

“The Panther Revolution”

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Fiction

As Zuneh stands guard inside the Palace’s east gate, she is exhausted. The nationwide protests have now spanned three weeks and are showing no sign of abating. *Protest*, however, is a relatively innocuous term that does not fully connote the rabidity of the marches and riots that have riven the Kingdom. Tonight, masses of animated demonstrators press against the fortified walls that surround the Palace grounds. They scream and chant and bang drums and burn images of King Toma. It is after dusk, but floodlights illuminate the proceedings, giving the impression of a staged tragicomedy. On the faces of the people: anger, anguish, madness, frenzy.

This mayhem, however, does not quite compare to the situation on the third night of the so-called “Panther Revolution.” For hours, the mob marched around the Palace, raging and throwing stones at the Guardsmen. Then young men began standing on each other’s shoulders and erecting ladders in order to pull themselves to the top of the walls, while others began lobbing Molotov cocktails onto the grounds. King Toma ordered the Royal Guardsmen to open fire into the crowd. By the time the masses dispersed, twenty-seven corpses and twice as many grievously wounded bodies littered the surrounding areas.

Zuneh, as always, followed orders that night. She poked the muzzle of her AK-47 through the bars of the gate and blasted away. Certainly some of the casualties were her doing, although she cannot remember aiming at any one person in particular.

Tonight the protesters seem to have much more bark than bite. As has become commonplace, they hold signs that read “Depose the Thief” and “The Gallows For Toma” and “The People Will Not Abide.” They sing anthems and blow horns. Although, during the early days the crowd consisted mostly of college students and young adults – primarily males – the demographics have evolved. Now it is an eclectic assemblage of aggrieved citizens: professional men in three-piece suits, shop owners wielding broom sticks, artists throwing paint, disgruntled municipal employees, tradesmen waving flags, teachers holding candles, concerned parents and grandparents.

And, yes, Zuneh is exhausted. Her nerves are frayed. She has been on duty for twenty days straight, twelve-hour shifts. The commander has been promising more downtime for the guards, but they are stretched thin and a reduction in numbers would be interpreted by the opposition as a sign of weakness. If there is one thing the King will not tolerate it is a sign of weakness.

There is talk that the King and his generals are planning a counterstrike, for lack of a better term. He is losing the confidence of the Royal Councilmen, although none of them would admit that publicly. Moreover, the collapse in morale among his rank-and-file supporters is palpable. They, of course, want the King to crush the uprising and preserve the status quo, a social structure and economy that benefits the few, the loyal, the connected. Toma has gone on record stating that he would use force only as necessary to defend the sanctity of the regime against saboteurs, but it is clear to all involved that his rule will come to an end if the fervor

persists. Many expect that he will soon mobilize the military to forcibly clear all public spaces of demonstrators and enforce a shoot-on-site curfew. With an estimated two million people turning out each night, the resulting body count would likely be staggering. At least that is Zuneh's estimation.

Zuneh is not eager to operate outside of the Palace walls. Engaging with the mob will certainly be perilous for the Guardsmen. Although gun ownership is severely restricted within the Kingdom, many firearms have circulated in the black market and there are now resistance snipers throughout the city. There are also improvised explosives and archers and men armed with hammers and swords. Furthermore, Zuneh does not cut a particularly imposing figure. Though athletic and fierce in hand-to-hand combat, she is short and slim and easily overpowered by men who weigh fifty or seventy-five pounds more than her. She knows her best bet is to find safety in numbers, to embed with a unit of hardened Guardsmen in the event that she is sent out into the streets.

