

Ruse of the Nadir

The desert sun had sapped her strength. How long had she been there? As she lay prostrate on the rock with lips cracked dry and mouth like late August cotton, a faint croak emerged from deep beneath her. She desperately needed water, Malaika thought. Just then, she heard a soft, gurgling, babble of a distant brook, and felt a damp coolness on her face and hands where her skin contacted the outcrop's surface. She perceived a whispering fragrance of gardenia perfuming the air. But there were no gardenias within at least a thousand miles. How can that be? You're losing it. Get it together. The relentless heat and dry wind are my reality, she said to herself, as she lost consciousness again.

Upon waking, the intense sun was still high in the sky, as if its normal path had been suspended and locked overhead. There was no shade anywhere. The sunbaked rock outcropping on which she had collapsed in exhaustion should have been hot like a broiling plate. Yet somehow it felt comfortably cool, damp, and restorative. While this perception of feeling offered great relief, it was disconcerting. Was the heat now causing these crazy sensations, she wondered? She closed her eyes to shut out the hallucinations. Her mind's eye, however, ascended to the same perch as the sun, and looked down upon her desiccated form sprawled on the rock.

Squinting, it saw Malaika—a skinny 12-year-old girl alone in a vast desert. It observed her sandy blond hair cropped short. A red-orange bandana tied at the nape of her neck swathed her forehead. Her sun-bleached eyebrows, filled with desert sand deposited as if by a windbreak hedge, were set evenly. Large, dark brown eyes rested under red, swollen eyelids and eyelashes crusted with wind-blown dust. A loose-fitting, long-sleeved, pale yellow, linen shirt with buttoned pockets on the breast and each arm covered her upper body. Similarly, she wore a pair of baggy, tan linen cargo pants with zippered pockets front and back as well as on each thigh. Heavy leather hiking boots and plaid, woolen socks protected her tired, swollen feet. The eye in the sky found her face as

intelligent, well balanced, and attractive in a tomboy way. Under the layers of dust and sand covering her face, curiously, it also saw an assured, hopeful expression. After reconfirming its observations with a sagely blink, the eye placed itself, as if quite naturally, in the left eye socket of a great eagle—a keen, elegant and powerful bird with a brown left eye and a blue right eye. Watching Malaika, it lifted from its perch by the sun and descended gracefully over a nearby dune and disappeared.

Upon regaining consciousness some time later, she remembered the eagle. In opening her crusted eyelids, she was surprised to see an old, weathered man in flowing, dirty, white robes approach her on the rock. His wrinkled, leathery face was dark brown, almost black. He had deep set, sapphire eyes that sparkled like rippled water pools of reflected, dancing light, similar to the eagle's right eye, she thought. Under a long, silver-gray beard, his teeth were as white as bleached camel bones. To her, the ancient man appeared to be a nomad of the desert. Leaning on the base of the rock, he smiled gently, and spoke to her in her language, which amazed her.

“I am thirsty,” he said.

“Me, too,” she replied in a hoarse, dry whisper.

“As you lay upon the rock, did you hear, feel, or smell anything unusual or out of place, perhaps?” the ancient asked.

“Yes,” she replied.

“I, too, detected the soft murmur of water underground, and the fragrant air emanating from this place,” he said. “These sensations directed me here to the rock where I now find you. As I sit, I feel the refreshing cool, damp surface of the rock in the heat of the day.” She was comforted to learn that the old man experienced the same perceptions, yet she was still perplexed by them.

“I'm glad to know you felt it, too. But what does it mean?” she asked.

“Let us give thanks and pray that we might quench our parched throats with clear, clean, cool water,” the aged traveler said.

“You, a stranger, appeared out of nowhere. But I’m relieved you are here. Am I safe with you?” Malaika said.

He took her hands softly in his and closing his eyes, he prayed aloud.

“Guardians of the wadi, we are weary, hot and thirsty travelers who seek your blessing of water to restore and sustain us in this desert. Thank you for leading us to your home. You honor us in doing so, but it is we that offer our respect and prayers in honoring you. We pray you find us poor supplicants worthy of the precious water you may share. Through your benevolence, we wish to continue our journey in this life, if it is your wish, Guardians of the wadi.”

