

[An excerpt from *The Servant of Dreams*]

Part II.

**The Servants**

September-October, 2014

*[Part II begins after a chaotic meeting in the village, where `AbdalHalim's faction accuses the westerners from Amman of being spies. Muhammad takes over the meeting from his father, and calms the crowd. Translating for James they impress upon the villagers the enormous task ahead of them to apply for the grant. Elle has volunteered to stay in Jordan and manage the application process, because James has to return to teach in the U.S.]*

*ARC is the American Research Center in Amman.  
CHIP is a well-established Cooperative in Petra, much like the one Bi'r Mathkour is trying to establish.]*

# 1

## Wadi `Araba

September 2014

James turns off the highway and heads straight across the stony, ribbed delta toward the lava hills where Elle is digging. He has news.

Should be digging. She's not there. He turns towards camp.

Camp is quiet. The two trainees and the *qahwaji* have gone back to the village, and the cabins are silent – no AC strum and thwank. For a moment he is alarmed, and then checks himself. Elle doesn't need his protection.

He unloads the loot from Aqaba – fish directly to the struggling refrigerator, two big coolers of ice, wilted vegetables and booze. Stands under the staring sun and hoods his eyes beneath his palms, stares around. Nothing. Something. A flit on the fort mesa. A silhouette that disappears, then brims up at the near edge, waves, recedes again. She's seen the truck come in.

He climbs the gullied track to the fort. Elle is sitting on the low boundary wall at the west end of the peninsula, though it isn't even close to sunset. It is horribly hot.

– Come into the shade. He offers his hand.

She looks up to him and her face is slick and swollen and glazed with tears and snot. He pulls her into the shade of the building, thinking *stone shade is cooler*. They are also thus hidden from the view of the village, if anyone is looking. He holds her, and she begins sobbing again. Maybe he's wrong. Maybe he can protect her from something, whatever this is, at least be a temporary shield. Stone shade.

Back at camp he lets down the west side of the goats-hair shade-cloth. Makes her a bourbon with lots of crushed ice from the cooler. They have not spoken. He has no idea what to say. *What's wrong?* So much is wrong. This is not the time to deliver his news. So he waits. This at least he is good at. His one interpersonal skill, he thinks, wants to smile, doesn't.

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After the third drink she goes into her cabin and washes her face. Combs her hair and pulls it back again, changes into a clean shirt. God she wants to wear shorts. *But here we are.* Booze doesn't register when she's like this. It just smooths her out a little, affords the little hitch in reaction time that keeps her from falling apart. She goes back out to the terrace.

– You want food? asks James.

– No, but it would probably be a good idea.

– I brought fish and – *voilà!* – steaks from the Movenpick bar!

– Seriously?

– You know Mohsin, the bartender, I just ordered steak but told him not to cook it. James grins, and she cannot but smile at his sweetness, his effort, his – love. For she knows this is what it is.

– Steak then, what the hell.

She watches James busy himself with the fire, the grill. He makes a sheesh of vegetable chunks, puts them in a marinade. He is a fantastic camp cook. He ought to be, after all these years. She smiles, despite herself, despite everything.

James pops another cold beer from deep in the ice.

– Cheers.

– Cheers.

– I got a leave. The semester.

– Oh. Oh my god. Oh oh oh. How did you work that?

– Traded this semester for next with a buddy in my department. It was a last-ditch thing – I can't believe it worked.

Elle grins, she can't help it. She feels herself open, pool out with relief, brighten, everything. She'd had no idea how stiff and brittle she'd felt. Now she feels like cooked spaghetti poured into a colander.

– Oh. Oh God. You'll be here through January.

To herself she thinks, *I'm not gonna have to do this on my own. I'm not by myself.* Which she would never say aloud.

Later, after a rare steak and a pile of spicy vegetables and half a bottle of red wine, Elle says – I think I'm going to go up to Amman for a few days. Stay at ARC, take ten showers, go to Lou's lecture.

– Egch.

– I'm not asking you to do it. I'll take the bus. Come back down with Lou. I just need a break. I need to communicate sort of intensively for a few days.

