

RAPTURE

By Kameron Hurley

“Then We which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall We ever be with the Lord.” Bible, Thessalonians 4:16-17

“Whoever works righteousness, man or woman, and has faith, verily, to them will We give a new Life, a life that is good and pure, and We will bestow on such their reward according to the best of their actions.” Quran, Chapter 16, Verse 97

1.

Every time Nyx thought she'd gotten out of the business of killing boys, she shot another one.

He lay bleeding at her feet as the spectators for the weekly fights streamed past, muddying the dusty street with his blood. She had not meant to shoot him, but she was drunk, a common condition during her exile. The boy had grabbed clumsily at the knot of her dhoti where she kept her currency. Her response had been unthinking, like breathing. She had pulled the scattergun from her hip and shot him in the chest. It was the only weapon she carried, these days, because she was generally such a poor shot. After nearly seven years in exile without incident, she hadn't expected she'd ever use it. What a boy his age was doing on the street instead of at the front, she didn't know. He was likely a deserter anyway.

As he squealed in the dirt, trailing blood as he scrambled away from her, a few curious passersby raised their brows, but no one interfered. This was Sameh, a scaly, contaminated, know-nothing little Nasheenan town bordering the vassal state of Druce, populated mainly by speculators and mad magicians. People stayed out of each other's business here. It was why she'd come.

Nyx worried someone might call an order keeper, but the boy had already turned into a neighboring alley, spitting and cursing and bleeding. The pop of the organic rounds in the gun hadn't been loud enough to get much attention, so in a few minutes the incident was forgotten, one more anonymous Nasheenan shooting among a crowd of spectators hoping to see a far more dramatic show of violence inside, in the ring.

A passing woman shook her head at the blood and said, “He's one of those surplus boys just come home from the front. They're stealing us blind. Wondered who'd do him in.”

Nyx hadn't heard much about any “surplus boys”, but then, she preferred to avoid the belchy, misty images spouting from the local radios whenever possible. The present and the past mixed together too much. Muddled her head.

Nyx did what she always did after she shot a terrorist or garroted a deserter. She carried on. She stepped inside the fight club. She ordered another drink, and sat down to watch the fights. Among this bloodthirsty crowd, she was just another touchy, trigger-prone spectator.

Throughout Nyx's exile, she didn't think much about all the men and women she'd beheaded, or the mullahs she'd pissed off, or the mines she'd planted, or the battles she'd lost. She thought about the ring. A bad left hook. Poor footwork. Blood in her eyes. Hornets on the mat. Because everything that happens after you climb out of a boxing ring, one half of your face ballooning into a waxy blue-black parody of death while you spit bile and blood and some fleshy bit of somebody's ear on the mat; slowly losing sight in one leaky eye, dragging your shattered, roach-bitten leg behind you... is easy. Routine. Just another day breathing.

After the fights, she sobered up a little on the three hour drive back to her mercenary buddy Anneke's homestead, just across the Drucian border. Anneke and her family had picked up house

when Nyx was exiled from Nasheen and moved across the border. They gave her a place to stay and built up a new life from scratch. They never once complained about it.

The homestead site had been Anneke's pick, a seaside compound with whitewashed walls and tangled, sandy gardens. The sound of the wailing ocean kept Nyx up at night and the contagion sensors sounded off more times a day than the muezzin in Mushtallah. They usually lost everything in the garden to giant beetles and blight. It'd been a season since she ate a green vegetable.

Nyx turned off the rutted main road and onto a logging trail half covered over in massive evergreen branches. The trees here before the land turned to dunes were tall as a Nasheeanian tenement building. They made Nyx claustrophobic. A single fallen branch had pulverized one of Anneke's kids two years before. Just like that, and Anneke's bakers' dozen had been culled to an even twelve.

Nyx drove through the towering seaside grove and down the long drive to the house. Eight foot walls squared the compound.

As she pulled around the circular drive, Nyx saw a foreign bakkie parked in the yard. It was a sleek blue-black hybrid. The whole front end pulsed purple as it sucked up the sun, feeding the bugs in the cistern that powered it. She'd seen fuzzy images of bakkies like this one playing in the background on the radio at a bath house in Sameh. They were some new thing out of Tirhan. Expensive, but efficient. No need for juice. The bugs had chlorophyll that fed on solar. At any rate, the tags were foreign on this one. Foreign to Druce, anyway... Familiar to Nyx.

