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Desertion

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Chapter One: Hassanali

There was a story of his first sighting. In fact, there was more than one, but elements of the stories merged into one with time and telling. In all of them he appeared at dawn, like a figure out of a myth. In one story, he was an upright shadow moving so slowly that in that peculiar underwater light his approach was almost imperceptible, inching forward like destiny. In another, he was not moving at all, not a tremor or a quiver, just looming there on the edge of town, grey eyes glittering, waiting for someone to appear, for someone whose unavoidable luck it was to find him. Then, when someone did, he slid forward towards him, to fulfil outcomes no one had predicted. Someone else claimed to have heard him before he was seen, to have heard his beseeching, longing howl in the darkest hour of the night, like that of an animal out of a legend. What was undisputed-although there was no real dispute between these stories as they all added to the strangeness of his appearance-was that it was Hassanali the shopseller who found him, or was found by him.

There is luck in all things, as there was in this first arrival, but luck is not the same as chance, and even the most unexpected events fulfil a design. That is, there were consequences in the future that made it seem less than accidental that it was Hassanali who found the man. At that time, Hassanali was always the first person about in the morning in this locality. He was up before dawn to open the doors and the windows of the mosque. Then he stood on the steps to call the people to prayer, pitching his voice to all corners of the clearing in front of him. Salla, salla. Sometimes the breeze carried similar calls from nearby mosques, other cryers chiding the people to wake. As-salatu kharya minannawm. Prayer is better than sleep. Hassanali probably imagined the sinners turning over irritably at being disturbed, and probably felt indignant and self-righteous satisfaction. When he finished calling, he swept the dust and the grit from the mosque steps with a feathery casuarina broom whose silent efficiency gave him deep pleasure. This task of opening the mosque, cleaning the steps, making the call to prayer, was one he had appointed himself to for his own reasons. Someone had to do it, someone had to get up first, open the mosque and make the adhan for the dawn prayers, and someone always did, for his own reasons. When that person was ill or grew tired of the charge, there was always

another person to take over. The man who preceded him was called Sharif Mdogo, and had come down with fever so badly in the kaskazi two years ago that he was still bedridden. It was a little surprising that Hassanali had volunteered himself to take over as the dawn cryer, though, not least to Hassanali himself. He was not zealous about the mosque, and it required zeal to rise at every dawn and bully people out of sleep. Sharif Mdogo was like that, the kind of man who liked to barge into complacency and give it a good shake. In addition, Hassanali was a worrying man by nature, or perhaps experience had made him that way, had made him anxious and cautious. These semi-nocturnal chores tortured his nerves and disturbed his nights, and he feared the darkness and the shadows and the scuttlings of the deserted lanes. But then these were also the reasons he offered himself for the task, as a submission and a penance. He started doing the duty two years before the dawn of this sighting, when his wife Malika first arrived. It was a plea that his marriage should prosper, and a prayer for his sister's grief to end. The mosque was only a short stroll across the clearing from his shop, but when he started making the dawn call to prayer, he felt obliged to do as his predecessor Sharif Mdogo had done. He entered nearby lanes, more or less shouting into bedroom windows as he walked past, bellowing at the sleepers. He worked out a route which avoided the chasms and caves where the worst of the shadowy mischief lurked, but he was still prone to seeing spectral visions hurrying away into the darkest parts of the streets as he approached, fleeing the prayers and holy words he uttered as he exhorted the slumbering faithful. These visions were so real – a monster claw glimpsed at the turning of a lane, discontented spirits softly panting somewhere behind him, images of gross underground creatures which glowed and faded before he caught proper sight of them – that often he performed his tasks in a sweat despite the dawn chill. One morning, during another anxious, sweat-drenched round, when the dark lanes pressed in on him like the walls of a narrowing tunnel, he felt a rush of air on his arm as the shadow of a dark wing caught the corner of his eye. He ran, and after that decided to end the torment. He retreated to the mosque steps to make his call, a short walk across the clearing. He added the chore of sweeping the steps to make amends, even though the imam told him that calling from the steps was all that was required, and that Sharif Mdogo had been zealous in his duties.

