

## **The Trick Is**

*By Gileonnen & Vashtan*

The desk, which he had been at great pains to clear only three days ago, had by this point succumbed to the inevitable entropy of papers that he supposed must be characteristic of any cabinet office. Some men called the onionskin scent that pervaded the room a 'dry' aroma, but to his nose it was queerly lush; he fancied that he could even smell a sharp tang of ink upon the air, when the room was empty of human bodies. The English were pleased to class Arabs among the 'great unwashed,' but Lawrence, who had been surrounded by unwashed Englishmen and unwashed Arabs alike, had never apprehended the distinction.

There was no help for the papers. He had no recourse now but to slip out the communiqués which concerned him, before they became utterly lost in the nonsense which the Secretary of State for the Colonies received daily. Churchill would see Lawrence productive in his capacity as advisor on Arab matters; in truth, Lawrence had begun to care little about Arabia of late. He worried at his lower lip with his teeth as he bent over the desk, patiently sifting the thin paper.

Amidst the faint rustle, the footfalls on the carpets all but faded to nothing. Only the wooden floorboards gave the movement away, a soft creaking as weight was shifted and somebody approached the door, knocking first, then making his entrance. It was Mr. Edwards, a civil servant whose duties were manifold and hard to define, a busybody who never appeared busy, but who instead haunted the venerable halls with the pretence of productivity, hoping to carve a career from not working too hard. (Which was rather the rule than the exception in Whitehall.)

“Sir, you have a visitor. I told him in no unclear terms that you are not to be disturbed, yet he was starting to make a scene outside...”

Lawrence straightened, dropping his hands to his sides. "No, send him in straightaway. A life without disturbances would be utterly devoid of purpose—and we must have purpose, mustn't we?" He smiled politely, lips closed over his teeth.

“As you wish, sir.” Mr. Edwards clearly disapproved, as only an underling could disapprove when he'd not met with the expected reaction from his superior. He turned with a stiff back and left again, walking softly.

When the door opened again, it was pushed open with force: more invading army than visitor. The intruder had the swarthy complexion of an Arab, unruly black hair combed back, yet retaining a stubborn wave, a part of it at the front turned upwards, much like the carved marble of Alexandros Megalos—fiery black eyes flashing with annoyance, yet the temperament was at odds with the fine English cloth the man wore, after the latest fashions of Jermyn Street.

Lawrence had to smile—a genuine smile that drew up the corners of his eyes. He made his salaam with an old elegance, retained over the elapsed years and only slightly hampered by his too-tight sleeves. "Sherif Ali. I might have guessed."

Ali returned the gesture, and the way he kept himself proud and upright seemed, in these clothes, much like the affectation of an Englishman. "Al-Lawrence. This is where you are hiding." A quick motion of the head, like a falcon on a fist, then, unblinkingly, regarding Lawrence. "I have come to learn politics."

"You've come a bit late for it, unless you care to learn about bureaucracy from the ground up."

Ali's face darkened, much like it had when the proud Harith had lost his patience with the intricate workings of the British election system. He did not consider bureaucracy a part of politics—merely a nuisance left to slaves and servants. Ali's idea of politics was that of an ambush without weapons—overpowering an enemy by different means.

Lawrence returned placidly to his papers, and when he had satisfied himself that every communiqué pertaining to the Arabian region had been discovered, he gathered them into a neat stack. "Nor does it explain why you've sought me out—we didn't part well, did we?"

"I did not believe that you would stay away," Ali admitted.

"What was there to go to? We failed at Paris. The dream died there." In some respects, the dream had died when he'd learned that Dahoum had fallen to typhus; Lawrence drew himself up at the door, inches away from Ali. He could feel his skin prickling at the unaccustomed proximity.

"But Al-Lawrence..."

"Al-Lawrence is a dead man, Ali. You are only speaking to his ghost."

Ali's brow darkened—not unlike a sandstorm that swallowed all the light. "But we are not dead!" he all but shouted, taking hold of Lawrence's shoulders, glaring at him. "We are not ghosts. We are not memories. I am not."

The contact made Lawrence shudder, a palpable shaking that transmitted itself into Ali's hands. His own hands rose to grip Ali's, prying at the fingers on his shoulders until his knuckles were white and he had worked himself free. Lawrence spoke sharply then, as though his breath were coming short. "No, Ali, you are not," he said, every word precise, his Arabic as nearly perfect as it had ever been.

"Then tell me why you have exiled me from your heart, Lawrence. Is that not part of your 'fair and due trial'? Your mark of *civilization* that you strove to bring us? To explain the sentence to the condemned man?" Ali stayed close, visibly restraining himself from gripping him once again, hands tightened into fists that were half-raised.

