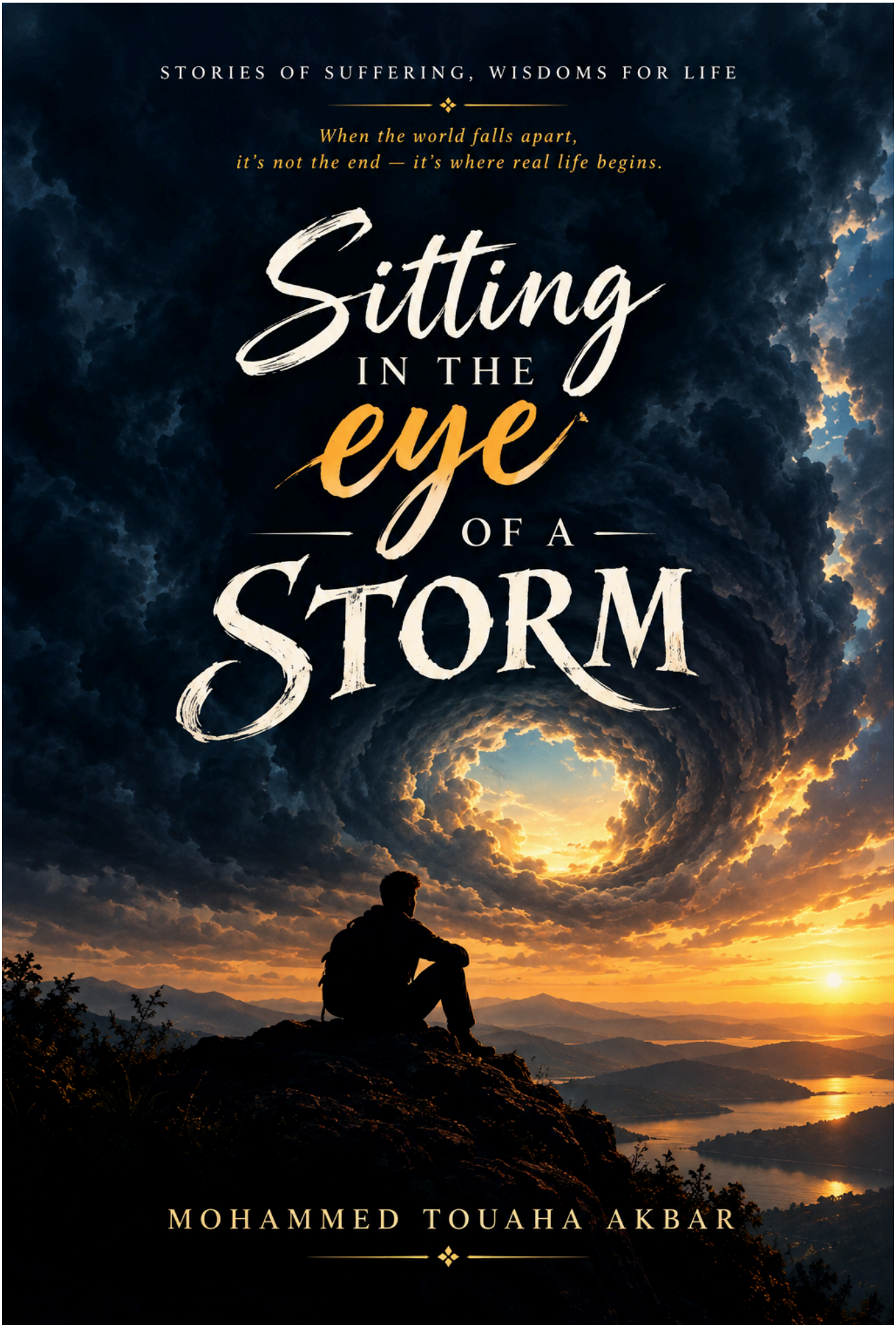

STORIES OF SUFFERING, WISDOMS FOR LIFE
When the world falls apart,
it's not the end — it's where real life begins.
Sitting
IN THE
eye
OF A
STORM
MOHAMMED TOUAHA AKBAR

Bismillahir Rahmanir Raheem

Sitting In The Eye of a Storm

Mohammed Touaha Akbar

A Letter To You

Dear Beloved Reader,

Before you turn to the first page, I want to sit with you here for a moment, the way you might sit with someone before a long journey, when there is still time to say the things that matter most before the road takes over.

