

one story

PARTISANS

KARL TARO GREENFELD

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We rotated watch, pairs of us spending three hours tucked behind sand bags piled in semicircles at the front and rear of our flatbed rail car. We seldom saw human beings in this wasteland, and after three days of lumbering progress toward the railhead, we had not seen any of the partisans who threatened our state. The tracks cut through rift valley and then, upon rising up through a limestone canyon, extended along the hard, flat, golden-yellow desert floor all the way to the horizon.

When we were moving, there was a weak breeze, and with our watches completed, we could lie in the shade of a stained tarp we had mounted on poles, our heads resting against our packs, the air smelling of the turpentine applied to the wooden flatbed to protect it from beetles. I read through the latest editions of journals I had brought from the capital.

All of us were from the capital, and resentful at being dispatched to a remote outpost. I had packed plenty of books and magazines, but already, after just three days riding this train, it was clear I hadn't brought sufficient reading to last my deployment.

Our commander, Minor-Leftenant Hillel, narrow-faced with pock-marked cheeks from recent acne, was newly graduated from military academy and the only one among us eager to take up his first posting.

The rest of us were conscripts, and considered this 18 months of mandatory service to be a cruel joke upon our youth. My friends and I had boasted we could use creative methods to shirk our duty, yet when time came to report, we were timid and acquiescing, reduced to hoping that a harmless, yet congenital condition would be diagnosed to excuse us from serving, slightly under-arched feet, perhaps.

Instead, 90 days later, we found ourselves at the Central Station, clambering onto this flatbed rail car that would take us in a direction that we were told was secret, but that we could tell, upon leaving the city, was due south.

I had rarely ventured far from the capital. My family had gone on excursions to the coast, cloudy weeks, the sea saturated with medusae. Yet we had never visited the South, as it was considered to be an uncivilized, harsh land suitable for goat herding and the subsistence agriculture practiced by aboriginals.

I had just retired from another uneventful watch—more rocks, more fruitless dwarf olive trees, more cactus, more harsh scrub scraping the earth—and had taken up position under the tarp with my fellows when I heard Orston shout, “Riders!”

We roused ourselves and made a noisy scramble for our bolt-action rifles. We lay down at the edge of the railcar and scanned the horizon in the direction Orston was pointing. There, in the distance, silhouetted by taupe-colored hills, we saw a squadron in

grey and brown robes galloping parallel to us. Their steeds kicked up a thick cloud of yellow and orange dust that trailed behind them like dense smoke, as if they were ablaze.

Our train was moving so slowly that the riders were easily keeping pace, and I squinted to see if they were armed. They were closing now, galloping at an angle so they would intersect the tracks in a few hundred meters.

“Hold your fire,” Minor-Leftenant Hillel reminded us.

“What do they want?” Orston asked.

Minor-Leftenant Hillel gazed through a telescope. I was jealous and wished I had his view.

“They’re children,” he announced.

As they neared, we kept our weapons trained on them. They were darker-skinned than we were, their heads wrapped in stained ochre and rust-colored swaths of thick muslin; they had longer noses than ours and numerous scars all over their faces. Their teeth were stained red and they made clicking and whistling noises as they galloped. Their robes made them appear vast and fluttering, a blizzard of fabric and hoof and sand and horse spit. They rode alongside us for a while, so close I could have reached out with my rifle barrel and touched the billowing cloth. I could smell their odor of sweat and blood and horse and urine. And here, up close, I could see their knives and their rifles slung behind them and the bandoliers crisscrossed over their chests.

But, despite the proximity, they never made eye contact. They rode alongside us and then, only as they passed, did I wonder at the Minor-Leftenant’s description of them as “children.” They were indeed young, but, as I looked around at my platoon, I realized that we were younger.

Minor-Leftenant Hillel said they were aboriginal warriors out on the hunt. The partisans we were being sent to fend off were different. I asked him how we could tell them apart, by their dress, their language, their weapons, their food?

He said you knew they were partisans if they attacked you.

The train finally made the railhead the next morning, and we disembarked via a stepladder to the desert floor, lining up to pass our equipment and provisions from man to man to make an orderly pile. We were surprised to see the unit we were relieving already waiting at the railhead to board our train. I had assumed we would take their place in the fortification. Wasn't the whole point of these fortifications that they be continuously manned? Otherwise, the frontier would be porous. I pointed this out to Orston, who shrugged, as if such tactical considerations were above his pay grade, which they were, of course.