"What good is civilization! It is only a pack of little men, converging like dogs upon an old lion to tear it to pieces—that is our British Empire's civilization. I am completely disinterested in it." He tried to push past, but was met with immediate resistance.

"But you are a great man, a lion yourself!" Ali retorted, voice raised with the Bedu's passion. "You could kill those dogs, each one of them. Or let me kill them for you." Ali's fingers were on his chest, bidding him halt.

"Is that what you have learned of politics under the King of Syria? Killing your enemy?" Lawrence knew that his expression was ugly, and he could not be made to care. "Then perhaps savagery is no better than civilization. Let me *through*."

Ali fixed him with that stare, but he knew when he'd reached Lawrence's vein of ore in the dumb rock; he'd struck it, sparks flying. Rebuffed, pushed away, his face was animated by emotions, barely reined in by his pride. "If you have cast me out, have you cast out the desert also?"

"The work wasn't suited to me any longer. You understand—I couldn't go on like that—" He hesitated, on the point of pushing the door open and stepping out.

"Yes, like the falcon is no longer made for flying and instead cowers in his master's tent," Ali scoffed. "And this is where you are hiding, because the tribes would have followed you everywhere—but you, Lawrence, were a mirage, weren't you?"

Lawrence drew in a breath, holding it for a long moment. Ali's dark eyes were intent upon him, as though the Harith man meant to fix him upon one spot by

the mere pressure of his gaze. *A mirage. A false spring of water, fooling parched men into trudging grimly onward.* "I was exactly that. Good day, Ali."

It was inconceivable to Sherif Ali how a man could deny his true nature even in the face of such an insult. Yet there had been a reaction, just before, the intake of breath, and he hoped it had quickened Lawrence's pulse as well, that Lawrence had not truly become one of his own, the sarcastic, pale, bloodless English with their subdued emotions and soulless control. He struggled for words in the face of Lawrence's Englishness, but he had been dismissed already. Carrying on a conversation that yielded nothing was an exercise in frustration; he'd learnt that much with the English. "Tell me there is no water," he said, voice sounding like it was being choked in his chest. He again took hold of the man, fiercely, their faces now only a breath apart. "Look me in the eye, Lawrence, and tell me."

Lawrence studied him, as though perplexed at the familiarity of his face—as though they had happened to meet at a train station, long ago, and he was struggling to remember the name that went with that dark face. When the kiss came, it was only light; a comrade's kiss, an old friend's kiss. Not a lover's kiss any longer. "I have dammed myself up," Lawrence murmured against Ali's lips.

A low sound came from Ali, a deep, painful groan; he'd have preferred to be whipped to the bone than to be kissed like this. Lawrence, the flame in the desert, Lawrence, the man who struck as keenly as the talon of a falcon, who demanded obedience like he was following his own prophecy—that Lawrence had faded in ways that made the earth its own dark shadow. Yet he remembered—he carried that other Lawrence inside, had followed that vision even to the country where it had come from. It was as though a demon had devoured Lawrence's soul.

"You have dammed up all water, and the land goes thirsty," Ali whispered. It was impossible to bear, so he pulled back, gave his salaam and bowed with deep respect, if only to hide his face in the motion, and left Whitehall, this prison of souls.

Lawrence forced himself to watch that too-swift departure; it was nearly a fit penance, for breaking faith. He had abandoned Ali. The least he could do was force Ali to abandon him in kind.

At length, he closed and locked the door behind himself.

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This was the last Lawrence saw from the Harith for a while, but it was hard to miss the rumors. All those interested in the Arab people—and there were many, if not for humanitarian or liberal reasons, but for the matter of their exoticism—charted Sherif Ali's way among the elite.

He was observed in the British Museum, visiting those treasures unearthed from his native sands, and he struck up many a vivid discussion with the collection's curator, who was said to be delighted to 'entertain a quick-witted scion of the Persians,' and who theorized on the Hariths' descent from Xerxes's wayward cavalry.

Sherif Ali raised a stir among people—he was seen drinking coffee with known rabble-rousers, liberals, and libertines, doubtlessly skirting the edge even of anarchistic circles. Then, when he was briefly apprehended and questioned, he removed himself from London, and was heard of again from those students returning from Cambridge for a weekend of leisure. He was hearing lectures, they said, on English history and politics, which garnered him less trouble than learning this first hand in the coffee houses.

It was in Cambridge where he struck up a friendship with Lord S, an eminently wealthy and somewhat radical son of impoverished gentry, who had had the good sense to marry the eldest daughter of a cloth merchant with many relations in the mercantile trade, which furnished the young couple handsomely to indulge in their pastimes. One of them was an interest in the exotic, and Sherif Ali stayed at their mansion as a fawned-over guest. Friends—or detractors in the guise of friends—then claimed that relations between the Arab and the avowedly attractive Lady S had crossed into the improper, which was discussed for a while and widely found credible, but others whispered that the true impropriety happened between Lord S and Sherif Ali, and others blanched with horror at the thought that it might, in actuality, involve all three of them.

