



Abhishek Pandit
Closure Café

Anastas closed his one eye and braced for the end. How could they harm him now? He was already dead inside.

The bitter and biting wind from the Hindu Kush had left his body numb. As he heard them load their rifles, he tried to make himself feel something—maybe, hate against them. He couldn't. They didn't know what they were doing. It was the anger coursing through their veins, among other substances.

But Tasneem? Instead of flashes of his life, only one last thought echoed: *Why didn't you expose them, Tasneem? Did I mean nothing to you?* He tightened his grip around his final gift for her, stashed in his jacket.

The volley opened. His chest seared in agony. Everything turned white.

When the blur refocused, Anastas found himself holding onto a cast-iron suitcase. He hadn't seen it in years, not since the orphanage back in Leningrad. Hundreds of strangers pushed trolleys down the polished black marble floors, gliding past him, into corridors swathed in mist. Being a head taller than most of the crowd, he could spot a few female attendants with winged helmets escorting other soldiers like him—in bloodstained uniforms. He was about to holler in their direction, when another voice, shrill and with a singsong lilt, called from behind.

"Excuse me, *Pastokobu-san*?"

Anastas spun around to find a young Asian woman half his size, her shock of golden hair coaxed into a bold bouffant. His own blond buzz-cut paled in comparison. Layers of makeup failed to conceal her blotched cheeks and blistered lips. She curved them into an eerie smile.

"Your boarding pass, please?"

She held out her open palm, clad in opera gloves that flowed up her arms into oversized purple robes. He hesitated. Multilingual announcements about takeoffs and airport gates were echoing in the emptiness above them.

"Did you mean *Pastukhov*?" asked Anastas.

Her rapid nodding made him dizzier.

"Where am I? Is this heaven? Hell?"

"That depends. If it helps, you're 100 percent dead." She wrested a paper from his left hand. He had no recollection of how it had got there.

"Who *are* you? The devil? With a hairstylist?"

She giggled like a schoolgirl, pointing towards her knotted floral scarf. A nametag below declared: *Brigitte Bardo*. Below: 春黄泉. If she was going to model herself on one of his teenage pinup crushes, she should have at least spelt the actress's name correctly.

"Let's see." She began to read his documents aloud. "Arrival—from Kabul. *Jyaa*, Afghanistan! 9th of November, 1985. Good, that's only a month ago."

"But I *just* arrived."

"Time moves much faster here. Don't worry, everything makes sense in hindsight." She dislodged the suitcase from his grip and lifted it as if it were a matchbox. "Please follow me."

"What if I stay right here?"

"Then Traffic Control will escort you out. You'll become a ghost. It's overrated. Come on."

He opened his mouth, but nothing coherent formed. He chased after her like a lamb behind a shepherd. As they passed souvenir shops and glitzy lounges, he wondered whether they might pop in. As if she'd heard his silent musings, she said, "No. Not everyone has the luxury of a peaceful death. Or at least, a quick one."

They arrived at a wall adorned with hieroglyphics and tinkling fountains. A fluorescent neon sign near the middle announced *Closure Café*. A low doorway crouched beneath it. He ducked and ran—

like he'd done several times to escape Mujahideen gunfire—but raced through curtains of bright yellow flowers instead.

Inside, the world turned much darker. The gothic chandeliers did little to help. By the time his eye adjusted to the dimness, the fake Bardot woman was already flicking his bulky baggage onto a table.

"What the hell is this place?"

"Who said it's hell?" she said. "See for yourself. When you're done, come meet me at the bar. There, in the far West..."

Surely, someone else could help. He marched off to explore. The air hung heavy with cigarette smoke. Announcements—like those outside—surfaced every now and then, only to drown again under the ripples of blues ballads. The café rolled out into the distance, refusing to confess its boundaries or purpose. Almost all its tables were occupied. Faces hid in wavering candlelight and steadfast solitude. He'd need some vodka in him before he could strike up conversations with these strangers.

Groups had gathered in some bastions of brightness. He passed lanky men with turbans sobbing beside a burnished jukebox. Something silver sparkled under a distant lamp. When he approached close enough, his jaw dropped. A colossal figure in chainmail armor hunched over the edge of a snooker table, aiming a rusted mace at balls trapped in a corner. They were doomed.

Anastas bolted, heading straight for the TV screen on the opposite wall. He found the fake Bardot woman swabbing a neighboring countertop.

"это пиздец! There's someone in a knight costume—"

She still oozed her syrupy tone. "Relax. It's not a costume. Some people need more time. Now tell me, what's your poison?"

