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Thawra

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Bard College

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Thawra

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

By

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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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Acknowledgements

To my Parents, for your unwavering support and shockingly unconditional love. I'm sorry for occasionally hanging up on you when your questions stressed me out. I love you always.

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To freedom fighters everywhere.

Chapter One

Her head slammed against the wall, and she cried out in pain.

“Miss, miss, are you alright? Do you need assistance?” asked a muffled voice outside the door.

“No,” she said. “I’m fine.”

She never threw up on planes. In fact, Avery had always felt slightly above any fellow passenger who had the nerve to get bothered by turbulence. While she majored in journalism, she had minored in biology. She knew very well that evolution did not intend for the human body to fly 45,000 feet above the ground. It took two brothers from North Carolina to finally jumpstart mankind’s ascent into air, certifying forever that flight

is a privilege and not a right. If that privilege involved feeling a bit jostled occasionally, then it was a small price to pay.

Somehow, that time felt different. Avery had lost count of the minutes that she'd been in the lavatory. The air was thick with illness. She had been on her knees for so long, she was sure there would be welts. Thankfully, she would not be wearing any skirts for a while after she landed. With every sharp movement and swift dip of the plane, a fowl ocean fell from her mouth into the toilet. Her collar has become stained with blue chemicals, as the water splashes back up at at her flushed face. If it was just lunch that was being ejected, she would not have been as perturbed. After years of praying to the porcelain gods at will, Avery no longer minded the taste of food the second time around. Unfortunately, no one ever gets used to straight bile. Being a twenty four year old female with a burgeoning career in broadcast journalism, she was now too old to be able to eat whatever she wanted without seeing it on her ass, but too young to afford a personal dietician. Putting two fingers down her throat to "take care of things", might as well have been one of her official job requirements.

She heard someone speaking in Arabic. "Yalla" is one of the few words that Avery knew by heart. *Hurry up.*

"Ana asef," she said weakly.

Steadying herself, she pressed her hands against the walls to pull herself up. Her mouth tasted like sewage. She stepped out of the lavatory and had to squint her eyes to adjust to the new light. She made eye contact with a row of Niqabi women as she tried to find her way back to her seat. She didn't remember it being so far away. She was either just lightheaded or losing her mind. She hoped very much that it was the former. Two of the veiled women quickly looked away, but the other woman pointedly stayed on her. She continued looking for her row, but was painfully aware of the sea of people eyeing her curiously. She kept her eyes down and continued walking, feeling more self-conscious than usual.

“Avery?”

Upon hearing the familiar Long Island drawl, Avery turned around. “Have you finally realized Economy class is more your speed?” asked Sterling.

“I don't know how I could have missed you,” said Avery. “Your cologne is like aromatic breadcrumbs.”

She genuinely didn't know how she had walked right by him. She had been distracted and forgetting basic things for weeks, but walking right past her seat was a new low. She discreetly tried to tighten in her stomach as she moved past Sterling, and awkwardly nudged herself in the middle seat. Sterling had taken his shoes off while she

was gone. “Sweetheart, this cologne costs more than your rent.” said Sterling. “The gender pay gap continues to work in my favor.”

“If I’m not mistaken, it’s *Jewish American Princess* by Calvin Klein, no?” Avery replied, putting on a cardigan from her stashed carry-on. If she had seen Sterling as any other guy on the street, she might have thought him attractive. Sexy, even. But she didn’t know him as a stranger. Avery and Sterling had been coworkers for two years, since the day she started at the network. Sterling as a cameraman, and Avery as a field reporter.

“Will you shut up?” snarled Sterling. “As of now, please don’t use the ‘J’ word when it pertains to me. For the sake of my bodily safety.”

Although Avery had admittedly minor Arabic skills, her knowledge of the Middle East was leaps and bounds ahead of Sterling’s. Their team of two was ragtag at best. Sterling generally worked with pop culture events. C-list red carpets, toy conventions, student film festivals and the like. Turmoil in Metropolitan North Africa was a first for him, but to his credit, he accepted the impromptu request to be the field producer for the piece. He had even considered calling his father to tell him the news, but had lost his nerve.

Avery watched Sterling close his eyes and recline his seat. Both Sterling and Avery were surprised that they were given business class privileges. The network was in trouble. The most recent budget cut had slashed the lighting crew salaries practically in half, which created a news story in itself. Due to them going on strike at the time, the previous month had featured literally very dark segments. Every major U.S. network's viewership had been falling, but theirs was falling the fastest. A decade of reporting one too many inaccuracies leading to humiliating apologies and retractions, plus numerous sexual harassment settlements garnering huge payouts, had made the network a laughing stock. Many anchors had jumped ship to other channels, while the smartest ones had emigrated to online platforms.

Avery tried to take a cue from Sterling, who was now snoring loudly, and closed her eyes. Without checking her phone, she knew the flight was almost over. She had left JFK Airport almost eleven hours ago. With her she brought one small Louis Vuitton duffle bag with her monogram, a graduation gift from a wealthy but otherwise absent godmother, and a hard rolling suitcase with a lock. Over the course of the flight, she had massacred her cuticles. Biting and picking at them with every negative thought. She knew she didn't deserve to be there. She wasn't qualified, she wasn't smart enough, and she certainly wasn't believed in. Avery held her mother and father's vehement assurances to the contrary in the same regard she'd held horoscopes in teen magazines. All the same, she did appreciate their support. Even Sterling, usually a

cloud of cynicism, had told her that the higher-ups wouldn't have chosen her if they didn't believe she wouldn't do a fine job.

In her heart of hearts, she knew the real reason why she was flying business class to Cairo. His name was Virgil Ainsworth. One of the only unanimously respected figures on the network, was Pulitzer Prize winning Middle Eastern correspondent Virgil Ainsworth. Throughout his tenured career, he had covered the Lebanese Civil War, Gulf War, Yemeni Civil War and had even interviewed the infamous Uday Hussein over a traditional Iraqi breakfast of makhlama. To the rest of the world, he was an icon. To the staff at the network, he was a sexist, alcoholic narcissist who was not to be looked directly in the eye. Avery learned that her first day of her college internship, after apparently acting too comfortable while giving him his mail. Even with all of his many personal flaws, he was put up with and revered for his undeniable journalistic gift. Avery had looked up to him for years, and begrudgingly continued to do so even when witnessing his off-camera persona. This was one of the reasons it was so unpleasant to watch him destroy himself

Objectively, he really should have gone to rehab ten or more years ago. What was acceptable and normal drinking behavior for Virgil in the seventies became inconvenient going into the eighties. In the nineties, it was becoming a problem. In the 2000's it was bordering on the unacceptable. The final straw for the network was Virgil's shockingly abhorrent toast to a retiring female producer at the most recent Christmas

party. The yearly event was iconic, so Avery was pleasantly surprised to have received an invitation at all. She wore her dark hair in shiny ringlets, landing just above her shoulders. With her red lips and exaggerated lashes, she thought she looked like Clara Bow. Avery didn't know the retiree well enough to share a special anecdote, but she was looking forward to hearing what others had to say. She imagined being in her place in forty years - wearing real pearls earrings as dozens of her colleagues and inferiors praise her existence, until finally the time comes for her driver to take her back home to The Dakota. The speeches were going well, if not a little cliché, until Virgil emerged from the open bar. He stormed the stage and put an arm around the producer, grazing her breast. She was used to it, and didn't even flinch. "Well Peggy," he slurred. "Your tits may not be as high as they were thirty years ago, but I'd still fuck you. If not for old time's sake." He planted a sloppy kiss on her cheek and stumbled offstage. Her husband, son and grandchildren continued to awkwardly eat their red velvet cake.

The network let out a statement to the media that Virgil had decided to take a leave of absence from reporting to focus on his family, and bond with his new grandson. The reality was that he was drying out at a luxury detox resort in Malibu.

Her thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a descending chime coming out of the speakers. A man spoke in Arabic, and people began to take off their earphones and fold up their blankets. The voice switched to English.

“This is your captain speaking,” the raspy voice said. “On behalf of myself and the rest of the crew, we welcome you to Cairo.” Avery noticed that the man spoke for much longer when speaking in Arabic. She looked down at the dangling nail on her pointer finger. Any rational stranger would think she had been attacked by some sort of animal. She took a deep breath to brace herself, and ripped out the remaining tissue. Blood dripped down her hand.

Chapter Two

Nahla's eyes stung, and tears trickled down her freckled cheeks. She couldn't remember the last time she had helped her mother make breakfast. Although she was only cutting onions to put in ful medames, she was conscious that the small gesture meant much more to her mother than just some extra kitchen help. Nahla leaned over the counter and opened the window. Her younger twin brothers, Tarik and Karim, were playing football in the street with their friends. Although only a couple of kilometers away from Tahrir Square, her neighborhood of Garden City seemed as detached as the states. In Garden City, no one went hungry or without school. Like her father, many of the neighboring men were lawyers and financiers frequently traveling throughout the Arab world, absent for months at a time. Others were doctors and chemists. Besides the giggling of children and the crying of peregrine falcons, the loudest regular occurrence was the call to prayer. Even when Cairo was raging and vengeful, Garden City was an oasis of serenity. It simply went without saying that as far as her mother and neighbors

were concerned, If no one can hear conflict or see conflict, it must not be happening. Nahla detested it. When her university friends asked where she was from, she would vaguely say “downtown”.