The railhead consisted of a two-story dried-mud stockade, inside the walls of which were a cistern sunken into the earth, a coaling station, and two low-ceilinged and terribly hot-looking barracks buildings. Besides the unit we were relieving, there was a small garrison and a station master who stood about, smoking cigarettes. A few aboriginals seemed to be in the employ of the station master, and they haphazardly shoveled coal or unloaded barrels. Empty bottles, smashed jugs, abandoned crates, and animal feces were scattered about the dirt courtyard. There was a stable outside the walls where a dozen, skinny camelid mammals grazed, rolling grass around in their jowly mouths. They had brown, matted fur that gave way around their teats and stomachs so that their undersides hung down like great, fleshy, wrinkled-looking sacks.

When we had unloaded our equipment, Minor-Leftenant told us we could fall out and take a cigarette break.

The men we were relieving had a gaunt, fatigued look and appeared even filthier and dustier than we were after several days riding the open-air rail car. Every part of their faces seemed lined with dirt and, where there was a crease, a fold, a wrinkle, there had formed a crack oozing with blood, puss, and tears. But more than anything else, they seemed anxious. As soon as we unloaded, they hurried aboard, their meager kits allowing them to settle in quickly.

“Let’s ask them how it is,” I said to Gortat, a tall fellow prone to rashes. He was scratching at himself now, cursing the sun and dry air.

He shrugged. “Go ahead.”

I stood up and walked over to the flatbed car, shouting up at our comrades. “Hello. We’ve come to relieve you.” I held up a pack of opened cigarettes, which one of them grabbed.

Before I could ask any questions, there was a commotion as five canvas body bags were carried out from one of the barracks by aboriginals, the station master marching ahead of them and supervising the loading.

The men in the unit who had taken their place on the flatbed car stood up and rearranged themselves to make room for the corpses, a few removed their caps.

“What happened to them?” I asked, taking off my own cap.

The men looked at me and shook their heads. They never returned my cigarettes.

Later, as we were waiting for the aboriginals to pile our equipment and provisions onto the camelids, I said to Hedo, a

former student at the Engineering School, that I didn't understand who the dead could be. We had been told in the capital that this was a safe, uneventful posting, basically a security detail. Yet, if soldiers were getting killed, and I had counted five of them, then it seemed we hadn't been given accurate information.

"What do you want me to do about it?" Hedo asked.

"Shouldn't we have been trained for this?"

But Hedo had an engineer's pragmatism: he wouldn't waste time or energy on problems he knew he couldn't solve.

We had gone through basic training together, though those of us from families with a little money had managed to bribe our way out of the most arduous exercises and into more comfortable barracks. We had all learned how to handle our weapons, jab bayonets into burlap sacks stuffed with straw, and to make a cooking fire from matches and a few twigs. But instead of the long 30-kilometer marches with full packs, I had lolled around on my bunk, reading contemporary poetry. Rather than shine my own boots, I was able to pay a boy who hung around the camp to do it. And anyway, we had all read in the newspapers that since the successful completion of the fortification network, the partisans no longer posed any serious threat to our state. My only fear had been boredom, hence the many volumes I had packed.

The next day, before dawn, our column set out, 24 soldiers, including Minor-Leftenant, 12 aboriginals carrying torches, 16 camelids and a two-wheeled water caisson pulled by mules. There was only one path from the stockade and we followed it, walking on a hard track with craggy stones embedded into it at odd angles so that you had to take care where you stepped.

As the sky brightened, the bits of mica in the stones sparkled as they reflected the first light, and almost as soon as we could discern the foothills we were making our way toward, it became so hot I couldn't think of anything else but my discomfort.

My pack was too heavy for me and I was regretting not having trained for marches like this and also second-guessing my decision to carry dozens of books, old masters and classics I intended to read. When we finally stopped to rest during the worst heat of the day, I did a quick triage of my volumes, tossing away a few precious titles with gilt covers. It was a struggle, deciding between this old master and that, and I had to repeatedly select the lighter of two titles, meaning those editions with brocaded and embossed covers were left in the sand. None of my fellow soldiers seemed interested in them.

