

**Extract from *Sons of the Rumour* © David Foster
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The Fire Lamb

Like every Son of the Rumour I was born restless and full of discontent. Some contend all nomads are born like this but, if so, we are dissuaded from it young. The nomad, of all men, must learn to conserve strength. He can afford to waste nothing.

As a child, I recall discovering my parents were not as I had wished them. This, I suppose, is a common finding, but mine were Sand People – desert-wandering shepherds. Is this my mother, I asked myself, this moon-faced creature missing her front teeth? And this old man, with his forked beard and hooked nose, can he be really my father? Isn't he hot, in his cope and trousers, goatskin boots and sheepskin cap? Am I some day to smell like *that*? And that little troop of bare-bummed brats with the salt lake under each nostril; is it true they're as like to me as a pebble of dung to a pebble of dung? If so, I need to *escape*.

At first I didn't know how. Then one day father presented me a tortoise that slept for ten months of the year. Each spring, when the tulips flowered, the tortoise would wake, eat, drink, mate, relieve himself, then return to sleep.

'Study this creature,' my father advised, 'that you may be rightly guided.'

I kept the tortoise, warm as a prayer and dry as a curse, in a sandbag I had fashioned from the skin of a giant monitor lizard, the kind who would crunch a tortoise as you or I might a sunflower seed. Once in a while I removed the tortoise, dusted off the sand and sniffed beneath his carapace to ensure he was still alive. One autumn he woke for a whole week and wandered around the yurt at pace; but as a rule he was no trouble and an excellent companion.

At dusk one evening, as I sat in a shittim tree watching a fox and a jackal fight over a long-toed marmot, I heard a scream from my youngest brother who'd not long been parted from his catheter and swaddle. I ran down to the camel-thorn stockade where I found him by a gate, clutching a newborn karakul to his breast.

Father, concealing a knife behind his back, was down on one knee. ‘Lambs must die,’ he said, ‘at fourteen days of age – no more – in order we procure these pelts that earn you frankincense.’

Unpersuaded, my brother, who was convulsively sobbing, would not let go the lamb.

‘Hand him over,’ ordered Father. ‘It won’t hurt if I cut his throat. Hand him over, there’s a good lad, and I’ll do it quick as I can. Happen you see the legs twitchin’ a bit, it won’t mean he’s not dead.’

My brother thrust out his little chin, his compressed mouth down-turned at the edges like that on a coarse woman reminded of a man’s fundament.

Father reacted as though his *own* throat had been cut. His shoulders slumped under his red cope. He took off his hat and shook his head. Then he turned on me. ‘Why are *you* here?’

Being eldest I felt, with pride, that I understood that face, but never had I seen it quite so pale.

Father looked down at his hands. He stared down at his knife. He scrutinised the blade. Then he rose, hurled the knife into the sky and roared, ‘Ulcers to your Soul!’ He cursed himself. He cursed his mother, he cursed his father, he cursed his brothers. He cursed Iskander Rumi, Lord of the Two Horns. He cursed the Prophet Luqman who could dig a well with his nails. He cursed me, he cursed my mother, he cursed the camels, he cursed the kufans, he cursed the gazelles. He cursed the gepards. He cursed the goats. He spat at the sheep. He cursed the sand, he cursed the wells. He cursed the moon. He cursed the Iron Peg, a star the name of which he knew. Then, having paused to collect his breath and his knife, he walked to a grove of black saxaul trees, cursed them, fell among their leafless branches and covered himself in sand.

‘Are you pleased you’ve upset Father?’ I asked my brother who was now sucking his thumb while clutching the doomed lamb in his free arm. He removed from his mouth this only clean digit he possessed and jerked it towards me.

The whole wretched scene made me sorry I’d been born. I returned to the yurt, took my tortoise from his sack and held him to my breast. We drifted off to

sleep together.

Next thing I knew, Father was crouching over me shaking me awake. Looking about, I saw I was lying on grass in a grove of pistachio.

‘Time to make felt,’ Father said. ‘Put the tortoise back in his sack.’

We made our felt in autumn. It seemed I had slept all summer and yet I still felt so weary. One of our auburn camels had a swag between her humps and pointing at it, Father said, ‘That’s where you’ve been sleeping.’

The mother felt lay all prepared under the layers of wool. A troop of boys, some unfamiliar to me, was fetching water. We had twenty thousand wells, all fed from the Oxus, to maintain. When the boys stood over the felt they emptied their vessels onto it.

‘New brothers,’ explained Father. ‘I had to marry uncle’s wife. He fell off that wall-eyed mule while you were asleep. Now we need a new yurt.’