She put down her knife and checked her iphone. She needed to be in Tahrir Square in an hour. Since a thunderstorm had woken her up early that morning, the time seemed to glacially be crawling by. Still, she knew there were several things left she needed to do. The first was to placate her mother, Hanan. The second was to pack her backpack, making sure to include specific items. Nahla was most dreading the former.

“Mama!” Nahla called out the window.

Even Hanan herself would admit that she left any menial tasks to her housekeeper, husband (when he was home) or the boys, but she made an exception with her precious garden. Careful not to ruin her weekly manicure, Hanan wore thick gloves and tended to her flowers the way other women would coo over an infant. She had left the kitchen to pick some fresh parsley. Expectedly, Nahla figured she had become distracted. Or perhaps felt awkward around her unusually present daughter and needed some space. Either way, Nahla reluctantly needed to speak with her.

“Don’t be an idiot,” Nahla thought to herself. “You are literally just talking to your mother. People do it everyday.”

Nahla heard the front door open and close. She quickly used the front camera on her phone to look at herself, but instantly regretted it. She could only imagine what Hanan would think about her recent breakout. In a household where appearances took precedent, Nahla was sure she rarely made the cut. Hanan turned the corner and entered the kitchen, her violet veil flowing loosely behind her with her signature quick pace. “What’s the emergency, habibi?” she asked, slightly annoyed,

“No emergency,” Nahla replied. “I’m just done with the onions. What else can I help with?”

Hanan eyed her suspiciously. “What has gotten into you, Nahla?” she asked. “For weeks you haven’t even looked up from your phone, and now you want to cook? Just come out with what you want to say.”

Nahla slid the onions off the cutting board into the frying pan next to her. A small splash of hot oil hit her hand, and she flinched. She missed university. Spending the winter intersession at home was tedious enough, but since campus had to be evacuated for supposed safety concerns, her winter holiday had become unexpectedly extended. Nahla missed her friends away from Garden City, and longed for the evenings they would spend together. Smoking apple mint shisha and sharing dreams for lives that would never be, and lovers that would never be tolerated.

Nahla stayed silent, and gently shuffled the pan over the open flame. The side of her hand was becoming pink from the burn. Hanan sat down at the small kitchen table and turned on the radio. As she turned the dial, Nahla could easily identify the artist from each one second sample. Finally, Hanan settled on 106.3 MHz. English blared out of the rectangular box. Nahla wryly noted the disparity between the bleakness of the news and the neon pink floral pattern adorning the radio. *“Egyptian police used tear gas and rubber bullets and beat protesters in a bid to clear thousands of demonstrators from a central Cairo square late last night after-”*

Hanan had turned it off. “Min sijak?” yelled Nahla, finally turning around to face her mother. “Turn that back on!”

Hanan’s deep brown eyes widened. Nahla took a step back. “What did you just say to me?” said Hanan, barely above a whisper. “I might be losing my mind, but I thought I heard you tell *me* to do something.”

Nahla took a deep breath and braced herself for whatever would come next. “Mama, you know I love you,” she said. “More than anything. But you must know that things are changing. Why do you hate it so much? It’s the beginning of a new era, we should all be excited!”

Hanan stared at Nahla, unflinchingly. “Habibi, come sit down,” she said.

Hesitantly, Nahla turned the burner down to low. Hanan motioned for her to pull out a chair. She heard her brothers laughing outside, clueless to the revolution happening in their backyard. “Do me a favor,” said Hanan. “Don’t lecture me about change. You are twenty one years old. When I was your age, I had already been married for three years and had you in my belly.”

Nahla’s stomach rumbled. She didn’t understand how she could be hungry at a time like this. “Mama, that’s not what I meant. I just-” Hanan cut her off.

“I’m not a fool, Nahla. I see how you look at this house,” Hanan raised her arms and motioned around the large kitchen. “This neighborhood, my friends. I know you wish we were more interesting... More combative, perhaps.”

“No one said anything about being combative,” said Nahla. “But I don’t understand how you can be so complacent. There are bigger issues going on right now than what centerpiece to order for your birthday.”

“You know what my life was like before I met your father. Before I came to Egypt.” said Hanan. “Dirt floors. No electricity. Shooting in the streets.”

Nahla wanted to say that many Egyptians were living like that that very moment, but decided not to press her luck. Hanan took a sip of tea, and Nahla used the opportunity to check her phone. Time was getting closer, and the conversation was going nowhere. At least, nowhere that would help her.

“I know that Allah will give Mubarak strength,” said Hanan, getting up. “Inshallah he will lead us for a long time.”

Hanan tightened her scarf, and turned off the stove. “I promise we’ll make the full medames tomorrow,” she said, lowering her gaze. “I have to take the boys to their friend’s house. Are you okay with cereal?”

Nahla stood up and pushed in her chair. “That’s fine. That’s even better,” she said. She felt her temples begin to sweat. “Do you know when you’ll be back?”

Hanan laughed quietly. “I’m almost embarrassed to tell you, but I’m getting my hair done after dropping them off. Then your aunt is having a surprise party,” she said. “You’ll probably be asleep when I get home.”

“Mama, there’s nothing wrong with getting your hair or nails done. Of course not,” Nahla said. “But when those things take precedence over what really matters, that’s when I-” .

For the second time, Hanan interrupted her. “With any luck,” she said, “The police take care of those thugs, and school will reopen very soon.”

She took her car keys off the hook and stepped away outside. “I love you, Nahla,” she said. “I just wish you’d be more grateful for your place tonight. People would die to live like we do. Make sure to keep curfew. ”

She smiled softly, and locked the door behind her. Nahla heard the twins argue over seats, and the car back out of the driveway. She really had meant to tell her what she was planning to do. That if all went according to plan, she would be joining those “thugs” very soon. She wasn’t intentionally trying to be duplicitous. Nahla hoped that if she thought it enough, it would become true. She turned the radio back on.

“...thousands more are expected to take to the streets demanding political reform in way of overthrowing President Mubarak. State security officials have branded the protests illegal, and said that those taking part will be dealt with strictly.”

Nahla opened the refrigerator. Careful not to squish any fruit, she reached to the very back. Behind the breaded chicken, Diet Coke and fresh orange juice, she carefully lifted out a large carton of whole milk which was on its side. Hanan was right - Nahla had been barely looking up from her phone lately. Young people from all over the city had become mobilized, and she didn’t intend to let them down. Facebook and Twitter were taking the place of rendezvous and newsletters. Police were using pepper spray to blind protesters and keep them compliant. Through word of mouth, it became evident that a splash of milk to the affected eye was a quick remedy. Nahla recognized that it wasn’t the most glamorous or cinematically appealing tool, but it was the most accessible. Besides, she thought, it’s not like she was the one delegated to bringing the glass bottles and gasoline. Before she forgot, she quickly opened the cabinet drawer where her mother kept the oven mitts, and pulled out some rags to take with her. Ones that would burn easily and that would not be missed.

Nahla walked to the closet next to the front door. She could still smell the remnants of her mother's perfume. It smelled like sweet roses and petroleum. She took out her backpack. There were still papers left over from class. It seemed so long ago when she was sitting in a classroom reading about the infamous disruptors of history. Some remembered more fondly than other. She put in the milk, rags and a small point-and-shoot camera from her pocket. She intended to remember this. Like her mother, she locked the door behind her.

Chapter Three

Allahu Akbar

Allahu Akbar

Allahu Akbar

Allahu Akbar

Ash-hadu alla ilaha illallah

Ash-hadu alla ilaha illallah

The coffee in Avery's mug trembled as the bellowing vibrato of the morning Adhan began. Avery had barely slept through the night. By the time she and Sterling arrived at the Nile Ritz Carlton and checked into their adjoining rooms, her adrenaline was running too high to truly give in to her exhaustion. Besides, she was still on New York time. She ended up taking a few thirty minute naps to pass the hours, but spent most of the night lying in bed staring at the ceiling. Her room had a small balcony overlooking the river. When she could no longer stand the boredom, she made some

instant coffee and put on her robe to go outside. The brisk February air nipped at her face, but made her feel more awake than she'd felt in a long time. The street below was mostly empty, save for a large herd of stray dogs. She was surprised that they were able to sleep through the call to prayer. They must have been used to it. When checking in, the concierge had told them that many people in the area had already evacuated. The hotel was mostly filled with foreign media.

Avery checked her watch, which was still on East Coast time. She counted seven hours ahead. Soon it would be time to meet the translator in the lobby. The network utilized a private company specializing in interpreting for Americans. His name was Ahmed. Or was it Amir? Avery frantically checked her emails for confirmation, but couldn't find anything. The concierge had also told them that some Egyptians were weary of the way the West was covering the revolution. They were especially suspicious of Americans, since the news came out that President Obama had flat out told Mubarak to resign, but hadn't bothered to send any aid. "They feel like they are being filmed for *Animal Planet*," he said. "Like a movie to shock and entertain you."

Even though Avery had all night to unpack the contents of her bags into drawers, she didn't bother. Since childhood, she'd always thought there was something romantic about living out of a suitcase. Being able to leave at a moments notice. Through her headphones, Avery faintly heard a knock at the door. Shit. She wasn't ready yet. She didn't want the translator's first impression of her to be sans makeup. Her phone

buzzed. A text from Sterling. "Please tell me you're not still dead asleep. I've been knocking for fifteen minutes."

Avery rolled her eyes and took her time walking towards the door to let him in. "Fifteen minutes, huh?" she said.

