

STORIES OF THE JASMINE REVOLUTION

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to portray the events of the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, which occurred between December of 2010 and January of 2011. The piece attempts to convey the occurrences of this historical event in a manner that captures the human element of the story. Whereas historical accounts emphasize the larger implications, causes, and effects of particular events, and journalistic accounts tend to focus on the details of those events, both approaches can under represent or at times completely disregard the fact that real human beings were responsible for and affected by the situations that historians and journalists attempt to chronicle. Through both intensive research and the application of the tools of creative writing, this thesis combines fact and fiction in an effort to portray what these events were like from the perspectives of the people who actually experienced them. In this way, it becomes possible to understand the events of the Jasmine Revolution in terms of the trials, fears, bravery, and suffering of the people of Tunisia, in hopes that this personal approach will encourage further interest and concern from those around the world who may only view these events as a distant news story or a chapter in a history book.

Chapter 1

“According to Transparency International's annual survey and Embassy contacts' observations, corruption in Tunisia is getting worse. Whether it's cash, services, land, property, or yes, even your yacht, President Ben Ali's family is rumored to covet it and reportedly gets what it wants. Beyond the stories of the First Family's shady dealings, Tunisians report encountering low-level corruption as well in interactions with the police, customs, and a variety of government ministries.”

- Cable sent from the United States Embassy in Tunis, entitled “Corruption In Tunisia: What's Yours Is Mine”

Dust cascaded down the streets of Sidi Bouzid, carried by the wind that collected it. The air was chilled, but hot sunbeams escaped the clouds, and the airborne dirt clung to the skin of a young man who carefully marched down the road holding a box of apples above his head. Mohammed Bouazizi squinted his eyes against the glinting rays, marking his step despite the dazzling light. For more than ten years he had walked this street almost daily, and he felt that even if the sun blinded him he could walk the route with his eyes closed. The street was full, but quiet. People milled about with no particular urgency. Despite the early hour he passed a group of drunk men his age staggering down the road. He sidestepped the nearest of them, who moved slowly but with no hint of getting out of his way. Crossing the street towards the battered minaret of a mosque, Mohamed took his familiar seat on the sidewalk, and placed his box of apples before him.

“Fresh fruit!” he called into the dull street. “Fresh fruit picked only yesterday! Best prices you’ll find!” A handful of passersby took notice for only a moment before continuing on. Fruit sellers were common in Sidi Bouzid, despite the low wages that

the position promised. The fewer people there were who could afford fruit, the more took to the streets to sell it. Mohammed smiled politely at those who looked his way, and continued advertising his wares with a cheerfulness he did not feel.

Others soon began to arrive along the street, carrying battered boxes similar to the one that sat before Mohammed. They made themselves as comfortable as the cement would allow. A slowly growing chorus of French and Arabic began to swell as the merchants advertised their goods, their voices echoing between the battered buildings that framed the unpaved road. A few of the new arrivals waved to Mohammed, who had arrived first as usual. He paused for a time from his appeals to return their greetings. The scent of dates and citrus fruits cut through the ever-present stench of sweat and garbage. Some lingered, hoping to find a vendor looking the other way long enough for them to grab something from one of the carts. They listlessly continued on as the shrewd eyes of merchants who'd purchased their wares on credit locked onto them immediately.

Mohammed stood for a moment, stretching his legs and exposing the colder parts of his body to the beaming sun. He yawned, contending with the familiar feeling of fatigue, and looked around at the crowd, at clouds of cigarette smoke. The sun did little to brighten the place; its rays tangled in the kicked-up dust. People talked quietly, as if afraid of being overheard, and the voices of the fruit sellers rose and fell with ever-decreasing enthusiasm. Those that didn't have enough *dinars* for a bribe warily looked up and down the street after each call, vigilantly alert for the sight of blue overcoats. And always the persistent stream of hungry Tunisians without a destination.

For twenty-six years this had been his home, and he couldn't remember it looking any different.

Resisting the urge to eat one of his own apples, Mohammed took his seat again before pulling in a deep breath for another shout into the deaf crowd. The beginning of the day was the hardest. In the first hour after leaving home, it was nearly impossible not to imagine his family as he had seen them before heading for work. Karim had still been sleeping in the room they shared, late to rise as always even though Mohammed knew he still had work to do before school that day. Mohammed had thought about waking him, but he saw how peaceful his younger brother looked and let him sleep.

His sisters had been awake though; the two girls side by side at the kitchen table with eyes dim from sleep and their books neatly stacked, ready for class. They had smiled at him as he entered, but Mohammed had felt that their faces looked drawn, more than weary. There wasn't much on their plates, yet they seemed content as they ate their breakfast.

When he'd left, his mother had been standing outside, her whisp-like form held still and frail. She had watched the sunrise slowly creep above the village, staring into the orb in a silent refusal to look away. Her eyes had squinted, but she kept her gaze steady until hearing the approach of her son. She had walked to him, kissed him lightly on the forehead, and when he looked over his shoulder on his way down the road she had resumed her post by the door, staring down the inevitable sun.

Mohammed continued to shout his encouragement to potential costumers, but his mind had begun to drift, leaving his body to continue the tedium of his work. He

remembered being Karim's age when he had left for work the very first time. The world was much larger then, and he hadn't known what exactly he was leaving behind when he had made the choice to put his own schoolbooks away so that his younger siblings wouldn't have to. He had only known that someone had to do it, and as the oldest one still left in the house it would be easiest for him. Now he could feel the walls of Sidi Bouzid wrapping around him like a vice.

But no matter how tight the confines of his circumstances, he could always gather strength from the knowledge of what he was sparing his brother and sisters. They would have their chance in school, and gain the tools to provide a better way of life for themselves. In fact, his sister Leila was away at university right now due to all the work he had done. Even he was afforded his own private victories from time to time by earning enough money to donate some fruit or vegetables to families poorer than his own. He had been robbed of many things in his life, but his humanity remained firmly his.

As his thoughts churned within him, his calls became more automatic. Mohammed thought of all the things that did not remain firmly his any more. But what little he had he needed, and when he was able to earn something extra he put it safely away, saving for a truck to cart his goods to a wider market. The time he saved would be more than worth the expense of gas, and there were many occasions where he went without his meal for the day to add a few more coins to his savings.

He did his best not to contemplate how much further along he would be were it not for the city officials, those men and women of the government who were rooted to

the town like leeches to a host. He couldn't afford their bribes, and there were times when he took his beatings despite a few extra coins hidden in his pocket so as not to have to surrender them. Other times when his goods had been confiscated, and he feared the retribution might be worse if he produced the hidden *dinars* and exposed his lie, he had returned to the creditors who had supplied him with the fruit to hand over his extra cash anyway.

But this was the way of things, and one had to keep alert if one was going to avoid them. Mohammed was as vigilant as any other fruit seller, but still had been harassed by the police and the inspectors on many occasions. He couldn't help but bristle at the memories of the relentless lack of justice, the fines and confiscations on behalf of the city's "public servants". They spared no one in their abuse of power, and any who asked for mercy were targeted with all the more vigor by the servants of the tyrant. Once when he was sixteen years old, a young woman clad in blue had approached his fruit stand and flashed a feline smile at him, her teeth glinting sharp reflections in the sun.

"I presume you have a permit to be selling these fruits here, boy?" Her voice had been full of sensuousness and tainted with menace, and Mohammed had grown tense before she could finish speaking.

"I... I didn't know I needed a permit," he had said. "Where can I get one?" Her smile had cut wider across her face.

“It’s not my problem that you couldn’t get a permit, boy,” she’d said. “It *is* my problem that you are operating illegally here. I should write you a citation, twenty *dinars*, more if I find any other violations around here.”

“Twenty? I don’t make that much in a week; surely you don’t expect me to have that kind of cash.”

Her smile had grown wider, and Mohammed had been reminded of a snake unhinging its jaw. “Actually, I do. And were I to write you a citation, you would damn well pay it. But luckily for you” Her hand had suddenly darted towards the boy and before he could react she snatched an apple from his box. “Today I’m only hungry for an apple. Tomorrow, who knows?” She had taken a deep bite into the flesh of the fruit, and resumed her patrol down the road.

Her name was Faida Hamdi, and that was the first of many visits. While she was but one of the hyenas that looked to him and the other fruit sellers for their sustenance, she seemed to possess a special glee for the task of squeezing them dry. Sometimes the municipal inspector came alone, but often burly guards escorted her - dark, towering men who flanked her on either side and awaited her commands. Once she had realized that Mohammed rarely had the money to afford bribes, much less a citation, she took pleasure in victimizing him. It was rumored that her father was a very successful police officer, and had schooled her in the ways of working within the law. Either way it was clear that she knew well enough when she had the upper hand.

Now, standing by his box, Mohammed found his façade of cheeriness deteriorating. With his blood boiling, he didn’t notice the sudden quiet on the street,

the scattering of vendors as they picked up their own boxes and ran. He was torn from his musings by a familiar, insidious voice.

“Hello, boy.” Faida Hamdi stood directly before him, her fierce eyes glowing as she surveyed his box of apples. She must have thought she had snuck up on him, and appeared surprised when he looked up at her and narrowed his eyes in an angry blaze instead of an expression of frightened shock. To have the object of his hatred manifested before him fed the growing fire in his heart. It threatened to burn through him, and he stood to face her, picking up his box of apples and holding them close.

“What can I do for you, inspector?” His voice held the texture of ice that contrasted sharply with the conflagration stirring in his mind. He wanted to break the venomous smile that she flashed at him. He was only dimly aware of her escort, men at whom he didn’t have to look to know how easily they could pummel him to the ground. All he saw was Faida Hamdi, and the long trail of degradations that stretched out behind her.

“Oh, I think you can guess,” she replied. She brushed dust from the black epaulettes about the shoulders of her blue suit, but did not draw her attention away from Mohammed. “It’s been an awfully long day. And I don’t believe I’ll have time to buy any food on my way home. It’s quite convenient to find you here, Mohammed.”

“Would you like to purchase some apples, inspector?” he asked, spitting the words at her like jagged shrapnel. He watched her laugh at his question, a harsh cackle that rang out across the street like an alarm, but not a single muscle of his face worked to change his expression.

“Purchase them? Mohammed, what foolishness is this?”

“Unlike some people in this town,” he said quietly, “-I rely on my own work for food. These apples are for sale if you would like them, Ms. Hamdi.”

Her smile twisted into a snarl, and she pounced forward to wrest the box from Mohammed. He saw her diving at him and knew that he would have to fight her off or let her take the apples. He had never resisted before, never fought back no matter how many times his heart had raged at him to do so. But with the speed of her advance and the intensity of his emotion, his instinct caused him to pull back.

He rotated away and wrenched the apples from her clawed hands. It had happened fast enough to surprise even him, but he knew he was in true danger now and all his senses were alert. When she did not resume, he held his ground and waited to see what she would do next. Her glare was full of equal fire to Mohammed's, her eyes like chasms at the top of volcanoes well overdue for an eruption.

Her right hand shot out like a lightning strike, and caught the apple seller directly across his cheek. The resulting sound cracked like a whip across the street; the noise silenced bystanders hoping to hide their observance of the scene by pretending to talk to one another. All was quiet for the smallest moment. Even Mohammed stood silent and still, taking a moment to register the depth of the insult she had just paid him. His cheek grew red from the point of contact, and the deeper crimson of his embarrassment radiated soon after to reinforce it.

A woman, he thought. A woman has slapped me across the face in the streets of Sidi Bouzid.

In his confusion, his rage had briefly subsided. But he felt it now, felt all the malice he could muster building and churning and compounding itself into a force that he did not feel he could control. He felt the shame of her strike stinging across his face, as if she had found a way hit him in the part of his body that let him feel pride. He watched her face as she surveyed the effect her action had worked on him. It was cold and delighted, and she flexed the hand she had hit him with as if contemplating another swing at his face. How could he stand here and do nothing? How could he ever come back here to work again in the place where a woman had unmanned him in front of everyone?

His nerves convulsed with the intensity of his emotions, and before he fully knew what was happening, he dropped his box of apples and charged towards Faida Hamdi with a single-minded fury.

A terrible scream rang out; he vaguely registered it as his own. Panic flashed in her eyes. Mohammed saw that, but didn't see the fists that shot out across his path as her guards moved to intercept him.

Before he could land a single blow of retribution he was knocked off his feet. The huge men dove upon him, landing kicks and punches as fast and hard as their bodies would allow them. Faida Hamdi looked on with grim approval as droplets of blood escaped the pile of writhing aggressors. Her expression had suggested disappointment when her guards attacked in too great a number for her to witness their brutality, but her thin smile at the sight of Mohammed's blood indicated that she accepted it as a suitable report of the action.

Beneath the pile, Mohammed had thrashed against his assailants, but he was overcome almost immediately and beaten until he stopped resisting them. Once he had gone limp, each man took a few more strikes at him. They drew back behind the inspector, their knuckles dripping with a dusty, crimson spattering. Mohammed could hardly move, and any effort he made wracked his body with a mind-destroying pain. But he drew up his eyelids, despite the stinging of the blood in his eyes, and channeled what was left of his strength to look with hatred on Faida Hamdi.

The inspector walked up to his trembling body, taking a moment to spit on him before she spoke. "After all these years, Mohammed, you really should know better." And with that, she picked up his box of apples and walked off, calling over her shoulder to the guards. "Search him for his scale, I know the bastard has it on him. Bring it with us. We're leaving."

One of the guards approached Mohammed and said, in a gruff voice, "Give me the scale." The apple seller fixed him with the same stare he had directed at Faida Hamdi, and did not move.

"Do you like being beaten?" the guard asked. "Because if you make me search you, I will not be gentle."

Mohammed made no effort to move. The guard began to wind up a kick, but the inspector called for her men to hurry. So, he stooped down to search for the digital scale. After pulling it from Mohammed's pocket, he quickly struck him in the ribs with his foot. Turning abruptly, with no further regard for the man who he had left bloody in the street behind him, he went to rejoin his party.