In the afternoon we began again, marching along the path between stunted juniper trees and brownish cacti with a bronze-colored, oily-looking flower. We seemed to be walking in a culvert, the land ascending in miniscule steps and ledges from our column, each rise a shelf of a few hundred meters and then another step of a few meters.

Eventually, in the distance to my right, I could see beyond the scree where there was a more substantial edifice, a series of jutting outcrops with shrubs growing in crannies in the yellow stone. We were too exhausted to talk as we marched, and my anxiety at what I had seen back at the railhead dissipated in my general fatigue and discomfort. It darkened in a matter of minutes—the sun, greedy to take its light with the horizon. Minor-Leftenant consulted with a few of the aboriginals and decided that we would stop there.

We were each given a flatbread, some dried meat, and a string of figs, which we washed down with water from the caisson. I fell asleep with my boots on and was woken in the middle of the night by my own shivering. I scrambled through my pack to find a blanket, which I pulled over myself, but that did little to fend off the surprising cold.

At dawn, when we marshalled, Minor-Leftenant seemed flustered by something as he walked down the ranks. I was too busy securing my pack and making sure my boots were tightly laced to notice that Hedo was missing. He had vanished overnight. Had he returned to the railhead? Wandered off to urinate and become disoriented?

Minor-Leftenant kept counting us and then ordered a roll call as the aboriginals sat in the shade of the camelids, as if somehow Hedo would suddenly announce himself and we would all turn toward his voice as he materialized.

“We have a deserter,” Minor-Leftenant announced.

We looked around the denuded landscape, light in every direction so you could barely find a spot of shade. Who would desert here?

The Minor-Leftenant now faced a dilemma: send out search parties or continue our march to the fortification. He thought about this for a long time, consulting a manual of some kind and then sweeping the horizon with his spyglass. He eventually elected to send two soldiers with an aboriginal guide back in the direction of the railhead. They were to march double-time searching for Hedo until they came to the railhead, where they were to report the deserter to the garrison. Minor-Leftenant was pleased and so we rose and commenced to marching again,

the sun already so high in the sky that most of us had become drowsy.

I was once again regretting the books I had to leave behind, the beautiful volumes I might never read, the carefully stitched bindings, the skillfully embossed titles, the gilt lettering, the fruits of our civilization, my father might have said.

Gortat was now walking beside me, scratching at his face as usual. In the two days since leaving the railhead, his rash had spread, engulfing his face in a suppurating, lunar landscape. The area around his left eye was so swollen that he appeared to squint.

“Hedo?” he asked, one word.

I shrugged, too tired to give him an answer.

“But where would he go?” Gortat asked.

That night, we made camp in a gully at the base of the foothills. Minor-Leftenant organized two-man watches, three hours each. I pulled the first watch with Aslan, a quiet, timid boy from north of the capital. His family were the caretakers of a farm owned by a wealthy family in the city. The day we had set out from Central Station was Aslan’s first day in the city.

When everyone turned in, I whispered to Aslan that there was no reason both of us should stay up, and I told him if he took the first half while I slept, he could sleep the second half of the watch. I settled in around the dying embers of our fire, wrapped myself in my blanket and dozed off comfortably. When I woke up, it was dawn, and Minor-Leftenant was shouting at me and Aslan for having fallen asleep on our watch, thus failing not only to keep vigilant, but also neglecting to wake the pair that were to relieve us.

In the night, two of our camelids had come untethered and

wandered off, meaning we would each have to carry additional weight for the rest of our march, causing everyone to curse us. As punishment, Aslan and I were to have half-rations of water until we arrived at the fortification. I had no choice but to leave behind the rest of my books. Hastily, I chose one book to keep, a popular novel written centuries ago, shortly after the founding of our state.

After four hours on the march through the roughest terrain we had yet traversed, steep paths up shrubby hills followed by treacherous descents, even the Minor-Leftenant felt sorry for us—or worried that he might lose two more soldiers—and so allowed us full water rations.

Aslan, who had lost his color as he was walking and who had collapsed to the hard sand at the last fall out, didn't rouse to join the line waiting with our canteens at the water caisson. He was found to be unconscious and was revived only after some prodding and slapping by Minor-Leftenant, who ordered him to drink some water, which Aslan did, though he didn't seem very sure where he was or who we were.

