

Chapter 10

Now Frank, Missile-Tits, and the old woman arrived at Corpus Christi in great distress, and how they took flight from there

The little truck did not hold enough gas to make Corpus Christi, and its passengers did not hold enough cash to fill the tank. Missile-Tits managed a generous negotiation wherein she offered a station clerk jewels in trade for gasoline, and he robbed them of everything at gun-point. He filled their tank half-way and bade them never return. They arrived in Corpus Christi penniless. To sell the truck, they would have to pay a tow fee that cast a long shadow on the vehicle's value, or take a ride-share back from the pick-and-pull, the cost of which would exceed their earnings.

In despair, the three made inquiries wherever pick-ups were sold, seeking a more generous offer. In one disreputable lot, they met a mercenary troop outfitting themselves for a great adventure. These proud warriors meant to gear up and make their way to the Eastern Mediterranean, where opportunities for men of their trade abounded. Ukraine, factions in Syria, and all the crazies in the wild sands between Turkey and Iraq were offering competitive salaries. The recent devastation from the massive earthquake that had finally taken Antioch had disrupted the supply of local soldiers, fueling demand. Furthermore, the chaos of decades of war and displacement in the region offered special bonus opportunities for anyone sufficiently heartless and amoral.

The mercenaries had no interest in the old woman's truck. In an effort to illustrate its value, Frank demonstrated his ability to fire an assault rifle from its passenger window as the truck bounced. The mercenaries whooped and cheered, and slapped Frank on the back. They made him a captain, and gave him a salary of a quarter-million, free passage for himself and his companions, and a line of credit at their commissary. One of the guys even had an uncle in San Antonio who needed a truck such as theirs on his ranch, and he paid them six hundred bucks for it.

The airport in Antakya had been rendered useless, so they flew into Iskenderun. Aboard the aircraft, Missile-Tits and the old woman made it clear to Frank that they were glad of the opportunity to stay ahead of any murder charges, and grateful to him as the provider of said opportunity. Their interest in his company, however, died at a hard border six seat-rows in every direction from their tete-a-tete. Utterly isolated, Frank found himself forever peering back over his shoulder at their close-paired crowns, nestled in a wide sea of blue pleather.

For distraction, Frank immersed himself in a study of the current circumstances of the old world, and of the ancient languages and traditional cultures belonging to the people he was on his way to kill. Opening a new search page, he thought, "Perhaps the old world is truly the best of all possible worlds, and in the new world we've simply forgotten its grace." Yet nothing he found in his reading supported this hope.

At length, Missile-Tits tired of the old woman's company, and called him over on the pretext of settling a bet. "The old woman here is dying to know whether the powdered rhinoceros horn has any actual effect. I suggested that we simply ask you, and she insisted that you will lie about it no matter what. I told her how hilarious it is to watch your attempts at mendacity, and she bet me four biscuits and three cokes that your goofy ass won't make her snort.

"So how 'bout it, there, Tiger? Does that shit actually work?"

Frank's mind had frozen through, yet his mouth flowed abundantly. "I have no fucking idea what you're even talking about, but apparently I've been guilty with no means of proving myself innocent in the eyes of the entire goddamned world since the night we parted. I've been robbed, jailed, beaten, shot at, made to ride the bus, rolled in shit, survived a plane crash, then a hurricane, four tornadoes, a blizzard, an Act-of-Faith, and an impassioned dressing-down by my beloved wife. This before unwittingly committing two murders, being robbed again, and fleeing my homeland for one of the most dangerous corners of the globe, and the only thing that's in my head or in my heart is that I'm glad you're here. I love you so much it hurts, largely due to my swollen balls, and I'd never even heard of powdered rhinoceros horn before I went to see Mr. Prisse-Buldge. So fuck off and leave me alone, if you're not going to be a help. I need to study!"

Frank turned and went back to his seat, and Missile-Tits held on to her dignity. Frank scrolled down his research page, and pulled out a book of Turkish and Arabic phrases, holding this open against the tray table with his knee. He let the glow of his laptop bathe his face and didn't absorb a single word, reliving every nuance of the interplay between himself and his wife in his head. Had he been brilliant? Stupid? Would she ever understand? Was he remembering that little grimace she had made because it was so goddamned important, or because it was so goddamned adorable?

Fuck! He wished he was shooting an assault rifle from the passenger window of a bouncing truck right now. Why did these seats have to be so friggin' uncomfortable? How long had they been in the air? It felt like a year. Frank's frustration triggered his adrenals, and he spent his fury tucking jackets and pillows about and beneath himself. No arrangement of these items offered much relief for his bruised backside, so Frank tossed and turned in his little seat, wondering at the amalgam of market forces that could have produced such an unhappy design, which now served him so poorly. Surely, this was far from the best of all possible airplane passenger seats.

Disgusted, Frank stood and made his way to the rear lavatory. He did not need to use it, he just wanted a passing glance at his lovely wife. Pretending not to notice him, she hid herself behind her dark curls as he passed. Yet on his return trip, she called out to his back. "What the fuck is a Prisse-Buldge, anyway?"

Frank turned, glad of an opportunity for conversation. "Huh? Oh. Mr. Prisse-Buldge was Mr. Gladstorm's immediate supervisor, and-"

"WHAT!?" Missile-Tits interjected, rage mixing with disbelief. "You went over your boss's HEAD?"

Frank explained about the missing money, the secret account, and the clandestine vacation. "It was my *duty* to go over Gladstorm's head! The best of all possible corporations surely must want to rid themselves of a bad actor and accurately reconcile their accounts. I-"

"Oh, shit, Frank! I always thought you were a little soft, but I figured it was just your way of keeping your head down and avoiding notice, which is EXACTLY what you were SUPPOSED to DO!"

"Did you really think you were *earning* a half-million a year, poking around in the shallow end of their database and punching out a few power-point slides for meetings here and there? How could you be so dense? Your job, Frank, your REAL job, was to eat Gladstorm's shit. When he gives you a big stinky pile, you make it go away, stench and all. You were a little bead of carbon in the filter, there to soak up the turds that land atop you so the waters below might run clear.

"I knew it, Gladstorm knew it. Shit, Frank! Everybody knew it but *YOU!*"

Frank couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Darling, I-"

"Don't even fuckin' start, Frank. My entire family is dead, largely thanks to your unfathomable stupidity." Missile-Tits sighed in exasperation. "Go sit down, I don't even want to *look* at you right now."

Frank understood this as progress between them, and did as she asked. Finally noticing that he had an entire row to himself, Frank folded up the arm-rests and reclined the seat-backs, stretching out lengthwise and finding rest at last upon the undulating and threadbare seat-bottoms as the whine of the engines rang in his ears and the frigid blast of stratospheric temperatures chilled the plastic curve of the fuselage.

Waking and sensing no change, Frank checked his cell. He had slept forty minutes, but wished for four hundred. He lay still, and found the aircraft silent. Stirring as quietly as possible, Frank peered over the seats and found Missile-Tits and the old woman asleep. Frank had not yet learned the old woman's name. Like so many of the arrangements on this trip, this seemed to suit the ladies' preferences without accounting for his own. He considered exploring her handbag, but thought better of this and snuck to the fore, where he bribed the flight attendant to show him the passenger manifest. Frank thanked the attendant generously and returned his seat to its upright position, letting down his tray table and unfolding his laptop, searching "Eleanor Grace Gomes".