James is silent.

– I'm not leaving, Elle says gently – I just need to get some stuff sorted out. And I want to get Lou to talk to me about what's going on here.

– *We* know what's going on here. Better than anyone. James is too vehement.

– Well – here, she points at the ground – maybe. But there's a lot about *here* that is going on up *there*, she points north – and we don't know shit about it.

James is silent.

– And I could stand a night on the town with a woman. Elle smiles, conciliatory – You'll be ok.

– Bring me scotch, okay? the good stuff.

– I will bring anything you want, *ya habib qalbi*. She barely restrains herself from taking his hand, just as headlights sweep up the track toward them. She stands to retreat into her cabin. James looks over his shoulder.

– It's Musa. Stay, please stay.

Elle sits back down.

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Just before dawn James stands with his back to the wadi, looking up, east, at the shrine on the mountain. He is drunk in so many ways. He imagines he wants to see the shrine silhouetted against the first blush of dawn, before any lights come on in the village, but a faint green flares as the minaret lights before *fajr*. He steadies himself on the rocky ledge. Thinks of the naga Ghazala in *Seven Pillars*. Lawrence writes of his magnificent riding camel, who loses her infant calf and lows and groans all night. His valet slaughters the calf to stew, and keeps the hide. In the morning Ghazala balks and shies. The valet throws the pelt down before her on the path. She quiets, nuzzling the bloody little hide. *Ya habib qalbi. Beloved of my heart.* Elle said. But maybe it's just one of those things Arabs say all the time, sweetnesses, courtesies. He has no bloody little hide to offer her.

He drives her to the highway in time to catch the early bus.

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## 2

### Amman

Carissa knocks at Lou's door, but there is no answer. She can hear voices out on the terrace. At lunch Lou said to come on over, but Carissa worries about crowding her, doles herself visits to the terrace like squares of chocolate from a finite supply. She listens at the door, then jumps back as she hears footsteps inside, how embarrassing would that be, to be caught with her ear to the door. She knocks again. The other voice, a woman's, queries. The door opens. It's Elle, from Bi'r Mathkour.

– Hi! I didn't expect to see your face.

– Well here it is, says Elle. – Fried and salted.

Lou calls – Hello! Get yourself a beer or whatever.

Elle waggles her head and bottle of bourbon and points at a glass of ice.

Carissa smiles and nods.

Their chairs are pulled into the band of shade along the wall. Elle pulls another back for Carissa. From the looks of things they've been there since lunch.

– You weren't at the Fellows' lunch, Carissa says to Elle.

– Nope. I'm not a Fellow this year, I can do whatever the fuck I want. I was availing myself of the shower and an air-conditioned nap on an actual mattress. A queen-sized mattress. Sprawling. It was delicious.

– Which definitely cannot be said for ARC lunches, adds Lou.

– What is that about? asks Carissa. – There are no vegetables.

– Hey now, have they stopped doing the boiled gray beans swimming in margarine-flecked water?

– Ah, ah. I stand corrected, smirks Carissa.

– And hey – potatoes are vegetables.

– But seriously, says Carissa – What is the deal with the food? It's not just that I'm a vegetarian – it's like food my great-gramma made, but worse. Arabic food is good food!

Elle and Lou sigh.

– Director before last was this woman who didn't like Arabic food. She was here for a long time. She established ARC's signature cuisine. Believe it or not, there are people who like it.

