

ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 16

THE FASTING GROUND



CHEW Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

THE FASTING GROUND

CHEW Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 16

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2026 Chew Z

All rights reserved.

ISBN 979-8-952790-15-5

Roya Publications

Publication No. 16

Typeset in DejaVu Serif.

Printed in the Reach

Name	Household House No.	Arrived	Departed
Huete Koglein	12	12/01/18	05/02/18
Hain Kietekin	3	28/01/18	16/02/18
Huete Kietekin	7	03/02/18	—
Hain Kietekin	18	17/02/18	30/03/18
Hain Kietekin	4	02/03/18	—
Hain Kietekin	22	14/03/18	—
Hain Kietekin	11	29/03/18	12/04/18 12/04/18
Hain Kietekin	9	11/04/18	—
Huete Kietekin	6	25/04/18	05/05/18
Huete Kietekin	15	09/05/18	—
Huete Kietekin	2	23/05/18	—
Hain Kietekin	20	06/06/18	—
Hain Kietekin	8	20/06/18	—
Huete Kietekin	14	04/07/18	—
Hain Kietekin	1	18/07/18	25/07/18
Hain Kietekin	17	01/08/18	—
Huete Kietekin	5	15/08/18	—
Hain Kietekin	13	29/08/18	—
Hain Kietekin	10	12/09/18	14/09/18
Hain Kietekin	19	26/09/18	—
Hain Kietekin	16	10/10/18	—
Hain Kietekin	23	24/10/18	—
Huete Kietekin	21	07/11/18	—
Hain Kietekin	2	21/11/18	—
Huete Kietekin	7	05/12/18	—
Hain Kietekin	12	19/12/18	31/12/18
Huete Kietekin	4	02/01/19	15/01/19
Hain Kietekin	9	16/01/19	—
Hain Kietekin	18	30/01/19	31/01/19
Huete Kietekin	3	13/02/19	—
Hain Kietekin	11	27/02/19	—

Name	Household House No.	Arrived	Departed
Huete Kietekin	6	13/03/19	—
Hain Kietekin	14	27/03/19	03/04/19
Hain Kietekin	2	10/04/19	—
Hain Kietekin	19	24/04/19	30/04/19
Huete Kietekin	8	08/05/19	19/05/19
Hain Kietekin	11	22/05/19	—
Hain Kietekin	3	05/06/19	21/06/19
Huete Kietekin	17	19/06/19	—
Huete Kietekin	5	03/07/19	18/07/19
Huete Kietekin	21	17/07/19	—
Huete Kietekin	9	31/07/19	15/08/19
Hain Kietekin	12	14/08/19	—
Huete Kietekin	4	28/08/19	30/08/19
Hain Kietekin	18	11/09/19	20/09/19
Huete Kietekin	7	25/09/19	—
Hain Kietekin	20	09/10/19	—
Hain Kietekin	10	23/10/19	—
Huete Kietekin	1	06/11/19	27/11/19
Hain Kietekin	15	20/11/19	—
Hain Kietekin	22	04/12/19	31/12/19
Hain Kietekin	13	18/12/19	—
Hain Kietekin	23	01/01/20	10/01/20
Huete Kietekin	16	15/01/20	—
Hain Kietekin	24	29/01/20	20/02/20
Hain Kietekin	6	12/02/20	—
Hain Kietekin	2	26/02/20	08/03/20
Hain Kietekin	5	11/03/20	—
Huete Kietekin	8	25/03/20	30/03/20
Hain Kietekin	11	08/04/20	—
Huete Kietekin	3	22/04/20	—
Huete Kietekin	7	06/05/20	—

SYNOPSIS

Halloran spent fifteen years gathering proof of the world's worst lies and watched, again and again, as the proof stopped mattering to anyone. Burned out not on truth but on the uselessness of evidence, he travels to a remote village high in the mountains, where a man named Rashnu offers something no institution ever could: one truth about himself that cannot be argued away. Through three ordeals — a fast that strips him of language, an immersion in mountain cold that strips him of comfort, and a night-long vigil beside a dying stranger that strips him of control — the mountain forces open a memory he has spent eleven years narrating around: a war-crimes story he broke, a translator he promised to protect, and the choice he made to stay silent and keep his byline. What Halloran finds is not vindication. It is the one fact about himself he can no longer lie about — and a man who gave it to him whose existence he can never verify.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

We live inside an economy of lies so total that even naming them has stopped functioning as an act of resistance. Institutions lie about wars, about assassinations, about the reasons given for both, and the lying does not even require good craftsmanship anymore — it only requires volume, and repetition, and the exhaustion of everyone still keeping score.

This book is not an argument against that exhaustion. It does not propose a policy, a document, or a system that will out-verify the liars. It proposes something smaller and, I think, more durable: that the body itself — hunger, cold, the presence of death — can produce a category of knowing that language cannot touch, edit, or retract. Ordeal traditions far older than any modern institution understood this. The fast, the exposure, the vigil beside the dying — these were never primitive superstitions. They were technologies for arriving at a kind of certainty that survives contact with a corrupt world, because it was never built out of that world's materials in the first place.

Halloran's story is not a solution to institutional lying. It offers no weapon against it. It only offers one man ground to stand on, purchased at real cost, while everything around him remains exactly as uncertain as it was before. I suspect that is the most honest kind of ending available to any of us.

Chew Z

CONTENTS

1. ARRIVAL	9
2. TERMS	17
3. DAY ONE, DAY TWO	19
4. DAY THREE, DAY FOUR	22
5. DAY FIVE THROUGH SEVEN	24
6. WHAT THE FAST GAVE HIM	26
7. REENTRY	28
8. THE SECOND ORDEAL, EXPLAINED	29
9. STAGE ONE	30
10. STAGE TWO	32

11. STAGE THREE	33
12. WHAT THE COLD GAVE HIM	34
13. REWARMING	36
14. THE ROOM	37
15. THE NIGHT	39
16. WHAT THE VIGIL GAVE HIM	40
17. MORNING	41
18. DESCENT	43
19. THE SEARCH	44
20. WHY DOES IT BOTHER YOU	45

1. ARRIVAL

The road stopped being a road about four kilometers back, degrading first into gravel, then into a rutted track scored by decades of runoff, and finally into nothing but the mountain's own suggestion of where a man might reasonably place his feet. Halloran had stopped minding the loss of it somewhere around kilometer two. There was a rhythm to walking on broken ground that the body found on its own, without asking the mind's permission, and he had let it take over the way he used to let his hands take over on a keyboard when the sentence was already written somewhere behind his eyes and all that was left was the typing.

He did not think of it as faith. He thought of it as the last available method.

The range had announced itself two days before he ever reached it, a serrated blue-gray line low on the horizon that the bus driver had pointed at without comment, and then had spent the better part of those two days doing what mountains do to a man traveling toward them on foot — receding exactly as fast as he approached, growing larger only in the abstract, a fact more than a sight, until the morning it simply stopped receding and became the entire sky.

This was high country, real high country, the kind that manufactured its own weather out of nothing but altitude and stubbornness. He had read about it on the flight, the way he read about everything before an assignment — orographic lift, the term for what happened when moist air was forced up a slope and had no choice but to cool and release what it carried, which was why the western faces of these ridges wore their forests like a green collar and the eastern faces, in the rain shadow, wore almost nothing at all, just scree and dwarf juniper and rock the color of old bone. He had read the words. He had not understood, until he was standing inside the fact of them, what it meant to walk for six hours along a ridgeline where the two halves of the same mountain range lived under two entirely different climates, close enough to touch, that never spoke to each other.

The morning of his arrival had started clear, the sky an color so hard and blue it looked less like weather than like the absence of any weather at all, the kind of sky that made distances lie — a peak that looked forty minutes off turning out, hours later, to still be most of a day's walk away, the air too clean and too thin to carry the ordinary visual cues a lowland eye used to judge how far a thing actually was. By midmorning a wind had come up out of a side valley he never saw the mouth of, carrying grit and the particular mineral smell of glacial melt, and by noon a bank of cloud had built itself along the western ridge with a speed that seemed almost aggressive, towering and violet-bellied, throwing down a curtain of rain he could see moving across a neighboring slope like a gray wall on legs, while he himself stood in full sun not two kilometers off, dry, watching it happen to someone else's mountain.

That was the thing no one had told him about this country, and that the books had only gestured at: the weather here was not a condition that arrived. It was a population, dozens of separate systems occupying dozens of separate slopes, each valley keeping its own sky the way each valley kept its own dialect, its own feuds, its own dead. A man could leave a snowstorm behind him at nine in the morning and be sunburned by noon and caught in a hailstorm before dinner, and every single one of those conditions would be, in its own narrow bowl of rock, entirely, locally true.

