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ACT ONEScene 1

Presidential palace. President's office. The Horn of Africa.

Dawn. A Muslim call to prayer in the distance.

PRESIDENT HADAD watches from the window.
Her chief of staff, ABDUL AZIM, holds a newspaper.

He wears a suit. She wears a dress and headscarf.

ABDUL AZIM

It goes like this: Two boys are walking along a river in the Northeast Valley, where they plan to go spear-fishing and pick yams to sell at market. They come upon a land mine, and one of the boys, the younger one—Madam President?

She turns to him.

ABDUL AZIM (Continued)

Not so close to the window. Please.

She moves away.

ABDUL AZIM (Continued)

They're brothers, you see—one is eight; the other, twelve—and the eight-year-old thinks the land mine is a toy and decides to pick it up or poke it with a stick or do something, at any rate, that little boys shouldn't do with land mines, and before his brother has a chance to warn him the land mine detonates and *boom!* The boy is gone.

HADAD

Which boy?

ABDUL AZIM

The young one. The eight-year-old.

HADAD

Mm.

ABDUL AZIM

And the older one is wounded very badly. Very badly. He's standing but a few feet away from his brother, and when the bomb goes off he catches a good bit of shrapnel in his face. And in his arms, his torso. Quite a few pieces in his leg. He's bleeding very profusely and very quickly. His brother was blown to bits and he's lying in the dirt dying.

HADAD

Goodness.

ABDUL AZIM

And he *would* have died, too, if not for a fisherman who came upon him. The fisherman rushes him back upstream to his village—he follows the boys' footprints with the boy over his shoulder until he gets the boy back to his village and into the arms of his father.

His father then rushes him to the village elder. But what can the elder do? They have no medical supplies, no ambulance. So the elder sends them back down to the river, where the boys came across the land mine in the first place. He says there's a camp there, a camp of men, *militiamen*, who have medics and medical supplies and a sort of makeshift hospital set up to take care of these kinds of things.

“Militiamen?” the boy's father says. “You mean insurgents? Jihadis?”

“Yes,” the elder tells him. “Jihadis. They bring us food from time to time, and supplies, and in exchange we send them our boys. They'll protect us.”

“Protect us from what?” the father asks.

“From bandits, from land mines, from starvation ...”

“But who,” the father says, “who will protect us from the jihadis?”

And finally the elder looks at him and says, “Why, the jihadis, of course.”

He chuckles.

HADAD

I don't get it.

ABDUL AZIM

Well, it's the first time I've told it. Perhaps if I started with—

HADAD

When did this happen?

ABDUL AZIM

I'm sorry?

HADAD

This incident. When did it happen?

ABDUL AZIM

Well—it's just a story.

HADAD

A story?

ABDUL AZIM nods.

HADAD (Continued)

It never happened?

ABDUL AZIM

Well, no. I mean, it *could*; that's the point. It's an anecdote. It's meant to be ... *illustrative*. Of things that *could* happen.

HADAD

I see.

ABDUL AZIM

Jihads don't grow without the support of the people.

HADAD

I am aware of the problem, Abdul Azim. I just don't understand the point of your stories.

ABDUL AZIM

Well, I'd say storytelling is at the very *root* of our problem, now isn't it?

(holds up the newspaper)

Dalmar Siddiqi, our beloved writer-in-exile, waging war on this government—

HADAD

Self-imposed exile.

ABDUL AZIM

Nevertheless.

HADAD

His newspaper column is irrelevant. It may be a hit in Paris, but—I need to know about his book.

ABDUL AZIM

(puts the paper down)

His book may pose a serious problem.

HADAD

Yes?

ABDUL AZIM

You're the widow of an assassinated President, now his successor. You've tried to govern as a moderate, but the jihadis control a third of the country. Beheading detractors, stoning adulterers, killing anyone who gets in their way—and yet, who do the people root for? The men who bring them food and clean water.

HADAD

Hijacked from our own shipments.

ABDUL AZIM

Nevertheless. When the delivery boys are wearing beards and AK-47s, those are the folks they trust.

HADAD

They *claim* to, because the jihadis have seized their villages.

ABDUL AZIM

Then why have we postponed the elections? Why are young men from abroad returning to join them?

HADAD

A handful. From Canada.

ABDUL AZIM

No, from all over the diaspora. London, Stockholm ... New Jersey. They're closing in on the capital. The only way we've kept them out is with military aid from the United States. But Siddiqi's book could put an end to that.

HADAD

So ... what? Other than crying foul about our prisons, which he hasn't seen in five years—

ABDUL AZIM

It's the American embassies.

Pause.

ABDUL AZIM (Continued)

The book has evidence.

She is silent.

ABDUL AZIM (Continued)

Of the attacks.

Still silent.

ABDUL AZIM (Continued)

On the U.S. embassies?

HADAD

I know what you're referring to.

ABDUL AZIM

The jihadis had to get those rockets from *someone*.

Pause.

HADAD

How do we know that's in the book?

ABDUL AZIM

The man from the State Department, Robert Samuels ...

HADAD

The CIA man?

ABDUL AZIM

(smiles)

The man from the State Department. He says the evidence is verifiable.

HADAD

He's seen the book?

ABDUL AZIM

Well, no, the publisher's guarding it very carefully—they have their own security detail—

HADAD

Who?

ABDUL AZIM

Everyone. Siddiqi, his editors, the book itself. The manuscript has a bodyguard.

HADAD

Then how do the Americans know what's in it?

ABDUL AZIM

Phone taps, intercepted emails ...

HADAD

Where in God's name did Siddiqi get his information?

ABDUL AZIM

Perhaps *you* can tell *me*. You knew him?

HADAD

He and my husband were at university together. We were friends, until he ...

ABDUL AZIM

Went to prison.

HADAD

Yes.

ABDUL AZIM

For “dissident behavior.”

HADAD

Yes.

ABDUL AZIM

Hence the vendetta.

(pause)

That's the thing about writers. If you're going to send them to prison, make sure they don't live to tell about it.