



LITERATUR IN DEN SPRACHEN BERLINS 2024

Furhad Khan **The Drowned Bird** **(Extract)**

2017, Istanbul

Despite Ali's staring, the door did not move. It'd been closed for the last two hours. He'd memorised the woodgrain like lines on a hand; he knew where the paint had chipped away, and where the brush had slipped, licking the glass with a careless stain.

His acquaintance with the door bothered him, as did the hushed voices he could make out from the other side. Shapeless silhouettes moved across the glass, though the door remained closed. He'd seen more closed doors in Istanbul than landmarks.

Sarah greeted him with a sour-faced smile as he sat down at her desk.

'I'm hoping you have good news,' he said.

'Well, I certainly hope you think it's good.'

'There's news?'

'The meeting is to inform you that you've entered a review stage.'

He narrowed his eyes.

'It means they'll review whether your application is where it's supposed to be, given the delays.'

'That's great news!' Ali said with a genuine smile that Sarah didn't reciprocate. Her noticeably low-key energy today caught him off guard. She was hiding something.

'I don't want you to pin all your hopes on this audit review, it's just standard procedure. It doesn't mean you'll skip the queue.'

'I'm not expecting to skip the queue,' his smile began to fade, 'I've been in it long enough, I should be closer to the end.'

'Yes, in theory.'

'In theory? I thought I was making progress,' Ali stiffened, 'I've provided all the documents you requested and had two medicals, but each time I'm here you tell me I'm still delayed. What exactly will be reviewed?'

'I'm not sure I appreciate your tone Ali. I'm only here to help.'

'I'm sorry,' he froze. He paused for longer than he expected, careful to police his tone so she would not think he was hysterical and end the meeting prematurely. At worst, she could note the word 'aggressive' on his application, leading to another mental health assessment.

She watched him blankly as he tried to compose himself.

She must've been in her late fifties, he thought, with crow's feet cornering her eyes. Ali imagined that in a previous life she'd had a softer expression, it was only years of heartbroken faces across the desk that'd hardened her. He liked to think her tone was deliberate, a strategy to ground him so he didn't get carried away like an untethered kite.

When he arrived in Istanbul, he'd naively assumed that the asylum process would be days or weeks. Everything became temporary; he was carted around like unwanted goods, sharing rooms with up to

twenty others. In the moonlight he'd found common ground with them as they recounted stories of home: unfinished university degrees, dead parents and siblings, broken marriages, and lost loves.

Of course, Ali hadn't been entirely truthful when it was his turn to tell the others about himself. He told them of his parents: his father, Zayd, a retired accountant, and his mother, Saba, a teacher who was two years from retirement when the protests began. He'd even told them about his uncle, Ismail, who was still in Syria the last he'd heard, though they weren't in touch.

However, Ali had left Omar out of the story entirely. He struggled to recount an alternative where the prospect of marriage had been planned after graduation from Aleppo University. How could he tell a roomful of strangers that Omar was the story? He could not tell them that the smiling young man with his arm around him, in the photographs he'd shown them was not his cousin, as he had said, but his boyfriend.

Over the years, he'd become adept at concealing the parts of him that would raise questions at best, and at worst fists. Those who didn't know his truth and his life with Omar knew a shadow. The companions he'd huddled with, telling stories to keep alive fading memories of homes they'd never return to, had also become shadows of their former selves-- they were all shadows now.

Ali had silently celebrated his anniversary with Omar each time it came around in the two years they'd spent apart. Omar had always been the one who made a bigger deal about anniversaries and birthdays. In his absence, Ali kept alive their tradition of a single cupcake with two candles and a bag of persimmon, in honour of them devouring a whole bag together on their first date-- their first kiss with the juices running fresh from their lips down their chins. The bright-eyed smile Omar had given him afterwards had stuck with him; no one had ever given him that kind of look, as if they'd discovered a secret sixth sense. That was seven years ago, that version of Ali and Omar no longer existed and nor did that Aleppo.

What became of the others he'd shared rooms with after crossing the border? The countless shoulders he'd huddled together with on cold nights. The tired, scared faces he'd watched also struggling to fall

asleep as the traffic roared outside. Were they also still in purgatorial waiting rooms just like him?

After the shared rooms, he'd drifted from hostels to spare beds, and blow-up mattresses on cold kitchen floors. Watching his face become gaunt in the successive mirrors he'd glanced into since leaving Aleppo. A ghost with haunted eyes staring out of his tightly wrapped skull, lips and eyebrows that had looked handsome on his previous face.