

God Will Provide

وستوفر الله

“No one can follow the details in a country like Sudan.”

–Omar Hassan Al-Bashir President of Sudan

Vapor rose off the watering hole disappearing into a cloudless sky. Sadiq wiped his dripping mouth on the back of his hand while three women walked down the trail from the village, clay pots balanced on their heads. Their hips swayed wildly to his eyes through the baking waves roiling off the pool, like three stalks of green savannah grass. Sadiq longed to cut them down, but threw the strap of his Kalashnikov over his shoulder before retreating up the bank. His time would come.

Eden and Poni each put her foot in the track of the other. Friends since birth they often played games in the path of Nyanath, Eden’s older sister. The sisters’ mother never used to call either girl by name from the opening of their hut. Instead she’d shout, “Nyala! Come eat your grain.” Poni would race home and in seconds the two girls would bound in on thin antelope ankles like the animal of their mother’s name for them, first Nyanath, then Eden. Everyone of the village knew that Nyanath was the head and Eden the tail, but no one ever shortened Eden’s name to ‘La’ or even whispered ‘Nya’ behind a hut to tell the older girl a secret. It did not make sense to split them. Everyone simply said, “Nyala,” except for father.

Ahmad knew his beautiful daughters commanded the eye of every eligible man who might see them. His wife often urged him to arrange a stable marriage, but Ahmad was loath to part with them. He heard whispered shock about the bright amber shine of Nyanath’s eyes. He saw boys trace the air with their hands in a curve not unlike Eden’s rump. Each time his somber glare shooed them away and as of yet, neither boy nor man

made the long walk to the end of the village to make an official visit. It was old-fashioned to expect such formality anymore. Most village girls grew impatient with formal fathers and the hard existence of village life. Now it was more common for a girl as young as fourteen to kiss her Papa good night and leave an empty rug by morning. Families did not send out search parties. Usually before noon sun some friend would creep by to unravel the escape plot with some neighboring village boy to the city of Al Fashir. Still other girls traveled the dangerous Darfuri roads to wind through Kurdufan on the way to some enchantment in Khartoum. In a month a letter might arrive from an educated daughter or word would miraculously pass through the caravan of the illiterate back to Ahmad's village. "Don't worry about me. I'm in love with a young man, the big city, travel, money, traffic" or some such nonsense that titillated all the young girls scrubbing clothes at their mother's callused feet. In truth it excited the mothers in a confusing dichotomy. They bore personal resentment that those who had yet worked so little escaped so soon, but the buzz rising from the ten-year-olds left behind made the mothers' earlobes itch for the scratch of more gossip.

More frequently of late, good word failed to travel home. Village girls evaporated into the dry nights of the rainy season that could not condense and some mothers grew uneasy. They grew like cloud shaded grass still holding dew. They reached out for moist news that would dampen their itch only to face a scorching sun of horrific rumor, impossible to confirm, but too detailed to disbelieve.

Nyala's mother, Titi, did not suffer these hydric tensions. She birthed sensible girls, ones who would stay home and help their father. That is what Titi asked of them in the end when her fever soared so high that she could no longer drink the water that

Nyanath poured at her lips and Eden could only clean up what flowed out behind.

Ahmad paced across the door in silent prayer. The village healer left for his collections of bones and powders. He had not heard of Titi until so very late. The healer spent the evening with her and finally told Ahmad at dusk that he must quickly retrieve the only powerful medicine still hanging in his hut.

“It will be expensive and I have such small hope of success. What shall I do, Ahmad?”

Ahmad had no money and only scrawny livestock that picked through the stubble outside the village. Ahmad nodded. “Go quickly, my friend.”

Thinking first Nyanath said, “How will we pay father?”

Eden reminded, “We’ve nothing to sell. The cattle are skin and the rains will not fall.”

Ahmad’s pacing was his first answer and prayer his action. “God will provide my daughters. Some how, God will provide.”