A heavy blanket of pain held Mohammed to the ground. It worked itself into his flesh, gaining weight as if it could absorb the blood flowing from his body. He felt its weight compressing him, forcing his rage into a tighter and tighter space like a pressure cooker. He opened his mouth to draw in breath, but closed it sluggishly as viscous liquid stung at his cracked lips. Mercifully, the sun grew dimmer as his eyes began to swell. Nervous voices danced on the outskirts of his ears. He thought he heard his name whispered amongst them, but he did not try to turn and look. Instead, he forced his eyelids to cover the space that the swelling had not yet driven them to, and shut out the world around him.

It was a few minutes before he opened them again, and his pupils contracted painfully at the renewed assault of the sun overhead. He felt numb, which was far better than what he had felt before closing his eyes, and he slowly worked his way off his back into a seated position. He looked around at the mix of concerned and apathetic faces that had gathered to see what was happening, and in his dazed state of mind he slowly looked about for his apples.

His rage returned, and the memory of Faida Hamdi grinning cruelly at his beaten body, clutching his box of produce, cleared his mind. He gritted his teeth as he worked his way to his feet, and with a grim, determined look on his face he brushed the loose dust off of himself. He looked up the street in the direction his assailants had gone, and the onlookers in the path of his sight moved apart as if forced aside by his gaze. He took in a deep breath, and felt it inflame his anger like a storm wind across a

forest fire. With slow, deliberate steps, he made his way towards the municipal building.

The gates were iron-wrought and towered imposingly over those who sought entrance. Mohammed paused before them, standing tall despite his injuries and staring down a police officer who stood on guard. The guard appeared disinterested, and he lazily glanced at Mohammed as he began to speak.

“My name is Mohammed Bouazizi,” he said, “and I am here to demand the return of my property. It was taken from me unlawfully.”

The guard smiled faintly at his words, and produced a walkie-talkie from his belt. It crackled violently in his hand as he spoke into it. Mohammed couldn’t make out what was said in reply, but without speaking, the officer opened the door beside the larger gate, and allowed him to pass. The man continued to smile as he let the apple seller in. Mohammed had learned to be cautious whenever police officers were smiling at him, but he didn’t spare the man another glance as he propelled himself with single-minded purpose towards the inner doors of the building.

A ranking officer stood before him, and Mohammed noticed other police encircling them, but he stared straight ahead at the man in front of him.

“So, what brings you here?” said the officer.

“I’m here to report the misconduct of some of your men. I was beaten by them, and they stole everything of value I had on me”

“Well isn’t that a problem,” the officer replied, turning to one of his men.

“Take him to the interrogation room.”

“Interrogation room? I just told you what happened, there’s no need for that.” said Mohammed as he took a step backwards towards the door.

He had hardly spoken when a swift fist shot out and sent him sprawling. His surprise mingled with his outrage and he scrambled to his feet, ready to face the man who had struck him. But with an equal suddenness his right leg collapsed beneath him as he felt a hard boot crash into the back of his calf. The police were on him when he went down. His hands were cuffed and he was jerked back up to his feet to be dragged down a nearby hallway.

He was tossed into a room, and he did his best to work into a sitting position to see his assailants. With his hands behind his back, and his head dazed from the punch, it was no easy task, but his rage was billowing like a burning furnace, and the blows he had received were only rupture points letting out steam. The pressure was still building though, and he felt like it might consume him.

Three men stood before him: the officer who had met him inside the door, another policeman, and a third standing back in the shadows of the poorly lit room. When the third one noticed Mohammed looking at him, he stepped into the light and grinned like a jackal. It was one of Hamdi’s men, the one who had taken his scale. The thief was addressed by one of the others.

“This is the one who assaulted Ms. Hamdi earlier today?” said the man standing closest to Mohammed. His officer’s insignia gleamed like a firebrand, but his eyes were cold and unreadable.

“Yes, sir. It was him.” replied Hamdi’s man.

“And tell me again what prompted this attack?”

The thief leveled his eyes towards the man he had beaten and robbed, his smile never wavering, and began to speak. “This scum here was illegally selling apples. No permit, you see. And when we- ”

“-*How* am I supposed to get a permit?” Mohammed had not meant to shout, but he had silenced Hamdi’s thug with his violent outburst. “Every time you thieves shake me down, you’re always talking about this magic permit and no one has any idea how to get one! I dare you to find a single fruit seller in this entire God-forsaken town who has figured out how to even *get* a permit, let alone actually owns one.”

The policeman who had not yet spoken stepped forward, and kicked Mohammed in the stomach with a steel-toed boot. He doubled over, coughed up blood, and looked up at the man undaunted.

“Speak when you are spoken to,” the man declared, before taking his place behind the shoulder of his senior officer.

“Continue.” said the officer.

Hamdi’s man had laughed when Mohammed had been kicked, but he quieted himself and took a breath before he spoke again. “As I was saying, this little shit didn’t have a permit, and when Ms. Hamdi kindly offered to allow him to pay his fine in apples, he got angry and attacked her. We stopped ’em, and left him there after he’d been taught a bit of a lesson. Then we came back here.”

“Oh, and my box of apples sprouted legs, did it? And only stuck around for long enough to walk over and take my scale out of my pocket before running off?”

Mohammed spat the words at him, considered actually spitting in his helplessness to do anything else, but decided to restrain himself when he remembered the blood he had coughed up.

“Some other street urchins must have taken them during the confusion after Ms. Hamdi was attacked,” replied Hamdi’s man smugly.

This was too much, and Mohammed felt his rage flaring to the point where he wondered if his handcuffs would melt away. He rethought his earlier decision, and spat a thick wad of bloody foam at the feet of the men who towered over him. He looked up at the ranking officer. “Tell me, at times like these do you like to pretend that you and your men keep this place safe? Or are you honest enough to admit to being a criminal?”

The man’s cold eyes remained impassive, but Mohammed thought he detected a twitch around the corner of his left one. He spoke to the underlings behind him, but did not stop staring at the man on the floor. “Pick him up,” he said.

The two men stepped forward and lifted Mohammed by his cuffed arms, being sure to pick him up by the elbows so that the weight of his body might tear at his shoulders. Once he was standing, they slammed him back against the wall, and each one pinned him up to the stone. Hamdi’s man had somehow managed to widen his grin even further, and the officer at his other side was doing his best to keep the unprofessional smile off his face, like his commander. The man he was attempting to emulate stepped forward himself, and with a sound like a whisper, he slid a long, black baton from his belt. He extended the weapon slowly, pressing the end of it

lightly against Mohammed's throat, and lifted the man's chin. He studied the apple seller for what seemed like a long time, and when he lowered the baton, he squared his stance and sent the weapon flying right into Mohammed's stomach.

Mohammed tried to double over as the breath was shot suddenly out of him, but he was held tightly up against the wall and couldn't move. Again the officer swung, this time aiming higher and catching Mohammed in the ribs. He heard a sound that might have horrified him, if he wasn't so distracted by the third swing which caught him again in the stomach. Twice as many blows rained down on him, and then he lost count.

Again and again his body absorbed the damage that was forced on it. He felt his flesh go tender, then bruise, then blister under the repeated strikes. It was becoming impossible for Mohammed to breathe as the officer increased his pace, his own breath growing deeper as he seemed to lose himself in the punishment he was administering to his victim. Mohammed felt the rage being beaten out of him as his senses became unable to register anything but pain.

When the officer noticed Mohammed go limp in the other men's hands, he stopped, and stepped back. The other two took this as their cue to drop Mohammed to the floor. He slumped sideways like a curtain dropped from its rod, and didn't move. He was awake though, awake and alive and while the pain was great, it was not greater than the anguish of what his life had become. It was not worse to him than the knowledge that these men, and the men who ruled them, and the man who ruled *them*, owned his entire world. He coughed up more blood, and while his body screamed at

him to protect itself he could do nothing to remove the glare of contemptuous, malignant fury from his eyes. He looked at his torturers as if they were beneath contempt, and his gaze promised to revisit on them all the crimes they had ever committed if given the chance.

“The only criminal in this room has just received his justice. My men will escort you outside, and if you come here begging again our forgiveness will not come as quickly.” After the senior officer had spoken, he turned his icy, impassive face towards the door and left.

The men that remained seized Mohammed. He did not resist them as they roughly dragged him out of the room, back down the hall he had come, through the entryway to the municipal building, and down the path to the gates. They uncuffed him, and unceremoniously flung him into the street with their combined strength. The gate closed as Mohammed tumbled forward. He lay there for a while, breathing deeply and flexing his hands with gentle motions as they regained circulation. The man who had let him through the gate peered down at him with the exact same smile Mohammed had seen on the way in.

Mohammed could feel how broken his body was, but he forced himself not to think too much about it. It was obvious to him why he was having trouble seeing, considering how much blood and swollen tissue there was. But he could not feel any pain. All he could feel was the black hole inside of him, the carnivorous vacuum that had sprung like a trap in his insides somewhere during his last beating. It was not for fear of pain that he lay still, but for a brief, dangerous moment, a lack of will.

He might have allowed it to swallow him, had it not been for the guard still standing over him at the gate. His leering face hung like a phantom above Mohammed, sending down its wordless torment like a blind judgment. He would not lay here beneath this man, this slave of slaves. Then, he would become a slave himself, yet another lifeless man on a long chain of corruption. It was a corruption in all senses of the word, and he knew that if it ever came to that, they would have taken the only thing he had left.

He worked slowly to a sitting position, rolled to his knees, and stood gingerly. He tested the limits of his battered body, and began to walk down the road.

Sidi Bouzid whirled around him like a flickering movie. He saw strange colors on the edge of his vision, but he could still see the broken down brick of familiar buildings and occasionally even the garbage in his path, although he didn't always make the effort to step around it. He walked down crooked, dusty roadways until he finally arrived at his destination.

The gates around the governor's office were higher than the ones around the municipal building. Two guards stood at rigid attention, but they turned towards him, hands on their pistols when they caught the look in Mohammed's eye. He approached like a continent; creeping ceaselessly forward against all the resistance that his pain offered him. He got closer to the men than they seemed comfortable with, and with a deep, gravelly voice, he spoke.

"I'm here to see the Governor."

The guards were lost for a moment. The sight of the man before them held them transfixed as Mohammed bled from numerous wounds, his eyes glaring like opals in dying sunlight. But soon one of them broke free again and remembered himself. He grinned as if someone was trying to play a joke on him, and when he began to laugh his partner was awakened as well.

“Here to see the Governor, are you? I see you’ve dressed your finest. What time is your appointment?” The tall guard sneered as he asked his questions. Mohammed did not seem to notice.

“I don’t have an appointment. I’m here to report the violence and theft that I’ve suffered, and enlist the Governor’s help in returning my stolen property.”

“Take it to the municipal office than. The police will take care of it.”

“I’ve already done that,” Mohammed looked down at his injuries and held out his arms as he spoke, “you can see the results of that conversation. It was municipal officers that robbed me, and I need to speak to the Governor.”

“If the police turned you out, you must have done something wrong. The Governor doesn’t have time to listen to the problems of every low-life who happens to know the way to his office. Get out of here,” replied the guard who hadn’t spoken yet.

“You don’t understand,” said Mohammed. “I need to see the Governor.” He had not expected to be let in. He hadn’t expected anything. He had simply picked himself up from where he had been tossed outside the municipal building, and channeled all the frantic, steaming energy that was threatening to rupture him into his metronome steps towards the Governor’s office. He felt like a machine being pumped

full of unstable power. He worked towards his goal with an automaton's motions and a rabid mind, ready to strip down his gears and combust if his engines weren't strong enough to overcome the resistance. Somewhere inside of him, a deep despair beyond description sank itself like quicksand and he could feel what was left of him being sucked in with it.

The first guard spoke. "Maybe you didn't hear me, asshole. The Governor is busy, and he isn't going to put aside what he's doing for the likes of you. Now go the hell away before I beat you until you can't go anywhere at all."

Mohamed didn't move.

"I need to see the Governor," he said again.

"Tell me, street rat, how are you going talk to him with a broken jaw?" said the second guard, and before Mohammed could register it, his fist came sailing out to catch him across the chin. Mohammed reeled and fell, and the crunch of the impact against his face caused the most sickening sound he had heard in the parade of beatings he had undergone today. When the ground rushed up to meet him, he embraced it, and even if he had the strength to break his fall somehow, he would not have.

This was it. This was the moment. He had vaguely known that he was setting out down one of only two possible paths when he had begun walking to the municipal office, and an entire lifetime of experience made it impossible to ever believe that he might find the merciful way.

He stood slowly, and looked around with numb eyes. The men were still cursing at him, threatening to strike again, but he could hardly hear them. All he could hear was a high-pitched whistling noise that reverberated in his skull. He winced at the sound while he raised his hands to his ears. The guards were shouting, but they faded into the scenery as Mohammed continued to look around him. When his eyes came to rest on a general store, its doors opening and closing in the breeze, he left the Governor's office and moved towards it.

It did not take long to find something that he could work with. Everything was gone now; all of his respect and his courage and his hope and his love and his life, were all gone. He did not have the strength to find them. He hardly had the strength to lift the buckets of paint thinner. His hand clutched a small box of matches that he pulled from a jar by the door on his way out.

He walked out into the street, not bothering to stay on the sidewalks. He was back in front of the Governor's office in under a minute, but every single second stretched out before him like an endless burden, and he struggled to overcome the obstacle that each step presented for him. People were looking at him now, perhaps wondering what this ragged, bloody man stumbling through the streets might be walking towards the tall gates for.

Mohammed did not see them. All he saw was a world that had shut him out, and wrung him drier than kindling.

He stood very still when he arrived at his destination. He stared up at the gates, deaf to the renewed threats of the guards and the conversation around him. He thought

about the town of Sidi Bouzid, and how he had spent his whole life here and had nothing to show for it. He thought about all of the hard work and the stolen rewards. He felt his desperation building as he thought of all the people who had tried to grind him into nothing under their boots.

He felt the emptiness become inflamed, like a torrent into a gulf, and he felt the rage returning. He reached down to open the first can of paint thinner, and as he pried off the lid, for the first time in as long as he could remember he felt brave and strong.

Both cans were open now, and the guards had stopped shouting to see what he would do. They looked curious, as well as dazed in that same manner as when they had seen Mohammed first approach. He lifted the first can above his head, tilting it back to send a stream of paint thinner coursing through his hair and across his body. The second one soon followed. He felt it swirling down on him, tracing every surface of his body and creeping into his open wounds. The thick, noxious scent plunged deep into his nostrils and he did not flinch as he breathed it in. He opened his fist, still clenched around the cardboard box he had taken, and pulled from it a single match.

