

## Chapter 17

*Now Frank and Mahmud came to the land of Shangri-La*

They must have strayed from the group at some point and missed a turning on the road to Lhasa, as Frank and Mahmud found themselves alone on a steeply descending switchback falling into a narrow mountain valley. At the root, a fisherman's shack stood empty before a dock that jutted into a vigorous streamlet. A canoe lay overturned across the dock, paddles tucked against the gunwhales.

Mahmud appeared uncertain. "Have you piloted such a craft before?"

Frank met his eye confidently. "My friend, you have obviously never been camping in Indiana." They turned the canoe over and set it in the water where the current would hold it against the dock. Frank got in the rear seat and showed Mahmud where to put his hands so he could climb in the front without dunking them both. They cast off and let the current take them.

The brisk water grabbed them immediately, and they picked up speed. Mahmud waved both ends of his paddle at the water to either side of him, doing more harm than good. Frank held his own paddle firmly and performed braking strokes, aiming the prow of the canoe at the surest waters as they shot downstream, the river ever widening and gaining turbulence. When the distant banks became low and hazy through the spume, and the rush of water came loud as thunder, Mahmud turned to address Frank. "Should the river not flow down, and away from the mountains?"

Frank looked up. The peaks of the Kunlun grew closer with every breath, until they filled the sky. How could this be? The thundering sound redoubled. Frank shouted up to Mahmud, "Ship your oar!"

"What?"

"Ship! Your! Oar!"

"What?" Mahmud turned to look at Frank, and the tip of the blade of his paddle broke the surface of the water. It was pulled from his grip by the current, then slapped out of his hands by a roiling eddy churning beyond the hump of a tall rock. The paddle came spinning at Frank, and he had to lift his own to protect himself. With Frank unable to steer, the canoe hit the lip of a mighty waterfall sideways, and the boat folded over on its side just as the river did, dumping Frank and Mahmud into the frigid mountain water far below.

Frank's lungs froze, so cold he could not force himself to draw breath. He had shut his eyes when he hit the water, and now they would not open. He felt himself buoy up to the surface and he spread his arms, letting his feet dangle, angling his mouth and nose above the waterline. At last, his affronted pulmonary system relented, allowing in a thin stream of even thinner air. Far from satisfying, it was enough to get him moving. Mahmud's lungs had frozen up, too, so he was only half-drowned. Frank dragged him to shore, along with the canoe, and brought him around with a series of shouts in the ear and slaps to the face.

The blue lips and sagging cheeks suddenly snapped to life, and Mahmud's eyes opened. Seeing Frank, he asked, "Are we dead? Where are the virgins?" Frank had no answer for his friend, he just pointed to the well-used canoe pulled up on the shale beside them. Mahmud's face fell. He took one big breath, looking around at the magnificent waterfall and the beautiful lake at the bottom of the canyon it had dug. He nodded, stood, and said, "Okay! Let's get back in the boat."

Both paddles were gone, but the rushing stream was the only way out of the canyon and the boat offered more safety than simply swimming. Frank and Mahmud cast off and took their seats, gripping the gunwhales and hoping for the best. The stream took them out of the canyon and down past high meadows strewn with boulders, until at last it vanished into a vault of awe-inspiring rocks that rose up to the sky. The two travelers had the courage to abandon themselves to the stream as it flowed under this vault. The river narrowed and gained speed, the rush of its waters echoing loudly in their cavern.

Frank white-knuckled it, boots down and knees aligned with the keel, willing the boat to stay beneath him as Mahmud flopped unhelpfully in the fore. Both were exhausted when at last the stream shot from beneath the rock into a golden morning upon a high mountain valley. The breeze came softly, and strong sunlight dried their clothes and their beards as the waters calmed and carried them beneath a shining burg. A proud dock jutted suggestively into the water, and Frank palm-paddled the canoe over to it. He held the boat steady while Mahmud climbed out, then did the same and pulled the canoe up out of the water, laying it upside-down across the dock much like they had found it.

In the wide branches of a willow tree near the dock, two five-year-olds sat with their arms around each other's shoulders, smiling and giggling at Frank and Mahmud. It was obvious that they were hopelessly in love, and never wanted to leave the tree or let go of one another. Their eyes shone and their feet kicked as they whispered and pointed at everything. Frank and Mahmud both felt astonished that in all the time they took to dock and store their boat, then make their way up toward the little burg, no adults came to chase the children from the tree, nor demand that they repent of their foolishness, nor even insist they

come home to finish their chores before dinner.

"What lawless hell have we discovered, that even the children have adopted such savagery?" asked Mahmud.