Like almost all of the women in the Royal Guard, Zuneh was drafted into the role against her will. Until a decade earlier, the Guard consisted of men only. King Toma, however, grew tired of the aesthetics of it. He abruptly ordered the institution of an elite unit of female commandos, citing noble ideals as his motivation: to inspire the women of the Kingdom to "aim for the heavens," as he put it in his famous Independence Day speech, to "find the warrior inside every heart." He established a so-called "recruitment initiative" to bring the fittest of women into the fold. This, of course, was implemented by bureaucratic sycophants whose only concern was to satisfy their dear leader. So, instead of *recruiting* the best women, they *conscripted* two dozen of the top female athletes in the country and began grooming other promising candidates as young as age twelve. Zuneh was fourteen years old at the time and a standout among her peers in

both archery and gymnastics. She was pried from her home and relocated to a training center in the Northern Territory, where she began a dawn-to-dusk program intended to convert her into a vicious and loyal military asset.

Soldierly attributes, however, were not the only priority for King Toma and, therefore, for the program directors. They also wanted these women to be the epitome of femininity: in peak physical condition, perfectly groomed, and sexually irresistible. “Lethal but nubile” was the way the King expressed his vision. They were to become *femme fatales* in the most literal sense. Those lacking in certain attributes were compelled to undergo cosmetic procedures. And, of course, these women had extracurricular responsibilities. They became the playthings of the King, the Royal Councilmen, the military leadership, and any and all dignitaries, foreign and domestic, that the regime hoped to persuade or impress. Zuneh and her comrades came to refer to themselves as the “Desert Geishas” or the “Concubine Commandos.”

Zuneh never personally entertained the King, but, for a time, she was part of a trio of Guardswomen that the Minister of the Economy often requested. He was easily fifty years older than Zuneh and the other women, bald except for a horseshoe of white hair, liver-spotted, potbellied, and in dilapidated physical condition. She doubted the old cretin had exercised a single time in his life. Servicing him was as revolting as one could expect.

However, it was during these appointments in the Minister’s quarters that Zuneh became acquainted with Pardaj, who is a few years older and far more skilled in the sensual arts. She is also very funny and, for her comrades’ benefit, would pretend to yawn and roll her eyes as the elderly Minister struggled to mount her.

Pardaj’s room is on the opposite side of the women’s barracks from Zuneh’s. Because same-sex relations are strictly forbidden in the Kingdom (aside from when they occur in an

official capacity), the two women have to be very discreet when they get together. Fortunately, avoiding the sentries is not much trouble and there are various ways to explain away their rendezvous as innocuous. Sometimes they make love when they get together, but more often than not they take turns reading from the adventure novels that Pardaj smuggles onto the base. Other nights they simply hold each other until sunrise and sing softly to each other and purr with affection. Zuneh realizes that these are the only times that she feels fully human.

With all of the commotion and the round-the-clock shifts, Zuneh has seen Pardaj only in passing over the past few weeks. God knows when things will go back to normal, but it cannot happen soon enough. Zuneh's heart aches.

Tonight, the masses of protesters disperse of their own accord shortly after midnight and Zuneh's watch ends at 2 AM. She returns to her room, lights a stick of incense, and lies supine on her bunk. Despite her exhaustion, she cannot summon sleep, so she stares at the ceiling and thinks of her parents. She has not received word from them in two months, although she trusts they are well. The King compensates the families of the Guardswomen – enough to ensure that they do not have to struggle as much as their neighbors, but not so much as to make things easy. Her parents, of course, would not participate in the demonstrations, regardless of their feelings on the matter. To do so would put Zuneh's livelihood and life in jeopardy.

3 AM arrives, the hour during which Zuneh and Pardaj often convene. Pardaj has been on the graveyard shift as of late, but that could change on any given day. Deeply craving her lover's touch, Zuneh decides to give it a shot. She changes into her black pajamas, slips on her sandals and steps to the door. She opens it a crack, listens, waits, peeks out into the night. The crackle of distant fireworks. The sweep of floodlights across the cloudy sky. She closes the door behind her and hurries down the gangway between the barracks.

When she gets to the corner of the building, she very cautiously looks both ways. No sentries in sight. There comes the whistle and pop of a bottle rocket right above the base followed by a chorus of celebratory voices. Then, an unexpected sound – a whisper – right behind her. She spins and finds herself staring down the barrel of an AK-47. The man holding it is dressed in a dark camouflage uniform from head to toe including a balaclava that obscures his entire face except for his eyes. He is accompanied by another man, larger, thicker, identically costumed. Whoever these men are, they are not part of the Royal Guard.

