

# Domlik

*Samuel Brown*

Winter was Domlik's best season. The New Year rains were the earth's sweat; and when the soil perspired, the dirt softened into mud so thick it postponed all organized demining activity. Even the bravest deminer—by all rights the title belonged to Domlik—was dispatched to his home village. Domlik's annual return to Busalam meant that his skills could be invested in cajoling moody Athir into extending his tab at Busalam's only bar, a thin-walled green house with an oval sign declaring SALON CROOKED DOG in filigreed purple letters.

By necessity each morning began at home, and this day was not unlike others in the wet season, when the mud and rain troubled Domlik's breathing and sapped his strength. His wife had risen first and now stood impatiently at the foot of his sleeping mat.

"Domlik, the day is filled with work."

He frowned at her. "Dear wife, I am a deminer. In the rainy season, my Ebinger 420 SI finds as much metal as an Englishman's beagle with two legs and no nose."

She snorted back, "We see you excuse and excuse, but never do we see you work. I wish that you would remove that weapon from us. Your metal stick is danger to your family. Your daughter Sunal pretends she is cooking stew by stirring a branch in the mud. She believes she is her father with her own weapon."

Domlik knew his wife did not want to understand and rolled to his knees, then pushed himself to his feet. "Where is my Ebinger?" he asked as he did every day, staring past her solid form.

"You know that I do not touch it, Domlik. I shall never touch it."

He wandered from the room where the three of them slept together and stepped into the back room where he kept his gear in a turquoise GI footlocker for which he had bartered a carton of Marlboros. Its damaged lock wore the scuffmark of a combat boot. Domlik had always trusted this

broken lock to secure the trunk. But now the lid was open like the mouth of a yawning cow, and the Ebinger was gone.

He rushed back to the main room, where his wife was sweeping dirt from his sleeping space, his mat rolled into the shape of a tree trunk. He blurted, "Where has our daughter gone?"

"She is visiting the Lamriks." Her even tone defied his urgency.

He hated the way that family of farmers watched him with envy and regretted that his daughter had made friends there, but they were close neighbors and there was nothing to be done. He sprinted down the rough pathway to their land. His daughter Sunal was bent over in the grassy field adjacent to the Lamriks' hut, her arms holding an instrument like a hoe.

He could not call her name, could only yell, "Stop." She straightened and looked toward him. As he drew closer he realized that she was wearing her brother's tunic. Seeing Malki's clothes on his daughter was like watching a ghost fill out a shroud, and though he knew she was beautiful, he could not bear the image of his son. Malki's death was too near, and he yanked the tunic over her head as he confiscated the metal detector. The handle was warm and wet where she had held it, making the Ebinger slippery and difficult to grasp. She was scared: her lips unsteady, her cheeks flushed, her eyes focused on her father's feet.

"You must never open the trunk. You must never use the Ebinger. You must stay away from all minefields, Daughter. Allah has not chosen that path for you, and he will destroy you if you do not obey him."

His stern tone tapered off as her sobs rose to his ears. He did not like tears, particularly from children, and he quickened his pace. His daughter walked behind; he could not bring himself to hold her hand.

His wife was waiting, meaty fists denting the soft flesh of her hips. He handed the tunic to her, hefting the Ebinger with both hands. She turned the cloth over her arm and inspected it. "Sunal, you must never touch Malki's things. You do not honor the dead." Defeated, the girl slumped her back against the walls in the corner of the sleeping room.

Domlik replaced the Ebinger in the trunk, removing the face shield and lead-lined tunic, his abbreviated uniform for the rainy season. He pushed the lid tightly against the base, watching his thumbnail whiten in a crescent against the damaged latch, and wished for the first time that the lock worked.

The angry mood in the house made it easier to head to the Crooked Dog, though Athir was unlikely to have opened so early in the morning.

Domlik knew he was Athir's best customer, though he suspected the bartender tried to forget this. Not only did he pay for many of his own drinks, Domlik also attracted others who came to hear his stories over mugs of *perak*, the bracing slurry of fermented grains that he himself had brewed until Fortune smiled on his family and blessed them with the deminer's stipend.