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Hassanali was crossing the clearing on this dawn when he saw a shadow across the open ground begin to move towards him. He blinked and swallowed in terror, nothing unpredictable. The world was teeming with the dead, and this grey time was their lair. His voice croaked, his holy words dried up, his body left him. The shadow approached him slowly, and in the fast approaching dawn, Hassanali thought he could see its eyes glittering with a hard, stony light. This was a moment he had already lived in his imagination, and he knew that as soon as he turned his back, the ghoul would devour him. If he had been in the mosque he would have felt safe, because that is a sanctuary which no evil can enter, but he was still a long way from there and he had not yet opened the doors. In the end, overcome with panic, he shut his eyes, babbled repeated pleas for God's forgiveness, and allowed his knees to give way under him. He submitted himself to what was to come.

When he opened his eyes again, slowly, peering out as if he was lifting a sheet under which he had been hiding from a nightmare, it was to see the shadow slumped on the ground a few feet from him, half on its side and with one knee bent. Now in the brightening light he could see that it was not a spectre or a shadow or a ghoul, but an ashen-complexioned man whose grey eyes were open in exhaustion only feet away from his. 'Subhanallah, who are you? Are you human or spirit?' Hassanali asked to be on the safe side. The man sighed and groaned all at once, and so announced himself as human without a doubt.

That was how he was when he first arrived, exhausted, lost, his body worn out and his face and arms covered with cuts and bites. Hassanali, on his knees in the dust, felt for the man's breath, and when he felt it warm and strong on his palm, he smiled to himself as if he had managed something clever. The man's eyes were open, but when Hassanali waved his hand in front of them, they did not blink. Hassanali would have preferred that they did. He rose carefully, incredulous about the drama he was now part of, then stood for a moment above the bundle groaning at his feet before hurrying to call for help. By this time it was dawn. The exact moment of greatest felicity for the dawn prayer was swiftly passing-it was only very brief-and Hassanali had not performed the duties expected of him. He feared that the regular early morning worshippers would be annoyed with him when they woke up later and discovered that they had drowsed through the morning's blessings. Most of these worshippers were elderly men who needed to keep their accounts healthy and up-to-date in case of sudden summons. But he should have remembered that they also no longer slept that well, fretted the whole night long and could not wait for the dawn and the call of prayer to release them. So even as Hassanali set off to seek help, worrying about having failed in his duty as the muadhin, some were stepping out of their houses to find out why there had not been a call that morning. Perhaps some even worried if Hassanali was well, or if something had passed him by in the night. There were witnesses, then, to the man's first appearance, people who gathered round his wide-eyed body and saw it slumped like a shadow in the open ground in front of the mosque. Hassanali returned with two young men he had found huddled half asleep against the café doors. They worked there and were waiting for it to open, clinging to the last moments of rest before the day's antics began, but they rushed to help when Hassanali shook them awake. Everyone liked to help in the old days. When they arrived at the scene, urgent behind Hassanali's increasingly self-important strides, it was to find three elderly men standing a few paces from the body, watching it with fastidious interest: Hamza, Ali Kipara and Jumaane. These were the stalwarts of the dawn prayers, who stood directly behind the imam in the congregation, and who were the coffee-seller's first customers every morning. They were men well past their best years, wise men who expected their lives' endeavours to be considered unblemished, and who kept their eyes open and on the world that passed them by. They did not usually stir for anybody but themselves, and thought age allowed them to act in this way. So they were not really three elderly men because everyone knew who they were, but by the measure of their time and place they were old, and their infirmities were part of their dignity, and their unbending display was perhaps an attempt at fulfilling what was required of them. For whatever reason, they now stood there, feigning indifference and making casual remarks while the young men and Hassanali rushed about. Hassanali opened the mosque and the young men fetched the rope bed, the one used for washing the dead.

Hassanali winced but did not say anything. The young men lifted the moaning body on to the rope bed and prepared to carry it away.