Zuneh freezes and raises her hands in surrender.

The second man steps forward and presses the barrel of a pistol to her temple. “Do not make a sound,” he warns in gravelly whisper. “Do not move. We will kill you if you flinch. Do you understand?” To emphasize his seriousness, he presses the pistol harder against her skull.

“Yes,” she replies stolidly.

“Turn around.”

Zuneh hesitates only momentarily, before turning to face the wall of the barracks.

The man roughly grabs her arms and pins them behind her back. He clicks handcuffs onto her wrists. Then, from behind, he reaches around and presses a moist rag to her face. It smells of citrus mixed with acetone, a confectionary odor. He punches her hard in the left kidney. She gasps, imbibing the fumes. Then she faints.

An indeterminate time later, Zuneh awakes. She appears to be in a jail cell: a concrete box on three sides with tarnished iron bars making up the fourth side. There is a door built into the bars with a heavy-duty locking mechanism. The ceiling is low and there are no windows, only a meager, flickering electrical light somewhere outside of the cell. It is impossible to know what time it is.

Zuneh is splayed on a ratty cotton floormat. She is woozy and dehydrated and fails on her first attempt to sit up. She shifts over to the wall and uses it to prop herself up. Her head bobbles and swims. She takes deep, restorative breaths and waits for her senses to realign. In a while, she is able to stand.

She steps over to the bars and peers down the passageway along which her cell is positioned. There seems to be at least one other cell further down on the opposite side, but Zuneh cannot see whether there is another prisoner.

“Hello?” she says, but her voice is weak and raspy. She clears her throat and speaks again. No one answers.

Zuneh realizes that she has the tremendous urge to urinate. There is no toilet in the cell, but there is an empty bucket in the corner. She holds it in for another few minutes before dropping her pajama bottoms and relieving herself in the bucket. As far as she can tell, there is only one surveillance camera in the facility, on the ceiling halfway down the passageway. She would prefer not to put on a show for someone in a control room somewhere, although that is not an overwhelming concern.

The jail is rudimentary and not well kept, but undoubtedly secure. No escape. Recognizing this, Zuneh sits down against the wall again and waits and considers her predicament. The most reasonable explanation for her situation is that her abductors are seeking a ransom or a prisoner swap. She presumes that they are part of the political opposition to the Toma regime, although there are at least a half-dozen factions who would identify as such. She wonders whether they targeted her specifically or snatched her opportunistically.

After a time, a door opens at the end of the passageway. Zuneh stands and steps to the bars. A man and a woman approach. Like her abductors, they wear camouflage uniforms and balaclavas that cover their faces.

The woman says, “take two steps back, please.” She has an unfamiliar accent, perhaps tribal, perhaps foreign.

Zuneh complies.

“You have a choice between life and death,” the woman says. “But it is not just your life that you must consider. We have taken your parents as well.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that we are holding your mother and father prisoner until you do exactly what we ask of you.”

Zuneh’s blood pressure spikes. She feels the powerful urge to reach through the bars and strike out at her captors, but remains poised, stoic. “What do you want?”

The man answers. His accent is familiar, local. “We want you to assassinate Toma.”

Zuneh is unable to stifle a chuckle. The request, of course, is absolutely absurd. She has never before been assigned to the King’s detail. She has met him only once, when she was initiated into the guard five years earlier.

“Now is not the time to laugh,” the woman states flatly.

“But the idea that I would be able to access Toma is laughable.”

“So you think.”

“There is no time for debate,” the man says.

“My superiors must know I am missing by now.”

“You are not due to report for duty for another two hours.”

“How do you know?”

“We know.”

Zuneh does not doubt this man, nor the woman. Their foot soldiers were able to infiltrate the Royal Guard’s base. They must have someone on the inside: a mole, a turncoat.