When Aslan stood, he staggered under his pack and then fell forward onto his hands and knees. He tried to again stand up and then collapsed. The Minor-Leftenant ordered one aboriginal to stay behind with Aslan while the rest of us and our baggage continued forward through a harsh, cracked landscape that resembled the rash on Gortat's face, the earth making a crunching noise as our boots pushed through a thin surface membrane.

Finally, after another uneventful night—I had to pull a double watch as an additional punishment—we rose up from this desiccated landscape to a more lush area of short crab-grass and occasional corpses of trees with red and orange bottle-brush

flowers. We crossed a sandy stretch of mossy dunes—like a little beach but with no ocean in sight—our boots sinking up to our ankles as we struggled in the wake of the camelids and aboriginals, who seemed to skim across the surface of this fine sand.

“Here,” the Minor-Leftenant said after we had risen from a particularly hard-to-negotiate depression.

We all gathered around the Minor-Leftenant where he stood at the top of a descending staircase of a dozen plank steps hewn into the earth. They ended at a heavy steel door, latched shut with a padlock. Minor-Leftenant climbed down, at the same time reaching for a key hanging by a cord around his neck, which he used to open the latch and then, after some struggle, he jarred open the metal door and entered.

We couldn't see inside, but the Minor-Leftenant quickly reemerged from the bunker and ordered the aboriginals to begin cleaning it out. This was, it would turn out, the command bunker. It was filthy with human excrement and required several days of airing before the Minor-Leftenant would venture down there again.

Until then, he ordered us to familiarize ourselves with the fortification. Its design was roughly the shape of an octopus laid out so that its tentacles all faced one direction, south, away from the head. The tentacles were trenches connected to dugouts at the southern end. The command bunker was the head of the octopus and the nerve center. Listening tubes had been carefully dug into the earth connecting all our dugouts, intended to facilitate communication throughout the fortification. The first dugout we came upon was also filled with feces. Gortat suggested that this was the latrine dugout and we continued to the next, which also contained ten centimeters of shit.

I had expected a more thorough construction: hardened, deeply subterranean positions of some kind. These were just holes in the ground with wooden planks for floors. Trenches connecting each little hole to the command bunker were long, narrow slits that had already partially filled in with sand and debris. These were the vaunted fortifications we had heard so much about in the capital? I took some strange solace from this perfunctory construction: surely, this must be the most thinly defended section of the border because there were fewer partisans here.

That afternoon, as the Minor-Leftenant supervised the unloading of the camelids and the mounting of the circular gun atop his command bunker, the aboriginals were ordered to shovel the feces out of the foxholes and dugouts while we stowed our supplies under a tarp, tied down against the wind. Then we had to commence widening and restoring the trenches connecting our dugouts to each other and the command bunker. I liked that work, as it allowed me the feeling of both contributing to my own and the state's well-being by making the fortification safer for those of us bivouacked there.

That night, we slept aboveground on the loamy earth, and we could see, in the distance, campfires of some kind. In the flat, desert air it was hard to determine the distance, but Gortat said they were very far away. I could hear heavy-sounding animals shuffling nearby, a sudden grunted barking noise of some kind. The camelids began braying and I heard the aboriginals chasing something away. By the time we rose the next morning, the aboriginals and the camelids were gone. The Minor-Leftenant said they would be back with supplies in a month.

I was assigned the middle tentacle of the octopus, manning it with Gortat. We swept out the dugout, and made sure the listening tube was clear. We attached a tin, funnel-shaped device to the tube, which we were to lean into to get our orders, or speak into when seeking to pass along information to the Minor-Leftenant. The system didn't make for very clear communication, and the first night we slept in our dugout, all evening long I heard fragments of my comrades shouting, moaning, complaining, and wondering, yet I couldn't make out who was speaking or what they were reporting.

Periodically, I could discern the Minor-Leftenant, ordering the tubes cleared so he could speak, but then all I heard was, "Something...he's out...nothing...what?... Something...in here..." and then gunshots and screams. We huddled in our dugout, unsure of who had been speaking, what dugout that had been. Then we heard the loud, repeating fire of the circular gun going through a belt of ammunition.

"We're under attack!" I told Gortat.

Both of us swung our bolt action rifles over the edge of the dugout and began firing wildly to the south, reloading several times. We couldn't see a thing, save the campfires in the far distance.

