

Chapter 19

What happened to them at Kashgar, and how Frank became acquainted with Dr. King

Back in the sunlight at the foot of the Kunlun, Frank and Mahmud dried themselves and took stock, preparing for travel on foot. Moments after they set out along the riverbank, a voice called to them from the brush. "Shave your beards, you mad fools! Don't you know where you are?"

Astonished, Mahmud followed the voice and found a man lying on the ground, sweating. His beard was shaved and his hair cut in the style seen everywhere in Beijing, though even Frank could recognize the proud Turkic lineage in the lines of his face. From neck to toe, he wore a suit of iron weighing two hundred pounds. The sun was shining on this, causing the man to sweat prodigiously.

"My friend," exclaimed Mahmud, "whatever are you doing, lying there dressed like that?"

"I am atoning for my sin, of course. Have you never been made to wear heavy clothes?" At that moment Frank and Mahmud stepped close enough that he could see their faces. The man on the ground flinched at the strong sunlight, squinting and sweating even more. "Ah! I can see that you are NOT from around here," he proclaimed.

"What sin might a man commit that incurs such a burden?" asked Mahmud.

"The sin of my own heritage, for I am a Uyghur person, and this is Xinjiang province, and a man with a haircut just like mine in a big city at the edge of the world has decided that Uyghur people should not live in Xinjiang province. Sadly, this is the only place my people live or have ever lived, going back hundreds of years, and the man with the handsome haircut has offered no suggestions as to where we might go."

"Let us help you out of that contraption," offered Frank.

"Oh, no! Please, let me lie. The sun shines fiercely, but for me this is a pleasant break from my normal routine. Besides, if you are observed freeing me, you will become similarly weighed down."

"I am astonished!" declared Mahmud. "What brings such misery to your normal routine, that your present state feels like an improvement?"

"I live in a prison, and sleep there alone at night away from my family. My children have been locked up in a school where they are taught to forget our language, and beaten if they do not forget quickly enough. My wife disappeared from her own prison with no explanation three months ago, and I fear the worst. I am awakened before dawn and bussed to a factory where I build the most popular and expensive American cells, in shifts that last fourteen hours. I have done this every day for three years, and have not yet received a paycheck. Today, however, is a nice break.

"Take yourselves off, brothers, away from Xinjiang! And shave your beards! Allah will forgive you, but these people will not."

Mahmud's eyes met Frank's with a sentiment that echoed his own. They must do something! Over the Uyghur man's protests, they unbound him and pulled him out of his heavy clothes, insisting that he join them on their journey. Once freed, however, the flaw in their plan became clear. Their new friend had lost his right hand, and the entirety of his left leg.

"Alas, my friend!" declared Mahmud, "We have no car, and no means of conveying you." He shook his head.

"It's alright," explained the Uyghur man, "You've made me quite comfortable. Now, I shall truly enjoy my day off! For your own sakes, however, you should be on your way immediately!"

Mahmud appeared crestfallen. "I refuse to leave!" he shouted. "Not before you tell me how you lost your hand and your leg."

The Uyghur man's face pinched in forbearance, then he replied, "There were cutbacks at the factory, and an accident with a piece of equipment destroyed my hand. Distraught and furious, I sought to cast myself into the machinery of the factory, ending my misery and halting production for a day or so while they broke things open and cleaned my flesh out of the gears. Yet this very pastime has become so popular among my colleagues that a net has been placed over the machinery to prevent this form of protest. My leg became caught in the net when I fell into it, and bound up so tightly that it had to be amputated. Now, run, you fools!"

"Oh, Les!" cried Frank. "This is an abomination you thought scourged from our world, and never dreamed could return! It's too much: I'll have to give up your optimism at last."

"What's optimism?" asked Mahmud.

"Alas," said Frank, "it's a mania for insisting that everything is alright when, in fact, everything is going wrong."

He wept as he beheld the Uyghur man, and tears for his misery persisted throughout the long hike to Kashgar. There, the first question they asked was whether any aircraft might be bound for Iskenderun. They were charged an exorbitant consultant's fee to have a car summoned, then paid over a king's ransom in exchange for a ride to the airport. Mahmud had to re-direct their driver several times. "Why are we headed to the mountain? Surely, the airport was constructed on the plain, yes?" reflected the most gentle of his observations.

At last, they arrived at the airport, and Frank and Mahmud suddenly remembered that their personal documents floated in shreds upon the winds of the Syrian desert. Frank noticed a man in a fine suit atop well-kept shoes, and traded him a sliver of diamond the size of a cat's claw for 3,000 Yuan. This he deposited into a vending machine, and in exchange received a burner cell. He spent an hour activating it, accessing those persons who managed his accumulations of camels and barrels of oil. They were instrumental in directing Frank and Mahmud to folks who could support their travel plans, providing documentation on short notice. At the root of a particular stairwell in a specific parking garage, they rubbed their faces clean and combed their hands through their hair, and Frank and Mahmud had their pictures taken.

Frank forked over a big damn pasture-full of camels to make this happen, but it didn't trouble his heart. Two months in the lamasery had taught him that all the camels in the world meant nothing if he couldn't get out of Xinjiang. His purse also bulged with diamonds, so Frank felt no fear.