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All of a sudden, there was a brief tussle between Hassanali and Hamza about where the sick man should be taken. Hamza was an imposing man despite his age, with a lined gnarled, grey-stubbled face and glaring eyes. He had been a rich simsim merchant in years gone by, but was now simply rich. His sons made money for him in a butchery business in Mombasa. He was sensitive about the awe due to him, and liked to be deferred to on any matter of the slightest importance. He liked to be treated as the informal jamadar thereabouts. In their prime, Ali Kipara had been a basket-weaver and Juumaane a house painter, so both knew their place with the jamadar and occupied it when called upon to do so. Hamza began to walk away, tetchy and impatient, calling on the helpers to follow him. It was obvious that the moral duty to the exhausted man lay with Hassanali who had found him, and who therefore was obliged to offer care and hospitality to him. Hamza knew this as well as anyone else, but perhaps Hamza did what he did to remind everyone that he was a wealthy man to whom such acts of mercy were an obligation.

In any case, everyone politely ignored Hamza, even his fellow sages, and the man was duly carried on the rope bed to Hassanali's shop. The door to the adjoining yard, which was also the entrance into the house, was too narrow for the bed with the body on it, so the two young men lifted the body and carried it into the yard, then placed it on a mat under the thatched awning attached to the house.

The three elderly worshippers squeezed into the yard as well, casting swift glances around. There was not very much to see but none of them had been inside Hassanali's yard before and could not suspend curiosity even at this dramatic time. It was a large yard, running the full length of the house. There were plants in pots, two curtained windows facing out of the house, one either side of the inner door, a paved platform for washing clothes, a cluster of seredani for cooking and at one end of the yard the washroom and the room for necessities-an ordinary yard. They might have noted the recently whitewashed walls and the lushness of the pot-plants, among them a red rose, a lavender in bloom and a bristling aloe.

The crowd of six stood unspeaking around the body for a minute, as if surprised about the way everything had turned out. Then, after a moment, there were several opinions about what should be done next, spoken one after another, like pledges to an obligation. We should call Mamake Zaituni the healer. And someone should fetch the legbreaker. I believe someone should go and tell the imam at once, in case he needs to say special prayers against contagion or worse. That was Hamza, as always going for the grand gesture. Hassanali nodded unprotestingly to the suggestions and ushered the small crowd out. They went reluctantly but they had no choice. It was only the drama of the groaning man that permitted their presence in the privacy of his home in the first place, so Hassanali only had to spread his arms and wave them gently for everyone to turn towards the yard door.

'Thank you, thank you all. Will you please ask Mamake Zaituni to come?' he asked, putting himself even further in his neighbours' debt.

'Without a doubt,' Hamza the merchant said in his self-important voice, waving his stick at one of the young men. 'Go, go, you, there is someone's life here.'

There were parting suggestions. Don't touch him until Mamake Zaituni comes. I won't touch him. Don't move him until the leg breaker arrives. I won't move him. If you need any help...I'll call. Hassanali shut the yard door without bolting it-he did not want to seem too inhospitable-and returned to the traveller on the mat under the awning. He was suddenly wary, anxious about being alone with the man, as if he had allowed himself too near a wild beast. Who could he be? What kind of man went wondering alone in the wilderness? He remembered now he had said that to the man as he lay on the ground: Who are you? The noise of their arrival was sure to have woken up his wife and his sister, who were probably already standing behind the window curtains, waiting to come out and see what was going on. All of a sudden he was afraid that he had done something stupid in bringing the sick stranger home. The thought set off a shiver of anxiety across his sternum.

He looked on the man with a marvelling smile. What was a stranger, wounded in the wilderness, doing on the mat in their yard? It might as well have been a flying horse or a talking dove. Such things did not happen to them. He remembered his terror when he had first seen his shadow and taken it for a hideous ghoul. Many things frightened him, a grown man. Sometimes his life loomed so large on him that he saw shadows everywhere. It could have been an ugly malicious anything at that uncertain time between light and dark, between the real and the undead world, but perhaps he should not have thrown himself on the ground in the way that he did. If it had been a sceptre it would have smiled before pulverising his soul. Hassanali's smile was as much for his soft-fleshed timid self as it was for the man at his feet. For this was no sceptre, and no more ugly than the next person. His face was drained and covered with straggly untrimmed, greying hair. His eyes were still open, bleary and unseeing, although even as he looked he thought he saw them blink. His breathing was shallow, softly panting, and behind it was a hardly audible groan. His arms were scratched and pierced by thorns. The calico smock he wore over his trousers and sandals was grey with dust and use. It was torn and mended, streaked and stained, acquired in his wanderings perhaps rather than brought from wherever he started out from. No one would start a journey with such rags. The sandals were tied with strips of cloth, and around his middle, worn like a belt, were the remains of a brown shirt. Another strip of the same material made a headband across his brow. Hassanali smiled at the melodrama of his costume, exactly like that of an adventurer lost in a desert or like a fighter. The thought made his stomach tighten. Had he brought a bandit to their house, a marauder who would kill them all? But no, this man was half-dead, perhaps himself the victim of bandits.

