

AZAM GILL

A decorative dagger with a gold handle and a silver blade. The handle is intricately engraved with floral patterns. The blade is plain and pointed. The dagger is positioned diagonally across the cover.

Flight
to
Pakistan

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Azam Gill



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To the rock-like *jawans* and NCOs of Flaming 47
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than promotions and pips.

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About the Author

Dr Azam Gill is a scholar and a warrior with first-hand experience of front line fighting and covert commando operations – on a seemingly incongruous lifetime's love-story with literature, study and teaching. Now a French citizen, he was born in Pakistan, the son of a renowned jurist father and a talented playwright and educationalist mother.

Accepted as a 'gentleman cadet' at the Pakistan Military Academy, he was commissioned to a light infantry battalion of the Punjab Regiment deployed in Kashmir, he also obtained his paratrooper's wings. In Kashmir, one of the world's flash-points, Gill successively served as Intelligence Officer, Company Commander and Regimental Adjutant. He was also in charge of the transit of spies through his sector. Later, he received a Master's in English language and literature from the Punjab University. He published a pamphlet, Jail Reforms, and a book, Army Reforms. Although Jail Reforms was on the syllabus of the Prisons Training Academy, both books were seized and burnt by the authorities. Gill was called to Islamabad and warned that he should leave the country before his imminent arrest. Seeking protection and a new life, Gill followed in the footsteps of the beggars and princes who have served in the ranks of the French Foreign Legion.

After basic training, he was posted to the 1er

Régiment Etranger de Cavalerie, created in 1645, which carries the official appellation of Royal Etranger. He was rapidly promoted, did a tenure in Africa as part of Operation Barracuda, received outstanding assessment reports and became the first Légionnaire to gain a PhD, which he received from Grenoble University. His dissertation, *The Effect of Editing on William Faulkner's Flags in the Dust*, was written in English. At the end of his Legion contract, Gill worked as a language teacher and became a Lecturer at Grenoble University's Polytechnic. He was then seconded to the French Navy on instruction secondment. During this period, he also wrote a monthly column on Geopolitics for *The National Educator*, a Californian monthly paper. His articles have been published in book form with an exhaustive bibliography and index under the title *Winds of Change: Geopolitics and the World Order*, available at online stores. He now teaches English for French National Education.

His hobbies include reading, writing, cooking, swimming and French Savate Boxing. Gill lives in France with his wife and three young children.



Azam Gill, as European Bureau Chief on Geopolitics for California's prestigious 'The National Educator', has written scores of insightful articles. His works, 'Jail Reforms' and 'Army Reforms' were published in 1978 by the People's Publishing House, Lahore, Pakistan. They are now black-listed by the authorities. His groundbreaking academic book, 'Winds of Change: Geopolitics and the World Order' was released through iUniverse in 2001.

Also by Azam Gill

Blood Money, published by BeWrite Books, 2002

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One

Lahore 1973 – First Day

Lahore's red light district is the westerner's conception of the mysterious East. Its tortuous *gallies*, or alleys, form a triangle. One side is the Badshahi Mosque, the largest in the entire Islamic World; a second, the timeless squat of the granite and sandstone fort that legend attributes to the pre-Vedic Rajah Lahu after whom Lahore is named; a third, the hypotenuse, the many entrances to the maze.

These *gallies* nurturing the world's oldest profession are permeated with the smells of semen, stale food, sweat, and *attar*. Time stands still before the unblinking gaze of cobblestones worn smooth through the ages.

Here, one might conjure berobed Abdul of the crafty visage and curved dagger, villainous under the flickering of an Aladdin lamp, conspiring to get his hands on the purse and chastity of a spinster from Omaha. This is the sinister orient of snake charmers and swaying cobras. A world where day starts at dusk and ends at dawn, following a rhythm unchanged since the time man first paid for sex.

The most common name by which these eternal *gallies* are known to those of the outer world is Heera Mandi, meaning diamond market. Beautiful and

cultured women are wholesaled and retailed in this place. A measure of their exclusiveness and inaccessibility to the common man is conveyed by the wistful yearning implicit in the name. Even the common prostitutes in the ten rupee *gallies* that slither through Heera Mandi are not enough to tarnish its image.

As the sun sets over the river Ravi in its vermilion glory, Heera Mandi comes to life. The infinitely wise cobblestones of the *gallies* receive their steady polishing from the hustling steps of pimps, of rich men seeking pleasures, and of jaded old men looking to satisfy hidden lusts. The garish fluorescence from kiosks illuminates the *gallies* in which it might just be possible to squeeze in a car but not make a U-turn.

However, behind this façade lie the more discreet and powerful *nautch* girl establishments. Here, a night's pleasure starts at a thousand rupees – and that merely for the exclusive right to hear a *nautch* girl sing and to watch her perform her dance, for *nautch* girls are not prostitutes. They function as either dancer-singers or concubines. To bed a *nautch* girl would entail protracted negotiations involving a very large purse indeed.

Some overhanging balconies display no merchandise, for these are the *gallies* of repute. The families running these houses are as jealous of their lineage as the best banking families of France, and as proud.

One *gallie*, nevertheless, stands apart. One can drive in and, with some skill and determination, even manage to turn around. Its twenty-four houses have two things in common: women from matriarchal

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lineages as carefully maintained as the most ancient ruling houses of Europe and Asia, and Mughal architecture.

The decor inside matches the architecture – sixteenth century Mughal. Time stands still under the stoic gaze of brass and wood carvings overlooking velvet and brocade covered mattresses and bolster pillows under filigreed lighting. Over the oriental carpet, a white sheet forms the dance-stage with a three piece orchestra of *tabla* drums, *harmonium*, and *sitar* to one side.

In such surroundings, Sirdar Ali Shah, known to some as Dara, sat immobile.

He liked the room. Not because of its opulence, but because it was a constant reminder of the rightness of his and his dead father's vision. It justified the methods employed to ensure superiority over his business competitors. Heera Mandi had reacted with lofty contempt when he introduced this setting – the serving of coffee, the *nautch* girls' Mughal court dress, and the decor. Efforts at modernization by the other dance-houses consisted of plastic covered sofas and the girls in *shalwar kameez* or even trousers.

Dara had a deep rooted appreciation for the value of dollars ever since his sojourn at Harvard Business School and his apprenticeship with the Valletti family of the New England Cosa Nostra. The self-righteous sniffs had soon turned to jealousy and then outright hatred as the bazaar realized he had cornered the tourist trade.

His western manners, combined with a discreet

profile, had at first led the bazaar to think Dara had gone soft. They gave him, for a brief period, the emasculating title of *mem* – the contemptuous name for a white woman.

This title had been swiftly replaced by another, while Dara amassed a fortune in foreign currency so vast that it could only be guessed at. Others in the bazaar who tried to copy his business techniques were exterminated. A convinced capitalist and free trader, his convictions stopped short of the anti-trust act. He went about his affairs with a subtle but coldly ruthless ferocity.

Tonight Dara sat in one of his houses.

It was a regular practice designed to keep him in touch with the grass roots of his wealth and power. Harvard Business School had instilled in him the value of never ignoring the shop or factory floor. West Point publications had further emphasized the virtues of integrity and leadership.

He brooded amid voluptuous velvet cushions in the Lotus Position, the origins of which are subsumed in the mists of Vedic antiquity. It was from this position he observed the nimble intrusion of the white man into his world.

The American stood framed in the doorway for a brief moment. Then gently closed it. He was tall, long haired and hard looking. The skin of his face was stretched tight by wind and weather. A casual observer would have judged his blue eyes as being alert. A keen observer would not have missed the faint hint of suppressed agitation.

Dara was a keen observer, and did not miss the way

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the blue eyes automatically calculated tangents, angles, exits, and approaches. Neither did Dara fail to notice the complete stillness of the very dangerous man, evident in his stance.

In a fluid movement of effortless ease, Dara rose and glided forward.

“Welcome, do come in, please,” he said in his modulated Oxbridge accent. He was dressed in a bosky silk *kurta*, over a white cotton *shalwar* and gold embroidered curly toed *khusas*. Around his shoulders he had carelessly draped a white Cashmere shawl.

Each took the other’s measure while going through man’s ancient ritual of shaking hands to declare mutual good faith. The American’s blue eyes met the gaze of gray eyes aware that the ease with which the host had broken the Lotus Position meant a very high degree of physical fitness.

Yes, the American thought. It could very well be him. About thirty-one or two, five-six, a hundred and sixty pounds with black hair, gray eyes and a smattering of pock marks. Just as Major Valletti had described him that night in Vietnam.

At a graceful gesture of Dara’s arm, the American eased himself on the cushions and crossed his legs. Dara noted the coordinated play of muscles beneath the field jacket and blue Levis. He snapped his fingers and the old *naika* – Madame – came scurrying with the gaze of her hard eyes locked on the scene.

“Tea, ca’afee, *pa’an*?” she inquired in the English that was mandatory in all of Dara’s houses.

“Thanks, coffee would do just fine,” the American said.

The *naika* hurried off, and Dara caught the whiff of a backwoods twang. Tennessee, or perhaps West Virginia. During his apprenticeship to the New England Cosa Nostra, Dara had encountered a cross section of American society. He knew the backwoods type – hard boys, and this one could very well have followed his elders into the army. He looked the soldier type.

Clad in her Mughal court dancer's dress, the dancing girl made her entry. She bent down to tie the *k'hungroo* dancing bells around her ankles, and the American's eyes passed over her sensual body.

The American faced Dara. "I'm Barney Custer. Are you Mister Sirdar Ali Shah?"

There was an indefinable flicker in Dara's gray eyes, while he courteously inclined his head.

"Are you also known as Dara?"

The dance-house owner nodded, his eyes very aware now, very alert. "There are those among whom I am known by this name, Mister Custer."

"Like Major Joe Valletti of the US Special Forces –"

At that moment the door crashed open. The dancing girl looked up, and froze. A reaction shared by the *tabla* drummer and the *harmonium* player.

There are two trademarks of the Punjab's urban hoodlum: the *barak*, a full-throated roar he inherits from the mists of antiquity, expressing a Punjabi's gut feelings, and the fish-shaped *kamanidar* knife, with a heavy, six-inch blade. When opened, the series of small gears affixed at the joint of blade and handle emit a rasping crackle that grates on the ears, although not a loud sound by itself.

It was this menacing combination of *barak* and

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kamanidar that froze the musicians and the girl into a tableau of three.

Two men stood in the doorway, the light flashing off their honed blades.

“Nobody move unless he wants to see his intestines!” one said.

The room suddenly filled with a primeval menace.

The second intruder moved towards the American with a gliding motion, weaving and ducking, twirling the knife in eye-dazzling sequences. Barney Custer stood with a long-bladed table knife – very steady, very still, his gaze locked into the thug’s. The hoodlum, coiled for the inevitable spring and underarm gutting slash, stopped abruptly and the knife dropped.

The .38 Smith and Wesson is neither the traditional implement of the Punjab, nor does it have a loud preliminary like the *barak*. The thumbing back of the hammer is just an oiled, metallic ‘snick’.

Here, however, the communicative shortcomings of the .38 Smith and Wesson end. It is to the credit of the late Messrs Smith and Wesson, that, without resorting to mass advertising, the mayhem immediately following this subdued click is universally known.

So the slight sound, together with the smile that was, and yet was not, a smile, over which expressionless, gray eyes, very calm, very steady, stared at him, stopped the ruffian in mid-crouch.

“Drop the knives, semen drinkers.” Dara’s quiet voice dripped contempt.

“That includes you, Mister Custer,” he said to Barney in English.

A third soft thud followed.

The inner door burst open to admit three vicious-looking gunmen led by a mustachioed giant in a black leather jacket wearing an earring in his left lobe. A fourth, a tall, lean man with a Sten-gun, followed.

Recognizing the giant with the earring, the two knife artists disarmed by Dara paled. The American seemed stoical, but the dancing girl and musicians looked relieved.

The giant looked at Dara.

“What happened, *Peהלwan-ji?*” using the traditional title of O’ Wrestler. “Did these semen drinkers give the *barak* I heard?”

“Yes, Gulloo,” Dara said. The gun in his fist seemed to vanish in a blur of movement somewhere in the folds of his *kurta*.

Gulloo’s eyes focused on the two hoodlums. They stood with their eyes on the carpet, immersed in a deep study of the *Bokhara* pattern.

There was a slight twitch to Dara’s lips the American did not fail to notice. *I’ll be damned if he ain’t enjoyin’ hisself!*

The two gunmen and the Sten-gunner led by Gulloo, the giant, stood silent, their weapons trained steadily on the American and his would-be attackers. At the slightest nod from Dara the gunmen would have slaughtered the three with impunity.

“Take them upstairs, including the *gora*,” Dara ordered Gulloo. “I’ll follow.”

“Truth O’Ali, my *Peהלwan*,” Gulloo said, adding, “The white man’s ancestry I don’t know, but these two –” he indicated the two intruders “– certainly come from a donkey’s cunt. I know them.”

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The giant's deep voice was very quiet, yet Barney's would-be assailants visibly trembled. He gestured with his head, the gun unwavering, and led Barney and the two punks from the room, followed by two of Dara's gunmen.

The tall, lean Sten-gunner stayed. His weapon disappeared beneath his blanket, and he squatted in a corner from where he could cover both doors.

He looked like the ex-soldier he was, a little out of place in this room.

Dara was filled with a premonition he could neither logically define, nor put aside. The events of the last few minutes were an ominous portent. It was part of something big, very big. Of that he was convinced. Well, he would know soon enough. His method of loosening tongues might not be on the curriculum of Harvard Business School, but it brought results, and results had always been appreciated by his professors.

"You can rest for tonight, all of you," decided Dara, dismissing the musicians, the *naika*, and the dancing girl.

"Perveen," he said directly to the girl, "be prepared to look after a special guest if you have to."

Perveen smiled, thrust her breasts at him, and rose, followed by the *naika* and the musicians. Ignoring his gunman, Dara opened the door to the *gallie*.

Police sub-Inspector Sukhera and three constables stood by One-eyed S'a'aka's kiosk in the street. Hard young men with wise old eyes armed with .303 Lee Enfield left-overs of the British Raj. They seemed to smarten at the sight of Dara.

"All okay, Shaj-ji?" the sub-Inspector asked Dara.

Dara smiled. “Relax. Just keep an eye out for what you are supposed to.”

Sukhera didn't like it, but his annoyance was made bearable by a fixed monthly retainer and direct orders from the Deputy Inspector General of Police to maintain a special post in this *gallie*.

“*Cha'acha*, anybody comes, this house is closed,” Dara said to One-eyed S'a'aka whose only kiosk in the *gallie* gave him a catering monopoly to the twenty-four dance houses.

The old man looked up with his one good eye, grunted, and kept applying lime to his *pa'an* leaves. Old fogey, thought Dara affectionately as he shut and bolted the street door. S'a'aka's lost eye had been a contribution of loyalty to Dara's father during the feuding fifties. Ever since his father's death, Dara had allowed the old man this catering monopoly instead of the pension he was too proud to accept.

On the third floor, Dara entered a room and shut the door behind him. The interior was illuminated by a single, powerful naked bulb. The only furnishings were odds and ends of litter – two *charpai* beds and three wooden chairs. The prisoners sat on the beds: Barney on one, and the two punks on another. Two of the wooden chairs were occupied by Dara's gunmen – Gulloo the giant, and taciturn Ghani. They were quietly watchful over their charges as Dara settled himself in the vacant chair.

After a brief glance at Barney, Dara turned his attention to the two knife wielding *goondas*. They were low-grade street enforcers, street-chic in silky *shalwar kurtas*. Amulets around their necks proclaimed their

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allegiance to an order of saints, and rings on their fingers attested a regular attendance to religious conventions. They were young, lean and looked like brothers.

“Do you know who I am?” Dara asked the pair.

“Yes, *Pehelwan-ji*,” the older of the two replied.

There was no visible change in Dara’s expression of detached impassivity. Only his voice seemed to grow colder, and a little quieter.

“How dare you come to my area with knives! Do you come hunting a name for yourselves, or the virtue of your sisters lost at my *dera*?”

Both *goondas* broke into a garbled whine about being poor men unfamiliar with the ins and outs of Heera Mandi. They swore they were ignorant of whose establishment they had assaulted.

Dara’s voice dropped to a whisper, but it still cut them short.

“Shut up, you little play-acting apologies for *theek-tha’ak* men.” His voice was cold and as deadly as the cobra’s venom.

“Next time you both talk in front of the *Pehelwan* I’ll shove your own knives up your filthy unwashed asses,” promised Gulloo’s husky voice – very measured, very precise.

The pair once again fell to studying the floor with acute concentration.

“All right,” conceded Dara, “then you tell me how you happened to disgrace my place.”

The older of the two intruders took up the narrative.