There is no water here in this hot, dry, barren place, she thought. The old man remained still and silent with eyes closed and a calm, serene facial expression.

“I hear the gurgle and babble of water, much stronger now,” she declared, sitting up on the rock. The old man remained frozen in meditation.

“The rock is glistening and slippery,” she said in astonishment.

“Do you smell the strong, lovely fragrance of the flowers as I do now?” she asked the yet fixed, silent personage at her side. He remained deep in reverent concentration.

From a fissure in the rock, a small trickle of water emerged and ran to their feet. Still the ancient man remained immobile, seemingly imperceptible and unknowable of the miracle she was witnessing. She then heard a gushing roar deep under the rock. Seconds later, the roaring sound erupted in a spectacular fountaining of clear, sweet water that rained buckets upon them. The steady shower aroused the old man, who stood with arms opened wide and smiling broadly. He craned his neck backwards and opened his mouth wide to receive quick swallows of water. Doing the same and laughing, Malaika said between great gulps,

“It is a miracle that has saved us!” She took off her boots and socks to dance in puddles. Watching her spontaneous celebration, the ancient removed his sandals to soak his feet, while clapping rhythmically to her dance.

Their drenching on the rock continued unabated for a half hour. The fountain ebbed and eventually retreated quietly underground, leaving pools of cool, clear, fresh water in hundreds of hollows and depressions on the surfaces of the outcrop. The old man collected water from the basins into several long leather pouches. The girl watched him in awe and silence. The aged one recited a prayer of humility and thanks to the Guardians of the wadi.

From his back sack, he pulled out some wooden sticks and hemp twine, lashing them together into poles. He reached in the pack again to take out a thin, well worn blanket made from a stitched patchwork of small animal hides and sundry fabrics as may have been discarded as rags by previous owners. With these materials, he readily erected a lean-to.

“Malaika, come, my child, to rest in the shade and shelter of my tent,” the old traveler said. He pulled from the pack something for them to eat. “It is camel jerky and small, rounded lumps of sesame seeds pasted with bits of dried dates,” he explained, as he offered the food to share. “And now my water bags are refilled to sustain us, thanks be to the Guardians of the wadi.”

She crawled into the shelter’s shade and eagerly accepted the food.

"What do the Guardians of the wadi look like," Malaika asked as she ate.

“To our people of the desert, they appear in different forms. As animals, bright red frogs or salamanders are most common. They can take the form of emerald or golden water beetles, too. They exist as plants in some wadis. Brown stoneworts or creeping ‘resurrection’ plants that cling desiccated on the rock surface that come back to life with sparse and infrequent rain or fountaining such as we just experienced,” the sage replied.

“I didn’t see anything like that,” she stated, “only the beautiful fountain that saved us. Did you see any frogs or beetles or plants here?” she asked.

“Yes,” he replied.

She let it go, being so grateful for water, food and companionship. If he imagined seeing Guardians of the wadi, she thought, then let him believe so. As she rolled the experience over in her mind, she asked the old man another question.

"How do the Guardians know which visitors to help or deny?" she wondered.

"This question is sometimes phrased as 'the ruse of the wadi'," the mystic replied.

"I don't understand," Malaika said.

"In time you may understand the riddle. You must be patient," he said.

He arose slowly and walked from under the lean-to a few paces away from the shade of their sanctuary to the hot, dry desert. He bent down and grabbed a fistful of sand then opened his fingers. A thousand wind-carved crystals found their way back to the desert floor. The girl watched. She pondered what insight to the riddle this gesture might hold.

Returning to the tent, he smiled and said,

"Malaika, you are observant and inquisitive. These attributes offer a good start to understanding mysteries of the wadi, whenever and wherever they may be revealed along your life's path."