By early afternoon the trail had climbed above the last of the scrub oak into a belt of stunted pine, wind-flagged, every one of them bent permanently eastward by a prevailing gale that must, he thought, blow through this exact col for most of the year, sculpting the living wood the way water sculpts stone, patiently, without malice, simply because it never stopped and the trees, having nowhere else to grow, had learned to grow around it instead of against it. He found something in that he did not examine too closely at the time and would think about a great deal, later, on the mountain, in circumstances that gave the thought considerably more weight than it seemed to deserve on a sunlit afternoon in October.

The valley opened without warning, the way valleys did in this country — you climbed a switchback convinced there was nothing ahead but more switchback, the trail doubling back on itself so many times that his sense of direction had long since surrendered any claim to accuracy, and then the land simply gave up pretending and dropped away into something wide and green-brown and terraced, ringed on three sides by peaks whose upper faces still carried the summer's last unmelted snow in long vertical fingers, like wax that had run down a candle and frozen mid-drip. He stood there with his pack cutting into shoulders that had gone past aching into something more like conversation, and looked down at terraces cut into the slope by hands that had died a very long time ago, at walls that had been standing since before anyone's grandfather, at smoke going up thin and straight in windless afternoon air pooled and settled in the bowl of the valley the way water settles in a basin, and he thought: this is either the most honest place I have ever seen, or the best-built lie I have ever walked into.

He had thought some version of that thought in a dozen countries, in valleys that looked almost exactly like this one and had turned out to hold almost exactly nothing like what he'd hoped to find in them. It had never once protected him from anything.

Sar-e-Khamosh did not announce itself. There was no arch, no sign, nothing that said you have arrived — only the gradual thickening of stone into wall into structure, the terraces giving way to a scatter of low buildings built from the same rock they stood on, so that the village looked less like something placed on the mountain and more like something the mountain had grown, reluctantly, the way a wound grows scar tissue, or the way a glacier, over centuries too slow for any single life to witness, grows a moraine out of the very stone it has spent that same span of centuries grinding down. Somewhere a goat complained about something. A child watched him from a doorway for exactly as long as it took to decide he was not interesting, and then stopped, went back to whatever business a child had in a doorway at three in the afternoon at eleven thousand feet.

The air itself was doing something to him he hadn't fully accounted for — thinner than his lungs expected, so that the last stretch of climbing left him lightheaded in a way no amount of gym-conditioning back home had prepared him for, a faint ringing at the edge of hearing, his heartbeat noticeably present in his own chest for the first time in years, as though altitude had reintroduced him to an organ he'd long since stopped thinking about. He would learn, in the days that followed, that this was only the beginning of a long process by which the mountain would keep reintroducing him to parts of himself he had spent a career learning to ignore.

He had expected — he realized only now, arriving, that he had expected something. A checkpoint. A greeting committee. The theater that every institution puts on for the newly arrived, the choreography that says we have been waiting for you, we know things about ourselves that we are about to perform for your benefit. He had spent fifteen years walking into rooms built to perform sincerity at him, and some old reflex in his chest was already bracing for it, already composing the paragraph he would write about the performance.

Nobody performed anything. A man was repairing a low wall with mud mortar and did not look up, working with the unhurried competence of someone who had repaired this same stretch of wall many times before and expected, without resentment, to repair it many times again, because that was simply what wind and frost-heave and the mountain's own slow appetite for anything built on it required of a person who meant to keep living here. A woman carried water past him at a distance that was neither wary nor welcoming, simply correct, the distance of someone who had decided long ago exactly how much of her attention strangers were owed. He kept walking, because there was nowhere else built into the day to stop, and the path kept climbing gently between the buildings toward something that might have been a center, if the place believed in centers.

That was where he found the man.

He was sitting on a flat stone in what passed for a courtyard, cross-legged, doing nothing that Halloran could identify as an activity — not praying, not meditating in any posture Halloran recognized from the specific catalogue of postures the world had taught him to associate with holiness, not working. Just sitting, the way a stone sits, with the specific unbothered patience of something that has stopped keeping track of duration, that has watched enough winters come down off these peaks and enough summers burn them back to understand duration as a lowland preoccupation, a thing that mattered to people who still believed their own lives were the measure of how long anything lasted. He was not young. He was not old in any way that photographed as old — no theatrical white beard, no ceremonial robes, nothing that would have made a good establishing shot for the documentary Halloran's old instincts were already, uselessly, framing. He wore what the other men in the village wore. He looked like he had built the wall the other man was repairing, forty years ago, and had simply never needed to build another one since.

"You are the journalist," the man said, without turning his head, in English inflected by something Halloran couldn't immediately place and gave up trying to.

"I was."

"Everyone says that when they arrive." Now he did turn, and his eyes did the thing Halloran had spent a career being suspicious of in powerful men — they looked at you as though they were finishing a sentence about you that had started before you walked in. "Very few of them mean it."

"I mean it."

"We will see what you mean." He gestured, not to a seat, because there wasn't one, but to the ground itself, an invitation general enough to include the whole courtyard, the whole mountain, possibly the whole proposition Halloran had flown eleven time zones and walked most of a day to accept without being able to say, if pressed, exactly what he was accepting. "My name is Rashnu."

Halloran had done the reading, on the flight, in the dead hours over water, the way he did the reading before every assignment — cram the vocabulary, cram the history, arrive at least able to recognize the shape of what you don't understand. He knew the name. He knew what it was supposed to mean, in the old religion this whole range of mountains had half-forgotten and half-kept, folded under newer gods the way this village was folded under the newer war, the way the eastern rain-shadow slopes were folded under the drier newer climate that had taken over from whatever older, wetter climate had first carved these valleys, back when the ice that made them was still here to do the carving. The one who weighs. The one who stands at the bridge and does not lie to you about what you weigh.

He decided not to say that he knew. It seemed, already, like exactly the kind of thing this man would not need him to say.

"Halloran," he said instead, and it came out smaller than he intended, a name offered up the way you'd offer identification at a checkpoint that hadn't asked for any.

Rashnu nodded, once, as if the name confirmed something he'd already filed. "Sit. Not because I have asked you to. Because your legs are done arguing with you and you have been too proud to admit it since the second switchback."

Halloran sat. His legs, it turned out, had opinions about the decision, all of them favorable.

For a while neither of them said anything, which was its own kind of information — Halloran had spent fifteen years in rooms where silence was a tool, deployed, timed, weaponized to make the other person fill it with something they'd regret. This didn't feel like that. It felt like the silence simply hadn't been asked to end yet, on either side, and nobody here was in the business of ending things prematurely. Above them, far up along the ridge where the last light still reached, a hawk of some kind rode a thermal in slow widening circles, riding the same updraft, Halloran supposed, that the sun-warmed rock face was still throwing off even as the valley floor sank into shadow, and he watched it for a long time without

either of them speaking, and found that he did not mind the not-speaking nearly as much as he expected to.

"You want to know what this is," Rashnu said eventually. "Before you have decided to want anything else."

"I've heard what people say it is."

"And what do people say."

Halloran considered how much of the truth to spend on the first exchange, an old professional habit, rationing candor like a resource that might run out before the interview did. He decided, almost experimentally, to spend all of it. "They say you help people find something they can't argue themselves out of afterward. They say it isn't pleasant. They say you don't promise it'll make anything better."

"All of that is accurate," Rashnu said, "except the last part is stated wrong. I do not promise it will not make anything better. I promise nothing about better. Better is not the business we are in." He picked up a small stone from beside him, turned it once in his fingers, set it down in what Halloran would only recognize much later — nights from now, weeks from now — as a different position than the one he'd taken it from, a habit that meant something or meant nothing, that Halloran would spend more energy wondering about than he ever spent finding out. "You have spent your whole working life gathering proof. Yes?"

"That was the job."

"And the proof stopped mattering to anyone. The documents. The footage. The witnesses with their faces blurred so no one could find them and finish what the story started." He said it without cruelty, which was somehow worse than cruelty would have been — cruelty Halloran knew how to receive, had built calluses for. This was just accuracy, delivered the way you'd deliver a diagnosis to someone who'd already, privately, made the diagnosis themselves and only needed someone else to say it out loud so it would stop being deniable. "You did not come here because you stopped believing in truth, Halloran. You came here because you stopped believing that anyone could be shown it. You are looking for a truth that does not

require an audience. That does not require belief from anyone but the one person standing inside it.”