Sterling was dressed in a red and green flannel shirt layered under a navy blue insulated vest. His khaki pants were slightly too long for his 5'9 frame, and hung midway past his crimson Converse high-tops. His floppy dirty blonde hair was still damp from the shower. "Did you know you're not supposed to drink out of the facets here?" he asked, walking past her to lie down on her bed.

"Of course," Avery said. "There's a big sign above the sink. Can you please get your shoes off my bed?"

Sterling slid forward so that his feet hung over the edge. "Well I didn't see the sign," he said. "And I drank at least a gallon. Now my stomach feels like it's folding in on itself."

"Man, I'm sorry," Avery said. "Can I get you an Ibuprofen or something?"

"No thanks. Ahmed gave me some aspirin."

“Ahmed?”

“The Interpreter? You need to keep up and read your emails,” said Sterling.

So his name *was* Ahmed. Avery pointed to the analog clock on the bedside table.

“We aren’t supposed to meet him for thirty minutes.”

Sterling sat up. “I had to pick up an outlet adapter from the desk, and saw him smoking outside.”

“How did you know what he looked like?” Avery asked.

“Do you literally not read your email? There was an attached pdf with all his information. His name is Ahmed Elsaid, and he’s thirty. Born and raised in Cairo.”

“I must have missed it,” said Avery quietly. She felt embarrassed and incompetent.

“We might as well head down,” said Sterling as he walked towards the door. He looked Avery up and down. “You look nice,” he said bluntly.

“I still have to put makeup on,” Avery said. “I’ll meet you down there.”

“Avery you look fine. More than fine,” said Sterling. “You’re covering street riots, not an awards show. Frankly, I think it would be sort of inappropriate to look too glammed up.”

“It’s a revolution, not a street riot,” corrected Avery.

“Tomato, Tomahto,” said Sterling. He was getting impatient. “Seriously, you look very nice. We need to go now.”

Avery moved in front of him to look in the mirror. Like Sterling, she was also wearing Converse, but low-rise and blue. Her mocha brown hair was up in a loose ponytail, with one small braid. She took extra caution to be modest, so her violet long sleeve shirt came up to her collarbone. Her jeans were loose enough to not be obscene, but tight enough to still create a smooth silhouette on camera. She thought to herself that she did look fine, if not nice. “Okay,” she said. “Where is the elevator?”

The lobby had a tan, blue and white geometric tile floor interspersed with sporadic areas of red carpet. Avery noticed a round table with lotus flower in a large

glass bowl. The water had a brown tinge, and the flower had wilted. Like the concierge had said, there appeared to be very few native Egyptians around. Most people are probably already at the square, she thought. If she was the last one to get the scoop and ended up (unintentionally) rehashing someone else's report, the network would not be happy.

“There’s Ahmed,” said Sterling, motioning to a young man sitting on a couch.

He gently put his hand on Avery’s back to guide her in the right direction, and she flinched. Sterling quickly moved his hand away as if he’d been burnt. “Sorry,” he said, confused and hurt.

Sterling ignored him and walked ahead. She knew he didn’t mean anything by it, but she felt it was an uncomfortable power move on his part. Whether he was conscious of it or not. The man noticed Sterling and Avery walking towards him and stood up to reach out his hand. “You must be Avery,” he said.

“I am,” said Avery, firmly shaking his hand. “Thank you so much for meeting us here so early.”

“It’s no problem,” said Ahmed. “The early bird gets the worm, as you say.”

Avery laughed. "I hope so," said Sterling wryly, as he adjusted the padded shoulder strap of his bulging camera bag.

Out of her peripheral vision, Avery saw Ahmed's expression change just slightly. He looked worried. Or maybe judgemental. He broke the silence. "Avery, please don't take this the wrong way," Ahmed said cautiously. "You may want to cover your hair. This isn't a situation where you would want to stand out in a crowd. Any other day it would be all right, but recently... things have become rough."

"I didn't think I needed to," said Avery. Her throat tightened and she felt like she was going to tear up from her embarrassment. "It's not like we're going into a mosque."

Ahmed shrugged his shoulders indifferently. "We should go. It's ordinarily only a ten minute walk, but I think at least one road is barricaded."

Sterling and Avery nodded and followed Ahmed out the automatic doors. "It's going to be a long day," Sterling said into her ear. "Loosen up a little."

He quickened his pace to walk next to Ahmed. Sterling made a mental note to cut out the joking familiarity between her and Sterling. They were colleagues not friends. Who the hell was he to give her advice? Feral dogs lay under cars, protecting themselves from the morning sun. Some lazily barked, but none left their impromptu

sanctuary. Avery was painfully aware of the worms peeking out of some of their open sores, and repressed an audible gag. She wasn't sure, but she thought she heard a low chuckle come from Ahmed.

There was an eerie quietness surrounding the three travelers. The only sounds being the dirt kicked up from their shoes and distant rumblings ahead. Ahmed walked swiftly and purposely, but occasionally turned his head slightly to make sure Avery was keeping up. She felt like she had only been walking for a few minutes, but when Ahmed finally stopped and turned to face her, she realized she they had covered at least a mile. He put his hand on Sterling's shoulder, motioning for him to join their strange little huddle and pay attention. "Do you see the building behind us? The one with all the the red window blinds?"

Sure enough, a couple dozen or so yards away stood a large golden bricked building. Graffiti decorated the exterior, and even bled onto the glass windows. Most prominently displayed was four letters, about two feet each. ACAB. "All cops are bastards," Avery said aloud, half laughing.

Ahmed looked behind him and gave a small smile - the first she had seen from him. "Get used to that," he said.

“I’m told that you’d like to interview some protesters and people around. Is that still the plan?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Sterling. “So much of the coverage has been from the perspective of police and government people, and that sort of thing. I want real people. People that actually have things to lose, but are willing to take the physical and political risks to get what they want.”

Sterling raised his eyebrows and gave Avery a bemused look. Avery was surprised herself that she had actually said that aloud, to a virtual stranger nonetheless. Really two virtual strangers, considering the superficialness of her and Sterling’s relationship. She nervously looked at her shoes, now more brown than blue. She was a rookie from a failing television network and former editor of The Sophian - the Smith College newspaper. Not exactly Nellie Bly.

“You don’t know how glad I am to hear that,” said Ahmed.

Avery looked up at him and saw that although he wasn’t smiling, his eyes were brighter than before. “I know exactly who you need to meet. He’ll talk to you,” he said.

Sterling took his camera out of its bag, and said something to Avery. She ignored him and hurried up, now walking ahead of Ahmed.

Chapter Four

Nahla's grey lace-up boots kicked up dust with each urgent step. She had been going to Tahrir square all of her life. First as a child with her parents, holding her mother's hand to cross the street to the Egyptian Museum. When she was a little older, her father brought her to the Omar Makram monument to impatiently teach her that "real heroes don't wear capes and fly". As she left childhood and became a young woman, the square became a place to escape her family. Between classes at university, she and her friends would politely give directions to lost and nervous tourists looking to buy a miniature pyramid, careful not to snicker at them until after their backs were turned. She would text her parents to tell them that class was going to end late, and venture into the market - wasting their father's money on cheap rings and mother of pearl trinket boxes. They indulged in grilled pigeon and licorice tea.

However this time was different. The air was less soft and jubile, vendors weren't calling out to sell their wares. Even the cracks on the sidewalk seemed sharper and

more precarious. The dirt seemed redder. She looked at the shop numbers, careful not to get lost in her thoughts and walk past the meeting spot. The sun would still be at its brightest for several more hours. Nahla realized that must be why she felt as if she was in a dream, not exactly living through the day but just existing. Things didn't really start until the moon began to reveal herself.

She suddenly felt dizzy, and stopped to steady herself against a flickering street lamp post. She had never been around so many men and so few women in the same place before. She observed a sea of hundreds of brown faces, many with painted Egyptian flags under their eyes or scarfs covering their mouths and noses. She knew from her friends who had already been in the fray that these scarves served a dual purpose. The first was to protect themselves from the tear gas used by the police. Empty canisters were littered all over the ground, some violently dented, warning the brand names almost beyond recognition. The second reason was to hide their identity. Not even necessarily from the police. It wasn't as if they were carefully arresting people based on fact checked and detailed witness statements. There was no need to flaunt anonymity to people who already believed them to be a solid and collectivist mass of inhuman non-complacency. They shielded their faces from Mubarek-loyalist vigilantes, as well as their families. If the revolution indeed ended up being all for not, their mothers and fathers would need to answer for the sins of their sons. And some of their daughters.

For every thirty young men, Nahla spotted one female. Many of the hijabi girls she saw were wearing Palestinian keffiyehs, channeling Yasser Arafat. The starkness of the black and white weave acted as spotlights, making it difficult for her to look away. Nahla reached out to pat her backpack, making sure she still felt the hard lumps of her supplies. She tugged at the adjustable straps, pulling the weight closer to her body. Even though it was still light out, people were all around her. She was beginning to feel like a fish swimming upstream, the current trying with all its might to hold her back. Her hand was still throbbing from the hot oil. Each time someone bumped into her, it felt like sandpaper was being rubbed over the abscess.

“Nahla, nahn huna!”

When Nahla heard her name, she turned around and stopped abruptly - causing a teenage boy to trip. Nahla immediately reached down to help him, but he swatted her hand away. His friends were laughing when he got up and brushed the dirt off his jeans. “You shouldn’t even be here,” he said furiously, barely above a whisper.