'Who is it' his sister Rehana asked behind him

'He's wounded,' he said looking round. He realised he was still smiling, a little excited. She was standing by the door, her left arm holding the curtain aside. She had only just woken up, he could see from the dazed and heavy look in her eyes, from

the roughness in her voice. She took three steps forward and looked at the man searchingly. His eyes were open, glowing like grey pebbles in brine. Gloaming. Then he saw them unmistakably blink. His broken lips were open in the middle of a groan. Rehana retreated quickly and Hassanali could only imagine what mad hope had filled her heart for that brief time. 'What have you brought us, our esteemed master?' She asked behind him, speaking in her mocking voice. Hassanali involuntarily winced. A day that started in that voice was often long and humiliating. He shut his eyes tightly for a second to prepare himself.

'He's wounded,' he said again, turning towards her. Her mouth was turned down sourly, his chin clenched. He felt his body stiffening with distaste. He saw her chin lift fractionally, taking offence, and realised that his irritation must have shown. But he had also seen the hurt in her eyes despite her anger, so he released his face and allowed his expression to subside. Perhaps she was angry because she had been disturbed. She liked to sleep in the morning. But really, there was a man in a heap at her feet, perhaps dying, and all she could think of was her sleep. Just then, his wife Malika squeezed out from behind Rehana's right shoulder and made a gasp of sympathetic horror at the sight of the man, her hand flying to her open mouth. It brought the feeling of a smile on his face, her kindness.

'Wait, you!' Rehana said, stopping Malika as she was about to step forward. 'Don't rush over there. Who is this man? Where did you find him? What's wrong with him?' 'I don't know,' Hassanali said softly, in the placating voice he used with Rehana when she was irritated, and which sometimes irritated her more. He didn't know how else to speak to her when she was displeased, especially when he could not answer her questions. Even when he did have an answer for her, her scorn made him doubt and dissemble. His faltering now, at this moment, showed even to him that he had been credulous once again. 'He came from out there. He's wounded.'

'From out where? Which direction? Wounded by what? What is he sick with?' Rehana asked, with a look of scornful incredulity. Hassanali was familiar with the look, and wished he could tell her how ugly it made her face which otherwise was attractive and pleasing. But he had never learned a way to say such things to her without making everything worse. 'What have you brought us, you and your antics? A sick man turns up from who knows where, with who knows what disease, and you bring him straight to our house so we can all die of what he is dying of? You're a man of affairs, you are. You're a man of the world, without a doubt. Have you touched him?'

'No,' Hassanali said, surprised that he hadn't. He glanced at his wife Malika and she dropped her eyes. She looked so lovely, so uncomplicated, so young. He felt a kind of agony as he looked at her, something between jealous anxiety for her devotion and a longing to please her. 'The young men picked him up and carried him in here. But you're right, I did not think of disease. I thought he was hurt. We'd better not touch him until Mamake Zaituni has looked at him. I've sent for her. Malika, keep away from him like Rehana says.'

'Now you're full of wisdom,' Rehana said sarcastically, wearily. The looking at the man lying there, and dropping her voice approaching a whisper: 'You put him on the eating mat. What were you thinking of, bringing a sick stranger to us like that, without knowing what's wrong with him? He might die,' she said, dropping her voice even further, 'and his relatives will come to blame us.'

'You can't expect me to leave a suffering son of Adam out there when we can offer him kindness and care' Hassanali protested.

'Oh I forget, you're a man of God,' Rehana said lightly, even smiling slightly. 'Next time take him to the mosque where God will look after him. I suppose we should be grateful you didn't bring us a stinking savage. Has someone gone to call Mamake Zaituni?'