In the next moment Titi called Nyala for the last time. “Come to me Nyala.” They still sprang to her side as if the news were good, their legs still impatient and their bellies churning for meat. Titi’s feeble arms could not lift her fingers to hold their cheeks like when the children elbowed one another at the door of the hut. So, each girl seized a hand and pressed their mother’s fiery palms to their faces while they listened. “Nyala. My girls... You can be no longer. Tonight, you are women because I am no more. Care for your father. Sisters should.... daughters must... always be...together.” Then, Titi grew calm in Nyala’s tears.

At sixteen and fourteen they wept into womanhood.

The healer stumbled back ready to administer his mystic art a few minutes later. Ahmad needed not to worry about money. Instead, he worried about his daughters.

Their feet grew thick calluses yet no children scrubbed in their shadow. These sisters sat, worked, mourned, aged always together. They stayed in the village to care for their father for the next four years. Their ankles were still lithe, Nyanath's eyes dripped with amber and Eden still curved, but a rhythmic sway supplanted the once antelope spring. The calendar crossed them off until they remained the oldest of the village beauties, rare and desirable, one now twenty, the other eighteen. Wealth of the countryside dwindled and no man made the walk for an official visit. Word of devoted beauty to a father spread beyond the shadow of Jabal Marrah, the bad mountain, and fame fueled misfortune.

Ahmad did his best to keep his daughters separate for safety. He tried to foster Nyanath's confident assurance by seeking her advice on the fate of the livestock, but the rains did not fall. It was 20 days through the month of Rajab and still not a drop. Soon it would be Sha'ban, the wettest month. If the southwesterly winds did not sweep up the Congo and shower them soon all the animals would perish. Nyanath advised to herd to the south to seek feed for the cattle.

"In Kafia Kingi I hear of rain, father. Switch the herd south. Eden and I can manage here 'til you return."

"I haven't herded since I was a boy, Nyanath. It is a hard life and I do not know the people of Kafia Kingi. It is better I stay here. I'll head east tomorrow toward Jabal Marrah. There are always grasses on the mountainside."

“No father,” said Eden. “I hear the rebels in the hills descend looking for water. There is no promise there.”

“Then we’re best here, Eden,” said Ahmad. He kept Eden special by following some of her advice and awarding her praise that he usually withheld from his oldest. “The watering hole still keeps us breathing.”

“We need water,” said Nyanath. She hoisted a clay pot from under a cloth in the corner of the hut. Without word Eden too slid toward the door behind her sister.

“Why must you both go?”

“Antelope travel in herds,” quipped Eden.

“The village says you are always the tail, not the mouth.”

“Even an antelope can break wind, father,” smiled Nyanath, but Eden did not.

She glared through the back of Nyanath’s head. “But the nose of the head will face the smell,” said Eden.

“I’ll walk to the wind, *little* sister.”

Eden stopped short in anger. It was just like Nyanath to call the last word before Eden could think of a reply. She had nothing left but to follow behind. At least Nyanath could not see her brooding and Poni would surely join them. Nyanath did not hear half of the friends’ whispers.

“Daughters you’ve lived too long together in this hut. Your fights grow more numerous. Your mouths breathe fire like the sun that dries up the rain and turns the soil to dust. When the rains return, the thunder winds ahead of them will raise the dirt to cover us. Such a haboob will darken us all.”

“Yes father,” said Nyanath bobbing reverently at the knees before continuing out the door.

“Eden,” said Ahmad holding the back of his hand up to her arm.

“Father?”

“When you’re struck blind it will be dust kicked up from your sister’s feet. Don’t follow so close. Sometimes, don’t follow at all.” Eden ducked out the doorway without a word. Mindlessly she jogged to catch Nyanath and her feet fell back into her sister’s tracks.

“I’ve been too formal a father,” said Ahmad to the corner where the clay pots once stood. He hoped Eden would have stayed behind, not followed. He wanted to tell her his ideas were changing. Maybe an official visit need not apply, but such a thought made him hot. “Ahh, Ahmad! This dry heat has burnt up your brain.” He was relieved that Eden had followed along.

Eden was not. Her teeth ground together when Poni bobbed a welcome. Eden had to suck hard at her tongue to unclench her jaw. “Peace be with you, Poni,” she spit at her friend who fell in behind.