Even now he could see Fortune's smile in the shadow over his door jamb, supple and smooth, but with a menacing twitch at the corner, the curse lurking within each act of Allah. With one exception, his career as a deminer had been a blessing, and he praised Allah for the chance to serve his people.

Domlik walked slowly along the street to the Dog. On the final block, he passed almost an hour inspecting second-story windows, half of which were covered in fabric instead of glass. In the beginning of his demining career, when the original Ebinger had been his magic staff, the world—particularly the houses closest to the Dog—became an untamed wilderness of treasures: keys buried in planter boxes, television sets covering beneath window sills, and the rare blush of white cloth hanging from an inside wall.

The white cloth had been the most intriguing of his early Ebinger discoveries, and Domlik had spotted several of them before realizing with ocher embarrassment that they were ladies' *brassieres*. He still laughed when he heard the word—*brassiere*—a sound only a foreigner would attach to such a garment. He had extracted only a single specimen, just enough to discover that the metal distracting his Ebinger was the wire rim of the fabric bowls that cupped women's breasts. Without the metal support, the cloth had wilted, and Domlik had thrown both fabric and wire into the sliver of old air between the Crooked Dog and Athir's adjacent apartment.

He had stopped exploring after Malki died. The activity no longer intrigued him, even if he had a daughter to replace his lost son.

Since his promotion in the regional humanitarian demining program, Domlik had occupied the seat to the right side of the *shriba* at town meetings. Though it was unprecedented for a man from Busalam to take the honored guest's seat, Domlik had never doubted his place. If he had any reservations, it was whether the inbred *shriba* was worthier to govern than an artisan of peace who daily risked his life removing *ukso*, the mines and unexploded ordnance thus labeled by Domlik's foreign teachers. His

chest and chin rose slightly higher than the *shriba*'s if he straightened the curve in his spine, his habitual reflex when he ascended the makeshift dais in the town hall.

Waiting for the Dog to open, he revisited the spectacle of the last meeting. Of all the important men, only the traveling surgeon, Ramik, made Domlik feel uncomfortable, not by anything he said or did, but by the confident set of his muscled shoulders. Domlik had smiled at the doctor, showing all his teeth as if to say, "A surgeon only sews piece to piece, while a deminer saves village upon village."

He'd worn his blast-proof lead smock to the meeting, knowing that any potential critics would have to still their complaining voices in the face of objective evidence of his service. He worked and risked more than anyone in the town, and the jealous slanders of the *shriba*'s younger brother were blasphemous and ungrateful.

Domlik had been surprised that his comments weren't solicited at the meeting, but he knew that in his honored position even silence expressed power. In any case, he preferred stories to speeches, and he was glad to save his voice for the Dog. Domlik had as little tolerance for hearing speeches as for reciting them, and only the brush of the *shriba*'s hand on the shoulder of his work shirt had made him realize that they were discussing the Rikoni field.

The now wild copses of bamboo on the eastern edge of Busalam had been mined so long and so extensively that only the men with the most wrinkles in their leather faces could remember when a direct road had connected village to city through the Rikoni field. There was talk that the latest victim still rotted in the center of the bamboo, too successful to be close enough for the village to extract him, not successful enough to have escaped to the other side. Domlik knew the talk was true the way he knew Allah rules the skies, so he accepted the circuitous route of the new road. At the right moment in late afternoon, he could see sunlight reflecting off human skulls, like pale fragments of the moon half-buried in the ground. Since his first vision of the bones, Domlik had been careful to visit only in the morning. The field both attracted and repulsed him, and he reached an equilibrium by staring from its edge with wary eyes. The stout arms of bamboo seemed to suck fear from the clouds like rain.

But the *shriba* had made up his mind this time: his voice was the grinding of a tree branch against a motorcycle sidecar. "You will need to clear Rikoni, or we do not know what we will do." In the *shriba*'s public ex-

asperation, Domlik could see the pallid face of the younger brother, whose jealousy of a deminer's glory would eagerly lead the village through Domlik's dishonor and into the mine field.

Domlik was glad when Athir's face appeared in the waxy half-window of the Crooked Dog's door, as his arrival freed Domlik from the memory of the thin scowl of the *shriba's* brother. The bartender's expression was not as welcoming as usual, but through the mud-spattered tip of Domlik's face shield, the difference was subtle at best.