She returned his smile, lost in thought. Other somewhat antagonizing questions that emerged again and again in her young mind. “Will I learn to find wadi to sustain me on my life's journey? If I do find wadi, how will the Guardians receive me?” Having quenched her thirst, she felt life and happiness seeping back to her being. Resting on her side in the lean-to’s shade, she recalled snippets of conversations with family and friends, and envisioned her parents; her friend Faith’s face waving goodbye from the bus; and watching the familiar front gate of their duplex

growing smaller until it disappeared completely in the shrouding darkness of sleep as she nodded off. She stirred awake to the snoring of her sleeping companion. She thought about her parents tucking her into bed, and gently cried herself to back to sleep.

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At the international school, Malaika and her best friend, Faith, were in the Form 1 class. At lunchtime, they usually sat under a shade tree within the compound to talk about assignments and how unfair some of their tyrannical teachers were. Mostly, they whispered and laughed about boys. But today was different.

“The news from the telly as well as the embassy is grim,” Faith said. “The jihadists have advanced unopposed from the south, according to my father. He told my mother and me this morning at breakfast that they had taken the airport last night!” Faith’s parents, like Malaika’s, were career expats on assignment overseas. Faith’s dad was involved in security, and her mom in translation and communications such as reports, press releases, and speech writing. Malaika’s parents were career foreign service officials working in food relief and palliative health care. Both sets of parents worked for the Foreign Office.

“My mom and dad said they agreed with other expatriate families that we must be prepared to evacuate at any time,” Malaika replied.

“What are we doing in school then?” Faith asked. Just as she uttered this question, the Headmaster’s voice came over the loudspeaker.

“Due to a potential, and I stress the word ‘potential’, threat of a hostile advance of extremists towards the city, all afternoon classes are cancelled. All non-boarding students are to gather their belongings and proceed safely and directly from school to home. Taxi and bus service has been arranged for non-boarding students whose homes are over two miles away. All boarders

are to report to your dormitories for further instruction there. Your parents will be notified as to when school will resume. Good day and stay safe.”

Malaika and Faith jumped up and ran to their lockers, then joined the stream of other uniformed students filing through the school gate onto the curbside. Faith, who lived across town, boarded the bus. Through an open window, she shouted,

“Malaika, call me at home. We must stay in touch closely tonight and over the next few days.”

“Righto,” Malaika yelled back. “Bet our parents are meeting with the other expats now to plan what’s best for keeping all of us safe.” Faith’s bus pulled out and left, as Malaika and others walked rapidly away from the school towards their homes. In twenty minutes, Malaika entered her duplex, where she found her mom on the landline talking in a somewhat excited voice. Seeing her daughter, she cupped a hand over the phone, and said, “Am I glad to see you home early today. Dad is coming shortly, too. It’s all about the jihadist threat.” She returned to her conversation, which only lasted a couple of sentences before hanging up. Her mom turned to Malaika and gave her a warm hug, an unusual greeting on normal school days. This isn’t a normal school day, Malaika thought, as she returned her mother’s embrace.

“Are we leaving?” Malaika asked. “Where are we going?”

“Your father has been meeting with embassy officials and Foreign Office staff all day. He’ll fill us in when he gets home, which will be soon. I came home early to start packing essentials. You can help,” her mom said. “Clothes, first aid kit, flashlights and batteries, and blankets. Then we’ll box up nonperishable food, fill up water containers, wrap candles and matches in zip lock bags, and retrieve the sleeping bags from the attic.” They assembled the provisions in a growing pile on the living room floor.

Malaika's dad drove into the carport and cut off the ignition to the Land Rover. Entering the side door to the kitchen, he said, "Sorry it took me longer than expected. I stopped to top off the tank and buy and fill extra petrol canisters. I bought some fresh batteries, six spare quarts of motor oil, and more jerry cans for water."

"Thanks for getting a head start on the packing, you two, that's great," he said. "I'll fill you in on the plan at the kitchen table."

Malaika admired her parents. She thought, my mom's loving care, organizing skills, and optimistic attitude are her special attributes. My dad's always there for us like a rock, as well as his fun-loving adventurous spirit. Her thirty-eight-year old mother, Caroline, was slender with a kind and beautiful face that didn't require much make-up. Her flaxen hair was straight and shoulder length, not dangling, such that it was a vibrantly bodied mane full of bounce and life. She was a city girl and graduated from an elite private university.