“You see, may your children live, it’s like this. We got ourselves a place in Royal Park – poor people, you

know, the dust of your feet. We, your servants, hang around Sarwar's milk shop. My King, you know Sarwar, who pimps for the movie extras that hang around the producer's offices that litter Royal Park. Well, he uses us as enforcers. Being the dust of your shoes, in between jobs we just wait around for whatever bones Allah may fling to His dogs. The dogs of your gateway have got to fend for themselves, and with your prayers, have got a bit of a name. Even college kids, sons of officers and bigshots, come to us for fixing their gang fights. We're weak hearts but we get along. Allah and his 140,000 prophets provide us our bread and water –"

He paused, looked around furtively, and continued. "So there's this lawyer in Royal Park, Malik Ashraf Ali –"

At the mention of his old foe, Dara's face went blank. He seemed to emanate a deadly aura. The intruder appeared to waver. Then, at a barely perceptible flicker from the dead gray eyes, he licked his lips and continued.

"... Malik ... Malik Ashraf Ali, O' server of the Black-Shawled One. He ... he's all right ... knows his job ... did some fixing for us. Real educated ... has the ear of the political bigshots and is heard right up to the Police Superintendent's office. Handles our cases, and also some for the studios.

"So, today around twelve, me and Kaka, my younger brother," he indicated the other *goonda* who was sitting with his head down, his object of intellectual absorption a filthy fingernail, "were as usual sitting at Sarwar's place. Malik comes up and says, 'Tata' – that's me – 'I want a word with you – both of you.' So

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we made him an offer of Sarwar's buttermilk, but he refuses and says he hasn't the time. We followed him to his office, which is just on the side of Royal Park bordering Lakshmi *chownk*. Same building, where the bigshot movie guys got their offices. He sat us on chairs right next to him among all his books," Tata's eyes rolled heavenwards at the memory of such proximity to intellectual power, "and offered us this contract.

"There's an *Umreekan gora* – a *happy-buays* type in Waldorf Hotel he wants us to bring to him. Says it doesn't matter whether or not it's a quiet job. Then, O' Saint, we asked him about the cops and he says not to worry. Well, we know for something like this, Malik's word is good –"

Once again, at the mention of Malik's name, Tata wavered. There was something about the name Malik which triggered an indefinable response in Dara. Even Dara's own two gunmen, Gulloo the giant and Ghani, grew more still. Barney's nostrils flared, then he sniffed. He, too, sensed the deadly aura in the room although he understood nothing of the language. As before, Tata was allowed to continue uninterrupted.

"Then he offers three for a neat quiet job, two if it's a killing and that doesn't include the court fees or jail expenses.

"That clinches it. We reckon it's easy money – leaning on a *gora*, and I say as much. 'Look', says Malik, 'this *gora's* all right. He's tough – a guerrilla fighter from Vietnam. Take a couple of boys with you and make sure you're carrying.'

"I didn't take him seriously and had no mind to split

a take with any broken earned one. If the Americans were like they are in the movies, how come they lost to those little guys in Vietnam? I may not be educated but I listen to the news on the radio –”

“Fuck your views on current affairs and get back to your barking,” interrupted Dara.

Tata cleared his throat nervously, and shifted his eyes.

“All right, O’ personfication of all my saints. So he describes the guy and tells us he’s staying at the Waldorf Hotel in Gulberg Market. We didn’t ask why he wanted the man. Kaka and me, we came down from Malik’s office and went to Abbot Road to have lunch, and as we expected, our cousin Kuku, who drives his own cab, turned up at the same place. We lit our cigarettes –” Tata paused to clear his throat, and his eyes were filled with longing.

“You can smoke now – here, have one of mine.” Dara tossed Tata a pack of Dunhill’s. “Keep the pack – a gift.”

He smiled inwardly at the folded hands and looks exchanged between the two brothers. *Khooni Dara the large-hearted Robin Hood.*

After gratefully drawing a lungful, Tata took up the narrative again.

“We talked it over with Kuku who agreed for a hundred to give us his taxi services till tomorrow morning. We plan on hanging around outside the Waldorf. The idea is to follow the *gora* till such time as he clears the Gulberg area.

“We parked at the Hideout Coffee Bar opposite the Waldorf Hotel waiting for the *gora* to make a move.

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About a couple of hours later, at around four o'clock we saw two Arabs," his mouth tightened in contempt as he spat out the word, "probably students, come to the Waldorf and then walk away to the corner and just hang around. We noticed them because one looked drunk and whistled at a Pakistani girl and we almost beat them up."

"Describe the two Arabs," commanded Gulloo, ignoring Tata's weak attempt at establishing his credentials as a patriot.

"One of them, Lord, was about six feet with a large beaked nose and a scar from nose to left ear. The other one was ordinary, but both were well built.

"After some time we got tired of drinking coffee and watching all the dames. Kuku takes out his bottle of *kutae ma'ar* dog-death hooch and we start getting a little high. About seven thirty it was dark and cold, so we huddled in our blankets. Suddenly we heard the sound of two shots from the Hotel. The *gora* ran out of the Waldorf, jumped into a motor-rickshaw, and got away. Just as he got into the motor-rickshaw, two men came running out of the Hotel, jumped on a Honda 175cc, and tore after the motor-rickshaw like a movie chase. So Kuku makes a screeching U-turn and goes after them."

"Were these two on the Honda the two Arabs you just mentioned?" Dara said.

"No, Lord. Looked like locals, but a little fancy – in trousers and jackets. So all three of us – the *gora's* motor-rickshaw, the Honda party, and us three – just in this order, got out of the market and on the Main Boulevard.

“By the fountain crossing we’re about twenty feet behind the Honda which was another fifty feet behind the motor-rickshaw. We switched lanes and then were right behind the Honda which was overtaking an Austin Mini-Cooper in a wide arc. Kuku shoves the taxi between the Mini and the Honda and just as he noses out of the gap, lets his right fender scrape the front wheel of the Honda, which throws the motorcyclists on the grass strip between the two lanes.”

Tata swallowed during a pause. His eyes betrayed a hint of pride while his brother gave a faint roll to his head, mouth slack. Dara and his gunmen looked contemptuous. Tata swallowed once again, and continued nervously.

“So that puts the two of them out of the race. More than likely Malik Ashraf sent them to secure the snatch.

“The motor-rickshaw turns left onto Jail Road towards the canal, heading towards a stream of thick traffic. We had to stop again. A poor man’s kismet never favors him, O’ Emperor. By the time we got out of the traffic, the rickshaw is a hundred yards ahead of us. The cold air through the windows acts on the dog-death hooch and we start getting a little high.

“After passing the canal bridge, we saw the tail lights of the rickshaw turn onto Zafar Ali Road and breathed a sigh of relief at the clear stretch of road which was perfect for a snatch. Kuku stepped on the gas, and we were gaining inch by inch, when we pulled a slow leak. The taxi starts wobbling to the left. Kismet never favors a poor man. It was certainly our sins that caught up with us, for it did not please Allah that we be successful this night.

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“The rickshaw went past Charing Cross and to the lower Mall, with the taxi at a 30 miles per hour behind it. Instead of turning from P’ha’atti *chownk* to the bus stand, the rickshaw runs right through to *chownk* Heera Mandi. The *gora* jumps out of the rickshaw, throwing the driver some notes.

“The rickshaw driver scoots away with his money, and we’re left to earn ours. By this time, I swear by the Holy Koran we have a half bottle each of dog-death inside of us. May my tongue shrivel if I lie, we were drunk. Kuku stayed behind to fix the wheel, and we followed this *gora* through the *gallies* to your place. May I bed with my own mother if I lie, the dog-death betrayed us this night.

“We didn’t recognize your exalted *dera* – how could we, being such poor people. We had never been past it. Else we could never have dared to come with knives. We might have come for *darshan* to the great Dara *pehelwan* – touch his feet and ask for his blessing.”

The narrative finished, Tata sat quietly with his eyes to the ground.

Dara now spoke in a flat, cold voice.

“First, I thought of having your sterile balls chopped off. Then I thought that’s too light for you. Tongues and eyes as well. However, I concluded it would be best for yourselves to get buggered by one of my boys in *chownk* Heera Mandi, or, better still, in Royal Park itself.”

Tata and Kaka, his younger brother, both caught their ears in the eastern gesture of penance and slowly shook their heads from side to side.

Barney Custer, who had sat quietly smoking, now

looked with interest towards the two brothers who had chased him to Dara's *dera*. Their faces were devoid of all color.

Gulloo leaned his giant frame towards Dara. "*Peהלwan-ji*, they're children," he pleaded. "On occasions I've kept some heavier boys from muscling in on their operation. Give them a chance. Truly are you a king."

Gulloo was playing soft and Dara hard. Thus, when Dara finally showed mercy, he would bear full credit for the largesse.

To have simply killed or maimed the intruders would have been an unstatesmanlike act of revenge, considering Dara's reputation. Mercy, however, would be more practical. A Punjabi proverb presages the politics of nuclear deterrence by a few centuries – *a frightened man is more useful than a beaten one*. Violence, even as a necessity, is an admission of defeat.

When, after having induced terror, compassion is unexpectedly shown, the subject will go babbling praises of him who granted mercy when he had no need to.

To be merciful to the two who had dared to violate the sanctity of his house would enhance Dara's stature and further secure his position as a Man of Respect to be loved and admired. The loyalty of his own people would be reinforced. In Malik Ashraf Ali's camp, the recounting of this tale would sow dissension. And, of course, many prayers would be said for Dara's soul. These, too, would come in handy at the appropriate time.

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“Since Gulloo is for me a younger brother,” proclaimed Dara, “and for you mother-father, you are also my children. Gulloo, throw away their knives and give them better ones from our armory. They were to get three thousand for the job. Give them twice that. They have come for the first time to our *dera*. Treat them like guests. Booze, *siripayas*, a lay, the works. That also includes their cousin, the taxi driver waiting in the *chownk*.”

While following Gulloo out, both Tata and Kaka expressed ritual homage to Dara’s magnanimity. They bent low, touching his knees with their hands and crossing them over their hearts before backing out respectfully, heads bowed and eyes lowered. Dara nodded with the refined grace of a Mughal emperor, and turned to Barney.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting, Mister Custer,” he apologized. “You mentioned Major Joe Valletti of the US Special Forces. From which part of the United States?”

“Boston.”

“His father’s name?”

“Marcello Phillippe Valletti.”

“Profession?”

“Garments, pizza parlors, trucking, construction, and catering.” Dara’s eyes looked at Barney steadily.

“... and Capo di Tutti Capi, Captain of captains, or Godfather of the New England Cosa Nostra.”

Dara nodded, and turned towards Ghani, who still held the gun.

“Relax, but be careful,” he said in Punjabi, and gave further instructions in the same language, before

turning to Barney in his precise Oxbridge. "It appears someone wants you rather badly."

"Yeah, I need protection," Barney admitted.

"And any friend of Joe Valletti's shall have it, Mister Custer," Dara said. "But first, our traditions, and before that, a slight inconvenience. Go with Ghani, and do as he says. Later, I shall send for you and we shall try to sort out your problem. Ghani knows enough English to communicate, *hain* Ghani?"

"O' yes I am good," Ghani said with a wink to which Barney responded with a grin and a nod as Dara left the room.

On the second floor, Dara opened another door, different from the others in the house. It was manufactured from a single plank of wood covering a two inch pressure steel plate. He shut the door behind him which locked automatically, turned the light switch on, and sat behind the Chippendale desk.

The room was windowless – ventilated, heated, and cooled by a complicated, concealed system like the lighting and the alarms. Otherwise, it looked like the office of any millionaire executive.

He liked the room. Here he was not Dara, but Sirdar. Joe Valletti and Harvard and this room went together. Yes, Joe was his friend.

For the last fifty centuries of the Punjab's history, it has yet to be resolved, which of the following sins is the greatest: raping a woman, forgetting a favor, or forsaking a friend. For at least five generations, friendship is maintained between families. A vendetta continues till eternity or the extermination of a line, whichever comes sooner. *Joe Valletti*, the island of

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affection in the loneliness of Harvard. A memory to be fiercely cherished, and, if required, meticulously avenged. At the last thought the mask was back on Dara's face.

The paneling around the office concealed the secret of Dara's quiet power: a hidden room made accessible by a series of complicated electronics known only to Dara. Since the adjoining house was also owned by him, a buffer room had been constructed between the two. Secrecy, thus, was total.

This secret room contained a series of index cards and filing cabinets scattered in a pattern concealed by a code of Dara's own devising, and duplicated on micro-film in a bank vault in Switzerland.

The files contained data on the rich and powerful. If used it could reduce them to puppets – a blackmailer's treasure. Most of it had never been used – to use it would be to lose it. Most of these people were known to him, and were willing to do his bidding. It was only when the presents and bribes failed, and there was no alternative, that he used his last cards, heartbroken by the defeat.

Dara opened the carved ivory cigarette case, extracted one. He blew the smoke out, and all his people revolved around him.

All those Sirdar loved. Dead or far away ...
Unreachable ...

Roxanna!

Especially Roxanna.

The Others.

His father.

Ustad Drake.

Allah Rakhi.

Joe.

His father.

Roxanna.

Drake.

Aunt Juliana.

Joe.

Aunt Juliana.

Aunt Juliana.

Joe.

Joe.

Drake.

Father.

Father.

*Father ... Drake ... Joe... Aunt Juliana ... Roxanna
... oh Roxanna ... ROXANNA! ...*

Two

Sirdar-Dara's Story: 1945-1965

The two boys faced each other in the dusty courtyard. The bigger of the two sneered at the smaller who looked up at him with a set face.

“So, what now, Kanjara?” the taller one mocked.

The shorter boy, with a low, animal-like growl sprang from a slight crouch. The movements a blur, using both hands, he caught the collar of the other's blazer and pulled, his forehead butted into the boy's face with effortless ease: sideways and upwards – Lahore's classic *takkar*. Then, he stepped back and kicked him in the crotch.

The taller gave a sharp grunt of pain and doubled up with both hands cupped over his groin. The crowd of maroon-blazered school boys gasped as he started to sink like a harmonium bereft of air, but before he could do so, his face was jerked up by the flat of both palms of the attacker against his cheeks – again and again. Humiliating slaps, slippery with spittle rubbed on the palms.

“Hey, stop it *mun!*” a voice with a sing-song Anglo-Pakistani accent commanded. Calvin Drake, the boxing coach of Don Boscoe High grabbed the smaller boy by the collar.

The boy tried to struggle free, growling and cursing while the object of his attack was being led away by supporting comrades. Then he turned to Drake with a curse, who looked down at him from his six feet, holding him at arm's length, and smiled at the futile blows – *like an animal bereft of its quarry!*

“Take it easy, son. You carry on cursing and I might have to hit you!”

Pride struggled against prudence in the youthful eyes. Discretion won, the angry gaze dropped from contact with Drake's eyes and the arms hung straight down by his sides. Good sense dictated that he avoid being hit by the ex-middle weight champ of British India.

Nodding thoughtfully, Drake led the smoldering youth to the school cafeteria, scattering the crowd of maroon blazers with a casually authoritative wave. He ordered two Cokes, and sat drinking, watching the boy sipping his, the lean body bent over the straw. The scattered pock marks, Drake concluded, did not mar the boy's looks. About thirteen or fourteen, he mused. Yeah, a couple more years and these very pock marks would start intriguing women of a certain type. An interesting face. Drake wondered if the resentment lurking in the gray eyes would mature into bitterness.

“What's your name?” Drake said.

“Sirdar Ali Shah.”

“Why the hell did you half kill that bloke?”

“Rauf is a bully. He snatched away a classmate's two and a half rupees because he's in the tenth class and we're only in the eighth and he happens to be

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bigger. I asked him for the money and he called me a *Kanjar*.”

All this was said in a matter of fact tone that Drake found chilling from the mouth of someone who was still a child. It was as if he had felt responsible, like a head of state, and having tried the diplomatic level and failed, as a continuance of politics, had gone to war. Sirdar obviously expected his logic to be fully appreciated.

“You didn’t have to go on hitting him,” Drake said.

Sirdar shrugged. “A fight’s a fight.”

“Hunh!” Drake grunted. “What’s your father’s name?”

“Warris Ali Shah.”

“Where do you live?”

“Heera Mandi.”

The youthful eyes were defiant, seeming to bore right through Drake.

Sirdar’s violent reaction to *Kanjar* now clicked in Drake’s mind, as did the boy’s defensiveness and a certain maturity.

“Did you learn to fight so good in Heera Mandi?” Drake said.

Sirdar watched the coach warily, but recognizing genuine curiosity and professional interest, relaxed his shoulders and smiled slightly. For a brief period he looked just like any ordinary boy in his school blazer sipping a Coke.

“No. This was my first fight.”

Drake’s blood quickened. “Would you like to box, Sirdar?”