The silence that had built once he had covered himself was suddenly shattered as he threw back his head and shouted. "How do you expect me to make a living?!" he screamed, and his challenge boomed above the high gates and seemed to echo across the entire city, perhaps even further. It was echoing still when he struck the match, and then the roar of flames swallowed up the sound as they danced down the rivulets of paint thinner to consume him.

Chapter 2

“Chawki Belhoussine El Hadri, a 44-year-old man, was shot during protest on December 24. He died on Thursday, the International Federation for Human Rights said in a statement. Mohammed Ammari, a Tunisian teenager, had been killed by police bullets the same day that El Hadri was injured”

-Al Jazeera

The house was moving, the walls were shaking, the floor rumbling, and Walid Akimi listened as the town of Menzel Bouzaiene came alive. He heard shouting and singing and cursing and fought hard to stay in his place. He almost looked towards the window where he could just see the throngs of people swimming forward around the outside of the house, but he dared not look away from his father, who was addressing him.

“You don’t understand what you’re getting in to,” the old man said as his deep brown eyes spilled over his son; the low, solemn tone of his voice pouring out as deeply. The boy frowned, but his father continued speaking. “You may think that you can make a difference out there with those people, but what difference will you make if you’re shot down by some Ben Ali gunman who gets paid to do just that.”

“The fewer of us that go, the less difference it makes.” Walid spoke slowly, and he kept his eyes on his father as he struggled to contain himself. An uprising was happening out there, literally right outside his door, and they didn’t want him to go.

His mother spoke next. She stood still and firm, but her voice quavered as it escaped her lips. “Please, Walid, listen to him. You are young, and you would run into the jaws of a lion that knows no mercy for you or any other. Listen, my child, please listen. Stay home with us. There are other fights to be fought without a bloodbath in the streets.”

He knew she spoke of money, of food and keeping the house, but as far as he could see, that was all one fight, each a battle to be won by the growing protests. There was a reason so much fighting had to be done, and its name was Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Still, it was hard to look at her, hard to see her sadness so plainly and still deny her. He had to go though, and at eighteen years old they could not stop him. His father was beginning to realize that and it was making him angry.

The pools of those brown eyes rose up into waves, and Walid could feel the intensity of them while the man spoke: “You are foolish. Young blood boils quickly, I haven’t forgotten. But are you so willing to let out that blood and steam that you’ll march into a bullet? Stop this, Walid! Do not leave this house!”

The boy’s expression hardened at the command. The words rolled towards him like thunder, reminding him of the thunder they had heard on the Mediterranean, when Walid was only a child and his father and mother took him on a drive over three hundred kilometers north to Tunis. The capitol had shined like a coal fire, dark and bright all at once, and the storm had warned of its fury well before it came on them. He was only a child then, and he was so distracted by the city that he hadn’t noticed the sound, but his father had and they found a place to go before the rain began. Walid

continued his efforts not to look out the window as he refocused his attention on his father. The man saw the darkening expression on his son's face, because he growled a sound of frustration through his scowl and stormed out of the room, leaving Walid and his mother behind.

Walid looked at his mother, saw the tears, and looked away again. "Please," she whispered, and that one word came so much closer to swaying his heart than any his father had said. He finally allowed himself some time to look out the window, and he felt her plea get swallowed up by the tide outside.

"I'm going, Mother. I'm sorry." He walked towards her to kiss her on the cheek, and could taste the salt of her tears on his dry lips. She kissed his cheek in return, but could say no more as he turned to leave. He reached out his hand towards the old, sturdy wood of the door, and stepped out into the streets.

His friend Nadhir was waiting outside for him, as Walid had suspected he would be. His phone had begun to buzz in his pocket when his father had left the room. The look on Nadhir's face was excited, and he grinned at his friend as he emerged from the house to the sight of the gathering crowds. Nadhir lifted up his hands as if presenting the opening act of a play, and began to tell Walid the news as he descended a few steps and came out onto the road.

"Hundreds are on the march, maybe more. Word is everyone is meeting at the square, and by noon we'll head towards the *RCD* headquarters. What took you so long?"

"Who'd you hear all that from?"

Nadhir reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. He touched the screen and handed it over to Walid. When he looked down at the device, he found sprawling Arabic and French, as well as the word Twitter written in white along the top.

“Why am I looking at your Twitter account, Nadhir?”

The boy smiled. “If you have to ask me, you aren’t really looking. Read what’s on the page.”

Walid looked down again and began to read more closely. Post after post was appearing on the cell phone screen as he tried to go through them. He saw information and instructions about where to meet and what to expect, reports about the growing size of the protest, words of praise and words of caution for all those who had taken to the streets, and the occasional prayer typed in and broadcast to everyone in Menzel Bouzaïene. Walid focused on the ones with the most details about what was happening, and tried to imagine what awaited them in the square. He handed the phone back to Nadhir.

“Come on, let’s go,” he said as he took his phone from Walid and placed it back in his pocket. The two of them joined the flood on its way to the square. They walked through the dust and dreary dwellings of the place they’d grown up, but it seemed to glow in a way it never had before, to shine with a light much different than the harshness with which the sun usually reflected off the walls.

Nadhir spoke through the growing noise of the people around them. “There are some things about Mohamed Bouazizi as well. He’s in bad shape, but still alive. He’s

at some hospital in Tunis.” Everyone had been talking about the man from Sidi Bouzid, the man who had used himself as a torch to set Tunisia ablaze. It comforted Walid to know that he was alive, but as he thought about the man burned and writhing in a hospital bed, he felt his anger push his feet a little faster towards the square. Nadhir moved to keep his pace and they kicked up dust with dozens of others on their way into the heart of the city.

They came to the meeting place as the sun climbed in the sky towards its highest point. The square was filled with the movement of bodies, the scent of sweat, and the sounds of shouting and singing. Signs could be seen with dark, angry writing, bobbing above the heads of chanting protesters. Walid took a deep breath, and felt his heart beat faster with excitement as he and Nadhir walked through the crowd. It was not long before they found a place for themselves and joined in the chanting. Many of the people Walid saw were around his age, but there were some older Tunisians there as well who chanted loudly, peering up and down the street with anxious or expectant expressions.

Both the boys were swept up with the energy of the people around them. It seemed to buzz and hum like a hornets’ nest, and Walid couldn’t count how many people had met in the square.

Suddenly, a silence fell over the crowd, and when Walid pulled out his cell phone and saw the hour he realized why. It was noon, and the time had come to march on the *Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique* building, President Ben Ali’s party headquarters in the area. A sound emerged from the stillness, low at first but

forming into notes that grew louder. A woman had begun singing the national anthem somewhere within the throng. After a few sweet words lifted through the air, the song was picked up by the people around her and spread like a ripple in a lake across the square.

“O defenders of the homeland!

Rally around to the glory of our time!”

Their voices rose in a great swell as the many human tributaries coursed into the square and took up the song. The crowd began to rumble like some great behemoth as the protesters began their march. The singing echoed off every wall and door and window, and even off the rocks and the few remaining trees, and was carried down every corridor of Menzel Bouzaïene.

“The blood surges in our veins,

We die for the sake of our land.”

They were moving faster now, and gathering up people as they went. Walid sang with a soaring sense of pride, and with a sense of power he had never felt before. Ben Ali had held Tunisia for twenty-four years, since well before Walid was even born. He had never known a country as fearless as the one he saw around him now when he looked at those who had joined the march.

“Let the heavens roar with thunder.

Let thunderbolts rain with fire.”

The buildings of the city looked small and frail compared to the size of the crowd. Like some slow stampede the protestors rolled over every scrap of ground

between them and their destination. The sound of their feet crashed around the street in a thousand separate rhythms, but their voices rose together in one song that swelled and rose with every voice that was joined to it.

*“Men and youth of Tunisia,
Rise up for her might and glory.”*

Some people were laughing, others crying as they sang. Some had their cell phones out, recording the procession on small cameras. There were veiled women, young students, old men, and even a few families with wide-eyed children in tow. Walid imagined all the other places that must look just like this as the protests spread across his country.

*“No place for traitors in Tunisia,
Only for those who defend her!”*

At the mention of traitors, many began to shout names in between the lines of the songs. Ben Ali was the most prominent of them, but his wife Laila Trabelsi and other members of the First Family could be heard through the singing as well. Towards the head of the living column marched a man with a Tunisian flag held high, the star and crescent dancing in the wind.

*“We live and die loyal to Tunisia
A life of dignity and a death of glory.”*

As they sang the final words of their third rendition, the *RCD* headquarters came into view, and the protesters were met with a line of men with guns drawn. They were clad in riot gear, and the insignia of the security forces was visible on their

uniforms. Their weapons were lowered towards the crowd, and a man with a megaphone stood behind them. He raised it to the space beneath his helmet's visor and spoke.

“This is an unlawful gathering. You will disperse immediately and return to your homes. You will not enter this building, and any attempts to do so will be met by force.” The officer stood before the rest of his men with nothing but the megaphone to distinguish him from the black-clad riot police behind him, their visors drawn down to hide their faces. He was loud, but the crowd was louder, and it was surging forward with a force that words could not turn back. His voice crackled from the speaker with increased intensity. “I said disperse! That is an order!” When he saw the protesters were not stopping, he put down the megaphone and shouted something inaudible to Walid, and his men pointed their guns above the heads of the people before them. They shot into the air, each pounding a few rounds from the ends of their rifles in hopes of beating back the ocean with the sound of gunfire. It was not enough to hold them off.

Walid was suddenly aware of how close to the front of the column he and Nadhir had gotten. In their excitement they had been swept forward, but the sound of bullets bursting overhead had caused his throat to tighten for a moment, and the tension in his body threatened to pull him inward on himself. He moved forward, pressed by those behind him, and looked up to the flag that waved at the head of the people of Tunisia. More shots rang out before them, and the flashes of light from the

flying bullets darted out at Walid's eyes and caused him to wince. The ammunition streaked overhead and screamed at the men and women below it.

"You will not be warned again!" returned the amplified voice of the commanding officer, urgent and deadly over the megaphone. His voice immediately cut off the barrage of warning shots. This time, when he issued his next command, he didn't lower the speaker. "Fire!"

More shots sounded, but the sound of the crowd began to change in a way that it hadn't before. Suddenly the songs and chants were wrenched away like music in a piano as someone gutted out the strings within. Screaming shattered the tumultuous air and panic ricocheted outwards like the bullets that caused it. Walid looked for Nadhir, but they had been separated in the chaos. The whole world appeared to slow down, and as he looked forward his eyes locked on the Tunisian flag, still held aloft by the person before him. He could see the flag bearer better now, the white and red scarf around his neck contrasting sharply with his black shirt, and the proud flag flying to match the pride in his eyes. He was simply standing there, still and somber and silent, and Walid realized that the two of them were of the same age.

There were hands grabbing at his arm, and he whirled towards their owner and broke the grip. He found Nadhir screaming at him, "We've got to get the hell out of here!" A sharp bang caused Walid to look back towards the one with the flag, but where the young man had been only the flag remained. It caught the wind and fluttered slowly downwards without anyone to hold it up, but it didn't fall fast enough to hide the sight beneath it. Walid saw him on his back, his dark skin dyed red and his

life pumping out of several wounds in his chest. He coughed, and a glob of blood and spit burst out from between his lips, but he did not scream. There was anger, and pain, but no fear in his eyes as he lifted a hand to reach for the falling flag. He did not have the strength to lift it far though, and as the flag fell upon him, the weight of it pressed his arm back down.

Walid was too overwhelmed to feel horrified. He gaped at his country's flag, now damp and still on the ground. He watched the circle of white around the star and crescent, and as he did he saw it eaten away by the red surrounding it. The emblem had landed over a bullet wound, and the flag was absorbing the blood of the body it obscured. Crimson liquid soaked deep into the fabric until the white could no longer be seen. Nothing but a dark red tapestry remained, dripping into the dust and vaguely outlining the corpse beneath it.

Someone screamed near by, and Walid's head jerked up in time to see a middle-aged man fall forward and land face first on the floor. A red blossom sprouted along his back, and he did not get up. Nadhir's voice rang out fiercely then. "Walid! Let's go!" He reached out and grabbed his dazed friend firmly by the arm and began to drag him. Walid did not resist, and soon the two were running. They ran back the way they'd came, finding the road full of wailing and cursing where the anthem had been sung hours ago. Or had it been minutes? Walid felt like it might have been years, and he almost didn't recognize where they were until he read some of the street signs.

People had regrouped at the square, but they were only a small fraction of those who had gathered there earlier. Many of them had only stopped here because

they were injured. He saw a man take his shirt off and tie it tightly around the leg of a wounded protester lying on the ground. When he cinched the tourniquet more securely, a woman's face appeared suddenly as the pain of the pressure forced her body off the ground and a scream from her lips. The man lifted her up with the help of another and they began to carry her away. Another woman stood behind them, keeping watch on the road back to the *RCD* building, apparently making sure the police weren't pursuing those who had run. Walid and Nadhir did not wait long enough to find out for themselves. They darted from the square, and Walid was grateful that Nadhir was leading the way as he struggled to keep his mind clear of all but one thing: *keep running*.

He did keep running, and by the time they made it back to his home the sun was sinking in the sky and sending shadows sailing before them. They were doubled over and panting when a deep voice startled them upright.

"You've returned." Walid's father stood from his seat by the door of the house, an unreadable expression on his face. "Nadhir, go inside and call your parents. Tell them you're okay, and that you'll be staying here for the night. It isn't safe to walk home just yet."

When Walid moved to follow Nadhir in, his father placed a hand on his shoulder, and the boy remained as his friend entered the house. His father did not speak right away, but instead removed his hand and stood very still, staring at his son with that same indiscernible look. Walid believed he was about to be scolded, until his father embraced him with a sudden fierceness.

“When I heard the gunshots, I had thought you were lost to me.” He squeezed his son, and with a horrendous force Walid felt the reality of what he had witnessed crash into him. He began to sob; a deep, muffled sound that bounced off his father’s chest and echoed around him like the dream that he wished this all was. He felt the embrace unwrap itself, and his father spoke again.