Lawrence tried to skirt the edges of these prurient discussions, slipping by like a phantom and (he convinced himself) only incidentally coming into contact with indecent rumors. Nonetheless, the idea of the affair had pervaded his consciousness as easily as it had the minds of his companions in the office for the colonies. "What's his game?" asked Mr. Edwards once, leaning curiously over

Lawrence while he was making diligent scratches on a report. "Is he here to be diplomatic, to make a scene? Is he on holiday?"

"He is here to learn about us," Lawrence had answered, never looking up from the tip of his pen. "Surely you don't think the English are the only men who enjoy watching the less cultured go about their business?"

"I wish he'd keep his nasty paws off of our women," Mr. Edwards had decided, and gone on to bother the advisor for Indian affairs.

This was the first inkling that Lawrence had, that the rumors of Ali's doings in England were to be considered his concern—not because he was Ali's friend, but because he was the advisor on Arab affairs, and the English had begun to suspect that Ali had come to make them look foolish. When Lawrence saw the posters go up for a production of Othello (depicted, he noticed, as an Arab Moor rather than a black one), he could not help but wonder whether this was considered ironic political commentary.

In light of the tense situation in diplomatic circles, Lawrence all but expected the invitation to Lord and Lady S's garden party. Refusing to invite other Arab oddities such as himself would only have occasioned comment; however, he nonetheless thought it an over-eager and perhaps even offensively orientalist gesture, issued as it was to Lawrence of Arabia rather than plain Thomas Edward Lawrence. He was to be a spectacle, he supposed, arriving in flowing white robes and a gutra like a bridal veil.

The card was firm and rough in his hand, with decorative edging that was smooth to the touch. Lawrence considered it and the invitation it betokened, weighing his options as he weighed the heavy paper. He knew himself to be a poorly social animal, particularly in recent years, and the invitation had not been presented in a way that made him disposed to take it.

But Ali would be there. Ali would be making polite conversation, kissing ladies' hands and bowing as he had been taught that the English did. His eyes would flash and his brows would draw down when he caught wind of an intellectual debate; he would hold his own, and more than that, he would not rest until he had claimed victory.

He would be divine—and for that, Lawrence would attend.

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The mansion was well-appointed, a short way from bustling Cambridge, yet with all the privacy that the elite claimed it required—only to break the tedium regularly with lavish social occasions. In the case of Lady and Lord S, her funds had married his style, and while the two were considered rather flamboyant, most thought them eccentric rather than vulgar, which, in those circles, would have been unforgivable. The mansion's stern Georgian façade contrasted with the arranged wilderness of one of the most striking English-style gardens. Possibly, Ali had chosen these as hosts to revel in the best of English lush landscape without the pains that attended traveling in England.

Many guests shared the hosts' tastes; women wore jewelry and make-up to make them appear exotic, often wearing their real Egyptian gold and precious stones. Ali, who had studied in Cairo, doubtlessly appreciated the irony. Yet he himself did not wear Harith dress—his complexion and grace nonetheless set him apart; as if he was to confound the English, he bowed and smiled, kissed hands like Lawrence had imagined, a hint of irony about his lips that made him positively irresistible to those that had come to gawk at him or condemn him.

Lawrence of Arabia was in attendance, as well, slightly exotic in his old uniform—he had worn it so seldom in the pursuit of unity with the Arab people that it had proved far cleaner than was customary. Whether he had chosen it because he had very few formal clothes, or because something in his character still longed for spectacle, he did not allow himself to contemplate.

He moved between the groups of well-dressed women and handsome men, hovering about the edges of their conversations without being recognized or invited to join. It was just as well; he was not particularly interested in being asked for his opinion on vegetarianism or collectivism, or any other -ism that the eccentric elite found fashionable at the time. Ism—so like the Arabic word for 'name'; he found that etymological conundrum far more interesting.

Lawrence's eyes came every now and then to rest on Ali, but he disciplined himself to look away quickly whenever he feared that he had looked too long. He had an unreasonable terror that Ali would meet his eyes across the room which would dash utterly the illusion that he had come for any other reason than to see his old friend.

Ali was often framed by Lord and Lady S, who delighted in showing off their exotic prize; but it was more than that—they genuinely enjoyed his conversation, husband and wife easily exchanging lines as though they were playing a game of tennis. Ali had been tempered—or professed temperance; the man Lawrence had known would have had little patience for idle banter. This, too, was part of Ali's anthropological studies. His hosts did the rounds with him, and Ali was only too aware of Lawrence, wearing the sand-colored uniform that made him look more gangly than he was, and Ali could have sworn that Lawrence did everything to avoid him. No water, not from this well; Lawrence was determined to deny him.