What you are about to read is a work of fiction. I want to say that clearly, at the very start, so that nothing about it is ever misunderstood.

The events these stories orbit are true. They are the true stories of the Qur'an, the trials of the Prophets and the tried, exactly as Allah has told them to us, and not one letter of what He has told us have I changed or reshaped or added to.

But the people you will meet inside these pages, the mother, the boy's playmate, the neighbour, the servant, the shipmate, the stranger at the edge of the story, these are mine. I imagined them. They did not leave a name behind in the Book, and so I have borrowed the space beside the truth, not the truth itself, to stand a human being there and ask what it might have felt like to be so close to something so enormous and not yet know what it meant.

This is what I have been doing, quietly, for a long while now. I have been thinking about the true stories from the Qur'an, letting them sit inside me, pondering them from every angle I can find, the way you turn a stone over in your palm looking for a face in it you hadn't noticed before.

And here, in this book, I am trying something specific with that pondering. I am trying to see those stories through different eyes, invented eyes, ordinary eyes, so

that I might feel them more deeply than I have ever managed to feel them from the outside alone.

Everything in these pages is built from my own imagination reaching toward that feeling. None of it is history. All of it, I hope, is true in the only way fiction is ever allowed to be true, true to the ache of being human in front of something you cannot yet understand.

I have written it this way for a reason, and the reason is you.

I want you to think more. I want you to feel more. And more than either of those, I want you to find, somewhere inside these invented griefs and invented waitings and invented mornings that fall apart without warning, a small measure of courage for whatever it is you are carrying right now in your own life, in your own unbearable hour, in the particular tornado only you are standing inside.

I cannot reach you directly. I do not know your name, your face, the shape of the thing that is breaking you tonight, and there is a real limit to what a stranger's words on a page can do for a heart in pain.

But if I could sit beside you in your hardest moment, if I could take your hand the way a mother takes her son's hand, and simply stay, I would count it one of the honors of my life. Since I cannot, I have tried to leave something of that sitting-beside-you inside these words instead, in the hope that it reaches you anyway.

Life is difficult. I do not say that lightly, and I do not say it from a distance. I know it from my own life, from nights I would not wish on anyone, and I know it from watching the people I love carry weights that never seem to set them down.

The world is, so often, exactly what it can feel like on the worst days, a limitless ocean with no shore in sight and a storm that will not pass. I am not writing to pretend otherwise.

I am writing because I believe the aim of my own life, the whole reason I want to spend whatever days I am given, is to serve my Lord by making the lives of others a little easier to carry through that ocean. This book is my attempt at that.

It is small. It is only a book, only some invented witnesses standing at the edges of stories greater than any of us. But it is offered to you as an act of service, however tiny, because you, whoever you are, wherever you are reading this, are the reason I am doing it at all.

I believe you will love it. I say that not out of pride in what I have written, but out of hope for what these stories, older and larger than either of us, might do once they reach you.

And when you have finished, whenever that is, I would love nothing more than to hear from you. Write to me.

Tell me what stirred, what ached, what you carried with you afterward, or simply that you are still here, still walking, still holding on. I would count that, too, among the honors of my life.

Your brother,
Mohammed Touaha Akbar
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The Boy Who Was Killed



I. The Mother

She had risen before him, as she always did, to blow the coals back to life and set the flatbread on the stone. The house was small enough that she could hear him turn over in his sleep before he was fully awake, the particular sigh he made, still a child's sigh though his voice had begun cracking that year.

When he came out rubbing his eyes she set the bread in front of him still too hot to hold, the way he liked it. He yelped and juggled it hand to hand, and she laughed at him, the real kind of laugh, not the tired kind. Outside, the light was doing the pale gold thing it did in that hour. The goats were already complaining about being let out, and for a moment, just that moment, everything in her small world was exactly where it belonged.

She had asked him, gently enough, to take the goats out to the far pasture before he went to find his friends, since his father would be gone until evening and someone had to. He had groaned. Not viciously. Just a boy's groan, the sound of a morning he'd already planned differently in his head being taken from him.

She should have let it go there. She knew that now, turning it over and over the way you turn over a stone looking for the mark that should have warned you. But something in her, tired from the night, from the bread, from all the small invisible weights a mother carries and never names, had pushed further than it needed to.