“Perhaps you *are* lost, my son. But not somewhere that I can’t find you and bring you home again. Let me show you something.” His father knelt down and began to roll up the left leg of his pants. He raised it past his thigh, and along the skin raged an angry, jagged scar; the flesh long healed but twisted in on itself like a frozen implosion.

“Do not think you were the first to fight against them. There have been many others, but such things aren’t spoken of. You’ve seen this scar before, but I’ve never answered your questions about it.”

Walid had often wondered how his father had earned the monstrous scar, but learned quickly that it wasn’t something he was willing to talk about. When he went swimming with his father, he stole glances at it and tried to imagine what could have caused the wound it must have transformed from. The fact that his father was choosing to tell him now filled him with foreboding.

“Some coward from the security forces gave this to me before you were born. He was harassing a friend of mine, and when he began to hit him I stepped in. I knocked him down but before he even struck the ground he had a knife out, and before

I even saw it, it was in my leg. Suddenly, *I* was the one on the ground, and he held that knife to my throat while he called over some backup on his radio.

“He made me watch while the ones who answered him beat my friend bloody; my own blood spilling out of my leg as he did. The man who’d stabbed me didn’t even look at them, he just grinned down at me like *shaitan* himself with his knife tasting drops of blood from the tiny cut he was making in my neck. He didn’t cut deep, just enough to have me bleeding, but added to my leg it was enough to knock me out. I woke up in a hospital bed next to my broken friend. We’d been left there in the street like dogs, but once the police were out of sight an ambulance was called. I almost didn’t make it.” As he finished his story, he rolled the leg of his pants back down and stood slowly to look at his son again.

Walid imagined his father pinned to the ground at knifepoint, and before he realized what he was doing he suddenly conjured up the image of the middle-aged man he had seen shot down at the *RCD* building. This time though, the man had his father’s face. The boy shivered, and felt his throat constrict. His father was so strong, but Walid had felt a lot stronger too when this day had first began, and he felt that the once firm ground was precariously shifting beneath him.

“It healed though, Walid. Though it took time and pain plenty it healed. As long as there is life, we will always heal, no matter how deep the wound.” He put an arm around the shoulders of his son and began to lead him toward the house.

Walid allowed himself to be guided to the door, still panting gently from the run back home. He fixed his mind on his father’s scar to wipe the more pressing

memories from his head, and felt both repelled and comforted by the image. Could he truly heal the chasm that another man's bullet wounds had opened in him? Could he make himself whole again after witnessing the complete dismantling of others? He wasn't sure, but he did know that the ugly flesh of his father's thigh was tough and rugged. It protected him better than his old skin had. The scar seemed to remind his father of things, dark things that had been too profound to hint at until now, and a promise of light somewhere beyond all that. Walid didn't know if he believed that, or what direction he should even start heading in if he ever hoped to find that light, but his father's arm around his shoulders held him up in more ways than one. Together, they stepped back into the threshold of the house and shut out the sounds of the grieving, growing city.

Chapter 3

“It is not acceptable that a minority of extremists and agitators in the pay of others, and against the country’s interests, resort to violence and street disturbances as means of expression, whatever their form is in a State of law like ours. This is a negative and anti-civil behavior that presents a distorted image of our country and impedes the flow of investors and tourists which impacts negatively on job creation, while we need them to curb joblessness. Law will be enforced rigorously against these people.”

- Zine El Abdine Ben Ali, Former president of Tunisia

Youssef Taher was taller than most of his colleagues, so his view of Carthage Palace was unobscured from where they stood on the sidewalk across from it. His black robes fell down around his long, slender body, and as he looked out towards the presidential residence he straightened the white fabric streaming outward from his neck. Once he had straightened it, a white line rested on top of the black buttons of his robe, covering them down to the middle of his stomach and completing his lawyer’s attire.

The robed sea of lawyers that had gathered before the palace stood like a black mirror for the swirling Mediterranean behind Carthage Palace. Tunis was unusually quiet, even with so many of them there protesting, and the absence of sound fed Youssef’s anxieties. They had not needed any further nourishment, as he hadn’t slept much the night before while anger and uncertainty had torn at his attention and refused him rest. All he could think about was Abderrahman: how they’d met back in university, how after that they’d kept each other afloat attending law school together. He was pleased when his old friend decided to settle down in Tunis as well, knowing

that he'd see him plenty in the years that followed. But Abderrahman was gone now; he had disappeared into the back seat of a police car and no one had seen him since. *Where the hell did you take him?* Youssef had thought into the darkness, and a ghastly image of his friend handcuffed to a chair in an unlit room flashed into his mind, blood running down Abderrahman's face past his broken glasses and into his whitening beard.

He couldn't have slept for more than an hour or two before he woke with the sun and got ready for what the day would bring. When the Lawyer's Order put out the call to join the protest, Youssef had been relieved of his feelings of helplessness; but as the word spread about what really happened to the three hundred lawyers who had protested a few days earlier, he felt fear infect his courage. He thought about his family, and what they might do if the security forces dragged him off and locked him up indefinitely. What if he was beaten so badly that he couldn't work? He dressed quietly in the dim, newborn light of the morning and did his best to steel himself for what might await.

When he had arrived at Carthage Palace, he felt his confidence return to him at the sight of so many friends and colleagues. He was amazed at how many had come, knowing that they all must have been hearing the same stories, reading between the lines of the same news reports.

As if they had heard his last thought, a man and woman he didn't know began speaking near by. The man spoke first. "Did you see the picture *TAP* released of Ben Ali's visit to Mohamed Bouazizi? The poor boy is literally covered with bandages,

and there's the president standing over him. I'm sure he thought he looked concerned, but to me it looked like he was admiring his work." Everyone knew that *Tunis Afrique Presse* was one of the government's mouthpieces like so many of the news outlets that were allowed to operate, and that such a display was exactly their purpose. But when Youssef had seen the photo they were talking about for himself, he had grown furious. Zine El Abdine Ben Ali had looked cold and calculating as he stared down at the results of his presidency. Youssef focused on that image and felt the rage return. Better to be angry than afraid; in the last twenty-three years of Ben Ali's reign, fear had earned the country little.

He had quickly lost track of the conversation he was overhearing once he began thinking about the picture, but when he returned to it, the woman was speaking. "The protests are spreading like wildfire from the coast to the desert, and the police are getting more violent than usual. Some of the protesters are too though, which is all you'll ever hear about if you look into the news. I'm telling you, this social media stuff is more than it seems. All of this might have died in Sidi Bouzid if people weren't posting videos and writing about what's really happening. I used to harass my kids about spending too much time on their phones and computers, but they know much more than I do about what's going on right now."

Her voice trailed off as all of them noticed activity at the head of their group. A few lawyers had broken away from the pack, and crossing to the other side of the street they turned their backs on Carthage palace. One produced a megaphone to address the gathering.

“My friends, it pleases me to see so many of you here today,” he began. “The Tunisian National Lawyers Order has stood for the principles of our profession since its founding, and I am proud to stand here with you today in defense of those principles. Members of our order from all across the nation have gathered in solidarity with our countrymen suffering under brutal police crackdowns, and in protest against the treatment of the three hundred lawyers who stood here not three days ago. Many of them were beaten, and some arrested, but today we stand again stronger and greater than before. Some of those individuals are here with us again today, but others have been locked away ever since, with no indication of where they are being held or when they are likely to be released.

“Is this what Tunisia has become? Have we fallen so far from the days of Habib Bourguiba? He fought for our independence, and under his guidance a free nation was born. But free men need not fear being dragged out of the streets and thrown into jail for voicing their opinions. Free men need not set themselves on fire to get the attention of their government when things become so desperate that they have no food to eat and no way to make a living.

“Yet Mohamed Bouazizi lies burned and fighting for his life in a hospital bed, Abderrahman Ayedi and Shoukri Bel-Eid sit in jail having committed no crimes, and the bodies of Tunisian children strew the streets of our central cities, felled by police bullets. We have devoted our lives to the study and practice of the law, yet they would have us believe that *this* is justice?”

He broke off as people in the crowd shouted their approval. Calls and cheers rang out in support, and Youssef could feel the energy building within the crowd. His heart was beating faster. He looked around, seeing the cheering lawyers and noticing the growing crowd of spectators around them for the first time. The man with the megaphone waited for the shouts to fall silent before picking the speaker back up and continuing his speech.

“No, this is not justice. And when people weren’t starving, it was easier to look away. When enough was enough, and we tried to speak, they tried to stifle us; but three hundred lawyers is nothing in the face of an entire nation of angry men, women, and bravest of all our children, who have suffered too much to let things continue the way they are. From the sea to the desert they are rising, and with every step they take they learn they have the power to walk tall and fearless. We are not prisoners in our own homes any more, even those of us that have been arrested. Something has been born in Tunisia, and it cannot be killed no matter how many policemen try to strike it down.”

Youssef scanned the crowd of onlookers again as he listened. Some were nodding their approval, and others were expressionless and attentive. One particularly well-dressed man appeared to be talking into a cell phone, which seemed strange as he was also clearly paying attention to the speech. The megaphone crackled as the lawyer paused for breath, and Youssef looked back towards the sudden sound.

“Many men and women cannot find a way to bring food to their families, and those that can have found themselves providing for another family as well: the First

Family. The president and his wife live in luxury while their people have nothing. Their servants are given free reign to exploit the citizens of our great country, and some are blind enough to wonder how we have come to this moment. I ask you instead, how has it taken us so long to come to this?"

More cheers met his question, and Youssef found himself cheering as well. But he kept glancing back towards the people who had surrounded them. He noticed that less of them were nodding and more of them looked on with intent eyes. Either those who had appeared supportive had moved on, or more of the expressionless men had arrived to outnumber them. Most of them were plainly dressed, except the man with the cell phone, and each one ran their gazes across the crowd of lawyers. Some turned to listen as the man with the megaphone resumed his speech once the cheers died down, but others continued surveying the larger scene.

"Twenty-three years ago, Zine El Abdine Ben Ali declared our beloved President Bourguiba mentally unfit to rule, and took the presidency for himself. He promised to continue our founder's dream for Tunisia, but in twenty-three years he has failed to do so. Now, his people demand an answer, and we will have one. For too long we have waited, and if he cannot give us an answer, it is he who is unfit to rule." A sudden silence followed his last words, its soundlessness closing in around the protesters like an airlock. It seemed like they were held there for an infinity as each one was struck by how much their country already had changed if a man was able to say such things into a megaphone outside the presidential palace. And then, as if the

airlock suddenly shattered opened, a boom of voices swallowed up the silence and a great, resounding cheer seemed to rock the walls and streets of Tunis.

It was then that the well-dressed man hung up his phone. He slipped it into the inner pocket of his suit jacket and made his way towards the lawyer with the megaphone. It was difficult to hear, but the lawyer had left his finger on the button of the speaker as he lowered it, and pieces of their conversation could be overheard. The man in the suit was trying to convince him to give over the megaphone, and he grew angry once he was refused. He reached into his pocket and produced something small that he flashed in the face of the lawyer, and Youssef caught the glint of sunlight on what might have been a golden badge. The lawyer stepped back and raised the megaphone back to his lips to speak.

“It would seem we have some company. This officer of the security forces was sent to intimidate us. To try and silence our -”

His words were cut short as the man he spoke of reached to his belt beneath his jacket, produced a heavy, black baton, and smashed the head of it directly into the speaker of the megaphone. The lawyer went down in a spray of teeth and blood. As if this was their cue, the many intent faces surrounding them were suddenly twisted with scowls and leers, and the men around them sprang swiftly into action. Every one of them was a plainclothes police officer, and they charged headlong into the people before them with indiscriminate rage. Youssef watched one of his partners, a man in his late sixties, get trampled down. A Taser shot out to catch a fleeing protester in the back, and he fell screaming. The device crackled in its owner’s hand, a burly man with

hunched shoulders who wielded a baton as well. His face was darker than a storm, but the softest of smiles found their way to his lips when his weapons found flesh.

There were screams all around, and a charred smell that caused Youssef to recoil from the man who had been Tasered. He turned to run, but he was in the belly of the chaos and couldn't tell which way was out. Uniformed officers had joined the fray, streaming in from nowhere and everywhere in full riot gear. Walls of transparent body shields pressed back black robed lawyers while batons of the same color reached out between the shields to strike.

The woman he had heard speaking before took a quick crack to the face from a baton and sank like quicksand. Youssef was frozen, and for an instant saw a picture flash into his mind from a day not long ago at work. It was an x-ray that had been subpoenaed by the court for a case he had been working on where a doctor had come to give expert testimony. A man had been beaten into a coma and robbed, and the doctor was explaining the nature of the victim's injuries. "The trauma to the head was extreme," he had said, pointing to the x-ray that Youssef now held firmly in his mind. "The skull caved in here, and here under the force of several blows from a blunt object. Fragments of bone lodged themselves in the frontal lobe of the cerebral cortex, and the patient was discovered unconscious by paramedics and delivered to the hospital for surgery. The patient has severely inhibited motor skills along with a series of other complications, and full recovery will be impossible."

Youssef hadn't thought about it much afterwards, but at the time he had imagined what the person whose x-ray it was might look like, and the memory

snapped him back into the violent reality around him. Again he searched for a way out, the way back home to his wife and kids who were waiting for him. He saw a place where some of the younger members of the Lawyer's Order had come together to try and make a stand. They stood in a big circle, facing outward to fend off attackers. Others less able to fight were gathering within the ring. Now and then, one of the young men would overextend their reach and be torn from the circle by an arm or a leg. They vanished beneath a writhing sea of armor-clad officers, but the circle closed in and the lawyers kept fighting. They were closing in tighter and tighter however, their backs brushing up against the people they fought to protect within the circle. One by one the number of defenders shrank.

Youssef did not see the man who approached him from behind, and received no warning before the flesh around his right knee exploded out from under him. A baton had sent the sound of cracking bone digging into his ears. He fell down onto his ruined leg and felt the weight of his body rend apart his wound with all the force that gravity could muster. He twisted forward and landed on his unbroken side, but when he hit the ground the pain shot its claws into his stomach and constricted him inward on himself.

As he lay on his back, he saw the man who had struck him down. It was the well-dressed officer, standing tall with a gore-smeared baton in hand, blood splattered all across his fine clothes. He smiled a wicked and satisfied grin as he surveyed his work, nudging Youssef's shattered knee with a polished boot. Youssef screamed and

looked down at his tattered robes. They sparkled with wet blood as the sun beamed down on his brutalized body.

