

Excerpts From THE BURNT CITY by Robert Bangor

Greg came out of the qanat boisterously. He was sweating, but not from heat.

“Whew!” he shouted, straightening up in the trench. “That was kind of scary, but it was cool.”

From somewhere to the north the low hum of a motor reached them. In the settlement they had passed, a rooster crowed, its call piercing the intervening two kilometers of silent desert.

However, Greg did not have time to savor the adventure of exploring the qanat, for when his eyes had adjusted to the blinding daylight he saw Chuck again, standing in the empty pool ahead of him. Greg gaped in disbelief when he espied the silenced gun in Chuck’s hand pointed directly at him.

“Did you have fun?” Chuck asked in his mocking nasal voice as he thumbed off the safety catch. His lips were twisted in an incongruous smile. He was enjoying this.

“What... what are you doin’? What’s that...?” Greg stammered uncomprehendingly.

“I need your body,” Chuck grinned.

For a moment, Greg misinterpreted Chuck’s quip, or perhaps he preferred to ignore the plain message of the gun. “Wait a minute, man. I mean, we’re friends an’ all, but that’s not my bag.” He stepped forward in the trench, his mouth pulled wide in a compulsive smile that contradicted the terror in his eyes, trying to ingratiate. “Let’s forget this and get goin’. I don’t feel like jokin’ in this heat.”

“Turd,” sneered Chuck. “Stay right where you are. You’ll look prettier falling there. What do you think I brought you into this operation for? Your brains or your looks?”

Greg spread his hands in a conciliatory gesture. This was not the way he had envisioned it, but he could no longer fend off the chilling truth. His legs rubbered, his body was completely sheathed in a cold, numbing sweat. All thought of the heat was gone.

“Hey, man, we’re buddies,” he whined. “Look! I’m laughing, okay?”

His attempt at a laugh was a coarse croak. He took another shaky step forward, then stumbled and fell on his knees among the mineral-stained stones of the dry channel. A dark stain spread around his crotch.

“I don’t want any of the money, Chuck. Forget it. You take the jeep and do what you want with it. I’ll get back to Tehran somehow. I won’t say nothin’. I swear it!”

The sun beat down on the two men. Drained of color, the eastern horizon trembled behind Chuck’s back and beyond the lone pistachio tree.

A desperate idea struck Greg.

“Is it the money or Margaret? I won’t give you any trouble about the money or her. I’ll do anything you want. I’ll tell her to be nice to you...”

Chuck was almost amused. The ludicrous groveling was very satisfying, but he could not afford to prolong his pleasure.

“Sorry. Just stay as you are, bastard. I’ve got the money and as for Margaret, well, we’ll see. You can watch us from heaven. By the way, I think you might like to know I’m not killing you for a mere quarter of a million. Your life is worth more than that.

Something like two million, in fact. Does that make you feel better, Greg? I appreciate your sacrifice. *Khoda hafez!*" (Goodbye!)

Chuck was snickering as he sighted his gun to aim straight at Greg's heart, his forefinger hooked around the trigger slowly increasing its pressure.

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Saebi fell back into his pillows and moaned. "Everyone I trust has gone. Our Iranian people have always been treacherous and unfaithful. History has made us so, so that we might survive. We are meant only for exploitation, either by the powerful among us, or those from abroad. I am alone. I cannot even trust my nephew with this task."

Motahheri leaned forward with interest. "What task?"

"You are a man of the world, I mean the official world. You meet people and it is your job to assess them, to sort out the reliable from the unreliable."

Motahheri demurred. "A man who has attained your station in life must possess a far greater quantity of such skills," he said, waiting for his question to be answered.

"Perhaps. Do you know Col. Aryaparast in Bam?"

Motahheri shook his head. "Not personally. I have heard of him, of course. He is retired now, I believe."

Saebi nodded.