– The owgs, says Elle.  
– Owgs?  
– Old white guys.  
– Are they all fucking enormous? As the words come out Carissa's eyes fly wide in self-mortification, she covers her face, *shit she let that out of her mouth*.  
– Some of them are pretty enormous, laughs Elle.  
– After my first semester here as a Fellow, says Lou – I just stopped going. It was just after the first Iraq War and nobody was here, really. I just couldn't hack it. There are actual ingredients down there in the fridge, if you can just wait until four to cook it, after Abu Adam leaves.  
– Ooh I bet Batty was pissed, says Elle.  
– She was, but what were they gonna do – throw me out for not eating lunch?  
– Ah well – but now it's a Rule. It's in the Welcome Book.  
– Oh my god, who is Batty? asks Carissa, alarmed. – What is the Welcome Book?  
– You have a Welcome Book, my dear, says Lou. – That little sheaf with the plastic cover. Do you mean to tell me you haven't read its every earthshaking detail?  
Carissa looks at them, panicked, for half a moment before she realizes Lou is joking.  
Elle says – Batty was Beatrice, the former Directress. Beatrice had her issues, but ARC was a pretty laid-back place then. Not anymore. Do not dismiss the Welcome Book.  
– The Welcome Book is law, baby, says Lou.  
It is clear to Carissa that they have been putting the booze away steadily since lunch. Lou is drinking wine, as usual. Elle bourbon. Maybe since before lunch.  
After another half an hour of inane chat the older women excuse themselves – excuse her – to take naps.  
*To pass out*, thinks Carissa, *is more like it*.

Carissa is at loose ends. Friday *maghrib*. Thursday is party night, and she can usually rustle something up, but Fridays it seems like everyone is already out. The researchers – the 'Fellows' – live on the hostel floors below, and already have their

cliques, their field sites. They set out on excursions on the weekends. Most of the other ARC staff live outside the center. There's just Janet in the big flat below theirs or down in her aquarium-like office on the main floor, patrolling who comes and goes. Up here Lou and herself, next door to each other, and her tiny studio doesn't even have a terrace. She is disinclined to take her book downstairs and sit on the big empty communal terrace – it feels too much like advertising for company.

She knows that Lou sometimes goes out for dinner by herself. With a book. It kind of irks her, because there she is, herself by herself, and would love to go out to dinner somewhere. One of the Fellows remarked on seeing Lou out at Dunya – a *club* – at the bar with her book. They asked her to join them and she said she was fine with her book. They said she was nice about it, but – she sat there snacking on arancini and drinking wine for more than an hour. No one else came. She left. The Fellow shrugged. Carissa would never.

Her mind defaults to Zaid. Right now, a little buzzed and a little sleepy, she wishes deep as a bad menstrual cramp for one of their old nighttime conversations. He used to go out to the archaeological site late, sit on the ancient stone walls looking west at the mountains and satellites, while she stayed chastely in her room at her host family's and murmured. They talked and talked and talked, talking a stand-in, a sublimation. They were only ever together, bodies, when they could get up to Amman at the same time. It was just too perilous in the village.

Of course they talked this summer, but it wasn't like the old talks. When she went to the village he said he hadn't wanted to tell her on the phone. Since the visit, only once. She talked him back through, back over and over, their plan to move to Amman together. But he's signed the *kitab* now. He's engaged now to a second cousin from al-Gharandal who has been promised him since they were children. He is supposed to marry her at the end of this month, and she knows that, in fact, he will. It would cause a volcanic upheaval in village life to reverse it. Carissa wonders if he waited through June and July for her to come to him, and she didn't, so now this.

Lou listened sympathetically to the whole story, but in the end said – I don't doubt that it was intense. But think about it. You are an intelligent young woman, well-

educated. American. Christian. Do you really think you could have hacked it in Busaira?  
– We would have moved to Amman. We met in Amman. Working – at work, I mean.

– Mm. Lou had chewed on her thumb a little. – You could not have – would not have wanted to – cut him off from his family. So. Busaira. Even if you were living in Amman.

By this point Carissa was crying.

Lou said, not unkindly – Get your party dress on. Meet some people. There are men all over this lovely planet.

Carissa awakens suddenly, disoriented. Her *abajour* are rolled down, so she has no idea what time it is, only that no dash of light pierces the steel screen. She fumbles for her phone. Eight-thirty – she slept for three hours. *Passed out, is more like it*, she thinks mirthlessly. She slides her window open – she likes to sleep without the air-conditioning. She hears Lou and Elle on the terrace, speaking quietly. She knows she should not intrude. She can't make out any words, only the serious tones, the flow of conversation, the occasional long pauses. She winces as she hauls the *abajour* up by its noisy crank-strap. The voices cease for a moment. Chairs scrape and clank – moving to the far end of the terrace. The conversation continues softly.