“And soon may it find you,” replied Poni sensing the sister’s tension. Usually her effervescent twitter followed the girls wherever they walked together, but the afternoon heat bore down on them while their thongs sizzled and popped against their naked feet like logs on the fire.

None of them spoke until Nyanath tipped her clay vessel into the watering hole. The bed was so shallow little flowed in and she began dipping the flat lid into the water to spoon out small splashes into her pot. Poni broke the sibilance in a murmur to her

friend. “Have you seen him since?” she asked. Her pupils stayed in the corners of her eyes focused on Nyanath. Poni spilled half of each lid she ladled out back in the pond, but did not care. It would give her more time to talk with Eden and help mask the sounds of their secrets.

Eden turned her back to Nyanath and watched her own hands in the water as she ladled her heart out to Poni. “Not since the beginning of Rajab. His work keeps him away.”

“Hush! Work? He’s a rebel, no?”

“No, he’s a messenger and kind. Do you not remember his loving words I have spoken to you? You spend too much time grinding your meal in a gossip’s bowl, Poni.”

“I grind what few meals I have with my teeth. Does the head know?”

“If the head knew half the things the ass was doing it would be spinning.”

The young women laughed and Nyanath looked up at them knowingly. Eden hated that look that fell with silence. She had spent her entire life in the wake of her sister and still guessed at what she was thinking. *How can Nyanath be such a mystery? She does everything right in front of me. How can I not know?*

“I think she knows,” worried Poni. “The village is too small for secrets.”

“I’ve told only you,” hissed Eden. “Is my secret too big to fit in your mouth?”

“No, no my friend, but we say so much near her,” said Poni looking over Eden’s shoulder.

“She can’t hear looks.”

“But the head may see them.”

“By this time next week it will not matter. He’ll visit my father. I’ll sever myself from the head by marrying before her.”

“God willing.”

“God willing and I’ll be calling for Him on my back.”

“God save you, Eden. You are a filthy ass.”

“Just be sure not to wash it in the drinking pool,” interrupted Nyanath. The younger two women stopped their giggles short and their faces fell. Nyanath always entered conversations like an ambush. There was no telling how long she silently listened, waited to jump into their secrets. “I’m full. Let’s return.” Nyanath left it all behind for others to worry.

Nyanath led them back to the bank from which they came. Lost in her guess work of a sister’s knowledge, Eden ran into Nyanath. Down toppled the pot, smashing on a trailside stone. Water hissed into the sand like steam. Surprised at what she did, Eden circled to see the real obstruction. A rebel stood nonchalantly in front of Nyanath. His rifle stock pressed against the buckle of his belt and he cupped the barrel in his left hand in front of him. His white shirt clung tight to the waves of muscles he kept flexing and releasing and Eden could see the indentation of his navel as if it sucked all his clothes into him, pulling her closer.

“It’s okay, miss. You can touch my rifle,” he said to Nyanath. Her eyes arced through him and he stared back. “I don’t mind.”

“You owe us for my pot,” leveled Nyanath.

“I’ll fill your pot soon enough,” said the rebel through his gleaming teeth. Eden looked away in guilty fear.

“No, I’m clumsy. I should watch where I’m walking. So sorry.” Eden hurriedly mumbled.

“Don’t assume his blame. He put his gun in my face and forced me into your way. Step aside jackal! You’re not welcome at this village’s watering hole. Run back to your mountain to hide.”

“I can see you’re the elder of these sisters, but I don’t think you’re an elder of the village yet. I’ll drink what I please.” His hand slid down the rifle and his finger to the trigger. “I said you could touch my rifle, but you better be careful not to get it near your mouth or my excitement may make a mess of you.” He raised the butt to his shoulder.

“No Sadiq!” pleaded Eden as she sprang in front of Nyanath. Sadiq immediately smiled, flashing the perfect pearls of his teeth. The muzzle pointed to the ground and his baritone laugh rolled from him like it flew out of a cave.

“You know him?” said Nyanath. Her head snapped from rebel to sister and back. Her eyes were wide and fierce, but they did nothing to stop his staring at her.