Nasheeanian tags.

Government.

Nyx slowed her bakkie to a crawl and killed the juice to the cistern. She pulled her scattergun from behind her seat. Nobody drove a Nasheeanian government bakkie over the border, not unless they were part of an armed caravan of politicians headed for the interior. That said, even caravans didn't cross the border at the coast – it was too contaminated. They would have come down the Sunskin Way E., from Mushtallah. Fifty kilometers from here.

Nyx pulled on her hat and slid out of the bakkie. She held the scattergun at waist height. The big white compound fence gave her some cover. She got close enough to the foreign bakkie to make out the footprints scuffed across the soft, sandy ground.

Three sets of prints. Two heavy folks, and somebody a lot smaller. Heavy bel dames – the Nasheeanian government's preferred assassins – didn't use vehicles with government tags. So the little one had to be some government official – and young. All the old ones were soft and fat.

Most Nasheeanian politicians were First Family matriarchs – snobbish, inbred, smooth-skinned folks with a taste for languages and distrust of anything that hadn't passed through an organic filter. They wouldn't be caught dead inside a shoddy seaside compound in a backward Nasheeanian vassal state.

Nyx circled around to the back of the house and listened for the kids. They were always up to some shit in the garden or on the grounds. But out here, behind the fence and filter, she didn't hear a damned thing but the thrashing sea.

She crouched next to the back gate. She didn't see any footprints around the back. No sign of anything being tampered with.

The gate was coded for her and Anneke's family. They'd invested in the filter and the codes first thing. Trouble was, you exiled yourself long enough and you started to get comfortable. You started getting drunk and going to fights. You started bringing women home. Nyx should have known somebody would find her.

She pressed her palm to the faceplate. There was a brief prickling as the plate extracted and verified her blood. Then the gate clicked.

Nyx shoved the door open with the end of her scattergun. She waited a half breath before chancing a look into the compound, gun first.

Anneke was waving her arms around like a woman on fire, caught up in some animated conversation with a Ras Tiegan woman. It took Nyx a minute to recognize the foreigner.

The Ras Tiegan was Mercia sa Aldred, a diplomat's daughter who Nyx had been charged with keeping alive six or seven years before. Mercia was a slim young woman now, with the flat face and tawny complexion of a Ras Tiegan. Her eyes were big and dark, half-lidded. As she turned to Nyx, the corners of her wide mouth moved up. Paired with her flat forehead, the broad nose, and strangely delicate frame, she was not a handsome woman. Mercia kept her hair uncovered now, but Nyx noted the scarf wrapped around her neck, stitched with the little x-shaped symbol that marked her as a follower of the Ras Tiegan messiah. No doubt she'd prayed to some minor god of diplomats before coming here. Ras Tiegans had minor gods for everything.

Behind Mercia stood two government-issued bodyguards. Nyx recognized their type. Former vets – underworked and overpaid. They wore loose, dark trousers and matching tunics. Their burnouses were less somber. Smoky gray instead of black. Both women had cropped hair and the peculiar hyperawareness about them that came from spending too much time at the front. Veterans were always the first pick for government security.

A delighted smile lit up Mercia's face. She made the leap from unremarkable to handsome when she smiled. Mercia stood in one clean movement, and even if Nyx hadn't known her, the polite, easy way she stood to greet her with that plastered-on smile would have given her away as some kind of diplomat or politician.

Nyx hated diplomats and politicians almost as much as she hated babysitting their kids.

"Mercia sa Aldred," Nyx said.

The smile broadened.

"You remember," Mercia said.

"Where is everybody?" Nyx asked Anneke. "How the hell should I know?" Anneke said. Her dark little face was scrunched up like a cicada husk. "It's fight night. You don't think the kids are going to hang around here with a couple old women, do you?"

"Anybody follow you?" Nyx asked Mercia. "Or can I take out you and your nannies and be done with it?"

Mercia's smile vanished. "I—"

The bodyguards moved forward.

Nyx cocked the gun and leveled it at them. "Who's first?"

"Lay off," Anneke said. "She's got something worth hearing."

"There are a good many people back in Nasheen who'd pay for my head," Nyx said. "I like it just

where it is, thanks.”