### 3

#### Bi'r Mathkour

Elle is staying for him for Bi'r Mathkour, but not for *him*.

He is staying for Elle. And for Bi'r Mathkour, but.

Elle can do more for Bi'r Mathkour than he can, now, in this new territory.

His thirty years of excavation and research really mean nothing to the village unless he can turn it into money, 'development' money. He tries to feel bitter about this, but he doesn't, really. He has always wanted to benefit the village, and what they need

most is cash. But the bureaucratic terrain they are entering – not his forte. Worse than that: he could be a liability. He presents himself best on the written page. In person he chokes.

He hopes, in a small, hidden, hopeless way, that she is also staying for him – *him*. But in extremis on Wednesday she spoke, brokenly, only of her lost son, lost time, of claustrophobic New England, empty LA, of the way the late August desert light unstrings her, threads her back to her young days here, of the coming fall, the light, warm, dry, transparent afternoons, the brittle evening air, the chill moons over the Jibal al-Sharah. She is ashamed of herself. She is ashamed to want to escape her fortunate life. She seems not to be staying here, but to be leaving somewhere. Someone. Not him.

She says nothing of the husband. Faithfully.

At dusk he goes into the village for no good reason. He doesn't have anything interesting to cook, but he doesn't really worry about that when Elle isn't here. He'll have Pringles and labneh and tuna from a can. It's not food he needs. At the shop he buys a coffee, a Snickers, more Pringles, and goes out to the plastic tables. There is a brief buzz of traffic on the highway and into town, men coming for *maghrib* prayer. The string-lights pop on around the concrete pad. The green fluorescent bars flicker at the top of the minaret. There is a speed-bump on the highway right at the shop. The owner paid for it. A Hilux, stuffed with bearded mujaheddin in dark thaub and flat-topped, diaper-wrapped headgear, slows for the bump. It's too dark to see if it's `AbdalHalim driving. Who are these guys? where is he getting them? In three decades James has never met a bedou fundamentalist.

The southbound bus pulls dustily onto the shoulder opposite the two shops. A tall, slender man debarks and waits, covering his nose and mouth, until the bus has rumbled away. He looks up, still standing very still and erect. James waves. Muhammad waves back, grinning. Hoists his packs and crosses the highway, drops it on the table and goes in to order coffee.

For a moment James feels like Jesus has come to save his own personal soul.

– I don't have anything ready to cook at camp, says James, when Muhammad suggests they get off the highway. – But I'll drive you back in here later if you want to come out.

– I ate sandwiches on the bus. I can sleep by the fire. I don't want to go home anyway.

– Yalla, let's go then.

Muhammad is wearing a blue-and-white striped rugby shirt, dark-wash jeans, and vogueish white leather sneakers. It occurs to James – and it occurs to him that it is occurring to him – that this is out of character. He realizes that he has noticed that Muhammad dresses carefully for his audiences – traditional thaub and abaya when he wants to make a point about his heritage – mostly in Amman; precisely attuned mountaineering gear for trail work, or when he wants to piss off `Abdalhalim. But this is a new look. And those are expensive shoes – they don't look *balawi*, from the used clothing stores in the souq.

After enough scotch James asks – What's up with this outfit? He gestures.

Muhammad looks down at himself, coughs out a short laugh. – Yes, outfit. It is an outfit. That is a good word.

– All yours.

– Helen. From Helen.

James looks up quickly – The woman at the –

– Movenpick, yes.

– She lives in Amman?

– Yes.

There is a silence.

– She works for Mercy Corps. One of these foreign... aid – *mu'assasaat*? foundations? Muhammad is unsure of the correct expression.

– Mhm. James thinks. – Agencies. She sent you the RFP.

– Yes. *Agencies*. James watches him tuck the word into his active vocabulary.

- Well. Good for her.
- Where is Elle?
- Amman.

Muhammad laughs his short laugh again.

– She needed good showers and AC and a better bed and the company of women, James says glumly.