“Yes,” said Eden quietly. “His name is Sadiq. We met at market.”

“I can guess what he was selling,” said Nyanath glaring down Sadiq, “Tales of his glory, no doubt, flashing his money in front of you and how he had much more at Jabal Marrah.”

“It wasn’t such as that.”

Nyanath’s eyes narrowed and scanned her sister stopping near her feet. Eden’s nerves tingled and she wobbled slightly as she crossed her ankles, itching one with the other. “I did not think to ask about your new anklet ‘til now,” said Nyanath. She turned from Eden and stepped toward Sadiq. The polished onyx bead’s split the glare of the sun

into a dazzle of stars that settled on Eden like particles of the future. “What promise did you give my sister when you bought her this bobble?”

Sadiq stood a little stunned that Nyanath put things together so quickly. He enjoyed her eyes focusing on him and he started to think he bought jewelry for the wrong sister. Eden rose up on her toes so her chest could catch her fluttering heart. She had not prepared herself for the moment Nyanath would hear the news of her marriage.

“Nothing,” said Sadiq. Eden fell to her heels. “Nothing, but a life of friendship,” smiled Sadiq at Nyanath. His new found lust for the elder of the famed sisters pushed up at his belt.

“On how many young girls have you practiced these words? A dozen? Fifty? Sadiq means friend, no?”

“It does.”

“Then be a *dear* friend and retreat to Jabal Marrah to your pack of jackals that plague her slopes.” Nyanath turned to Eden. “Give him back the anklet, little sister.”

The indignity of living as the tail made Eden stand pat. “I’ll not, sister. It is mine for a lifetime. Isn’t it Sadiq?” And Eden shot past her sister to snake her arm around Sadiq’s back. “We’re to be married in the month of Ramadan.” Eden could not look at Sadiq. His one word, “nothing” hung in Eden’s worry like a dry wind chapping her unblinking eyes. She was nothing, a tail, an ass for eighteen years and now she saw a way clear to something new. She looked wide-eyed at Poni who had stood mouth agape through it all. Eden’s nearly imperceptible nod awoke Poni, her true obliging friend.

“Of course,” blurted Poni whom Nyanath forgot stood by. Now the deluge ensued from Poni’s month of silence. “In the month of Ramadan he promised to ‘fast

from food and feast on love.’ Such words made me jealous. I almost told you Nyanath. Such promises are rare in our village. They are difficult not to repeat. Now I am so happy not to hold it in any longer. Won’t the children shower you with kisses, Sadiq, when they hear your beautiful words,” she paused for a breath. “I am Poni, Eden’s oldest friend. We’ve not met, but your words have whispered to me too. I’ve hoped for a friend of your mountain to raise me up. I have never-”

“Calm yourself Poni. It is not your wedding we plan,” said Eden. “You don’t want to empty your brain on a day so hot. You may forget to drink.”

“Yes, yes you are so wise my friend. You’ve picked a wonder, Sadiq. You must be eager to speak to her father and be the first suitor.”

“Yes, the first,” said Sadiq looking only at Nyanath. “I understand he expects an official visit.”

“Yes. Let’s go now,” said Nyanath expecting this jackal would run if she chased. Eden looked up at him with anxious hope.

“Oh no, not today,” said Sadiq with a kiss to Eden’s forehead. He began to back up the bank trying to shake free of Eden’s grip on his hand. “Not without a gift for the father of such beautiful daughters. Not without better clothes.”

“Perhaps without a rifle,” said Nyanath.

“Yes, I’ll come with tools of woo, instead of war.”

“When will you visit?” asked Eden breathlessly.

“A week from tomorrow, my beauty, after your evening meal I’ll call on your father so he and I can drink to his new son.” He finally dropped her hand and turned to leave. Eden could no longer contain her smiles. She jumped forward, antelope again and

kissed Sadiq on the mouth. He peered around her head at Nyanath who modestly turned her back.

“Peace be with you, Sadiq,” Eden called happily up to him as he climbed the bank to head east from the village. He waved his hand without a word. He strode away out of sight from the drinking pool. Nyanath watched where he walked until only the barrel of his Kalashnikov could be seen swaying, muzzle toward her.