Her father, Wade, who was forty four, had grown up on a farm learning the value and necessity of hard work and dependability. His freckled face was covered by a short, well-trimmed beard and mustache, brown with gray undertones. He kept his brown hair short, with no part or sideburns. He wore reading glasses. He was almost six feet tall and kept in good shape. After leaving the farm to complete a volunteer stint in the Navy, he earned a college degree in agriculture. This was not so much as to learn what he already knew, but to secure the educational credential needed to enter the Foreign Office and travel. Caroline and Wade met during a training session for new employees. They were so much in love, Malaika recalled from looking at family scrapbook photos many times before. And they still are in love, she thought happily.

"Well, ladies, we've decided for everyone's safety and wellbeing to evacuate as soon as possible. As you know the jihadists captured the airport fifteen miles south of town in a stunning, rapid assault last night. Reports are they're moving towards the city. It's a highly dynamic and

dangerous situation. As such, we're left with no choice but to convoy overland about three hundred miles northeast to the neighboring capital city. The only way out is to caravan through the desert. We must leave at nightfall. With eleven Land Rovers and Jeeps equipped with extra wheels and cans of petrol strapped on the roofs, and plenty of water, food and other provisions packed inside each vehicle, the evacuation planners, including me, estimate we can reach our destination within twenty-four hours."

"Are Faith and her brother and sister in the caravan with her parents, too?" Malaika asked.

"Yes, in fact, they'll be the lead car. Her father is familiar with the savannah around here through his surveying duties, as well as his weekend hunting forays with local guides," her dad replied.

"It'll be crowded in their Land Rover. Can Faith ride with us?" Malaika asked.

"No, not this time, Malaika," her dad responded in a soft, understanding voice. "This is a time when families need to be close together. When we reach our destination, there'll be ample opportunity for you and Faith to see each other."

"Well, let's finish packing," her mom said. They loaded the Land Rover.

"I've thrown together a dinner from what was left in the refrigerator and pantry," her mom said. She lifted an upside down, large, shallow rattan basket that served as a fly cover to reveal a family favorite.

"Spaghetti with meat sauce, garlic bread, and salad with Italian dressing. There are even sliced peaches and pound cake for desert!" Malaika said.

"You're amazing, Caroline," her dad said. "I'm starving. Let's eat."

After eating, they locked up and climbed into the vehicle. Malaika sat in the back seat among boxes, bags, and luggage to settle in between the two front seats with her elbows on the headrests. "Dad," she asked, "will we be safe from the jihadists?"

“The terrorists are invading from the south, and we are going northeast. So, they won’t be anywhere near us. Our escape route is safe, no worries,” he replied. From the side window of their vehicle, Malaika looked back at their duplex until it disappeared from sight. They drove to the planned rendezvous spot, where several vehicles waited. When all eleven vehicles had reported, the caravan was ready.

“Faith, I asked if you could ride with us, but my dad said families had to stick together,” she spoke into a walkie-talkie. No cell phones were allowed because they might be tracked.

“I asked my parents and got the same response. They said we can get together all we want at our destination. Still, it’s nice to talk using these radios,” Faith replied.

“Let’s roll,” came the command from the lead car to the others over the old, but effective walkie-talkies. The expatriate caravan departed as the sun was setting, at six o’clock. They took a paved, but heavily pitted and unmaintained, highway north for a half hour, then turned northeast at a predetermined place into the roadless bush.

“Will we be able to see and avoid ravines, rocks, or other hazards as we drive this off-road route?” her mother asked.

“We’ll go slow and use our headlights, so we’ll be OK,” Malaika’s father replied.

In avoiding the ubiquitous thorn trees, boulders, and gullies, they crawled along like a string of golden holiday lights swaying and bucking in a storm. After a couple more hours, the jostled refugees settled in for the abrupt and jarring turns, constant bumps, and sudden changes in vertical position of the noses of their vehicles. Despite the frequent clutching and gear shifting, braking, turning, and up-down motion, some of the occupants relaxed into a rhythm of sorts. Others, even after taking motion sickness medications, contorted in nausea. Nonetheless, even those with the queasy stomachs and splitting heads knew this was the only and best possibility of escape. The

caravan crept onward and they endured their dizziness and nausea. Two vehicles had to change blown out tires, but other than that, the group had made steady progress in the night.