"Oh, Major Lawrence," Lord S called out. "You have to meet our delightful guest, Sherif Ali." Conveniently leaving out the rest of his name, an intimate gesture that Ali felt oddly inappropriate for the English.

"We have been acquainted before," murmured Lawrence, when he was at their side. He glanced once over Ali; the Arab was resplendent in a well-cut suit, his teeth flashing white in what might have been a smile or a snarl. Since they two were playing Englishmen, he held out his hand to be shaken rather than making a comfortable salaam.

Ali hesitated for a heartbeat, then took Lawrence's hand with his, holding it firmer and longer than was the custom. "No-one truly knows the flame that sears a man's heart," Ali cited, a line of poetry in Arabic. "Major, it's a pleasure to see you again. I hope you are doing well," he added in English.

Lawrence schooled his face to polite interest at the poetry, although it knifed at him. He answered in the idiom of the stranger as well as the Englishman, with a small and queer smile. "Well enough—and I could say the same of you, I suppose? You've certainly fallen in with new company since we met last."

"My gracious hosts..." Ali indicated a small bow—to the lady first, and then to the lord. "It pleases them to hear the quaint stories from a far away land that has no hope of rain." He gave Lawrence a smile that held more meanings than a traditional poem. "They do not believe me that sometimes, traversing the desert in a wadi is dangerous, as the water can rush in with such force that my people are surprised and drown in it."



"I'd believe him," Lawrence told the couple, although the lightness in his voice was forced. "But you mustn't suppose that your own people are any less surprised—nor any less likely to drown."

"Oh, really?" Lord S remarked. "Of course, I would never call him a liar, but drowning is not the first thing that comes to mind when contemplating the desert."

"No, indeed not," said Ali.

"What is the first thing that comes to mind regarding the desert?" asked Lady S.

"Purity," Lawrence answered at once, unconscious of even the urge to speak until he had spoken.

"That's an interesting observation," said Lord S. "Ali? Since it is your homeland?"

Ali looked at Lawrence. "Freedom," he said, simply, sounding sincere and almost coy.

"And you can still say that, after the conference?" asked Lawrence.

Ali pressed his lips together, his brow darkened, before he answered. "Let me ask you, how long does it take to build an Empire? And how long does it take to lose it? We feel the chains heavy on our wrists, but does this make our sons slaves?"

In Lawrence's voice, there was a steady, hot intensity. "Then I have grown impatient with this interminable slow progress—I cannot see men in chains, even when their children will be free men. I'd rather be quit of it."

Ali smiled at him. "The Americans did it. The French did it. The French fought for their Republic and keep us in the darkness? The British hold freedom and liberty high, and make us drag chains behind us?" He shook his head, but smiled, which was the only thing that softened the accusation. "We will be free, Lawrence. Freedom is a thought. Freedom is the desert. You cannot tame it."

"Then you must be careful of what you do with your freedom—you've seen what the British have done with it; the Americans have no consciences, and the French slaughtered their own."

"This is why I'm here. I am learning about freedom." Ali gave a smile that held a double meaning, a private joke he enjoyed. "And my hosts have been the most gracious teachers." He was being polite by drawing them back in the

conversation. The Lady S was riveted by the intensity; Lord S seemed confused about the allusions and metaphor, but he smiled, because he could simply delight in outrageous thoughts uttered over a glass of wine.

At that point, though, Lady S visibly blanched, and reached for the arm of her husband, who excused himself and led her gently away.

Ali's gaze followed them, and then he looked at Lawrence.

"Has your friend been ill?" Lawrence asked, very calmly.

"She is, as the expression goes, in the family way." Ali's voice was kept low.

"Should I offer congratulations?"

Ali smiled at him. "What is the custom for this? Would you not wait for the child to be born to congratulate the parents?"

"So the rumors are true." Lawrence felt ill, as well; as though he ought to excuse himself for a moment or for the rest of his life, flee this hideous party and never return. The bottom seemed to have dropped out of his world, and left him falling through space.

Ali reached up and touched his arms. "Rumors?"

Lawrence dropped into Arabic as easily as one might drop into a boxing stance. "Don't pretend to be stupid or polite. Neither one suits the Harith."

Ali threw his head back like a surprised horse and fixed him with his dark eyes. "You have already decided whether it's true or not. And what if it is. Do you think this 'wog' has dishonored one of yours? Is that it? Do our women have no honor?"

At once, Lawrence longed to strike him—to lash out and destroy those accusing eyes, those white teeth, the entirety of this man whom he had once loved with a fierceness that he could scarcely have described. "It doesn't matter, does it?" he asked instead, still keeping to Arabic because it required control of him. "We aren't lovers any longer; you may take whatever lovers you wish."