"So you're the *bartender* now?"

"Yes."

"Then why'd you carry my things?"

"I play many roles. Budget cuts, you understand?"

"Are you human?"

"Too many questions. Why don't you get a drink? You'll have enough time to think about the only question that matters."

"Which is?"

"The one you couldn't answer before your death."

Against his better judgment, he reminisced. Tasneem's cold, gray eyes. Watching them flick over Politburo paperwork. Her flawless translations from Russian to Pashto. Her fluency in silences.

"What's the point? I can't go back. Wait, where do the flights go?"

"*Onwards*. Your next birth, a new identity. However, as I recall, your boarding pass doesn't have anything under 'Departure'."

"How do I get that filled?"

"Once you find inner peace, it will appear automatically."

"How do I find peace?"

Her eerie smile resurfaced. "Only *you* can answer that, *Pastokobu-san*. Good luck!"

She turned to other patrons.

Perfect. Do too little, spend eternity as a guest. Do too much, spend eternity as a ghost. He couldn't win. Not if he played by the rules. But since when had rules worked for him? His training and survival instincts kicked in. *Attack the weakest flank.*

"Okay *Brigitte*, I'll have a vodka."

"Reliving the old days, aren't we? With your friends in the army? Here."

She handed over an already poured glass. Had she foreseen this request? He'd have to counter with a curveball.

"I have no friends in the army. Or anywhere. Some people are *meant* to be alone. And you, are you alone? Any friends?"

"Me?" She blushed, darkening her already inflamed skin. "Of course. *Countless.*"

"No, not the drunk passengers who play along with your bimbo act. I mean *real* friends."

She bit her lip. As she fidgeted with her scarf, he noticed burns underneath, ribbed with veins. So she was a fellow human after all.

"If I do a good job," she continued, "everybody in the café will be my friend."

"Says who?"

"My predecessor."

"So you came here like I did, took over as bartender, but got stuck doing multiple jobs. You pretend to be well-settled, but can't get them to give you a dress or gloves that fit you. You won't even try saying your actual name and assume people will prefer the Western one—"

"Haruki Izumi. Izumi," Her head drooped, like in a half-bow.

"Hi *Izumi*, where are you from?" He forced a grin.

"*Kyushu* Imperial University. *Fukuoka*...er ...we have fine Scotch too—"

"I'll have some, thanks. So if you landed up here, you didn't die instantly either. You had an unanswered question too. What was it? Why haven't you answered it yet?"

Izumi stared at the floor. "Why does it concern you?"

"My last commanding officers were corrupt assholes. But I had to salute them just because they're senior. I wish I could salute an officer because he's brave and cares for his men. I want to know his story. What's *your* story?"

Soft sighs and clinking glasses echoed throughout the café.

"I stayed because I needed to understand people better. And you? Did you care for *your* men?"

"I loved my men. The army was home for me. My only family. They didn't always care as much about me, sometimes..." He pointed at the fatal wounds near his aching heart. "The people I loved destroyed me. I can't ask why. So I guess we're both stuck here forever."

Her cinder-black eyes gleamed with tears. She looked around, biting her lip again. She then stood on tiptoe. A whisper.

"Listen, maybe you can find what you need. Meet Karen Sticks —Arrivals Desk 108, near the carousel. You must convince her."

He opened his mouth to thank her, but stopped short. What if this was some ploy? Then again, what other cards could he play?

He slid off the stool and marched away. Out, past the marigold curtains. Against the incoming tide of the newly deceased. At the 108th counter, a long antenna mast, shaped like an oar, buzzed beside three IBM mainframes, humming and overheating—a peninsula amid the chilly mist. Within, a figure in a black hoodie reeked of stale sweat. Another neon sign announced: *Charon Styx*.

The figure noticed him.

"LOL, don't bother. These days I go by 'Karen.' And you're Captain Anastas Mikhailovich Pastukhov."

"How do you know my name?"

"Just doing my job. Plus, databases help. Plus, you *do* look like your Mom. That Maria, she's a talker. That eye—what a blue. You sure got your Dad's eyes—I mean, eye. 'Mikhail,' wasn't it?"

"Papa? Mama? They're *here*?"

"Chill. They *were*, ages ago. They had great Karma scores, though. Moved *Onwards* with the first available flight."

"So where are they now?"

"*Who* are they now?" Karen corrected him. "Sorry, that's confidential."

"Did they leave any messages?"

