

The Hour of the Wolf

by Javed Hayat

Beneath an opal moon, the open field and wilderness across it look immersed in varying shades of blue. A strong night howler blows across a little girl's face as she walks the field as if in a trance; her whole visage framed against the backdrop of this very act of violence.

I watch the little savage, the flawlessness of her movement, and the steadiness of her jaw. Someone who has just seen the stars take a fall and Heavens painted crimson, and goes about as if she has not a care in the world.

Three weeks of riding long and hard deep into this hell-hole and we still do not understand the natives. As legions of men we have come marching at their gates, warped in shells of hardware with peripherals unfamiliar; cold to touch. Carrying gifts of prey to the unsmiling with a deafening thunderous roar, to conquer them within the walls of their city. They offered little or no resistance, faced with a well-designed proxy against the meek of the earth. As metal replaced mercy and the hour of the wolf endured in permanence.

The girl is holding a dark brown box, wooden and fragile. She has busied herself taking out some rag dolls and laying them down carefully onto the ground.

And she does so very slowly.

A few of the men from our battalion are busy doing the digging; lots of shouting and singing, with the strong odor of mud and dirt from that direction. Death is not hygienic, and we need to keep the air clean. A lot of digging needs to be done, and the trenches need to be dug deeper this time.

I hear a drunken mercenary with a phlegmatic voice. From the corner of my eyes I watch him gesturing towards the door leading inside a dilapidated building. A woman follows.

My jaw stiffens. Being reminded of a woman in the heat of the battle, producing a knife from her clothing and closing in with surprising agility, as I pointed at her and aimed, my mind soaring with deadly possibilities.

But something did hamper my finger, burning like dark coal against the icy cold glint of the metallic lever. There was no decision, no thinking on my part. The trigger just didn't go. I remember the eventual sound of the blast, deafening roar of a double barrel, and the sight of my commanding officer unveiling before me as the woman went downward.

His red face perspiring and intense, his eyes wide and looking back at me. A spiteful glance sending the chill down my spine. I would do well never to get into such a tangle ever again, now secretly vowing to be more decisive come the next town.

The secret is to keep the trigger pressed for long till it doesn't feel so cold any more, or so I have been told.

My chain of thoughts broken by a low humming sound. My hands fumbling as I lit the darn thing, shaking - there is a tremor in my fingers these days that I don't feel too good about. The little girl has begun to chant in a slow, low tone, and she speaks in a language we do not care to understand.