Halloran looked past him at the darkening bowl of the valley, the terraces losing their color first, then the walls, then the smoke itself dissolving into a sky gone the deep unbroken blue that only happened at real altitude, in real cold, far from any city’s wash of light, and thought about how long it had been since anyone had said anything to him that he could not immediately locate the manipulation inside of — the angle, the ask, the thing being sold underneath the thing being said. He looked for it now, out of reflex, the way you’d check a doorframe for a wire.

He didn’t find one. That, more than anything the man had said, was what frightened him.

“What happens now,” Halloran said.

“Now you eat one more meal,” Rashnu said, standing without visible effort, the stone he’d been sitting on somehow looking, in his absence, like it had never been sat on at all. “Tonight. Because it will be the last one for some time, and I do not believe in cruelty for its own sake, whatever else you hear about this place.” He looked down at Halloran, and for the first time something moved behind the assessment in his face — not warmth, exactly, but its distant relative, the look of a man recognizing a particular kind of wreckage because he has catalogued that kind before. “Tomorrow, we begin taking away the things you have been using instead of the truth. It will feel, for a while, like dying. I want you to know that in advance, so that when it happens you do not mistake the feeling for information. It is not information. It is only the body, complaining about being asked to stop lying to itself.”

He walked away without ceremony, the way he’d done everything else, and Halloran sat alone on the flat stone in the thinning light, listening to the goat complain about something further off now, and to the wind picking up out of the same nameless side valley that had thrown grit at him that morning, carrying with it now the particular deep cold that only came down off a glacier after sundown, and thought: I have flown eleven time zones and walked into the sky itself to be told that hunger is not information.

He did not yet know how wrong, and how correct, that sentence was about to become.

2. TERMS

The last meal was bread, lentils, a bowl of yogurt gone slightly sour in a way that tasted less like spoilage than like a decision, and Halloran ate it slowly, at a low table set near a window that framed nothing but a wedge of darkening sky and one shoulder of mountain gone the color of a healing bruise, the way a man eats a meal he has been told to remember.

Rashnu sat across from him but did not eat. "You will want to ask me what the rules are," he said. "People always want the rules first. It is a way of pretending they still have some control over what is about to happen to them."

"Do I have any control?"

"You have the control everyone has. You can leave. The gate — such as it is — does not lock. Nothing here locks. That is not generosity, it is a design choice. A truth a man is not free to walk away from is not a truth. It is a cell with better lighting." He glanced toward the window, where the wind had begun to make a low, steady sound against the stone, the particular sound Halloran would come to recognize, in the weeks ahead, as the mountain's ordinary nighttime voice, distinct from the higher, more urgent note it took on before real weather. "Though I will tell you, so you are not surprised by it later: the way down is considerably harder to survive in winter than the way up was in autumn. That is simply the mountain's arithmetic, not a threat. People who leave, leave before the first snow closes the passes, or they do not leave until spring."

Halloran turned that over. It sounded, on its surface, like the kind of thing a con artist says specifically so his marks will repeat it to each other as proof of legitimacy. He filed the thought without saying it, and something in Rashnu's face suggested the filing had been noted anyway.

"There are three parts to what happens here," Rashnu went on. "People call them ordeals, which is not wrong, though it makes them sound designed for suffering, which is not the point of them, only an unavoidable feature of them. Each one removes something you have been using in place of the truth. The first is language — your own, and everyone else's. The second is comfort, which is a more stubborn liar than language, because it convinces the body before it convinces the mind. The third is control over what you are permitted to witness, which is the deepest lie of the three, and the one you have built the most of your life on top of."

"And at the end of it."

"At the end of it, if you survive each stage honestly — not painlessly, honestly — you will know one thing about yourself that you will no longer be able to argue yourself out of. I cannot tell you in advance what it will be. I do not choose it. I only remove what has been standing in front of it."

"That sounds like something a cult leader says the night before he starts taking your passport."

Something that might have been amusement crossed Rashnu's face and was gone before it could be confirmed. "Your passport is in your bag. It will remain in your bag. I have no use for it, and less use for you as a captive than as a man who chose, every single morning, to still be here." He stood. "Sleep tonight in the room you were shown. Tomorrow there is no more food. Not for a long while. I will tell you when the long while has become long enough to be dangerous rather than merely difficult, and you will not always believe me when I tell you, because the mind lies fastest and loudest exactly when the body needs it to be honest."

Halloran lay awake a long time that night in a stone room that held the day's heat for exactly as long as it took the wind outside to find every gap in the shutter, and then held nothing at all, listening to a silence so complete it had its own texture — not the absence of sound but a specific, high-altitude quality of sound, thin and carrying, so that he could hear, very distantly, what he took to be a rockfall on some far slope, a long dry rattle that went on for several seconds and then stopped as abruptly as it had started, the

mountain shrugging some small piece of itself loose the way it must do a hundred times a night, unwitnessed, uncatalogued, requiring no one's belief to have happened. He thought about how many rooms he had sat in, across how many years, being told versions of trust us, we know what's necessary, we know what's true — by generals, by press officers, by his own editors — and how each time some small, professionally necessary part of him had believed it a little, right up until the moment the believing cost someone else their life.

He thought: I am doing the same thing again. I am walking into a room and believing a man because his voice is calm and his eyes don't move.

He thought, just before sleep took him, with the wind still working at the shutter and the cold finally winning its slow argument with the last of the day's warmth in the stone: maybe that's the only method there ever was, and the only thing that changes is whether the man deserves it.

3. DAY ONE, DAY TWO

He woke to a light he did not recognize — not the ordinary gray of dawn but something harder and whiter, and it took him a groggy minute to understand that the peaks visible through the gap in the shutter had gone from their evening bruise-purple to a blinding, painful white, and that snow had fallen somewhere above the village in the night, not on the village itself, which still showed bare stone and bare dirt, but on the higher slopes, a new dusting laid over the old permanent fields near the summits, so that the whole visible range now wore two whites — the ancient gray-white of glacier ice that never fully melted, and the fresh, blue-shadowed white of snow that would be gone again within days, the mountain keeping its books the way it always did, a running tally of gain and loss playing out on a timescale too large for the village below to fully register except as weather.

Hunger, on the first day, was not what he expected. He expected a fading. Instead it arrived loud, entitled, almost comic in its pettiness — by mid-morning he was composing, with total sincerity,

a mental essay on the specific inadequacy of every meal he had eaten in the last decade, and by early afternoon he had landed, inexplicably, on his ex-wife's cooking: a chicken dish with too much cardamom that he had complained about for the entire length of their marriage and that he would, at this exact moment, have traded a kidney for.

He spent the day doing what Rashnu had told him to do, which was nothing in particular — walk the terraces, sit where the sun reached, watch the light move. He found that watching the light move was, at this altitude, an occupation in itself. The sun here did not simply rise and cross and set the way it did at sea level; it arrived late into the valley, blocked for the first hour after true dawn by the eastern ridge, so that the village woke into a cold blue shadow-light for a full hour before the sun finally cleared the rock and struck the western slope first, a line of gold climbing down the mountain opposite like something being poured, reaching the valley floor only well into the morning, and then, in the afternoon, retreating back up the eastern slope in the same deliberate order, so that the day's actual usable light — warm, direct, worth standing in — lasted several hours less here than the calendar would have promised anyone at lower elevation. He understood, watching it, why the villagers moved through their mornings with the unhurried patience they did; there was no reward here for rising with a sun that would not arrive for another hour regardless.

He mentioned the cardamom chicken to Vashti, whom he met properly for the first time hauling water past the low wall, her sleeves pushed back despite the cold, forearms reddened from the stone trough's icy runoff, and she laughed — the first unguarded sound he'd heard since arriving — and said the mind grabs whatever is closest to the surface and tries to make a religion out of it. "Mine was a gas station sandwich," she said. "Three days in, I would have committed several federal crimes for a gas station sandwich."

She did not offer more than that, and he did not ask. There was an etiquette here, he was already sensing, built entirely around not

asking, and it sat strangely comfortable on him, a man who had spent his whole career being paid specifically to ask.

By evening of the second day the hunger had not faded so much as changed register — less a demand now, more a held note, something underneath the day rather than interrupting it. He noticed himself irritable over nothing, snapping internally at the goat, at the wind, at the particular blue of the evening sky for taking its time. Headache sat behind his left eye like a tenant who had stopped paying rent and had no intention of leaving. The wind had shifted sometime in the afternoon, coming now from the northeast rather than the northwest, and with it a different, drier cold, and one of the older men mending nets near the courtyard had looked at the sky and said something to another man that made them both go quiet and glance toward the highest peak, and Halloran understood, without needing the words translated, that a change in wind direction here was read the way a change in a source's tone was read back home — a small thing that meant something larger was about to be true.