The officer wound up a kick and shot it deep into Youssef's knee. It sent him into shock. His body tensed up and his world grew dim. He found himself wanting to smile as he thought *I need to get a lawyer*.

The pain was an ice bath that had overcome his entire body and was slowly shutting it down. His weakened lungs compressed, his eyes throbbing as they fought to stay opened. His world became shadows that danced and fled from one another. Eerie shrieks echoed off in the distance like wolves in the woods chasing prey. A million miles away, his mind was trying desperately to tell him what had happened to his leg, but he turned away from that and went further inward. Something warm was trickling around him in a pool that reddened his dimming vision. His eyes shut for just a few seconds, and then flickered opened. His lids sunk again as quickly as they'd risen, and the darkness took him.

Chapter 4

“I think that the one lesson that we Arab citizens should learn from this is that information is key. If we share it wisely, we can drive those rotten Arab regimes out of history faster than we all hoped.”

– Tunisian Blogger, Hisham Almiraat

Blue light flickered from a screen and played across the apartment walls, cutting a man-shaped shadow into the one behind Ahmed as he sat before his computer screen. An old chair with wheels at the bottom creaked underneath him, and the World Wide Web was strung out beneath his fingertips. He clicked and typed, peered through one window and then another, and kept a constant watch on the streaming social media feeds he had placed to the right of his screen. A map lay to the right of his laptop on the desk he used, small Tunisian flags drawn in over cities that had joined the uprising. An empty pad of paper occupied the left side of the table.

The room usually felt small to him, but not when he was on his computer. The streets of Tunis sent their motorized cries through the glass of the window to the fire escape, but the heavy curtains locked away all other evidence of the city. He heard nothing though, nothing but the occasional email notification ringing from the tiny speakers of his laptop.

There were riots as far north as Bizerte and as far south as Hammamet. Protests were emerging in the cities of Jandouba, Gasserine, Beja, Sfax, Nabeul, and all across the country to the very capitol of Tunis. Ahmed sorted through the data like a

steersman navigating turbulent seas. Grainy videos taken by cell phones and sharper pictures from real cameras were pouring in from everywhere. He watched police surround protesters in Gabes. A moment later he witnessed the tear gas canisters flying over a peaceful gathering in Sousse, and watched one fifteen-year-old girl raise her fist and shout chants while the other clutched a bloody rag to her head where a canister had struck her. Riots raged in Sidi Bouzid where protesters and security forces exchanged rocks for bullets, and not far from there he watched the video that had been posted of Chawki Belhoussine El Hadri's funeral. The man had died of wounds he took when he was shot down alongside Mohamed Ammari in the town of Menzel Bouzaïene. He chose the best videos he could find and saved them in a document, occasionally scratching notes on the pad next to his laptop.

Once he had gathered enough videos, he put the document aside and logged in to Facebook. His page loaded on the screen and he checked to see if he had any notifications or messages from anyone. As he expected, his friends were almost exclusively posting pictures and videos of protests. Sites like YouTube and Vimeo and just about any other place where videos could be posted had long since been banned in Tunisia, making Facebook the only place where videos could be uploaded. Ahmed began to add the ones he had found to his growing collection. Nawaat.org, Arabic for "the core", was doing good work in compiling blogs and videos, avoiding government censorship by opening its forums to people both critical and in favor of the ruling party and the president. But articles in defense of the president were growing fewer and fewer. If the censors should decide to take out *Nawaat*, it was

important that there be content available in other places. Facebook was an endless space with which to fill with all the information that Ahmed could find.

As he finished up with the last of the videos, the door to the apartment swung open and the sound caused him to sit upright and turn towards it. Nesrine stood in the doorway, her long black hair streaming over her shoulders and camouflaging the dark camera strap that she had slung across her body. At her slender hip rested a high definition still-shot and video camera. A lens jutted out from it and disappeared into a black lens cap, and the caramel skin of her hand emerged along the top of it as she hooked her thumb through the strap. She walked into the door, placed her camera on a desk that lay along the wall adjacent to Ahmed's desk, and lightly kissed him on the cheek. She moved away towards the other room, but he stopped her and pulled her back to him, sliding out his chair so that she would fall into his lap. He kissed her for most of a minute, and when their lips parted she smiled before walking into the other room and reemerging with her own laptop.

Nesrine sat down where she had placed her camera and spoke to Ahmed over her shoulder. "Any news?" she asked, as she opened up her laptop and turned it on.

"Plenty," he replied. "I've added a few new flags to the map. Ben Ali has announced a five billion *dinars* development plan for Sidi Bouzid and says he will create three hundred thousand new jobs. But if you look at the videos I just posted no one in the city seems to care. Governors and officials are getting fired all over the country; the governors of Sidi Bouzid, Jendouba, and Zaghuan have all been replaced as well as the ministers of communication, trade and handicrafts, and religious affairs.

Again, doesn't seem that anybody cares much. The security forces are definitely getting more aggressive thought. What about you? Get any good shots?"

"Things are sort of quiet today," she said. "Tunis has been locked down ever since the lawyers made their second stand. There were some small gatherings, but more police attended them than protesters. I did get a few good pictures though. I think I have enough material for my next blog post."

Ahmed was glad to hear that the streets had been quiet. He always worried when she went out to photograph protests. He would sit on his laptop with every resource at his disposal waiting for updates from the events she went to document.

As much as he worried, he never told her so. It was her sense of adventure that had first attracted him to her back at *Universite De Tunis El Manar* where he had met her at their old dorm. When her mind was set on something, it was set, and despite his reservations about her work she was a very talented photographer. She had been there six days ago when the first protest hit the capitol, her camera at the ready when one thousand Tunisians had taken to the streets in solidarity with protesters in the nation's poorer regions.

It hadn't been called a revolution yet, but when Ahmed saw the pictures of the police when they came to shut them down, he might have thought they were fighting off rebels. The movement had grown in size and momentum, and the harder the government tried to resist, the closer to full-scale rebellion the country ventured. People were rising up now with the goal of bringing down Ben Ali, and the undertone of revolution sent a new wave of resolve through the protesters in Tunisia. Nesrine had

switched to her zoom lens when the police had attacked that day, and caught everything from the striking batons to the expressions of pain and anger that flashed across the protesters' faces.

She was there the next day when the first 300 lawyers gathered near Carthage Palace. She had caught a lead on Twitter from someone in the area who had noticed them, and with hardly a word she was out the door. She had come back out of breath and looking troubled. She told Ahmed that a man had approached her and tried to take her camera, but she was able to run him off. That didn't stop her from going out again three days later though during the second lawyers protest. Ahmed had worried most for her then. People had been arrested at the last protest, and the pictures she had showed him flashed in his mind all day. Luckily, this protest had been announced in advance so there were enough people there that he could track what was happening. But when the Twitter posts went from simple reports to warnings of police crackdowns, Ahmed had stood up from his chair and left for Carthage Palace immediately. He didn't find her there. Instead, he found blood and torn clothing all over the street, most of it black fabric. He had walked home slowly, praying silently with every step that when he opened the door, he would find her there. He tried to remember the prayers he had learned at the mosque when he was younger, and slowly the words came back to him. He whispered them into the darkening streets and tried to swallow his fear that the apartment would be empty when he returned.

It was not, however. She had been sitting there on the bed, her camera on the floor and her eyes glistening with tears. He wiped them away, and they made love

with a kind of passion that only the fear of loss can create. That was two nights ago, December thirty-first, and after they had fallen asleep in each-others arms they awoke in a new year.

That morning, she announced she was staying in. When he picked up her camera as she stepped into the bathroom, he looked at the pictures from the day before and understood why. They spent the day together with the computers off, living deep beneath their blankets wrapped up in each others heat. But today it was work as usual. Once the revolution began, they had abandoned their fruitless search for jobs and devoted themselves to the cause, and there was much more to be done.

Nesrine's blog enjoyed a strong following of readers, as did those of many of the bloggers brave enough to venture towards the line of what was considered appropriate by the censors. Ahmed had always preferred to do his work behind the scenes however. Ever since the foreign journalists had been kicked out of Tunisia, no coverage of the protest was able to get through the state media blackout. But while Ben Ali may have been able to target a few journalists who reported for satellite media channels outside government control, they couldn't stop the thousands of Tunisians taking to the Internet with videos of police brutality and government-sanctioned injustice. Al Jazeera had been the first to use the material in their broadcasts, but soon other Arab media outlets caught on and all those networks were scouring the Internet, looking for videos to broadcast to the entire world.

Ahmed was working to make that much easier for them. He knew all the places still available to Tunisians to post videos online. He knew all the active blogs worth

following, and which of them were likely to post images and videos along with their writing. And he had Nesrine, who always was sure to shoot a few videos for him every time she was out photographing. His Facebook page was a veritable database of videos from all over the country, categorized by region and organized by date. And every night at 10 pm, Al Jazeera would broadcast as many videos as they could find into the homes of every Tunisian with satellite TV.

Not all that Ahmed did was as innocuous as compiling videos, though. The Tunisian firewall was strong, and important information needed to be brought through. Wikileaks had recently released a series of cables between the United States Embassy in Tunis and the U.S. government that described the rampant corruption in Tunisia. The Committee to Protect Journalists had released multiple statements calling on the Tunisian government to end the censorship of media protest coverage. Many other websites and articles were locked away behind error screens and notifications of restrictions.

Ahmed accessed a proxy server based out of Montreal and browsed a number of blocked websites, moving everything of interest into a new document as he scanned the many websites Tunisians couldn't access. Later, he would plant the things he found in forums all across the Tunisian web, slowly disseminating the information from different proxy servers in anonymous posts. He expected it by now, but he still couldn't help but be surprised at the lack of attention that the Western media had given Tunisia's story. They had given so much coverage to the post-election protests in Iran back in 2009, so why not the uprising in Tunisia?

While he was still on the proxy server, he opened up the document of videos he had collected earlier and logged on to his American YouTube account. He posted the most graphic of the videos he had, not wanting to include too many in case someone noticed a pattern in the videos coming in on this account and the ones he was posting on his Facebook account. Then he disconnected from the server back into Tunisian Internet.

Nesrine's voice pulled him away from the laptop. "Have you seen this Al Jazeera article on government hacking? It seems the Tunisian Internet Agency has been very busy." As she spoke, an email notification rung out from his speakers, and he checked his inbox to find a link to the article Nesrine was talking about. It was entitled "Tunisia's Bitter Cyberwar," and it announced that several major bloggers and journalists had fallen victim to hackers. Ahmed read through it quickly, but slowed down once he saw the names of some bloggers he knew:

...Another activist who was caught in the phishing campaign is a Tunis-based man, who goes by the name of Azyz Amamy in the online world.

Amamy told Al Jazeera in a phone interview that his Facebook and email accounts had been hijacked on Monday. Amamy was able to recover both accounts within two hours, after Facebook and Gmail responded to his request. The difference is that he had retained control of a separate email account with which he had registered both accounts.

Two hours was enough time for the authorities to get the login information for his four blogs from his email accounts, deleting all the content.

"When they took Lina [Ben Mhenni]'s account, and Sofiene Chourabi's, within an hour all the Facebook pages they administrated had disappeared. And then their accounts were deleted," Amamy explained.

The speed of the phishing operation, hitting several high-profile targets in a single day, demonstrated that it was exceptionally sophisticated, he said.

As well as Chourabi, Amamy and Ben Mhenni, those known to have been targeted include Med Salah M'Barek and Haythem El Mekki.

Amamy suspects the phishing operation was far-reaching and that many more were hit, but are too scared to go public.

Several sources Al Jazeera spoke with said that web activists had been receiving anonymous phone calls, warning them to delete critical posts on their Facebook pages or face the consequences...

"This has never happened before," Ahmed said. Bloggers commonly had their websites blocked by censors, and in extreme cases persistent ones were arrested on pretense or even attacked, but a synchronized web strike like this was unprecedented.

"Have you checked your accounts? Does anything look strange?"

"As far as I can tell, everything looks fine," she replied.

"This is why Facebook needs to change their stupid policy. Who cares if people use their real names or not when they make a Facebook page? If people were

allowed to use pseudonyms, they couldn't be traced back to their email accounts. And they definitely couldn't be found by those idiots calling people up and threatening them to take down posts like some sort of damn censorship hotline. Its absurd that they cant be flexible about this, and people are paying for it.” He jumped on to a search engine to see if he could find more information about the hacking. A lot of well-visited pages had been wiped out; blogs and social media accounts had been torn out of the fabric of the Internet, and Ahmed could see where the holes had been made.

As he continued to survey the damage, Nesrine spoke again, and the uncertainty in her voice made him turn to her. “Are you looking at Twitter right now? This might sound like a stupid question, but who is ‘Anonymous’?”

“Anonymous? You mean like the Internet group? They’re a collective of Internet users that sometimes coordinate their efforts over anonymous forums to take out websites they don’t like.” When the U.S. government came down on American companies doing business with Wikileaks last month, Anonymous put out the call to raid the websites and headquarters of companies like Amazon and PayPal who had cut off Wikileaks. “Distributed denial of service attacks have brought down a lot of websites as Anonymous members overwhelmed their servers with countless communication requests, telephones rang off the hook with robotic voices on the line, and fax machines shot out page after page of solid black sheets of paper until all their ink had been drained. Some people got arrested, but there’s no way to get them all. That’s the whole point of Anonymous.”

“Sounds like good guys to have on our side. You should get on Twitter,” she replied.

He brought up his Twitter feed at the center of his screen, and his eyes grew wide in the laptop light they bathed in. Words flashed like black fire along the page. He saw posts that read “Operation Tunisia is under way!” and “We are Anonymous! We are legion! Expect us!” and he saw links to other pages in blue. Link after link after link came streaming in, all going to the same place. He took a deep breath and clicked one.

A fuzzy grey screen appeared when he did. There was a white circle in the middle, and the picture of a suit and tie being worn by an invisible man, the Anonymous insignia, was imprinted within it. A big triangle sat in the corner of the screen, and he moved his mouse towards it to press the ‘play’ button. “Nesrine,” he said, “Come check this out.” He pressed the button once she had arrived and the screen crackled to life. A deep, robotic voice was speaking as the insignia shimmered in the background.