Seeing the lad’s slight hesitation, the coach put both arms on his shoulders.

God, Drake thought, and the team needs a light middle weight like nobody's business.

"Because, *mun*, you can't go through life proving your worth in street fights. Want to show them, do it legally in the ring-an-all, you know?"

Sirdar lowered his head, and Drake waited, tense. You've blown it, bugger, he thought.

Then the boy raised his head and Drake saw the set of his chin and knew he had won.

Sirdar nodded. "But how can I? I live so far away and my father says I'm not old enough for a motorbike."

"Well, we might fix that. Talk to me tomorrow, okay? Now run along home. I'm not reporting the fight."

It was much later in life that Sirdar learnt how much the Eurasian coach had taken on his shoulders to prevent his expulsion for having thrashed the Deputy Commissioner's darling.

As Sirdar cycled away in the afternoon sun, his heart instinctively led him towards Lawrence Gardens. Finding the comforting spread of a Jammu tree, he lay down in its shady coolness.

Sirdar's father, Warris Ali Shah, known as Kala or Black Warris for his darkly brooding temperament, was shrewd and far-sighted. A hard, bitterly ruthless man whose first love – Sirdar's mother – had died and whose second and only love was the son she left him.

Kala Warris was one of the early few who realized the value of formal education as a means of escape from and domination of the Kanjar *baradari* – the extended family or clan. He had the intellectual honesty

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to admit to himself no number of academic degrees could passport a Kanjar through a society that structured its prejudices on the Hindu caste system. His past would follow – or rather precede – him in life-size capitals.

Kala Warris had other plans for his son. Plans which, if they were to materialize, would put his son in a position of controlling the nationwide *baradari* of Kanjars – the Indian subcontinent's orthodox purveyors of high-class female flesh.

The Kanjars are not exactly pimps, more like male madams. Mostly illegitimate offspring of courtesans and princes, courtesans and pimps, courtesans and rich commoners, camp followers of armies and mercenary princes and soldiers, princesses and low castes, to the extent that none knew exactly who his paternal forbearers were, except that their blood was a good mixture of royal and common. Matriarchal family trees, however, were rigorously maintained.

Sirdar's own mother had been a famous courtesan kept by various aristocrats till his father married her. She was named after the Mughal Queen who discovered the *attar* of roses – Nur Jehan, or Light of the World. She had been a strange woman by any standards. Vivacious, small, and fearless, she had stolen his father's heart. The strange love affair of Kala-Nuran was even now whispered about in the *gallies*.

The child of a powerful Baluchi chief and his Pathan concubine, Nur Jehan had been sold by the Kanjar *baradari* in Peshawar to the *baradari* in Multan. At sixteen she took Multan by storm, and at seventeen gave birth to a male child of a Sindhi chieftain knighted

for his loyal services to the Raj. The child, who grew up to attain high political office, was taken away by the father. To sever the ties of the child's birth, the Knight of the British Empire sent his bodyguard to assassinate the mother. It was then this all powerful chief encountered the sense of family which binds the Kanjar *baradari*. The word *baradari* as a suffix to Kanjar refers to their united, powerful front in times of crisis. In word and deed, a brotherhood. It was this small, glaring bit of knowledge the Sindhi Knight of the English King failed to appreciate.

The *gallies* of North India's flesh bazaars gasped, then whispered the appalling ignorance of such a great man. Even the most high ranking, the most arrogant of the English officers preferred to shoot tigers and stick charging wild boars rather than buck the *baradari*. Those who did find themselves on a ship to England following vice-regal orders. And this fool sent his bodyguard to assassinate the flower of Multan!

The Lords of Northern India's flesh bazaars were surprised, then angry. They whole-heartedly approved of the disarming and ritual disrobing of the bodyguard: the would-be assassins had been escorted out of Multan's Heera Mandi stark naked. No blood was shed – the Kanjars are businessmen. If the Sindhi Knight had approached them with enough money, the girl's tongue might have been ripped out of her mouth. The rest of her body could then have continued to be a source of revenue for the *baradari* without any danger to him. But so be it.

The *baradari* then closed ranks, and sent Nur Jehan to Lahore. Arrangements were completed. The English

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Resident of Sind felt enough embarrassment had been caused to HMG by the knight's indiscretions. The Englishman had a quiet word with the King's Indian Cavalier, who agreed to forego any further murderous intentions. An ancient Indian proverb advises that the Kanjar is like a stagnant pond – if you throw a stone in it, its splashes will only smear you.

While in Lahore this Flower of Multan had her biggest adventure. Nur Jehan saw Kala Warris and they fell in love ...

It was to take Kala Warris a murder, several gun duels, the traditional sum of a hundred thousand and one rupees and three more years before they could be man and wife.

The two bards who had tried to sing the ballad of Kala-Nuran to popularity were warned not to. During her life time, the relationship was too deeply personal for Kala. After Nur Jehan's death, the relationship was too raw.

Apart from the photograph of a classical Indian beauty, even Sirdar had no knowledge of his mother, except that she took ill and died. Something vague, yes, soft hands, nose being tweaked ...

Since his mother's death, Sirdar had been brought up by his father. At times he felt the lack of something so strongly that its intensity frightened him. And in school, when the word mother came up in textbooks, he sometimes felt a distinct sense of alienation. Once, while in class, so long ago he could not remember when, the teacher had told a story illustrating maternal love. As he listened, he felt himself grow larger and larger, experiencing a vague sense of weightlessness.

Then he had shivered, for it was suddenly cold on a warm day in the Punjab plains.

Now, this sun drenched afternoon after the fight in school, Sirdar turned over on his stomach, feeling the soft grass rustle under him. He'd have liked to grow up and have a lawn as smooth as velvet. Jimmy, his dog, would be sure to like it. When Jimmy was happy, you could tell it from the way he wagged his tail, the twitch of his nose, the furrow between the brow and his excited yelps.

Earlier that year, Sirdar and Jimmy had found each other when Kala Warris took Sirdar to the pet shop and bought him a beautiful six-months-old Alsatian, despite the laws of Islam prohibiting the dog as a domestic pet.

Kala had explained to his son: "I want you to grow up an aristocrat. Last week I went to the Deputy Inspector General's place. I saw them taking a walk. Stick in hand and a little faggot cocker spaniel trotting beside him. I said to myself, I said, Kalae-king, you're too old for this, but when your son grows up educated he's also going to walk fancy with a dog. So what the hell – the DIG may be a third generation educated blueblood. Four generations back they were no better than us. I'll buy my kid a bigger dog – a man's dog – one that can bugger the little spaniel pansy with long ears."

Kala had grinned at his son's discomfiture.

"A dog twice the size of the aristocrat's dog who's an aristocrat on *our* graft. And when my boy's older," he paused to ruffle his hair, "I'll get him a walking stick – the fanciest damn walking stick in town."

Sirdar had grown to love the Alsatian with a

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passionate intensity that surprised his father. Under the alert eye of a bodyguard, Sirdar would take Jimmy for walks and play with him in the Minto Park near their house. He felt his spirit soaring at these times, followed by a warm glow which made him want to hug Jimmy and rest his cheek on his warm wet muzzle. Kala realized an emotional need in his son. He rejoiced to see Sirdar with the dog. That neighbors and rivals felt a proportionate amount of envy further gladdened his heart.

Sirdar liked the grass tickling his face; liked it; enjoyed it.

He thought of Bashiran, his father's woman, of S'a'aka, Jo-jo, Qurban, Nikka, and the other gunmen of his father's house, of Jimmy's bark, of this afternoon's incident – Rauf's sneer loomed then faded, but the eyes dripping contempt for a Kanjar remained and would not go away ... the eyes ... contempt ... his hand clawed up a fistful of grass ... Jimmy's bark ... his father ... Jimmy – he hated them all ... wanted to destroy all – like he had Rauf's face. A million thoughts revolved ... focused ... receded ... the humming of bees licked his drowsy senses ... and with the scent of flowers in his nostrils he slept ...

It was dusk when Sirdar steered his bike into the *gallie* dominated by carved balustrades which would shortly be filled by the girls. He cycled up to the main gate of his house. Like the others, its multi-floored rooms opened onto a running gallery overlooking a paved central courtyard. The door of one room opened right onto the street. This room was for customers. The other, the main gate, was made of steel and led into the

courtyard which hid his father's 1958 winged Chevrolet convertible and his racing *yakka* – a horse drawn chariot.

Sirdar back-pedaled to a stop and banged on the gate. A face peered at him through the peephole and the guard opened the gate with an explosive sigh of relief.

"The *Pehelwan* is worried sick about you. Half the boys are out looking. Where the hell were you?" the guard chided.

Sirdar fixed the guard with an acid look. "Where is *Abba-ji*?"

Taken aback, the gunman replied, "In his *hujra*," and took Sirdar's cycle.

Swinging his school bag, Sirdar mounted the stairs to the second floor and entered his father's expensively furnished bed-sitting room. Kala Warris was lying on his bed, smoking a *hookah*. Seeing his son, he got up in a movement incredibly fast for such a huge man, and roared.

"You son of a bitch. I send you to school to study and you fuck around and come in without so much as a *Sala'am-Aleikum* to your father. What do you have to say to this?"

Kala towered over the boy, his beard quivering. In only a *dhoti* and cotton vest, his hirsute torso bare, he was terrifying.

"I think he's in love – found himself a girl," tittered Bashiran, his father's buxom woman. She reclined on the bed in a slip and *shalwar*.

"Get out, woman. I wish to speak to my son!" Kala lashed out at her.

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She hurried from the room, with a decidedly post-coital sway to her hips.

“Well!” Kala Warris turned to his son.

This was the first time he had ever shouted at Sirdar, and he thought, it took me thirteen years to realize that the only person who is not the least bit afraid of Kala Warris is this creature I fathered.

Sirdar stood squarely in front of his father.

“First off, I’m your son, not a bitch’s. Second I didn’t fuck around.” He looked pointedly at the semen stains on the white bed sheet. “Third, you never gave a chance to get a *Sala’am-Aleikum* through your shouting. And last of all, I don’t want to study.”

His breath quickened and he dropped the school bag.

“I want to join the business. I don’t want to be a big shot.”

He gulped, and his eyes went around the room. He wanted something to vent his anger on – and seized upon the easiest.

“I don’t want the dog either,” he spat out. “Get the boys to shoot it and drop it in the Ravi!”

Sirdar’s voice quivered, and then he broke into hiccupping tears through which he stood glaring at his father, fists doubled.

Kala’s mouth tightened. He frowned, his thick black brows more furrowed than usual, shocked out of his rage. If his son was willing to revenge himself against his father at the cost of his dog, he must have been deeply hurt.

“What happened, son?”

“What happened, what happened?” Sirdar bitterly

retorted. “Nothing happened! Only your big plans misfired. Your fancy *dog* misfired.”

Sirdar’s voice quivered through his tears.

“You send me to that mother fucking Don Boscoe School. You get me neckties and pants. I don’t argue. I don’t mind the sneers in the bazaar. At least they aren’t open *because I’m Kala Pehelwan’s son.*”

Sirdar choked, swallowed, and went on.

“I study and get good marks. I don’t play. I got no friends. I just do what you want me to do. Eat home food. No *fallooda*, no *haleem*. What the fuck for? So that the no good fag son of a daughter fucking Deputy Commissioner calls me a Kanjar? Us on whose graft they feed their families, buy their dogs and walking sticks? Have you ever asked me what it’s like? All you do is read my course reports and go round showing them off and buy me a new present! Sh-i-i-t! I want to get into the business so that any time somebody calls me what I am, I don’t half-kill him like today. I throw a bone in the dog’s mouth and he shuts up.”

Chest heaving, Sirdar stood in a rage, his mouth working impotently. He sat down on his father’s bed, pounding his fists on the mattress and cursing incoherently.

Kala Warris, who prided himself on his ability to *shanakat*, or judge a man, was at a loss to understand this phenomenon of the little creature he was raising to manhood. He sat near his son. After a few minutes, Sirdar’s tears subsided, and he sat quietly, sulking. Kala bubbled thoughtfully on his *hookah*.

“You want to weep more, go ahead. It will lighten your heart and wash away your sorrow.”

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The boy gave no reply.

Warris took a few more puffs and laid an arm around his son's shoulders. He could feel the muscles bunched up with tension and tried to gently massage them without letting his son realize it.

"Your mother was a great girl," said Kala. "I loved her. And we got married. We didn't have to legalize it, but we wanted our child to be legitimate. And she died in my hands and I couldn't do anything about it."

He was silent for a few seconds drawing on his *hookah*.

"We talked a lot about your future. You've misunderstood me. I meant for you to study, but not to give up friends. I suppose I've been too busy to pay proper attention to you. The family business is your heritage. In fact, your mother and me took it for granted you'd grow up and take over from me. All this that Allah has been kind enough to give us is yours."

Feeling the muscles beneath his hand relax somewhat, the big, brutal man nuzzled his son's hair and kissed him on the forehead, then spoke again:

"So you beat up the DC's son? Any son of a bitch rides you, you ride him harder. Now give me the details of the fight."

Sirdar, for the first time since his mother's death – a *vague childhood memory groped at, but one that seemed to elude him at the critical moment* – felt like a child again. Perhaps it was the insult of that afternoon, the nap in the garden, the long ride home, or the gentle fatherly tone he was hearing for the first time. He cuddled up to his father and recounted in detail the afternoon's incident, his talk with Ustad Drake and the

nap at Lawrence Gardens.

When Sirdar concluded, both father and son looked long at each other. Then they felt a simultaneous rush of awkwardness, and looked away.

Kala cleared his throat noisily.

“Had lunch?” he inquired.

“No *Abba-ji*.”

He tousled his son’s curls.

“Good. We’ll eat out tonight – father and son. Go up to your room, wash, put on your best, and then come down.”

Three

Dressed in trousers and bosky silk bush-shirts, father and son descended the stairs to the courtyard, Kala's voice booming, "*Ohae!* S'a'aka, Jo-jo, are you ready?"

"Yes, *Pehelwan-ji!*" chorused the two gunmen. They emerged from the lower rooms, discreetly attired in white.

Kala and Sirdar got into the rear of the Chevrolet, while Jo-jo took the wheel. Jo-jo was a dark-skinned Christian convert from the untouchable Hindu classes. Kala Warris had picked him up from cleaning the municipal sewers and given him a man's job. One-eyed S'a'aka who sat next to Jo-jo had been Kala's sidekick and chief gunman for the last twenty years.

To Jo-jo's inquiring look, Kala instructed, "Go around the whole bazaar, real slow. Then the Mall, the round of all the Lawrence Garden clubs, the Government Officer's Residence, canal bank, Gulberg and then the Shehzan Restaurant. Take the bazaar real slow."

Father and son sat relaxed and quiet as the well known green Chevrolet went around the bazaar. People automatically moved to the sides, most of them sala'aming respectfully. Kala nodded in response with the feline grace of a jungle cat. They went along the Mall, with Kala pointing out various people to his son.

At the Gymkhana entrance of the Lawrence

Gardens, father and son got out, and walked along the cool pathways, followed at a discreet distance by S'a'aka. They strolled past the clubs. The air held the faint chatter of well dressed couples entering the buildings.

Then they drove through the quiet of Lawrence Road and entered the Government Officer's Residence. In these tree-lined avenues of power, Kala, S'a'aka and Jo-jo betrayed some discomfort. Kala remarked to Sirdar: "It takes at least a Sessions Judge to get a home here. The centers of power – where the wives are."

The Chevrolet whispered past the stately villas lining the canal, turned onto the more opulent mansions of the nouveau riche in Gulberg, and finally entered the genteel byways of segregated Model Town, before turning around towards the town center.

Back at the Mall, the dwarf doorman of the Shehzan, resplendent in his white uniform and turban, held the door for them. In the plush elegance of the dining room, well groomed faces looked up at the bearded giant and young boy making their way towards a corner table. *Father and son out for a treat.*

The waiter silently appeared with a menu card and placed it in front of Kala, who handed it over to Sirdar.

"Order whatever you want – only ice cream for me, the best, and something fancy for S'a'aka and Jo-jo outside," Kala said.

His tones were the husky adenoidals which have only one origin in the whole of the Indian subcontinent – the walled city of Lahore. That and the nicknames did something to the old waiter who had seen service since

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the times of the Raj. Such an accent would never have been allowed to enter the Shehzaan. His suddenly blank eyes defined the limits of his reaction.

When the waiter departed with the order, Kala turned to Sirdar.

“Like the place?”

Sirdar nodded. “We should do this more often, *Abba-ji*,” he ventured.

“Hum!” Kala grunted to the suggestion. “Notice anything happen with the waiter when I spoke?”

“Yes *Abba-ji*.”

“Good boy. That’s why I want you to study.”

Kala’s voice was bitter, lonely.

