

Copyrighted Material

Strandline ♦ Traethlin ♦ Alkhatu alsaahiliu

THE COVE HAD ALWAYS called things to it. Her father would blame the jutting headland, saying that it slowed the tide so that it brought forth its offerings. Her mother used to say that it was something much more than that. That the sea would show you what you needed it to, in its own time, and that the only thing you could do was wait. There would be driftwood, of course, bleached white; tangles of fishing nets and constellations of starfish so dense they'd thicken the waters with their numbers. There had been bodies, too, seal-grey and ashen, gently nudged to the sands, the victims of storms and shipping lanes or broken souls who had trusted themselves to the deep. Their pockets would be checked for change, before they were dragged to the dune-swamped church. There they'd be placed in paupers' graves, each wooden cross marked with which tide had brought them in, as if the sea's giving and its taking away made any difference.

Nefyn stood, holding her breath, the dark pools exposed by the slack-water glistening around her, the limpets gasping for the tide. She listened as the sandpipers and plovers, stark in winter plumage, questioned the dawn moon with their cries. She hadn't been able to sleep for weeks, her tiredness making her feel as if she were drowning. She exhaled, her breath billowing into the blue stillness. From here she could see the

Copyrighted Material

curve of the coast. The warm glow of lights over the sleeping village a few miles to the south, and to the north, the sharp angles of the military base, unnaturally rigid, magnified somehow by the weight of rain in the sky.

She turned, pulled her coat around her, and walked barefoot along the beach in search of today's offerings. The strandline lay just out of reach of the water, a fragile trail that traced the coast, configured and reconfigured at each tide's turn. An ever-present collection of disparate things brought temporarily together. The glass cabinets in the cottage were full of specimens she had collected over the years, shells and whelks, egg cases and seeds. So now she would only bring home the most remarkable things, knowing she would have to sacrifice a beloved object for its place. Her feet found footholds along the shingle beach, her soles impervious to its grit, having walked this way since she was a girl.

The cove was deep, the steepness of its rise making sound move differently, voices reverberate more, making light linger a little longer. You could not hide anything from the sea; the cove itself was evidence of this. The waves had sought out and worn the softness of the coast away in their merciless quest to expose its hidden shape. Her father had dared build a boatshed at the foot of the cliffs and spent his life launching his boat from the beach, searching for whiting and mackerel. Watching him, Nefyn had learnt to see through the water. To calculate where the stone arch of Porth y Wrach on the headland met the pool where the mackerel idled in August, and to recognize the glassy surface of blue water where the whelks sheltered in winter. To

Copyrighted Material

read the bay's hidden language. There were no boats today; the alarms had been sounded and flags raised. Everyone knew the consequences of straying into The Range whilst the military tested their drones. The bay would be closed for weeks at a time and when it was, Nefyn could do nothing but lie sleepless on her bed, listening to the distant thunder of munitions, each strike awakening in her a new depth of dread.

When the military had first come to claim and divide the sea, her father and some of the other fishermen had tried to tell them that the fish moved with the seasons and that leaving them a portion meant nothing. They had claimed to understand, before imposing stricter and stricter conditions, frustrating the fishermen into giving up. Their number dwindled after that, the community scattered. The carcass of her father's boat lay in the boatshed, under a tarpaulin skin. Her brother forced to work on other people's boats on the north coast for weeks at a time before returning home exhausted, only to leave again after just a few days.

Nefyn's eyes flickered upwards to the cliff and the cottage as a light pierced the gloom. Their home clung precariously to the cliff edge above, the sea digging deeper, undercutting the land on which it stood, tipping the house slowly towards it. Her brother would be up now, moving around in the cold, pulling his jumper over his head. Making tea.