“I have as much right to be here as you. Be safe tonight, brother,” Nahla replied icily.

The boy’s lips parted incredulously, and he was soon lost in the horde. The crowd was getting bigger, their congregating inadvertently kicking up dust into the atmosphere. Nahla rubbed her eyes to clear them of the debris, silently thanking herself for not bothering to put on mascara. “Nahla!” she heard again.

A beaming figure came out of the dust, absentmindedly elbowing her countrymen in the face to reach Nahla. Nahla and Deena had been friends for a little over two years, meeting during freshman orientation on the first day of university. Unlike Nahla, Deena's parents were not rich, and thus had no pretenses to support Mubarek. With her mother and father's unwavering support, Deena had practically been living in Tahrir Square since the "Day of Revolt" on January 25th. Nahla felt herself lovingly enveloped, her cheek pressed against Deena's triple pierced ear.

"You walked right past us!" said Deena, trying to be heard over the growing roar of the crowd. "For a second I thought you changed your mind."

"Bi sharafak," said Nahla, rolling her eyes. "Not only have I not changed my mind, but I came through with what I promised." Nahla reached around to pat her backpack.

Deena's eyes widened hungrily. "Come with me," she said, and took Nahla gruffly by the arm.

The two girls weaved through the hordes of angry men, having no choice but to endure the occasional grope and catcall. Nahla's cheeks flushed with embarrassment, but also excitement. She had never been touched by a boy that way before. She saw an older man in the crowd slap the back of a teenager's head, reprimanding him. He reminded Nahla of her father, and she instantly was engulfed in a heavy blanket of shame. "Stop thinking like a whore," she told herself.

“They’re all here,” Deena said, motioning with her free hand to an alley inlet almost completely obscured by garbage bags.

Deena dropped Nahla’s wrist and trudged over the huge lumps of leaking plastic. She lifted the collar of her shirt to cover her mouth and nose, exposing her freckled midriff. Nahla suddenly realized why. Glancing at the boarded up shops on either side, she realized that both were butcheries. Garbage trucks hadn’t been collecting for weeks. Leftover meat and animal carcasses had been sitting in the hot sun feeding maggots and flies for some time. Nahla gagged, and almost tripped face first on the ground. “Will you please come on?” Deena scolded, not turning around.

Nahla could hear people ahead, and tried to compose herself. She already felt self-conscious enough being the token rich girl playing pseudo-revolutionary, the last thing she needed to add to her first impression was a shirt covered in vomit. If she couldn’t hack a few garbage bags, how could she possibly be ready to take on something much greater and with much higher stakes. Nahla clamped her hand over her mouth and nose, and soldiered through the mess. By the time she had made it to solid concrete, her socks had gone from white to a chunky brown.

“Nahla, you know basically everyone here. I’ll be right back,” said Deena, apparently as way of introduction.

Nahla looked up from examining her ruined shoes. Deena had lost all traces of friendly familiarity, and had presumably resumed her role as defacto group leader.

Nahla recognized three of the four people behind Deena. Half of them sitting on cardboard boxes sharing a cigarette which should have been stomped out a dozen puffs ago, and the rest half leaning against the brick wall sloppily covered with layers and layers of paint. Attempts by police to literally white-wash anti-Mubarek sentiment. In red block letters still dripping, the newest additions included “Delete Mubarak” and “Congratulations on the new paint”.

It was a motley crew, to say the least. Nahla didn’t know exactly what she had been expecting, but she was pretty sure it wasn’t this. She felt disappointed. It’s not as if she had assumed her friends had transformed from middle class university students to bandoleer-clad guerillas, but she had hoped that everyone was taking this as seriously as she was. From her perspective, she felt as if only Deena and her had come ready and prepared for the night ahead of them.

Her dissatisfaction must have registered on her face. “Nahla, don’t look so thrilled. You’re making everyone uncomfortable,” Fadil said, finally throwing the cigarette on the ground.

All of the people Nahla did know in the strange little alley congregation, she had met at university. Except for Fadil. Fadil and Nahla had been going to school together since the extent of their curriculum was colors and shapes. When the differences between boys and girls became more and more apparent, Fadil and Nahla branched out into their own factions. Their mothers remained close friends, which gave them at

least a few opportunities to see each other without the pressure of instituting a romantic relationship prompted by their schoolmates. The cliché was not lost on Nahla, but she and Fadil were truly and unequivocally “just friends”.

“Did you just get out bed or something?” asked Nahla. “Am I seriously the only one that pulled through?” she said, taking her backpack off and gingerly plopping it at her feet.

“You were supposed to get here twenty minutes ago, so maybe drop this reliable act you’re putting on,” said Fadil, smiling.

“Don’t worry Nahla, at least we brought out share.”

Next to Fadil were Rennah and Riham, twins Nahla had met in a Palestinian film class. They had bonded over the unreasonable workload and had even wrote an anonymous letter to put in the professor’s mailbox, pleading with him to take into account the fact that they had other classes besides his. In return, the professor basically cut the homework assignments in half, and asked the letter writer(s) to come forward so he could publicly acknowledge their powerful prose. Rennah, Riham and Nahla never did out themselves, and had been friends ever since.

“Of course,” said Nahla. “I should have know that you guys would be on top of this.”

Riham nudged her sister to take off her backpack. “Let’s compare,” she said.

Nahla unzipped her bag to show the milk carton, rags and camera. "Is this enough milk?" she asked.

Riham looked uneasy. "If that's all you brought, I guess It'll have to do," she said.

Rennah elbowed her sister so sharply Nahla flinched. "You're so ungrateful," she said. She smiled at Nahla. "That's perfect. And good call on those cloths."

Rennah opened her own bag, releasing the ambrosial perfume of gasoline. A red box with a black spout weighed heavy on the canvas bottom. Nahla saw Fadil cockily flip his lighter in the air and catch it.

"Aren't white lighters supposed to be bad luck?" asked Nahla. "Jim Morrison, Jimi Hendrix and Kurt Cobain all had them in their pockets when they OD'd."

"That's an urban legend," said a voice to Nahla's left.

The stranger still hadn't moved from the cardboard box. He was fiddling with an empty cigarette pack, his thumb tracing over the state-mandated warning label "Nicotine is addictive. Smoking may cause death." Below was photo of a dead cockroach laying upside down, it's spindly legs flayed in the air.

"Besides," he said. "Kurt Cobain shot himself."

"Nahla, this is my cousin, Omar," said Fadil proudly.

Omar nodded. He was clearly several years older than the rest of the group. He looked more worn, like he had seen things that the others had not. She noticed that most of his fingertips were badly burned. "Where did you go to school?" Nahla asked.

Omar gave a wry smile and stood up. "Nowhere. I'm in the army." He paused. "Well I *was* in the army."

Nahla instantly regretted her question. How presumptuous, she thought. Unlike the military, college wasn't compulsory. Not everyone could buy their way out of it by going to school. So much for a first impression.

Deena reentered the alley, bringing with her the smell of garbage she had just waded through. "It's really filled up out there. I haven't seen it like this before," she said.

She turned to Omar. "Where did you say your brother is, again?"

"Oh, is he joining us?" asked Riham, struggling to lift her backpack.

"No, he's working tonight," Omar said. "Translating for an American TV crew."

"I hope you ladies are ready to make your television debut!" said Fadil excitedly.

Omar scowled at his cousin and Fadil quickly looked at the ground.

"This is so much bigger than us," he said. "This isn't a fucking vanity project for you."

For the second time that day, Nahla flinched. She rarely heard curse words like that. Especially ones not used just jokingly. Nahla became painfully aware how unprepared she was after all. Not just for whatever these Americans wanted to show, but for the fast approaching evening.

“They’re waiting for us on the West side,” said Omar.

He pulled a keffiyeh out of his back jean pocket and draped it around his neck. “This is your chance to show America what this is about. That we’re not just kids throwing a tantrum.”

Omar picked up his own bag behind him, which Nahla hadn’t noticed. She heard the sound of clinking glass,

Chapter Five

“Check one, check two, check three...”

Avery tapped the head of the microphone, causing shrill feedback to ring into Sterling’s headset.

“Fucking hell!” he shouted, bringing his hands to his ears and almost getting drowned out by the evergrowing crowd.

Avery laughed, and from the corner of her eye saw Ahmed crack a smile. They had ten minutes until airtime. Avery’s last live broadcast from the field had been covering a pile up at a soapbox derby in Queens. Several kids were left with various cuts and bruises, while another was rushed to the children’s hospital with a concussion. When it bleeds it leads. Of course, this was slightly different. Avery had put on a cardigan not only to look more professional, but because it was getting chilly. The scalding Cairo sun was leaving quickly, taking away its warmth. She discreetly licked a

finger and touched it to her head, smoothing down some flyaway hairs. She regretted not putting on more makeup. Although it wasn't likely that the locals would admonish her for her lack of contour, it was far from unheard of for the network to send out passive aggressive emails to female anchors they felt were not up to aesthetic scratch.

"Ah," said Ahmed. "Here they are."

Sterling looked up from fiddling with the camera. Avery turned to see who Ahmed was referring to, and her stomach dropped. "Do you know them?" she asked, trying in vain to sound upbeat.

"Yes, my cousin and some friends of his. Your interview subjects, I was thinking."