"Hold your fire," I could hear the Minor-Leftenant shouting. We ceased. He ordered us to report our positions in sequence. Dugout 8, at the far west, was unaccounted for.

Two soldiers were ordered to investigate. When they reached the dugout, we could make out, over the listening tubes, "Nobody...there's a dead animal...hyena or...no sign—"

In the morning's first light, we saw the two corpses of Sasha and

Arno to the west, both cut down by the circular gun, apparently, as they ran from the hyena that had fallen into their hole.

Gortat's rash had worsened so that his eyes were almost swollen shut. He could barely see and had to be assisted when we made our way down the trench to collect our rations.

I went to visit the Minor-Leftenant in his command bunker. He sat on a stool, with the ocular lenses of a periscope in front of him and the eight curled tubes ending in funnels at ear level. He could swing the periscope around to view behind him or in front of him and above him was a hatch that he could crawl out of to operate the circular gun. It seemed an awful lot for one person to keep track of, the many voices, the various visibility angles, the circular gun, and the welfare of our steadily decreasing platoon.

"Gortat can no longer see," I informed my commander.

"I can't spare any more men."

"Yes, but in his condition, he's not up to manning a post."

He was gazing out his periscope. "We're spread thinly as it is. I can't take him off the line."

I asked the Minor-Leftenant if I could go through the first-aid kit in search of some medication, perhaps some camphor. He granted permission. Anyway, I knew, where could Gortat go?

That night, there was more gunfire and more shouting through the listening tubes. I couldn't make out what was happening or who was firing—I heard a loud, "I got him!"—and at dawn, we found what appeared to be a partisan clad in a yellow robe ten meters southwest of the command bunker.

I was ordered by the Minor-Leftenant to inspect the body.

I approached it cautiously: my first encounter with the dreaded partisans, albeit a dead example. I kept my rifle trained, lest he be feigning his death in a typical, dirty partisan tactic. But the corpse didn't stir, and as I got close, I saw that it wasn't a robe he was wearing, but a feminine-looking, yellow dressing gown of the type that might be purchased cheaply in one of the capital's package stores, only it was badly torn and frayed, strips of the material having been sliced away so that I could see the flesh underneath.

Could this be a female partisan, I wondered? She was light-skinned, I noticed, which was surprising. I slung my rifle over my shoulder, kneeled down and with both hands, flipped the body over and saw it was Aslan. His teeth had all been knocked out, garish henna tattoos in Byzantine patterns had been applied to his face, and earrings fashioned from tin can tops and crude hooks had been pushed through the lobes and pinnae of his ears.

We dragged Aslan toward the fortification and slid him into a canvas body bag, leaving him alongside Sasha and Arno.

"God help us...God help us...God help us."

The Minor-Leftenant ordered whoever was crying into the listening tube to cease. "We are soldiers, and we are to man this position. That is our duty," he reminded us.

"Perhaps we can talk to them," the voice (was it Orston? It sounded like Orston) now suggested. "Perhaps we can make a deal for safe passage."

"That's treasonous," the Minor-Leftenant said. "Who said that? Another comment like that and I will put you in for a court-martial."

We now spent all day in our dugouts, seldom leaving our positions, not even to defecate. I had sole responsibility for our position, since Gortat could only lie prone on a plank elevated

from the feces covering the dugout floor, his face so smeared with pink camphor that he looked like a child's papier-mâché project gone terribly wrong.

Gortat would ask me what I could see as I observed the horizon, and I told him: nothing, the shrub, the undergrowth, the riffing grass, the hills in the distance. There was no sign of the partisans. At night, I could still see in the distance the campfires, but they seemed neither closer nor farther away.

What were these fires? Who was gathered around them? Partisans? Aboriginal encampments? Some speculated that it was another army waiting to attack us, some that it marked the entrance to an ancient city, built into the mountains. We watched, but there was never any movement from the direction of the fires. We began to dream about them at night.

Gortat begged me not to leave him behind in the dugout. When I went to get our rations, our crackers, figs and dried meat, he would trail along behind, clinging to a belt I had attached to my own. We saw the Minor-Leftenant at his post, gazing into the periscope. He had stripped down to his trousers and a T-shirt and smoked as he scanned the horizon.

"Is there a plan?" I asked.