"You groan like I've asked you to carry the mountain," she'd said, sharper than she meant, "when all I've asked is that you be useful for one hour of your life."

It was not a cruel thing to say. She would tell herself that later, over and over, in the years the saying of it would live in her chest like a splinter that never worked its way out. It was not cruel. It was only true, the way a mother speaks truth to a son too young to hear it gently, the ordinary friction of every house with a boy in it. But he had looked at her, and something in his face had closed, just slightly, the way a door

closes when someone has decided not to slam it only because slamming it would cost more than staying quiet.

"Fine," he'd said. Just that. He had not looked at her again as he pulled his sandals on. He had not looked at her as he whistled for the goats, and he had not looked back at the house at all as he went, the small stubborn set of his shoulders the last whole thing she would ever see of him walking under his own will. Alive, into a morning he still believed was only going to be long and boring and his mother's fault.

She had almost called after him. She remembered that too, later, endlessly. Her mouth had almost made his name, some soft thing to smooth the edge of it, some *go on then, and mind the goats near the water*, anything. But there was dough on her hands, and the coals needed tending, and the moment passed the way ten thousand ordinary moments pass in a house, unmarked, uncounted, indistinguishable from all the others until the day one of them turns out to have been the last.

She did not know, kneading that morning's second batch, that she was kneading it in a world that already, unknown to her, no longer had her son breathing in it. She did not know as she wiped the flour from the table. She did not know as she called out twice for him to come back for his midday bread and heard nothing, as the light moved from gold to white to the flat hard color of full noon. The sun she was watching was moving over a field where men had already come and gone, and left something behind that was no longer a boy playing with goats.

Her hands were still in the dough, folding, pressing, turning, when she heard the running feet outside. More than one pair, too fast for good news, and a voice already breaking before it reached the door.

II. The Boy

He was still faintly cross when he reached the goats, the way you can be crossed with someone you love without it touching the love at all, a small cloud passing low over otherwise clear ground. *Useful for one hour of your life.* He kicked at a stone and told himself he would take his time about it, since she'd made him miss the others. There was some comfort in that small, useless rebellion, the only kind a boy his age had.

The pasture beyond the village ran down toward the river, green going gold at the edges where the sun had been at it since morning. The goats knew the way better than he did and mostly saw to themselves. He found the others there before long, the boys he ran with most days, already down near the water skipping stones and arguing over whose throw had gone furthest. The small cloud of crossness in him thinned and then vanished almost entirely at the sight of them, the way a child's grievances tend to when there is suddenly something better to do with the day.

They played the way boys play when no one is watching and there is nowhere else to be, chasing, wrestling, inventing rules to games that had none. For a long while there was nothing in the world but that, the ordinary golden nothing of an afternoon with friends, which is its own kind of mercy, though no one thinks to call it that while they still have it. At some point he broke off from the others to sit on a flat rock and watch a beetle work its slow, serious way across a leaf. Close enough to hear his friends' shouting behind him, far enough to feel, for a moment, pleasantly alone.

He saw the two men before he understood he was seeing anything that mattered. One was older, humbly dressed, walking with the unhurried certainty of someone who had somewhere to be and knew exactly how to get there. The younger man beside him walked differently, watchful, the way a student walks beside a teacher he hasn't fully learned to trust yet. They were talking, low, urgent, though the boy

caught none of the words. Only the shape of a conversation that did not include him and was not meant to.

He should have kept to his rock. Some instinct, faint and easily ignored the way a child's instincts always are against the pull of curiosity, told him so. But the beetle had reached the end of its leaf, there was nothing else to watch, and the men were coming near enough now that not watching them took more effort than watching.

The older man's eyes found him.

There was nothing in that first look that a boy could have read as anything but a stranger's ordinary glance, passing over him the way eyes pass over a goat, a stone, a bird in a tree. But the man did not look away again. Something in the boy's chest tightened without his permission, the way it did sometimes in the dark of the house when he woke from a dream he couldn't remember and lay still, listening for a sound that wasn't there. He glanced back once toward the water, toward his friends, small and far and laughing at something he couldn't hear, and thought of calling out to them. He didn't, because there was nothing yet to call out about, only a feeling, only a stranger walking, and a boy does not want to be the one who made a fuss over nothing.