Zuneh crosses her arms. “What do you expect of me?”

“We expect you to kill Toma at the right time, the right place.”

“And, if I am unable.”

“Your mother and father die.”

“I’ll be punished if I even attempt to get near Toma without authorization. If they suspect that I am conspiring against him, they will put me to death immediately.”

“Then you must act with the utmost discretion.”

“How do I know that you are not an agent of the King? Perhaps this is a test of my loyalty. You cannot expect me to trust you.”

“Then your mother and father must die,” the man responds.

Zuneh turns away from her captors and begins to pace. A large, brown spider makes its way along the top of the back wall. She realizes that it is impossible to verify anything these people are saying, but at the same time, she must behave as if they speak only truth. She feels their eyes on her as she contemplates the situation.

The woman says, “We need a decision. Death or collaboration.”

Zuneh turns to them. “Explain to me how it would work.”

“Very simple. We return you to your base and you await further instruction. When the time comes, you do your part and you do it well. Meanwhile, your parents are comfortable and safe. They do not suffer.”

“And if you succeed, your parents will be looked after for the rest of their days,” the man adds.

“What does that mean?”

“It means you will not have to worry.”

Zuneh looks at the ceiling for a long moment, then nods affirmatively.

After the man and woman leave, two soldiers come into the cell, place a black cotton sack over Zuneh’s head and lead her out of the jail. They load her into the back of a cargo van.

Twenty minutes later, the vehicle comes to a hard stop. One of the soldiers removes the sack from Zuneh’s head.

“Wait here. Someone will let you in,” he says. Then he slides the van door open and pushes Zuneh out.

The sun is high in the sky, near midday, sweltering. Zuneh finds herself standing at the service gate at the rear of the base. Once the van has disappeared down the street, the gate opens very slightly. Zuneh slips inside.

The gate clicks shut behind her. Someone grabs her by the arm.

“Let’s go. Quickly.” It is Pardaj.

The two women hurry between outbuildings to the barracks. Before they go to their separate rooms, Pardaj grabs Zuneh by the shoulders, looks into her eyes, and says, “Have faith.”

Zuneh swallows hard and nods. She opens her mouth to ask a question but Pardaj has already turned on her heel and strode away.

In her room, Zuneh hastily changes from her pajamas into her sky-blue service uniform, all the while trying to process what transpired over the past few hours. Clearly, there is a conspiracy within the Royal Guard. Pardaj is part of it, but is she the only one? For all Zuneh

knows, there could be a dozen traitors or more – all waiting for Zuneh to do her part. But, if they had already recruited Pardaj, why do they need Zuneh to pull the trigger? Could they not have executed their plans without her? Zuneh desperately wants to talk it over with Pardaj. No telling when they will have the opportunity.

At two, Zuneh hurries to the yard for the start-of-shift roll call. When the Captain calls out her name, she shouts “Present!” in an unwavering voice. No one appears to be the wiser that she was missing from the base for nearly eight hours.

The Captain steps forward to announce shift assignments, but today is different. He explains that an “operation to restore order in the Kingdom” will begin tonight. A 9 PM curfew will be declared and the Royal Guard will work with the military to clear the streets. The King has authorized the use of all necessary force – a full-fledged counter-offensive. Until that time, all Guardsmen should report to their previously assigned positions. Zuneh will be at the east gate again.

The first half of the shift is rather uneventful. However, Zuneh is on edge the entire time. As far as she knows, she may be called upon by the conspirators to do her part at any moment. She realizes that this is likely more than just an assassination; it is a coup. The conspirators would not take down the King unless they intended to fully depose his regime. And success in this gambit will require the cooperation of the military. This conspiracy must reach to the highest levels, she realizes. It is a wonder that they have been able to keep it quiet.

At dusk, things take a turn. The protestors begin to pour into the streets in numbers that Zuneh has not witnessed since the third night massacre. By nightfall, the crowds are amassed on all sides of the palace, a sea of bodies stretching far into the distance. Clearly word has gotten out

that tonight will be the climax of the Panther Revolution. Do or die. The people will not go quietly.