Rashnu found him at dusk, sitting against the same wall the man had been repairing two days before, now finished, the new mud a slightly different color than the old stone around it, already beginning, Halloran noticed, to take on the first hairline cracks that told him this repair, too, would need repairing again before long — the mountain's slow appetite already at work. "The anger is normal," Rashnu said, without being asked. "It is the mind, discovering that its favorite tool — narrative, the ability to tell itself a story that makes the discomfort mean something — is running out of material. It will try harder before it tries less."

"Is that meant to comfort me."

"It is meant to inform you. Comfort is not on offer this week." He crouched, unhurried, the way older men in this country crouched, a posture Halloran's own knees had never learned and would not learn now, on an empty stomach, on a mountain. "Tell me something true about today. Not something interesting. Something true."

Halloran thought about it longer than the question seemed to deserve. "I was angry at a goat."

"Good," Rashnu said, and there was no irony in it at all, which was somehow the strangest part of the whole exchange. "That is smaller than anything you have told anyone in years. Smaller is closer."

4. DAY THREE, DAY FOUR

By the third day the hunger had gone quiet in a way that alarmed him more than the noise had — a kind of appetite suppression that felt less like relief than like a system powering down non-essential functions to preserve something else. His thoughts moved differently: fog for long stretches, punctuated by moments of a clarity so total it felt almost violent, as though his mind had been sanded down to a single working edge.

The weather turned that day, the northeast wind making good on whatever the net-menders had read in it — not snow, not yet, but a flat gray overcast that came in low and fast off the range's far side and erased the peaks entirely, so that for the first time since his arrival the mountain simply disappeared, the village left sitting in a bowl of close, featureless cloud that seemed, in his hollowed and fogged state, less like weather than like a kind of forgetting, the whole visible world reduced to forty meters of wet gray rock and the shapes of buildings he already half knew by feel. Sound behaved strangely in it, flattened and close, voices carrying oddly from buildings he couldn't see, so that the village felt, for the two days the cloud sat over it, smaller and larger at once — smaller because he could see so little of it, larger because everything he couldn't see had become, in the absence of sight, a matter of pure imagination.

He slept badly and dreamed constantly, the dreams unusually vivid, unusually specific — a door in his childhood house that had never actually existed, the exact grain of a hotel carpet in a city he'd forgotten the name of, faces he hadn't thought of in a decade arriving with total fidelity and no accompanying story, no context, no reason for their appearance beyond the fact that his mind,

starved of new input, had begun running old tape simply because old tape was what it had.

On the fourth day he woke before dawn with his heart going hard and fast for no reason he could locate, and lay very still in the dark waiting for it to mean something, and it didn't, it was only the body, doing what bodies did when there was nothing left to metabolize but themselves. The cloud had lifted in the night, he found, stepping outside into a cold so complete and so still it felt almost solid, a hard frost silvering every surface, the peaks standing back into view scoured clean, sharper-edged than he remembered them, as though the two days of cloud had been a kind of sleep the mountain itself had needed and had now woken from, refreshed, unforgiving.

He found Vashti awake too, sitting outside in the cold pre-light wrapped in a blanket, her breath visible in slow, even clouds, and sat beside her without asking permission, which felt, by the standards of four days ago, like an enormous violation of a boundary that no longer quite existed between them.

"It gets stranger before it gets calm," she said, not looking at him, watching instead the specific pink that was beginning, far off, to touch the highest snowfield before any other part of the world had light at all — the alpenglow, he would later learn to call it, the sun striking the peaks minutes before it reached anything lower, so that the mountains seemed, for those few minutes each dawn, to be generating their own private sunrise, burning from within while the valley still lay in full dark. "The third act is the worst for most people. You're not there yet. You're still in the part where the mind is arguing."

"With what."

"With the idea that it isn't in charge." She pulled her coat tighter, watching the pink deepen toward gold, the light beginning its long unhurried crawl down the western slope the way he'd watched it climb the same slope in reverse each evening. "Where I worked, before — it doesn't matter where — the whole job was managing what people believed. What they were allowed to know, in what order, so the belief landed the way you needed it to land. I was

good at it. I told myself for years that I was good at it in service of something worth being good at.” She said this the way a person recites a fact they have already forgiven themselves for and are only now discovering the forgiveness didn’t take. “This place doesn’t manage what you believe. That’s the whole trick of it. It just keeps taking away the things you’d normally use to manage it yourself.”

He didn’t ask what she’d believed, or for whom, or what it had cost. The etiquette held. But something in the way she’d said it doesn’t matter where made him certain it mattered a great deal, and that she would tell him, eventually, on a day when telling him cost less than not telling him.

5. DAY FIVE THROUGH SEVEN

By the fifth day his body had started making decisions without consulting him — standing too fast brought a gray tunnel swimming in from the edges of his vision, his hands when he held them out in front of him carried a fine tremor he hadn’t ordered and couldn’t stop, his core seemed to have dialed itself down two degrees, a low persistent chill that no amount of sun could quite reach, though the sun, when it found him, found him gratefully, and he began without quite deciding to structure his days around the light’s slow migration across the terraces, following the warmth the way the village cats did, a patch of sun-struck stone becoming, by midweek, the entire architecture of his ambition for a given afternoon.

The wind had settled into a pattern by then that he’d started, almost without noticing, to read the way the villagers read it — calm and cold in the mornings, rising through the day, a steady downslope breath in the evenings as the high snowfields cooled faster than the valley floor and sent their chilled, denser air sliding down through the terraces like something poured, a nightly tide he could feel arrive at almost the same hour each evening, a full ten degrees of temperature riding in on it within the space of twenty minutes, so that he learned to be indoors, or at least wrapped, before its arrival, the mountain keeping a schedule more reliable than any he’d kept in fifteen years of newsroom deadlines.

The emotional flattening Rashnu had warned him about arrived on the sixth day, and it frightened him more than any of the physical symptoms — a long gray stretch of hours in which nothing, not the mountain, not the cold, not even the hunger, seemed to carry any particular weight, as though someone had turned the volume down on the entire experience of being a person. And then, without warning, walking nowhere in particular in the early afternoon, on a terrace above the village where the wind had scoured the ground bare and the only sound was a loose stone somewhere clicking against another in the gusts, grief arrived out of a perfectly clear sky — no trigger, no memory attached yet, just grief itself, raw and total and absolutely unearned by anything happening in the present moment, and he stood in the middle of the path and let it move through him because there was, for the first time in longer than he could remember, nothing else competing for the space.

Rashnu found him afterward, and did not ask what had happened, only looked at him with the particular attention of a man checking a gauge. “Don’t narrate it,” he said. “Not yet. If you give it a sentence, you have already started lying about it. Let it stay a feeling a little longer. Sentences come later, and they come cheaper than you think.”

Halloran, who had built an entire career and a marriage and a personality out of the conviction that nothing was real until it had a sentence, found he had no argument left to make against this. He simply nodded, and the two of them stood together on the exposed terrace in the thin, hard afternoon light, the wind pulling at their clothes, the whole visible range spread out below and around them in a silence too large to be filled by anything either man might have said, and somewhere behind his sternum something that had been held very tightly for a very long time loosened by some small, almost undetectable degree.

That night, for the first time since arriving, he did not dream about anything invented. He dreamed about diesel, and cold stone, and a smell he hadn’t let himself remember in eleven years.

6. WHAT THE FAST GAVE HIM

a memory surfaces

The valley had a name once, on a map, in a language he'd since half-forgotten, and he had been on the ridge above it for six hours with a long lens and a fixer who kept telling him, in the flattened English of a man translating his own fear, that they should not still be here. It had been a different range then, lower, harder-edged, the ridgeline scattered with the same wind-flagged dwarf pines he would meet again, years later, on a mountain he did not yet know existed, though he would not make that connection until much later, sitting in a stone room half a world and a decade removed from the memory itself.

They stayed anyway. That was the job. You stayed until you had something, and then you stayed a little longer than that, because something was never quite as good as undeniable, and undeniable was the only currency his editors respected.

Through the lens: a compound, low mudbrick walls, a courtyard he'd later learn had held three generations of one extended family. Men in uniforms that matched no insignia he could immediately place moving through the gate without urgency — that was the detail that stayed with him longest, in the years after, longer than anything that came next: the lack of urgency. Men who took their time were men who were not afraid of consequences.

He watched them separate the compound's people into two groups. Women and small children toward the trucks. Men and boys — down to a boy who could not have been older than twelve, walking with the specific over-straight posture of someone imitating the men around him because he did not yet know what his own fear was supposed to look like — marched behind the eastern wall, out of the lens's line of sight, into the dead ground the ridge could not see into.