The Minor-Leftenant turned to me. He nodded. "The plan hasn't changed."

"I believed, when we were given orders, that this was a very different posting, that it was to be uneventful. Dull, even."

I supposed, actually, that this was dull, in stretches. It was just that the dull stretches were punctuated by intense bouts of terror when we were getting killed.

The Minor-Leftenant shook his head. "Uneventful? What

are you talking about? Private, this is your duty, get back to your position and stay off the tubes unless you are under attack."

"The partisans aren't attacking us," I said. "They are just waiting for us to kill each other."

"Get back to your post," The Minor-Leftenant ordered.

"It's this place, this place is cursed. It's haunted. It's like a vortex," Gortat said, "a gathering point of negative spirits."

I looked around at our position, the far-flung dugouts, my distant comrades peering from them like meerkats from their holes, at the command bunker and the circular gun atop it—placed, I noticed, with a clear field of fire at our posts as well as the surrounding terrain. The grass and dirt around us was now covered with our refuse, the canvas body bags of our fallen comrades—even the stench of the place had become abominable, a combination of our shit, our sweat, our urine, our decaying comrades.

"We have to get out of here," Gortat moaned.

"You can't even see," I told him, "you can't go anywhere."

"We're going to die in this bunker." Night had fallen, Gortat kept on whimpering.

Finally, to keep him quiet, I plugged up the tube with a wet cloth so the Minor-Leftenant would not hear us and began to read to Gortat from my remaining novel, the picaresque story of a young man from a wealthy family who was sent to court and fell in love with a woman he could not see, but could only hear because she was behind a lacquer screen—an intricate design of a phoenix and attending serpents. The young man was exiled for angering the prince and had to spend many years wandering these very borderlands, encountering brigands and murderers

and thieves among the tribals he found there—before returning to court a hero for vanquishing warring tribes.

It was easy to conjure the tribals he met by imagining those aboriginals we saw from the train. The landscape described was a very accurate representation of where we now found ourselves, the same vastness and immeasurability. At one point, the hero even rode toward campfires that seemed to recede as he approached. When he arrived, he found beautiful female savages who enslaved him before letting him live among them freely.

Gortat became silent as I read to him, content to lie back and listen. Soon we both grew tired and fell into dreams.

We were startled awake at first light by heavy footfalls approaching down the trench. Something or someone was closing fast, and I quickly fixed the bayonet, worked the bolt on my rifle, and took position facing the mouth of the trench. Even sightless Gortat sat up, holding his unattached bayonet in his hand.

Rushing around the last bend in the earthworks came Orston, who threw up his hands as I was about to thrust. He was breathing heavily. “You’re alive?”

“Obviously.”

Petro and Drad, according to Orston, had been discovered that morning, still in their dugouts, torn apart, their limbs severed, their intestines spilling out, their eyeballs pecked away, as if a large animal had mauled them.

“An animal?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said.

“Wouldn’t an animal have eaten them?”

“They were partially eaten, or, well, I didn’t see them, but some of their parts were missing.”

“Did anyone hear anything?” I asked.

“Of course. Didn’t you?”

I quickly nodded. I didn’t want to admit our tube had been plugged all night.

Orston told us that while the screams of the men had been audible over the tubes, gasps, cries for help, shouts of anguish, no one had been sure which dugout it was coming from, and everyone, including the Minor-Leftenant, had held their fire. Previously, of course, there would have been much gunplay, but we—or they—had seen the disastrous effects of that, so instead we—they—kept in their dugouts, frightened into inaction. At last when the tubes were quiet, the Minor-Leftenant had ordered every dugout to check in, and Petro and Drad had been silent. I had also not responded to this roll call and Orston charged out to see if we had also been attacked.

We both looked in the direction of the command bunker.

“What are we going to do?” I whispered to Orston.

Orston shrugged and pointed toward the Minor-Leftenant, the circular gun atop his command bunker: what choice did we have?

Once Orston left I took stock of our provisions. A wax paper bag of hard tack, a string of figs, eight strips of jerky, two liters of water. I was worried for Gortat. I helped him up.

He stood awkwardly against the dugout wall, cringing despite being safely under the sightline. I swept his sleeping palette, even making the small domestic gesture of unfolding and refolding the cloth he used to prop up his head. After I assisted him to lie back down, I rearranged his bandages and made sure his rations were within reach.