“You’ll not tell father of this will you?” said Eden.

“No need little sister. Your rebel will not be back. Only a fool would believe him.”

“Then I am such a fool. Twenty years at the front is enough for you. I will place the lead in your heart. It will not weigh me down to wallow in your bitterness. It just so happens that I finally take the lead in love. You’ll have to learn to follow. Come Poni, we’ve planning to do.” Eden grabbed Poni’s hand and tugged her toward the village nearly sending the second family pot for a tumble.

Ahmad sat uneasily. His stomach churned on the meager rice prepared by Eden. She spilled half of his dish when he entered the hut from a day burying cattle. Her nervousness unsettled his thoughts. Perhaps she had not drunk enough water saving it for him. The days before she smiled so much he thought she might be dizzying and losing her mind.

Nyanath sat quietly weaving a rug from tatters of cloth she begged from the surrounding huts. From some she traded when charity failed them and she managed to collect a scrap from each family of the village. She wove every night an hour past

sundown and tonight she would finish. A week and a day spun dizzily to the west and the head knew the tail would bed for the last time in this hut tonight. She knew Sadiq would not come, his sights were not set on her sister, but she whispered to herself as she wove. “What a beautiful wedding gift for my sister to rest upon, all the cloth of the village. I’ll weave her a map of memories. Here’s Poni’s plot, Sittina’s, and Anai the story-teller.” She would point to each cloth as if she were a merchant on the streets of Khartoum, building the appreciation of a waffling customer on some ancient treasure of the Sudan.

No, these visions evaporated like a child’s daydream to her now as darkness stalked down the slopes of Jabal Marrah. Father would not toast date-wine to the loss of a daughter or gain of a son. Yet, Eden would still be gone by morning with the love of a dying village rolled under her arm. The family was starving for water, food, neighbors. Ahmad’s few cattle wobbled in the heat digesting gravel and few families remained to buy their bones.

“There’ll be less food tomorrow,” said Eden passing in front of the door, peering out at dusk.

“Sit young daughter,” calmed Ahmad. He pushed his half-eaten bowl of rice toward Eden. “Here. Today’s heat twisted my guts. I can eat no more. My poor appetite can feed your hunger.”

“I cannot. You need your strength to work.”

“It takes little energy to watch my cattle die. Eat. I’ll rest for the night.”

“No father!” said Eden panicking. She put one foot outside and peered to the east. “You stay up awhile longer and finish your meal.”

“Just like a mother to her children. Well this child of mother earth must go to bed.” He kissed Eden on the temple. He had raised a curtain after Titi died to give the girls their privacy and now Ahmad ducked behind it to retire to his rug.

“I’ll build a fire outside to let you sleep,” said Nyanath.

“Don’t stay up too late with your weaving,” Ahmad said over his shoulder.

“What will we eat tomorrow?” asked Eden. Her desperation to engage Ahmad into the night made Nyanath look away. Eden leaned against the threshold half hiding and half fleeing. She crossed her ankles scratching one with the other.

“Just eat what you have for today, daughter,” said Ahmad pulling the curtain closed. “For tomorrow – tomorrow – God will provide.”

At this Eden’s head fell. Sadiq splashed through her fingers. The anguish on her face sickened Nyanath’s heart. Her sister suffered the boil of love that festered, ready to burst. Nyanath did not want to be the hot needle to pierce it, but when she asked Eden to collect scrub brush with her to fuel the fire by which she wished to weave, she hit like a red point.

“No,” exhaled Eden outside the hut. “I must wait for him here.”

“He’s – he’s not coming sister,” said Nyanath as gently as she could.

“Liar! You jealous liar. You just wish to lure me away when Sadiq comes, so he’ll think I’ve changed my mind and left him.”

“No I-”

“I’ll not be fooled. You don’t like him because he found me first. You don’t like me because I’m finally ahead of you. The head will chase the tail ‘til the spinning turns us around.”

“I’m only worried about you”

“Ha! Worried about me. Find your own firewood. I follow you no more,” and Eden returned to the hut.