He did not see what happened next. He heard it. Single shots, spaced, unhurried — the specific unhurriedness of men for whom this was not the first time and would not be the last, men with no reason to rush a thing no one was coming to stop.

He counted eleven. He has never, in eleven years since, been entirely certain the count was accurate, because counting was the only thing his mind had been able to do with the sound, the only structure available to make it survivable in the moment, and structures built for survival are rarely honest afterward.

Three days later his outlet ran a piece about a “clearing operation” against “confirmed insurgent elements,” with a number in it — a different number, a press-release number, sourced to a briefing he had sat through with his own notebook out, writing down words he knew, even as he wrote them, were being used to replace other words.

He filed the number. He did not file the sound.

He told himself, for eleven years, that this was a distinction without a difference — that the sound would not have changed the outcome, that the story ran regardless, that a journalist reports what can be sourced and the sound, absent the eleven bodies he never saw and never could prove, was not sourceable, was not evidence, was only a thing that had happened to his own ears and therefore, by the standards of the profession he had built his whole self around, did not count.

The memory arrived now, on the mountain, on the fifth night of an empty stomach, not as an argument but as weather — total, ambient, without commentary, exactly the way Rashnu had told him true things arrived before the mind got to them. The diesel smell that hadn’t been there, that his memory had apparently manufactured and attached to the moment sometime in the intervening years the way memory does, filling gaps with whatever material was lying around. The cold stone under his hands on the ridge. The specific unhurried rhythm of the shots.

He woke before dawn with his face wet and no memory of having cried, and lay there a long time not narrating it, the way he’d been told, and found, to his own surprise, that the not-narrating did not make it smaller. It made it, for the first time in eleven years, simply and entirely real.

7. REENTRY

They broke the fast slowly, the way Rashnu insisted it be broken — broth first, then soft food, days of careful reintroduction while Halloran's body remembered, with what felt like genuine reluctance, how to want things again. He was weaker than he expected to still be a week later, his hands unsteady on a cup, his balance uncertain on the terraces, and yet some other measure of him — he could not have named it, would not have trusted the name if he'd found one — felt sturdier than it had in years.

The season had turned properly while he was inside the fast, he noticed now with the particular attention of someone reentering the world from a long absence — the terrace gardens stripped and put to bed for winter, the goats moved to a lower pasture he hadn't known existed, tucked into a fold of the mountain that stayed a few degrees warmer, and the light itself changed, the sun's arc across the sky noticeably lower and shorter than it had been the week he arrived, the golden hour now arriving mid-afternoon rather than late, the shadows the peaks threw across the valley floor growing longer and colder by the day. Winter, he understood without being told, was not a season here so much as a verdict, arriving with the specific unhurried inevitability of something that had never once, in the memory of anyone in this village, failed to arrive on schedule.

Vashti was different with him now, or he was different toward her, or both; the etiquette of not-asking had softened into something that allowed small offerings without demanding reciprocity. She told him, unprompted, walking the low wall in the cold morning, breath fogging between them, that she had worked in an agency whose name she still would not say, managing what a great many people in a great many countries were permitted to believe about a war that both of their governments had, at various points, denied fighting.

"I was good at it," she said again, the way she had before, the sentence apparently load-bearing enough that she needed to keep testing its weight. "I believed, for longer than I'm proud of, that being good at it in service of the right people made it a different thing than what it actually was."

"What changed."

"Nothing changed. That's the part nobody tells you. I didn't have a moment. I had a very long erosion, and one ordinary Tuesday I realized the erosion had already finished and I'd missed the part where it mattered." She looked at him sideways. "You'll understand that better than most people would."

He thought of the number he'd filed instead of the sound, eleven years ago, and said nothing, and she seemed to understand the nothing as an answer.

8. THE SECOND ORDEAL, EXPLAINED

Rashnu gathered them — Halloran, Vashti, two others whose names Halloran had learned but whose stories he had not yet been offered — in the flat courtyard on a morning with real bite in the air, the mountain's first honest warning of what was coming, the sky to the north wearing a high thin veil of cirrus that one of the older men had pointed out to him days before as the surest sign of weather still a few days off but already, undeniably, on its way — mare's tails, he'd called them in his own language, a phrase Vashti translated for him without being asked, and Halloran had looked up at the thin combed streaks of cloud and thought that whoever had named them, centuries ago, on this same mountain, had seen exactly what he was seeing now.

"The fast removed language," Rashnu said. "What is next removes comfort, and comfort is the more dangerous of the two, because the body defends it with a violence the mind does not have access to. What we do now can kill you if it is done carelessly, so understand that it will not be done carelessly. There is a floor beneath this fall. Someone is always watching the ones inside it. You are not being asked to prove anything to me by how far you go. You are being asked only to stay honest about what is happening to you as it happens, for as long as staying conscious permits you to."

He explained, in plain clinical terms that Halloran found almost comforting in their bluntness, what would happen: staged cold immersion, monitored, the stages named and described in advance so that no sensation, however extreme, would arrive as a surprise

the body could mistake for catastrophe rather than process. "Fear amplifies the danger more than the cold itself does," Rashnu said. "So we remove the fear first, by telling you exactly what is coming. This is the only mercy the second ordeal offers. It offers it in full."

He led them, as he spoke, along the path to where the basin waited — not a building but a feature of the mountain itself, pressed into service, a natural stone bowl fed by a channel of meltwater diverted down off the glacier above, the water so cold it seemed to give off its own faint mist even in daylight, and Halloran understood, looking at it, that this was not a facility built to punish him. It was simply the mountain, doing what the mountain did, in a spot the villagers had long ago learned to make use of rather than fight.

Vashti, beside him, did not look afraid. She looked, Halloran thought, like someone returning to a room she'd already been in once and had decided, on balance, was survivable.

"What are you looking for," Halloran asked her quietly, while Rashnu spoke to the others. "In there. What's supposed to be under the cold."

"Whatever's already under everything else," she said. "It doesn't change what's there. It just finally gets you quiet enough to hear it."

9. STAGE ONE

They went in at first light, on Rashnu's instruction, when the air itself was at its coldest and stillest and the basin's water had not yet had the day's meager sun to warm it by even the fraction of a degree that sun could manage at this altitude. The sky overhead was the hard flat white of a morning about to turn, the mare's tails from two days before thickened now into a solid gray ceiling that pressed low over the ridgeline, and the wind, for once, had gone entirely still, an ominous, expectant stillness that Halloran had learned by now to read as its own kind of warning.

The water was a mountain stream dammed into a shallow stone basin, fed by snowmelt that had never in its existence been warm,

and the moment Halloran lowered himself into it his body performed a reaction so violent and so involuntary it felt like being seized by someone else entirely — every muscle contracting at once, shivering that was not the polite kind he'd experienced standing in a cold wind but something closer to a full-body convulsion, his own frame trying, with total sincerity, to shake heat into existence out of nothing.

His fingers went first, numbness arriving fast and then, worse, giving way to a throbbing ache as his body cycled blood back into them in pulses — the hunter's response, Rashnu had called it, warning him in advance the way he'd warned him about everything, and knowing the name for it did not make it hurt less, only made the hurting feel, strangely, more survivable, a known quantity rather than an emergency.

And underneath the violence of it, something else, something he had not been warned about because perhaps it could not be warned about in advance and only discovered: a sharpness. An alertness so total it bordered on euphoric, his mind clearer in that basin of black water than it had been in years, adrenaline and something else — some old chemical reward built into the animal for surviving cold, he would learn later, reading about it in a life he no longer quite recognized as his — flooding through him alongside the pain rather than instead of it.

Vashti was in the second basin, a few meters off, her face composed in a way that told him nothing and everything at once. Neither of them spoke. There was, he understood without being told, nothing to say that the water wasn't already saying better. Above them, the gray ceiling had begun, very slowly, to lower itself further down the peaks, swallowing the highest ridgeline entirely, and somewhere far off, muffled by distance and cloud, came the low unmistakable rumble of thunder, strange and out of season, the mountain's own weather choosing this exact hour to make its argument known.

10. STAGE TWO

The shivering, which had felt like it would go on forever, without warning began to fade, and this, Rashnu had told him in advance, was not a good sign in the way it felt like one — it was not the body winning, it was the body starting to lose the argument, conserving what little heat remained for the organs that mattered most and abandoning the muscular effort of shivering as too expensive to sustain.