Gortat's face was no longer recognizable, his eyes slits, the rest of his features mashed, distorted and made assymetrical by the swelling, the weeping wounds. I sprinkled more camphor onto the rash and replaced the bandages.

"Please," Gortat said, "finish the story."

I replugged the tube and began reading again. Our hero had returned to the capital, wealthy with spices and jewels from his experiences among the savages, but also a possessor of something less tangible, more valuable and frequently commented upon by the women at court: he had matured, he was a man, strong, muscular and with great appeal to the opposite sex, whom he began to seduce in an effort to find again the voice of the woman he heard from behind the screen.

He went through dozens of the capital's finest courtesans, in prose that elicited from Gortat numerous requests to reread a passage or sentence so he could savor the turn of phrase and explore the contours of its meaning.

"Yes," Gortat said, "ah yes, I can picture it!" He was rubbing himself.

I put down the book. Enough reading for now.

Days passed. We did not leave our bunker. The heat of the desert beat down and turned the room into a sweatbox. At night we heard gunfire and the screams of our comrades. Then one night there was nothing but silence, and the silence was worse than the screams. I plugged the tube. Nothing quelled our terror but the novel.

There were only a few chapters left. I read more slowly, trying to savor the final pages, to keep us from reaching the end. Our hero found the lacquer screen with the recalled phoenix pattern,

the serpents surrounding it, and the princess who kept it still in her antechamber. Convinced she was his true love, he proposed, and a lavish wedding was prepared, yet he frequently admitted to certain doubts about her, for while he remembered the pattern of the screen, suddenly he was unsure about his recollection of the voice. She had aged, one of his manservants told him, her timbre had deepened.

Then, one evening, as he was waiting for his bride-to-be, he heard a woman's voice singing behind the screen. Ah, this is the voice I know, he thought. She may have aged, but she still had that same, sweet song. Yet, when he went behind the screen, it was a maid he found. His true love was a servant woman!

He called off the marriage, enraging the family of the princess. Her brothers vowed to kill him. He took the servant woman and together, they rode south, back to those same tribal territories.

"No!" shouted Gortat. "He should stay in the city."

When I came to the last page of the novel, I closed the book and told Gortat that the hero couldn't stay in the city. He had to go out into the wasteland, they would have killed him if he went back.

That afternoon as Gortat slept I observed the frontier, watching a funnel of dust gather and then sweep across the desert, joining together with other cyclones to form yellow, ground-touching clouds—a sand storm that rained particles on our position. I wrapped cotton cloth around my nose and mouth and blinked furiously.

Finally, the wind passed; the light was fading, the yellows and ochres and beiges and buffs shedding color as the sun set. And then I saw the fires. Tiny flickers across the hills, bordering the

far-off mountains. Their constant glow unaltered by everything that had happened at our fortification.

I waited and once dusk had fallen, I gathered my pack. Carefully, I placed the finished novel beside Gortat's bed, where he would be sure to find it. Then I lifted myself up out of my dugout. I stood in the dark and waited for the rattle of the Minor-Leftenant's circular gun.

The desert smelled of dust and worn leather bindings, like the library in my family's home. I thought of all the books I had abandoned during my journey. I took a step. I took another. And then I began walking, across the desert, toward the distant fires.

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Karl Taro Greenfeld is the author of five books, including the collection *NowTrends*, coming later this year from Hobart's Short Flight/Long Drive books, *Boy Alone*, a Washington Post Best Book of 2009, *Speed Tribes* and *China Syndrome*. A long time writer and editor for *The Nation*, *Time* and *Sports Illustrated*, he was the the editor of *Time Asia* and among the founding editors of *Sports Illustrated China*. His writing has appeared in numerous anthologies including *Best American Nonrequired Reading*, *Best American Travel Writing*, *Best American Sports Writing* and *Best Creative Nonfiction* and has been widely translated. Since taking up fiction writing in 2006, his stories have appeared in *Best American Short Stories*, *The Paris Review*, *Commentary*, *The Sun*, *The Southern Review*, *The Missouri Review*, *The New York Tyrant* and *American Short Fiction*, among other publications.

To read an interview with Karl Taro Greenfeld about "Partisans," visit the stories section of one-story.com. To discuss the story with other subscribers, visit one-story.com/blog.

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