At 8 PM, Zuneh and her comrades are replaced at the east gate by Army soldiers in tan uniforms and ordered to report to the courtyard. By the time she arrives, most of the two hundred Royal Guardsmen are already in formation. Zuneh takes a position in the eighth row back. She spies Pardaj two rows ahead and to her left.

The Commander, a stately and imposing figure, steps in front of the assembly and raises a bullhorn to his mouth. “The time has come to take back our streets!” he declares, the din of the demonstrators almost drowning the sound of his amplified voice. “The rebellion must come to an end and you, the Royal Guard, will lead the charge. You are the tip of the spear. The elite of the elite. And the King expects you to perform your duty with honor and courage and love for the Kingdom.”

He goes on to explain that the Guard will be coordinating its efforts with the Army and that, as he speaks, tanks and columns of troops are moving into city centers throughout the Kingdom. The Guardsmen will be split into four companies, one dispatched from each palace gate. Their primary responsibility is to clear the perimeter. “The King,” he asserts, “does not want to be able to see a single enemy from any vantage. Am I making myself clear?”

“Yes, Commander!” the collective reply thunders.

Zuneh is assigned, this time, to operate out of the west gate. On the Commander’s orders, she and the rest of the Guardsmen march to their positions. Shieldsmen move to the front of the formation. Zuneh embeds herself in the middle. The cacophonous outbursts of the protesters have grown deafening.

Suddenly, Pardaj appears at Zuneh’s side. Seeing her, Zuneh exhales, “Thank God.”

“Let’s stay together,” Pardaj instructs.

“Of course,” Zuneh replies. It takes all of her willpower to resist embracing her dear companion. She looks into Pardaj’s eyes, which momentarily flash an indication of warmth and affection.

Whistles blow and a voice over the loudspeaker announces that the curfew is now in effect and that all civilians who remain on the streets will be regarded as enemies of the Kingdom. The protesters sneer and jeer and redouble their chanting and singing. It seems as if not a single one has chosen to heed the warning.

The Guardsmen are instructed to don their gas masks. Zuneh pulls hers on over her head then tightens her helmet. Shortly, soldiers begin lobbing tear gas cannisters into the crowd. The demonstrators attempt to get away from the noxious fumes, but they are packed so tightly that they can barely shift from one area to another. The scene becomes chaotic. A few of the cannisters are retrieved by protesters and thrown back onto the palace grounds.

The soldiers then throw flashbang grenades directly into the center of the crowd. The concussive explosions light up the night sky. This causes a stampede, protestors scampering in every direction, climbing over each other, smashing against the palace walls. Thousands screaming and shouting at once. More flash-bangs and the crowd begins to disperse, retreating down the streets that radiate out like spokes from the hub of the palace. Whistles trill. The gate finally swings open and the Guardsmen advance into the square. Zuneh holds her AK-47 to her chest and follows the men in front of her. She looks to Pardaj, who is stone-faced and focused on the task at hand.

Protesters hurl rocks and Molotov cocktails which crash against the shields of the men at the front of the formation. In response, gunfire: guardsmen begin shooting into the crowd.

Mayhem breaks out, civilians running every which way. Some fighting hand-to-hand with the Guardsmen, others attacking with clubs and machetes. For a time, Zuneh is packed in too tightly among her platoon to take any direct action. Then a Molotov cocktail is lobbed into their midst and explodes on the street. Three of her comrades are engulfed in flames. They drop to the ground and begin rolling. Guardsmen bearing fire extinguishers step forward and douse the men.

The group has now broken formation and are fully engaged with rioters on all sides. Some of the Guards are running across the square toward the retreating demonstrators. Zuneh follows them so as not to be left behind. Rifle shots shatter the air like the percussive beats of a drum corps. Horns blow. Another Molotov cocktail erupts nearby. A symphony of screams and booms and blasts. The city has turned into a hellscape. Something smashes into Zuneh's helmet, a large rock she presumes. She fires her gun into the air.