Nefyn stopped, her dark eyes scanning the strandline, the daylight growing around her. She bent to pick up an urchin, its paper-thin form luminous in the blue light. She examined it in her fingers for a moment. Its

Copyrighted Material

surface was punctured with lines of perforations like the plates of a skull. Her father would say that the tide took the foolish, the reckless and the unlucky. Nefyn had often wondered which one he had been. Her mother had already left them by then, before her father had ventured out to sea on the cusp of a storm. He was found underneath his boat, his body tangled in fishing lines, blue and bloated, his breath whisked away. Perhaps he had been unlucky, she considered, or perhaps the sea had tried to show him all she could and had finally run out of patience.

There was nothing she wanted this morning. She dropped the urchin, listened as it rolled away. She could hear the tide turning, the undercurrents quickening. The sugar kelp which she hung in a ruffled belt on the cottage door had not dried out in days, meaning that this stillness could not last much longer. Something was changing. She could feel it. She turned and walked back up to the cottage, knowing that a storm was near.

Gharb ♦ West ♦ Gorllewin

IF HE LAY STILL enough, for long enough on the narrow bed, he could keep himself just below consciousness so that hours would blur into days, and days would fold into weeks, without him being aware of the four walls which held him. He could feel his muscles wasting, his flesh seemed loose about his bones, and the little exercise he was forced to take exhausted him. But if he slowed his breathing in this way, his body would become lighter and he'd feel the touch of his father's palm on the back of his neck and he would be six years old again, learning to swim underneath the Mediterranean sky. Angles of blue and white would fill his mind. He would see his body glistening and strong under the scalding sun. Hear his father whispering, 'Trust me, trust the water, it doesn't want to harm you,' then he would feel his own childlike panic overwhelm him as he grappled for his father's neck, felt himself sinking. On other days, it was the scent of bitter orange that filled his senses, its cloying sweetness drugging him into a welcome stupor, or the buzzing arpeggio of the muezzin's call to prayer.

When consciousness was insistent, he would sit, his back against the cold plaster, his eyes half closed, pushing back the walls with his mind. Like tracing paper, he would overlay memories of his past on to his present. The back wall was the dappled walk beneath the

Copyrighted Material

lemon trees towards the university. Past the café where his friends took black tea. The far wall was the corridor where he had first met his wife, the place where she had scolded him sternly for pinning a notice to the wrong board. His flamboyant begging for forgiveness. The bemused look she had given him. The moment he decided he must know more about it and her. The wall behind him was his office, the bricks his books, the muslin drapes that overlooked the city at a time when no one thought to ask what religion their friends were. This bed. This bed was where they had made love without making love. Her white teeth, the way she swore over coffee.

In this way, every day was a day of resurrection. Adding detail, the footfall on the geometric floor of a souk, the laughter of children outside his flat, the stunned flies of summer. And when sleep did overwhelm him, to a dreamless abyss, he'd wake gasping for air and reach for the compass on the bed beside him, the only possession they had allowed him to keep on religious grounds. Hamza had not prayed for years, although he had not told them this. The compass had been a gift from his grandfather when he had come of age. They had smoked shisha together and he had pressed it silently into his palm. They had sat for a while, nothing but the blue smoke and the sound of the bubbling *nargilah*. Hamza had opened the case, looked at the names of the sixteen winds marked on it. Held their names in his mouth for a moment. *Greco*. *Levante*. *Scirocco*. *Osto*. His grandfather had watched him, his aged, damp eyes narrowing as he inhaled the perfumed smoke and suggested to him gently that

Copyrighted Material

being a man meant knowing where you were from, knowing where you were going and knowing how to find the *qibla* in order to pray.

He had little sense of time; the windowless cell put paid to any natural rhythms, the only real indication of day and night the changing of the guards outside his cell in eight-hour shifts. A little less noise at night. He knew their footsteps by now. The older guard called Adley, gaunt and irritated, his resentment at being given such a menial job palpable in the agitated flick of his cigarette. When he learnt that Hamza smoked, he pushed a cigarette under the door, knowing full well that Hamza had no way to light it.