"Look, Pastukhov, it's crazy enough already... demises, conceptions, coordinating them... we can't be your answering machine, too."

"Can I send a message to the living?"

"Are you even listening? I *just* said—"

Anastas tuned her out. *Closure Café*—what could ensure closure? He reached inside his pocket.

"Karen, I need a favour."

She glowered. "*Why* should I help you?"

He guided a gold coin across her desk. "Her name is Tasneem Niazaï. Born in Kabul, on the 9th of November, 1962."

"I can't force her. It's her choice."

"It's *your* choice too." He thought of the oar. "You weren't always like this—some desk clerk. You're more than that—"

"Thank you, *next passenger please*."

When he re-entered the café, defeated, the smooth jazz had succumbed to frenetic rhythms. A crowd had gathered around the TV. It was much wider than he last recalled. Izumi didn't seem to notice him. She was transfixed instead by the disturbing images onscreen: a stern, seated man speaking into the camera from what looked like the American President's office; a sleek metropolis next to the sea; two skyscrapers choked in the darkest smoke before one crumpled into a reluctant phantom of dust; families hugging and weeping.

Who had cried for him? Did *anyone* miss him? He had seen what fate befell incontinent Afghan villagers. His corpse, too, must have disappeared in a trench. Not even a gravestone would remember

his passing. It was over. He grabbed his whisky, lumbered away and collapsed into the nearest empty booth. He drained his drink, enduring a bitter sting on each sip. Complete silence. No release.

"Look at you," said a familiar voice. "As if it were yesterday."

Anastas peered up. Before him stood a heavysset woman in an embroidered *kamiz* skirt, her salt-and-pepper hair peeking from under a headscarf. She wore tortoise shell glasses. Lurking beneath them, he found that steely gray.

"Tasneem!"

"Yeah, it's me. So...hi! Er...long time. How...how are you? I was hoping we would get to talk—"

"почему ты говоришь по английски?"

"Stas, I don't remember my Russian anymore. Anyway, looks like everyone speaks English in heaven—"

"What heaven? This is hell! *You sent me here!*"

"Can I sit down?"

Neither said a word. He caught a whiff of her rosewater perfume. *Ah, that scent.*

"*Da*, sit."

He cracked his knuckles. Then he looked at the Tasneem in front of him, and thought of the Tasneem he'd once known. He remembered nights when they took diverging paths out of headquarters, reuniting later on the rooftops of abandoned buildings, never seen by colleagues, but always accompanied by the acrid smell of burning. From between wrecked pylons and frightened gas lights, they surrendered to the moonlit majesty of the silver snows of the Hindu Kush. They talked about a better world once all this was over. When she could build schools for girls. How he had never believed in his leaders. How he knew that his country would soon fall apart. He could still feel their fingers intertwined. Hard and soft. All of him with all of her. One. He didn't know where he ended and where she began. Anastasneem.

"Why did you do it?" His voice came out subdued. "I fought for you when my men tried to force themselves on you, and got *this*." He pointed at his blind left eye. "Then *why* didn't you fight for me?"

"Because we could never win—"

"*Tsss!*" His fury had simmered long enough. "Didn't you have the evidence? Did you translate the recordings I gave you?"

"I did."

"What were they saying? The Mujahideen?"

"You were right. They were getting the opium across the border with the help of your seniors—"

"In return for what?"

"For a cut of the stash. The enlisted troops wanted it the most."

He slammed his fist on the tabletop.

"I *knew* it! So those fuckers knew that I knew. *That's* why they framed *me* as the traitor!"

He turned to Tasneem. "And you? All that talk about saving the world. Then when the time comes to stand up for justice, why did you keep your damned mouth shut?"

"Because it wasn't just me! They would kill me, yes. But my family? What had they done wrong?"

"Bullshit! You're a coward, that's all you are! I can't believe—"

"Hush! Now *you* listen to *me*." Her eyes blazed behind her glasses. "You think I'm afraid of them? Then wouldn't I wear *hijab*? Would I study with men at Kabul Polytechnic? In Russian, under Soviet professors? You think I give a damn if they call me a sellout?"

"Ha!"

"The day before you died, they cornered my father after his Friday prayers—"

"*Da*, they didn't like his common law judgments. So what! Nothing new—"

"No! Because they found out about you and me. They said if we did anything that went against their cause, they'd kill my entire family. I don't care about my life, but I can't lose them—"

"But you could lose me? What makes you think you get to decide? Just because *you're* the one who started all this?"

"I regret many things, Stas. Inviting you for a cup of *kahwah* is not one of them."