Their new documents would bear information that Frank and Mahmud needed to have at the fronts of their minds, though all of it was entirely unfamiliar. A man sat with them and they rehearsed their new identities. Frank, who never concealed what was in his heart, related all his adventures to this man, and admitted that he wanted to rescue Missile-Tits.

"Then I certainly won't help you get to Iskenderun," he said. "I'd be hanged, and so would you! Your 'Missile-Tits' has become the governor's favorite wife!" This was a terrible blow to Frank, and he punched the piss-soaked cinderblocks of the parking garage stairwell until his knuckles bloodied, and screamed "Fuck!" a few times.

Frank caught his breath, and suggested they all go back to the airport and wash their hands. As he dabbed at his knuckles with paper towels, Frank drew Mahmud aside and said to him, "Here's what you must do, my friend. We each have diamonds worth five or six million in our pockets. You're more resourceful than I am, so please go to Iskenderun and get Missile-Tits. If the governor makes any difficulties, give him a million; if he still refuses, give him two million. You've never killed an oil billionaire, so they won't mistrust you. I'll fly to Venice and wait for you. Venice is a free state where there's nothing to fear from vulgars, zealots, oil billionaires, or klansmen."

Mahmud gave Frank a look that suggested he had not kept up with the news. Then he shrugged, embraced his friend and bade him farewell, heading to his gate. Frank's flight to Venice would not depart for several hours, so he passed the time touring the airport. In a forgotten corner, Frank came upon a man shaking in his creaky chair. Before him upon a low table, a steaming bowl of noodles in beef broth lay out unattended. Behind him, a door to the high desert plain stood open. Three uniformed police stood at parade rest against the far wall, observing.

The man's clothes were rumpled and sweat-stained, and his face was gaunt. His hair was greasy and disheveled, and great dark bags hung beneath his eyes. He did not appear to be a native of Kashgar. Frank's curiosity was piqued. "My friend," he began, "what manner of circumstance is this?"

"It is a stalemate," replied the beleaguered individual. "These police would like to arrest me and put me in prison, but they cannot do so unless they observe me breaking the law. Knowing that I am hungry, they have set out this enticing bowl of noodles in the hope that I will steal it. They have also left the door open in order to tempt me to leave the airport, which would also be illegal, as they have revoked my press pass."

"Why have they revoked your press pass?"

"For the same reason any press pass, anywhere, gets revoked. They don't want me to report on what they know I will find."

"But certainly, this is not what they told you," rejoined Frank, happy to have struck up a conversation. "What reason did they give?"

"Who cares?" the rumpled fellow shrugged. "Bullshit smells the same in every language."

"So you are a journalist?"

"I am a shepherd. I have a doctorate in divinity from Oxford, and have earned a master's in journalism through correspondence, as it serves my work. I came to Xinjiang to document the conditions of the Uyghur people, and have found the police desperately eager to aid my work, accompanying me everywhere and helping me select appropriate questions, guiding my narrative in an attempt to assist the construction of the best of all possible news articles."

"They have shown me a great deal, for there is much to see in Xinjiang province. Yet, however politely I ask, I have yet to see a Uyghur family, or household. I have yet to visit a Uyghur mosque, business, or school. Furthermore, I have yet to interview any Uyghur person directly. And still, somehow, I have desperately outstayed my welcome."

Frank looked at the police, then back at the poor shepherd. "Why not simply take flight, and return to Oxford, or whatever place might suit?"

"Alas, the police have confiscated my return ticket, along with everything else, so I have no means of escape!"

This decided Frank. He asked, "Would you like to come with me to Venice? I'd be happy to pay for your ticket in exchange for further conversation."

The bedraggled shepherd smiled patiently. "The police would only find some sticking point, and deny me boarding after collecting the airfare from you."

Frank looked at the police, who paid less attention to him than to the steam of the noodle bowl, or the breeze in the open doorway. Remembering his friend behind the thousand year door atop the mountain, Frank approached the shepherd in the rumpled suit and knelt so that their eyes met on the level. He took both the shepherd's hands in both of his, met the man's eye with a spark of mischief and a tiny smile, and said, "We shall see."

The shepherd's face gained some flush as he stared back at Frank in surprise, his eyebrows slowly rising as his mouth formed an "O" of wonder. He looked down at their hands.

"I am Dr. King."

"Frank."

Then they shook hands like Americans, firmly, to let each other know that their friendship was worth something. Yet neither made to harm the other. Dr. King stood and followed Frank back toward the ticket counter in the main terminal. Remembering his friend from the mountain once more, Frank turned his face to the police with the same expression that the Shangri Lama might adopt when entering a new room. The police held their breath and stared at the floor as Frank and Dr. King walked down the hallway, leaving the steaming bowl of noodles, and the soft desert breeze in the open door, behind them.

All throughout the halls and back corners of the airport, people more unfortunate than Dr. King abounded. Whether beleaguered, or escorted by police, or deeply hungry, they had not even the heart to lift their eyes and plead, lest they invite shame in as company for their misery. Yet Frank had already saved one man, and while his heart told him that was not enough, his reason insisted that any more would be pushing it.

They laid over in Bordeaux, which both men found surprising.