His hands stopped answering him properly. He tried to grip the stone edge of the basin and found the message arriving at his fingers late and incomplete, as though sent down a line with half its wires cut. His speech, when Rashnu asked him a simple question — what is your name, Halloran, tell me your name — came out slurred, the syllables arriving in the wrong order, and some small clinical part of him that was still watching from a slight remove noted this with a strange calm, the way you'd note a gauge crossing into a red zone on a dashboard you weren't, yourself, in a position to do anything about.

The thunder from earlier had drawn closer, close enough now that he could feel it as much as hear it, a low pressure in his chest that arrived a half-second after each distant flash lit the underside of the cloud ceiling a dull, sourceless white, and the first fat drops of rain, cold as the meltwater itself, began to strike the exposed stone around the basin, hissing faintly where they landed near enough to the water's surface to be heard at all over the roar building in his own ears.

But under the fading noise of the shivering, something was becoming audible that had been drowned out until now — not a sound, nothing so simple as a sound, but a kind of internal quiet, a stripping away of the reflexive commentary that had run underneath every waking moment of his life for as long as he could remember, the narrator that never stopped narrating, finally, mercifully, running out of material.

He was aware, distantly, of Rashnu's hand on his shoulder, checking something — pulse, pupils, the specific quality of his stillness — and of his own body's dim, animal awareness that it was

in genuine danger now, not metaphorical danger, not the manageable danger of difficult emotion, but the plain mammalian danger of a core losing its argument with the cold, made worse now by rain finding its way past his collar, by a wind that had, in the space of minutes, come back to life out of the north carrying the specific raw edge of the storm building over the ridge. He felt no fear about it. That absence of fear, he would understand only much later, was itself the most dangerous symptom of all.

11. STAGE THREE

He does not remember deciding to undress. He remembers, afterward, being told that he had — that somewhere past the point where his speech had stopped making sense, his hands, moving with a clumsy but absolute conviction, had begun pulling at his own clothes, certain, in whatever was left of his reasoning, that he was burning, that the cold had become an unbearable heat and the only sane response was to remove every layer between his skin and the relief of open air, even as the storm broke fully over the basin, rain coming now in wind-driven sheets, thunder close enough that the flash and the sound arrived together, no gap left between them at all, the whole visible mountain reduced in the strobing gray light to jagged fragments — a ridge, a wall, a shoulder of black rock — glimpsed and lost, glimpsed and lost.

Paradoxical undressing, Rashnu would call it later, once language had returned to him — a real and well-documented failure of the body's dying thermostat, blood vessels near the skin giving way under the strain and flooding the extremities with a false sensation of warmth so convincing that men freezing to death are regularly found, afterward, half-undressed in the snow, having died utterly certain they were burning.

Inside that certainty — total, physiological, felt in every cell with more conviction than he had ever felt anything he'd called true in fifteen years of professional truth-telling — the memory arrived. Not remembered. Relived, whole, with a fidelity that owed nothing to narrative and everything to the specific chemistry of a mind stripped of every defense it had left: the smell of diesel and lime,

real this time, not manufactured by eleven years of retelling. The exact weight of the shell casing in his palm, cool, ridged, a serial number he had memorized without meaning to. The retraction notice, eleven days later, the specific bloodless language of it — following further review — that he had read four times before he understood it was ending his career on purpose.

Hands were on him then, more than one set, voices pitched low and urgent in a language he half understood, pulling him from the water into rain that was, by any ordinary measure, its own kind of cold, though it registered to whatever was left of him as almost nothing at all against what had come before, and the last thing he registered before the world narrowed to a single point of white and then nothing was Rashnu's face very close to his, streaming with rain, not alarmed, only intent, saying something that might have been his name, over and over, the way you'd call a name across a widening distance to make sure it still had somewhere to land.

12. WHAT THE COLD GAVE HIM

a memory surfaces

The grave was eighteen months and one valley removed from the ridge where he'd counted eleven shots he was never certain of. He had gone back for a follow-up piece, the kind editors commission when a story has cooled enough to be revisited without anyone getting nervous about it, and a farmer digging a new irrigation channel had found what farmers in that country occasionally found, and had, for reasons Halloran never fully understood and never stopped being grateful for, called a number that eventually reached him instead of reaching no one.

The smell arrived before the sight did, which was, he would learn, always true of these places — lime and something underneath the lime that lime is specifically used to slow, and something underneath that which nothing slows completely.

He catalogued what the eye insisted on cataloguing whether the mind wanted it or not. A child's shoe, still laced, the lace tied in the specific double-knot his own mother had taught him as a boy, a detail so ordinary and so devastating that he had to stop writing in

his notebook for several minutes before his hand would work again. Cloth. A watch, stopped. The particular arrangement of bodies that told a forensic story he did not yet have the vocabulary for but understood anyway, in his stomach, before his brain caught up: this had not been combat. This had been arrangement.

The story he built afterward took four months, three sources willing to go on record under conditions that took most of those four months to negotiate, and one piece of physical evidence — a shell casing, matched through a serial number he should not have been able to obtain and never fully explained, even to his own editor, how he had — that traced not to the insurgent group his outlet had spent two years blaming for exactly this kind of atrocity, but to a unit trained, equipped, and until recently paid by his own government, operating for this specific season under a flag of convenience clean enough that the paperwork, on its face, told a different and more comfortable story.

The piece ran. He remembers the morning it ran with a clarity that has never faded — the particular quality of vindication, feeling, for one entire day, that the fifteen years had been worth something, that proof still meant what he had always needed it to mean.

Eleven days later it did not exist anymore. Not retracted with any drama — no correction printed prominently, no accounting. A single paragraph, days later, buried, citing further review and sourcing concerns that no one, including the editor who wrote the paragraph, ever specified to him directly. He kept the drafts. He kept the shell casing, illegally, in a drawer, then in a lockbox, then in the false bottom of a bag that had crossed more borders than any object he owned had a right to cross undetected. He has never stopped carrying some version of it since.

The memory released him slowly this time, not all at once the way the first one had — the cold had made it total but the return from the cold made it, strangely, bearable, the way a wound is more bearable once you know its exact shape than while you are still discovering how deep it goes.

13. REWARMING

Coming back from the edge of hypothermia was, Rashnu told him afterward, very often worse than the cold itself, and Halloran spent the better part of a day discovering how correct that warning had been — his core temperature continuing, absurdly, to fall for a stretch of time even after he was wrapped and warmed, the body's own delayed reckoning with what it had just survived, and then, as circulation returned to his extremities, a pain so specific and so total that he understood, for the first time, why rewarming pain was spoken of by people who had survived real cold with a particular kind of reverence, worse in the telling than the freezing itself.

Outside, the storm that had broken over the basin blew itself out by midday, moving off east across the range the way storms did here, and by evening the sky had cleared to a hard, washed brilliance, the first real snow of the season now lying fresh and white on every peak in sight, the temperature dropping with the clearing sky the way it always did, the clouds that had briefly acted as the valley's blanket now gone and the heat of the day escaping straight up into open space. He lay in the low stone room wrapped in every blanket the village could spare, and watched, through the same gap in the shutter that had shown him the first snow weeks before, the sky above the ridge deepen into the particular hard black that only came after a storm had scoured every trace of moisture from the air, stars arriving in a density he had never once seen above any city, close and sharp and entirely indifferent to the fact of his survival.

And then, on the far side of the pain, something arrived that he had not been told to expect and would not have believed if he had been told: a flood, unmistakably chemical, unmistakably real, a lightness moving through his chest and limbs that had nothing to do with relief in the ordinary sense and everything to do with some ancient biological reward wired into a creature that had, against real odds, warmed itself back from the edge. He lay wrapped in blankets in the low stone room they'd carried him to, and wept, not from grief

this time but from something closer to its opposite, and did not try to narrate that either.

Vashti sat with him that evening, both of them wrapped, both of them hollowed out and strangely lit from within. "The third one is the hardest," she told him. "It doesn't look like it will be. That's what makes it the hardest. There's no water, no fasting. Just a room, and a person, and nothing you're allowed to do about any of it."

"What happened to you, in yours."

She was quiet long enough that he thought she wouldn't answer. "I sat with a woman I never met, who was dying of something ordinary, nothing to do with any war I ever touched. And somewhere in the middle of that ordinary night I understood something about a report I filed once, that got a translator killed, that I have spent eleven years telling myself I couldn't have known would happen." She looked at him, and there was no performance left in her face at all, none of the composure he'd first met her with. "You already know what yours is going to be. I think you've known since before you got on the plane."

He didn't answer. He didn't need to. She was right, and they both knew it, and the etiquette of not-asking had finally, quietly, run its course between them.