Inside the bar grew an abundance of stories to be plucked from the Tree of Life and shared, and Domlik slouched into the buckled Formica in preparation for his first drink. He had often wondered where the woody presence in *perak* came from when there wasn't even a splinter in the stills he had used and seen. Staring at Athir's dimpled chin, Domlik wondered whether he washed the bar with *perak* and then served the soiled liquor to his customers. The burning sensation that chased a gulp made the bark flavor on his lips a question for quieter moments, and his throat, after a wet cough, was lubricated for a day of anecdotes.

His first listener was also the oldest. Surtav had served as Busalam's cobbler until his eyesight dimmed so completely that he stitched his thumb to the sole of a work boot. Though he managed to cut himself free, he had been unable to wash the blood out of the leather and was shamed into retirement. When Domlik paid his own tab, he as often as not covered several drinks for the old man. As a result, each time he entered the bar they exchanged the uncomfortable smiles of client and patron.

Domlik never wondered how Surtav recognized him despite his failed eyesight, augmented by a durian branch he'd put into service as a walking stick. The old man held the branch mid-shaft at a tawny section where his hand oils had dissolved the grayish brown bark. To Domlik the stick seemed barely more substantial than Surtav's scarred thumb.

Rather than disrupt Surtav's quiet tapping of his walking stick, Domlik decided to wait for a quorum to assemble, though doing so left him with nothing to say to the old man, who mumbled gratefully to the counter between his elbows. Domlik withdrew a Marlboro from the packet he'd stolen from an American volunteer and savored the dry texture of the filterless butt on his lips. He allowed himself one of these cigarettes a week to make his small supply last the winter, the rest of the time making do with local counterfeits, which spelled the brand name with an "n" or an extra "l."

He rolled the cigarette in his mouth, unlit, and thought about his children. In a year, his daughter and son had become indistinct from each other. Their names had quietly merged until the name Sumalki usually caught on his lips when he saw his daughter instead of her original Sunal. He had tried to change her name with the *shriba* when he returned for the winter, but his wife had bellowed that it wasn't right to taunt the dead. Then and since, he had regretted marrying such an irrational woman. His children's beauty made him wonder at times whether his wife was truly their mother. The *shriba* had refused to accept the name change. Underterred, Domlik had fixed the name in his will, pencil-etched on the inside of a carton of Marlboros: "To my daughter Sumalki I bestow my gear and the locker."

As the day's accumulated dust eroded the sun's rays, patrons slowly filled the bar, where they were intimate by the limits of space rather than choice. The GI card tables furnishing the room clustered as close as stones in a fence. There was no room for the stools that stubbornly encircled the tables, though each night the same miracle occurred, and every patron found and occupied his seat. Domlik let his listeners situate themselves behind their drinks before beginning his story.

He had made preparations for the evening earlier in the day while he waited for the Dog to open. Alone on the street he had finalized his resolve to disclose a new *ukso* from the glossy newsletter the Dutch group sent him each season to keep his skills sharp. His eye had settled on the KRG-219, a smooth-sided Russian sundisk that he had yet to encounter in practice. He recognized that his neighbors were as obsessed as he was with the pageantry of mines and their extraction: the PMN-2 green canteen with a black turtle holding tight on its entire voyage from the Soviet Union; the R2M2 explosive meat tin containing not strips of fish flesh, but the compressed death of cyclonite wax; the P-40 Apple, a metal cone filled with Composition B. He knew the *ukso* like butterflies in a display case, how to categorize them by triggers, lines, fuses, strikers, firing pins, casings, sensitivities, tripwires, boosting detonators. He knew their textures and their heft, their dirty stench. His favorites, though they frightened him by dealing death from a distance, were the bounding fragmentation mines. The letter codes for the many versions of Bouncing Betty represented the deliberate imprecision of war and its hatred of strangers.

Four of his audience lacked limbs—three legs and an arm among them—while Zitra boasted a J-shaped scar like a fishhook with its tip in his

cratered eye socket. They were as obsessed with the *ukso* as Domlik, and together they radiated an energy that compelled him to speak.

