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## The Gulf of Mankind

The truck made slow progress as it bumped along over the rutted track; any springs it had once possessed were long gone. It creaked and groaned as if in sympathy with the girl travelling on its dirty, cracked leather back seat. Her throat was dry, clogged with the same hot gritty sand that filled her nostrils, caked hard; stinging; red rimmed eyes scratched as they moved fearfully from side to side. It was easier to close them, less painful, but she forced them open. Her chest ached with the swallowed dust bath, adding to the feeling of tightness already constricting her heart. The last few hours had taught her that heartache wasn't just a figure of speech, it was acute, intense, unbearably physically real. But even that hurt was preferable to what she knew lay ahead.

Distant lights blobbed on the horizon, each jolt brought them nearer, larger, as the rattling vehicle continued relentlessly on its journey through the all-consuming darkness. Ahmed had reached over and turned off the feeble headlights half an hour ago. The only light marking the road ahead came from a strong full moon and a scattering of stars, guiding them through the potholes that littered the track as haphazardly as pockmarks.

Her companions lit foul smelling cigarettes turning the air blue with a redolent haze. The astringent, acrid smoke burnt her throat and filled her lungs with its turgid heaviness adding nausea to her already wretched state. An uncontrollable bout of coughing racked her body earning her only disinterested glances in the rear view mirror.

Alongside Ahmed, her husband Armud was driving. No one spoke, no one offered a murmur of concern or enquired to see if she was okay. As she looked at the back of her husband's head it was difficult to imagine that they had loved each other once. It seemed like a distant memory. They had been so happy, so young, so carefree, living only in each other's arms, sharing each other's body and mind as freely as they shared the food and chores in their humble home. Until the day that is, 'Was it possible it was less than a year ago?' she wondered idly, when her husband's cousin Ahmed had returned to the village. His black serpent-like presence had invaded their private Eden and smothered it with an impenetrable silent cloak of mystery and secrets.

The coughs subsided, she held her breath, willing them to stop as she felt the kick inside her. She glanced down and placed a protective hand over the life within. Closing her eyes she allowed herself a brief respite, shutting out the turmoils of thought, to caress the precious elbow, or knee, or foot that stuck out and moved slowly across her stretched belly. She was eight months pregnant. She thought back to the night her baby had been conceived. So much had changed since then. She bit her dry cracked lips to stop them trembling and tasted the salty spurt of blood. There should be so many perfect moments ahead, she had not yet reached her twentieth birthday, there were brothers and sisters to be born, a loving caring family to be

created, her children having their own children, this was her dream but there would be none. No happy tomorrows, only today.

Maternal feelings as old as time stirred within her immature body. She needed to comfort her baby, her daughter; to show the unborn child that she was loved more than any other child in all the world was, or ever had been, loved, entirely and without reserve.

She knew intuitively that the unborn infant was a girl, a beautiful strong willed girl who ... a tear trickled down her cheek unheeded. She continued to caress the precious bundle, pushing unwelcome dark thoughts away.

Her daughter Allana, would have laughing brown eyes with chocolate and honey streaked shiny curls, plump little arms and legs that would wriggle with delight when her mother kissed her warm, soft, smooth little body. Tiny hands that would reach out, demanding to be picked up, secure in a sea of cuddles. Tiny strong brown arms would wind themselves around her, nestling a tiny head in the crook of her neck, gurgling with delight as she cradled her. She could smell the clean, pure newly washed baby smell, feel the comfort of snuggling against warm flesh, the light touch of damp curls tickling her cheek, hear the cooing and burbling baby talk and see the happy smiles. Bright, light, warm, happy contentment, at peace with life as only a small child can be. Her heartbeats slowed as her mind allowed the happy scene to unfold.

Bright lights hit her full in the face, invading her daydreams, with a jolt the stolen moments of peace vanished as the lights forced her eyes open, making her pupils dilate with returning fear. The taste of bile rose bitter in her throat. This was it. She could smell the tension and exhilaration emanating from her companions and felt sick.

Time stood still as the truck slewed to a halt. Her husband turned and fixed her with a sightless stare, the stare of a wide-eyed, fanatical stranger, irises dilated to black fathomless pits of doom. His hatred a palpable living entity consuming his entire being until it alone was supreme. Ahmed had stolen into their lives with a slithering insistence, extinguishing their love as he sucked Armud in, devouring him whole until he regurgitated only an empty shell. He had insinuated his vile snaking length between them, dissolving their passion in the acid conviction of his beliefs, until nothing else remained.

Outside their constricted world of battered metal, the mixture of light and sound swirled all around them in a cacophony of whirling dreamtime; slow motion; shouting; shooting; screeching; scared anger closing in from all sides.

Suddenly she was alone. The men were out of the truck, running. They would draw away a few soldiers but not too many. Things would go exactly as they planned. Exactly as they planned. They, not she. She was but a pawn in their game, the last solitary piece left. Instructed not asked, never consulted in their world of secrets.

They had reckoned without the soldiers days of idleness with nothing to do but train, honing already fit bodies to the perfection of athletes. The two men were easily

overtaken, their struggles ineffective against the soldiers strength as they were hauled back towards the check point.