"Why not?"

"You were an honorable man. Maybe even a great one. Someone our children could be proud of."

Anastas felt his throat catch. "Did you really see a future with us together?"

"I wanted to believe you. That you'd stay back. Convert to our faith. That my people would forget your uniform and see the man under it. Like I did. But how far would you go to fight the Mujahideen? For how long? Looting, shooting... and then bombing all those villages...*how* could you justify that? I don't mean *you*, but you can't pretend it's not part of who you are. Every time I held your hand, I saw my own people's blood on it. I knew I'd made a mistake. It could never work."

"So you let me die."

"I did. I let you die. I tried. I...I'm sorry."

"Do you think 'sorry' means *anything* now?"

"All that was *sixteen years* ago, Stas. I couldn't even bury you. It still gives me nightmares. Well. We're here now. And I hope...I hope you'll forgive me. I know it's a lot to ask, but...I'm sorry and—"
She stared at her sandals.

"What happened after me? The war—"

"Ended, a few years later. Your people went back. They left us in chaos. My father said we had to leave."

"So where were you all this time?"

"The US. New York. Our degrees became useless. For years, we waited tables...drove taxis...while I went to community college. No Americans wanted to be friends... because I'd worked for you guys. We couldn't go home either. Can you imagine what it's like...to be trapped between two worlds?"

"I can, actually. Then?"

"I graduated —again—and got placed... in a technology job. Made some money when the Internet started picking up."

"Inter-what?"

"Doesn't matter."

"Indeed, it doesn't." Venom crept into his voice. "The Mujahideen were right. Big money in America, huh? A capitalist sellout after all."

"See, *that's* your problem." Her nostrils flared. "You know *nothing* but pretend to be in control. One more word of that nonsense and I'm *gone*."

"*Nonono*, please. I'm sorry. Stay. Please. Tell me."

"I heard about what other women like me had to endure back home. I wanted to give back. So I started a non-profit to help more girls study science. My father said I should I focus on our own. But people are people, right?"

Anastas' lips tightened. "Did you find another man?"

"Sulaiman. A teacher at one of our partner schools. Had bourgeois interests, like yours—theater, the classics—"

"Children?"

"Two. My boy...he's going crazy. Got into a fight with me on my last day. Of all things, just because of his stupid hair gel. That, and because I don't call him 'Mike'—"

"Do you *ever* count your blessings? If only he was *our* son... I'd show him how to shave... tease him about girlfriends... the way my Papa never could—"

"I'm not complaining. I miss them already. My babies. My Mariam and Mikhail."

No. It couldn't be.

"You named them—"

"That's right. After your parents."

Anastas laid his hand on her shoulder, overwhelmed by a tenderness he thought had died long ago.

"Does he know?" he asked.

"Sulaiman? No. And now, he never will."

"Why didn't you tell him?"

Tasneem swallowed, but said nothing. For a long moment, they both sat frozen.

"I don't think I'll ever forget that day." Crumbling inside, he pulled a breath from the depth of his being: "I forgive you."

Tears broke free, warm and swift.

"I don't know what to...thank you, Stas. For so much. More than I can...and for this."

She opened her palm. The gold coin glistened, creamy chocolate seeping out of holes in the foil. "I didn't think I had the courage to face you. Until Karen gave me this..."

"*Tsss*. I wanted to get you some nice *Alënka* bars for your birthday. This was all they had left in the candy rations. Not exactly pirate treasure."

A stab of regret. A flush of embarrassment. A silly grin. A lifetime. All of it glided across her face in seconds.

She smiled. "My pirate captain."

"What took you so long?" he asked.

"It's *ridiculous* how outdated the software is here. No wonder they can't assign Brigitte any staff. I was giving Karen some advice on her database architecture—"

"So I was suffering, and you were enjoying your *girl talk*?"

"Hush, crybaby. Not everything is about you." She shook her head and began to peel off the coin's wrapping.

"Tasneem, you shouldn't eat food past your expiry date."

At first, the joke didn't register. Only inches from the chocolate, she erupted in laughter and smacked his shoulder. Maybe he still had the touch.

He reached for her hand. She pulled it away.

"Your attention please," An announcement boomed overhead. "Flight JHN-1011 will commence boarding shortly."

"Yours?" he asked.

She nodded.

Part of him had secretly expected it. There was still so much to say. He knew he would never find the perfect words. He hardly ever did.

Now or never.

"Thank you, Tasneem, for coming here...for being in my life...and making it...good. This time, be careful with the sugar, okay?"