The men were closer now than strangers passing through a pasture had any reason to be. The younger one hung back a little, his face doing something complicated that the boy didn't have the years to read, something between obedience and distress, as if he too were waiting to find out what was about to happen. The boy's legs tensed under him, ready before his mind had agreed to be ready, the old animal readiness that needs no permission. He told himself it was nothing. He told himself the beetle was more interesting. He did not run, because running from nothing would have been foolish, and some small stubborn part of him did not want to prove his mother right about anything.

And then the man was closer still, and closer, and the boy's body understood something his mind had not caught up to yet. Some old animal knowledge in the legs and the spine that says *this is wrong* before a person has words for wrong. He opened his mouth to call out, to his goats, to the village, to nobody, and there was a hand.

He fought. It should be said plainly, because it is true and because it matters: he was not still, he was not calm, he did not go gently into what was being done to him. He was a boy with a boy's whole strength, and he used every part of it. His hands finding the man's arm, his heels finding the ground, his whole small body twisting against a grip that did not loosen. Some part of him was still certain, even then, that this was a mistake that could be corrected if only he fought hard enough, shouted loud enough, made himself heard by someone, anyone, before whatever was happening finished happening. His voice found, for one raw instant, enough air to make a sound that was almost a name, almost his mother's name, before it wasn't anything at all.

And then, beneath the fighting, beneath the animal terror that any creature feels when its one life is being taken from it by force, something else begins to open in him. Quiet and enormous, the way a room can be enormous even when you are dying in the corner of it.

He thought of his mother's hands in the dough that morning, the particular motion of them, folding and pressing and turning. A motion he had watched ten thousand times without once thinking to call it beautiful, and understood now, too late for it to matter to anyone but himself, that it had been. He thought, with a clarity that had no business belonging to a boy his age, of every small unkindness he had ever handed her without meaning to. Every slammed door, every sulk, every *fine* said like a stone dropped between them instead of a word, every time she had called his name across the house and he had let a full breath pass before answering, just to prove he could. He saw her face that morning, the particular tiredness in it

that he had not noticed at the time, and noticed now with a grief so sudden and total it nearly displaced the fear.

He thought of his father, who was hard to make laugh and worth every bit of the effort when you managed it. Whose hand on the back of his neck after a long day meant more than words the man rarely used. He thought of the two of them together, his mother and his father, in the small unremarkable evenings he had never once thought to be grateful for. The three of them simply existed in the same house, which he now understood, with the terrible clear-sightedness of his last minutes, to have been the whole of his happiness, entire and complete. He had spent so little of it in gratitude and so much of it in the small ordinary ingratitudes of being young.

He thought, absurdly, mercifully, of the bread, still too hot to hold, and how he had never once told her it was his favorite thing she made. He thought that he would give anything, everything, every year he had been promised and every year he had not, to walk back through that door one more time and say it. Just that. Nothing grand. Only *thank you*, and *I'm sorry*, and *I didn't mean fine the way it sounded.*

He was sorry. Not afraid anymore, though the fear was still there, underneath, the way the ground is still there underneath deep water. Sorry, mostly. Sorry for the morning. Sorry for every morning like it. Sorry that the last whole thing his mother would ever have of him was his back turned, walking away. Sorry that the last thing his father would ever have of him was a boy he had left with the ordinary instruction to mind the goats, never knowing it was the only instruction he would ever give him again.

If he could have used his last breath for one thing, it would not have been to save himself.

It would have been to go home, just once more, and put his face against her shoulder, and say nothing cross at all.

The beetle, still on its leaf, kept moving toward wherever it was going, unaware that anything in the world had ended.

Down by the water, his friends had scattered at the first strange shout, the way children scatter from anything they don't have words for, running for the village without once looking back. But one of them had frozen instead, dropped low into the tall grass at the pasture's edge, too frightened to run and too frightened to look away. He had seen all of it, every part of it, and would spend the rest of his life trying to explain, to anyone who would listen, what it looks like when the world simply stops making sense.

III. The Playmate

He did not run, not at first. That is the thing he will never manage to explain to anyone later, not fully, not in a way that stops sounding like a confession. He was nine years old, crouched low in the tall grass at the pasture's edge, and his legs simply would not obey him. He watched all of it. Every part of it. His body had become nothing but two wide eyes and a heart slamming itself uselessly against his ribs, and it would be years before he understood that a child frozen by terror is not a child who failed to act. In that moment he knew only that he could not move, and that not moving felt like its own kind of crime.