That's what Avery did not want to hear. CBS had gotten an actual cousin of Suzanne Mubarak. NBC had interviewed a particularly violent protester while he was carted away in handcuffs from the police. The segment had gone viral when his body was found later that day, beaten to death. Lucky bastards. The network would not be thrilled that Avery's "big get" had been a group of lanky teenagers, with no molotov cocktails in sight. If it weren't for one girl's hijab, they wouldn't have been out of place at Chelsea Market. Especially with their black and white scarves. Four girls and two boys. She did a double take and saw that two of the girls were identical. Avery looked at Sterling for backup. She knew she couldn't say to Ahmed "Thanks but no thanks - any other hookups?" but perhaps Sterling could tactfully suggest finding some more visually

exciting subjects. He always had a way of squirming out of situations that weren't in his best interest, and his gift could finally work *in* Avery's benefit instead of against it.

Sterling looked back at her and nodded, understanding her concerns. He leaned in closer, so Ahmed - who was greeting the group - couldn't overhear. "Avery, it's fine. We'll go with the youth angle. The new generation fighting for their future. Taking things into their own hands. Plus, I doubt anyone else has gotten a teenage girl, let alone four."

Avery realized that she had let the unthinkable happen. When she wasn't looking, Sterling had become the culturally respectful voice of reason. Avery's mindset had gone where she told herself over and over it wouldn't. The people in Tahrir Square weren't characters on a television show, carefully crafted by a writer's room to titillate Middle America. An accordion began to play somewhere in the crowd, eliciting a wave of cheers.

"Let me introduce you," Ahmed said, forcing Avery out of her thoughts and making her jump slightly.

"This is Avery and Sterling," he said. "They're your link to the rest of the world, so don't embarrass yourself."

Avery wanted to laugh, but by Ahmed's facial expression, she could tell he was very serious. "I'm positive that won't happen," she said. "Thank you all for letting us take up some of your night. I promise we won't keep you long."

Ahmed gently slapped the back of the tallest of the group. “This is my cousin, Omar.”

Omar smiled and put out his hand to shake. When he let go of Sterling's, Avery noticed that his fingertips were red and flaky, like he'd pressed them against a hot stove top. Shaking Avery's hand, he said “Nice to meet you. I want to thank you for giving us the opportunity to tell America what's actually happening here. What all this is actually for.”

“You speak English,” stated Sterling, confused. Omar and Ahmed politely pursed their lips to conceal their smirks, but the younger ones of the group burst out laughing. Avery couldn't blame them whatsoever. Only one of the girls stayed silent, looking genuinely annoyed. Although part of Avery could have punched Sterling, most of her felt secretly satisfied that once again, he beat her out on the cultural stupidity scale.

“Oh, um, well duh, right? I just didn't expect...” stammered Sterling, turning red.

“Don't worry about it,” said the younger boy. “I still run into trouble here and there.”

“If anything gets lost in translation, I'll just mouth to you what they really mean,” said Ahmed.

The same girl that looked offended at Sterling's flub raised her eyebrows at that comment. Avery agreed that the comment was a little condescending. The girl stepped forward, but didn't put her hand out. "I'm Deena," she said.

"It's nice to meet you," Avery said.

Again, the girl raised her eyebrows. "Great," Avery thought. "One more person I've gotten off to on the wrong foot."

"My name's Rennah," one of the twins said. "This is my sister Rahim."

"Rennah, I can speak for myself. You always do that and it is so annoying. Stop being so-."

"Fadil," the younger of the two boys said.

He grinned, showing off his braces. He reminded Avery of the typical boys at her high school. Hiding their insecurities and daddy-issues through a thick sheen of bravado and Axe Body Spray. "I could see right away that you're on TV," he said. "You must get a lot of fan letters." The twins simultaneously rolled their eyes.

Sterling blinked, seeming surprised. "That is so nice of you," he said. "I'm behind the camera, so most people don't know what I look like. I do get a few letters here and there, though."

Omar snorted. “Oh, I was actually talking to her,” said Fadil awkwardly, motioning to Avery. “But, uh.. You look good too, I guess.”

This was not turning out to be a good evening for Sterling. On the plus side, Avery figured that there was a good chance that by the end of their trip, Sterling’s ego may be diminished a little.

The last girl cleared her throat, more out of nervousness than a nudge for attention. “I’m Nahla,” she said, and paused. “So what exactly do you want us to say?”

“Just be yourselves,” said Sterling. “Have any of you been interviewed before?” he asked.

“For my uni’s newspaper,” Rinnah said. “But never on camera.”

“Well, this should be very similar to that,” said Avery. “The only difference is that people will see you when you give answers. Because it’s so loud here, it would be great if you guys could speak speak directly and closely into the microphone. I’ll hold it, but if you want to bring it back to you so you can add something or correct me, just touch my arm.”

The group nodded. “There’s going to be a five second delay on the broadcast. So when you say something, it will be come to the audience five seconds after it actually happens.”

“So is this live or not?” Omar said harshly.

His new tone took Avery aback. “It’s live,” she assured him. “A short delay is pretty standard. Like, in case someone swears - so please don’t - someone back in New York can bleep it out.”

“Or if someone gets hurt, or if there’s blood or anything like that,” said Sterling. “Then we would have to go to a commercial. We can’t show people anything explicit.”

Avery discreetly glared at Sterling. “Not that that will happen or anything.”

“It already has!” yelled Deena. Avery and Sterling were startled, and even her friends looked surprised.

“And it will again. This isn’t a peaceful protest. Martin Luther King Jr. doesn’t “have a dream” here,” Deenah snarled venomously. “If you Americans can’t fathom that sometimes blood needs to be shed to make a difference, then why are you even here? What is the point of you?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend,” said Sterling.

Deenah paused. “Don’t think we don’t know why you suddenly give a shit about our human rights. Americans love cheering for other countries to become democracies, because it reinforces your superiority complex with your own ‘government’, she airquoted.

Nahla put her arm on Deenah's back. "Deenah, relax. You're getting worked up over nothing." Her voice was calm and soothing.

Deenah pushed her away. "Nahla, you *would* be the one to say this is nothing."

"Obviously that's not what I meant."

"I shouldn't have invited you here. All you've been doing is taking pictures and complaining about people touching you. I assume that you're going to post those pictures so people think your life is actually exciting, no?"

"None of that's true," said Nahla.

"You're being mean, Deenah," Added Rahim.

"Yeah," said Fadil. "Besides, it isn't your place to invite someone to come here. She lives here too. And she has the right to complain if she's being touched and groped by strangers."

Deenah snorted. "She lives in Garden City. Let's face it," she said to Nahla. "When Mubarak does leave, your life isn't going to be so perfect anymore. No more six figure government paycheck for you dad. No more weekend trips to Alexandria."

Nahla was holding back tears, and her voice cracked. “My life is the furthest thing from perfect.”

“Tell that to everyone here. You won’t get any sympathy, I assure you,” Deenah held her arms out wide and pointed to the huge blob of bodies behind them.

“You need to go,” said Omar, quietly.

Deenah’s eyes widened. “I would think you of all people would understand,” she said.

Deenah gave one last look to Nahla. Her face softened only slightly, and she opened her mouth to say something. Obviously changing her mind, she turned on her heel and slid into the crowd.

The silence was screaming. Nobody knew what to say. Nahla ran her sleeve over her eyes, soaking up any moisture. Although Avery was sympathetic, she didn’t have time to comfort her. Two minutes until broadcast.

“All friends argue sometimes,” said Sterling awkwardly.

“Tensions are running high tonight,” Avery added.

Nobody said anything, and Avery felt her stomach do an anxiety backflip. Nahla managed a weak smile and nodded.

Suddenly, a rectangular glow appeared through Sterling's pocket and the familiarly grating screech of the marimba ringtone caused them all to flinch.

Sterling reached into his bag and handed Avery a earset, motioning for her to put it on. "Hi, Ruby," he said.

Ruby Lipschitz was fairly new, and worked as a producer for the station. She was aggressively organized, and essentially was in charge of arranging smooth transitions between desk reporters and field reporters. Several years before she began working, Gawker had run an expose on the epidemic of Au Pair abuse among New York City's elite. Along with Diane Von Furstenberg and a Guggenheim heiress, Ruby was outed by name as being one of the worst. Her former au pair sued her, and they settled out of court for an unknown amount. No one knows just how much she was ordered to pay to the young French woman, but it was enough that her financier husband made her get a job.

"Hey guys," she said, her voice entering Avery's right ear through her headset.

"On my count, Rich LeVance at the main desk is going to toss it to you. I'll patch him in in about thirty seconds. Sterling, I'm being told that your signal is strong and your feed is coming through clearly."

Avery quickly raised her phone to use the black screen as an impromptu mirror. She smoothed her eyebrows and ran her fingers through her hair. "Who wants to be first?" she asked the group.

“I’ll go,” said Omar.

Sterling and Avery exchanged a look. Something about him intimidated her.

“Great,” she said, motioning for him to come next to her in the frame.

“Here it comes,” said Ruby. “Good luck.”

A blinking red light appeared on Sterling’s camera, and he gave a thumbs up. A new voice came through Avery’s ear. “-and with that background, I’m going to give it over to our temporary Middle Eastern correspondent, Avery Johnson in Cairo. Avery, I understand you are with some protesters this very moment.”

Avery took a deep breath. Her knuckles were white from clutching the microphone so tightly. “Thanks Rich,” she said. “Yes, I am here in Tahrir Square right now, where the now-called ‘Egyptian revolution’ has reached its 18th day. After President Mubarak announced last night that he will not be stepping down, tensions are at an all time high. Hundreds of thousands of demonstrators are here this evening, and that number has only been growing since we arrived. To my left is Omar-.”