“Dear citizens of the world,” it began, “the time for truth has arrived. A time for freedom and transparency. A time for people to express themselves freely and to be heard from anywhere across the world. Yet, the Tunisian government has decided it wants to control this present with falsehoods and misinformation, and restrict the freedoms of their own people; all of this in order to impose upon them their own self serving vision of the future. However, they can only accomplish this goal by keeping the truth hidden from its citizens and by putting restrictions on the free access of

information. In doing so, the Tunisian government has made itself an enemy of Anonymous.”

Ahmed felt a slight chill along the back of his neck as the grey image around the insignia came into focus, revealing rank upon rank of people, their faces covered by white masks. He felt the nearness of Nesrine, and reached out for her hand in a desire to be closer to her as the robotic voice continued on over his speakers.

“Anonymous cannot and will not remain silent while this happens.

Anonymous has heard the cries for freedom from the Tunisian people and has decided to help them win this battle against oppression. Anonymous believes there have been and will be further changes in the way the world is organized so that never more will small groups of people be able to restrain the fundamental freedoms of the collective that is human kind. Anonymous therefore believes the Tunisian attempts at censorship are doomed to failure if only we, Anonymous, the people, take up our individual responsibilities. For if only we decide to make it so it will be done. To the Tunisian government, attacks on the freedom of speech and information of your citizens will not be tolerated. Any organization involved in censorship will be targeted. Attacks will not cease until the Tunisian government hears the claim of freedom from its own people. It is in the hands of the Tunisian government to bring this to a resolution. Oppressive governments of the world, take this as a warning. Anonymous has been watching the recent developments in Spain, France, Hungary, China, Belarus, U.S., and many other countries with a great deal of attention. Keep this in mind, for you may be next.

“To the Tunisian people, we stand together and united against this oppression. This is a battle which is waged not just for you alone, but to serve as a precedent and statement to the world.”

Suddenly, the image changed and videos of Tunisian protests began to play while the voice spoke.

“We unite to send a message that we, in fact, are not simply quiet citizens who can be peddled and choked into submission. When forced to by the threat of oppression, we can be loud as hell, and when the people roar it will send shivers across the spines of all of those who want to stifle our freedom and take our precious liberties away.

“Anonymous is a banner under which any citizen can fly. It is a banner that accentuates the bold and loud manner in which we as citizens must act when we have to. Most importantly, Anonymous unites us all, regardless of age, gender, race, religion, ethnicity, or place of birth. It unites us all and calls upon us as citizens of the free world, a world where we as citizens can stand up and make our mark in history, for the events of these times will be the printed words that our children will come to read. Let your children and your children’s children be proud of the fact that you were a part of a revolution that changed the world, a revolution that said ‘we will not forgive corruption, we will not forget injustice, we will not tolerate the denial of our freedoms, and we will not be silenced.’ Yes, this means you are Anonymous. You will not forgive, you will not forget, you will not be denied your right to free speech, free press, free association, and your right to an uncensored world of information provided

to you through the Internet. When we stand together, we have strength. Join us in this battle for freedom worldwide. Come out this January sixth and let your voice be heard. We are Anonymous. We do not forgive the denial of the right to freedom of expression. We do not forget the injustices caused by the removal of this right. If you are responsible for these acts, expect us, always. Knowledge is free.”

The video froze, marking its conclusion, and Ahmed realized he had been holding his breath. He let go of Nesrine’s hand and looked at her. A bewildered look had etched itself into her face. She caught his eye and whispered, “Could this be real?”

Ahmed turned back towards his laptop and began typing. He entered in the address of the first government website he could think of. All that he found was an error screen. He kept looking, his fingers diving and darting at the keyboard as he checked website after website.

“The president’s website, the prime minister’s website, the ministry of industry, the ministry of foreign affairs; - they’re all down. They even took out the stock exchange!” He was smiling now, his fingers flying as he checked forums and blogs for more news. “This is incredible,” he said. “Anonymous has no central leadership. They work like a hive mind, coming to a consensus on ideas in their forums with each member carrying out their operations in his own unique way. The Tunisian Internet Agency would be swarmed with distributed denial of service attacks, malicious software planted in their computers, and most importantly of all Anonymous would do everything in its power to break down or bypass the firewall.

No matter what is done to stop them, something new will appear for every threat they fight off.”

He stood up and kissed Nesrine, deeply on the lips for what seemed like longer than the video had lasted. When their lips parted he smiled again. “Tunisia has finally gained an ally.” He imagined a world where freedom was more than an ironic euphemism for control. He imagined how Tunisia would look without so many men with guns in it, and the type of future he and Nesrine could build together in a country that supported its people. *It’s amazing what changes just the promise of freedom can bring*, he thought to himself as Nesrine’s steady breathing rolled off his chest. His excitement mingled with his love, and he held her close while he imagined the possibilities.

Chapter 5

"Following violence in universities and lycees, and while awaiting an investigation to establish who was responsible for inciting students, we have decided to stop all the lessons in all educational establishments ... from tomorrow, Tuesday, until further notice,"

-Statement released by the Tunisian Education Ministry to TAP news agency

The sun was making its early ascent when Samira Sellimi entered the central courtyard of Tunis University. It was a cool, clear day, and she felt the wind grab handfuls of her hair and throw them back over her shoulders. One of the Facebook protest pages had announced the march last night and told everyone to arrive at 9 am, but there was work to be done before then and Samira had arrived an hour early to do it. Already a small group was gathering, and she surveyed the courtyard as she walked towards them.

Twenty to thirty students stood in a circle discussing plans in excited voices. Samira caught a glimpse of her friends who she had planned to meet, and she moved to join them. Farah was laughing at something, her brown eyes shining in a frame of hair the same color, and her slight frame vibrating with energy. Zied seemed distracted though, and his towering height joined forces with the look on his face to make him appear very distant. Perhaps he was only tired. He had called this group together to meet before the protest, and knowing him he had stayed up all night thinking about today's events. Samira entered the circle between them and they turned to greet her.

“What have I missed?” Samira asked, and Zied quieted down the others in order to finalize a plan. They were a mixed group, and Samira knew very few of them as she surveyed the students around her. Some of the girls had their hair covered, and a few had their faces fully veiled, but the rest had their heads uncovered and the only male student that she recognized was Zied. They all had something in common though, and strangers or not they were the sons and daughters of the Tunisian revolution. That was all they needed to unify them.

Zied stepped forward into the circle to address everyone. “Alright, we need to gather as many students here as we can in the next hour. I want us to break up into 5 groups, one for each campus, and we will spread the word as far as we can to anyone who may not have seen the message online.” He went about the task of dividing them up, selecting Farah and Samira for his own group, and once each group had been assigned a campus he spoke to them again. “Move quickly, and make sure you tell every student you see where to find us. What we need today is numbers, and the more we have the louder we will be. In the past few days, things have gotten worse than we imagined they could, and today is our chance to show that the students of Tunis University stand behind the revolution.”

Samira felt her excitement building as they made their way to the campus their group was responsible for, but she regarded it with caution as she reflected on Zied’s observation. Things had gotten worse, much worse than she ever expected they would. The year was only ten days old, but so far it had been the bloodiest one she had ever known. On the third of January, a few hundred students just like her had protested in

Thala, and were soon choking on tear gas as they marched. The police came down on them, but the protesters fought back and burned out a few government buildings.

Two days later, Samira had logged on to her computer to find half a hundred laments for Mohamed Bouazizi. He died of his burns on January 5th, and Samira had felt tears fluttering down her cheeks as she read the account. It would not be the only time that week she would cry for a person she had never met before.

The video released by Anonymous had reached the entire country. Groups all across the nation planned their own protests, including all 8,000 members of the Tunisian National Lawyer's Order, who chose that day to begin their general strike. Obviously the government had been expecting this though. They used the day to strike out at bloggers, arresting well-followed cyber activists like Slim Amamou, Aziz Amami, Soufienne Bel Haj, and a 17 year old named Bullet Skan, alleging a connection between them and the internet group Anonymous. A few journalists were rounded up as well, and they even went so far as to arrest El General, one of Samira's favorite rappers whose protest song "Mr. President, Your People Are Suffering" had become incredibly popular.

From there, it only got worse. Violent videos began appearing on Facebook of deaths in Kasserine, and the images of Thala plunged into a chaos of rioting and police clashes made Samira sick. She had forced herself to look at them though, forced herself to take in the sights and sounds of pain and fear, and used them to temper her resolve into steel. When reports of sniper attacks in the central cities began circulating however, she had only been furious. Her hands had clenched as she read the names of

those who had been killed from afar. As she watched a video of a man sniped down in a crowd, she slammed a fist on her desk as crimson tricklings escaped a dark hole just about his brow. The wretchedness, the cowardliness of it made her want to scream. She had thought of all these things on her way to the university today, and the thoughts drove her forward and pulled her back all at once.

Many students in Tunis had marched yesterday on the ninth, marking the biggest show of support from students now that mid-term exams were over. Samira hoped that equal numbers would arrive for today's protest. When she and her group arrived at the campus, they set a place to rally everyone together at and split up to cover as much ground as possible. Samira walked quickly through a small lawn lined with residence halls, entering each one to see who she could find in the common rooms. After she had directed 40 or so students to the rally point, she rejoined her augmented group and went back towards the main courtyard alongside Farah. Zied walked at the head of the group. Five students had arrived at the campus, but a few hundred students were heading back with her. The conversation around her hummed with excitement, and she noticed that the pace of the pack seemed to speed up as they got closer to their destination. Two students were speaking near by, one with his phone out reading what was displayed on the screen.

“‘Milk can be used to wash out tear gas from your eyes, bring some in a water bottle to protests. Don't use water!’ See? I told you I didn't make it up. The guys out in Thala have been at this for days, there is a whole thread on twitter full of protest tips. Here's another: ‘Soak a bandanna in vinegar and keep it in a plastic bag, wrap it

around your face if you see gas canisters. It will protect you temporarily.’ And if you don’t have any of that, here’s another one that says you can break an onion in half and put it near your nose and eyes to lessen the irritation. I’ve been reading through this stuff all night, I’ve got everything we need.” As he spoke he used his thumb to point over his shoulder at a black backpack that hung across it. Samira was pleased to see that he was not the only one with a backpack on, but nonetheless she held her hope that the protest today could remain peaceful.

It was 8:30 when they got back to the main courtyard of Tunis University. Three of the other groups had already returned, and Zied led his own to join them. By the time the fifth group arrived they numbered in the thousands. Samira marveled at the crowd, but she knew this was only a fraction of the 32,000 students that attended the university. There was still time for more to show though and she found herself losing count as students slowly streamed in on all sides. They had lost Zied, but he soon emerged from a cluster of people to rejoin her and Farah.

“Incredible. Look at all these people!” he said, gesturing at the gathering crowd with an amazed expression. “They just keep coming. And we still have fifteen minutes before we are supposed to go.” Samira smiled at him, catching his enthusiasm as she so often did when he got really excited about something. She looked around at the swelling crowd and saw a sea of faces. The courtyard was full to bursting, and signs and songs waved through the air from the hands and lips of thousands of students. She read condemnations of the president off of poster boards, saw memorials for Mohamed Bouazizi hoisted high with pictures of the young man who had given

them all the courage to assemble here, and listened to the anthems of her fellow students.

The hour approached swiftly, and in a few minutes it would be time to move out of the courtyard and march into the city. Already some students had emerged from the front gate due to the sheer bulk of people within. Everyone around Samira was glancing at their watches and cell phones, counting down till nine o'clock. With two minutes to spare, an atmosphere of anticipation had been developing in the courtyard. The sound of sirens suddenly cut through the air.

Samira and her friends were in the middle of the crowd, so the students were completely penned in by the time she was able to get a view of what was going on. Police in riot gear ringed the courtyard in a semi circle around the front gates, and vehicles were parked sideways behind them. On top of two trucks, large water canons were mounted and manned by scowling officers. Smaller vehicles had men on top of them as well armed with pressure guns to fire tear gas canisters. At the base of the vehicles was a row of men with guns. She saw men with body shields press students back into the courtyard, sealing off the front gates like human doors. A voice was booming somewhere from behind the police line, rolling amplified commands like thunder across the courtyard.

“Stay together!” Zied shouted. His shout was met by others, although they were coming from further forward where the students and police were closest to one another. Samira tasted bile as she felt herself beginning to panic. She knew what this was though, had seen it in a hundred videos and read about it in the blogs of people

who had been here before her. The fact that it was real now terrified her, but that terror held none of the blindness of the unknown. She let it wash over her and through her, and beat away the panic before it could take her by the throat.

A loud popping sound erupted from the police line, and Samira saw silver catch the sunlight as a dozen tear gas canisters traced an arc above the courtyard. One by one they blasted open in mid air and clouds of white mist were created from the percussive explosions. Samira saw them descending like a smothering blanket and pulled her shirt up around her nose to try and filter out the gas.

‘They didn’t even warn us,’ she thought to herself. ‘They just boxed us in and attacked.’ She could see the crowd around her thinning, but there were too many of them and too few exits for people to leave fast enough. Like a wave of groaning dominoes, she saw students being bludgeoned down by police officers who reached around their body shields with batons, marching forward in lockstep and trampling over the people they knocked down. Soon though, all she saw was white smoke, and soon after that all she could see was black and red as her eyelids slammed shut in hopes of driving out the fire that was burning beneath them. She screamed, and when she sucked in breath to fill her lungs again she dragged a cloud of smoke inside of her like a whirlwind of tiny daggers. A fit of coughing drove her straight to her knees as pain threatened to strangle her.

Suddenly though, there were hands all over her. Two hooked underneath her arms and pulled Samira upright while another hand wrapped itself in her hair and pulled her head back. She was dazed and blinded and could not see what was

happening or who was touching her. Before she could try to speak, a sigh escaped her lips instead as she felt something being poured over her face, quenching the burning fires that lit up her eyes and mouth and nose. It flowed over her, and the relief was so sudden and complete that she almost fell to her knees again. The hands that were holding her were strong though, and she heard a familiar voice come from their direction. "Farah, give me a bandana." Samira regained her footing as she felt Zied wrap a bandana around her face and the smell of the vinegar assailed her nostrils. She kept her eyes squinted to try and see through the clouds. Fortunately, some wind had picked up and a lot of the gas had been blown away. Her renewed sight revealed to her the danger they were in.