The last dry glow of day tucked in the village. Nyanath’s pace into the brush quickened. She could feel her sister tearing away from her so she must double her efforts to finish Eden’s rug. She needed more light to weave them together. For the first time in months she wished the sun to shine longer.

Dry brush collected easily. She need not stray far from the village to find some. In minutes she bent grass-like beside a load carried under her arm, large enough to light her work until late. She fretted that Eden might leave in her absence in the brush. Then Nyanath consoled herself on her silliness. Her sister would stay up longer. *She’ll wait until I’m asleep to search for that lying jackal.* “If I get my hands on him – Where is Sadiq?”

“What might you do to me?” said a voice from the night. It sucked the wind from Nyanath and she could not scream in her fright. Instead she clutched her bundle of sticks until they pierced the flesh of her side. The new moon gave no light, but Nyanath could still see the glint of starlight on the barrel of Sadiq’s Kalashnikov when he stepped into the clearing from the bush. His wide smile disarmed her fear and his vacant black eyes scanned her seductively.

Without thinking she stepped forward and hugged him with both arms. Her firewood cracked on his shoulder and splintered to the ground. “Oh, I’m so happy to see you,” said Nyanath. She felt tears welling up like those that had washed her to womanhood. “Eden will be overjoyed. She’s waiting for you now. Father’s in bed, but

we can wake him to meet his new son.” And she hugged him again wrapping her arm behind his head pulling his face into her neck. She smelled the alcohol roiling into the air off Sadiq’s breath. She sensed the early celebration in his wind. “I’ve woven you both a rug,” she gushed.

“Is this the younger one?” said a voice behind Nyanath, “With an ass like a zebra.” Her head snapped around and she tried to jump away from Sadiq, but his arm held tight around her waist. Her instantly desiccated tongue caught in her mouth.

“No this is the older one with the amber eyes. I knew you’d come to like me. I haven’t stopped thinking of you since the water hole. You wanted to hug me then. You fooled your sister about your fire for me. Jaja, I told you she wanted to touch my rifle.”

Nyanath stood limp in disbelief. Jaja stepped into view and held a knife to Nyanath’s throat. “Ahh, pleasure before pain,” he said.

“Not this one, Jaja. She’s for me. You can fuck her sister after we burn the village.”

“Sadiq! What are you doing?” gasped Nyanath.

“Following our thirst,” grinned Sadiq’s cavernous mouth. His iron hand on the back of her neck pressed her toward his lips. She pushed at him and tried to dig at his eyes, but he wrestled her to the ground and pinned her arms. Jaja dropped to his chest in the dirt and put the blade of his knife under her chin.

“Scream and die,” said Jaja. Fear sucked up her breathing.

“Jaja! Leave!” ordered Sadiq. “I don’t need an audience. Secure the watering hole while the others circle the village. General al-Mahdi wants this village clean. His tankers drive down at dawn.”

“Why can’t we share?” begged Jaja.

“Leave! You pig!” and Sadiq slung his Kalashnikov off his shoulder to club his comrade in the face before throwing the rifle down. Jaja slunk off and Sadiq’s intoxicated eyes drank in Nyanath. “I’ve been looking forward to this all week.”

In the hut Eden wrung her hands. Her disgust, anxiety and abandonment turned her bowels. She paced about the room until she heard her father restlessly turning behind his curtain. She stepped outside and waited for Sadiq. Darkness continued to fill the village and still Nyanath did not return. The brush was not far and Nyanath did not need much wood.

Eden sat on the stool Nyanath had prepared. The unfinished rug her sister wove rested upon it and Eden started to feel more comfortable now that she ended her pacing. Her still nervous hands began to stroke down the trailing cloth that hung to the dust. Her fingers worked into the tight weave Nyanath made and Eden could feel the softness of the old worn cloth her sister used. It reminded her of the first rug Titi taught the girls to weave. They used to fight over who first would sleep on it. Of course Nyanath lay on it first, but she rolled it carefully in the morning and handed it to Eden wishing her a beautiful night’s sleep like she enjoyed on the rug. And of course they both taught Poni and Sittina how to weave their own rugs while their mother’s worked at preparing the midday meal. When they finished they carried their new rugs to the center of the village where Anai the story-teller twisted the threads of the village history into his tales. Nyanath and Eden took only the one rug that they sat on together, side-by-side. During Rajab of their youth they would pull the rug near the door to listen to the rain drum the

roof. They would stick their hands out the opening to feel the drops that they would pull back to wet each others lips after a long dry season. Titi would kneel behind them and hug the sister's head's together, always together.