If Allah had not chosen him as a deminer, Domlik would have become an army sapper. He had never in his life wished for another person's death, but there was implacable logic in the technological variations of mines, the simple sophistication of form and function that separated them from their business of haphazard death. Until, and then again after, Malki's death, he could not connect his legless neighbors with the explosive pellets he harvested from the soil. He was glad to be on the side of the bearded white men in sandals and T-shirts instead of muddy fatigues; but if he had to choose, he would rather plant mines for the army than live life without them.

In his storytelling, Domlik was careful to blur crucial details regarding each *ukso*. His training had been arduous and cost him an entire summer of *perak* in seminars with fat bureaucrats who wore ties even when rivers of sweat flowed down their chests like chicken grease after a drunken meal. The misinformation was Domlik's way of keeping the system in balance. The rites of demining mirrored the perfect knowledge of the Quran's poetry that only the imam could fully possess. Considerable work had been required to reach Domlik's level of expertise; he had made mistakes early in his career, omissions that could, in inexperienced hands, lead to accidents. On the one hand, his listeners had to know that he possessed the secrets of *ukso*, while on the other hand, they had to fear it enough to avoid disaster. And they needed to remember who among them was the professional deminer.

In addition, Domlik coupled each *ukso* revelation with a reminder of their dark power beyond nature, a danger that Allah would not control because it was too malevolent. Domlik stretched his face into the most frightening grimace he could imagine when he intoned the exact name of a mine. "*Ukso* is the burning hand of the Adversary that fills your throat with your legs." At times he would bend deeply and grab his own face, his elbow at a sharp angle below the knee, fingers pulling down the shelves of his eye sockets. The one day, a year prior, when he had smeared red clay on his hands to make the flames more convincing, the men had stared at him until his cheeks filled with blood that required harder drinks than *perak* to hide.

He had regained his legitimacy after the red clay mishap within a week and renewed his campaign of fear, closing each story with the same

phrase, impressed on him as true by the Quranic melody of the words. "Only the anointed shall survive the black fire," always punctuated by a thump of his right palm against the side of his face shield.

The Dog slowly filled. Amar with his whitish eyebrows locked permanently in a fan of surprise. A scar at the left edge of his mouth appeared to be a tattoo distorting his cheek into an unrelenting grin. Simar's eyes dancing with a limitless energy that unsettled Domlik. His peers' attention bound them to him, and he prepared to say the name KRG-219 to seal their communion. He had paused and was ready to whisper the mine's name through his customary grimace, when he felt an insistent tug on the side strap of his tunic. The pressure of the shielding apron against his skin made him realize that he had been sweating.

The voice, though quiet, pierced his armor and burrowed into his wet hide. "Sunal is in Rikoni."

The smile collapsed from his face as his mouth jerked shut. Ramik's aloof eyes stared at Domlik. He knew the surgeon was lying because Sumalki was too wise to be in Rikoni. She knew better. She would not follow in her brother's footsteps.

Ramik was more formal than usual, visibly nervous, which frightened Domlik. "I am speaking truly, Domlik Ramawljan. Your daughter is in the Rikoni field. She took your detector and is gone. Sumnak saw her near the football pitch, and he called, but she would not mind."

Domlik's chin withdrew beneath the scalloped shadow of his face shield as he lumbered through the door, hunched shoulders sealing the words in his mouth. The air on the street was as thick as inside the Dog, and his ribs burned with the same intensity as his throat, the pain storming through his body. He forced his feet to stumble along a path so familiar his eyes were not necessary.

At home his wife was cleaning the floor in the hunched position of a cat, her legs moving freely beneath the loose dress of a married woman. She was oblivious to his fear. He marched silently into the back room to his footlocker. The lid was still closed tight. He examined the latch as he flipped the trunk open, and it showed no sign of trespass.

Inside the musty locker lay the secateurs, grappling hook, trowel, trip-wire feeler, his boundary markers and locator sticks. He reached for his forehead and found the face shield in its accustomed place. His chest was protected by the reinforced tunic that smeared his cotton Earth Day T-shirt over the sweat-pickled skin of his chest. His leggings lay at the bot-



tom of the locker. He jerked them into the air with a tinny clattering of metal that the locker gulped into silence. Domlik bit his lip until his teeth almost touched through the red lumps of skin, and a tear blurred his eye, but the pain could not rouse him from his waking nightmare. The Ebinger detector was not in the trunk. Its absence invaded his mind beyond the reach of words, echoing the sound of Malki's death. He ran from his house in a panicked stagger, unable to breathe at all.