When the men were gone, he ran. Not toward the village first, though the village was closer, but toward the sound of his own name, because someone was already calling it, already coming down through the pasture at a pace no grown man should be able to keep up for long. It was the boy's father. Someone in the village had seen the strangers, had felt the wrongness of it the way a whole street can feel a

wrongness before anyone names it, and word had reached him before he'd even finished tying his sandals.

"Where," the father said, not a question so much as a demand torn out of him, his hands already on the boy's shoulders. "Where is he?"

The playmate could not speak. His mouth opened and nothing came, only a thin, broken sound, and the father's grip tightened, not from anger but from a fear too large for gentleness.

"Where?" the father said again, softer this time, and something in the softness broke the boy open more than the shouting could have.

He pointed. That was all he could do at first, one shaking arm toward the flat rock and the trampled grass beyond it. The father was already moving before the arm had finished rising, and the boy stumbled after him because there was nowhere else in the world his legs knew how to go.

What the father found there does not need to be told again. It has already been told, in full, in the telling that came before this one. What matters here is what came after, when the father turned from what he had found and looked instead at the only living witness left in that field, a boy of nine with grass stains on his knees and a face gone the color of old ash.

"Tell me," the father said. "Everything you saw. All of it."

And so, standing in that pasture with the sun still high and ordinary overhead, the playmate told him. He told it badly, in pieces, out of order, his voice cracking on words too big for a boy his age to be saying at all. He told him about the two strangers, the older one and the younger one, the low urgent talk between them that hadn't included anyone else. He told him about the hand. He told him, because the father asked and would not let the question go unanswered, exactly how his friend had fought, how hard, how long, how his voice had almost made it

to a name before it didn't. He did not spare the father anything, because the father would not let anything be spared, gripping the boy's shoulders the whole time as if letting go might mean losing this last thread to his son as well.

When it was finished, the playmate stood shaking in the grass, and the father did not move for a long moment, and neither did he.

In the years that followed, this field would come back to the playmate more nights than not. Sleep would become a country he visited and was expelled from, again and again, for decades, until he was an old man who still sometimes woke in the dark unable to say what year he was in. But that grief belonged to the version of him still to come. In this moment, the only grief that mattered was the one standing in front of him, a father with empty hands, asking a child to be the last living voice that had seen his son alive.

IV. The Father

He stood in the field long after the boy had stopped speaking, long after the boy himself had been led away by someone kinder than grief allowed him to be in that moment. The sun had not moved as much as it should have, he thought distantly. It seemed wrong that the sky could still hold its ordinary blue while the ground beneath it had swallowed something so entire.

He had seen him. That was the thing his mind kept trying and failing to set down, the way a hand keeps closing on a burn long after the fire is gone. He had seen his son lying in that grass, and no father should ever have to carry an image like that inside him for the rest of his life, and now he would, every day, without appeal, without the smallest mercy of forgetting. His legs had nearly failed him on the walk to where the boy lay. When he reached him, some sound had come out of his own

chest that he did not recognize as his own voice, low and tearing, the sound of something in a man giving way all at once.

He had gathered him up anyway, though he was already gone, because his arms did not know yet what his mind already understood, and for a long moment he had simply held him, rocking slightly, the way he used to rock him as an infant on nights he could not sleep. His hands were shaking now, and had not stopped shaking since. His chest felt as though something inside it had been physically removed, leaving a cavity the rest of his body did not know how to close around.

Why? The word came up in him again and again, not as a question aimed at anyone in particular, simply a sound his soul kept making the way a wound keeps bleeding whether or not you press a cloth to it. Why this? Why him? Why in a field on an ordinary morning that had begun like every other morning of the boy's short life? He thought of the boy as an infant, the particular weight of him asleep on his chest. He thought of him learning to walk, falling, laughing at his own fall before he'd even learned to cry at it. He thought of the morning just past, a scolding over goats that would now sit inside his wife forever, and something in him wanted to be angry at the unfairness of that too, that the last ordinary friction of an ordinary house should now have to carry the weight of a final memory.

He did not weep only once. He wept standing there, more than once, in ragged uneven waves that came and went without warning, and each time he thought he had steadied himself another one came up through him and took his legs out from under his composure again. He was not an old man, but standing in that field he felt something in his age all at once, the particular tiredness that has nothing to do with sleep.