We dragged the sodden daughter felt between two camels to mature. It wasn’t just for yurts; we sat on felt, we slept in felt, we rode on felt and we dressed in it. We made our felt of adult wool; fleece from newborn Persian lambs was sold for frankincense. Father had an avidity for frankincense.

‘Tell us what you dreamed,’ he said, wrapping the mother felt in hide. ‘That’s what I’ve been longing to hear all this time you’ve slept.’ He fastened the straps about the hide and hooked the felt to a rope. A gepard, our local cheetah, ran by, chasing a goitered gazelle.

‘Naked women,’ I told him, ‘in a red room, prancing in a circle – blondes.’

‘To think that’s the best you could come up with.’

‘Wait! You haven’t heard what comes next.’

‘I don’t want to hear what comes next as I suspect I know. Furthermore, I know what comes next after that – strife and servitude! How you disappoint. I’d hoped you might have something of the *prophet* in you. Here, grab hold of this rope and get on that camel and do a bit of *work*.’

That day and after we made our felt and cut wood for a new yurt frame; we had a bit of wood left over, so we made a fire and stared at it. I asked Father what

had become of uncle's wall-eyed mule.

'Thinkin' of runnin' to town to chase them blondes?' he said. 'Forget it. You'll marry a girl of my choosing, a houri with a bindi and bound to be a blackhead. Can you imagine you owe me a thing? Where would you be without me?'

'Unborn?'

'*Dead* more like, which is pretty much the same. See, by rights, I should have killed you; should have drowned you at birth. Should have sprinkled your blood on an altar, fourteen days, no more. Cut your throat, then burned your rump, kidneys, and the caul above your liver as a Sweet Savour unto the Lord of this Flame, which is our nomad way. Eases the conscience and justifies the murders. Those who open their mother's matrix are meant for a mercy seat, ah well – that's why things have not gone smoothly here and never could.'

He muttered a prayer at the flames.

I took the tortoise out of his sack and went back to sleep on the pile of fresh felt.

When next I awoke it was winter and I was shivering. There above me stood Father, this time shouting in joy.

'Absolution!' he cried. 'Wake up! Bestir yourself and follow me.'

I put the tortoise back in his sack and ran through the snow to the lambing hut. All my brothers and mothers were there and in a corner, on hay, lay a lamb, still wet, with a skin that *glowed*. The frightened ewe, attempting to escape, refused to look at this lamb while Father, shouting and lifting the air with a fist, held her by his knees.

'First born, too!' he roared. 'Well done! The fire lamb opened the matrix.'

We'd heard of fire lambs though only old men had seen them; Father's father once met a man who'd seen one in these very Black Sands.

After a bit, the lamb's glow faded and someone went to get a lamp. We could see that the lamb, whose mother was black, was golden-haired.

'Fetch me the knife,' said Father to me with a wink. 'This fleece is worth a

fortune, Prophet. We can't have it getting dirty.'

But when I returned with the knife Father slashed up his face with the blade, Uighur-style.

'Ah, that's better,' he said. 'Now, fetch me a black sheep, I've had a change of heart. While you're about it, fetch *all* the black sheep. We'll murder them, every last one.'

All our sheep being black, the women muttered in disapproval. What were we to live on? A fight broke out, with various brothers contending in various factions. Part of the stockade fence fell down and the sheep ran out among the wolves. Father chased after them, clutching his ewe and fire lamb, knife between his teeth. The camels began breaking hobbles.

I took my tortoise and went back to sleep.

Spring. We woke in the same instant. The wall-eyed mule stood nearby grazing at tulip, hyacinth and iris. While my little pal went off to eat, drink, mate and relieve himself, I explored the camp. Only the lambing hut remained and in that hut, stroking his golden fleece, was Father. But the fleece was still attached to the lamb and the lamb had grown quite friendly.

'Ah,' said Father, 'you'd be hungry. Care for some ... well, there's nothing much to eat.'

'Where are the others?'

'Wouldn't know and wouldn't care. Took the frankincense and stock. Took the rice and watermelons. Watch that mule, he's wall-eyed. On reflection, the only things stupider than sheep are the people who keep them. Mind you, this fire lamb can *speak*. He has been moved to prophesy. The fire lamb I give to you as well as the wall-eyed mule.'

'But I can't leave you here alone!'

'Why not? All you ever do is sleep! Mind you, if you could tell me what frankincense is and where it hails from, then I should be most warmly obliged, but if not, I can live without. I'm actually feeling quite close to Ahuramazda so it's best I keep myself to myself as nothing could be easier than persuading a holy

man he's mad. I've done it myself. Off you go now, convert the world with this fleece. I'll look after the tortoise.'

'But what's the use of this fleece,' I said, 'when the lamb it's attached to is still alive?'

'The same use as a prayer,' Father replied, 'when the god it's addressed to has yet to appear.'