His brain could spare no attention for the squealing of his lungs, and he sprinted on, his leg muscles twitching and kicking beyond his conscious control. He knew the path to Rikoni by heart, the craggy roots of a durian tree whose trunk was branded with a diamond-shaped cluster of bullet holes, the impromptu football pitch in tangled bluethorn that hovered near Rikoni's edge. Some days he had stayed within the safe borders of the football pitch while others he had gone beyond, right up to the edge of the bamboo. This was the first time he would come to Rikoni without full gear. Though he was not encumbered by leggings and Ebinger, the lead tunic slipped across his wet chest, disrupting his stride.

The minefield rose from a gentle upslope just visible from the football pitch. As he climbed, he could see Sunal's fiercely dark hair like a mushroom among the bamboo's jointed pillars of green and brown. He could not see whether she was moving, though the commotion of her form in his running eyes made him fear that she was. He paused at the first row of bamboo, hands pressed tight against his kneecaps, and yelled as loudly as his breath would allow, "Sumalki, be still. I am coming for you."

He examined the uneven line of cracked markers that he himself had staked three years ago, his first summer as a deminer. He wanted to push Dr. Adams—the retired American engineer with too little hair but too much belly—past the markers to his death. He could still see Adams's jowls jiggle as he briefed Domlik's class on demining safety protocols. The smooth pink skin on the American's cheeks glowed in front of Domlik, obscuring his view of his daughter.

The tunic squeezed a froth of sweat against his skin, which was already painfully chafed. His knowledge of the safety protocols sapped his strength, and all that remained within him was dread. Each moment Domlik stared toward his daughter from the safe side of the perimeter, she swayed closer to an early heaven, which could be no heaven at all. He turned toward the Holy City and begged Allah for fleet and sure feet. He

knew that the Prophet loved his own daughters, and he wished to make Allah spare Sumalki with honeyed lips of protection.

Domlik lunged into Rikoni, propelled by an unbalanced mixture of fear, hunger, and pious hope. His feet moved in a dance of their own devising. His eyes jumped from Sumalki's barely discernible face to the ground before his feet, to the stocky reeds of bamboo, to the dirt beside him in bursts that made his head ache. The bamboo seemed to him bayonets of an enemy infantry that he could not evade for long, and he struck a trunk with his shoulder, almost causing himself to fall. He righted himself and ran faster, his legs occasionally flipping sideways, as if Allah were guiding his steps away from *ukso*.

Halfway to Sumalki, he was overtaken by the giddy doubt that the field was even mined, that there had ever been danger in Rikoni, an instant's peace that dissipated when he glimpsed a tripwire sagging between bamboo stalks and the slovenly bulge of dirt that covered a Bouncing Betty.

He jumped over the string, his nylon jogging pants slick against his wet skin. The more he ran, the less he breathed, and he coughed a squeaking noise from his Adam's apple. Suddenly he was standing over Sumalki's teary face, a small window of dirt and flesh atop her ten-year-old frame. Her muddy shirt trembled as she shivered beneath it, her elbows unhinging clumsily to extend her hands toward her father. He leaned over her, and as her frightened breath touched his neck, he choked, spilling tears onto her mud-dappled black hair.

Her fear nauseated him, and he froze, needing to find a strategy beyond chanting his daughter's name. He placed his feet under her bottom, then shuffled until he was straddling her from behind. He stooped and lifted her onto his shoulders to avoid unsettling the ground beyond the spot she had accidentally cleared. As she held onto his hair, legs wrapped around his neck, he folded his own legs, then dropped into the indentation she had left in the mud as precisely as he could. She was heavier than he remembered, and he resolved to carry her more when they were safe and could eat porridge together each morning. He glared at the 420-SI and wanted to shatter its mud-blurred eye against the palisades of bamboo.