But it was the other one that Hamza disliked the most. The younger one they called Owens. He was broader, fair-haired and thickset, his tongue sharp with ambition, a certain swagger appearing in his gait when unwatched by others. Hamza had seen his type at checkpoints. Asking for papers and studying them for too long, disappearing to talk to colleagues in booths, enjoying any discomfort. Thriving on any expression of impatience you made and punishing you for it even though you had committed no crime. He had seen his type a thousand times, making old women wait, frail and tired in the searing sun, simply because they could. But it wasn't Owens walking down the corridor now. Hamza lay listening. It was someone else. An older footfall, heavier, soft-bodied, at once urgent and defeated. He waited for the murmur of voices and the metallic sound of the keys to subside. The door opening. Hamza didn't react. The sound of breathing. A bag being placed on the floor. The weight of the door being locked once again.

Copyrighted Material

‘Hamza?’

His voice was hoarse today, his breathing shallow. A silence. Then the sound of footsteps and the cold touch of fingertips on Hamza’s inner wrist. The whip of an arm yanking a cuff over a watch face. Silent counting. A calculation. The fingertips disappeared, leaving only the sting of another’s touch on his skin. He heard the rasping of the silver chain as the Doctor picked up the compass from the bed, held it in his hands. Dragged the chair towards Hamza and sat.

‘I know you can hear me.’

Hamza felt the strangeness of having someone else so near. The Doctor’s chest was noisy, as if his haste along the endless, featureless corridors had unsettled it. ‘I can’t sleep, thinking of you here. Please, Hamza, you have to eat.’ Hamza lay unmoving. ‘Those sores are getting worse.’ The creak of the chair as the Doctor leant closer. The Doctor searched his face for a response. There was none. He lowered his voice conspiratorially. ‘Listen to me. They won’t force you to eat, Hamza. If you die, you’re one less problem for them.’

There was something in this man’s voice that made Hamza think of his father. A silence before the sound of his breathing returned once again.

Hamza had been moved. For years. From Syria to Oman, from Oman onwards. Moved and moved so that he had become so far removed from where he had been, who he had been, that he no longer knew himself. Cells. Trucks. Boats. Each country complicating his story. Travelling further and further until he had almost forgotten himself. There had been other medics, too,

Copyrighted Material

who were kind enough, but none like this one. This one was older. Perhaps that was it. He was not a military man either. This base seemed smaller, more remote. After so many years, he had, it seemed, reached the end of the line.

Hamza had not spoken to the Doctor for months, the mistrust in which he held his captors at each base constant and unwavering. But one day, the Doctor had told him how his wife had scolded him that morning for snoring. And it had awakened in Hamza a yearning for the ordinary so intense that it had almost broken his heart. After another visit, the Doctor had left him some cake she had made. He'd kept the guard talking long enough that Hamza could eat it. They had begun talking then. Tentatively at first, both skirting the extraordinary circumstances that brought them together, and keeping instead to generalities. Hamza's former post at the university in Homs. His parents' pride at his achievements. The Doctor's life in the nearby village, his visits to the military base made necessary by its size and lack of facilities. And then, in time, when they were surer of each other, they had argued. Hamza challenging the Doctor's hypocrisy, his earnest insistence that he lived in a country with a natural empathy towards the colonized, his discomfort at being both colonized and colonizer. His infuriating rigidity and adherence to what he called his duties, his 'oaths'. The papers he had been forced to sign on beginning his work at the base. His refusal to help Hamza, the ease with which he could have sent word to Hamza's family if he chose to. Their natural liking for each other. Frustrating. Confusing. And in this way, over time,

Copyrighted Material

they had forged a fragile, mutual respect. An almost perfect imbalance.

Perhaps, for Hamza, it was knowing he'd decided to end his own life that allowed him to be more open with the Doctor than he had been with all the others. A certain recklessness of feeling that let him speak. And over time, the glimpses the Doctor gave Hamza – of a life lived – made him grieve his own past life so much that it strengthened his resolve, galvanized his decision to retreat.