– Me also! Muhammad now laughs deeply and long. – *La samah Allah*, God forbid, I come to like these hotels. They are like being nowhere in the world. *Kawkab khas*, my own planet. I shut the windows tight and turn the AC up high and lock the door. Drink my whiskey. Everyone fuck off.

– So you stay where your tourists stay?

– I include in fee. Mostly I save money and stay nearby or camp. But when it is very hot, or a difficult day, he spreads his hands out, palms up – It is very hard not to lock the door and freeze myself. Shower! Big bed! AC! He laughs again, and pours himself another tea glass of scotch.

– No women? James giggles. He is getting drunk.

– Nothing left for women, those days. So fucking tired I cannot think about fucking. Sometimes, when guests are rich assholes, treat me not so nice, I want to go fight someone, but not even energy for that. Motherfuckers.

– I see you are building your vocabulary. They both guffaw. Then silence again.

– My father tell me about Elle, the son. She is marry?

James hears Muhammad's English deteriorating with the scotch. He shakes his head.

– Divorce?

James shakes his head. – I don't know.

– Hunh.

– Yeah. But hey! I'm staying until January!

– Habibi! My father very happy. You and Elle, you both?

– Yeah!

– She divorce. No worry.

The men sip their whiskey and watch the low coals. It is warm, the fire is purely habit.

– I need sleep, says Muhammad.

– You have another group coming?

– Not for two weeks. Low season. Too hot. Good. I can spend some weekend in Amman. Muhammad smiles sweetly and looks up at James from under his brows.

– That's good. You want some shorts and a t-shirt? He smiles. – Ya don' wanna go messin' up yer nice duds.

– Pardon me?

– Don't want to ruin your new clothes.

– Ah. Well. Yes. If is okay. He seems embarrassed, but pleased.

– Sure.

James gets him the clothes and says good night. It's true that it seems intimate. And James, too, is pleased by this.

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He emerges before sunrise to find Muhammad already dressed in his outfit and brewing tea. James would rather have coffee, by far, but says only *sabah al-khair*

–Morning of goodness, good morning.

To which Muhammad responds quietly, *sabah an-nour*, as required – Morning of light.

James goes about making a simple breakfast – eggs, bread, oil, za'atar, olives. After breakfast the conversation is idle but comfortable. James compliments Muhammad on his English.

– Helen. It helps with the tourists, *tab`an*. She helps me a lot.

– I see that.

– When does Elle come back?

– Wednesday. Lou is giving a lecture at ARC on Tuesday.

- About what?
- Ah – well – about development projects in rural communities. Villages.
- *Wallahi* – really?
- In English of course.
- *Tab`an*. Of course

James realizes that it is somehow interesting that this lecture on rural development will be directed mainly to non-Jordanians in Amman. But of course it is really meant for other development professionals.

– But hey, he says – the Wadi Musa group is driving up. You could come back with Elle. Or – uh – whatever.

It occurs to James that – of course CHIP’s going: because the big tourist communities around Petra speak English, use computers, have wi-fi. Still. If they weren't a SLECT project they wouldn't even know about it.

- You not going?
- Nah. I hate those ARC things.

Muhammad waits, his face interested.

– There is always a crowd – a lot of government Jordanians. The Americans. Others – you know. *Ajanib*. And for this talk? Fuck – all these USAID people and so on. Other agencies. Worse, there is always a cocktail party afterwards. Wine, beer, food. So a lot of people come just for the wine and food, and to talk to each other afterwards. Not my deal.

Muhammad laughs. – No, I see this.

– If you want to go with the Wadi Musa guys I could drive you up there Tuesday. I need to go to the *khudarji* anyway. Get some cool mountain air. Lou gave us a key to her place.

– Us? says Muhammad with a bright, astute smile.

Andrew blushes like a ripe peach. – Yeah. Us.

– You should speak Arabic. You know words. Say – *I want to go to the vegetables market*.

James' rosy-brown skin reddens further. He stammers. Literally chokes slightly on his own spit.

– You can, insists Muhammad. – Say it. I want. Go. To. *Khudarji*.

– *Biddi ... aruh... ila al-khudarji*.

– *Yalla, ya zalameh*. C’mon, dude. Let's go.

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