says.

The room is oval, drafty despite the fire lit in the hearth. An Eastern wind slides under the doors and lifts up specks of dust, stray leaves, crumbs of cherry cakes the Caliph likes to have for breakfast.

‘I don’t know his handwriting,’ the Caliph says.

‘You do,’ says Lion. ‘He wrote a book for you, not even three summers ago.’

‘I don’t remember,’ says the Caliph.

‘Take me to your library. I will show you.’

The Caliph is still sitting down. His eyes examine the distant wall of the room and the window looking out onto the gardens, as if that could bring him the answer he’s looking for.

‘I’ve known Yuhanna for many years. If you’re lying, you will hang.’

Lion nods and bows his head, his face calm, his eyes intent. ‘As you will, Caliph. But it is not me who should hang.’

#

The horses are shiny with sweat. They gallop down the jaundiced road made of sand from the desert and crushed rock from the mountains.

The men don’t stop for rest. The horses are thirsty, their slender legs shaking from the pace and the distance. But no one can stop until Yuhanna is delivered to his fate.

It is not the violent pounding on the door which wakes Yuhanna up. It is not the voices shouting for him, nor the horses neighing nervously in the darkness. A streak of moonlight creeps into the room and brushes Yuhanna’s face, light like a mother’s breath. When he opens his eyes, before he hears the onslaught down below, he sees *her* face on the canvas. Painted in faint gold and silver, she looks straight at him, her smile full of warning.

Yuhanna jumps from his bed. His shirt, which used to be white, hangs off his lean body unaccustomed to food or rest.

Before his feet have slid into his shoes, the men are upon him. The room is not long enough for Yuhanna to run nor big enough for him to hide.

‘You! Keep still, or you die!’ one of the men shouts, his raspy voice tearing the night’s silence. The men bear arms – knives, machetes, axes.

He stops where he is. His breathing is rapid but his hands are steady.

The window looks out onto the dark street, where a late rain is starting to drench the cobbles. It is too far to run and too high to jump, so he waits, and smiles at the men, and nods his head like he has been expecting them all along.

‘The Caliph wants you!’ one of the men bellows.

Yuhanna smiles again. ‘Must my friend wake me up like this? Could he not send a bird with a message to me, before breakfast? I would happily have fasted until I spoke to him.’

The men are shuffling and pushing him now, tying his arms behind his back, leading him towards the door. Yuhanna is still smiling. He wants to turn around one last time to look at the icon left half-painted on the easel, but the men drag him out too soon.

On the steep stairs, one of the men pulls him back for a moment. ‘Take this!’ he whispers, pressing something into his hand.

Yuhanna thinks it is a weapon to set him free, but in his hand he can only feel a small vial, round and cold like a dead eye.

‘Take it! It will quicken your end!’ The urgent whisper mixes with the echo of footsteps on the stone staircase.

Yuhanna holds the vial in the closed palm of his hand.

#

The rats are hungry.

Yuhanna knows this by their relentless squeal and their furry shuffling around his feet, but most of all he knows this because they bite. Small, tentative bites, their sharp little teeth exploring his hairless ankles. The smell of the dungeon crawls over Yuhanna’s skin like a spider. He feels he will never wash it off, if he lives. But he won’t live, he knows that.

The guards come from time to time and bring a bowl of water. One of them takes pity on him and brings him a small bowl of rice. Yuhanna sits in the corner of the cell curled up like a child punished, a tight ball of hunger, fear and pain.

#

Aaminah is not from these lands. Her hair is pale like dawn over the desert and curls in ways you don't see in Eastern women, in their straight dark tresses. Her eyes are colourless, her chin small. But her lips do wonders in the darkness of the royal bed. The Caliph listens when those lips speak.

'Our court is plain, my love,' she says to the Caliph, with a smile. 'I have seen the courts of great kings and I know.'

It is early afternoon and the court is quiet, the courtiers resting after a rich lunch. The Caliph is stretched out on his bed, lazily caressing the woman's body, but Yuhanna's face haunts him too much to find pleasure in it. The light coming in from the outside is warm, merciful. Aaminah speaks again.