"I don't know, but keep your eyes open" said Frank, who was beginning to think of himself as a Hoosier Caliph. While he was saying this, with all of the bombast due such pronouncements, the welcoming committee got the drop on him. Frank turned and found himself nose-to-chest with a mighty woman in flowing silks, who smiled at them with the same delight Frank had seen in the eyes of the children in the willow tree. He couldn't help but smile back.

The woman met his eyes with a gaze fierce and friendly in equal measure. Behind her lips, bright and even teeth bade him, "Welcome to Shangri-La!"

Frank gaped helplessly as Mahmud prostrated himself; the balls of his feet, knees, elbows, palms, and forehead gracing the earth at her feet. Each persisted in their adorations until everyone became uncomfortable, even the children in the willow tree. They noticed it would be more fun to feel in love somewhere else, and absconded in search thereof. Ultimately, Frank came to realize that he should say something in reply.

Learning that they were visited by "Frank the Hoosier Caliph" and "Mahmud the Astonished, born fresh into the world with a full beard, beneath a waterfall", the timid host of Shangri-La came forth from the skirts of their matron, and beheld their new friends with joy and welcome. Each moved with a grace befitting their passions. Their faces were so lovely, they brought ache to Frank's heart, and their expressions all incorporated the fierce joy and glad friendliness that sang so abundantly in this place.

As it had with Missile-Tits on the plane to Iskenderun, Frank's mind froze over while his mouth ran abundantly. "I tremble to learn your name, great lady, matron of this fearsome host!"

Then her eyes came to truly focus on Frank, and he saw the rings in her nose and ears, and the chains between, all of gold. He saw the warpaint and its masterful artistry, and the healthy glow of her skin. He saw her eyes like stars, close enough to burn. "I am Abaf-Ya." As she said this, she folded her hands together before her breasts, and lowered her eyes with a smile that made Frank pee a little. She bowed slightly, and he had to exert his will upon his autonomic nervous system altogether. "You must be hungry," observed Abaf-Ya. "Please come with us to our village, and we shall dine."

Frank and Mahmud acquiesced with stammers and genuflections, and followed Abaf-Ya and her host up a smooth green roadway. Sensing dinner, the children followed well behind them, holding each other as they walked and smiling and laughing at everything. Mahmud's shoes had fallen into desperate condition. When he noticed that the people of Shangri-La all went barefoot, Mahmud divested himself of his clumsy footwear and suddenly wore an expression of rapture, squishing his toes through the short green grass comprising the roadway.

Seeing this, the host of Shangri-La giggled with shared pleasure. Frank hastily removed his combat boots and the frightful socks beneath, and immediately noticed that the grass was petting him. Or perhaps it vibrated like a massage chair. The sensation spread calm and order through his nerve-racked system, loosening his muscles. Frank stretched and felt vertebrae crack, and breathed deeper than he had since the road to Lhasa. He found himself smiling broadly with Mahmud as they continued upward toward the village. The two children found them utterly hilarious, and squeaked and screeched about it and tickled each other and wrestled themselves halfway back down the hill.

To Frank's utter astonishment, Abaf-Ya and the other Shangri-Lites regarded this behavior with approval, if they noticed it at all. He shrugged, and turned his attention to the remarkable roadway. It was comprised of densely packed blades of grass, one-eighth-inch tall, and it felt wondrous on the soles of his feet. He assumed it must be a pedestrian path, but suddenly a heavy freight conveyance floated past them, easily sensing their presence and moving around the host, zipping above the road with a gentle sound like a songbird yawning.

Frank remarked, "In all the rest of the world, trains rattle and chug like little earthquakes, blocking traffic for miles while they screech, iron upon iron. Yet here they simply move around us with a friendly sigh. And asphalt roadways scorch in the heat and crack in the cold, collecting filth and breaking bones. Yet here the soft grass massages one's feet! It seems that everywhere in Shangri-La, the useful has been made pleasant."

Abaf-Ya honored Frank with an expression of deep confusion and asked, "Why ever would that not be so?" Frank smiled, and admitted that Abaf-Ya had reasoned wisely. He thought about her question as they walked, and realized that something very serious, indeed, stood between the best of all possible worlds and the good people of Indiana.

Their road brought them at last to the village, where unfenced yards boasted blooming trellises opening upon herb gardens and flower beds. Proud, ample homes stood a respectful distance apart, and the peaks of greenhouses shone from behind one shoulder or another, large enough to host a cherry tree, or apricot. Mahmud became very excited when he spotted mango leaves beneath the glass peeking from behind a big grey-pink mushroom-shaped dwelling.

The sun was out, high above and blinding. Frank inquired of Abaf-Ya, "Do your people need much sunscreen, on days such as this? Being so high in the mountains, I imagine that ultra-violet radiation poses a threat to your health."