Where fell the rains of their youth? Where flew the clouds they could call from their rug like friends from across the village? Where this night was Nyanath?

It was too late. She should have returned. Eden started to look up from her memories, but the night afforded short view. Her ears began to listen for a picture of her sister's place in the bush. The insect sounds of Africa filled the black. Ahmad's snoring egged them on and the cattle rustled through the stubble. Then she heard it, high pitched, intermittent. Eden walked away from the stool.

For a week and a day Eden minced along the knife separating passion from pain. Such a fine edge between, such a dark moonless night, it was difficult to see the difference. Into the bush she stalked a sound like grass leaning toward the wind before a gust blew it back. At first short breathless cries whined into the night. A deep baseline of grunts conducted her forward. From behind the bramble just outside the village in the darkness of starlight four feet spread out in the dust. Their rhythm drowned out the scratch of Eden's quickening steps. The thin naked ankles quivered with each grunt. They kicked and dropped in spasms. The toes dug into the film of dust the cattle trampled out of the pottery dry earth. In the throes a foot thrust into the air sending a shower of dust toward the stars. Eden blinked through the matter, bodies ground together in the filth until the grimacing faces on them turned her cold.

The Kalashnikov roared in Sadiq's ear. The people of the village awoke to its rumble just before the onslaught of the rebels descended from their posts. Soon rifle cracks put them back to sleep. Ahmad died from a bullet wound to the neck. His head lay outside the threshold of his hut and his body inside. His half-eaten bowl of rice sat untouched near his chest, but the rebels did not bother to cover him with the unfinished rug a few feet away on a stool.

In the morning General al-Mahdi's tanker trucks put long hoses into the drinking pool and drained it before noon. They rumbled toward Jabal Marrah as fierce winds swept over them from Ouaddai. The drivers looked in their rearview mirrors when they saw a dark cloud rising up from the earth. The winds continued to howl while the steering wheels shook and the road disappeared. The drivers stopped in fear of losing the road and to pray. They looked again to their mirrors and they could no longer see their own faces. A continent of sand blasted the mirror's glass white. The drivers waited for the end.

The wind ripped the earth off into the sky and lightning began to flash all around. Finally rain flashed in torrents and made rivers off every knoll. By evening only a steady rain fell. Portions of road rode rough, but the tankers decided to press forward through the night at a crawl.

By the following morning the tankers creaked slower and hissed to a halt outside al-Mahdi's compound on the slopes of Jabal Marrah. The general himself walked out to meet the convoy of tankers and rebels, his arms in the air, his lieutenants strafing the welcome clouds with machine gun fire. All smiled and the returning rebels swore the earth wore a new cast of green. He looked almost frantically for the leader of his troops.

The passenger cab door of the final tanker swung open and the General looked down the long line and smiled wide. He strode down the convoy and seized the forearm of the leader.

“Sadiq, my son, look what you have brought me.”

“Another success – five tankers filled to the brim.”

“I meant the rain.”

“Pardon me father. I can barely hear you.”

“I meant the rain.”

“Yes amazing. The pumps pulled so hard at the watering hole that they pulled up the earth behind us and brought a wave of rain crashing down on top of us.

“God is great, Sadiq. Don’t I always tell you that God will provide?”

“You do father, but I fear I cannot provide you with the sisters you anticipated.”

“Even you, honey dripping from your tongue, could not convince them to come.”

“Well one of them touched my rifle and insisted on making a mess.”

“And the other?”

“Her blind hysterics forced me to do some cleaning.”

“With water?”

“No father. You must know God’s plan.”

“Which plan is that?”

“All women clean with blood.”