“You’ve been taken off the lists,” Mercia said, quickly. Her hands were up now, gesturing rapidly as she spoke. “They’re even sending Chenjan terrorists home. Mhorian spies. Mercenaries, too. And bel dames. Anyone who moved against the queen during the war has been pardoned. It’s part of the armistice.”

“Catshit,” Nyx said. “There have been ceasefires before. One of them lasted twenty years. The war’s not ending. No such thing as peace. Somebody’s paying for my head. Who?”

“There’s no bounty, Nyx. And the war is ending.”

Anneke grimaced. “Ease off. Eshe sent a message and vouched for her.” Anneke reached for an empty glass sitting on the sandy stone of the yard and poured a drink. Nyx hadn’t noticed the drinks before. How long had this sweet-tongued diplomat been lapping at Anneke’s ear?

“Oh, Eshe the Ras Tiegan rogue called, did he?” Nyx said. “Well, let in every wandering creeper who caught his eye, then.” Then, to Mercia. “Who sent you? Bel dames? Queen? Your slick diplomat mother?”

“My mother’s dead,” Mercia said.

“Well, sorry about your mother,” Nyx said. She wasn’t sorry at all, in fact. She had never liked Mercia’s mother, but the old cat bitch’s death likely put Mercia next in line on someone’s hit list.

“You don’t listen to the news?” Mercia asked.

“Not if I can help it.” Nyx said. She hadn’t sought out news of home in three years. All the news was the bloody same. “I’m not in Nasheenan security anymore, I don’t give a cat’s piss for politics. So tell me why you’re here or go home.”

“I’m Ambassador sa Aldred until my mother’s replacement is appointed,” Mercia said. “Things in Nasheen are very bad.”

“Things in Nasheen have always been bad.”

“And there is good money to be made when things are bad.”

Anneke thrust a glass of whiskey at Nyx. Nyx considered it. She eyed the bodyguards again. “You want to talk? Send them back outside.” She nodded to the guards.

“No way in hell,” the little guard said.

“I could shoot you now,” Nyx said.

“Please wait in the bakkie,” Mercia said.

“I have to respectfully –“ the big one began.

“I said wait there.”

The bodyguards mulled for a bit. Then started for the gate. Nyx kept her gun trained on them. The big one eyed Nyx as she passed, said, “We’ll burn this place down you do anything to her.”

“It’ll be a little late then, won’t it?”

The woman bared her teeth.

When the gate was closed behind them, Nyx lowered her gun. “Nasheen is on the brink of revolution,” Mercia said. “There are discharged boys with nothing to do but start fights and steal bread. Women are running raids on their own into Chenja, in defiance of the ceasefire. The bel dames... I have never seen them so openly hostile to their own people. The streets are bloody. Bloodier than I’ve seen them, and I spent half my life in Nasheen. I’ve had three bodyguards murdered in as many months.”

“What does this have to do with me?”

“I remember you saving my life when it was yours they wanted,” Mercia said. “I’d pay you for it again.”

“Honey pot, you came all this way to offer me a job?” Nyx snorted. “I think that’s enough talk. Take your women out of here and go home.” She started toward the house, said over her shoulder, “And next time you come banging on a wanted woman’s door, think up a better story.”

“Wait, please,” Mercia called after her.

Nyx trudged up the steps. She should go out front and kill the bodyguards. She wasn’t too keen on killing Mercia – she was a diplomat after all – but there were plenty of places in Druce to stash a body. Thing was, she wasn’t so certain it was only Mercia and the bodyguards who knew where she was now. How long until some other bakkie full of women came along and bombed out the house? How many more of Anneke’s children would blister and bleed to death before it was done? Seven years. She thought she might just die out here, forgotten, presumed dead. But once they found you out, there was no turning back. She would have to kill a dozen people to keep this place quiet and safe, now. Kill a dozen people... or go back to Nasheen with Mercia.

“You know how long it took me to find you?” Mercia said. “Finding Eshe took many months, and I had to tell him the fate of the world was at stake before he’d even give me the name of the nearest town. I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t important.”