"Thank you for your kindness, *Al-Lawrence*", Ali said, pulse pounding hard in his throat, and the blood surged through his veins with all the fierceness that was his birthright. "To love you is to love water that either parches the throat by its absence or drowns me with its anger!" He moved forward, pushing Lawrence back hard. "Should I beg for rain? Do you want to make me a beggar, crawling in the dust? Would that satisfy your cravings?"

Lawrence felt his fingers twist in Ali's fine shirt—felt it as though from far away, as though it were someone else's hands going to the dark man's collar, someone else's lips drawn back in a snarl. "I want nothing from you—I want *nothing*—"

"You are a liar, and a coward!" shouted Ali, pushing him back with force, because he couldn't pull him close and kiss him until their lips bled. He'd take his fill if only he could, he'd take anything, drink as much as he could, his restraint too sorely tested.

"And you are a silly little man, pretending to be English," snapped Lawrence. His fist connected with Ali's jaw only a moment later.

A collective sound went through the assembled guests, and a few women gave high-pitched shrieks of shock. Ali was too surprised that Lawrence would hit him in the face to fully escape the blow, and he cut his lips on his teeth, which, however, only served to make him angrier and further heat his blood—he wanted to strangle him or pull a dagger and kill him, beside himself with anger. He shouldered into Lawrence and drove him further back, right into the buffet—crystalware and silver platters raining onto the floor where they fought.

Suddenly, Lawrence snapped back to himself, the hard edge of the table driving into his back, Ali's shoulder inexorable against his chest. He tumbled back over the table and into a slick mass of hors d'œuvre, feeling them crush under him and stain his uniform. He *knew* Ali's eyes; he went still under the other man's weight, hands still braced at Ali's sides, his entire self caught up in his own dark reflection in those eyes—

—which were filled with rage, anguish, and that same love and desire that simply couldn't be washed away, that were part of Ali like the color of his skin, and suddenly, Ali became aware of it himself, the way he was pressed into Lawrence, who was still, not moving, neither greeting nor refusing him, and his flesh did not want to hit or kill him, his flesh wanted to worship, and claim, and be humbled. "I will never..."

But his words were interrupted when two gentlemen gathered the courage to pull him off their countryman, cursing him for his hot-headedness, pulling him back like a dog, and Ali let them, staring at Lawrence, unable to contain any of his emotions.

Lawrence got to his feet, brushing himself off. "Have a care, gentlemen—he was in the right, and I did him a great offense. Your own countrymen would have done the same for less. Let him go." His voice was very low and calm, but it brooked no argument whatsoever.

Ali pulled himself free as much as they let him go, and he tasted blood in his mouth. Too proud to wipe it from his lip, he stood there, facing Lawrence, feeling only too keenly how the brief contact had disheveled him. He felt surrounded by enemies—the lion among the dogs, feeling that they would have torn him apart if they'd only gathered the courage. Madness, to enter their own country. Madness, to believe he could trick them, walk as an honest man amongst thieves.

As Lord and Lady S re-entered the room—now buzzing with disquieted murmuring—Lawrence made a bow to them. "I am not as good company as you might have hoped," he said. "If you will excuse me."

They seemed surprised, but let him go, concerned about the murmur in the room and a scene which they'd missed and which had overshadowed their party.

Ali followed, even though he caught warning glances and one tall gentleman with a handlebar mustache almost stepped in his way and would have warned him off, if Ali hadn't broken into a run to catch up with Lawrence. He did not speak nor protest—he knew when Lawrence was in flight, even if he seemed to know nothing else anymore.

Lawrence paused and looked back when he had reached the edge of the long drive, seemingly unsurprised to see Ali there. "I had thought that you might follow me," he said, when they were close enough to speak without shouting.

The Harith met his gaze. "Thought... not feared, not hoped. Just thought." He stopped close enough that Lawrence might have touched him.

Lawrence offered his arm, and it was an odd gesture—something like how Englishmen offered their arms to ladies, and something like how Arabs offered their arms to friends. "Couldn't it have been both?"

Ali stepped closer, as if he expected to be hit again, cautiously, most of all because he felt an extraordinarily strong longing to accept the offer and be a friend again. He took the arm, face dark and introverted, as if attempted to protect himself from being bared and shamed yet again. "I have little stomach to be English," he finally said. "And how could I, if their best have no stomach to be English, either!"

"I can't blame them. Being English is tiresome, and unrewarding." Lawrence drew Ali's arm close against his body, as though there had never been conflict between them.

Ali wished he could rest at Lawrence's side, as they had passed the time so often, peacefully and quietly, or how they'd been when he'd watched Lawrence write or sketch. "I asked them to invite you," he said, in a low voice. "I had to see you again."

"And you thought that I'd refuse if you asked?"