She sees Pardaj and one other Guard amidst a mob of rioters. Civilians are attacking with steel bars and shovels. Pardaj is knocked to the ground and, immediately, a swarm of men pile on top, pummeling her. Zuneh fires into the assailants. Several of them flop to the ground and the rest quickly disperse. She hurries over and helps Pardaj to her feet.

They survey the scene. Most of the Guardsmen have spread out across the square. Some spray bullets indiscriminately. Others are in melees, fighting for their lives. This is not simply a riot response; it is a battle; it is a war.

A massive, fiery explosion throws Zuneh and Pardaj to the ground.

The shockwave takes away Zuneh's breath. She turns to her side, coughing, disoriented. Something piercing and hot has penetrated her thigh. She reaches down and comes away with a palmful of blood. Everywhere she looks, Guardsmen and civilians are splayed like discarded chess pieces, casualties of the blast.

Zuneh crawls over to Pardaj, who writhes on her back. Blood spurts in pulses from the side of her neck. Zuneh removes Pardaj's gas mask and presses her hand to the wound, but the effort in no way staunches the bleeding. Panic creeps in. She searches the scene for assistance. A grumbling tank has entered the square, slowly rolling over shattered concrete and unmoving bodies. She tries to flag it down, but it does not stop and soon has moved far to the other side of the square.

Zuneh looks into Pardaj's eyes. "I'm going to drag you to the gate," she rasps.

Pardaj gurgles and stares at the sky. Her amber hair is matted with crimson fluid. Her tongue moves in and out of her mouth in a reptilian fashion.

Zuneh hooks her elbows under Pardaj's armpits and begins pulling her across the square. She feels ten times heavier than she looks, a limp mass of flesh and bone. Zuneh's left leg is all but useless. She struggles with all of her might, in excruciating pain, to advance just a few meters. Suddenly a large Army soldier appears and scoops Pardaj into his arms.

"I have her. Cover me!" he yells.

Together, as guns blast in the distance and, nearer, the wounded wail and beg for salvation, and as agony and chaos descend upon the city like a burial shroud, they traverse the seemingly interminable distance back to the palace gate.

In the days that follow, there are reports of massacres all across the Kingdom. The royal media have dubbed the event the "Night of Sorrows" and blame insurrectionists, saboteurs, and foreign-backed rebels for the staggering body count. According to official figures, over two thousand civilians died in the fighting, along with forty-two guardsmen and two hundred and

fifty or more soldiers. However, the word on the street is that the civilian casualties were likely ten times higher than reported. Hospitals and morgues are overwhelmed.

The counter-offensive effectively stamped out the demonstrations. The protests have ceased and the few civilians who dare violate the curfew are quickly rounded up. The King has declared victory against the “adversaries of the realm” and has made plans for a celebratory feast at the end of the month.

Pardaj is dead. Shrapnel from the rocket attack severed her carotid artery. She bled out before she even reached the hospital.

Zuneh was struck by three pieces of shrapnel in her thigh, a serious but non-life-threatening wound. The medics quickly stopped the bleeding and sowed her up. She is granted leave for two weeks, although, heart-broken, she decides to remain in her quarters around the clock. She would desert, but there is still the matter of the assassination. Having lost Pardaj, she cannot bear the idea of putting her parents in even the slightest jeopardy. They are all she has left in the world. And so, she is fully committed to killing the King, even if, in all likelihood, it is a suicide mission. However, at this point, knowing what she knows and having seen what she has seen, Zuneh would follow through with the plot regardless of the stakes.

At the same time, she wonders whether the masterminds behind the impending coup are still in position to carry out their plans. Pardaj, it seems, may have been central to the plot, and now she is gone. Furthermore, it is impossible to know whether the people who orchestrated Zuneh’s abduction survived King Toma’s crackdown. Zuneh, of course, has no way to reach out to them, no way to determine whether she will be called on to act within a week or a month or longer. It is wholly possible that the entire conspiracy has been struck down, that her parents are dead. She has never felt more alone.