At midnight, Faith's dad in the lead car announced to all drivers,

"The travel should become considerably easier now. Our column has passed through the savannah to desert. There are no more trees to avoid hitting and the rocks are smaller and more manageable to traverse. Onward!" The desert floor was mostly windswept hardpan, with occasional soft sand deposits in hollows or in the lee of low ridges. There were far fewer sets of shining eyes of wild animals reflected in the headlights, too. They continued more comfortably now.

The first hand-launched rocket hit directly the lead vehicle containing Faith's family, sending the Land Rover high in the air as a fireball of mangled metal. It seemed to explode a second time when its fiery hulk fell on top of the second vehicle, setting it aflame, followed instantly by detonating fuel cans destroying it and all occupants. Almost simultaneously, a second rocket obliterated the last vehicle in the column, a Jeep. Malaika woke from her dozing to grab the walkie-talkie, screaming into it,

"Faith, are you alright? Faith, answer me!"

Instinctively, the drivers of the remaining vehicles swerved out of the column in all directions to escape the ambush. But it was too late. Grenades and machine gun fire scored direct hits on the fleeing vehicles, some of which detonated like bombs in flashing, booming whoomphs. Within five minutes, the entire column was strewn akimbo on their sides or overturned, some vehicles still burning with hideous cries of severely injured refugees piercing the night air. A handful of the attacking terrorists moved quickly towards any of the vehicles from which woeful human moans and pleas emerged. Abruptly, the voices in the vehicles were silenced by automatic rifle fire at close range.

The attackers systematically looted any vehicle that was not completely destroyed or burning. In the carnage, the dead bodies of Malaika's parents' draped and hid her unconscious, but uninjured body. The terrorist scavengers took any intact petrol cans, weapons like pistols or rifles and ammunition, food parcels, full water cans, jewelry and any other valuables from the wreckage. As they picked through her Land Rover, they did not detect life in her unmoving body, thus Malaika was spared. Within a half hour, the jihadists vanished into the night.

Upon waking hours later at daybreak, Malaika was horrified to find her parents' dead bodies and dried blood covering her. In shock, she crawled from underneath them and out the window of the vehicle lying crippled on its side. She groaned and vomited. Feeling a large bump on her forehead and severe headache, she recalled the attack. She looked and listened for any sign of the jihadists. There was no sight or sound of any living person left of the four dozen refugees, except for her. To her temporary relief, no jihadists remained. However, another fear shook her. She cried in the emptiness of the landscape and her soul, and then screamed to no one there,

“What's to become of me alone in the desert?”

My parents are dead, and no one else is alive here except for me, she thought. Momentarily brightening, she remembered the walkie-talkies in each vehicle. Quickly, but carefully, she searched the wreckage, but did not find any. So, I'm lost in the desert without anyone or any means to contact someone to help me, she thought. I'm on my own, she pondered, as she cried anew with her splitting head on her knees.

As the sun lifted from the horizon to climb higher in the sky, Malaika stirred and blinked tears away. She stood and searched the vehicles again for any water or food she could find. Fortunately, the daylight revealed a few full canteens and sundry caches of food items like candies, crackers, and two oranges. With a small packet of scrounged provisions including a toy compass, she decided to keep traveling, by foot, towards the original destination to the northeast. She

embarked deeper into the desert. After three days, she found herself out of water and food with no town in sight. A desert of no return, she thought. She collapsed on a rock outcropping in the middle of a dry, desolate desert to die.

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During their time in the desert, she asked his name repeatedly, but he never responded. Exasperated, as they departed the wadi, she said, “Well, I’ll call you ‘Grandfather’ then, if that’s alright with you.” He only smiled at her, choosing to remain mysteriously silent, as he often did. As they walked together, she said,

“I like making believe you are my Grandfather.” She decided to let go of being annoyed with him. “I am thankful to you for saving me, Grandfather. I’m trying to listen when you speak so that eventually I may learn, as you say.” Surprisingly, this evoked more than a nod and a smile.