"I hoped you wouldn't." Ali shook his head. "It would have left you a way out." His fingers tightened on Lawrence's arm, and he half-turned to look at him, the golden hair, the light eyes, the pale skin. He'd always considered Lawrence a striking man, and it was more than possible that it was his blond hair that had endeared Lord S to him.

A silence fell between them, then, like a tacit acknowledgment that Lawrence had fled after all; Lawrence broke the silence reluctantly. "I will only ask you once," he said, although he kept his eyes upon the ground. "Is she carrying your child?"

"It appears likely", Ali said. "Since they were married for four years and she was never expecting."

"Does he—" Lawrence caught the look on Ali's face, and laughed softly. "Of course he knows. It's not in your nature to keep a secret in that way."

"No." Ali pressed his arm again. "Call me an immoral man." He smiled, touching his head briefly to Lawrence's shoulder. "What sins I commit, I commit them in the open."

"And the sins committed against you? Would you have those open as well?" Lawrence thought not only of own sins against Ali—a brawl in a crowded room; an abandonment in Damascus—but also of those private sins that had been committed against his own person in an ill-lit, stinking chamber.

"Europe did a conference on the sins committed against us." Ali paused and gazed into his eyes. "I wish so much to go back, and take you with me. Before everything was ruined and squandered. When you burned so bright, I did not fear cold or dark, because you held my soul."

"I can't go back again," murmured Lawrence, and he drew up Ali's hand to kiss the back of it. "I haven't the strength for it—I'm no longer pure enough—" He

smiled, letting the hand fall between them. "I do dream of it. I would destroy everything I had, my dusty manuscripts and this damned uniform, to be an Arab when Arabia was still innocent and glorious as a brand against the night—"

Ali drew him close to kiss him; he'd have done anything to banish the thoughts, done anything to give Lawrence peace, and if there had been any sin, it had been to tear him out of the place he'd been hiding, and confront him, opening his wounds. To heal, he thought, but knew it was for his own solace as well; to understand why Lawrence had not only abandoned the Arabs, but him, Ali, and himself, Lawrence, with it. "Peace, Lawrence," he murmured against his lips. "Inshallah."

Inshallah; Lawrence trembled at the word. *As God wills it.* "And if God always willed me to be a man of no great importance? If it was written that mine would be a little story of failure, and not a great legend of change?"

"You gave us a taste of freedom." Ali fixed his gaze again upon him. "Of unity. You called us Arabs, not Harith, not Howeitat. We now know what we can hope for, and one day attain, if God wills it. You opened our eyes to the possibilities." Ali took his shoulders firmly. "And even so, even if the desert did not begin to bloom, God wrote your name across my heart."

"Then I have done a deed worth remembering—you will remember me, when you return?"

"As long as I have breath," Ali said, sincerely.

Lawrence pressed his brow against Ali's, then, in the gathering darkness. "Remember me as I was—as we were, in Arabia. As your fellow Arab, and not as an Englishman."

Ali closed his eyes, holding Lawrence's shoulders close, firmly fixing that image in his mind, the white-garbed stranger with the illuminated eyes, the man emerging from the desert when everybody had feared him dead, his fierce stamina, his defiance of what was written, some said his defiance of God. He remembered running his fingers through that hair, resting at his side, propped against the dune, listening to the prayers on the wind and the sounds of the camels. "You are more to me than an Arab or a Harith," he said.

"And you were more to me than my own life." Lawrence kissed him again, briefly, and then let him go and drew away.

"Have you truly exiled me, Lawrence?" Ali remained there, standing, when he wanted to charge after him and force him to stay.

"I am asking you to exile *me*," said Lawrence, low, meeting Ali's eyes and holding his gaze. "Give me up for lost. Abandon me—you've come into this damned civilized wilderness to bring me back, but I must return on my own if I am to return. If I'm to defy fate again, I must be the agent of my own salvation before I can do any good to another."

"And if I do not come on behalf of Arabia, but for my own selfishness?"

Lawrence nearly laughed. "In some ways, you *are* Arabia to me. In the most vital and meaningful ways—I love you, and I long to fight for you, and I know that you're perfectly capable of fighting for yourself."

Ali stood speechless, thoughtless, for a long time. "Will you let me embrace you this night?" he asked, solemnly.

"Only embrace me?"

"And kiss you, and be as we were..." Ali raised a hand to touch Lawrence's face. "Nothing else would give me peace. Nothing else can be enough."

Lawrence laughed, then, too-loud, nothing intimate about it. His eyes were bright, even in the dim light. "It would give you *peace*? You want me to give you *peace*. Nothing would give me peace but to be beaten, to be flogged until I'm half-senseless—or to be shot, or to crash to earth in an aeroplane... you will have no peace from me. I can give you no peace."