Ar-Rabb, he made himself think, even as the grief kept breaking over him, even as the thought had to be built and rebuilt each time a fresh wave knocked it down. *Al-Malik.* The Sovereign. The Owner. He had said these names his whole life, in

prayer, in the ordinary rhythm of a believer's day, and had never once stood inside what they meant the way he stood inside them now, his son's blood still on his hands, his throat raw from a grief he had not been able to keep silent.

He made himself think it through anyway, slowly, piece by piece, because the alternative was to let the pain alone decide what was true, and he did not trust pain to reason well. Allah was not merely the owner of his son the way a man owns a field or a flock, something acquired and therefore his to keep. Allah was the Creator of him first, entirely, the One who had knit him together in his mother's womb from a thing no eye had seen, who had lent him breath and hearing and sight and the particular tilt of his laugh, none of which the father had ever manufactured out of his own power. A man who borrows a thing does not own the terms of its return. And Allah was not only Creator but Sustainer, the One who had kept that small heart beating every single night of the boy's life without the father's leave or effort, ten years of breaths the father himself had never once had to purchase or maintain.

Even as he thought it, grief rose up again and swallowed the thought whole, because knowing a thing and being able to bear it are not the same mercy, and for a long moment he simply crouched there in the grass with his hands over his face, saying nothing, thinking nothing, only enduring.

When he could think again, he made himself continue. If all of it was true, and he believed with his whole broken heart that it was true, then the return of what had only ever been lent was not a theft. It only felt like one, because a father's love does not measure in ownership, it measures in the ache of the empty space where a small body used to stand. But feeling and fact were not always the same land, and he made himself walk, however unsteadily, however many times his legs gave out beneath him, from one toward the other.

Justice, he thought next, testing the word the way you test a plank before trusting your weight to it, his voice cracking even in his own mind. Whatever this was, it could not be injustice, because the One who had allowed it was the same One who had defined what justice even meant, before there was a father, before there was a field, before there was a world to hold either. A creature does not stand above his Creator to judge the Creator's decree by a measure the Creator did not first give him. And more than justice, more than mere fairness cold and exact, there was *rahmah*, mercy, wrapped somehow inside a wound so deep he could not yet see its shape, and might never see it, not in this life, not with these eyes still stinging with tears he could not stop.

He thought, too, of authority, the plain fact that the One who owns and creates and sustains a thing entirely has the full right to do with it as He wills, a right no father, however loving, could claim over his own son to begin with. *We belong to Allah, and to Him we return.* He had recited that verse at other men's graves his whole life, easily, the way you recite a thing you have not yet been asked to carry. He understood now, kneeling in this field with his son's weight still a phantom ache in his arms, that he had never once carried it before today.

His task, he told himself, was not to understand. It had never been his task to understand, only to submit, to serve, to trust the One whose mercy and wisdom reached further than a father's grief could see from the small, bounded place where he knelt. He was a servant. Not a servant only, a mere slave. Nothing more, and nothing less either, because a servant of a King like this one was no small thing to be. The submission did not empty him of pain. It simply gave the pain somewhere to stand.

He rose at last, unsteady, his knees stiff from kneeling too long in the grass, his face still wet, his hands still shaking faintly at his sides. Whatever he had made peace with in this field, alone, was only half the burden. The other half was walking

through his own door and finding the words, if there were words, to carry his wife through the same fire he had only just begun to walk through himself.

V. The Mother and the Father

She was still at the table when he came through the door. Her hands were still moving in the dough, folding, pressing, turning, though the second batch had long since been kneaded past any use, and she did not look up at him, because some part of her already knew that looking up would make it real in a way that was still, for one last moment, avoidable.

He crossed the room and took her hands out of the dough himself, gently, the way you take something from a child who does not yet know it is time to let go. Her hands, once free, did not know what to do with themselves, and hung there between them, and he took them into his own instead, and held them, and that was how he told her, without a single word yet spoken, that the thing she had feared since the running feet outside was true.

She did not scream. She would tell him later that she had wanted to, that some enormous sound had risen in her and found nowhere to go, and instead what came out of her was small and broken, a single syllable that might have been his name or might have been nothing at all. Her knees went, and he caught her, and they sank to the floor together, the flour still on her hands now on his shirt, on his arms, a small ordinary detail neither of them would ever be able to explain why they remembered so clearly afterward.