When Zuneh is able to walk competently again, she returns to duty. Now that the Panther Revolution has been quashed, she partakes mostly in training exercises, showy patrols around the Palace and through the city, and the occasional escort for a dignitary. Although there is a milieu of general unease in the Kingdom, life, for better or worse, is back to normal.

Then word comes down that the women of the Royal Guard will play a ceremonial role in the King's impending victory feast. Nine of them, Zuneh included, will be seated with the King and will receive special medals of valor for their efforts during the operation. Could this be the moment of truth? The circumstances seem to imply that someone within the King's inner circle is collaborating with the resistance; that someone has gone to great pains to ensure that Zuneh will have a prime opportunity to strike.

Or, perhaps, it is merely providential. Perhaps the moment Zuneh sticks her neck out, she will be unceremoniously chopped down.

The day of the feast arrives and a heroic military parade is orchestrated. It begins at the Shrine of Greatness and winds through the city to the north gate of the palace. Zuneh marches in columns with the surviving one hundred and fifty-eight Royal Guardsmen. Those who perished have not been replaced yet. The induction ceremony for the new Guardsmen is scheduled to take place in several weeks.

There is a remarkably strong turnout of Toma supporters for the victory parade. They line the streets waving royal flags and bearing banner images of the King and the Royal Family. The children hold pinwheels and sit atop their fathers' shoulders and shriek with excitement as the tanks rumble past. Crowds sing "The King Is Our Salvation" and the Royal Anthem and throw flower petals at the feet of the marching soldiers. All this on the same streets that were littered with corpses and bathed in blood just weeks earlier. For most of the parade, Zuneh marches

mindlessly, overwhelmed by the inanity of it all. She thinks about Pardaj, who she loved so well, but, of whom, in truth, she knew so little. She sees her fallen, wrecked, expiring in a puddle of blood.

The feast begins after the end of the parade. A long line of dignitaries is ushered, inch by inch, into the grand ballroom, announced individually by the Sergeant-At-Arms and heralded by trumpeters. The nine Guardswomen stand at attention outside the entrance to the palace for two hours during the arrival ceremony. The sun is aflame, high in its path, and the heat is as though a dragon has breathed upon the city. Zuneh blinks as sweat drips into her eyes. Her heart beats heavily, anticipating her deadly obligation. Finally, the Commander arrives and leads the women inside to their positions at the King's table, where they again hold steady behind their seats, awaiting His Majesty.

Zuneh scans the ballroom: the diamond chandeliers, the silken tapestries, the towering, frescoed ceiling. She appraises the esteemed guests in their ostentatious finery as they mingle and cavort. She recognizes the Ministers, of course, and a handful of other luminaries, but most in attendance are anonymous painted faces and stuffed kurtas. They flatter each other and pick at hors d'oeuvres and sip champagne, oblivious to the traitor in their midst, her heart brimming with contempt.

That morning, Zuneh cleaned and loaded her pistol with extra care, scrubbing the inside of the barrel and polishing the ivory handle. Now she feels its subtle weight on her hip. She worried that the Guardswomen would be disarmed for the event, but, as it turns out, the King wants his ladies equipped: "lethal but nubile" as always. Yet, Zuneh second guesses herself. In these late moments, fear and uncertainty creep in. What if her treacherous deed is for naught? What if the ripple effects are not what the usurpers anticipated? What if she succeeds in bringing

Toma down, only to see him replaced by an even more venomous and vengeful heir? She wonders whether she should shoot him in the head the moment he steps near or to await a signal of some sort. Her mind sprints.