*Flogged.* Ali vividly remembered the wounds he'd cared for, jealously guarding Lawrence's wounds in the camp outside Deraa. What the Turks had done to Lawrence, how they'd broken his spirit. Seeking destruction after he'd escaped with his life—was that the solution to the riddle? Madness? A desire for death? Ali shuddered. Flogged. Was that what Lawrence desired of him? The kiss of the whip. "Do you desire that of me?" he asked, voice infirm.

"Not of you—but I do desire it."

Ali gave a slight nod, accepting what he could not understand, not after he'd wiped the blood away and kept those wounds clean, for fear of fever and death. "What of me do you then desire?"

"I refuse to satisfy you, and yet you persist in asking how you might satisfy me—is it generosity? Pity?" Lawrence shrugged. "If you must please me, then beat

me for how I struck your face. Make me plead for mercy, and deny me that mercy—or do you pity me too much?"

"I love you too much," Ali said, voice disobedient, trembling.

"Then leave me. The man you loved died a long time ago."

Ali raised his hands, as if about to plead, his pride brought low by Lawrence's last words, face animated with pain and passion, torn between two requests he could not honor. Water turned to sand the moment it touched his lips. "And the man you are now, then, and I see before me...desires only destruction?"

Lawrence began walking again, away from the house, his arms crossed before him. He could smell the last of the food still smeared on his back; the mingled aromas and the slight greasy feeling disgusted him, made him want to be naked and clean and ascetic. "Not destruction—but to be made less. I long for diminution; for submission to something inexorable ... but you love me, and so you want to raise me up to some greater existence, just as I long to do the same for you. It can't be reconciled."

"I will never become your tool to destroy or diminish yourself." Ali watched him leave, knowing deep in his heart that this would be the final farewell. It made him feel sick and weak, as bad as crossing the sea to get to this forsaken island that the English called home. "No, even if you claim that is the only way to love you, you will not make me a Turk."

"Don't you see, I *can't* love you purely any longer—the way we were on the clean sand, when loving you was the same as loving the cause, and release was like victory. That was *taken* from me, Ali...it was taken." Lawrence made a choked sound, like a cough caught in his throat. "You can't offer it. You are not a Turk; there is nothing that you can give me that will atone for what they stole."

Ali felt like he was strangled, it was like a blade in his body, and every word twisted the grip. "Inshallah," he said again, and that was a struggle, for he wanted to scream or plead. Placing all this in the hands of God and trusting that it was his will...it was almost more than he could do. In more ways than one, Lawrence had inspired rebellion in him, and that fire could not be doused. "I only wish you would forgive yourself as the world has forgiven you. As God must have forgiven you, Lawrence."

The conversation seemed suddenly absurd—horrifically absurd, this polite repetition of platitudes of devotion and longing; Lawrence had to keep himself



from whirling on Ali and striking him again for his earnest wishes. "I've told you to give me time. Was I not clear? Give me time to find my way back on my own—*damn* it, only give me *time* and space to breathe—"

Ali nodded and pulled back; he had said all he could, not even begging would change anything now. Unless he agreed to destroy the man he loved, there was nothing left he could do. He pulled himself up to his familiar proud posture, face taut with sheer willpower that kept him at the spot. "As you desire," he stated, the irony only emerging after he had said the words.

Lawrence managed a very small smile. "Where might I call a cab, this far from Cambridge?"

"I am convinced our hosts for the evening will gladly aid you. If you do not wish to return to the house, I can oblige you."

Lawrence slipped his hand into Ali's, then, and allowed himself to be led inside. Only a small surrender, but he felt with it an all-pervading sense of loss.

When they were waiting for the cab in the library, Ali did not besiege him further; the Harith remained close, but silent, determined to not try and take up a lost battle yet again, and to honor his own words. When a servant informed Lawrence that the cab was waiting outside, he stepped a little closer for his goodbye. "In winter, I will be in my house in Damascus."

"Don't wait for me there," said Lawrence, although he clasped Ali's hand warmly. "I'll try to repair myself—but don't wait for me."

"No promises, Lawrence," Ali murmured. "No pledges. Nothing is written."

"But I'll write you—in Arabic, unless you've become too much the Englishman here."

"I would like that very much." Ali shook his head, and returned to speaking Arabic. "I am here to learn, not to become. I am what I am. There is no honor in walking among thieves dressed as a thief, as the saying goes, and had I known how much you hate the English yourself..."

"I hadn't known myself how much I despised them, until I saw you as one of them." Lawrence let go of Ali's hand, and drew away to the door. "Remember me," he said, framed in the doorway, something of dignity in his posture despite the stains upon his uniform. "Remember me—and let me go."

Ali's hands were fists, so he crossed them at his back, shoulders back, head held high, his eyes meeting Lawrence's eyes. "Farewell," he said, then gave his salaam, as it was the only way he could really bid farewell.