"He is one of my community and very honest. I have asked him to administer the Fund for the benefit of needy Bahais in the south, should the necessity arise. He has agreed, but there is one difficulty. I must get the money to him."

Motahheri smiled incredulously. "Surely that cannot be such a problem. Send it with a messenger. You must have someone who can go if you cannot go yourself."

Saebi tossed his head, his jowls trembling. "Who? My nephew? Since the bank robbery, he is afraid to sit behind the desk. I cannot risk a journey myself with my poor health. My bodyguard? Fine strapping fellow; has worked for me for years. But while he will protect my life? I cannot trust him with the price of a leg of lamb. Moreover, I am not so sure of his protection any more. He is a Muslim. If some fool mullah gave him the order to slit my throat, would his personal loyalty to me stay his hand?"

Saebi's eyes flashed with real fear. "I must get away from Iran quickly."

"Send it by bank or post."

"These days? Come, come! Bank workers are circulating lists of bank transfers and spreading malicious rumors about my enterprises. What I do with my money has suddenly become the reading matter of the unscrubbed masses. The mails are not to be trusted with cash. Anyway, I have heard that they will be going on strike soon. No, the money must go by a trustworthy courier."

"Where is the money now?"

Saebi did not answer.

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The small dial of her wristwatch showed half past twelve. She turned away from the mirror guiltily, as though she had been secretly trying on someone else's clothes... or life.

Daryush had called an hour or so ago to ask whether she was all right and needed anything. Sweet of him. He had offered to give her another Persian lesson, but Margaret had turned him down. She wanted to be alone, yet she softened the refusal by reminding him to come tomorrow at the regular time.

She had not much thought about Daryush as a man. He was not bad looking. She thought he would look even better with a mustache to distract the eye from his permanent 5 o'clock shadow. She was sure he was half in love with her. As a lover, he would probably be inexperienced but very grateful.

She had had one affair with an Iranian, a burly Iranian Army captain named Jamshid, one of the students of an English class she taught for adults. One rainy day, he offered to drive her home. He took her hand and held it from time to time as he drove. He was always laughing and making little jokes with her, while always being sober and respectful in class. The third time he drove her home, he persuaded her to let him make a detour... Their affair lasted about two months, broken off by the completion of his course and his return to his base (and his family) in Khuzestan. He had called her several times from Khorramshahr, but after the troubles began, his calls became less frequent. She had not heard from him for several months now. She wondered where he was now. Had he been involved in any of the troubles down there?

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The canyons of the Burnt City were in shadow as Mehdi left the catacomb that housed the Warriors' base. He shuffled down the path between the great blocks of conglomerate stone, scarcely noticing the little cross canyons linking this one with the others. An overhanging cliff between the mouth of this canyon and another coming in from the northeast, near the eastern edge of the eroded deposits that had created the Burnt City, hid their vehicles from casual observation: it was their motor pool.

The Chevrolet was there, its protruding rear covered by a bit of camouflage netting, next to the Volkswagen and the Land Rover, the latter in the deepest part of the undercut. A light motorcycle, another trophy of war, rested against the rock wall. This collection constituted the entire vehicular fleet of the Ghaziyan-e Haqq in Kerman Province.

Mehdi was alone. He swept the net off the Chevrolet and threw it on the Volkswagen. Then he got into the old Chevy and drove it out towards the salt flats on the strip of gravel, carefully avoiding the traps of powdery white dust that could roil up and foul the motor and the electrical systems. Windows open, the warm air washing over his face and arms holding a faint saline odor as though near a sea, Mehdi left the thirty-foot escarpment of the eastern edge of the Burnt city behind him. He followed the rim of the salt flats southward for seventeen kilometers before turning right, into a track that led up a wadi past several small villages on the way to Shahdad.

He could have attempted to call Tehran from Shahdad; it would have saved him the long night drive to Kerman through the mountains, but Shahdad was not on the automatic system. Calls had to be placed manually by inquisitive operators.