Zuneh suddenly realizes that she may be living the final moments of her life, cycling through her final breaths. If she can bring herself to act, there will be only a miniscule chance she ever leaves this room and, if she does, she will likely be executed in short order. She decides to stop obsessing over the assassination and to think of pleasing things while she still can: her last visit with her family a year prior, when her many aunts, uncles, and cousins convened to break the fast; swimming with the sea turtles along the reef as a young child; turning cartwheels in the pasture while her mother and father watched on and applauded; lying with her head on Pardaj's naked belly, kissing her caramel lips. And she realizes that these special moments have been few and far between, at least in recent years, in the years that she has been a utensil and ornament of the Kingdom. She decides now that she wants to live longer – much longer – so that she can fill her life with sweet memories. Is that not the reason we are on this planet? She yearns to be far away from this godforsaken palace, from this godforsaken regime, on a tea estate on the peninsula perhaps, in a small cottage with Pardaj, and she wants to wake up every morning and breathe in the musky, oxygen-rich fragrances of the gardens, and she wants to take care of her gentle parents as they grow old.

But, she concedes, her story has been written and she has arrived at the ultimate page.

With great fanfare, King Toma is announced and the attendees spring to their feet and begin to applaud. He enters the ballroom wearing a golden, lion-skin cloak and a gemstone encrusted platinum diadem, a long sword in a decorative silver scabbard on his hip. He holds a golden scepter with a crystal orb on the end of its haft and he wields it back and forth slowly,

acknowledging his well-wishers as if he were a high priest brandishing a thurible amidst his flock. Toma's three wives – stunning, bronze-skinned, extravagantly accoutered – follow in a slow procession a few paces behind the trail of his cloak. And the guests continue to applaud and shout “hurrah” until, at long last, he reaches the seat of honor and gestures for them quiet down.

Then, standing yet, his scepter held high, he announces, “Peace and prosperity in the Kingdom and security in the realm! May God bless this feast! ” His devotees erupt once more with a resounding ovation.

Zuneh is seated four places to the right of the King, who is flanked by his wives, the Commander, the Prime Minister, and their wives. As the first course is served – a colorful and aromatic fruit and nut salad, Zuneh touches her pistol, rubs it once or twice, as if to prepare it for duty. The moment is coming. The moment is coming.

After the dishes of the fourth course are cleared, the Sergeant-At-Arms announces that the evening's entertainment will begin. A drum corps and a band of musicians emerge from the far end of the room, followed by a line of two dozen belly dancers in brassieres and gauzy harem pants, their midriffs and shoulders bare. As the music blasts, the dancers make their way throughout the room, shimmying and swirling their hips seductively. The guests, men and women alike, emit a roar of appreciation and clap along as the music builds and builds.

Zuneh prepares herself – mentally, emotionally, spiritually. The belly dancers finish and then a diminutive man in a motley minstrel costume takes a position front and center and begins to sing a capella for the King. His voice is deep and operatic and mighty despite his stature. It echoes against the gilded walls and throughout the cavernous space, and soon he has everyone in the room smiling and laughing along with his lyrics, each verse wittier and bawdier than the last. And in between there is a catchy chorus, which the guests begin to sing in concert.

The crowds will cheer and the bells will ring

We pledge allegiance to our gracious king

So wave a hand and take a bow

Now is your time; your time is now!

Then, as the song reaches its final stanza, the minstrel concludes with a flamboyant flourish and drops to a knee before the King. The King stands and applauds wholeheartedly as does every guest in attendance.

Now is your time; your time is now. If there were a signal, thinks Zuneh, this would be it. The minstrel – he is in on the plot. His instructions are clear. While the ovation continues, she secretively unholsters her pistol, steps back from the table and eases in the direction of the ebullient King Toma. After a while, he ceases applauding and sits down. The audience, following his cue, sink into their seats.

But not Zuneh.

She stands. Directly behind the King, her pistol in hand.

She makes eye contact with the minstrel, on whose face a queer smile has frozen.

One of the King's wives turns, notices Zuneh, offers a strange look.

Zuneh sneers.

She raises her pistol and points it at the back of the King's head, just below the band of his absurd, depraved crown.

The room spins.

The atmosphere pulsates.

Eternity beckons.

Someone shrieks.

And Zuneh pulls the trigger.