“Not to make a *ba’u* out of you, getting six hundred a month chicken feed and living on graft. I could never even make the back door of the clubs I showed you. If you study, you could make it right past the front doormen. Instead of taking you to fancier places like Fallettis, I brought you here because this is the oldest close collar place. Look around you and you’ll see that the youngest patrons are all middle age. These are the kind that grow flowers, breed dogs, dress fancy, and own walking sticks they can talk about for hours.

“*This* place used to be run by an English *mem*. The standard was so fucking formal; she wouldn’t admit open collars in the hottest months. The place has class – but you can only move from the corner to the center tables if you don’t speak like your father.”

Sirdar earnestly soaked up every word of this unlettered company president who drew upon a vast storehouse of experience. Kala continued.

“It’s not just reading and writing and speaking. Soon

I'll shift you to a fancier school. Get friendly with the kids of all the big-shots. You'll have your own bank account – take them to movies, brothels, the works, and they'll forget what you are. Only don't let them ride you – ever. By the time you run the business, they'll be Police executives or civil servants.

“That's the time to feed them more. From kid stuff you move up to the heavy presents – jewelry and carpets and Scotch and perfumes.”

The waiter brought Tutti-frutti for Kala, *pala'a*, chicken *musalam*, and *nargisi koftae* for Sirdar. They started to eat, and then suddenly felt they were being looked at.

Father and son simultaneously glanced up from their food and caught the other patrons staring. Impassively, the two Kanjars returned the stares and the patrons looked like public school boys caught cheating in an exam. Their suddenly renewed interest in their dinners was interesting. *Bad form*. The center table was occupied by two distinguished looking men in their fifties. Both were dressed in white tropical suits with so English an air about them that it would have made an Englishman laugh. They were the only two who had not stared. Kala discreetly pointed them out to his son.

“One's a judge of the High Court, the other's a general,” he explained.

“They're both our clients. The General likes to suck little boys' balls and the Judge likes his ass whupped.”

Kala and Sirdar finished eating, paid their bill with a fat tip to the waiter, and rose.

As they left, their backs prickled. Several pairs of

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lips had tightened in the dining hall.

When the sedan left the curb, Kala exploded with mirth.

“Ha-ha! S’a’aka, the pigs in the restaurant and most of the fat sows accompanying them almost split their britches!”

“Why?”

“Me, smacking my lips and Sirdar handling his spoon and fork like they were a set of porcelain digging tools,” he laughed.

Jo-jo and One-eyed S’a’aka chuckled. Sirdar looked thoughtful and there was a determined jut to his chin. Observing this, Kala knew, at that instant, deep down, by the instinct that had formed the basis of his survival, his son would be a very big name – perhaps the biggest so far.

At the peak hours of business, they re-entered the *gallies* of Heera Mandi. The air was sprinkled with the faint strains of *sitar* and *tabla* music and the balconies and doorways were filled with women. The bazaar hummed with a mixture of pimps, clients, and penniless spectators mingling with the exotic smells of Asia.

“Jo-jo,” Kala said, “take another round of the bazaar”

“Darae’a, my *puttar*,” he addressed Sirdar. “Look around you. This is our world – the world of the Kanjars.”

They entered their house to the sound of music and *k’hungroo* dancing bells – business was brisk this evening. Humming a tune to himself, Kala went upstairs, followed by Sirdar.

In Kala's bedroom, Bashiran, his woman, lay stretched on the bed in a *shalwar* and thin muslin *kurta* under the glow of an exquisitely shaded bulb. The strains of an Urdu *ghazal* could be heard from the softly tuned radio.

"Aren't father and son through yet?" she asked in a sultry voice.

"No," rebuked Kala. "Leave the room. I'll send for you later."

As she went out, Sirdar could smell the desire in her body-musk, see it in the roll of her hips and the lassitude in her eyes. He felt embarrassed.

Kala Warris pressed a switch, filling the room with the hum of an air conditioner. With the door closed, there was an air of quiet seclusion.

Speaking in a measured voice, Kala Warris addressed his son:

"Now my *puttar*, listen hard. You might be thirteen, but you have got to think like thirty.

"From now on, you start learning the business so that in a year you're my right hand. But you learn the business after school hours. Being the only son is a responsibility – for both of us. I've protected you from many things. Didn't want you going into a restaurant and being stared at because you couldn't use a knife and fork like the sister fucking heathen British who say that the prophet Eesa'a is the Son of Allah. May the blasphemers be dragged one day before the Pure of Allah and hanged. When the Raj was handing out titles and land grants, the people who curse the British *now* – in fancy English accents – were the first to hold their hands out.

Flight to Pakistan

“Take the Syat family.” Here Sirdar leaned forward with interest at the mention of one of Pakistan’s most vocal political families. “Father was knight, governor of the Punjab and leader of the Unionist Party which opposed independence from the British. This *sir*,” Kala spat the word with contempt, “was the son of a batman to an English officer. This batman used to wait at Pindi railway station with a letter from his dead master, begging Englishmen for pennies. After enough whining, he got a land grant and his son a commission in the army. Later, it was this army officer who became Chief Minister of the Punjab and a Sir and served alcohol and pig’s meat to his kaffir masters.” Kala snorted, then continued, “The Sir’s son now talks of their family’s services to Pakistan and Islam. My fucking cock served Pakistan better. When this Mister Son of the Mister Sir was on the Indo-Pakistan border commission, he handed over ten square miles of a strategic enclave to the Indians. Yes, my *puttar-ji*, yes – and now semen drinkers like him hold mikes in their hands and fart through their mouths about the love they have for their Islamic Republic.

“In 1947, when Pakistan was created by the British, I couldn’t understand all the politicians’ talk. Couple of things were clear, though. Pak meant Pure, and Istan land of, and the pure were the pure of Allah, the *momin*, Muslims and nobody else, who would take the wealth of India. I also knew what the bazaar said. The British were going, and if the Muslims could drive all the Hindus and Sikhs to India, then we could seize their lands and property. Since the Muslims were penniless, the idea stuck and the streets of Lahore ran red with

Hindu and Sikh blood. They owned all of Shahalmi market. It was gutted to the ground, which is why the buildings are all new. Servants murdered their masters and seized their wealth and property.

“They say it was the same with Muslims in India – but I don’t know. I can only testify to what I saw with these sinner’s eyes. Riffraff refugees from India claiming to be *nawabs* came with empty gunnysacks to fill with the leftovers of the Hindu exodus. But there are still millions of Muslims in India, well off and rich. Except for a few sweet makers in Sind, there are no Hindus left in Pakistan.

“Pakistan is a land purified by greed and loot. Our own bazaar is in the shadow of the biggest mosque in all of Islam – the Badshahi Mosque – constructed by Mr Orthodox of the Muslim Mughals himself – the Shahanshah Aurangzeb.

“Suddenly, in 1947, India was forgotten. Five thousand years of history had its mother fucked. In school curriculums history was replaced by Pakistan Studies. The casteless Muslims took out membership of Arab tribes – adopting surnames like Sayyid, Qureishi, Khwaja, or Sheikh.”

Kala chuckled, and slapped his hand on the small table.

“This Sheikh bit is the funniest, because it’s the title for an Arab chief! Since the past thirteen years, everybody’s either an Arab, or an Iranian or Afghan – something exotic. Wonder what happened to all those Indians?”

Kala checked his mirth and his face became serious again. Sirdar was intent, soaking up every word, every

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inflection. His father continued.

“In fact it was in 1947 that I picked our surname Shah. Not because we’re Sayyids, descended from Mohammed Mustapha, the Black Shawled One, Peace be upon Him –”

Father and son kissed their fingertips, touched their foreheads, and raised their fingers skyward at the mention of the Prophet of Islam.

Kala went on with pride.

“We are Kanjars – proudest of the proud, purest of the pure. Shah sounded short and smart and was open for the taking. I grabbed us a family name instead of a Hindu’s property! There are, of course, those who can trace their family trees from some Arab missionary – may Allah grant us deliverance from His wrath –”

Kala and Sirdar touched their ears in a gesture of preventive penance.

“So get this clear,” Kala intoned, “I want you right up among those third hand synthetic Arabs – not to turn *you* into one, but for you to get the best out of them. And never let these guys make you feel any lesser than them. The ones who became big shots after the creation of Pakistan were either servants of Hindus and Sikhs or else migrant *bhayyas* who grabbed leftovers. The older big-shots started with a land grant from the British for keeping the natives in line and raising their sisters’ legs for the Sahibs!

“Remember: no man is born big or small, white or black. A man is as big as his brains and his balls. This wide open world of ours is up for grabs – so when you grab, grab hard and show no mercy. Mercy comes later – it’s a luxury which helps consolidate *after* – after

you've won. Mercy from the humble is weakness – from the strong, compassion. Never let your being a Kanjar stop you in your grab – it's an advantage. If you're a Kanjar, you couldn't be lower, so the only direction you *can* go is up. What you got to do is go for the top rung of the ladder and then kick all those below in the face. Once you're secure, then show large-heartedness. But don't let anybody take you for granted.

“We, the Kanjars, will always be outside of society. So be it. Take the best of this frogfucking society. Use it, then stand on top of the dung heap of chicken fucking vultures and laugh.

“Firstborn and my only one, if we're no better than them, we're no worse. What the hell are you going to lack – fine manners? You'll be taught them. Clothes? The best. Brains? We've got more – that's why we got more money.

“And we got the edge – muscle.

“Now two last things: your old man's trade secrets.

“First, each man has two prices – one at which he's bought, the other at which he stays bought. Enough money will buy anyone, but not permanently. There's always that one man who isn't buyable. Stay away from him – *don't jump into fire*. There'll be muscle working for you. Money'll keep them loyal – just so far. Beyond that, it's your loyalty to them – your love and care. Make sure they know you love them.

“Second, my son, my life dearer than life itself, never raise your voice. You're not going to grow up big like me. When a big man gives the *barak*, nobody questions it. It's plain he can back it up. A small guy's

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barak isn't taken seriously till he backs it up with muscle.

“So hit first, and then maybe *barak*. Best way to get your intestines aired is to let some friend of his sister's land the first one. Hit first, and the only decent targets are the eyes or the balls. If you just want to lean on someone, let one of the boys do it. Keep the reputation that if you hit, somebody goes to the hospital or the graveyard.

“You're thirteen but you got to think thirty.”

Sirdar determined to make this sermon a manifesto for his life – especially the last, which he would take a step further – he would never raise his voice, never use the *barak* except once, or perhaps twice, to make his mark, to make him remembered and feared.

Four

Cycling all the way home, Sirdar whistled a popular tune to himself. The last time he had fought had been in anger. Today was sheer cockiness. He felt good. At the end of boxing practice his body had felt free and light while his heart sang. He had been agile, fast, and smooth. He knew that he had mastered the fundamentals of Drake's coaching – two left jabs, and then a left-right combination. When fast and smoothly delivered, this combination proved devastating. Drake had nodded approval, and Danny King, Sirdar's sparring partner, had looked thoughtful. The team felt confident about Sirdar's performance in the forthcoming Inter-School championships.

After practice he turned his cycle through the Police Lines to Qilla Gujjar Singh for a bowl of ice-cold *falooda* in syrup. He looked and felt cocky. The DON BOSCOE – BOXING emblazoned on his track suit provoked fighting talk from a bunch of lounging toughs. Sirdar fearlessly waded into them. The timely arrival of a group of wrestlers and boxers from Sirdar's school saved him from being stomped. Qilla Gujjar Singh being Macha Shukarwala's territory, it was his gunmen who broke up the fight which threatened to turn into a riot. During the reconciliation ceremony immediately after, these gunmen were pleased to learn of Sirdar's parentage. Kala Warris and Macha were known to be friends and

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partners in some business ventures.

Sirdar, too, was happy. He had come a long way since the last fight with Rauf, the bully. Three months ago it had been anger. Today was – hell, just like that.

Following Drake's intervention which had kept Sirdar from being expelled from school, Kala Warris had gone to see the coach. What emerged from this meeting changed the boy's life.

It was decided that Sirdar would take his sports kit to school. After classes he would have lunch at Drake's house. Juliana, the coach's wife, would tutor him till game time. After boxing practice, Sirdar would return to his world.

Drake was a proud man.

"No, *Shah-ji*, no tuition fees an' all," he said to Kala. "I don't want your money. My home isn't a hostel or a hotel. We like your boy."

However, Kala made it up to the struggling Eurasian in kind, maintaining a steady flow of presents. Drake's wife, Juliana, was a pretty wisp of a girl, as warm hearted as her husband. Invoking the *moon-bola* tradition, Kala Warris made her his sister. Such a relationship is taken very seriously. Once so addressed, she had to be treated like a sister. Affection is most commonly displayed by gifts for the larder. Thus, there was a constant supply of eggs, chicken, fruit, and butter, besides the finest Scotch for Drake. Kala never looked directly at Juliana, his *moon-boli p'haen* – honoring her with this great mark of respect was not lost on Drake. When the couple protested such generosity, Kala dismissed it with the bland, "Would you deny a brother the love he bears his sister?"

While Sirdar became proficient in boxing, he also became almost a family member of the childless couple.

Juliana fussed over him like a mother hen, calling him Sirdoo, cooking him English dishes. It was here Sirdar learnt western table manners. Juliana kept showing him catalogues from J. C. Penny, Montgomery Ward, and Sears Roebuck. From their arrangements Sirdar learnt the rudiments of western dress and interior decorating.

Drake's bachelor uncle, who lived with them, was a professor of history. He opened another hitherto unexplored world to Sirdoo – the world of books and news magazines. He also gave the young Kanjar Sir Basil Henry Liddell Hart's *Why don't We Learn from History?*

Sirdar's mind had grasped the fundamentals of his father's talk following the dinner in Shehzan Restaurant. The Drake home, this new routine, was the best way to realize his and his father's ambitions. The best of the world – to be *in* the world – without being *of* that world.

Sirdar made the most of it.

Kala Warris had been delighted when Sirdar asked for money to subscribe to *The Economist*, *National Geographic*, *Fortune*, and the conservative *Reader's Digest*.

Kala boasted to his friends: "This kid of mine asks me for money. And for what? Not movies or just spending around like other kids, but for magazines. Not the ones with naked *mems*. The hoity-toity ones – and he reads the newspapers every day!"

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He bought his son a transistor radio so that he could catch the news from the BBC and The Voice of America.

Sirdar began practicing his English accent by the dual expedients of listening to the BBC and being forced to speak only in this language at the Drake's home.

His father's gunmen would constantly ask him to translate choice Punjabi expletives for them into English. The unfamiliar consonants made them giggle.

As Sirdar coasted down Heera Mandi, people gave him odd looks. This was the first time he had re-entered his world in the track suit proclaiming his affiliation with another world. Earlier, he had made a habit of changing back into the school uniform before coming home. So *Kala's fancy ba'u's started boxing now* – this evening he didn't give a damn about the looks.

As usual, Sirdar went straight up to his father's *hujra* like a good Punjabi son, to 'show his face' as an expression of filial obedience.

He entered the *hujra* with a polite 'As-Sala'am-Aleikum'. Kala reclined on his bed. His eyes narrowed.

"Who were they?" he demanded, looking hard at the bruise on his son's temple.

"Just punks, *Abba-ji*," Sirdar casually explained. He settled on a red *mura* under the cool breeze of a whirring fan.

"How many?"

"Three."

"And you?"

“Alone – at first. Then the team came just as I got hit from behind and went down. You know Inspector King?”

“*Ahoe!*” exclaimed Kala. “He say anything?”

“*Nahin-ji*, nothing! His son’s our team captain. Stopped me getting stomped.”

Sirdar recounted the details of the fight.

Kala soaked in each detail. The mention of Macha’s gunmen made him smile.

“Good boy,” he said, “but you didn’t tell me about King’s kid being your friend!”

Sirdar shrugged. “He’s okay with me. Pretty chummy,” and was pleased to see a satisfied look in his father’s eyes.

“How’s the boxing getting on?”

“Drake thinks I’m good enough for the Inter-School Fights.”

“I never want to hear you say ‘Drake’ like you’re talking of an equal. You fuckin’ well call him *Ustad-ji* even behind his back.”

Sirdar flushed, but Kala went on as though nothing unusual had happened.

“Bashiran!” he shouted, just as she entered the room with a tray of tinkling *Rooh-Afza* sherbet and tall glasses. “Dara’s entering the boxing championships. See that he gets a special diet of cool foods. The works.”

“Don’t worry,” Bashiran assured, “I’ll grind almonds with poppy, melon and pumpkin seeds in milk and give him a *sirdai*. It’ll keep his head and liver cool, nourish his brains, and keep his mind off girls. Plenty of fruit, and lamb chops and chicken.”

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Her voice betrayed genuine affection for the boy. She was neither his mother, nor stepmother, yet Sirdar treated her with respect.