She sat where she had been left. Nothing moving but her eyes. Ahmed's bright yellow slitted orbs fixed her and commanded her to perform. He hissed furious low guttural instructions at her, but she was not a collaborator, she was merely an instrument. She sat rigid, still as a statue, her breathing shallow.

She could see Armud captured in the strong arms of the soldiers. He screamed at her, commanding her to obey Ahmed. Slowly she shook her head, he had no hold over her now. It was over. She could make a difference.

Deftly she slid down from the vehicle, fright gave wings to her feet and she ran. Out across the dunes, the sand drifting between her toes as her sandals sank in its softness, thwacking against the soles of her feet as she took flight. Heavy skirts hampered her, impeding her escape.

The warning shout, effective as a shot whizzing past her ear, stopped her dead. She stood stock still, trembling, heart thumping as she turned to look back at the check point. It seemed no one had moved. The soldiers were still there swarming around the truck, light glinting on their rifles, guarding their captives. She looked at their commander whose shout had stopped her. He had a fine face. She caught and held his clear blue eyes. He was not ten metres away. A group of his soldiers made to move towards her but he held up an abrupt hand to stop them, a gesture instantly obeyed.

He didn't look as though he was much older than she was. A young man in an alien place caught in the spotlight. He held out a welcoming hand towards her but she slowly shook her head. His blue eyes held her own soft brown ones captive, persisting in holding her prisoner, as effective as any physical restraint.

The other soldiers and their prisoners melted into the background, she could see only him, they could have been the only two people on the face of the earth. Slowly, still fixing him with her gaze, her eyes never faltering, her fingers crept down over the heavy robe slowly inching its blackness higher and higher, her hands becoming claws as they travelled up her legs digging into the lithe brown limbs she was revealing.

Through the mists circling her brain she heard her husband yelling at her, demanding that she stop, commanding her to come back. She took no notice, battle camouflaged arms restrained him, he could not stop her.

It seemed in slow motion that her hands lifted the gown higher and higher, all the while his blue eyes never left her face. The gasp of horror from his men broke the thread that held them and he looked down. She saw shock and disbelief, followed by anger traverse his face in quick succession.

His taut soldier's frame turned angrily towards the two captives. Armud at least bowed his head, in fear or shame. Ahmed's face betrayed a vicious rictus of a smile, slashed thin lips barred in defiance. Chris turned from him in disgust, his eyes

seeking the woman's again, compassion for her flowed across the space between them.

There above the heavily pregnant belly protruding under milk swollen breasts, a green belt was strapped. There was no mistaking the explosives attached to it. In this vicious world he had thought he was beyond shock but- the thought of the sacrifice of this poor frightened girl and her unborn child sickened his soul.

She knew there was no reprieve from the destiny her husband had chosen for her. But it was in her power to change the destiny of this kindly looking soldier and his men. She smiled at the human compassion she saw in his eyes. Her fingers relinquished their vice-like grip and her robe fell like a curtain.

He took an involuntary step towards her. It was her turn to hold out a restraining hand. Sadly she shook her head, they spoke different languages but their eyes spoke as clearly as any tongue, they both knew her fate was sealed.

Slowly she turned and walked back out amongst the dunes. She had not looked at her husband. She wanted the blue-eyed fair skinned stranger, who looked at her as a caring human being, to be the last person she saw.

A growing whirring of helicopter blades invaded the night sky, churning the sand to a dust bowl as they hung above the check point like bright avenging angels; but they were of another world now; a world where Ahmed and Armud would be restrained, never to destroy any more Edens.

Her remaining time was for her and her child. She bent to unstrap her sandals, and kicking them loose felt the cool sand beneath her feet. A gentle breeze lifted her hair from her clammy, sweat stained forehead, cooling as it stroked her cheeks. Morning would break soon. She walked on.

Sharp piercing pain at the base of her spine surprised her and brought her to a sudden halt as she felt the rush of warm sticky liquid between her thighs. A low moan escaped her lips; tears ran unchecked down her face, her baby was coming.

With frantic fingers she tore at the restraining belt, pulling with all her might. Great sobs engulfed her, she was too young to die. Fighting down the rising panic she tried to think logically, beads of sweat stood out on her forehead she frowned with the effort of intense concentration and blinked away the perspiration dripping down her face, she had to fight, she had to save her baby. She knew enough to realise that there was no use pulling at it, brute force wouldn't work, if she was going to free herself she had to think, to be clever, she couldn't give up, there had to be a way. A faint buzz followed by an ominous ticking told her time was running out, the belt hadn't budged an inch, as deep down she had known it wouldn't. It was impossible. Her trembling fingers fell away on leaden arms.

Another contraction caught her and distress brought her to her knees. She was going to die out here in the desert, alone with her child. She wanted to scream, to cry, to yell. Instead she started rocking gently backwards and forwards, her arms cradling and comforting her waking child. Shh, shh, shh. Her clear true voice singing

a lullaby sounded lost and alone in the desert. The moon wobbled through a haze of silent tears.

Through the blur she saw a shape, blinking revealed the blue-eyed soldier advancing carefully towards her, the blade of his knife glinting in the moonlight.

Nearby a bird chirped a few notes heralding a new dawn as with an intense light the world became silent.