“Shit,” Avery thought. “I didn’t bother to ask his last name.”

Hoping he’d pick up on her oversight, Avery moved her microphone to him.

“Omar Mattiah,” he said, staring into the lens.

“Omar, this is a big question, but why are you here?”

Omar tugged on his keffiyeh and swallowed. "I've pretty much been here since the beginning. Like you said, it has been 18 days. It has been 18 days since we gave Mubarak our demands, and for 18 days he has ignored them. This could have ended weeks ago. We don't ask for much. Bread, freedom and social justice. Me being here is a symbol."

"A symbol for what?" Avery asked.

Omar fidgeted with his scarf again. "Um, maybe symbol is the wrong word. The fact that we have all of these people here fighting for the same cause, shows that Egypt is united in its resistance. The police don't scare us. Their dogs don't scare us. People are arrested without cause and tortured, but they still come back here. This isn't something that Mubarak can just wait out in his palace."

"It's interesting you say that you are 'fighting' for your cause. How literal is that? Can you describe the sort of violence that has been commonplace?"

Omar looked away from Avery and stared blankly back at the lens.

"Omar?" asked Avery, nervously. "Omar?"

No reply. The rest of the group looked worried. Although Sterling's face was covered by the camera, Avery was sure he too was concerned that their star interviewee was out of commission. To her growing agitation, the unseen accordionist

was still going strong. “Um. Maybe let’s get some help from our translator,” said Avery, motioning for Ahmed to get in front of Omar, but still out of frame.

He immediately obliged, and snapped his fingers to get Omar’s attention. In the back of her mind, Avery could hear what Virgil Ainsworth had said to her about on-air silence during her internship orientation five years before. In his signature raspy transatlantic accent, he’d told her and her fellow rookies, “Dead air is like getting slapped with a paternity case from an ugly woman. It’s one of the goddamn funniest things in the world when it’s happening to someone else, but when you go through it yourself, it puts your career in jeopardy and is just plain embarrassing .

Suddenly, Omar emerged from his stupor. His cheeks were burning. “I’m so sorry. I don’t know what that was. Um. What was the question?”

Avery pursed her lips to conceal her combined relief and annoyance, and nodded her head in the direction of Ahmed. Omar looked at him attentively. “Hal alnaas yuqatilun huna? hal yujad eunf?” whispered Ahmed, barely audible over the wheezy bellow of the accordion.

Omar lit up. “Ah, yes. There have been some fights. But we don’t start them.”

“Who does then?”

Omar turned his back to the camera to point towards the nearest blockade of police, about 20 yards away. "Them," he said solemnly. "No one can expect us to not fight back against thugs. If someone jumps you on the street and takes your wallet, are we supposed to be polite and keep walking? Of course not."

The difference between policeman and protester were jarring. While civilians filled the square with brilliant green, white and red, the police stood out like hideous and diseased birds of prey. They were scattered throughout the square in different lines, dressed in jet black fatigues. Like some of the protesters, their faces were also covered. Helmets with bullet proof shields erased their identities, and instead made them one indistinguishable mass of opposition. Even from far away, Avery could see several of the men's uniforms stained with what looked like blood.

"Let's switch to another perspective," said Ruby in Avery's ear. "Who is on deck?"

Avery gently patted Omar on the back, and he jumped slightly. He was becoming less intimidating to her each minute. "Omar, I want to thank you so much for sharing your thoughts with us," she said.

Omar blushed and nodded. Ahmed motioned for him to step out of frame. "One thing that has marked this event as different from past revolutions, is the role of women.

Yesterday, there was a female led march around Tahrir Square, which drew thousands from all different age groups.”

Avery tried to make contact with Nahla to signal her to come forward, but she was pointedly looking down. Rennah coughed into her closed fist, and smiled eagerly. Avery noticed that her thumbnail had been painstakingly painted with the Egyptian flag. She couldn't put her finger on it, but there was something about Nahla that stood out to her. Maybe a pain that demanded to be heard, regardless of if she realized it herself. Although Avery and the girls were only a few years removed in age at the very most, Avery felt very foreign around them - and not in the obvious nationalistic way. It was an uncomfortable truth.

Without prompting, Rennah walked into frame, beaming. Avery cleared her throat to get her train of thought back on track. “With me is just one of the young women out tonight. Rennah...”

Before Avery could extend her arm out, Rennah craned her neck to speak into the microphone. “Rennah Gamal,” she said.

“Rennah, why do you think here has been such a diverse turn out?”

Rennah paused. “The things Mubarak has done have hurt everyone. It's 2011, and we can't expect our fathers and brothers to fight our battles for us all the time. We have a responsibility not only to ourselves, but to the little girls that come after us.”

Rennah looked past the camera at her sister, and raised her eyebrows defiantly. Nahla laughed. "When do you think Mubarak will resign?" asked Avery.

The incessant accordion noise was getting drowned out by sudden screaming. Avery recognized various Arabic swears and accusations about the professions of people's mothers. She looked over her shoulder and saw a group of police no more than ten feet away. Airborne rocks and glass bottles smashed against their shields, but they did not retreat. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up as she felt her adrenaline rise. Rennah squinted and shook her head. "Sorry, what did you say?" she asked.

Although Avery's back was turned, she was sure the police couldn't be more than a few feet away. She had to almost shout to be heard. "I want to know when you think-."

"Aihtaras!" a voice nearby yelled.

The crowd immediately scattered. Someone sprinted in front of Sterling and caught his shoulder on the heavy camera. He cried out in pain, and Sterling fell down. Rennah started crying and ran to her sister. "What the fuck is happening? We just have a visual of the ground!" said Ruby.

Avery told her feet to move, but she was paralyzed. Rennah and Riham pulled Sterling to his feet and ushered him away. “We have to go,” said Nahla urgently, the only one still with her.

She felt dazed. As she began to feel a sharp sting of heat approach her, Nahla barreled into her, forcing her to move. “You’re going to get us both killed! Go!”

From the corner of her eye, Avery saw three policeman tackle a young man to the ground. His eyes were wild and his hands reached towards the sky, like someone who’d just made the winning goal to secure the World Cup. Nahla cradled Avery’s head to her chest, as the explosion rang behind them.

Chapter Six

Nahla's ears were ringing at a decibel she'd never felt possible. Through blurry double vision, she saw chaos. Protesters and police alike writhing on the ground. Those that were on their feet were attempting to stomp out the small sparks which were scattered across her eye-line. Suddenly she remembered the journalist she'd dragged with her. Amanda?.. No, Avery. Still on her stomach, Nahla tried to prop herself up. The moment her palms touched the ground, she felt an acute sting and cried out. She realized her hearing was back, and almost immediately wished it wasn't. She heard groaning, crackling and a dog whimpering in pain.

"Tell me you are you okay?"

Nahla turned her head, wincing as what seemed to be glass flecks in her hair scratched her neck. Avery was sitting up, looking concerned. Her jeans had torn,

exposing her badly skinned knees. Nahla repressed a gag when she saw a large glass shard peering out of the wound. It looked deep. Avery steadied her hands on the ground to get up. "Wait!" said Nahla.

With a grimace, Nahla willed her body to stand up. She steadied herself with her hands, and notice her right hands had small but prominent gash. She rubbed it on her pants, creating a streak of red. Avery looked up at her, confused. Nahla sighed. "Let me help you. Don't move too quickly."

Avery gave a little smile. "You're nice, but I feel fine."

Through a mandatory EMT course for pre-med students, Nahla knew that Avery's adrenaline was acting as a temporary pain suppressant. Nahla pursed her lips and silently pointed to Avery's crimson stained knee. Glancing down, Avery's borderline tranquil expression instantly changed. "Oh my fucking God," she said matter of factly.

Nahla was almost tempted to laugh until Avery began to cry. There was something extremely unnerving to Nahla about about the current situation. Not the obvious one, about being thrown almost three meters by the force of a molotov cocktail. The less obvious one. The power dynamic of a teenage Arab girl staring down at a New York City reporter. Avery had been nothing but kind and respectful to Nahla. She knew that she had no right to savor her pain. That would be sadistic. Still, there was

something slightly satisfying in her vulnerability. Although she was still fuming at Deenah for humiliating her in front of her peers, Nahla related to her cynicism regarding America's sudden interest regarding Egyptian affairs. She imagined an archetypal American family in Wisconsin, sitting in their living room watching her interview, the little of it she actually gave. Would they think she was surprisingly pretty? Would they be shocked to see her long shiny hair unencumbered by a hijab? Nahla grew up on American movies, music and clothes. She spoke English as well as any of them. When that the twitchy blonde cameraman had been surprised to learn this, her friends laughed at his stupidity. Nahla joined in, but she personally had not seen the humor in his offensive presumption.

People were moving all around, not going in one particular direction. Through a brief gap in foot traffic, Nahla noticed an array of painfully beautiful pray rugs. By their fringed tassels and blackened corners, their owners presumably had to evacuate at the last moment. She hoped they would find their way back to them eventually.

"I'm scared I'll sever a nerve or something if I stand up. You don't have any tweezers, do you?" said Avery, sniffing.

The blood from Avery's knees had reached the ground below. Red stained the dirt, turning black as it dried. Two ever-expanding dark circles, constantly resupplied by the waterfall of blood coming from her legs. Nahla looked at her hand. The bleeding had

stopped. It had been the same color as Avery's. Still, even with the thick bloody film covering her skin, Avery's legs were white. Nahla's hand was brown. She heard a group of men laughing in the distance. She looked at the moon overhead, and remembered that her mother and father were looking at the same one. "I think I have a pair in my bag," she said.