He dropped her into the space between his legs where she burrowed into his tense abdominal muscles, which were knotted into an endless cramp. Her scent in his mouth forced images of Malki into his mind. His

children were the same size now, their slender arms the same shape, their tapered noses identical. He wept again as her warmth merged into the smoky charcoal of Malki's funeral, shreds of skin hanging from muscle, his body the consistency of rain-soaked pork fat.

Sumalki's flesh was white, and the sweat on her arms made the skin glisten with tiny jewels. Her bony frame in his lap felt like a wild animal caught after a long struggle, too exhausted to resist captivity. His daughter's warmth against his belly caused hunger to displace fear. He promised himself an entire jug of *perak* with a lamb's leg if they survived. He would share all of it with his daughter, whose heaving shoulders he squeezed between his own. Her bony spine in his sternum tightened his lungs within his chest, and he had to lift his chin to exhale. Her breathing was disorderly, as if she were sobbing; and he prayed Allah that she be spared the visions of her brother that were falling from the ashen sky.

He heard a murmur like distant crickets and could see his neighbors at Rikoni's edge. They were shouting indistinguishable words and waving their arms. He could not find his voice to answer them, but he arose with Sumalki in his hands, holding her over his head for the sliver of strength that remained in his body. The two of them fell back to the ground, Domlik's tailbone splashing in the mud. Even sitting, he felt his back muscles weaken and his head fall toward an unseen *ukso* that would steal the heads off their bodies. There was languid comfort in the minute portion of a second between resigning himself to death and Sumalki's arresting his slump by jerking forward in his lap. Sitting bolt upright, he heard her whimper, "I'm sorry, Daddy. I was helping you."

He focused his attention to comfort her, but his voice was the tinkle of a wind chime. "Do not worry, Sumalki. Daddy is come."

She responded with an endearment he had long forgotten, humming it like a prayer. "Daddy's daughter, Daddy's daughter."

Night smothered dusk, and the heads of their neighbors were replaced by holes of light in the sky over the bamboo. Domlik wanted to pray *Magrib* toward the Holy City, but he could not face west for fear of detonating an *ukso*. He knew that Allah would be patient because he had given Domlik the gift of his daughter alive. If they had to starve together in Rikoni, they would. But he would not be separated from Sumalki.

Her breathing eventually slowed into a steady rhythm, and he knew that Allah had blessed her with sleep. He prayed that the same sleep would pass him by, lest he slump onto an *ukso* hidden in the darkness. He

folded his hands across Sumalki's lap, enclosing her wordlessly against the deep night. The sky's blackness was not diminished by the growing moon, which cast a weak shadow over Rikoni. The dim, stippled ground beyond his daughter's feet made Domlik's vision uncertain. The shifting shadows conjured memories of Malki's funeral.

His wife had at first wrapped the remains of their son in a linen shroud, but the purplish scars had been sticky, embedding the fabric in blackened flesh. The appearance of the charred specter of Malki had been neither unexpected nor endurable, and Domlik made his wife cover the fabric in garbage bags, though even they showed smooth spots where the linen held to Malki's body most tightly. One black bag for the top, one for the bottom, secured with a sash in the middle, the entire package in turn covered with a final blue-and-white shroud. The colored stripes on Malki's wrapped corpse melted into the shadows of bamboo, and Domlik stroked Sumalki's hair gently, so that she would not awaken. He needed to feel her skin, to know that in her Malki had never left, had never exploded an *ukso*. His fingers on her skin, he lost his thick mind in the night's blackness, and he could not pray *Isha*. He buried his nose in her hair and inhaled. The hairs tickled his nostrils but her smell was strong and familiar. Her fresh life crowded out the funeral images, and for a moment he felt whole and safe.

Allah sent an early dawn. The pale moon was burned from the sky by its angry older brother so quickly that Domlik did not think to pray *Fajr*. As the sunlight penetrating the bamboo brightened further, Domlik heard nervous laughter and the whinny of metal slapping against the ground. Sumalki wiped a green pebble from her eyes, while Domlik squeezed her shoulders between the palms of his hands. He felt her upper arm click as it moved inside the joint.

The *shriba*'s green jeep shimmered through the bamboo. The retired military vehicle was covered with a gleaming mountain of uncoiled, corrugated tin. Domlik recognized the large metal fragments as pieces scavenged from culverts in the streambeds Allah had redirected after the army engineers abandoned Busalam.