14. THE ROOM

Rashnu came for him three days later, once the last of the rewarming tremor had left his hands, and led him without explanation to a low room at the far edge of the village that Halloran had not been shown before — small, lamp-lit, smelling faintly of woodsmoke and something medicinal, a narrow bed against one wall on which an old man lay very still, breathing in the slow, spaced, unhurried rhythm of someone whose body had already begun negotiating its own ending. Outside, the wind had returned to its ordinary evening pattern, the cold downslope breath off the snowfields arriving on schedule, audible through the room's single small window as a low, steady note that would, Halloran

already understood, run underneath the entire night ahead of him without once letting up.

"His name is Nazir," Rashnu said. "He has asked, as much as he is able to ask anything now, not to be alone tonight. You will sit with him until it is finished, or until morning, whichever comes first. You will not write anything down. There is nothing to write with in this room, which is not an accident. You will not photograph this in your memory the way you have trained yourself to photograph things, building the sentence you'll use to tell someone else about it later. There will be no someone else. There is only you, and him, and the night."

"Why me."

"Because you have spent your whole life turning witnessed death into something you control — a story, a number, a piece that runs or does not run, an editor's decision, someone else's fault. Tonight there is nothing to control. There is no piece. There is no editor. There is a man dying in the ordinary, unarranged way that most people actually die, without an audience and without a lesson attached, and your only task is to be here for it without turning it into anything at all."

Halloran looked at the old man's face in the lamplight — unremarkable, deeply lined, entirely unaware, so far as Halloran could tell, that he was being watched by a stranger — and felt something he had not expected to feel, something closer to terror than anything the cold water had produced in him. "I don't know how to do that," he said. "I don't know how to just — be here."

"No one does, at first," Rashnu said. "That is why it is the last ordeal, and not the first." He set a hand briefly on Halloran's shoulder, the same gesture from the cold basin, and Halloran understood only now, with a small cold shock, that it had been a check for pulse then and was only a human gesture now, and that he had not, until this exact moment, been able to tell the difference. "By morning, your memory of tonight will already have begun lying to you. That is simply what memory does. I am not asking you to preserve this perfectly. I am only asking you to be inside it, honestly, for as long as it lasts."

He left. The lamp burned. The old man breathed his slow, spaced breaths, and Halloran sat down on the low stool beside the bed and, for the first time in fifteen years, had absolutely nothing to do with his hands.

15. THE NIGHT

The first hour was the hardest, and it had nothing to do with death at all — it was simply the unbearable strangeness of sitting with no task. His mind kept reaching, out of fifteen years of reflex, for an angle, a structure, the shape a piece would take if this were a piece, and each time he caught himself doing it and made himself stop, the stopping itself became a kind of exhausting labor, a muscle he had never had to use and was building for the first time, badly, in real time, with no instructor but the silence of the room and, underneath it, always, the wind's low steady note at the window, the mountain's own breathing, indifferent and continuous.

By the second hour the reaching had quieted, not because he had mastered anything but because he was too tired to keep fighting it, and something like presence began to arrive in its place — he noticed the specific rasp of the old man's breath, noticed the lamp's small consistent sound, noticed his own heartbeat, noticed the cold coming up through the stone floor into the stool and then into him, small physical facts with no story attached, simply true and simply there. Once, far off, he heard what he now recognized without needing to be told — a rockfall on some distant slope, the mountain shedding another small piece of itself into the dark, unwitnessed by anyone but him, and he found the sound, this time, oddly companionable, evidence that the world outside this room was continuing to be itself regardless of what was or was not happening inside it.

Somewhere in the third hour the old man's breathing changed register, longer gaps between breaths, and Halloran found his own hand moving without his permission to rest, lightly, on the blanket near the man's arm — not gripping, not comforting in any performed sense, just present, the way Rashnu's hand had been present on his own shoulder in the water — and he understood,

distantly, that this was the first wholly un-narrated act he had performed in longer than he could remember.

It was somewhere in the depth of that stillness, unbidden, with no ordeal of hunger or cold to force it open, that the last memory came — not relived with the total sensory violence of the first two, but arriving quietly, almost gently, the way a door opens when it was never actually locked, only long unused.

16. WHAT THE VIGIL GAVE HIM

a memory surfaces

His name was Emroz, and Halloran had promised him, in the specific careless way a person makes a promise they intend to keep and simply do not understand yet what keeping it will cost, that nothing in the piece would ever be traceable back to him — no direct quotes, no identifying detail, a blurred face on the footage that never ran, a source description vague enough, Halloran had told him, told himself, told his editor, to protect a man who had risked everything he had to hand over the outtakes that made the shell-casing story provable.

The retraction ran eleven days after publication. Halloran had a choice in the weeks after — a choice he has spent eleven years describing to himself, when he describes it at all, as no real choice, though sitting now beside a dying stranger with nothing left to perform for, he understood it, for the first time without flinching, as exactly what it had been: a choice. He could go public independently, outside the outlet, with what he still had — the shell casing, the unpublished testimony — and in doing so guarantee that whoever had gone looking for Emroz once already would have every reason to finish the job, while also guaranteeing the end of his own career, his access, his byline, the identity he had built his entire adult life around. Or he could stay quiet, keep the byline, keep the access, keep being a man who broke important stories, and simply not think too hard about a translator whose name he had promised, and mostly kept the promise, not to say out loud.

He stayed quiet. He told himself it was for Emroz's safety, and some small percentage of that was even true, which was the

specific cruelty of it — the story he built was not a lie exactly, only incomplete in the one place completeness would have cost him something.

Four months later, through a source he never fully trusted and never fully doubted, he heard that Emroz was dead. The circumstances were vague, deniable, exactly the kind of vague that a man trained for fifteen years to demand sourcing on everything could have investigated, pressed, confirmed or ruled out, if he had chosen to.

He did not choose to. He told himself, at the time, that confirming it would change nothing, could bring no one back, served no purpose but his own guilt. He understands now, in this lamp-lit room, with a stranger's slowing breath the only other sound in the world, that this had been exactly backward — that he had not investigated because investigating would have made it real in a way that not-knowing, technically, legally, deniably, did not. He had done, in miniature, in his own private life, the exact thing every institution he had spent his career exposing did on a larger scale: he had chosen the number over the sound. He had chosen the version of events that let him keep his byline.

He has never said Emroz's name out loud since the day he heard it was no longer a name that belonged to anyone living. He said it now, quietly, once, in the lamplight, to no one, to the dying stranger who could not hear him, to the room, to the eleven years, and something in his chest that had been held so tightly for so long that he had stopped registering it as a held thing at all finally, without ceremony, without relief exactly, simply let go.

17. MORNING

The old man died a little before dawn, so quietly that Halloran was not entirely certain, for several minutes, that it had happened at all — the spaced breathing simply thinned past the point of returning, and the room, which had held two people breathing in it, now held only one.

He did not go for anyone immediately. He sat a while longer, in the specific stillness of a room that had just lost its second occupant,

and became aware, gradually, that the window had gone from black to the deep pre-dawn blue he now recognized as the valley's own particular hour, the eastern ridge still holding back the actual sun by a good hour yet, though somewhere far above, he knew without needing to check, the highest snowfields would already be catching that private, silent, first light that belonged to the peaks alone. He found that the terror he'd felt at the start of the night — I don't know how to just be here — had resolved into something he had no ready word for, something that was not peace exactly, closer to a kind of settling, the way sediment settles in water that has finally been left alone.

Rashnu came at first light, as though he had known the exact moment without being told, and stood in the doorway a moment taking in the room before he spoke. "You did not write anything down," he said. It was not a question.

"There was nothing to write with."

"There is always something to write with, for a man like you. You would have found a way, three days ago." Rashnu looked at him with the same assessing patience from the first afternoon, and Halloran understood he was being weighed, not unkindly, and that the weighing had an answer now that it had not had before. "What do you have."

Halloran thought about the question's plainness, its refusal to dress itself up as anything gentler than what it was. "I let someone die to keep my name on a byline," he said. "And then I told myself a story, for eleven years, where that wasn't what happened."

Rashnu nodded once, the same economical nod from the courtyard, days and a lifetime ago. "That is smaller than a war crime," he said. "And harder to carry, because no tribunal will ever try you for it, and no retraction will ever undo it, and no one else will ever ask you to answer for it unless you ask yourself. That is the nature of the third ordeal. It does not hand you the world's lie. It hands you your own, the one you built entirely alone, with no institution to blame for it." He stepped aside from the doorway, an old man's body already being tended to by two women who had entered without a word, the ordinary machinery of a village that had done

this many times before continuing around them. "Go and sleep. In a few days, when you are steady, you may go home, if going home is still a sentence that means anything to you. There is nothing more the Ground can remove from you. What is left is only yours to carry, the way it was always going to have to be carried, eventually, by someone."