“Yes. Meat, wench, and lots of it,” Kala approved. “Also the best mustard seed massage oil to keep his muscles supple. Tell one of the boys to send for that Masti Gate sweeper to massage him.”

The three of them sipped their *Rooh-Afza*, which means ‘Joy to the Soul’.

Kala once again addressed Sirdar: “To hear you tell, you didn’t fight bad. But you depend too much on your fists alone. Don’t forget the other weapons Allah has been kind enough to bless your body with. Elbows, heel of palm, knee and leg work, teeth, and fingers for gouging. In a fight, a boxer is limited. He can only use his fists. The guys you fought today are just punks. No class. You come up against a street fighter of some class; he’ll play hell with your boxing. I’ve made many a boxer and wrestler kiss the concrete. I’ll get S’a’aka to teach you some tricks. Then you can punch as a trained boxer, and with the ruses of the Kanjar’s secret art of *bhinote*, you’ll always have the edge.”

Bashiran now noticed the bruise on Sirdar’s temple. Born and brought up in the bazaar, her eyes instinctively went to his knuckles. She was pleased to see them well bruised. Her sensual lips parted in a proud smile.

“Some bastard’s going to hurt tonight,” she remarked, and then added: “Come along, I’ll rub some rarefied butter *k’æo* on your knuckles.”

“No thanks, it’s okay,” grinned Sirdar. “I’ll have a bath later. That should be enough.”

Bashiran took the tray and went out, smiling to herself.

Kala frequently groomed his son in Punjabi etiquette and behavior, known as *Ikhlak* – a wisdom transmitted from father to son. Kala now proceeded to impart this wisdom to his own son.

“And this fighting business – it’s just a means. Not an end. If it wasn’t, then S’a’aka would run this business and I’d be S’a’aka. The real weapon is here –” he tapped his head “– and even here –” he pointed to his crotch. “You can’t get it up till the brain wants it to get up! That’s why I insist you have a dozen almonds every morning. Good for the brains. That, and the curried sheep’s brain *maghaz* you have for breakfast twice a week. Fighting by itself will get you nowhere. It just puts you in a position from where you can go somewhere, if you’ve had enough brain curry and almonds. For the rest, it’s your *Ikhlak*.”

Sirdar nodded thoughtfully, and Kala, warmed to his topic, continued.

“*Ikhlak* is your behavior with other people – your humility in the presence of those weaker than you. The modesty with which you recount your exploits is *Ikhlak*. Never show off, never compete. If a four foot midget says he’s six feet tall, don’t argue. Tell him he’s eight feet tall, and that *you* are four feet. Then wait and smile. A man who has power has no need to show it off – it’s visible to a blind man.

“Be known for your hospitality and generosity. Talk well, never about yourself, but to put your guest at ease. And always slightly exaggerate the exploits of

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your guests. *That* is your breeding. *Therein* lies your *Ikhlak*.

“To be a friend of your friend’s friends, enemy of their enemies, and friend of the enemy’s enemy. To smile and greet a man with such affection that he speaks always of your capacity to give and receive love. The essence of all *Ikhlak* is love and humility, and only that can make your star shine. A man without love is a failure in life, and if he fails in life, how can he succeed in business? Our own business is so risky, so dangerous. One bit of greed means a wrong judgment, which can mean your life. The wisdom which comes from love and humility is one of the great secrets of life.”

Now Kala’s face took on a messianic mask, and his voice deepened into a prophetic melody:

“See the wind, O’ fruit of my lions. Resist it not, yet don’t let it push you either. Know it well, that it may serve you.

“Know the waves upon the Ravi. You will then know the waves of the life around you.

“Always sprinkle sesame seeds around an anthill and observe the wisdom of Allah’s smallest creation.

“Let no beggar ever go hungry past your house. Don’t under rate the prayers of even the humblest on your behalf, for Allah listens to all.

“If one comes to your door seeking aid, never let him go back disappointed.

“Be straight in your dealings. Keep a clear, open heart. And if anyone hurts your heart because it was open and clean, then ensure that his heart ceases to beat.

“Always look to the top of the mountain, but never sprint. Keep your breath, for you need it on the way.

“Seat your guest on the cushion, and your own ass on the ground. Thus may you realize your greatness.

“Eat – eat well, but never overeat. Serve yourself that which you are capable of digesting. Else you get cramps.

“Lastly, dot of my seed, never be untrue to yourself. Life makes you deceive. Deceive, then, for it is so. But one person deceive not, and that is yourself.”

Kala’s eyes bored into those of his son.

“Yes, *Abba-ji*. The Truth,” affirmed Sirdar.

For a while, both father and son sat in the quiet of the room savoring their drinks.

Kala quizzed.

“Have you learnt well the *K’a’afies* of the Sufi Saints of the Punjab?”

“Yes *Abba-ji*.”

Kala smiled to himself. He was confident his son could pass the test. Long before man learnt to read and write, wisdom was passed from father to son by word of mouth. Its assimilation was tested by riddles. Among the illiterate educated of the Punjab, it is not unusual to take a test on the *K’a’afi* of a Sufi Saint. Kala started the questions, and both shed centuries off their shoulders.

“What is not forever?”

“The chirping of the *bulbul* in the garden.”

“What is inconstant?”

“The breeze in the garden.”

“Thus, what else is not forever?”

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“Parents, beauty and youth, and the company of friends.”

“Why?”

“For they must part.”

“What, then, is reality?”

“Allah.”

“Why?”

“For Allah is truth.”

“Define Allah.”

“He is indefinable.”

“How many prophets did Allah send?”

“One hundred and forty thousand.”

“Who was the last?”

“– Muhammed Mustapha – Peace be upon Him.”

“– and the Greatest?”

“Muhammed, the Black Shawled One.”

“Who knows the reality of the air?”

“The Bird.”

“– and that of water?”

“The Fish.”

“– and who else?”

“None else on earth.”

“Who values the garden?”

“The Gardener.”

“– and the tree?”

“The Squirrel.”

“– and the fruit of the tree?”

“The Guardian of the Orchard.”

“Who is the master of the heavens?”

“Allah.”

“– and of the earth?”

“Allah.”

“Who values Allah most?”

“Muhammed, the greatest of all the Prophets.”

“Who loves Allah most?”

“Muhammed, and the four who together form the Five Pure Bodies.”

“Who else?”

“Many aspire, but none may reach.”

“Who is the humblest?”

“The Biggest.”

“And the strongest?”

“The Winner.”

“Who may show mercy?”

“He who wins.”

“What is man, then?”

“The smallest speck in the universe and the puppet of his own mistakes.”

“What is man capable of?”

“Nothing.”

“How, then, may he aspire?”

“By Allah’s grace.”

“Does man control his kismet?”

“No. All is written down by *Hazrat Jabraeel* – Angel Gabriel. Whatever must be, must be. Allah Ho-Akbar.”

Father and son touched their fingers to their lips, then foreheads, and raised their index fingers and eyes heavenwards. It was done. His son was a good son. The father was pleased, chin proudly raised, eyes prophetic.

“Go now, my son, and Allah be with you. Go to your room, wash yourself, anoint your locks with the oil of the mustard seed. I shall wait for you.”

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Sirdar bent, touched his father's knees, and left the room.

Every evening Sirdar would sit at his father's feet according to Indian custom and continue to learn the business. He was beginning to appreciate the diversities of Kala's financial web.

In addition to the *nautch* house in which they lived, they owned two more, besides a multi-storied brothel, a couple of liquor and drug stills, and an ice-cream factory. Sirdar periodically went over the books with the managers, who were scrupulously honest. The constant shadow of Kala Warris and his gunmen was conducive to healthy moral values and efficient accountancy.

Sirdar was also beginning to see another side to his father's character. Illiterate, Kala Warris kept an account of his investments in a notebook by drawing straight line symbols of his own devising. However, he kept track of most things by his remarkable memory, while being his own insurance against loss, fraud, or competition.

Thus did Sirdar receive his education in both worlds.

Five

At exactly midnight, a police whistle announces the official end of a night's business in Heera Mandi. Long after it had shrilled, Sirdar lay awake in his bed. He had decided not to box anymore. That morning, he had won the Punjab Inter-School welterweight title, and felt satisfied. Henceforth, it would be more productive to concentrate on his studies and the business. It was a decision he had taken earlier without consulting Drake. Sirdar knew the coach would be hurt, and had confided in Juliana, his wife.

After the fights, Sirdar had taken leave of his father to attend the victory function at school. After the speeches and bonhomie, Sirdar was ready to go home when Drake stopped him with a mysterious look.

"Don't go yet. Say hello to your Auntie," he said.

Wondering, Sirdar got on Drake's bicycle carrier. When they reached the Drake home in Braganza Quarters, Drake whistled outside the entrance.

As Juliana appeared in the doorway, Sirdar's excitement keeled over.

"Auntie, Auntie! Auntie-ji, I'm the Best Boxer!" he jabbered, snorting and making passes at Juliana with his fists. She exhibited appropriate fear by recoiling in mock terror.

"Ooah! You're a real tough man, *baba!*" she exclaimed. She put her arms around him in a hug.

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“Come along in, Sirdoo. I’ve got a real surprise for you,” she said.

With an arm around his shoulders, she led him to the small dining room with its furniture of a bygone age. In the center of the dining table a big cake said CONGRATS SIRDOO – a chocolate cream creation, his favorite, baked with Juliana’s expertise. Next to it was a present.

“Go on, stop staring like a fool. Open it,” she urged, her lips parted with excitement.

He opened it with his lower lip between his teeth. It was John Masters’ *The Deceivers* in a paperback edition. Inside was inscribed *Congrats champ. Aunt Juliana and Ustad Drake*. Sirdar was at a loss for words.

Juliana’s face bore an anxious look.

“Don’t you like it?”

Sirdar couldn’t stand the look in her eyes, and felt compelled to do something unprecedented. He went forward and kissed Juliana reverently on the cheek.

“How did you know I’d win, Auntie-ji?” he asked huskily.

Juliana stood tall and straight. Proud.

“I just knew, *mon*. Drake was sure, and last Sunday I prayed in church. Then you had to get it.”

He lowered his head. Then he looked up, grabbed her hand, and blurted out: “*Ustad-ji* wants me to continue boxing at least till the national matches, but I can’t, Auntie-ji. Today was my last fight. If I want to carry on, *Abba-ji* won’t stop me. But I can see for myself he needs my help. Besides, I also want to really get into the business. So all I’ll have time for, really, will

be business and studies.”

Sirdar seemed to grow older before her eyes, and she felt hollow in the pit of her belly.

“But I promise you I’ll study,” he said quickly to console her. “Right up to my B.A. at least.”

In a rush he concluded: “In fact, now I’ve got into the habit of not being able to sleep till I’ve read something.”

Juliana patted his cheek, summoning a brightness she did not really feel.

“You keep quiet about this now,” she warned. “I’ll tell your *Ustad* about this later. Myself.”

Drake’s voice chided playfully as he entered the dining room: “What is this? A love affair going on!”

Sirdar blushed. An oriental, he was unused to this kind of humor. Juliana and Drake exchanged mischievous glances at his discomfiture. Drake punched him playfully in the chest.

“Cool down, bugger. Just joking!”

Then the evening turned into a flurry of activity as the professor and other neighbors dropped in for the tea party Juliana had arranged for her Sirdoo’s triumph.

Back in Heera Mandi, Kala, too, had thrown a feast to honor Sirdar’s victory. The dinner menu conformed to the royal service of *choti veena* and *bari veena*, followed by chilled desserts decorated with gold and silver leaf.

Two *maunds* of sweets had been distributed by Kala in Heera Mandi, and another *maund* outside of it.

Dinner was eaten around a crisp white sheet spread on the floor of Kala’s *hujra* – the *dastarkhan* of fable.

Sirdar was given several hastily bought presents, including a beautifully engraved brass knuckle duster

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from Macha Shuk-arwala, with the advice, "Hide it in your gloves next time so they carry the sister fucker straight to the morgue!"

S'a'aka gave him a Van Heusen shirt, and Jo-jo a bosky silk shirt length, which he would get custom tailored. The rest stuck safely to fifty and hundred rupee notes.

After the post-dinner burps of appreciation, followed by loud *Al-hamd-Allilah's*, the boys and minor guests left the bosses to their inevitable business talk.

The four *pehelwans* were left discreetly alone. This was Kala's opportunity to present his son. The farsighted professionals were curious about Kala's intentions for his son's future, for after Kala's death, who would inherit his empire? Present at this meeting were Macha of Qila Gujjar Singh, Budha of Chung, Wa'ada of Mohalla Kakazaian, and the Babu of Beadon Road.

Sirdar excelled himself that night. He started the conversation on international affairs, of which they knew little and merely nodded appreciatively at the boy's self-confidence and knowledge. Any doubts they might have had regarding his potential for handling a crime family in the future were dispelled at the latter's skillful handling of business talk, especially his grasp of the entertainment business.

Shortly after the guests had departed, Jo-jo knocked on Kala's door.

Accompanying him was a dark skinned pimp in his teens with a blood soaked head. Seeing Kala, the pimp cried in a tear choked voice.

"O' Emperor! We are your children, and look up to

you. In Rang Mahal I got jumped by two biters of their sisters' clitoris. I was buying cigarettes at a kiosk, and one of them shoved me. I asked him what for, and the other one came up and slapped me. I couldn't do much when they both jumped me. When they let up after breaking my head with a bottle, I told them I was one of Kala *Pehelwan's* children but they laughed and said they write Kala *Pehelwan's* name on their pricks and don't know who he is. Called you a pimp. I wouldn't have stood for it, but I had no fighting tools on me –" he choked with emotion, "– I have been insulted, *Pehelwan-ji*. The whole *baradari* has been insulted and our noses rubbed in the dust!"

"Calm down, Sheedaya!" Kala said, "I shall avenge the honor of the *baradari* and of my son. I shall have their cocks cut off and shoved inside their own asses. Jo-jo, tell S'a'aka and Nikka to gather some boys. Get Sheeda's cut fixed up and give him some hot milk. Then take him along to point out the sister fuckers and make an example of them. Here, this is for your medicine and milk –" Kala held out a hundred rupee note to Sheeda.

"No, thank you *Pehelwan-ji*," Sheeda demurred. "I am your child. Do I not eat the scraps off your table every day, mother-father?"

"Never say that, my son. Is it not the duty of a father to look after his children? Take this, and do not hurt my feelings."

A *rehra* load of Heera Mandi toughs galloped into Rang Mahal, with the horse frothing at the mouth. The baying

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clansmen of the *baradari* circled the crossing, eager for blood. The bystanders were looking at them with the excitement of hungry wolves.

Then Sheeda's excited voice reached the bystanders: "There they are!" Sheeda pointed with an outstretched arm.

The two rising *goondas* tried to run. The *rehra* driver expertly maneuvered the horse to block their escape. Desperate, their hands went beneath their *kurtas*. Before they could get a weapon out, S'a'aka and an athletic youngster jumped from the *rehra* and landed with both feet on the hoods, and then the Heera Mandi clansmen were around them like a swarm of locusts. Two stood up in the *rehra* and brandished revolvers to keep the crowd at bay.

The two punks were scientifically beaten, then bugged by Sheeda. The rest of the Kanjars hollered and catcalled, holding up their knives against the neon lights in an ancient ritual of the *badla*.

The *baradari* boys came whooping back into *chownk* Heera Mandi, the horse urged on at a full gallop, singing praises of Kala's generosity and philanthropy while getting drunk on *kutae-ma'ar* dog-death liquor. All except S'a'aka, who had hurried to the Police Station to get the fix in. Later, when he went in to report to Kala, father and son were going over the account books. Sirdar's carefree days of boxing and cycling were coming to an end, and Drake had to be told.

Six

The bedroom was bathed in subdued lamplight.

“Darling,” Juliana murmured as she nuzzled her head against Drake’s shoulder.

“Mmm ...” he turned to face her as they lay in bed.

“I got something to tell you.”

“Mmm ... go ahead ...” he said as his hand reached out to caress her breast.

She gently covered it with her own. “Be serious, darling.”

“I am, about what counts.” His thumb continued to caress her nipple.

She moaned, then sat up, her hair falling over her chest.

Drake grumbled. “Okay, okay!”

“Sirdar’s giving up boxing.” She sensed Drake’s body stiffen.

“How do you know?”

“He told me.”

Juliana explained.

Drake grunted.

“Well, I suppose it had to come to this,” he said regretfully. “He could’ve kept at it. He would’ve gone far.”

“You like him, don’t you?”

“I love him – don’t you?” he asked, stroking her bare shoulder. So smooth to the touch.

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“Of course I do. He’s such a sweet boy. So quiet and determined. And terribly proud – the right kind of pride.”

“Yeah. More of it than the Queen of England!”

Juliana’s eyes clouded with pain.