Nyx got to the top of the steps. She heard two of Anneke’s kids – Avava and Sabah – arguing inside about which of the three squads of kids was making dinner that night. Anneke’s remaining dozen were almost thirteen years old now, and there were few things more mentally aggravating than a house full of hot-and-bothered thirteen-year-olds. Most of them were wickedly good shots and passable at putting together mines, thanks to Anneke and Nyx, respectively, but more and more these days, Nyx was asking herself what the hell they were doing teaching kids to fight a war that was supposed to be ending.

“Nyx!” Mercia pleaded.

Nyx started to push through the filter that kept the worst of the bugs and contagion from the house. “Fatima sent me!”

Nyx stopped cold in the door. Turned back.

Mercia had followed her to the edge of the porch. Mercia’s look was less composed now, on the edge of panic. Why? Why was it so important to bring a bloody anachronism back to Nasheen? Weren’t there enough bel dames and mercenaries to keep the streets running red?

“And what does Fatima have to say?” Nyx asked.

“She has... a job for you.”

“And you couldn’t say that up front?”

“She didn’t think you would come. And if it had been her or another bel dame at your door, you would have killed them outright. But she said that if you wouldn’t come... She said she has a job for you. She wants you to be a bel dame again. She says now that the queen’s pardoned you and she’s leading the council, she has the authority to redeem you.”

Nyx felt something flutter inside of her, something that had been dead a good long time.

“She must be very desperate to send you here with an offer like that,” Nyx said. “Or she must think I’m very stupid.” “Things are bad, Nyx.”

“How do you profit from this?” Nyx knew enough about politicians to know that even Mercia was likely a fine one at this point, and fine politicians didn’t do anything unless they stood to profit from it.

“It’s not about me, exactly, it’s about... saving Nasheen.”

“Of course it is,” Nyx said.

She raised her gun and aimed it directly into Mercia’s face. The little diplomat had the sense to tremble. The color bled out of her face.

“Get the fuck off my porch,” Nyx said.

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“You going to fuck her or kill her?” Anneke asked when Nyx sent Mercia off with her bodyguards. “You never look that close unless it’s one or the other.”

Nyx stood with Anneke in the prayer room on the second floor, watching Mercia and the bodyguards get into the bakkie. Downstairs, the rest of the kids had come home and joined Avava and Sabah, still arguing about who was going to make dinner. Nyx supposed their choices would be fried locusts, yam noodles, or something unsavory that they had fished out of the ocean. They had pulled some globular one-eyed monster out of that seething, viscous sea the week before, and the thought of it still gave Nyx the dry heaves.

“Not sure yet,” Nyx said.

Anneke sighed. She had a stooped way of walking now, something to do with the degeneration of her spine. Genetic, the magicians had told her. Shouldn’t have hauled around forty kilos of gear for twenty-five years of mercenary work, either. But what was done was done, and though bone regeneration was possible, eliminating the root cause of her disease was not, and no matter how often Anneke went in to get it fixed, her body would just fail again. Anneke’s hair was shot through with white now, and her pinched, Chenjan-dark face was the face of an old woman, though she wasn’t much older than Nyx.

“You gotta make a decision sometime,” Anneke said.

Nyx said, “She upstairs?”

“Who? Oh. Yeah.”

“Mercia see her?”

“No.”

“You tell Mercia about her?”

“Fuck no, why’d I do that?”

“Mercia’s got a pretty story,” Nyx said. She watched Mercia’s bakkie roll off down the rutted drive. “I just don’t know that I believe it.”

“Believe her or not, they know where we are now,” Anneke said.

“I got that.”

“You going to risk it?”

And Nyx heard the real question behind that. It wasn’t fear for Anneke’s own life, no – Anneke knew she didn’t have long left – it was fear for the kids, and for everything and everyone they had come to care for here. It was a mistake to let her guard down, to let anyone close, even after all this time.

“Just got to tear it all down,” Nyx muttered.

Anneke pursed her mouth. “She’ll understand. She knew what you were before you hooked up with her.”

“Nobody really knows what I am,” Nyx said. “Not until I put a bullet in their head.”

Nyx went upstairs. Opened the bedroom door. There sat her lover, Radeyah, sketching the view of the sea from the balcony on a foolishly expensive slide that devoured each stroke. She was joyously lit up in that moment like a woman at peace with God.

Radeyah turned as Nyx entered, and the light went out of her face.

“It was one of them wasn’t it?” Radeyah said.