She grabbed her shoulder to swing the strap off, but felt only her sweat dampened sleeve. "No!" she yelled, surprising herself with her volume.

"You left it behind? That's okay," said Avery.

Nahla glared at her. "No, it is most definitely *not* okay. I needed the stuff in there! My camera was in there. I specifically brought milk and rags. I'm so dumb."

Avery groaned quietly and outstretched her leg, causing the stream of blood to trail down thicker and faster. "I can see why you're upset about your camera, because that sucks... But, the other things seem pretty replaceable. No offense."

Nahla knew that she was right. Avery didn't seem to know how badly she was bleeding. Even though the rags were just junk, at least she would have had something to stop the bleeding. "I heard that there are always medics around," she said. "You're going to be fine."

Someone behind Nahla took a photo, the flash illuminating and bouncing off the barbed wire barricades in the distance, separating the military from the general population. Avery stopped fiddling with positioning her leg, and looked up. "This isn't your problem. You should look for your friends. I'm sure Sterling will find me any second," she said softly.

She was right. There was no inherent loyalty which tethered these two women together, Nahla thought. A few meters away there was an abandoned tank. It looked like it had been left alone by the police for over a week. It was completely covered in spray-painted anti-Mubarak slogans and Rabia signs (an outstretched hand with one finger pointed down, recently synonymous with the Muslim Brotherhood). The tank reminded Nahla of an image seared into her hippocampus at a young age. Before the twins were even born. Hours past her bedtime, she sneaked downstairs to playfully surprise her parents in the living room. They were distracted, watching the news on CNE. She crouched behind the couch, waiting for the perfect time to jump out. She stretched her neck up to see her parents' expression. For once, the news caught her attention. An American tank dragging the body of a dead Iraqi soldier. His eyes were still open, as was his mouth in a silent scream. The Americans were laughing, parading the men through the streets of Baghdad. For the first and last time in her life, Nahla saw that her father was crying. Nahla quietly ran back up the stairs, balancing on the balls of her feet to diminish any noise. She'd never told her parents what she saw.

Nahla wasn't deluded. She knew that the injured girl on the ground in front of her had nothing to do with that. She was practically Nahla's own age. But still, her president did it. Her country did. Nahla's phone was now dead, with her cordless charger stranded in her lost bag. All day she had been getting Twitter updates from American newspaper and TV stations. Everyone seemed to support a Mubarak-free Egypt. Even President Obama had voiced his support for the cause. But what would happen to these Americans if and when Mubarak leaves? Perhaps they see the Arab Spring as some sort of delayed redemption for the invasion of Iraq. Finally their conscience would be assuaged when the greatest government system ever - democracy - is achieved.

For what seemed like the umpteenth time since Nahla came out of her ear ringing stupor, she looked down at Avery. Avery's eyes were half closed, and she was mumbling something to herself. The bleeding had all but stopped, but the the glass inside her knee still sparkled like diamonds. Nahla sighed. For better or for worse, she wasn't like Deenah. When she looked at Avery, with her uninhibited laugh and bitten fingernails, she saw a person and not a cause. Maybe Deenah was right. Maybe she was naive and childish. She couldn't think about that right now. Avery really didn't look well. Besides, she had a feeling that if the roles were reversed, Avery would have already taken care of her.

"No. I'm not leaving you," said Nahla.

Nahla scanned the crowd. Some of the macabre jubilation had returned. Several people had taken their lighters to pictures of Mubarak, and were waving his flaming face in the air. She even heard the accordion start up again. She needed to find a doctor or nurse. She knew that there were volunteers who had set up camp in the square for situations just like these. But she was wary to leave Avery. Several men had stopped, and were eyeing her hungrily. Their eyes trailing up and down her damaged body. She wished Fadil was here. He would have called them dogs and run them off. Omar would have been even more helpful. Although Nahla had never felt more independent or autonomous as she did that night, she was still in no place to attempt to scatter grown men. Especially grown men drunk on revolution. She noticed that Avery's knee was bleeding again. She cupped her hands around her mouth to create a makeshift megaphone. "Shakhs ma , alraja' almusaeada!" she yelled.

The men staring at Avery shuffled away. At least that was one problem taken care of. Again, she looked through the throngs for anyone with a stethoscope or vest - any sign of medical pedigree. "Hal yujad tabib?" she called to no one in particular.

She kneeled down to get closer to Avery. Tentatively, she reached out to stroke her hair. "It's going to be okay, Avery," she said. "When you get home, everyone is going to be so impressed. You did a really good interview. You asked questions that aren't usually asked at all."

Avery's eyes were still closed, but she smiled, showing her teeth. Nahla saw that, like her, Avery also had a built in retainer to correct what was probably an underbite. Maybe she'll mention it to her later, she thought. "I barely even got to do anything," Avery said. "It was like ten minutes at most."

"No, I think it was a little longer than that," lied Nahla.

"You needed a medic?"

Nahla and Avery looked up to the source of the soft, breathy voice. The woman seemed to be in her late twenties, and wore a dayglo orange vest over a turquoise sweater. Her white hijab was speckled with brown and red stains. She looked as if she hadn't slept in days.

"Yes, thank you! There some sort of small explosion and we got thrown, and..."

"There's no more room at the hospital, so I'll have to help her right here."

"Um, that's fine. Yeah, whatever works."

“I’m Hanan, by the way,” the women said, unzipping a bulky pouch strapped around her waist and crouching down.

Hanan took out a cotton ball and small bottle. She reached into her pockets and pulled out latex gloves. With her hands covered, she poured liquid from the bottle onto the cotton, shaking off the excess when she was finished. “This is going to hurt,” she said.

Sure enough, as soon the the cotton touched Avery’s knee, she cried out. “This is so infection doesn’t set in. Hopefully I’m not too late,” Hanan said.

She went back to her pouch and took out tweezers and a white lighter. Nahla couldn’t believe it had only been a couple of hours since she had met her friends in the alley, preparing in vain for a night that would go completely not according to plan. It seemed like a lifetime ago. Hanan flicked the lighter to expose a flame, and passed the tip of the tweezers back and forth through it. She looked up at Nahla. “You should hold your friend’s hand.”

Nahla nodded, and took Avery’s hand in hers. Avery squeezed, and she squeezed back. As Hanan dug the sanitized tweezers in to Avery’s knee, Avery squirmed and covered her mouth with her hand. Tears streamed down her face. With the hand that wasn’t on Avery’s, Nahla stroked her hair.

“Got them. Those were sure in pretty deep,” said Hanan.

Hanan held out her gloved hand, displaying six bloody shard of glass, the largest at least ten centimeters. She put a clear gel on the outline of Avery’s gash, and tightly bandaged it. “When it become more convenient, you should really go to a real hospital or doctor’s office,” said Hanan. “But this will do for now.”

Avery cautiously touched her bandages. “It barely hurts anymore,” she said, pleasantly surprised.

“I put some numbing cream on it. It won’t last for more than a couple hours though. Take some ibuprofen when you can. I’d give you some, but we need to ration it for gunshot victims.”

Avery put her hand on Nahla’s shoulder and awkwardly steadied herself up. It reminded Nahla of the scene In *Bambi* where he tried to walk on ice. “I can’t thank you enough. I don’t even know what to say,” Avery said.

“We all need to look out for each other,” said Hanan. “Salam, sisters.”

Before Nahla could say anything more, Hanan zipped her pouch and waded back into the crowd. Funny how that type of exit kept happening, she thought. Nahla and

Avery stood silently for a while, digesting what their evening had become. Finally Avery spoke. "You didn't need to do that, Nahla," she said. "You saved me."

Nahla smiled and hoped she wasn't blushing. "It's fine. I'd hope someone would've done for the same for me."

"It would be an understatement to say I owe you big time," said Avery. "This is a gigantic leap, but when all this is done, if you ever want to see New York... You'll always have a place to stay with me."

Nahla's jaw dropped. "That would be incredible," she said.

The truth is that both young women, perhaps Avery more than Nahla, knew that this would be unlikely to ever come to fruition. But during a night of panic and disorder, an imaginary trip to New York City was a nice oasis. Before either of them could say another word, Tahrir Square began to roar.

Allahu Akbar

Lift your head high, you're an Egyptian

Allahu Akbar

Nahla looked around for an explanation, but her neighbors looked just as confused as she did. Someone began shouting into an electronic megaphone, making his voice only slightly audible.

“We can’t hear! Louder!” someone shouted.

The crowd shifted, making room for hundreds of young men running in their direction. They were all shouting over each other, elated. Some were crying and hugging. One of the older ones commanded the rest to be silent. They obeyed. He grinned. He held a megaphone to his lips. “Attention, brothers and sister. Five minutes ago, Vice President Omar Suleiman went on television and made an announcement. He said that Mubarak has decided to resign from the office. The army has been entrusted with the republic.”

There was a split second of stunned silence, and then - *boom*.