"We need to move," she said, surveying the advancing police line. Students were strewn across the courtyard floor, battered against the stone and trying to crawl away. Boots and batons rained down on their backs as they sought to escape. She watched a young man try to tackle a police officer who had struck down a girl next to him, but he was pulled through the line and tossed back to the men with guns behind them. One quick strike to the face with the butt of a rifle sent him sailing backwards to crack his head on the stone beneath him.

Samira wanted to run, but she tripped over scrambling protesters every way she turned. The gas had blinded a lot of the students, and they danced through the chaos to the music of their own screams. She watched them silenced by black batons, and felt her eyes watering again as some tear gas puffed off of her shirt and threatened to incapacitate her a second time.

She couldn't account for how quickly it happened, but suddenly they were on her. Farah was shrieking, and Zied stood in front of them both, but a sideways baton strike caught him in the temple and he fell backwards, knocking Farah down and under him as he dropped like a felled tree. Everything seemed to freeze then to Samira, and she looked up at the closest police officer in slow motion. The man stared at her with angry eyes through the clear material of his body shield. She couldn't believe how angrily the man looked at her, this man who had just beaten so many strangers bloody. She had done nothing to him, to any of them. She had only come to school today, with a hopeful heart and a sincere wish to make her country a place she could be proud of. She saw what he thought of her wishes in his eyes though, and she knew that even behind his protective visor, he was blinder than any of the students who were choking around him. He was not blind enough to miss the blow he aimed at her however.

The baton came low, and she felt it bite into her hip bone with splintering force. The side of her body caved towards the pressure, and she felt herself buckling forward until the officer drove the tip of the shaft right into her sternum. She staggered backwards, feeling the rusty scream of her broken hip more than she heard it, but somehow managed to keep her footing. Something soft was being crushed beneath her good leg, and she could feel it moving, but she didn't have time to look down. The baton came sailing out from the line again and caught her across the collarbone. She whimpered breathlessly, and went into shock once the pain threatened to snuff her out like a candle beneath the boots of her attacker.

Instead of putting out a candle however, those boots crunched over her as if she were gravel. She felt steel encased in leather meet with bone encased in skin, and where the steel went the bone gave way. It was in this manner that she broke five ribs, and her right arm in two places. The pain was something far though. It was distant and unclear, and a haze ensconced her vision that might have been more tear gas or perhaps just her eyes playing tricks on her. She saw her school, towering over the bloody courtyard, and like the sea roaring on a distant shore she heard human voices praying, shouting, and wailing while marching boots beat time into the wet, red stones. The men who owned those boots were moving on though. Not a one looked back at the results of their work, focusing instead on those yet untouched before them. Samira took a trembling breath, and felt her consciousness slip away like the wind she soon exhaled afterwards.

Chapter 6

“On Thursday morning a Facebook group called ‘The people of Tunisia are setting themselves on fire Mr. President’ announced, in Arabic: ‘Today Hammamet: With our blood, with our souls, we sacrifice ourselves for the martyr.’

-New York Times

Officer Bilel Hadrioui kicked in the door of the Hammamet police station with rage in his eyes. The crunch of the door giving way beneath his boot and the sound of the crude barricade behind it shattering calmed him somewhat. He strode into the station and scanned the room, finding no one, and proceeded inward to investigate the rest of the building. With gun out and ready in his right hand, his men were fanning out behind him, and he heard them sweep the rest of the building until finally one of them broke the silence.

“Sir!” The sound came through the floorboards in a dull throb, and Bilel stepped out of the unlit room he was searching and followed the voice upstairs. He found three of his men with machine guns pointed at a door that looked sturdier than the others he had seen in the station.

“What have you found?” he asked in clipped words that jarred the men into upright attention. The familiar tone and silent arrival of their commander never failed to demand an immediate reaction from his officers once they had spent more than a few days serving under him. And observing this never failed to please him.

One of the men stepped forward and spoke up. “Someone has locked themselves inside this room, sir. We weren’t able to kick in the door. It’s pretty sturdy.” Officer Hadrioui nodded to the man and walked up to the door. His gaze scanned the length of the wooden obstacle before him, and he calculated the best way to bring it down.

“Listen to me,” he said, his voice unraveling like a thread pulled by a sharp needle. “My name is Officer Bilel Hadrioui. You will open this door right now or I’ll bring a ram up here and break it down myself. You have thirty seconds to do this, and those thirty seconds are the last chance you will get to cooperate.”

Something about his voice, those syllables of silken iron, had all the force of the ram that he surely would not have hesitated to use on the door. Perhaps even on the people behind it once he got inside. He heard nothing as he counted silently. He felt his heart beating faster as fifteen seconds elapsed, and a smile slowly crept across his face as he reached twenty, but it faded fast once he heard the sound of a key clicking into place, and a lock sliding open.

Officer Hadrioui raised his weapon as the door creaked outward on iron hinges. A face peered out at him, bewildered and afraid, and he heard a thin voice edge its way around the door that its owner was partially hiding behind. “Don’t shoot, we’re police.” The door swung open the rest of the way and Bilel stepped in, holstering his gun, and his men followed close behind him with weapons still ready.

Inside, he found five other men with weapons in their hands. They looked at him with anxious expressions, and Bilel gored them with a contemptuous gaze. He looked around the room and understood why the door had been so sturdy.

“So, you were at least smart enough to lock yourselves in the armory. Perhaps, one of you is even smart enough to explain to me what you’re doing hiding up in this station when your city is burning. Anyone care to try?” His voice was getting louder now, building like the pressure in the ground before an earthquake. The earthquake began when no one stepped forward. “Are you deaf as well as stupid?!” he screamed. “Who the hell is in command of this station? Which one of you pathetic little cowards has enough of a spine to tell me what you’re doing in here? Perhaps you aren’t police officers. Perhaps you’re dirty fucking rebels who snuck in here to hide.” He finished the threat by redrawing his gun.

The man who had opened the door stepped forward. He was hunched and a little plump, and his whole body seemed to be shaking and quivering. “I’m in command, sir. The station was overtaken by protestors –”

“Rebels!” shouted Bilel. “This is a rebellion you cowardly pig. You and your men are locked in a god damned arsenal and you allowed your station to get overrun? How did this happen? If you were attacked why don’t I see any bodies around here?”

The man’s trembling grew more violent, and Officer Hadrioui resisted the urge to shoot him and start over with whoever was next highest in rank here. At last, the man managed to choke out a few more words. “They came in huge numbers. We haven’t had any action out here in years. We were undermanned and under

prepared...” His voice trailed off, and Bilel knew he wasn’t going to like what he heard next. “So... so we told them which mansion belonged to the Trabelsi family. Once they left, we called for reinforcements and... and moved into a defensible position to hold the station, in case they came back.”

“Like hell you did,” said Bilel. He was out of patience for this pathetic little man. “You,” he said, pointing to one of the others in the room. “Tell me what you saw. How many of them took the station?”

“A few hundred, at least,” he replied. “We had calls of three minor disturbances and we dispatched a few officers to each. Suddenly, we lost contact with all of them, and before we knew what was happening people were swarming in from every door and window. There was no way we could have stopped them.”

“Spare me your excuses,” Bilel cut in. “It’s enough to know that you and your fellow officers here are completely inept, why is not important. Continue.”

The man took a deep breath. “We don’t know much else, sir. We haven’t heard back from any of the patrols we sent out and the armory has no windows. We thought it would be best to hold out until you arrived.”

Bilel glared at him for a moment before turning back to the ranking officer. “I’m taking command of your station. Do what I tell you, exactly how I tell you to do it, and I will restrain myself from carving out whatever part of your brain convinced you that hiding like a woman was a better idea than doing your duty. Report your inventory to my second in command, and if you miscount a single gas canister, you’ll

have a few less fingers to help you count next time.” With that, he turned toward the door and marched out.

The city of Hammamet was spewing smoke when he stepped back outside. A cool ocean breeze pulled the black clouds out to the Mediterranean, and Bilel watched the darkness sweep over the tall mansions and hotels that the city was best known for. The tourists were long gone, but the residents in this part of Tunisia were wealthy and important, and Bilel had been sent with a sizeable force to quell the uprising. Fifty Special Forces riot police had been deployed under his command, along with five support vehicles, and an army division was scheduled to rendezvous with them within the hour.

“Get over here and listen up!” the officer shouted, and his men immediately stopped what they were doing to attend him. “Officer Adhoum, where are you?”

“Here sir,” said Bilel’s second in command, as he stepped out of the ranks.

“Take three men and get a list of the inventory in their armory here. Sort out whatever isn’t serviceable and make the rest ready for distribution,” Bilel ordered. “I want those vehicles up and running. Get full crews on them, but do not engage any rebels without my orders. I want you scouting the area; I need numbers and locations, so keep ‘em coming on your radios. The rest of you, hold here and wait for orders. The army boys should be here any minute, and if what these poor excuse for policemen here tell me, we might need them. Be on your guard.”

Men sprang into action to carry out their orders. Bilel looked up the road to see if any trucks were coming, then turned his gaze back to the smoke rising over the city.

The engines began firing as his scouts left the station and Officer Hadrioui grimaced as he began the part of his job he was worst at: waiting.

Two of his scouts had returned by the time the army soldiers marched into Hammamet. They were two hundred strong, each armed with a machine gun, and the column was flanked by four jeeps with heavy chain guns mounted on top and stern men behind them. Their commander approached Bilel as his second scout was reporting in.

“There were hundreds of them in the central city alone sir,” the scout said. “As soon as they saw us they made a run for us, throwing stones and even a few fire bombs. We didn’t engage like you ordered, but even if we had I don’t think we could have gotten them all before they got to the vehicle.”

The military officer chose that moment to introduce himself. “Looks like you’ve got some trouble there. Maybe we can help. I’m Captain Benzekri. We’ve been deployed to assist in the situation here. Did I miss anything else of significance in the scouting report?”

Bilel stood, annoyed at the interruption, and said, “If the rest of my scouts come back with similar reports, we are looking at a few thousand rebels. They’ve ransacked the Trabelsi mansion and the presidential vacation home, set a few fires, and stolen some vehicles. Hopefully your men can shoot those guns, looks like we’re going to need them.”

“Well that remains to be seen,” said the captain. “My orders are to observe the situation and report back to command for instructions.”

Officer Hadrioui barked a laugh. “What other decisions do you have to call in on, Captain? I hope you keep that radio close at hand for when you have to piss. I can’t imagine why the decision as to whether or not to shoot rioting rebels isn’t an already made choice, but have it your way.” Bilel took an instant disliking to Benzekri, but if the reports he was getting were even half true, they’d need every one of those two hundred guns the captain had at his back.

Two more vehicles returned with equally troubling reports, and when the final one didn’t come back for over an hour Bilel decided it was time to move out. The captain left a small garrison of men at the station, and after the contents of the armory had been divided between them and Officer Hadrioui’s men, they marched out to the closest location where rebels had been spotted.

The streets were covered in soot, and Bilel saw ragged footsteps trace erratic paths through the dust of destruction. Now and then he heard a soldier cough as a particularly thick cloud of smoke cut across the column, but otherwise all the men were silent save for the sound of their boots on the concrete. Windows had been smashed and doors kicked down into luxurious residences, and the ocean still sounded its constant rumbling through the chaos of the city.

Suddenly, a screech tore through the air and sent two hundred and fifty sets of eyes darting ahead and to the right. Guns were drawn and the column began to open up into formations when Officer Hadrioui’s last scout vehicle skidded out around the corner and came to a halt in front of the advancing forces. The driver stood up, sweat pouring down his face, and screamed his report in a tone that hinted at panic.

“Thousands of them, more than I could count! They saw which way we went; they can’t be more than a few minutes behind. They are chanting and screaming, and when a few almost snuck up on us under cover of the noise they didn’t even flinch at the warning shots we fired. We took off, but they know which way we went though; they’ll follow our tracks through the scorched streets and this is not enough men to handle them!”

“Shut your damn mouth if you’ve run out of useful things to say,” shouted Bilel. “They obviously didn’t have any guns or you wouldn’t be here wasting our time with your useless assessments. You’re a scout, and nothing more unless I make you something more. Now, if that’s all you have to report, get back to the station and have the officers there put out the information to Tunis. Tell them we are preparing to engage the rebels.”

“Hold on a moment,” interrupted Captain Benzekri. “I’ve already told you that we do not have authorization to engage before reporting back in.” The captain simply shrugged at Bilel’s scowl and called over a soldier with a radio to contact his superiors.

Officer Hadrioui turned back to the driver. “Wait here,” he said. Benzekri’s radio crackled, and Bilel was unable to make out what was being said in the conversation, but he saw the captain look over at him twice while he listened. As he strained to hear the words, he found that the sound was getting fainter. Instead, he heard the noise of the ocean, growing louder the longer he listened. Soon the sound expanded into a deep drumming, as if a mighty wave were rolling down the nearest

main street towards the column of soldiers. Bilel walked to the corner and looked down the road to discover a very different type of wave heading straight for them.

A huge mass of people was spilling forward from the horizon in a mob that stretched out for full city blocks. Fires rose up around their flanks, and buildings were ransacked before they were burned. The force of the wave's motion overturned cars on the street, and the roads seemed to shake with a great weight even though the rebels were still far off, well out of gunshot.

"Adhoum! To me!" His second in command scrambled forward to Bilel's side.

"Yes, sir?"

"Arrange the men into task forces, have them ready to go at a moment's notice. I'll go check on the captain. If he hasn't received his orders yet, I'll shove that radio up his ass and see if he gets better reception."

Officer Hadrioui turned to approach Captain Benzekri as Adhoum went to carry out his orders. The tide was swelling, the smoke rising higher as the rebels pushed forward like a slow behemoth. Bilel saw the captain switching off his radio as he reached him.

"What's the word, Benzekri?" asked Officer Hadrioui, hoping the man would catch the insult in his deliberately neglecting to use his title.

The captain looked up, smiled, and said, "The word is we're pulling out."