Abaf-Ya replied, "Here in Shangri-La we are fortunate, indeed. We have several unique native plants which we cultivate in abundance, that pump out molecular oxygen much faster than all the animals can breath it up. It rises to the stratosphere above us and forms a localized ozone super-layer, absorbing or reflecting the sun's more harmful rays."

Frank noticed that dogs and cats graced the wide lawns in a multitude, chasing small arboreal rodents with rich dark fur, rapid heart-rates, and mesmerizing golden eyes. They were met in the roadway by a flock of sheep driven by a grinning, bright-eyed child much like the two from the willow tree. The sheep had thick, red wool, and one of them happened to rub against Frank's hand as they passed one another. The creature's wool felt so fine and supple as to surpass silk, compelling Frank to pet the sheep. His petting made him several new friends very quickly, and the Shangri-Lites laughed. Frank noticed that many of their garments were made from this material.

Everyone began petting sheep, digging fingers deep into the red wool atop their heads and between their shoulders and above their tails. Laughing and braying became accompanied by the skittering of happy hooves, and each group left the other merrier for having met.

Beyond the flock of sheep, Abaf-Ya took a turning into a deep lawn sculpted everywhere with vegetable gardens, herb patches, and flower beds. The path led down to a low, dark maison sheltered by walnut trees and covered in ivy. Whether a lemon-yellow butterfly as large as Frank's hand, or a jade statue of a young girl at play, or a fountain splashing into a pond of young koi, every step and turning brought a new wonder to Frank's senses. Abaf-Ya and her host delighted in Frank's pleasure, sharing his happiness and experiencing their own world anew through his eyes.

Frank said, "It is wonderful that you are so kind. Back home, when someone new becomes surprised, everyone mocks them for their ignorance, causing them to feel ashamed and foolish."

Abaf-Ya frowned and asked, "What purpose does such wretched behavior serve?" Frank had no answer. They came to the proud door of the maison, which operated as an inn, and received a graceful welcome, in keeping with what Frank had experienced of Shangri-La.

They were seated on thick-piled cushions around a low table, and served hot tea and seasoned lentil cakes with fruit- and herb-chutneys. The rice arrived, nine different grains boiled separately and stirred together, tempered with roasted nuts, seeds, and herbs. Tamarind-carrot soup rich as gravy came beside a broth of red pepper and onion, redolent of garlic. Breads made with yogurt pulled grudgingly away from their teeth, blessed with ghee and roasted garlic and coriander chutney. Tender-braised and thin-sliced lamb arrived ladled-over with yogurt-cucumber sauce, and Mahmud declared that this was even better than the feast they had shared in Dick's arbor.

Frank felt tempted to keep on, but after thirty minutes of feasting the table was cleared and reset with salads and yogurt lassis. These dishes did not appear tempting, so he demurred. Abaf-Ya reproached him, "It will aid your digestion. You will need it in the hours to come. You will see!" Frank shrugged, and tucked in, and found everything wonderful. Another round of tea arrived as a deep drum struck up a head-bobbing rhythm.

One by one, the Shangri-Lites recovered from their meal and gained their feet, dancing to the drums. Many took up instruments; cymbals and lutes, trumpets and flutes. Their virtuosity in music and dance rivaled the storied orchestras and ballets of Vienna and New York. As each left the table and joined the revelry, things grew more rambunctious.

A pretty young woman with very bright eyes and a heartbreaking smile danced up to Mahmud and held out her hands to him, hips swaying. He rose from the table and joined her, following eagerly with an empty grin. Frank felt tempted to laugh until just such a woman came unto him, and he knew for certain that he wore the same idiotic expression as he stood to follow her. They danced for several hours before the ladies decided it was time to go down to the dark and silent hallways below, where Frank received a broad and highly educational tour of Shangri-La's culture and history. His partner invited him to explore the riches of her mountain valley, Frank rejoined with his sufficient reason, and they enjoyed themselves immeasurably during the ensuing back-and-forth.

Wrapped in his new lover's arms, Frank stirred and began to fuss. She woke and asked, "What is it?"

"We have not paid our bill. Surely, the staff will want to close their books and go home."

"This is their home" she replied, "and we have no bill. This inn is run for the convenience of travelers engaged in commerce or research, and is paid for by the government. It's a rather paltry place, really. You must go to the cities, and see Shangri-La in its full glory!"

In the morning, Frank and Mahmud found themselves alone together once more. Frank babbled, "What country can this be? Unknown to the rest of the world and so different in every way than anything we've seen before? It's probably the country where everything goes well, because there must be one like that somewhere. And, despite what Les used to say, I often noticed that everything went rather badly in Indiana."