'We need a painter. There is only one. He can make your court beautiful. Like the courts—'

'Yes, like the courts of the other kings who have kept you by their side,' the Caliph cuts her off. 'I know. I don't like to think about it. I don't care for their courts and how beautiful they are.'

'But you care for this court, my love. And this painter. Show him mercy. Let him do his work.'

The Caliph's face changes as he looks into her colourless eyes, impossible to read. 'Why do you care about his fate? You have never met him. You don't know anything about him.'

'I know *you*. I know you won't sleep again, if you behead a friend.'

'He committed treason. His letter called on the foreign armies to attack me.'

The woman sits up and smooths down her clothes. Her wrists are delicate and heavy with diamonds. 'Then make sure he can't write another letter.'

The Caliph looks up at her, surprised. 'Cut his hand off? But he paints—'

'He will learn to paint with the other hand. Writing is different.'

A sudden gust of wind lifts the heavy curtains and knocks over a vase, shattering it on the terracotta tiles.

In the morning, they take Yuhanna from his cell to the square, to meet the hungry eyes of the crowd. The day is warm, full of the first scent of lemon trees. Bewildered, Yuhanna can still see the colours around him. He wishes he could paint this moment, before the pain stops everything.

He has been told and he knows what is coming; what will be taken from him. He closes his eyes, waits; imagines the blade landing with a heavy thud. When the blade finally comes, there is nothing but pain.

When they carry him back inside, his cell awaits. After the searing sunlight, it feels dark and quiet like a womb. The pain consumes every inch of his being. There is no scream which lifts it, no cry which makes it better. Soon he is burning with fever, closer to the dead than he is to the living, blind and deaf to everything but his own shrieks, cradling the stump of his arm to protect it from the rats which have smelt blood.

He is lying sideways on the floor, strings of vomit hanging off his cheeks like some strange lace connecting him to the stone underneath. He doesn't know the day, the time, or his own name.

Behind his closed eyelids there is a vision: the icon left by his bed, the smiling woman depicted on it, her face mild like a spring morning.

He is begging for the vial which rolled away into the dust, still held by his fist that was no longer attached to anything.

On Yuhanna's parched lips, there is now a prayer. *Save me, precious mother. Join my hand back to my body.*

But the hand is far, far from the cell, swaying in the wind in the Al Marjeh square.

#

Lion celebrates with a feast. In the silence of his own quarters, he drops the mask he wears before the Caliph. He sits on the floor, sinking his teeth into raw pork, pouring gallons of wine down his throat.

But his victory is as bitter as the wine. The icon is still at Yuhanna's abandoned house, unfinished, beautiful, out of reach.

Lion leans back on the cushions. Behind closed eyes, he imagines trailing his fingers down the canvas. Then he plunges a knife into it and pulls hard, the sound of ripping sharp and sudden like distant thunder, final justice delivered for a God who mustn't be seen with human eyes.

He sits up with a startle.

Yuhanna's house is guarded by the Caliph's men, until he either lives or dies. Lion knows which it is going to be.

#

The bird song is very faint at first, as if coming from a great distance. It grows closer with each note, each sound. When it reaches Yuhanna at last, he opens his eyes as if for the first time. Surprised like a newborn, he blinks, catches his breath, coughs. Slowly, he becomes aware. Death has left his cell without him. He is shaky and cold, but he is breathing, moving, and soon becomes aware of something; something new.

There is no pain.

Yuhanna closes his eyes to prepare himself, then opens them again, but already he knows. He looks down his own body and sees two unblemished, living hands.

#

In a narrow house made of stone, on the top floor, by the bed carved in worm-ridden wood, an icon sits on the easel. The icon is unfinished; the woman's dress and halo only half done, all the detail still missing from the background. But the woman is smiling, as if real, as if alive. Her hands are holding a small child. A third hand, painted in glistening silver, rests on the folds of her dress.

The End