18. DESCENT

He stayed four more days, weak and strange in his own skin, relearning the specific weight of ordinary things — a full meal, a night's unbroken sleep, the sound of his own voice used for something as small as asking for salt. The village around him had settled fully into winter by then, the terraces bare, the goats gone to their lower pasture for good until spring, smoke standing straighter and thicker over each roof as fires were kept through the day rather than only at dusk, and the first snow that had dusted the highest peaks weeks before had crept, by increments he'd watched happen the way he'd watched everything else on the mountain, steadily further down the slope, so that by the morning of his departure it lay in a ragged unbroken line perhaps two hundred meters above the village itself, close enough that he understood Rashnu's warning about the passes had not been theater at all.

Vashti walked with him partway down the mountain on the morning he left, the two of them saying little, their breath fogging in the sharp early air, the trail underfoot rimed with frost that would not burn off until well past midmorning at this elevation, the silence between them no longer an etiquette but simply the natural shape of two people who had run out of any need to perform understanding at each other. Below them the valley he had first seen weeks before, green-brown and terraced, now lay muted under a thin gray light, the terraces the color of old rope, the river at its center running high and fast and nearly black with snowmelt, and he understood that he was seeing, in a single morning's descent, nearly the entire arc of the season the mountain had walked him through — the last of autumn's color giving way, terrace by terrace, switchback by switchback, to the bare hard browns and grays of the winter that had been arriving, patiently,

the entire time he'd been too occupied with his own unmaking to notice it arrive.

"You'll try to find him," she said, at the point where the path forked and she would go no further. It was not a question either; everyone here, he was noticing, had learned to speak the way Rashnu spoke, stating things instead of asking them.

"Find who."

"Rashnu. Once you're back in the world and your old instincts wake back up. You'll want to know who he really is." She looked at him with something that might have been sympathy, or might have been simple recognition of a pattern she'd already lived through herself. "Everyone does. It's usually the last thing the mountain teaches you, and it teaches it to you after you've already left, which is the only way it can."

He did not ask her what she'd found, when she went looking, if she'd gone looking. Some final residue of the etiquette held, or perhaps it was simply that he already suspected the answer and did not need it confirmed twice.

The valley closed behind him the way it had opened in front of him three weeks before, without ceremony, the switchbacks reasserting themselves, the village disappearing into the folded land as though it had agreed, the moment his back was turned, to stop existing for anyone who wasn't standing inside it, and by the time he reached the place where the road resumed being a road, the peaks themselves had vanished behind the shoulder of a nearer ridge, gone the way the range itself had first appeared to him — not suddenly, but by the same patient, indifferent geometry that had governed every distance on this mountain since the morning he arrived, revealing nothing to a traveler that it was not already prepared to take back.

19. THE SEARCH

It took him six weeks back in the world to admit to himself that he was looking, and by then he had already exhausted most of what a man with his particular unglamorous back-channel access could

exhaust: three intelligence contacts who owed him favors old enough to have accrued real interest, a records request routed through a friendly clerk in a ministry two countries over, a defector debriefing archive he still, technically, was not supposed to have access to.

There was no Rashnu in any of it. Not a redacted Rashnu, not a Rashnu operating under a different name that the record-keepers had helpfully cross-referenced — nothing. No entry stamp at any border crossing in the region, across a decade of records, matched a physical description close enough to be useful. No military record, no defector debrief, no NGO registry, no local council document from a district that otherwise kept meticulous, almost obsessive records of who lived on its land and for how long.

It was not that the records had been hidden. Hidden records left traces — redactions, gaps, the specific shape of an absence someone had gone to trouble to create. This was different. This was the absence of a shape at all, as though the question itself had never had anywhere to land.

He called Vashti from an airport, the two of them now several months and one continent apart, and told her what he'd found, or rather what he hadn't, and there was a long pause on the line before she answered, long enough that he wondered if the call had dropped.

"I stopped looking a long time ago," she said finally. "You should think about why it bothers you so much that I did."

20. WHY DOES IT BOTHER YOU

"It bothers me," Halloran said, "because I spent fifteen years building a career on the idea that everything real leaves a trace. That's the whole religion I was raised in, professionally. If it's true, it's provable. If it's provable, it leaves a mark somewhere, in some record, for someone patient enough to find it."

"And he doesn't leave a mark."

"He doesn't leave a mark."

Vashti was quiet on the line for a moment, and when she spoke again her voice had the particular gentleness of someone delivering a fact she had already made peace with, a long time before he had. "You went looking for one thing in your whole life that couldn't be a lie," she said. "One thing you wouldn't have to source, or verify, or defend against a retraction eleven days later. You found it. It's yours. No one can take it away from you, and no institution can bury it, and you don't need a single document to know it's true, because you didn't get it from a document. You got it from your own body, in a room with no notebook, at four in the morning, with no one else watching." A pause, the specific quality of someone choosing the next sentence carefully because they suspected it would matter more than the ones before it. "So why does it bother you that the man who gave you that might be a lie himself?"

He did not have an answer for her, not one he could put into a sentence that felt honest rather than merely clever, and after a while they said the ordinary things people say at the end of calls between two people who have survived something together and are still, in their separate ways, learning how to carry it, and hung up, and he stood in the airport with his bag at his feet and the boarding call for his flight sounding somewhere behind him, unheeded.

He thought about Rashnu's name, the meaning he had looked up on a plane three weeks before he understood what it would cost him to learn it properly — the one who weighs, the one who stands at the bridge and does not lie to you about what you weigh. He thought about how carefully, how completely, a man would have to construct an absence of himself in order to leave that particular name floating free of every record that might otherwise anchor it to anything. He thought, too, of the mountain itself — of how it had shown him everything, the whole architecture of its weather and its light and its long slow seasons, and had still, in the end, kept its own interior entirely to itself, the passes closing behind him exactly on schedule, the peaks withdrawing behind nearer ridges the moment he stopped needing to see them, as though the range had only ever revealed precisely as much of itself as the truth he'd come there to find had required, and not one degree more.

He did not think Rashnu was lying. That was the part he could not get any purchase on, turning it over on the walk to his gate, on the flight, in the months afterward that this book does not follow him into. He did not think the mountain, or the fast, or the cold, or the vigil, or the thing they had given him in the end, was false. He believed it the way he had never let himself believe anything in fifteen years of professional disbelief — completely, without a document, without a source, without an editor's sign-off.

He simply could not stop noticing that the one truth he had finally found unimpeachable had been handed to him by a man who could not, by any method available to him, be verified to exist.

He carried both of those facts home with him, the truth and the unresolved shape of the man who'd given it to him, and found, somewhat to his own surprise, that he was able to carry them at the same time, in the same body, without either one canceling the other out. Perhaps that, more than anything spoken aloud on the mountain, was the actual lesson of the Ground: that a life could hold one certainty and one permanent, ungovernable question, side by side, and go on anyway.

He did not go looking for Rashnu again. But some nights, in the ordinary noise of a world that had never once stopped lying to him and never would, he found himself listening for something underneath it — a stillness, a weighing, a bridge he could not see the far side of — and could not always tell, in the dark, whether he was hearing it or only wishing, one more time, that something in this life was still capable of asking to be believed.

GLOSSARY

Emroz [em-ROOZ] — Persian, *today*. The name of the translator Halloran promised to protect. It is the ordinary word for the present day.

Rashnu [RASH-noo] — Avestan, *judge, justice*. In Zoroastrian tradition, the yazata who judges the soul where it crosses the Chinvat bridge — and where, in the older accounts, the verdict is the person's own conscience made plain rather than a sentence handed down from outside.

Sar-e-Khamosh [sar-eh khaa-MOSH] — Persian, *the silent head*. The village. It announces itself with no arch and no sign, only stone thickening into wall.

Halloran spent fifteen years proving that powerful people were lying, and watched, each time, as the proof stopped mattering inside a week. He did not burn out on the truth. He burned out on evidence.

The village is four days past the last road. The man who meets him there is called Rashnu, and what he offers is neither comfort nor a teaching. It is one fact about Halloran that cannot be sourced, argued with, retracted or filed.

The price is three ordeals. A fast that takes his language. An immersion in mountain cold that takes his comfort. A night beside a dying stranger that takes the last thing he still owns — the habit of turning what he sees into a story for somebody else.

He comes down with the fact. Then his old instincts wake up, and he goes looking for the man who gave it to him, and finds that no border post, ministry, archive or district register has ever recorded that such a person exists.

Some truths can only be paid for in the body.