'Hamza, listen to me. You don't have much time left. I . . . I wouldn't presume to ask for your friendship, but . . .' Hamza felt a hand on his arm. 'We have grown closer and I have tried to pull you back. But there comes a point when your body . . . it won't recover. Your tests, Hamza, they're not good.'

The Doctor allowed the words to settle between them, watched as Hamza's chest rose and fell with a whisper. Their conversations had dwindled over the last weeks, as Hamza continued to refuse food. The Doctor had watched this young man diminish and fall silent as his own inner conflict grew. His cheeks burning with the shame of it. He had tended prisoners before, knew he shouldn't get involved, but as he watched the four walls pushing in on Hamza, he was soon engaged in his own secret war with him, a war to keep him alive. He would find reasons to visit. *Maķe* reasons to visit, but every time he opened the metal door to his concave features, the deep set of his eyes, a sickness would creep to his stomach. At night, the Doctor would lie wide-eyed, a trembling in his core that spoke of a deep, inward grief. On these evenings, his

Copyrighted Material

wife, sensing that he was awake, would lay a gentle hand on his arm and turn to watch her husband stare into the darkness in his helplessness, a tear glistening heavily in the corner of her eye.

He could hear voices in the corridor now. He looked at Hamza's hollow features, his sallow skin. Another sleepless night had preceded this visit, and he had got up at dawn to carry his burden to Hamza. He cleared his throat, his voice suddenly constricted.

'I wanted you to know that my wife . . . my wife and I, we lost a son.' The Doctor felt the words in the air around them, wondering how it was possible for such old words to startle him, to seem so new. 'He was just a boy. He became ill. There was nothing I could do. Perhaps now there would be treatments, but back then . . .' His voice trailed off. He looked down at the compass and felt it warming against his hands. Shook his head, felt his breathing grow shallow.

'Anyway, I could only watch. Wait for the inevitable. But I could come here today, and I *can* ask you, please, *don't* do this. I can't imagine the suffering you have seen, but I can put myself in your parents' place. If you were my son, I'd want you to fight. I'd want you to live. Nothing . . .' he continued, 'nothing has been the same for me or my wife since . . .' The Doctor shook his head, as if to shake off his heaviness. Looked at Hamza's eyes, which remained firmly shut. 'I just wanted to say that, that's all.' He cleared his throat. 'I know more than anyone how easy it is to lose faith.'

A silence fell between them, the Doctor feeling the weight of the compass in his hands. He held it a long time before prising the case open with his fingernail.

Copyrighted Material

It clicked open. Hamza listened to the familiar sound. The Doctor looked at the compass and smiled. The chain lying heavy in his lap. A pause. 'You know they were made to tell your fortune originally . . . wind roses, compasses.' He paused. 'They weren't made to tell direction, they were made to tell you what your future would bring.' He looked at the pin as it spun. Held it flat in the middle of his palm. His brow becoming furrowed. 'Then again, perhaps it's best we don't know. Don't you think?' Hamza heard a soft smile in his voice as he snapped the compass case shut. There were voices outside. Owens. The changing of the guard. The Doctor placed the compass on the bed. Got up. There was a rattling of keys.

'Think about it.' The Doctor pretended to take Hamza's pulse once more. Owens leant into the room and scanned it.

'He's not scheduled a medical visit,' he barked. The Doctor let Hamza's wrist go and gave him a tight smile.

'I know, I was passing. It's part of the medical oath. To keep an eye. You know that, surely.'

Owens studied him. 'Come on,' he said, sparing his elder no civility. The Doctor picked up his bag. Owens stood in the doorway, forcing the Doctor to turn sideways to pass him. The door slammed shut once again, and Hamza's eyes flickered open.

Drift ♦ Driftio ♦ Almaghzaa

‘**W**HERE ARE YOU GOING?’ Her brother was stuffing clothes into a waterproof bag. He didn’t even look up. ‘Joseph?’