“They’ve asked me to go back to Nasheen.”

Radeyah and Nyx had grown up together in Mushirah, a farming settlement on the Nasheenian interior. Friends first, lovers later. Then they fell apart when the boy Radeyah fancied came home from the front with half his body missing. Radeyah stayed on in Mushirah, and Nyx went to war.

Nyx thought that was the end of it, until a boozy night in Sameh, now thirty years later, when she saw Radeyah sitting out on the levee sketching the sea. Nyx had known her immediately. Radeyah was older, and plumper, her face was still warm and her body, if anything, more inviting. Nyx knew it could only end badly.

It’s why she was so shocked when Radeyah came to her two weeks later at the local tea house and said, “I’ve been wondering all week why you were staring at me. But you’re Nyxnissa so Dasheem, aren’t you? Do you remember me?”

In answer, Nyx had ordered her a fruity drink, and asked if she had finally bought the seaside house she always talked about. Radeyah laughed, and it was a liquid laugh that stirred something long since dead and buried inside Nyx – some whole other life that she had to forget in order to lead this one.

Radeyah ceased her sketching. “Tell them no,” she said. Nyx admired the nimble way she held her stylus. She imagined Radeyah would have been a fine swordswoman, if she ever had a mind to pick up a sword. But Radeyah had spent her entire life on a farmstead in Mushirah. After her family died, she said she came to Druce to paint the sea, but when Nyx saw her moth-ridden flat with the leaky tub, moldy ceiling and surplus of drugs in the bathroom, she suspected Radeyah had not come to Druce to retire. She had come here to end it all.

Nyx didn’t like that idea. When she was with Radeyah, she dreamed less of the ring.

“I have to go,” Nyx said.

Radeyah’s jaw tightened. “I suppose we’ve been playing at being lovers a year now. Like children. It was bound to end soon enough.”

“You know what I am. What I’ve done –“

“That was all a long time ago –“

“The Queen has a very long memory.”

“Just tell them –“

“They know I’m here now. They’ll come for you. All of you. They’ll burn it up and scatter your corpses. That’s who I deal with. That’s the kind of person I am. If I don’t go with them now, you’re dead.”

“How long?” Radeyah said.

“Could be two or three months. Could be a year. I don’t know.”

Radeyah wasn’t good at hiding her emotions. She never had to. The pain that blossomed on her face made Nyx’s gut clench. She had to look away. Had to start cutting out that part of herself again, the one that cared about a thing because somebody else did. I’ve gotten soft, she thought. This woman made me soft.

“I waited for a man most of my life, and when he returned, he was little more than a hunk of charred meat. Is that what you’ll come back as? Or something worse? I have spent my whole life waiting to live, Nyx. I’m too old to wait.”

“I’m not asking you to wait.”

Radeyah closed her slide and stood. “I should go.”

“Stay for dinner.”

“I should have known you would go.”

Nyx walked up to her. Took her by the arms, leaned in. “If I didn’t give a shit about you I’d tell them to fuck off. I’d wrap you up and cart you off to some other house and fuck you on the porch all day until they burned it around us. But I do give a shit. And I’m too fucking old to see everything me and you and Anneke and the kids built destroyed because I couldn’t do one last job.”

Radeyah wrapped her arms around Nyx. Nyx pulled her close. They made love there on the floor as the light purred through the billowing curtains. Nyx traced Radeyah’s scars from her two births, all dozen children lost to the war. When Radeyah came, she bucked beneath Nyx’s hand, revealing the twisted collection of scars on her backside where the magicians had pulled shrapnel from her after a commuter train accident north of Mushirah. There were more scars, more blemishes, a lifetime of Nasheenian living mapped out on her body. Nyx loved her for it, a little. And feared for her – far too much.

Radeyah stroked her hair, after. “I won’t wait for you,” she said.

“I know,” Nyx said.

Even as they lay together in the cool breeze, Radeyah soft and comforting next to her, Nyx felt herself pulling away, boxing herself back up, until soon she was nearly numb, and the spidery tattoo on Radeyah’s ankle that still bore Nyx’s name no longer gave Nyx the same flutter of affection. It was easy to become everything she hated again. Remarkably, maddeningly easy.

Nyx closed her eyes, and stepped into the ring.

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