“And he’ll grow up to replace his father,” she said sorrowfully. “What a waste. Is Kala as bad as they say?”

“Worse – a real *budmash* – this brother of yours. And your Sirdoo’s going to top Daddy’s record – no jokes,” he insisted.

She had felt inordinately pleased today when her Sirdoo chose to confide in her instead of Drake directly. Her heart had swelled with unfulfilled motherly pride. Drake’s voice droned on while his hand continued to stroke her, soothe her.

“The lad’s ruthless. Absolutely. Wait till he comes of age. You love him and so do I, but facts are facts.”

“Darling –” she started in a pained voice, but Drake drew her in his arms and smothered her with a kiss, cutting off further conversation.

A year later, with their baby a few months old, the Drakes flew from Lahore airport for London, their community’s back-home-Mecca. They were seen off by Sirdar and his father who had come with the best garlands money could buy. In procuring passports and getting their savings out of the country – something banned by a permanently cash-strapped loan-begging State – Kala had proved his salt to his son’s mentors. With the garlands, Sirdar had hung a ten *tola* gold

necklace studded with rubies around Juliana's neck.

"This is from my own earnings, Auntie-ji. Keep it," he whispered – his voice tight.

Juliana's eyes were wet.

"Good luck, son. Look after yourself," she said with an ache in her heart for this boy whose brilliant potential she could visualize in the dance-houses of Heera Mandi.

Kala placed his hand on her head, weeping openly.

Sirdar and Drake shook hands silently and looked long into each other's eyes.

This was the parting of the ways.

Seven

After his middle exam, Sirdar changed schools. He entered the English medium Cathedral High School, determined to start the school's coeducational life with a flourish. Along with the fuzz around his face, there arose within him an awareness of his manhood. He was conscious of women.

As Jo-jo dropped him at the McLeod Road gate and the big car purred away, Sirdar entered the school with a firm resolve not to have his Don Boscoe experience repeated. He would pick out the toughest bully, make an example of him, and ensure peace for the rest of his tenure.

He deliberately swaggered to the class room outside which the girls and boys were waiting for the bell to signal morning assembly.

The girls cast demurely curious glances at Sirdar. His body was muscular and lean. The gray eyes and rugged features were certainly attractive. A smattering of smallpox scars added just that touch of intrigue.

When he shook hands with the boys, Sirdar made it a point to squeeze a little. They enviously noted his blazer and trousers, cut and stitched to perfection, and creased by a master hand. While some gave him welcoming smiles, most were wary.

Sirdar turned his attention to the girls.

“*As-Sala’am Alekium,*” he murmured, switching on his natural charm.

He received shy replies and one in particular with confident eyes caught his attention.

“Walks around with his chest out,” came a remark from his rear. Sirdar turned to face a tall, husky lad with a dark line of carefully tended fuzz on his upper lip.

“Were you talking about me?” Sirdar asked in that very quiet tone, which was oddly disturbing.

“And if I did?”

“Then you’d better back up your words – after school – outside.”

The slim boy standing next to the one who had spoken whispered urgently in the husky youth’s ear. The husky one looked a little frightened, as though he had done something he was not supposed to have done and been caught in the act. Then they both came up to Sirdar. The slim one spoke.

“I’m Zaki – aren’t you the welterweight champ from Don Boscoe?” he asked Sirdar.

Sirdar was young enough to feel flattered. Besides, the girls were listening. Flushed, he nodded.

Zaki grinned.

“Hey, this is my friend, Shahbaz. We’re all in the same class. He was just kidding because you’re new. You don’t have to fight him.”

Shahbaz smiled sheepishly and stuck his hand out.

“... saw your picture in the papers ... didn’t recognize you ...” Shahbaz murmured.

Sirdar gracefully shook the proffered hand.

“No problem. I must ask your pardon for my haste.”

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“Haste makes waste,” sang Zaki in a dowager’s falsetto.

The ice broke and everyone laughed.

In the short break the class stayed together. The first girl who spoke to Sirdar was the one whose dark eyes had caught his attention this morning. Her budding breasts stood out through the uniform. This time he noticed her upturned nose with a passionate but still innocent mouth. Her hair was dark, worn in a thick plait reaching down to her waist.

“Which school have you transferred from?” she asked Sirdar.

“Don Boscoe.”

“Were you serious this morning – about fighting, I mean?” she wanted to know.

“I think so,” admitted Sirdar.

“Hunh! You’re a champion boxer, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“I think it’s a silly thing – fighting.”

“Fighting perhaps, but not boxing.”

“Boxing’s the same. Getting in a ring and hitting each other. It’s childish.”

“It’s just a game!”

“Just for brutes.” She tossed her head and walked away.

“What do girls know about fighting and boxing?” Sirdar turned to the others, grinning.

This remark immediately sparked off a lively debate on women’s lib, chauvinism, and liberalism, by the end of which he was very much a part of them. The conversation was conducted in English. These were,

after all, Macaulay's Indians ... *brown only in their coloring* ...

At the end of the day, Sirdar strolled out of the school gate whistling to himself. As he got into the rear seat of the sedan, Jo-jo leered.

"You look very happy. Hooked a girl on your first day?"

Sirdar continued whistling softly to himself with a glint in his eye. *Just for brutes* He chuckled.

Opposite Fazal Din's drug store he asked Jo-jo to stop, borrowed some money, and went inside. A few minutes later he came out with a brown paper sack.

"What's that?" Jo-jo wanted to know.

"A shaving set: aftershave lotion – Old Spice Burley – Cologne – the works."

"So the bug's bitten you – wait till the *Pehelwan* finds out!"

"Don't you dare –" Sirdar began, and then guffawed when he saw the other's look. Kala Warris was a notorious upholder of morality in the old tradition.

That evening Sirdar shaved for the first time.

After two years at Cathedral High, Sirdar took his matriculation exam. It was the period corresponding to the carefree life at a University for most other men. His life revolved around school and business. This was the final period of his transition to maturity. There is a point beyond which no human can mature. Whatever maturity he has at that stage, he can only maintain, and his immaturity he has to make the best of.

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And then there was Roxanna. Since the day she passed her cutting remark about boxers they had developed an animated rivalry which was the talk of the school. Surprisingly, neither of them was aware of such talk.

There were months of countless arguments – arguments over everything from politics and ideals to religion and art.

Roxanna could not exactly define her emotions. The boy thoroughly confused her. Sirdar was the first person to have broken through her shell of idealism and values and hit her with a street-smart knowledge of what it was like beyond her horizon.

This went on till the day she unconsciously called him Sirdoo, like his Aunt Juliana. Some time after, neither could remember exactly when, they discovered they were in love. There was no exchange of endearments, no adolescent gropings, no wild promises. In a society where women are segregated, they were lucky enough to have stolen moments at school. Dating was well-nigh impossible. A very deep, undefined understanding existed between the two. In Roxanna, it was manifest by a longing softness of the eyes and a marked decrease in her intellectual opposition to Sirdar. In Sirdar, by a diligent plunge into the business and studies which surprised even his father.

Once, they had managed what can be best called a date in Pakistani terms.

Roxanna had confided in three of her cousins – girls of course – and they settled on the movie play. As a

rule, girls don't go to movies unchaperoned. In some cases, however, an exception may be made.

Roxanna's mother had dialed a number.

"Hello?" a male voice responded at the other end.

"Eram Cinema?"

"Yes."

"Could you pass me the manager please?"

"Just hold on ..."

There was a pause before a deeper voice came through. "Yes, Khwaja Anwer, Manager Eram Cinema on the line. May I help you?"

"I am the wife of the Deputy Inspector General of the Punjab Police."

There was an inaudible smartening up from the other end of the line. "*As-Sala'am-Aleikum*, Begum Sahiba. To what do I owe the honor of this personal call?"

"Thank you for your courtesy, Khwaja Sahib. Would it be possible for me to reserve four seats in the Dress Circle for my daughter and nieces?"

"But of course, Begum Sahiba! Eram Cinema would be honored to receive the DIG Sahib's family."

The manager's soothing tone continued: "I will make the special arrangements we always do for the families of our officers. Which show will it be?"

"The six to nine. Our driver will make the payment on arrival."

"No – no Begum Sahiba!" protested the Manager. "Please don't rub dust in the hair of the management. It is honor enough that the Begum DIG has chosen this

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cinema out of all the seventy-five in town. As the DIG Sahib is our father, so are the daughters and nieces of the DIG like my own.”

“Thank you, Khwaja Sahib, but you know my husband is an honest officer, and his principles ...”

“Begum Sahiba,” cut in the manager’s flustered voice. “Would your humble servant ever dare interfere with the noble principles of so great an officer? I merely insist that you allow me to accept the young ladies as my daughters.”

“... mmmmm ... mm ... I ...” demurred Roxanna’s mother, shifting slightly on the stool in the hall. She was getting fat. Her buttocks itched.

“Then it is decided. They shall be my guests, and the guests of the cinema. Their honor shall be as my own.”

After some concluding small talk, Roxanna’s mother put the phone back on its cradle. She smiled at the power bestowed on her by her husband’s position, and muttered a silent prayer for her aunt’s soul – the one who had arranged the match with the dashing Police Officer twenty-two years ago.

Khwaja, the manager of Eram Cinema, also smiled as he put the phone down. What a PR coup Allah and his prophets had seen fit to land in his lap. He dialed the local Police Station. Five minutes of conversation with that tin god. He had let it be known the DIG’s ‘family’ would be visiting the cinema. The Inspector would double the uniformed detail that is on duty outside almost every cinema to ensure against stabbings, fights, and molestation with their bamboo batons and Lee Enfields. In addition, a few plainclothes

policemen would be in a row near that which the girls occupied. The manager would thus gain points with the Inspector, since the latter would now be able to gain points with the DIG.

Khwaja then called for all the bouncers. They would be given a very special briefing.

“Sirdoo?” Roxanna said.

“Yes.”

“Have you seen Arma’an?”

His heart quickened.

“No. Have you?”

She hesitated.

“No.”

Silence.

Both cleared their throats. Roxanna swallowed, then plunged on headlong, talking fast: “Tomorrow evening I’m going to the six to nine with three of my favorite cousins. Our Baba Driver will take us. And he hates movies. He’ll stay outside in the car.”

“We could have a date?”

She nodded.

He leaned across the library table to kiss her. She dodged, but not fast enough. He managed a peck before she got up and walked out of the now deserted library. Very fast, with only one backward glance at his grin.

After this date, they never managed another.

There were stolen moments in the school, at social events. Little pecks, giggles, to cover something that ran like a fire in their souls.

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They were both recommended to be school prefects.

Roxanna was proud, then disappointed when she learnt Sirdar had refused. He didn't think he would be able to manage the time.

For Roxanna and Sirdar, each morning was an exciting moment. They looked at each other, and it was sunrise.

Their sun set when school broke.

It has been thus in the Punjab for centuries since the advent of the Persian dominated Islamic culture which segregated the sexes, squeezing Indo-Aryans between the Kama Sutra and the Koran. It is common for a year or two of smoldering glances at the village well to end in marriage – without a word having been exchanged. And thus it was with Roxanna and Sirdar. They accepted this fate, for they still had more liberty than millions of others, especially Roxanna. She didn't have to suffocate in a shuttlecock *burqa*. The outlines of her ripe body were open to view.

When he took his matriculation exam, Sirdar was a compactly built young man who looked older than his sixteen years.

The last day at school was a blurred memory of Roxanna's hungry eyes. They would not even meet at the exam center, segregated by sexes.

Both found themselves alone in a corner of the library between rows of classics.

"So, Sirdoo, best of luck in your papers."

"Thanks, Roxanna. Wish you the same."

"So we'll meet some time?"

"Yes we will. *Inshallah*," replied Sirdar.

She picked up her books and walked away, her

head high, fighting back the tears she did not want him to see.

Sirdar watched her retreating virginal hips working furiously, and a part of him went with her.

She must have known about me – my background, that is – everybody else did – but she never betrayed any such knowledge – perhaps because of her breeding – perhaps – well – maybe anything.

After taking his exam, Sirdar had sixteen weeks to wait for his result. A grown man by most standards, he devoted his whole time to the family business.

Eight

The Legend of Dara Pehelwan is born

Six weeks after he had said goodbye to Roxanna, Sirdar had spent the entire day at the bus stands with an auditor, studying the accounts of the transport company. It had tired him. Returning, he bathed, changed, and felt like taking a walk in the bazaar. Something he had never done before, but he felt like it today. He was on edge.

Sirdar dressed with care in his gold embroidered *chappal* sandals, a starched white cotton *shalwar*, and bosky silk *kurta*. For some odd reason, he slipped Macha Shukarwala's knuckle duster into his pocket.

As he descended the stairs, Bashiran and his father were coming up.

"Where are you off to?" asked Kala in surprise.

"Just for a walk around the bazaar," Sirdar replied.

"Got a tool on you?"

Sirdar patted his pocket, outlining the knuckle duster.

"Fine. Take a couple of the boys," he gently suggested.

"Thanks. I'm okay by myself."

Kala grunted in reply.

Sirdar walked around the bazaar, feeling the stares

of the street people who immediately looked down when he glanced their way. With some, he exchanged courteous pleasantries.

He knew what they all thought.

There goes Kala's son – a ba'au. All he does is study and look after the business – fucking Jew! Look at him swaggering on Kala's cock.

Sirdar felt frustrated and uneasy.

He came onto the main bazaar and stood sipping Coke at the kiosk beneath Rakhi's *Kotha*.

Rakhi was thirtyish – a very sexy lesbian who ran her own house under Kala's protection. Part of the attraction of her *Kotha* was Rakhi's inaccessibility, which made her more desirable than all her merchandise. Snatches of faint music drifted down to the street.

Suddenly, there was a commotion of raised voices, male and female, and the sound of rushing footsteps on stairs. Rakhi's pair of bouncers fled down the street. Four angry customers prepared to give chase. Before they could do so, their leader, a tall man with mean little eyes, was restrained by Rakhi.

"Stop it now," she pleaded, "that's enough."

Rakhi's voluptuous body was outlined in a thin muslin shirt. The face above it was classical Mughal. Heavy lidded eyes, long sharp nose, budlike mouth, dark hair, healthy complexion.

The four customers crowded her.

They were dressed in western trousers and shirts and had the stamp of small town *goondas* from some backwater like Mirpur or Jhelum. It was quite obviously their first time in a classic Heera Mandi.

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The leader laid a calloused paw on Rakhis's arm.

"We'll stop it, *Jani*." He leered. "Now you help us start something."

Sirdar finished his Coke and came to stand near the hood's elbow. He sensed the expectant eyes of the crowd and of Rakhi. He felt very sure of himself when he spoke.

"*P'haijan*, women's arms are not touched in public," he chided gently.

"Oh really?" The leader spoke in the unmistakable accent of the Pothohar plateau. He laid another calloused paw on Sirdar's arm. "What do you do to men's arms?"

"Break them, *ba'u-ji*," replied Sirdar, and punched him on the jaw, dropping him.

Before the others could react, Sirdar jumped with full force on the man's crotch. The man screamed once, drummed his heels on the road, and lay still.

The one who had been behind the leader charged Sirdar, hands held forward, fingers curled in the wrestler's grapple. Sirdar feinted with his left, and landed two textbook hooks: a right to the side of the neck, and another on the jaw. His left arm free, Sirdar dug inside his assailant's crotch and twisted. As the man doubled up in pain, Sirdar's smile grew a little colder. His next move chilled the onlookers. With a swift, deliberate motion, he gouged his left thumb into the other's eye and grabbed the lower lip with the right, widening the mouth by a good inch. With one hand on his crotch and another on his face, the man gurgled *hai, hai!* in pain, staggering like a drunk.

From the corner of his eye, Sirdar glimpsed a blur of movement.

Before he could react, there was an explosion at the side of his neck and face. Then he was gripped in a half nelson. His grappler, instead of hitting, tried to jump backwards in an effort to break his neck. Sirdar sensed, rather than saw, Heera Mandi braves about to move in.

He managed a strangled “Keep out! It’s my fight!” and jumped backwards with the grappler to save his neck from being snapped. Just as Sirdar felt his grappler tense for the second jump, he remembered the knuckle duster. His hands free, he got it around his knuckles. As the second jump concluded, Sirdar swung two blows to his blind rear. They connected enough to loosen the half nelson. Jerking free, he backed away.

The first two were still out cold, and would be for some time. The fourth now stood next to his companion of the abortive half nelson.

Both moved towards Sirdar. The one who had tried the half nelson shed his shoes. Sirdar judged this was a dangerous man – for he moved like a practitioner of the collective combat sport of *ka’udi*. Barefoot, he would be more dangerous.