He would wait, in vain, even if he would learn to not expect the dear visitor, with the passing years. Holding the memory and not waiting was an impossible task, like knowing freedom and not striving for it. That was the irony (and he had learnt more about irony among the English than he would have wanted): Lawrence knew it was impossible, and yet demanded it.

Just like in those old, adventurous times.

\* \* \* \* \*

Their success at blowing the rails has made them giddy, dizzy; everyone has a kiss for Lawrence's cheeks and a verse from the Qu'ran to recite, musical words on God's favor for the bold, the just, the righteous. There are new watches, new boots, and new horses for many—Ali has for himself a gold pocketwatch that he carries in a pouch at his waist, and his eyes flash golden in the evening sunlight.

By the time they have looted the train and made camp for the night, the air has grown cooler and men are making their devotions on prayer mats. "I am immortal!" Lawrence laughs, brushing at the tiny scar on his cheek where shrapnel has cut him. "We are gods ourselves, Ali—mad and wonderful gods—"

Ali holds him by the waist, laughing himself, under the wide desert sky, sand giving beneath their riding boots. "You are..." Bringing him so close, chest to chest, and whoever stumbles first, they topple and roll down the dune, suddenly alone. "...like the moon, Lawrence...and I am the star that pales next to it."

"All stars are suns, Ali; the moons only reflect their light." He is laughing still as he leans in to kiss Ali's lips, sand and dust caught between their skin and roughening the kiss.

Ali hasn't let go, the kiss and the taste of dust mingling, but he does not mind, because the wonder has fully claimed him, this beauty and grace and courage, and he kisses Lawrence back, both of them leaning against the dune's gentle slope. "Yet...the moon is so much greater," he murmurs, trying to return the poetry that Lawrence's words give to Arabic.

The prayers are still spiraling into the air over the rim of the dunes, up to the gathering stars. Lawrence tilts his head to kiss Ali's neck, and there is dust there, too; dust and sweat and the musky scent of his body. "Only nearer—as near to us as I am to you now, compared with the distant stars of Damascus's lights—"

The Harith trembles from those kisses, eyes alight with passion. "And the moon is cool and gentle, while the sun is fierce..." Ali runs his fingers through the golden hair, full of wonder at the exotic stranger who fights so very much as he does, and he presses closer, the length of his body against Lawrence's, his left hand smoothing the cloth covering Lawrence's chest. Nobody will come looking for them; they are far away, yet they still hear the prayer, and camp, and the occasional sound from the camels.

With great affection, Lawrence traces his thumb over Ali's cheek. "Then you are my sun—an Arab Apollo, all fierce brightness and poetry. Kiss me," says Lawrence, and even in their equality, it is an order.

Ali obeys; he might obey no-one else, but he wishes to obey this order. He kisses the other man, fiercely, rolling on top of him to feel the body against his, fingers tightening in the blond hair as the kiss grows deeper, his passion igniting like a fuse, and he feels that he can conquer anything if Lawrence bids him to, if Lawrence is at his side and leads him. His breath becomes more forced; he breaks the kiss, very nearly tears the white robes as his lips and teeth meet the skin of Lawrence's throat.

Lawrence's cry is only quiet, trained low by the proximity of men; his fingers curl tightly in Ali's hair and his knee fits between Ali's knees, all chaste pressure and wicked intent. "Now, quickly," he whispers; "I need you."

Ali meets his eyes, for a moment, then his hands swiftly part the robes, the delicious pressure spurring him on, he is laughing silently, feeling outrageous, this close to camp, this close to the man who is an inspiration to all those men who are just a shout away. He should be praying, too, but in a way, he is. If they both weren't star and moon, it might have been an ignoble thing to do, to claim this man and mount him, but it is not. It is beautiful how Lawrence holds him, and he, him, hands entwined, kisses swallowing the groans.

They move together in a swift synchronicity, sweat-damp skin flush to skin, yielding and yielded to at once. Lawrence guides Ali's hand between them, to grasp him and stroke him as they shudder and press, slide and groan to completion.

Ali's heart is racing when he pulls away, sated, astonished at the depth of tenderness and awe, and he feels life pulse in his throat, and Lawrence's heated body underneath his fingers. Immortal; he knows what Lawrence feels, and kisses him again, grateful, and tender. "You take all my words," he gently accuses him.

"And lock them away in a box, in Aqaba?" Lawrence asks, teasing, laughing even as he tries to wipe himself clean.

"Like the paper money." Ali laughs, falling back into the sand, looking up to the sky. "Auda's face...his curses..."

"Be careful of thinking him foolish—he may one day prove wiser than we are." Lawrence curls at Ali's side, head against his shoulder; he thinks that he has never been so happy, never so alive to the pure and uncomplicated joy of living.

They lie still, then, looking up at the stars with a wonder for the infinite possibility written there.

**~The End~**