The jeep stopped, and the men unloaded the tin onto the ground. Two small men pushed a slice of metal upward, like a swelling storm, until it collapsed forward with a muffled twang, then carried the next section across the path cleared by the first piece. At regular slow intervals the men disrupted the muggy air with another thudding tin culvert aimed toward

Domlik and Sumalki. The metal slabs were continuously recycled in a transient road that cleared a hollow corridor from the perimeter.

Occasionally the sheets of metal caught in the bamboo and bowed upward until several men clambered aboard, snapping the trunks near the base. When the caravan was ten meters away, a culvert section detonated a mine as it landed, a nauseating thump of anger that formed a boil in the tin. Domlik could not remember seeing an *ukso* there the night before.

Domlik trembled, and Sumalki threw her arms over her head, wrapping them roughly behind his neck. His tears joined hers as they tracked through the mud on her cheeks. The wind expelled from beneath the final section of tin made their tears cold, then the splattered mud made them warm again. The *shriba*'s brother approached them on the metal carpet, wearing a meticulously polished welder's hood. With a rapid bow, he grasped the Ebinger and pulled, but Sumalki would not release the instrument. The veins on the back of the man's unmuscled hands swelled with exertion, and he let go. After a second tug and a scowl, he relented, leaving the ringed scepter in its position on Sumalki's lap.

Domlik's limbs had frozen in place, and he needed assistance to rise, though he would not release his daughter, even as the others pulled on his left arm. As he rose he saw greed under the welder's helmet in the muddy white tooth pinching the man's lip. With his left hand, he pushed his deminer's face shield into the *shriba*'s brother's eager chest. Leaving the welder's shield on the ground, the man returned, arrogant and unprotected, along the path of crushed bamboo. Domlik, unable to make his buzzing, wobbly legs advance, waited for the slow reversal of the tin road, one culvert fragment after the other flopping onto the ground. He was aware only of his daughter's warmth against his chest and the pressure on the balls of his feet as he negotiated the metallic surface, shuffling from ridge to ridge. Despite his clumsiness he refused to set Sumalki down, and she squeezed his arm with one hand, bearing the Ebinger in the other.

The men and the wives who waited behind the field markers bore expressions of gratitude and embarrassment, caught between wanting to stare at the rescued pair and needing to look away. Domlik's wife made eye contact first, her earthy hands clenched into fists. Her lips stretched forward as if she would spit, but instead she demanded, "Give me Sunal."

Domlik stared at the spot where his daughter's hands melted into the base of the metal detector. "Sumalki is Daddy's daughter."

His wife snorted. "She is Sunal. She might have paid with her life

for your bad habits. Allah has made you taste your bitter fruits. You have brought dishonor to your family.”

“By Allah, Sumalki has honored me.” He could no longer feel the arm on which his daughter rested, but he pushed forward in a focused stagger, forcing his wife to step back. She followed for a time, yelling more with each stride. She did not try to remove Sumalki from her father’s arms, and the diffused quiet of a spent storm slowly overtook her, until she retreated from the two of them. Domlik could not attend to her departure, instead continuing on toward his goal.

When they reached the Crooked Dog, the sun shone directly into Domlik’s eyes. Sumalki hid her face from the hot rays by curling across his chest, transferring her staff into his cramped arm. Her warm sweat coated the handle. Domlik swatted at the doorknob with the 420-SI until the detector ring broke and fell to the ground, then kicked with his boot until the doorjamb splintered. He relished a feeling of power as the door swung open.

He carried his daughter into the stifling darkness of the bar. The room’s emptiness was so heavy he had to set her on the floor. She watched him cross back to the shelves where he appropriated two jugs of *perak*. They clanged as he carried them with a single finger looped through their handles, then dropped them on the floor. He crawled against the wall where they had fallen, and Sumalki snuggled next to him, her head under his armpit.

He tipped a jug into his mouth then into hers, and the day became warmer with each shared swallow. She rested her head on his arm, and the mild discomfort of her shoulder pushing into his ribs was a satisfying reminder of their survival. Their feet faced the holy city as they drifted into sleep.