For years Rehana had treated him as if he were foolish. It was not always so. It was once she grew to be a woman that she spoke to him as if he were sluggish in understanding, as if he was an incompetent in the world. He thought it amusing at first, Rehana playing at being grown-up, in league with their mother who had turned tetchy with age and widowhood. In the meantime, he laboured day and night to preserve their honour and put food in their mouths. That was another thing he never dared to say, that he laboured as he did and for his thanks they berated him for incompetence in the face of the world. In time Rehana hardened into her disdainful manner and Hassanali unavoidably became resigned to her scorn. He did not know what else to do. It was not only time that made her so scornful. No, it wasn't. It was Azad and Hassanali's part in that. Sometimes her voice swelled through his body and made his eyes water with helplessness.

'Yes, someone has gone for her,' he said. He glanced at Malika, and she gave him a quick look of recognition then looked away. 'Is there coffee?' he asked her, to speak to her and get her away from Rehana.

Malika nodded. 'I'll make some,' she said, and moved in an exaggerated careful arc around the moaning body towards the braziers.

In the slow moments in the shop, when he had tired of telling the rosary to pass the time, he could not resist ripples of anxiety that swelled up from nowhere to stifle his breath.

They concerned unpredictable and often petty matters. At these times, a small thing for too long grew large and troublesome, and one of these things was a dread he had that Malika's recognition would one day also turn into disdain.

Rehana lowered herself on to a stool by the back door and leaned against the wall with a sigh, waiting for Mamake Zaituni. Hassanali turned slightly away from her, suppressing feelings of guilt. He was too quick to accept blame. He should harden himself against these unspoken accusations. He leaned against the awning post and looked at the grey bundle of a man he had brought home. He remembered his pleasure at having him there in his backyard and it made him smile to think of Hamza trying to steal him away. Hamza could not resist that kind of thing, always

competing, always showing off. Would Hamza have tried to steal the stranger if he had been a stinking savage as Rehana said? He thought not. Hamza had a mouthful of notions about the savage, among whom he had travelled and traded in his younger years: how unpredictable his anger was, how reckless his greed, how uncontrollable his hungers. An animal. Would Hassanali himself have brought him home? Would Hassanali himself have brought him home? That thought made him grin. Of course not, they were all terrified of the savage. Everyone told savage stories all the time. No one survived out there in the open country except the wild beast and the savage, both of whom feared nothing, and of course the fanatical Somali and Abyssinian Hubsh and their relatives, who had long ago lost their reason in endless feuds. He glanced at Rehana, and saw that she was watching him grinning to himself. She shook her head slowly at him, her eyes large and awake now.

'Masikini,' she said. 'Poor you.'

'I was thinking of Hamza,' he said. 'He wanted to take him to his house. That old man, he always wants to be first.'

'And you stopped him, didn't you?' she said sarcastic awe in her voice.

At that moment there was a call over the yard wall. Mamake Zaituni had arrived. When Hassanali opened the door, he saw that the elderly magi were settled on the rope bed to await events, and that two young men were hovering behind Mamake Zaituni as if to protect him from harm. The healer bustled past him, tiny and tireless, reciting prayers in a steady undertone, paying out her life's spool. Hassanali had not expected the crowd waiting outside. He waved them away, making his gesture ambiguous in case anyone took offence, and closed and bolted the door.

'Is all well in there?' That was Hamza, making himself heard over everybody as usual. Hassanali opened the door again and hushed them gently, but he was pleased to see that the three elderly men were on their feet, and the two young men had good hold of the rope bed and were about to lead off. He waved goodbye and shut the door quickly. 'Hassanali, when are you going to open the shop? Jumaane asked him over the wall. They wanted him out there as soon as possible, so they could get a report on what was going on.

'I'm coming, my brothers,' he called back.