‘I’ll be back in a few weeks.’

Nefyn stood in the bedroom doorway, blocking his path. ‘You just came back.’

Joseph shrugged, trying not to look at her.

‘I won’t be long.’

‘But why?’ Nefyn searched his face. He turned to find his papers before pushing them into his back pocket. His voice rose sharply.

‘We need the money, Nefyn.’

Nefyn’s eyes ran everywhere like water. ‘It’s a girl, isn’t it? You didn’t used to go so often.’

Joseph stopped for a moment. ‘It’s not a girl.’

‘Just tell me if it is.’

‘It’s not a girl, I said.’ His voice was loud within the confines of the feet-thick stone walls, the low ceilings. ‘There’s a boat, they’re paying well,’ he mumbled.

‘And you’d rather be anywhere than here.’

‘Don’t be stupid.’

Nefyn remained in the doorway, a palpable stillness to her. She looked pale this morning, gaunt. Her dark hair almost black. A thin dress. A cardigan. Looking at her, he sometimes couldn’t fathom how they had been born together. It had happened at home, their mother

Copyrighted Material

determined not to leave the house, and when the midwife eventually arrived and brought him into the world, she placed him quickly aside in order to deliver Nefyn. She had arrived *en caul*, her amniotic sac still intact, completely unaware of the fact that she had been born. Their exhausted mother had looked in on Nefyn's self-contained serenity before the midwife jabbed at the sac that enfolded her. Tore it, much to their mother's anger. It was only then that Nefyn howled, as if she were being killed. Sometimes Joseph wondered whether she had ever really been ready for this world. That night, their father had bought a round of drinks and they rang the bell in the low-beamed bar of The Ship; babies born in water brought great luck.

Joseph noticed that her eyes were still searching his face. His shoulders softened.

'I know it's hard for you, but we've got to buy food.'

When he was younger, he had tried to find work locally, but the questions and the goading soon became intolerable. The fact that he still lived with his sister, the fact that she 'wasn't all there'. He learnt that retaliation brought trouble, and passivity brought more abuse, so it was easier to hitch a ride to the north coast. Work anonymously. Friendly but distant. And it would do for a while, for a week or two, but as the days rolled by, a restlessness would grow in him, a listening-out, more complicated than duty or guilt, until he had to come home. He watched her green eyes become troubled. Fingers picking at fingernails.

'You can't go. There's a storm on the way, I can feel it.'

Joseph rolled his eyes. 'Here we go.'

Copyrighted Material

'It's true, this time.' Her voice faltered. She looked away for a moment. 'I'm sure it is.' Joseph picked up his bag and pushed past her into the narrow kitchen.

'There's plenty of firewood there,' he said. He took some packets of tea, biscuits, pushed them into his bag. Nefyn watched as Joseph took a bottle of pills from his pocket, turning to fill a glass with water. He tipped a tablet out on to his palm and placed it on the wooden table between them. Pushed it towards Nefyn.

'Take it,' he said.

Nefyn studied him with cool eyes, folded her arms, making the most of the little agency she had. She watched a flicker of irritation cross his face. 'Come on,' he coaxed. 'You know they're for your own good.'

Every time he left, he would count out the tablets, place them in a line on the windowsill. One for each day he would be gone. At first, his trips were shorter, less frequent, but now they were becoming routine. She watched him as he tipped the tablets into his palm and laid them out for her one by one. He turned, looked down at the pill, untouched, on the table.

'How many times do we have to do this, Nefyn? They keep you safe,' he urged, his shoulders sinking.

'They keep *me* safe?' Nefyn could sense his growing impatience, his desire to leave.

'I wouldn't give them to you if I didn't think they helped.'

Nefyn smiled coldly. Studied him. Joseph could feel his anger at the back of his throat. The walls of the cottage starting to weigh on him.

'They don't help, they make me feel nothing, Joseph.'

Copyrighted Material