

## Bataar

Liina Aamaya sat uncomfortably in her mother's bedroom. Her mother had always been strong. She was the rock that provided a solid foundation for Liina's life. A former soldier and hero of the Great Uprising. Liina's father died when Liina was very little, so her mother had been her idol. Now her mother was dying. Weak and pale, there was nothing more the doctors could do for her. Her withered body lay in her bed, propped up by pillows. Her mother spoke.

"Liina?"

"Yes, mother?"

"Turn off your phone."

Liina sighed as she turned off her phone. For years she had tried to convince her mother that if she just muted the volume they would not be interrupted by a call, but her mother always insisted she turn it off.

"Is your phone off?" her mother asked.

"Yes, mother." Liina answered.

"I need to speak with you in private," her mother said. "With nobody listening in."

Liina was surprised by her mother's comment, as much by the fact that her mother knew the Party monitored phone calls as by the fact that her mother was apparently going to say something unpatriotic. Liina did not monitor calls as part of her job, but she was occasionally provided with call transcripts when a suspicious call was detected that might affect one of her projects. She pulled the battery out of her phone for an extra level of security.

"We can speak in this room," her mother continued. "Many years ago I rewired the room, so when the Party thinks they are listening to this room they are actually listening to our neighbor's bedroom. I was young, then. Very brave, and very foolish. And back then the monitoring was not very sophisticated. Kang and I were newly married and I wanted privacy."

Liina smiled inwardly. "You sly dog," she thought.

"I know you worry that you will inherit Kang's poor health, and that his cancer may become your cancer," her mother said.

Liina listened patiently. Her mother often talked about her ancestors' health, who died of what, and symptoms she should watch for. Intellectually, Liina knew this was important, but

she was still young enough to feel invulnerable. People who got sick years ago couldn't possibly affect her. Medicine had advanced so much since then.

"You need not worry about Kang's health," her mother continued. "Kang was not your father."

"What?" Liina couldn't believe what she had just heard.

"Your father was a man named Bataar Nabil. Remember that name. Bataar Nabil. That is the man whose blood will affect your health." Her mother seemed to relax as she said this, as if a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

"I have never heard of this man." Liina said incredulously.

"He was a T'ingian soldier," her mother announced.

"But you fought in the war against the T'ingians!"

"It was not a war," her mother said with disgust. "It was a massacre. I went to war a young, idealistic soldier, certain she was defending her country against an army of insurgents. We were told they were funded by foreign capitalists who had corrupted their leaders. What I found were people just like ourselves, who wanted to be left alone, to live and farm as they had for centuries. They had no knowledge of Party rules, and no interest in politics." She paused for a moment to catch her breath, but her eyes were bright with the memory of past injustices.

"They had an army," she continued, "but it was an army of peasants, armed with hoes, sickles, and a few ancient rifles from previous wars. The press claimed they had tanks, airplanes, and other advanced weapons, but we saw none of those. When they threw rocks at us the press reported they 'launched missiles.' We would fight a skirmish, then the Elite Guard would round up the prisoners, their families, and surrounding villagers to be reeducated and resettled. Families from other provinces were brought in, supposedly to take care of the fields until the reeducation was finished and the original inhabitants returned."

Her mother sat lost in her memories as her eyes filled with tears. Then she spoke again. "One day when I was on a scouting patrol I witnessed a reeducation. I was in the woods. No one could see me. The Guard herded hundreds of men, women, and children into a field. They shot them with machine guns and buried them with a bulldozer." She grew quiet again, remembering the past.

"And Bataar?" Liina asked.

“We had much idle time,” her mother said. “I think they moved us slowly so they would have time to bring in families to take care of the lands we liberated. Our rations were poor so we often foraged for food. One day I was searching for food in a barn when I found Bataar hiding in some hay. He was sick, wounded, and starving. I knew I should take him prisoner, but I had already seen what the Guard did with prisoners. Bataar was young, about my own age, and oh so handsome. I nursed him back to health, and we fell in love. I was engaged to Kang at the time, but it was an arranged marriage. We barely knew each other. One day while I was searching for food, another soldier found Bataar. I never saw him again. Shortly after that I was injured during a skirmish and was sent home. Kang and I were married, and you were born. Kang never knew.”

Liina sat in stunned silence.

“Kang was a good man,” her mother continued. “He was a very good man, but he was not my first love. I know I should have told you this years ago, but I was frightened. The newspapers told everyone we were heroes who had won a glorious victory. A few soldiers dared to tell the truth, but they were silenced. The Party said they were sick, that the war had affected their minds. They were sent to hospitals and never heard from again. Even soldiers who only told the truth privately, to other soldiers, were overheard and sent to hospitals. We who survived learned to keep quiet.”

Her mother gave a short gasp and winced in pain.

“Mother!” Liina said as she grabbed her hand. “Are you all right?”

“I am fine,” her mother answered as her breathing returned to normal. “My body is failing, but my heart is at peace for I have finally told you the truth. Bataar Nabil is your father. You must look up his records. His blood is your blood.” She closed her eyes and lay back against the pillows. Liina held her hand for a long time. Until her breathing stopped.