'We're going to prayer,' Ali Kipara called out, perhaps to tempt Hassanali to join them. Mamake Zaituni kissed hands with Rehana and Malika, although she did not allow either to kiss her hand really, and made sure to kiss theirs. It was a trick of the humble, to kiss the other's hand and slip yours away before the kiss could be returned. It was her way to show humility even to the humblest that she never allowed anyone to kiss her hand, and it was said by everyone that this was part of her saintliness and one of the reasons God had given her the gift of healing, as He had to her father before her. Muttering prayers to herself, she took her buibui off and folded it carefully, as if it were made of the finest silk and was fragrant with sandalwood incense rather than of the thinnest cotton which smelled of wood smoke and grease. Her old cotton shawl was tucked tight around her face and then fell

down to her wrists, so that only her hands and her sharp etched face were visible. She slipped her sandals off and stepped on the mat, then walked round the man without touching him, scrawny and bent like an old bird of prey. She said a prayer, to ask for aid and protection against the unknown. Then she asked Rehana and Malika to go inside the house, to spare the unknown man shame, she said. She spoke sharply, irritably, as if they had looked to gain some improper pleasure by hanging around. She was always like that, brisk and definite. Never at a loss about what is proper. Rehana made an impatient sound but did not resist. The combination of humility and briskness made Mamake Zaituni impossible to refuse, and she was the one who always had the presence of mind to know what was best to do. She tore the smock with a thin blade without moving the man, tearing him open from collar to ankle. He was light-complexioned and a European. His body was thin and bony, and he looked brittle and strange in the brightening light. At first Hassanali had thought he was one of those fair-skinned Arabs from the north that he had heard about, with grey eyes and golden hair, but when they took his sandals and trousers off, they saw that he was uncircumcised. Mzungu, Mamake Zaituni said, speaking to herself. A European. He was bruised and torn but had no wounds on the front or sides of his body. His belly was so strangely pale and smooth that it looked cold and dead, and Mamake Zaituni's bony hands hovered over these parts hesitantly, and Hassanali thought it was with a mixture of fascination and dread, as if she would touch out of curiosity. Those were the same tireless hands that kneaded the dough for the bread that Mamake Zaituni made and sold everyday, the same hands that rolled it and tossed it on the griddle, then turned it and later picked it out without burning themselves. The same hands that massaged an inflamed kidney or dressed a bleeding calf or plunged themselves unhesitatingly into human agony. Now they hovered over the pale belly of the man.

She turned him over on his side. He groaned and opened his eyes, and Hassanali expected a bad smell to come off him, but he smelled of dry meat and dust, of rags left out in the sun for too long, of travel. He must have been lost for several days, to judge by his starved look and the smell of dust and sun on him. There were more bruises and tears on his back, and a deep green shadow around his right shoulder but no wounds, no blood. They eased him over on his back, then Mamake Zaituni covered him the torn smock and called the women out. She felt his face, and he groaned again, opening his eyes blearily. 'Give him some honey in warm water,' she said, speaking sharply was her manner. 'One part honey, three parts water in a coffee cup.' She glanced at Rehana and looked away hardly making contact. Rehana returned her glance with a sneer. Not me, Hassanali imagined her thinking. 'Then let him sleep. There's nothing wrong with him. He's exhausted and thirsty, that's for certain. He has a bad bruise round his shoulder, so there might be a break or a dislocation. Let the Legbreaker see to that. I'm going to finish cooking my bread, there'll be people waiting for it. I'll bring him some soup afterwards.' 'He hasn't got a disease?' Rehana said enquiringly, disbelievingly.

'I don't see any signs,' mamake Zaituni said. 'No fever, or rash, or bad smells or diarrhoea. It may be the sun has dried him out and made him dizzy. Limemkausha na kumtia kizunguzungu. I'll come back later after you've given him the honey, and after the legbreaker has seen him. I'm going back to my bread now.'

It seemed that the women had no need of Hassanali any more, rattling off instructions to each other while Mamake Zaituni prepared herself to leave. Hassanali left reluctantly, hoping that the man would speak, or would look at him or in his direction. It did not seem right to leave him to other people after finding him. But he could not speak, or at least he had not by the time Hassanali finally passed into the house to go and open the shop. 'Call me if you need any help,' he called out. 'And Malika, don't forget my coffee.'

'Yes, master,' Malika said, making a parody of obedience. And that was how Englishman Pearce arrived, causing a sensation and a drama that he never became fully aware of.