Sirdar’s head was still fuzzy. He shook it from side to side and backed towards the kiosk. Keeping his eyes on his warily advancing opponents, he probed behind, reaching for a bottle. It was thrust into his hand by the kiosk *wala*. Sirdar shook the bottle, and the crowd backed up – a crowd only too aware of the lethal effects of an exploded 7-Up. Before the advancing pair could emulate the crowd’s common sense, the bottle

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exploded at their feet, followed by two others in quick succession.

Sirdar moved in behind his fire support, exploiting it with the skill of a good field commander.

He finished off the fourth man with an uppercut to the point of the chin, leaving the *ka'udi* player to be savored at leisure. The *ka'udi* player was still rubbing searing grains of glass from his eyes when Sirdar started in on him.

In under a minute, the *ka'udi* player had been reduced to a moaning, almost unrecognizable piece of biology.

Like the other three, he would live, but it would be the life of a man made a little wiser by self-knowledge.

Breathing hard, Sirdar still retained his chilling smile. He saw respect in the eyes of the crowd, and stared at the small pools of blood on the street.

Rakhi's two bouncers, who had fled, now stood at the edge of the crowd. Sirdar recognized his fourth cousins, and crooked his index finger at them. They shuffled forward and stood before him with lowered eyes.

"Pumpkin fuckers," Sirdar cursed in an even voice, "you let out-of-town pubic hairs and semen drinkers lean on you. You disgraced the *baradari*. There is no doubt your maternal uncles fathered you."

"Yes, Dara *Pehehwan-ji*," they chorused in unison, and the title came naturally to their lips.

The green Chevrolet screeched to a stop and all four doors flew open. A sigh went up from the crowd as five of Kala's boys jumped out, guns in their fists.

"Nobody move – but nobody!" yelled S'a'aka, his

one eye glaring malevolently, a Sten-gun in his hands ready to rip down any interference – real or imagined.

He stopped dead at the littered carnage.

Sirdar, relishing his new status – Dara *Pehelwan-ji*, noted S'a'aka's surprise and confirmed: "Yeah – it was just me," and the crowd buzzed appreciatively.

S'a'aka's brutal face split into a broad grin. He raised the Sten-gun high above his head in both hands, and pirouetted a spontaneous *p'hangra*.

"*Ohe main sadqe jawa'an!*" he cried. "May I be sacrificed – *H-a-a-AAAA!*"

He twirled the Sten in the air.

A drop of oil dripped on Dara's head.

Nizam Din, another of the boys, came towards Dara, with an expression of veneration on his face.

"What do you want done about them?" he asked, indicating the four men bleeding on the ground. "*Dhuzun* in the back of the head and in a sack down the Ravi for the crocodiles?"

Dara shook his head.

"These two pumpkin fuckers whose maternal uncle and father were the same person ..." he gestured towards the bouncers who had bolted earlier, "have them rub their noses on the ground one hundred and one times with their ears clutched in their hands for penance – the cock position. Each time they rub their noses, they shall repeat twice '*Ya Allah tauba!*' and '*Ya Allah ma'afi!*' so that they neither forget Him nor His Mercy."

The crowd touched their ears, kissed their fingertips, then touched them to their foreheads and looked

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heavenwards while turning the open palms in the same direction. Dara continued.

“While they are going through this process of penance, beat their naked buttocks with a slipper.

“As for these four here,” Dara indicated the *pothohari goondas*, “take them to Ilaj Clinic. Get them fixed up, and put them on a bus or train to wherever they want to go. If they show their faces in the bazaar again, they must realize they would do so at the peril of their lives.

“The kiosk *wala* handed me a bottle at a critical time. Give him a hundred rupees and assure him of our future patronage.”

Nizam Din crossed his hands over his heart and murmured.

“*Khair, khair, Darae Pehelwan di khair!*”

He signaled two gunmen to come forward through the whispering crowd.

“*Cha’acha*,” Dara called to S’a’aka.

“*Hai!* My tiger-like son – Dara! Yes!” he replied with a gesture of his chest, eyes moist.

“Nizam and the boys can handle this. Why don’t you go over to the Police Station and tell them what happened?”

“Sure, them, and the rest of the town!”

Dara became aware of Rakhi standing next to him. Beneath her muslin there was only Rakhi and nothing else. The musk of her body sent the blood racing in his veins.

Rakhi thanked Dara in her husky voice, her eyes traveling over his body, and then asked, “Are you hurt?”

“Just a little around the neck,” he admitted.

She was nearly as tall as he. Her arm went around his neck to caress his hurt, bringing her nipples close to his chest.

Dara looked at her.

Suddenly, he felt very sure of himself. He wanted her, and his loins stirred.

“That’s no way to say thanks. And this is no place. Upstairs!” he said, his voice hard.

His breath panted like an animal’s.

At the foot of the stairs which led right onto the street, he turned to the crowd.

“All of you – listen good. Any house that pays *us* protection, gets it!”

Later that night, a satiated Rakhi confessed to Dara, stroking his bare back.

“You know, *jani*, you’re the first man I came with.”

In the preceding hours, she had initiated him in the tradition of the Kama Sutra.

Attracted by a male for the first time, her orgasm was almost a spiritual experience, heightened by a feeling of debauched power over a virgin of sixteen.

And he was good, the best she had had, reducing her to a moaning, scratching cat.

Dara lay awake after she had drifted off to sleep, a hand on her smoothly shaven mound.

So, Auntie Juliana, by my world’s standards I’ve come a long way. In one night I’ve tasted the bazaar’s most sought after bed, and learnt that Thandi Rakhi is not as cold as her title, – she’s Tatti Rakhi. I’ve gained the title of Pehelwan and shed the mantle of Kala’s ba’u

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kid. First fight in the bazaar, and a blockbuster. S'a'aka and Ustad Drake did a good job on me. And you see, Auntie-ji, the legend of Dara Pehelwan will grow – THEY WERE FOUR BUT A WEEK'S BAZAAR TALK IS SURE TO MAKE THEM EIGHT ...

Good night Auntie ...

*Pleasant Dreams Roxanna ... Roxanna ...Rox ...
anna ...*

Nine

Three days later Dara came into his own.

Kala summoned him to his *hujra* early, at about eight in the morning.

S'a'aka and Nikka were already in attendance. Kala looked grave.

"Yes, *Abba-ji*. Anything wrong?" Dara said.

"Plenty, but nothing we can't handle," his father replied calmly. "A pair of brothers – Zaman and Zubair, who came to Lahore from the Abbottabad hills as domestic servants. Then they put up a little kiosk in *chownk* P'ha'ati. All of a sudden they became gangsters. *My* mistake is I let them operate, taking them for just a pair of mountain hicks scratching a living. Now they've started sprouting wings, muscling in on our territory. Yesterday they beat up one of Moodi's boys. Their substandard booze is becoming a health hazard."

Dara thought of what he had learned of his father's operations over the last few years: of the network of *thaekas* – illegal sale points for liquor and drugs – in Heera Mandi whose real owners were Heera Mandi's shadowy Dons; of the few outsiders allowed to operate, by paying a tax to the *baradari*; of the fact that the Kanjar *baradari* ensured that the rotgut moonshine neither blinds nor kills; of how on pain of death, the outsiders had to ensure the quality of their products.

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Yes, these two had bought themselves serious trouble.

Kala continued. “The other *pehelwans* are pressing me to sort them out, since it’s near my territory that Zaman and Zubair sell their booze. At times they can make pretty good stuff, but most of the time their booze is dangerous. They even sell counterfeit National Brewery bottles, and people all over town come to them. I want them taken out now, before they get to be a bigger problem.

“I’m giving this to *you*, Dara. Handle it your way – you’re old enough.”

Even before the briefing was over, Dara had made up his mind. He got up.

“Nikka,” he signaled with his head, and walked out of the room, ignoring S’a’aka’s one jealous eye.

Dara recognized S’a’aka’s talents as much as he did Nikka’s potential, but felt no need of such talent. Neither did he need a veteran who would steal credit for a caper.

Nikka followed Dara up to his room.

They settled in the two armchairs. Dara was supremely confident, Nikka expectant.

Dara explained.

“Only you and I handle this caper. Here’s what I want you to do. Get onto the night people – the eyes and ears of the town. I want the whole dope on these ass-lenders.

“Two things interest me: their background and source of sudden income. You’ve got a week at the most.”

Nikka’s eyes gleamed with approval. The prevalent custom of Lahore would have dictated that they head

out in a galloping *rehra*, challenge with a *barak*, and rely on skill with gun and knife to settle the issue. This is what Zaman and Zubair expected. This was exactly what Dara was determined to avoid. He resolved to justify his expensive education with his first case study.

Nikka nodded respectfully and went out.

The information came in bits and pieces and Dara made another landmark in his future methodology. Meticulously, he kept writing down the information, and at the end of the third day, rearranged it on foolscap sheets.

During this period, Kala, S'a'aka and the other boys gave Dara curious looks as he passed them to and from his room for occasional excursions of coffee and tea. They tried to pump Nikka, but came up against a blank wall. Even Kala started having doubts about the wisdom of schooling.

However, the picture that emerged from the foolscap sheets was this:

Zaman and Zubair were poor mountain boys who came to Lahore in search of work. Employed as domestic servants to a jeweler, they discovered their employer's fencing activities, and decamped with his gold. Being stolen property, it could not be reported to the police. With this capital, the brothers had bought a kiosk in *chownk* P'ha'ati and leased a house in Guru Mangat village on the outskirts of Lahore. In this house they set up a still for producing very high quality rotgut, bottling it in National Brewery bottles and selling it at the kiosk. The sale end was run by Zaman, and the distillation by Zubair.

The two upstarts were a social menace. A widow

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whose only financial support was her carpet weaving son, suddenly found herself bereft of an income. Her son was one of Zaman and Zubair's Saturday night victims, and his funeral was as expensive as the carpets he wove at a hundred knots to the square inch. This widow being an inhabitant of the outskirts of Heera Mandi, came to the only National Social Security she knew of – Kala Warris. He had put her on a pension, but the details of the artisan's death had worried him. Zaman and Zubair had caused injury, but this was the first loss of human life, and, as such, to be taken very seriously. Kala's lips had grown grim. Human life was a sacred trust.

The day Dara was satisfied with the information on the two villains, he phoned the general manager of National Brewery. Dara taped the long conversation, carefully erased his own voice, and locked the spool in his drawer.

That same night, Nikka was out and came home in the early hours of the morning with a suitcase which he took to Dara's room.

All the next day they stayed in the room, taking a lunch tray from the maid-servant in such a way as to prevent her from seeing inside. At dusk, they went out on Nikka's scooter dressed in nondescript dark clothes.

An hour and a half after midnight, the quiet was shattered by a loud explosion, followed by two smaller ones, startling the residents of Guru Mangat. As people rushed towards the house which contained the soap manufacturing plant, they failed to notice the two men unobtrusively walking away in the shadows. *Factory*

workers after a night shift. They even had their Tiffin carriers of food in their hands.

At four thirty in the morning, Anjum Piracha was woken up by the strident ringing of the telephone. The General Manager of National Brewery picked up the handset with a curse, admiring the sleeping form of his wife undisturbed by the sound of the infernal instrument. He listened to the few terse sentences.

Instantly, he was wide awake.

“Yes, yes, I’m glad they’re dead,” he said. “Of course I know who I’m talking about – the bastards who were pirating National Brewery products ... Zubair is dead, I understand ... and Zaman will soon be, you say? Well done! I say, who are you, old chap?”

The phone went dead in his hand, and he replaced it on the cradle. *Hmmm ... Anonymous call ... first called and told me he’d discovered the source of counterfeit National Brewery product ... wanted to destroy it for his own reasons ... fine ... now the still’s destroyed and one’s dead ... another one’s going the way of his brother shortly ...*

A nipple peeked out from beneath the covers, and his loins itched. Nasima liked to awaken to lusty lovemaking. He applied his tongue to the nipple. He fancied himself a gentle lover in the Kama Sutra tradition of his ancestral culture.

Replacing the handset on its cradle, Dara switched off the tape, and sat back with a smile. Anjum Piracha, the GM of National Breweries, could be effectively

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compromised as an accessory before and after the fact of Zubair and Zaman's murder.

Dara had orchestrated his questions in such a way on both calls as to provoke an admission of conspiracy from the GM. Once Dara's own voice was erased from the tapes, they would be proof of Anjum Piracha's hand in a conspiracy to murder Zubair and Zaman. If hard pressed, Dara could always drag in Anjum Piracha, whose clan boasted eleven senior civil servants. If not now, blackmail would prove useful in the coming years.

The morning's newspapers carried it splashed all over the front pages with the usual police hand-out.

"... TILL LATE LAST NIGHT NO ARREST WAS REPORTED ..."

Police were said to be making extensive inquiries.

Dara put the paper aside and looked at his watch. Time to move. Nikka should be in position by now.

Clad in an insignificant gray *shalwar kurta* with a *parna* head cloth thrown over the shoulders and lower part of his face, Dara quietly slipped out of Heera Mandi. His departure was unnoticed at this time in the deserted streets of a world that worked at night and slept by day.

Catching a motor rickshaw, he dropped off in front of the entrance to the mausoleum of the Saint Data Ganj Baksh. Unhurriedly, he sauntered into the busy crossing called *chownk P'ha'ati*.

Nikka was right in position across Zaman's kiosk, on a parked Vespa with the keys in the slot. They carefully avoided each other except for an all clear look from Nikka which meant no police.

At the kiosk, Dara waited with a knot in his stomach

for the two customers, an old woman and a small boy, to go on their way. For his morning's work, he wanted at least a ten foot radius.

Dara looked at Zaman carefully. A handsome man with Greek features common to a district which had been the favorite resting place for invaders from across the Khyber. The only sign by which he betrayed his brother's death was a redness of the eyes and a drawn expression.

It was not surprising that Zaman had not shut his business that morning to mourn the loss of his brother. He would be taking pains to distance himself as much as possible from the liquor distilling house and anyone else who had occupied it.

Dara was keyed up, but breathed deeply and evenly. He had to exert an effort of will to keep it from showing as the woman with her match box and little boy with his Coke departed.

He moved alongside and handed a rupee note to Zaman.

"A packet of K-2's," Dara murmured.

Zaman was sitting cross-legged on his perch, level with Dara's chest. He leaned forward to take the note from his customer's hand, his concentration on the money.

The customer seemed to miscalculate, and the note fluttered down in the act of changing hands.

The kiosk owner leaned further to pick the note from the same cross legged position, balanced only on his ankles.

The same hand which had earlier offered the note gripped Zaman's moustache with the speed of a

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Russell's viper. Zaman was jerked out of his perch with a knife at his jugular, eyes bulging with fear.

For the first time, Dara disregarded his father's advice. He shattered the early morning air with a *barak*, and dragged his victim to the center of the *chownk*.

As traffic halted and school children screamed, Dara neatly made a horizontal slit in Zaman's belly. Zaman shrieked like a soul in purgatory and blood splashed over the tarmac.

Dara's next act sent a chill through the Punjab's underworld, earning him the title of *Khooni Dara* – Bloody Dara.

Smiling, *Khooni* Dara plunged his hand in the horizontal slit in Zaman's belly and pulled out the entrails. Zaman screamed – a long drawn scream.

Sheathing the wet knife beneath his *kurta*, Dara coolly proceeded to strangle Zaman with his own intestines before the stunned crowd.

Before a dazed public could react, Nikka's scooter whispered alongside. Dara jumped on the rear seat and whipped out a revolver. As they scooted away, he fired three shots in the air which mingled with the screams, shouts, and roar of the Vespa's gunned engine.

Dressed in a shirt and trousers, Dara entered his room. Ignoring Jimmy's canine feet lickings, he changed into a *dhoti* and *kurta*, and settled into the armchair, spent like a marathon runner. He picked up a copy of Punch magazine and tuned in to Radio Lahore. The lilting beat of a folk song came on the air, and he applied his mind to the recently concluded Cuban Missile Crisis while

absently scratching Jimmy's head and smiling. Dara was a Kennedy admirer and believer in the New Camelot.

The door opened and Kala Warris stepped in. He saw his son calmly reading a magazine from which he now looked up, his right foot keeping time with the music.

"Yes, *Abba-ji*?" Dara inquired.

This is my son ... he is only sixteen and has just killed a man and his eyes are still innocent, or I am a cunt ...

Kala's face was tight as he settled on the bed nearby.

"Lay off that magazine and switch off that whore's voice. I want to talk to you."

Seeing his order complied with, Kala continued: "I just heard about your stupidity an hour ago. I don't know how you can sit so calmly. After all the money spent on your education, you go in broad daylight, and not content with just stabbing the licker of his mother's cunt, you got to strangle him with his own intestines. The papers are going to play it up and there'll be hell to pay.

"Have I ever been like a Hindu *bania* – stingy with money? Couldn't you get Nikka to do the job? Couldn't you cover that ugly face of yours? At least you wouldn't be recognized. Why – why the fuck did you do it yourself? Except that you want a reputation?"