The sound of a trillion fireworks going off at the same time. A trillion orchestras playing Tchaikovsky. Nahla was reminded of when her hearing was out and her ears were ringing. But of course, this time was different. “Avery, can you believe it?” she screamed, turning around. Avery wasn’t there. She waded through the surrounding crowd to find her. She wasn’t hard to spot. She had probably wandered off in the excitement, she thought. She didn’t want to think what she knew in her heart was the

truth. That Avery no longer needed her, so she'd left. That she wasn't even worth a goodbye. Nahla heart fell to her stomach. She knew she shouldn't let some random American stranger ruin the greatest night of her life, but she couldn't help feeling betrayed. As she was about to turn on her heel and head towards Garden City, she heard Avery scream.

Chapter Seven

Today belongs to the people of Egypt, and the American people are moved by these scenes in Cairo and across Egypt because of who we are as a people and the kind of world that we want our children to grow up in.

....The word Tahrir means liberation. It is a word that speaks to that something in our souls that cries out for freedom. And forevermore it will remind us of the Egyptian people -- of what they did, of the things that they stood for, and how they changed their country, and in doing so changed the world.

The unseen audience in front of the podium erupted into applause. President Obama nodded humbly and touched his maroon speckled tie, his hands partially obscured by the Arabic subtitles on the screen. Avery reached for the remote control on the small bedside table. She muted the TV, but kept the picture on. Through the glass

walls, she saw Sterling turn the corner carrying two paper cups. He caught her looking at him and smiled. When Avery was brought to As Salam International Hospital, his lens cap was found in her pocket. Avery had no memory of keeping it, but she must have instinctively picked it up off the ground. His name and number was loopily scrawled in purple marker, and he was promptly contacted. He and Ahmed had been looking for her since the explosion, to no avail. Since joining her at the hospital, he hadn't left her side. Avery practically had to beg him to go and get her tea, just so she'd have some time to be alone with her thoughts.

"I thought you might want some flavor variety, so I got you a hibiscus tea and a hot chocolate," he said, putting them down on the table.

"What, nothing for you?" said Avery, reaching for the hot chocolate.

Sterling shrugged and rubbed his bloodshot eyes. He looked terrible, and smelled even worse.

"Sterling, seriously. Please go back the hotel for at least a couple hours. Take a shower and get some good sleep. I have everything I need here."

Sterling sat down on an overstuffed armchair in the corner, careful not to bump against Avery's IV bag. He shook his head. "I should have been there," he mumbled.

“We both know that wouldn’t have meant anything. Don’t even talk like that. There’s just no point,” said Avery.

She turned her body to look at him square on. Her hospital gown was a size too big and scratched her chest as the rough fabric moved against her. “You’ve been so great. Talking to the network, dealing with insurance, my parents, everything. I’ll never be able to thank you enough.”

Sterling rubbed his eyes again. He was clearly about to fall asleep. “Ahmed did most of the talking with the people here.”

“Is he still here? I want to ask him something,” said Avery, trying to sound nonchalant.

Sterling looked up, uncomfortable. “I don’t think he wanted to see you. After... Well, he seemed almost guilty. Ashamed.”

Avery tried to hide the disappointment she knew was in her eyes. She’d always had a terrible poker face. “Just because he’s Egyptian doesn’t mean he has to answer for all of them,” she said.

“I think he felt like your view of the country and the revolution as a whole would be ruined because of a few...” Sterling caught himself.

“Well, more than a few,” he said almost inaudibly.

Besides the monotonous beeping of the heart monitor, the room was silent for what seemed like a long time. Or maybe it was only a few minutes. Avery had had a tenuous grasp on the passage of time since the previous night. But for better or for worse, things were coming back to her. Sterling, I really insist that you get some rest for a few hours. Believe me, I’m not going anywhere without you,” She said, trying to smile. The strain caused the cuts on her lips to open up again.

Sterling opened his mouth in protest, but stopped when he saw the solemnity on Avery’s face. “Are you sure?” he asked.

“More than positive,” said Avery.

Sterling looked weary, but got up. He grabbed his ripped messenger bag from the hook on the door. “I’m fifteen minutes away. Don’t try to be a martyr. Please let yourself be helped.”

“Just go,” said Avery, more aggressively than she meant to.

She turned away so Sterling couldn't see her try to hold in her tears. After a few moments she heard the automatic doors open and then slide back together. Without looking, Avery extended her arm to press the raised blue button on the Analgesia pump on her headboard. A stream of morphine immediately entered the IV tube attached to her arm. Avery sighed and closed her eyes. She felt her pain begin to melt away. The profoundly acute aching from her legs, abdomen, breasts and neck became a bad memory. She was all too aware that they would come back in a matter of hours, but she put the thought aside. Her gown ceased to feel like a poorly woven flour sack, and instead turned into silk pajamas. The kind her mother gave her for her sixteenth birthday, patterned with green foliage like the wallpaper of the Beverly Hills Hotel.

But no matter how hard she tried, she still felt all of their hands. Some softer and gentler than others, but all the same - unwanted. Even worse than the pain, Avery loathed the small amounts of nonconsensual pleasure she had felt. She bit her lip, and kept pressing down until she felt skin break. She needed to feel pain. Avery unmuted the TV. A handsome man with a purple tie and artful stubble was talking about Telecom Egypt.

She had only been away from Nahla for a few seconds. She wanted to get a better look at the celebration. Maybe she could get some of their names and meet up

with them later for an interview. Suddenly, she felt pressure on her waist and warmth on her neck. A man was touching her, saying something in Arabic that she didn't understand. She had taken a self defense class in college, and knew that twisting her body away from one's assailant would hurt his wrists and force him to let go. Before she could position herself, a second man grabbed her. She screamed. A dirty hand clamped down on her mouth, and she bit his fleshy palm so sharply she tasted blood. He screamed and elbowed her in the face, shattering her nose. More men gathered around. One man pulled her shirt over her head, commenting in English about her supposed reasons for wearing a pink bra. "Avery!" she heard a girl yell.

"I'm here! Help!" she tried to say.

She knew it was Nahla. She had already saved her life once, now she was going to do it again. There must have been more than a dozen men around her. Some were filming on their cellphones. Most were laughing. Nahla called her name again. Some of the men turned to look. Avery weighed two choices in her head. Nahla was younger and smaller than her. She was carrying as many modes of protection with her as Avery, which was to say none. Calling her over would only give the men another target. But at least it would split them up. Take some away from Avery. She shuddered at the last thought, and began to truly sob. She had no option other than to hope Nahla would give up and run away. She felt herself get turned over like a sack of flour, and something sharp graze against her spine and shoulders, cutting her bra off. Someone threw it into

the mob, like a rockstar throwing his sweat-drenched towel into a pit of amorous groupies. Hands were tearing her pants off, and it was at that point that she knew she was done. If she hadn't been rescued by then, it wasn't going to happen. She went limp, which caused the men to be slightly gentler. She felt someone stroke her hair, and tried to pretend it was Nahla. That they were still together waiting for help that *would* come. The pain of hands twisting her breasts were contested only by the humiliation of hands entering her. She felt her thighs moisten. She wasn't sure if she was bleeding or had gone to the bathroom on herself. Maybe both. Someone stomped on her wrist, and she yelled. More laughter. Fingernails dug into her scalp, creating bloody craters and taking away fists of hair.

“Sharmuta!”

“Waqiha!”

“Fajira!”

Her body was no longer hers. The accordion was still playing. Every once in a while, a hand brushed against her in a way that made her toes curl. This was worse than any cutting, kicking, anything. Avery's eyes were swollen shut. She had swallowed two of her own teeth. Avery no longer remembered what it was like to taste something other than blood.

The anonymous older women who had brought Avery to the hospital, thought that her assault had lasted for more than two hours. They had seen the crowd, and the men coming back and forth, and assumed it was some sort of game. That they were maybe gambling. It was only when a man appeared swinging bloody underwear around that it became clear something nefarious was occurring. One of their brothers shot his pistol above the crowd, causing the men to scatter. They assumed Avery was dead. Her face was so dirty and bruised and bloody, that they had no idea she was foreign until the nurse had cleaned her off.

Her left wrist and arm were in casts. Her nose was in a splint. In a lousy attempt to cheer her up, Sterling had joked that she and Owen Wilson were going to have matching noses. The injuries no one could see were worse. Stretched muscles and internal tearing. When Sterling called her parents to explain what had happened, she had instructed him to just tell them that she had been beaten up. To leave out the sexual element.

The telephone commercial was done, replaced by the news. Commentary played over live images of Egyptian families hugging - a father carrying his daughter on his shoulders. Jubilancy and hope. Young boys in keffiyehs gave peace signs to the camera. Avery took a sip of the hot chocolate Sterling gave her. It was delicious. The

glass doors separated, and her doctor appeared. He was a kind older man, with smile lines and large ears. "How are you feeling?" he asked.

Avery looked back at the TV. For a second she thought she recognized Nahla, grinning ear to ear and petting a filthy stray dog, but the image quickly cut away to the news anchor.

"Avery, did you hear me?" The doctor's thick brow furrowed, and he lowered his clipboard.

Avery thought for a second. "I'm fine."

The End

Arabic	English
Adhan	Islamic Call to Worship
Aihtaras	Look out
Allahu Akbar	God is (the) Greatest
Ana asef	I'm Sorry
Ash-hadu alla ilaha illallah	I testify that no one is God except Allah
Bi sharafak	Seriously, dude?
Fajira	Whore
Habibi	My love
Halalnaas yuqatilun huna?	Are people fighting here?
hal yujad eunf?	Is there violence?
Hal yujad tabib	Is there a doctor?
Min sijak	Are you serious?
Nahn huna	Over here
Sharmuta	Bitch
Thawra	Revolution