"Tell me," she said, when she could speak again, her voice was raw. "Tell me all of it."

He told her. Not everything the playmate had told him, not the parts a mother's heart could not be asked to carry whole, but enough, gently, his own voice breaking more than once against words he had to force himself to finish. She wept as he spoke, silently at first and then not silently at all, and he held her through it, saying nothing, because there was nothing yet to say that speech would not have cheapened.

It was a long while before either of them tried to speak of anything beyond the raw fact of it. When she did speak again, it was not grief alone in her voice but something sharper, something closer to anger, and it came out of her in a rush she seemed unable to stop.

"Why like this," she said. "Why in a field, why with a stranger's hand, why with fear in his last hour instead of peace. He could have gone to sleep. He could have gone as an infant, before either of us had learned to love him this much. He could have never been born at all, and then there would be no wound, no field, no hands I will never stop seeing in this dough. Why did Allah not make it easier? Why did He not make any of it easier, for anyone, ever?"

He did not flinch from the questions, though each one landed in him like a blow he had already half received in the field. He took her hands again, both of them, and held them the way he had held them a hundred times over the years, and did not let go even when her voice rose, even when the anger in it frightened him a little, because he understood it was not truly anger at him, and not even truly anger at Allah, but grief wearing the only face large enough to hold it.

"I don't know why it was this way," he said, when she had gone quiet enough to hear him. "I asked the same question, standing in that field, more than once. I don't have an answer that will make the pain smaller. I don't think there is one, not in this life, not for us."

"Then what," she said, "what is left, if there is no answer."

"What is left," he said, "is that he was never ours to begin with." He said it slowly, carefully, watching her face for the moment it would need him to stop, but she only looked at him, waiting, and so he continued. "He was Allah's before he was ours. Allah made him in your womb from nothing either of us gave him. Allah kept his heart beating every night of his life without either of us standing guard over it. We only ever held what was lent to us, and lent to us with more love than we ever earned, and the Lender has not wronged us by asking back what was always His."

"That is a hard thing to hear," she said, and her voice cracked on it.

"I know," he said. "It was hard to think, standing over him. It is hard now, saying it to you. I am not saying it because it takes the pain away. I am saying it because it is true, and because I think, in time, it may be the only thing steady enough for us to stand on."

She wept again, and asked again, in different words, across a long while that neither of them tried to hurry, why an easier road had not been chosen for their son, for themselves, for anyone who had ever loved and lost this way. And each time he answered her, not with the same words worn thin by repetition but with the same steady love underneath them, holding her hands, sometimes her face, once simply holding her while she shook and said nothing at all for a long while.

"He is not unjust," he told her, more than once, in more than one way. "He owns every single thing in existence, entirely, down to the breath in our own chests at this moment, and He has full right to do with what is His as He wills. If we cannot see the justice in it, that is the smallness of our sight, not a flaw in His decree. And underneath the justice, love, His love for our son greater than ours could ever be, greater than the love that made us weep over him tonight."

"I don't feel loved by this," she said, quietly, ashamed of the words even as she said them.

"I know," he said. "I don't ask you to feel it tonight. I only ask you not to let the not-feeling become the last word. Let it be a question you carry to Him, again and again, instead of a door you close on Him forever."

Near the end of that long night, something in her seemed to loosen, not because the pain had lessened, it had not, it would not, not for years, perhaps not ever fully, but because she had said everything the pain had needed her to say, and he had held every word of it without flinching, and somewhere in the exhausting labor of that they had arrived, together, at the same small, hard, steady ground.

"We belong to Him," she said at last, so quietly he nearly missed it. "And to Him we return."

"And to Him we return," he said.

Neither of them stopped crying, not that night and not for many nights after. They were, as they told each other more than once in the years that followed, only weak servants, given a decree too large for their small hearts to hold without breaking, and they carried the ache of it forward the rest of their lives, in the quiet unremarkable way grief lives inside a house long after the mourners have gone home. But they carried it together, and they carried it kneeling, and they carried it toward Him rather than away, and in the end, on a night when the whole world had seemed to close over their heads, that had been enough to stand on. Not because it emptied them of pain.

Because it gave the pain somewhere, at last, to kneel.