She walked backward. "Sugar? You think *sugar* is dangerous? The real poison is *bitterness*. It makes you do crazy things. I saw it with my own eyes—those planes crashing into the towers. All those lives lost. I'm not even one of the real culprits. But I *looked* the part. I was just getting my Sunday groceries. I still don't know who fired. It's okay. Maybe I deserved it. For what I did to you."

Anastas gaped.

"Maybe if you weren't so lost in your pain, you'd realize it's not just yours. Peace be upon you, Stas."

The girl from those moonlit nights turned around, a tired woman. Deep red stains had bloomed across the back of her kamiz, like a rose. Her final farewell—a flower. And in a blink, she was gone.

He staggered back to the bar. The TV sprawled even wider. He examined his boarding pass. 'Departure' was still blank. So was he.

"*Jyaa*, long time," said Izumi. "Did you meet?"

"*Da*. We've cleared things. What happens next? I go to hell?"

"There is no hell. Or heaven," said Izumi. "We make both of them. Inside ourselves. So which are you making now?"

"Neither. She told me why she did what she did. But it hurts all the same. I can't move on. Not yet—"

"It's funny, isn't it? You chase the answer and the answer's not the answer."

"I didn't say that—"

Izumi waved her gloved hands around. "I thought I'd study those people. Maybe someday I'd understand how they could do what they did. Then they finally got what they deserved. I still wasn't happy."

Anastas sighed. "Exactly. It was all pointless. You know what never lets you down? Vodka. Get your strongest one."

Izumi's shoulders slumped. "No."

He sensed a new firmness in her voice, which pushed him closer to begging. "*Please.*"

Ultimately, he would just become like the others at their tables. Sit alone. Hope for healing. Drink. Fade into the shadows. So much for Closure 'Café'! Pathetic! They didn't even serve coffee. Or tea. Or kahwah. Like that first one with Tasneem...

And then, they hit him—the words she had said next:

An honorable man, maybe even a great one.

Each struck like a bullet to his chest. They shot him through with life. What was he doing? Was this how he would honor Tasneem's memory? Or his parents'?

"Not for me," he said. "For those people, near the jukebox. I saw them crying. They need the vodka more."

"I thought you'd never ask." Izumi was radiant. Her disfigured face now glowed with joy, maybe even with pride. "I'm running short on glasses. Why don't you return yours? In the meantime, I'll fix up something for good spirits. Thank you, *Pastokobu-san.*"

"Why are you thanking me?"

"I thought I already forgave them for Fat Man. Then with you—for the first time—I truly put someone else before me. I'm free. Finally. You'll see."

He felt a tug. Like a rope that they both pulled against without realizing it tied them together. Faced again with a knot of emotions he couldn't untangle, he leapt to his feet and marched, towards where he'd met Tasneem. As he wove his way through the throng, he wondered what threads linked him with the strangers around him. Only someone like Izumi would ever know.

He passed the table where Izumi had plopped his baggage. It was much smaller now.

"Izumi? Did you...?" He craned his neck over the crowd to check where she once stood. A blonde wig lay abandoned on the floor.

"Izumi! Izumi?"

He stumbled towards the shrunken suitcase. Jammed beneath it was a sheet upon which was sloppily penned:

Pastokobu-san,

You say you are alone. You were not meant to be alone, because you can see what's special in everyone. I trust you with my legacy.

Karen promised more assistants. I'm starting afresh. Maybe it's time Closure Café was reborn too.

Duty to our nations decided where we died. You decide your next step.

- Izumi/ Brigitte Bardo

On the flipside he found the stub of a boarding pass.

In faded ink: *Arrival—Mitsubishi Electric Works, Nagasaki [16/08/1945]*

Then, freshly stamped: *Departure—Onwards*

He lost track of how long he stood there, reeling. Aghast at how much he'd overlooked. What was his suffering, compared to Izumi's? Or Tasneem's? Why even compare what was meant to be shared?

When he came to his senses, he heard clamor around the bar.

His heart no longer ached. It no longer doubted. It knew. Anastas had to follow it. Tingling all over and lighter than ever before, he raced like a ray of candlelight, vaulted over Izumi's counter and faced the waiting passengers. They were mostly elderly, but a few of every age, every color and every juncture in the journey. Finally, a beginning.

"*Da*, welcome to *Bardo Bar*! I'm modern pirate Captain Blondebeard at your service. Without an eyepatch, but with a hairstylist. So tell me...what's *your* poison?"

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