Bilel paused for a moment, uncertain of whether or not the captain was joking. When he saw that the man was not, he felt his heart begin to pump faster, and the muscles of his jaw clenched like a bear trap. When Bilal spoke, the captain leaned

forward, his ear drawn to the soft, sinister sentence as if caught on a hook. “What the fuck do you mean you’re pulling out?”

For a moment, Benzekri blinked his eyes and seemed at a loss for words. But he regained himself in a moment and said, “Orders from the top, General Rachid Ammar himself. No army troops are to fire on Tunisian civilians.”

Bilel was incredulous. “Do those look like civilians to you?” He gestured behind him at the oncoming rebels. “They are burning this place to the ground!”

“According to my commanding officer, those are protesters. And that’s enough for me.” Captain Benzekri turned to his men. “Alright boys, we’ve got our orders and we’re pulling out of here. Form back up the column and let’s go.” And just like that, Officer Hadrioui watched his strength get reduced back down to fifty.

Bilel was surprised at his response. He would expect the fury to be blinding by now, the bloodlust burning him like a whip at his back and driving him forward in white-hot rage. That was his job, his purpose here, and he was chosen well for it, but something was eating away at the back of his mind and distracting him from his anger. Something was very wrong if General Rachid Ammar had ordered these particular troops to leave this particular city. He wouldn’t waste his time ordering one little division around. He must have issued that command to the entire army.

“Shit,” Bilel cursed bitterly. He knew there was no way his men could hold back the tidal wave that was approaching. Even with the army they probably couldn’t have done it, but now it was impossible. He wanted to step out into the street and open fire right then and there. He wanted to order his men to charge them right now and

build a wall of bodies to stem the flow. But the implications of losing the army were too great to ignore, and he knew that he needed to get back to the station and receive orders. He couldn't afford to be taken down by this mob, no matter how many of them he might have killed before they got him.

“Alright men, looks like those army dogs are only bitches. We're going back to the station to regroup. Let this rabble burn those buildings down around their heads.”

They made it back to the station quickly. No man needed much goading to keep a quick pace. Bilel entered the station to see that Benzeki's garrison had already left, and all that remained were his last scouts and the six officers they had found locked up when they first arrived. One of the officers was typing with frantic fingers at a computer keyboard while the other listened to someone speak on the phone.

“Tell me what is going on,” commanded Officer Hadrioui. He could tell something was seriously wrong by the expressions on everyone's faces.

The officer at the computer looked up with fear in his eyes and gave a report. “The army has pulled their forces out of Sousse, Sfax, and Tunis, as well as minor cities like this one all across the country. The General has announced that he has rejected President Ben Ali's order to fire on protesters, and the security forces have been deployed in their entirety to defend the capitol and other major cities in the absence of the army.”

Bilel felt a sinking sensation in his stomach. If this was true, there would be no reinforcements to send for once the mob got back to the station. If this was true, there would be no reinforcements for anyone to send for, anywhere.

Officer Hadrioui felt uncertain for the first time in twenty-three years. He put on a stony face and asked, “What are our orders? Are there any other security force units deployed near-by?”

The man looked down. “I don’t know, sir. We can’t get in contact with anyone with the authority to give them to us. They’re deployed in the major cities and we’re being told that all of them are engaged right now. The nearest troops are in a Coast Guard boat just offshore, and they are refusing to dock while the riot is underway.” Bilel felt his fury dampen under the rains of doubt and confusion. This had never happened in his lifetime, and he didn’t know what he was supposed to do.

It was then that Officer Hadrioui heard again how loud the sound of the ocean had grown. He looked out the window of the station to see the implacable wave sweeping down the street towards him.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7

“Freedom is never dear at any price. It is the breath of life. What would a man not pay for living?”
-Mahatma Gandhi

Hanna Mzali heard her footsteps count a dull, hollow rhythm against the paved streets of Tunis. She did not know how long she'd been walking, and she couldn't feel the burns the sun had left on her exposed skin. But she could taste blood, and she felt herself being swept forward with hundreds of thousands of others past the fire and wind and sun and concrete of the city where she'd lost so much. She felt her boys around her like shadows, but knew they were far off. She could always sense them somehow though, and even *not* sensing them told her what she needed to know. Her pace was steady and she only looked forward as the city swelled with Tunisians.

Smoke plumed into her nostrils and spoke of rubber and wood. She felt the slanted pavement of the street beneath her feet and now and then realized that she was walking out at an angle with the road. Hanna reminded herself that she had to go straight, and after righting her course she fixed her gaze forward and moved on. Sound surrounded her, overwhelming her ears until her sense of hearing retreated and transformed the din into a dull roar. She followed the people around her as they navigated the turns and bends of Tunis, pushing forward at a lumbering, unstoppable pace.

Hanna only vaguely knew where everyone was going. She had stumbled from her house when she woke up that morning to find the streets overflowing. She knew who the people were, and what they were doing, and even though she didn't know how they planned to do it she felt herself pulled outside to join them. Had it occurred to her to try, Hanna could not have explained the impulse, but the sudden experience of a feeling, any feeling after so much emptiness, was too much for her to resist.

The chair she'd been sitting in had dug into her back and legs, and she felt an ache growing there that threatened to halt her. The past few days there had left her drained, but as much as the exhaustion raked her body, it also numbed her to the pain. It was within her mind where the real struggle was happening, there where her heart and soul were bleeding and not even the coldest sense or reason could stem the flow. She could still control her body though, and she felt that the simple act of movement brought the smallest bit of life back into her bones. She heard the calls of the people around her, however distant, and wondered if this was how it had sounded to her children when they took their march. She tried to imagine how each of them might have looked at the scene around them, but she quickly abandoned that thought and refocused on walking.

The buildings were growing larger around her. Cars were held immobile, like bugs in amber, as protesters congested every inch of pavement that the street had to offer. It was chaos, but the ones creating it were looking out for their fellow creators. Their calls and songs echoed off the stores and apartments and chased wisps of smoke through the crisp air. Hanna was completely surrounded, but those around her never

pushed her. She heard the sounds of shattering glass and breaking brick, but no screams. The screams meant an attack, as she had overheard her second-born son tell her youngest the night before they left. She was grateful that no police had come yet, but something deep and dark inside of her whispered that she hoped they would, hoped they'd swarm in so that she could see for herself what it had been like. She brushed the thought away with a sluggishness that would have horrified her a week ago. But everything had changed in just a few days, and a different woman walked the streets of Tunis now. She felt older than she ever had before.

She could still see them; it didn't matter if her eyes were opened or closed. She saw all three of them standing in a line from oldest to youngest: Tarek, Mohammed, and then Beyni. That was the order they had left her, she'd been told. Tarek protecting his younger brothers, then Mohammed protecting his younger brother, and then there was no one left to protect Beyni. He had been fierce for his age, and free, but all the fire that a thirteen-year-old can muster would never be enough to fight off the security forces of Zine El Abdine Ben Ali. The name tasted like acid, like sulfur and dust, even when she only spoke it in her mind.

The news had come to her two hours and thirty-nine minutes after she realized that Beyni had stolen out of the window from his bedroom to join his brothers. She had checked the bathrooms, his closets, under his bed, every place in the house she could possibly think of. But she'd known what had happened the moment she stepped into his room and saw the window hanging open. When she finally accepted that he had left, she sat down in a chair and fought a battle over control of her breathing. Once

she had steadied her breath, she waited. She waited in the chair until a knock came to the door. Then she had gotten up, opened the door, received the news, and returned to her chair where she sat for two straight days. She did not eat, or sleep, or drink, or move. She didn't even cry. She sat still; a stone woman robbed of her life like the lives she was robbed of. When she had finally stood to join the crowd she grew dizzy and almost fell, but she took hold of the wall nearby, and after taking three deep breaths she walked out the door.

Now, she was moving faster, all but her heart free from that encasing stone. She saw stone everywhere in Tunis though, and above all she kept moving forward. A nearby voice broke through into her awareness. "Strange," it said. "Why haven't any police shown up? They should be everywhere by now. A huge group of them went to confront the protesters at the Interior Ministry just a few hours ago." The voice receded again. Hanna thought that was strange too, but she thought about it the way she might have wondered where a passing fly was off to and it was soon gone from her mind.

The streets were changing again, becoming less slanted and darker in color. Hotels could be seen swimming along the shoreline off in the distance and sunlight glinted off iron and glass as the crowd moved closer to the heart of the city. Hanna had seen the city completely filled with people on holidays and special events, but this was unlike anything that had ever happened in Tunis. The roads were swallowed up by resilient feet that had marched the full length of the city. They were shooting like an arrow of impossible size right at President Zine El Abdine Ben Ali's party

headquarters. As they got closer, Hanna noticed the eyes bearing down on them from the surrounding buildings. They peaked out from behind curtains and over the ledges of rooftops, and Hanna wondered who they belonged to.

Soon, the street opened up into a wide boulevard, and Hanna witnessed the many marching tributaries converge in a massive stream. The *RCD* headquarters loomed beyond. She could see now why they hadn't encountered any police on their way. The party headquarters looked like a fortress, with armored vehicles behind the gates and men with guns in every window and across the length of the roof. Three helicopters flew overhead, and many of the eyes Hanna had seen in the buildings now peered out their windows through the scopes of sniper rifles. The protesters had stopped moving, whether of their own volition or in response to an obstacle she could not say, but for a tense moment nothing moved but the sharp thwack of the helicopter propellers.

A large marble staircase led up to the main doors of the RCD headquarters, and after the ranks of officers on every step could be seen a podium that had been placed at the top, a microphone resting on its surface. The doors of the building slowly swung open, and the silence deepened as the protesters waited to see who would emerge. A thin, balding man stepped out, sunlight gleaming off his glasses and lighting up his crown of white hair as he approached the podium. Hanna recognized him at once as Mohammed Ghannouchi, the Prime Minister of Tunisia and Ben Ali's second in command.

The man coughed into the microphone, and the sound bounced across the boulevard like a boulder rolling down a mountainside. Speakers had been rigged up all across the road, and when he began to talk, his voice projected clearly to the hundreds of thousands who had amassed at the gates. “Greetings, fellow Tunisians. This is Mohammed Ghannouchi speaking, and I ask you to hear what I have to say before you attempt to go further. We have heard your voices, heard your desire for change, and that change is coming. We are willing to listen to the people of Tunisia, and we will answer your demands for a better nation. But our country has fallen into lawlessness and chaos, and while you have fought your revolution in hopes of bettering our homeland, there is much work to be done in restoring Tunisia from the damages of this unrest. It is for that reason that I come to you today to inform you of the results of your efforts.”

Prime Minister Ghannouchi paused for a moment and drew in a deep breath. Perhaps it was just the microphone repeating that sound through a thousand speakers, but Hanna thought she could hear all the people around her pull in a breath as well. Ghannouchi opened his mouth to speak again. “First and foremost, President Zine El Abdine Ben Ali has stepped down from his position as our nation’s leader.” Before he could even finish the sentence, an eruption rippled across the entire crowd like an atom bomb, sound and energy colliding and expanding at a speed too fast to register. Shouts, screams, cries, prayers, and songs all forged themselves into one colossal expression from the mouths of thousands and thousands of protestors.

“Ben Ali is gone!” some screamed.

“Victory!” cried others.

“Triumph!”

“Tunisia!”

“Tunisia!”

“Tunisia!”

The power of that sound, of that deep primal voicing of human desire, Hanna felt herself being lifted on it, even as her grief anchored her down. It swelled up around her and cascaded through her heart and mind and made her a part of the spirit that had gathered there, the pulsing, pure energy of a people who have just been told that they are free. She felt it warm her for a blissful moment, but it was as brilliant as it was brief.

Soon she was falling back into the darkness again. The weight of her heart would not allow her to stay aloft for long, and when the Prime Minister resumed his speech, she was brought back to earth. “I will be assuming the role of Interim President under chapter 56 of the Tunisian constitution. Additionally, we will form an interim government with the leaders amongst you so that we can rebuild our country together, and work to reshape Tunisia during this transitional period to follow.” At this, a lot of angry shouting could be heard, but the excitement of the victory over Ben Ali was enough to satisfy most for now. There would be time to weed out the remnants of his government, but the president was gone after twenty-three years of rule, and the people of Tunisia sounded their pleasure across the capitol city and

beyond. The Prime Minister, now Interim President, continued to speak, but he was drowned out by the sound of celebration.

Hanna struggled to keep her sons' ghosts from obscuring her view. She wanted so badly to return to the pinnacle she'd tasted for that moment when it had been announced that the president was gone. She wanted to join in the chorus of praises and exaltations, but her loss choked any words from her throat that might have formed there. This was surely a victory, but Tunisia had suffered so much in the past twenty-three years, and all of it had culminated in this final, bloody month. She knew she wouldn't be the only one tonight who had not been freed from their mourning by the day's news.

Despite her pain, it couldn't be denied that Tunisia was on the verge of a new era. Already the country had become a completely different place, or else the people she saw around her would be sitting in their homes or on their way back from work right now instead of out in the streets. People were not afraid to speak or act any more, and once they had shed their fear, they took down the most powerful man in the country.

However, much was still in question now that Ben Ali was gone, and the power vacuum that he left behind might be filled by any number of possibilities. No one knew what role the military might play, who, according to a Wikileaks document, had been encouraged by the United States to take over the country in the event of national unrest. Formerly banned political parties had already begun preparing to reemerge, both secular and religious alike, many of which could not claim to have any

members from the younger generation who had started and won the revolution. Not to mention, the ruling party was still well entrenched in Tunisia, and even though they may have lost their leader, there were many people close to Ben Ali, especially his childhood friend Mohammed Ghannouchi, who still held positions on the cabinet. The revolution may be almost over, but the task of rebuilding would be infinitely harder.

Hanna closed her eyelids and thought about her son Tarek, who had given her cheek a tender kiss before leaving for the protest. She remembered his eyes, how sad and certain they looked. His brother Mohammed was the essence of excitement, and his youthful gaze held nothing but a lust for adventure, but Tarek truly understood what awaited them. *He knew, but yet he went*, she thought. *He was willing to pay for our country's freedom, whatever the cost.* She imagined how he must have looked fighting for his brothers, how he must look now if he were up in some heaven looking down on what his life had purchased. She thought he would be satisfied, even if she might never enjoy satisfaction again.

It was for his sake that she opened her eyes, and looked out onto the fledgling hour of a new Tunisia.