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It took many months for Liina’s grief over the death of her mother to soften enough for her to look for Bataar. Her job required her to be an expert on computer stealth, to slip in to foreign computers, find and copy files, insert bogus files, plant malware, or do whatever else the Party deemed necessary for national security. She could hide her tracks completely so that no one could tell the computer had been hacked, or she could plant false clues that would indicate a different country had done the deed. This also meant she could slip into the Party’s computers, search the databases of their bureaucracy, and find information that was not intended for public access. It had to be done carefully, of course. It took her many weeks to complete her research, squeezing her searches in between tasks she was doing for the Party,

and of course covering her tracks so that no record of any search remained in the Party's computer network.

As she suspected, there were no records of Bataar Nabil, or of any individual T'ingian. It was as though they had never existed. There were detailed records of how many T'ingians were sent to reeducation camps each day – the Party excelled in keeping detailed records – and also records on the new families who moved into areas that had been liberated by the victorious army. There were also daily records on how many T'ingians completed their reeducation programs and were returned to their homes. It was only by comparing these records to the census reports, kept by a different agency on a different computer, that Liina could see that the census corresponded to the number of new families who had moved into the province. T'ingians who completed their reeducation and were sent “home” somehow never increased the population.

Liina had not been totally surprised by her mother's revelations. The news about her real father had certainly been a shock, but her suspicion that the Party did not always tell the truth had been growing for many years. Her doubts began when the party sent her to a decadent capitalist country to get a postgraduate degree in computer security. The country was not as decadent as she had been led to expect, and her fellow students did not appear to be oppressed by their capitalist overlords. Indeed, she was shocked by how they openly criticized their government and their leaders about many things. The luxuries, parties, drinking, and other consumption which first struck her as being decadent she later saw as being the result of abundance. Somehow their society managed to produce consumer goods at a phenomenal rate. Even the poor, of whom there were many, enjoyed luxuries unimaginable in her country.

She was also shocked to discover how different her classmates' view of world affairs was from her own. In particular, she could not believe that they viewed the worker's paradise of her own country as an oppressive dictatorship. She tried to tell them how her mother had saved the country from a traitorous insurrection that had been instigated by foreign governments. They called it ethnic cleansing, and said her government had exterminated an ethnic minority so its lands could be taken over by “ethnically pure” settlers from other provinces. They showed her photographs and news reports which she thought were fake. They were entirely at odds with what she had learned in the Party's schools.

When she returned to her country she was assigned to a military cyber-security unit. There she was shown how to use her skills to thwart the security systems she had studied. She expected to spend her days prying into hostile military computers, discovering invasion plans and thwarting attacks on her country. Instead, she was told to infiltrate corporate computers, university computers, utility system computers, and other non-military systems. She downloaded corporate secrets and research data. Occasionally she was told to corrupt data or

insert malware. Even research into lifesaving pharmaceuticals would be disrupted so that her country could have the honor of announcing (and patenting) a newly developed drug.

Liina's doubts about the Party and everything she'd been taught began to grow. If cooperative socialism was so superior to capitalism, why did they have to steal trade secrets from capitalist industries? If everyone was working for the common good, why did the factory managers get rich off these stolen secrets while the workers stayed poor? Wasn't that in itself a form of capitalism? And why were the Party leaders the richest of all? If the people really did run the country, why was there only one Party, and one candidate for every elected position? Where were the open discussions, debates, and criticisms she'd heard in the capitalist country?

Her mother's revelations about the Great Uprising resolved her doubts. The news reports she saw in the capitalist country were true. Everything she'd learned in her own country's schools, everything her military superiors told her, and everything the Party said was a lie. The Party had murdered hundreds of thousands of innocent T'ingians, and now it was trying to lie and steal its way into world domination. It had to be stopped. The question was, how?

Liina knew that the Party was just as dependent upon computers as any of the countries she had hacked. Party secrets could be stolen and leaked to the world. Industrial data could be corrupted. Utility systems for key facilities could be disrupted. Malware could be planted in military computer systems. But she couldn't do it alone. She suspected, no she *knew* there must be others working within the Party's apparatus who shared her views. Others who had seen the outside world and realized the things they'd been taught as children were lies. How could she get in touch with them? They couldn't meet. They couldn't talk online, over the phone, or by messaging. The Party had eyes and ears everywhere.

To date, Liina was above suspicion. She had gotten excellent grades throughout her schooling. Her superiors had written glowing reports of her work performance. She had never voiced even a hint of criticism of the Party or any of its policies. Her Social Credit Score was exemplary. It must remain that way. If she were ever suspected, if she were ever caught – she banished that thought from her mind. She couldn't even imagine how horrible and how short her life would be if that happened. She must remain anonymous. No hint of suspicion must ever fall on Liina Aamaya. She would create an alter ego, an avatar to perform nefarious deeds. Perhaps that was the way to recruit allies. She would only communicate with people who, like herself, could create and control an untraceable avatar on a remote computer, far away from the Party's surveillance. They would never know the real identities of their co-conspirators, so they could never betray one another.

Her avatar needed a name. It only took her a moment to devise one. Battar Nabil. The Party had erased all records of him. He didn't exist. He couldn't be traced to Liina Aamaya.