“Good,” he replied. As they walked and rested in the desert, they talked of many things. Camped alee a dune one night, a howling from the desert jolted her awake terrified. Shuddering, she shook the old man.

“Grandfather, wake up, some horrible beast is upon us!” A dreadful barking moan came nearer. The mystic cocked his ear then lay his forehead to the ground.

“Those are the dreadful cries of night phantoms that used to be ruling desert gods. Believers of the Prophet Muhammad drove them away. They became wailing demons leading travelers astray, the Arab Muslims say.” In a wild, dusty moonlight, Malaika cringed and clung to her protector as a blowing sand cloud passed over the dune through the lean-to.

“Westerners say the sound is merely windblown sand resonating off the crest of a dune, but what do they know,” the old man said. “The desert’s night voice, the Rul, is mystery and magic.” No sooner than he spoke, the wind abated and the demonic howling ceased. The girl and grandfather slept.

“Grandfather, after losing my parents, what shall I do?” Malaika asked during the next night in the desert.

“I lost my father to pestilence when I was six years old. My mother died in childbirth soon afterwards. My aunt raised my siblings and me. It took months for me to stop crying at sundown over the loss of my parents. Eventually, I learned acceptance and thanks for their giving me life. In this acceptance, I took responsibility for my life. I am happy that you are feeling better about your loss. There may be pangs of grief that emerge later. Don’t be afraid of grieving. It is a natural, healing process, a sort of disguised blessing.” She listened to his stories, as they walked towards the setting of a full, auspicious moon.

“There’s our destination. We made it, Grandfather!” Malaika shouted suddenly, as they crested a hill. They had reached the city in just under four days and nights.

“Yes, my child, our journey is concluded,” the old guide stated.

“How can I ever thank you for saving my life?” she asked. “I can’t leave you, Grandfather,” she added.

Entering the city, Malaika said, “Let’s go to the embassy. They will help us.”

“It is not my embassy. No, child, you go ahead. I will make my way to rest in a cool, shady spot,” he replied.

“I won’t leave you, Grandfather,” she said.

“I am happy that our pathways intersected at the wadi. There, we were given opportunity to share a short part of our life journeys together in the desert. We have now reached our temporary destination. We must go our own ways. We will each keep what we have experienced in our hearts forever,” he said.

“No, Grandfather, I cannot let you go just like that,” she sobbed.

Taking her hands, he pressed them firmly. “You gave me a remarkable gift at the wadi.”

She interrupted him, blurting, “I gave you no gift, Grandfather! It was you who saved us by praying to the Guardians of the wadi.”

“All my life, I was always alone at the most of the nadirs and all of the wadis on my life’s pathway. You gave me the gift of sharing what we experienced together at the wadi and on the howling dune. I learned that it is much more meaningful and satisfying to help other persons with pure hearts revive themselves on their life journeys, especially after one of life’s inevitable nadirs, as you recently suffered,” he replied.

“Again, I don’t understand, Grandfather,” she said. “Please don’t go.”

“I must leave you now, Malaika. Go in peace to follow your life’s calling. I am honored by the gift you gave me,” he said. With a small bow, he offered a small, white, fragrant flower with several deep green leaves still attached to the stem.

“A gardenia,” she said, taking it delicately into her hands. “How could you find this flower here?”

As was his custom, he left her question unanswered, hanging in the perfumed air that enveloped them. She watched as he turned to walk away, recalling afresh his words about grieving as a part of healing. His flowing robes and worn sandals melted and disappeared into a crowded open-air bazaar on a dusty, cobbled street filled with local people and tourists. In lonely despair, she closed her eyes and tilted her head back. A moan of profound grief was stifled in her throat, however, as she opened her tearful eyes. Looking skyward above the roofline of the city, she saw the same beautiful eagle with one brown eye and one blue eye, gliding effortlessly as it banked above her and vanished into the sun.