Unable to restrain himself any longer, Kala reached out to grab Dara, who had received his father's harangue with a smile.

Nimbly evading the grip, Dara jumped up and stood

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in the middle of the room, hands hanging loosely at his sides and feet apart, his face an unreadable mask.

Kala was up on his feet now.

“Why, you two-bit sister fuckin’ cunt –” he swore, and stopped in midsentence.

In his mind Kala Warris had always thought of Dara as his little *puttar*, but now standing before him was a man – sixteen years old – but a man. He could see it in the level, grim gray eyes, in the confidence of the stance. This man understood the business. He could brawl with the best of them, and less than an hour after making his first kill in an unprecedented manner, he had been calmly listening to music and reading one of his fancy English magazines.

Kala’s face split into a grin, teeth gleaming through the black beard.

“Sit down,” he said. “You’re a bigger sister fucker than your father!”

“Yes!” agreed Dara, and both sat back.

Kala’s face was still serious.

“Okay. What’s up your sleeve?”

“It’s like this, *Abba-ji*. Nobody saw me go to the still. Some may have seen me coming back. Who’s gonna get on the witness stand and testify? I don’t know who killed the bastard – sure, if I’d had a chance, I would have wasted him, but I didn’t. The explosion, you know, is very well covered up.

“Now this case? Nikka stole the scooter from the District Courts, and there was no hue and cry. Under our *dhotis* and *kurtas* we were wearing trousers and tee shirts. After the hit, we got into the back alleys of Paisa Akhbar. At a quiet corner, we just threw off our *dhotis*

and *kurtas*. Then we went and parked at the University cycle stand opposite the Department of English. Nikka had brought a couple of note books, and we just looked like two University students. I went up to the lavatory of the English Department, washed the knife and left it in the water closets.

“We took a taxi from Tollinton market for the Fort. On the way, Nikka and I made enough conversation to convince the taxi *wala* we were students bunking classes for a day at the Fort.

“From the Fort we walked back home.

“Now what do you make of the facts? These aren't American or British *pulsias* who gather fingerprints and go through ballistics. These are good, underpaid, under equipped, crooked Pakistani *pulsias*. All they need to do is to take me to the Choon Mandi torture station and beat a confession out of me. We know that's impossible.

“Now please send somebody to Khwaja Rashid's, our lawyer, to fix up a bail before arrest. When the *pulsias* turn up, you wave that paper under their noses, and add the fix, *but let them register a case against me* –”

“YOU CRAZY?”

“No – listen. When I appear before the magistrate and you put up my alibi, I'll get discharged, won't I?”

“So?”

“So, if I'm charged for a crime once, and acquitted, I can never be charged again, can I?”

Kala stared at his son. Then he joined the tips of his fingers, touched his forehead and raised his palms towards Allah.

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“May I be sacrificed! *Ya Allah!*” he exclaimed. “The wonders of the white man’s science, his arguments and mission schools. Verily was it a blessed day for the Punjab when the great Napier Sahib imposed English Common Law, and the missionaries started their English schools. May the white race and its civilization always prosper. Truly are the wisdom of its laws superior to ours.”

“There’s more, *Abba-ji*,” Dara said. “National Brewery’s involved with us, though they don’t know it yet! When the dust settles, we can distribute the customary eleven *deg* pots of rice at the Durbar of the great Saint of Lahore, that his soul may be appeased and that the guardians of his shrine look upon us and talk of us with favor. Eleven we shall distribute in Heera Mandi bazaar along with eleven *maunds* of sweets to close the mouths of our critics and loosen the tongues of our well wishers. The beggars who eat shall say prayers for us, and when we announce that we are sending two widows to Mecca to perform the pilgrimage of Haj for the absolution of their sins, surely even Allah’s Spirit shall be pleased.”

Dara paused – then looked at his father in a way he never had before.

“Lastly, source of my birth and cause of my existence, you whose seed I am,” he addressed his father, “remember that I am a man of peace, a man of business, and as your wisdom reminded me, a man short of height and breadth. To fight every day is foolish and weak. I have done what I have done and the manner of doing was a deliberate choice, in order that I might never have to do it again. I have stopped

Lahore's Hitler at his Munich, that our girls may continue to dance in peace as they have been doing over the centuries."

"Amen, amen, amen," muttered Kala.

After the outburst, he had lowered his head. Now when he raised his eyes, they were not those of a father regarding his son, but of a businessman facing his partner. Kala weighed his next words carefully: "You've done a good job – a damn good job. You really are a bigger bastard than I am, and the investment in your education is paying off. Now even if you don't ever kill anyone, people will respect you – though some years later, you will have to," he concluded with regret at the anticipated loss of human life.

And the legend of Khooni Dara was born.

*So, Auntie Juliana, now I've gone up another step
... I'm as mean as any and meaner than most ... don't
feel sad ... I do what I have to do ... I do it well ... will
you still love me ... Can I ever say anything to you,
Roxanna, you who I love Roxanna ... Roxanna ...
ROXANNA!*

Ten

There was a slight jerk, and the giant plane eased its bulk into the air. When the light went out behind the NO SMOKING and FASTEN SEAT BELTS signs, Sirdar breathed a sigh of relief. He lit one of his Dunhill's, blew out the smoke with a long hiss of satisfaction and smiled at the pretty hostess.

She switched on her professional charm.

"You can give me your garlands if you want to," she offered.

"Thanks. Throw away the ones with flowers, but I'd like to keep the ones with gold embroidery," he replied with a wicked light in his eyes traveling over her trim figure.

As she walked towards the galley, he partly turned to watch the sway of rounded buttocks through half shut eyes. He let the smoke slowly drift through his nostrils and mouth. Sirdar felt very much alone while he reflected over what lay in store for him at The Harvard Business School.

He had wept at Lahore Airport and so had his father, the boys, and his friends. Was he not crossing the seven seas, exposing his soul to the impurity of western civilization? Nikka had whispered in his ear about *all those mems who are just crazy for Pakistani men ... and the booze ... fast cars and dances ...* Sirdar had walked across the tarmac with a hollow

heart, and Kala and the others had broken into tears.

The plane rose in the air, and Sirdar's birthplace in the land of the Pure grew smaller and smaller under his gaze.

His mind went back four years.

He was still on bail for the Zaman murder when his matriculation result was announced. With a fast beating heart he went to Cathedral High to collect his leaving certificate. Everyone he met avoided his eyes, taking extra care to be polite to him. His eyes roved hungrily for Roxanna, but she was not there. The matriculation being a national exam, the end of school formalities are finished before the exam. The only valid reason a student has for entering a school is to pick up his end-of-school certificate.

In a way, Sirdar was glad, too. He was not sure how he would have been able to explain the Zaman affair to Roxanna with the same smoothness as his lawyer had in court. Then there was the matter of their social backgrounds. The incorporation of the Hindu Caste System into Islam has not done much towards changing it. As such, they could not have gone very far with their relationship unless they had eloped to Europe. Even then, before that stage, a couple has to continue to meet. In their case, considering Roxanna's orthodox family, this, too, was out of the question. A girl and a boy in Pakistan are only permitted furtive, demeaning exchanges. Murders are very frequent over such affairs. Put very simply, a Kanjar and the daughter of a Police Executive cannot get beyond being

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classmates. All this they both knew and understood. They could do nothing, change nothing. For centuries it has been so – kismet. However, there was that bottomless void to contend with for the rest of his life.

Then, while Lahore's prestigious Forman Christian College of the Punjab University was preparing to receive a new batch of freshmen, Sirdar prepared to enter this new phase in his career. His father bought him a car, opened an account with Barclays and took him to the tailor. Sirdar bought books, took out a membership with the British Council Library, and reflected.

When he entered FC College, he had no need to fight. The papers and town grapevine had done enough for him. His aim was two-fold. To handle the family business, and to use the ridiculously expensive missionary run college as a jumping ground for expanding his contacts. He realized the importance of style and appearance in social acceptability.

Towards this end, he bound himself by several rules. He would smoke, but only imported Dunhills, tobacconists by appointment to the House of Windsor. He would drink, but only Ballantine's 12 Years Old, German beer, or the finest of French champagne. He would wench, but only with the classiest of tarts. He would dress western, but only with flair, and he would always keep the peace till circumstances left him with no other option.

For academic scores Sirdar decided to rely on palm greasing. He took out a membership with the USIS to facilitate his admission to an Ivy League College in the United States to study business management. Later, he

could apply the most modern of American methods to his family business – methods which had already started transforming the economies of several small third world countries of the Pacific Rim. Yes. He, too, would benefit from the American Way.

Sirdar sorted it out with his father. They would not invest any more of their profits, but bank them, and content themselves with just guarding their interests and getting sufficient finances into the States for his studies and the contacts he hoped to cultivate.

During the first year of his studies at FC, Sirdar used his time wisely. A few weeks after classes started, he befriended a clerk and bribed him for a copy of a list of students with their affiliation. From this list he selected and made one of his own, and set about to deliberately cultivate relations with those who came from well-connected backgrounds. All others he rejected and thought their company a waste of time – except for a brilliant handful whom he was sure would go far. These he even helped out financially. It was at this time that he bought his first filing cabinets and started his files and card indexes.

Sirdar threw lavish parties with plenty of liquor, women and the obsequious photographer-cameraman behind the one-way mirror. Each reel went into a separate file.

His hold on the lads by means of the photographs and prostitute's affidavits was a long term investment. He had another hold on them, which was more immediate and which they recognized. College life in Pakistan, whatever the exclusiveness of an institution, is gang orientated. Dara's friends did not have to worry

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about gangs. His reputation was a blanket protection.

Kala approved whole-heartedly of his son's approach. If rich parents were tight-fisted, then they must share the blame for their sons' moral digressions. Kala Warris was, of course, once again impressed by his son's farsightedness and wonderstruck by the continued possible uses of the white man's wisdom in a sovereign state freed of colonial shackles.

Sirdar's thoughts were interrupted by the airline's synthetic coffee and accompanying snacks. He noted with cynicism that the national airline of a dirt poor country proud of its rich heritage, had subcontracted its catering to Maxim's of Paris. He downed the coffee anyway, lit a cigarette, and leaned back in his seat. His eyes stared at the passing cloud beneath an azure sky. Massaged by the hum of perfectly tuned engines, his mind clicked another shutter.

Roxanna!

Yes.

She came with a group of her Kinnaird College classmates to attend a bi-lingual intercollegiate debate.

As the familiar KC microbus stopped at the steps of the FC College Hall, the door was politely held open by one of the group of boys – a well dressed young man with the legend PROCTOR proclaiming his status from the lapel of his well cut blue blazer.

Their eyes met, gazes locked, and the world stood still.

Then the moment passed, unnoticed by the others, replaced by Sirdar's cultured voice from a smiling face.

"Why hello, Roxanna!" he said in English.

"Oh! Hi, Sirdoo!"

Her cheeks were flushed.

The same banalities – a façade for uncommunicated words and unspoken thoughts while the world passed by.

The American professor in charge of the group was a tall, slim spinster in her forties devoted to her College. She gave Sirdar a quick smile. The girls did the same, and there was a scattering of hellos in the air.

"There's still a half hour for the debate to start. Why don't we – just the two of us – talk over old times at the college tuck?" Sirdar suggested gently to Roxanna.

Roxanna glanced appealingly at her chaperone.

"Miss Gregson, this is one my classmates from Cathedral High, Sirdar Ali Shah. Sirdoo, this is Miss Gregson, our English teacher."

They smiled and murmured commonplaces at each other while Sirdar felt a tug at his heart. *Sirdoo!*

Roxanna's eyes continued their helpless appeal, but her voice was confident when she addressed her teacher.

"Miss Gregson," she said, "Sirdoo says it's still a half hour before the debate starts. May I accept his offer of a cup of tea?"

Miss Gregson's eyes twinkled.

"Yes, if you want to. And you, young man, take care of her!" she warned Sirdar.

"Don't worry, ma'am," he reassured, "I'll bring her back in one piece."

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Sirdar and Roxanna cut across the wide expanse of well tended lawn under gossipy stares. Miss Gregson's heart warmed, and she thought, what a nice pair they make ... such an elegant young man, and what a graceful girl ... maybe they'd get married and their kids would – she checked her runaway thoughts and mentally scolded herself for being a romantic.

While crossing the lawn they were silent, just content with being together. As Sirdar held the door to the cafeteria and Roxanna stepped inside, four boys at the table gave her a look, then flushed when they saw who she was with.

“Care for something?” one of the four asked.

“No, thank you,” Sirdar replied courteously, and made himself comfortable at the corner table opposite Roxanna.

The four lads paid the bill and departed, leaving them alone in the place. Sirdar ordered tea.

“So, Sirdoo, are you engaged?” she asked with a lurking anxiety behind the impish eyes resting on the heavy gold ring.

“No – this is just my father's present for starting college,” he replied to Roxanna's question. “Besides, who'd give their daughter's hand to a murder suspect?”

He immediately regretted his words.

She cast him a horrified look.

“Sirdoo!” she exclaimed. “Did you kill that man in that awful way?”

“What do you think?” he retorted. “Did I do it?”

His eyes mocked hers in desperation.

“What do I know? First the papers said you did it. Then they said you didn’t do it. But I’m asking you – *did you do it?*”

“And I’m asking you – *do you think I did it?*”

“Don’t be an ass. What do you think? What do I think? I don’t know!”

The old anger and defiance were still a part of her.

“Okay. Then tell me – do you know who I am? Where I live?”

Roxanna sat silent, very still, and the air between them crackled with tension. Then she seemed to straighten up and tower over him.

She enunciated each word carefully:

“You filthy, two-bit bastard, the day after you joined school everyone knew. I thought we both understood each other. I thought you knew that I knew you knew. You son-of-a-bitch! My father is the DIG Lahore Range, and I wouldn’t know? After the murder uproar my father gave me each detail about your father when I told him you and I had been in the same class. I didn’t believe you committed that degrading murder. I thought you were still Sirdoo, not *Khooni* Dara like they said. I thought you still had self respect and respect for others. And all this while you’ve been thinking that whatever it was between us –” her voice was beginning to lose the carefully controlled enunciation and crack at the joints “– was because I thought you were from one of those *respectable* families, and not because you were yourself?”

Roxanna’s eyes roved the empty cafeteria.

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She was breathing in great gulps now, fighting to keep back the sobs which threatened to pierce her self control. She went on:

“I cared for you, but you turned out to be a cold blooded bastard. So cynical, always, with that wise smirk. Always unreachable, and far away. Now I realize your crooked mind was making twisted schemes all along. That’s why you never spoke a tender word to me – never admitted a need for me! What did you expect – that I’m a girl and I should have come crawling to you?”

“I’ve been hearing about you. You go to Lahore College and even our College with all those loafers in your gang and your big car and chase girls. Did you ever bother to look me up?”

“You louse, for a year, each time I came out of college, I fantasized about you waiting outside for me. In spite of your family’s profession –” Sirdar winced, it was like a slap in the face.

“– you know nothing about women. Why did you get beneath my skin when there are so many girls prettier than me where you live? The papers were right. You ARE *Khooni* Dara. You must have done that brutal killing and I debased myself to even think of you.”

Leaving her tea untouched, she almost ran outside, then checked herself, and sobbing silently, walked briskly towards the college hall.

Sirdar sat stock still. There was a dark well inside him – black and bottomless, and empty, as he watched the last of his boyhood walk out of the cafeteria and out of his life.

What can I say Roxanna? I dare not tell you what you want to hear, not with my eyes in yours ...

Roxanna ... we are imprisoned by our own worlds

Roxanna ...

“Ladies and gentlemen. We are now flying over ...”

The Captain’s voice interrupted Sirdar’s thoughts. He looked through the window but could see nothing. He leaned back and closed his eyes.

It was past the midnight police whistle when Dara entered Heera Mandi. Leaving the Buick at the foot of Rakhi’s stairway, he walked up, watched fearfully by the lounging Kanjars. Experienced people. They knew that when a man’s eyes were rip-roaring pig drunk, but his step still steady, he was very dangerous.

Midway up the stairs, Dara started to shout.

“Rakhi! Rakhi! *Ohe Jani!* Where are you? Your Dara is here!”

She stood at the head of the stairs and her eyes widened at his condition. Without a word she took his hand and led him to the bedroom.

Rakhi slowly opened her eyes against the daylight. The sun had long since risen, but Dara was still asleep. Seeing him cuddled up in the red velvet quilt sent a fresh wave of desire racing through her loins and she started rubbing her naked body against his.

Dara turned over, his hand automatically went to her shaven mound and she shivered. “Daraya – ”

“Mmm ...”

“Is your Roxanna better than me in bed?”

His eyes opened fully, and he propped up on an

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elbow, staring at her. The stare sent a chill coursing down her spine. She realized he was on a razor's edge. One wrong word from her, and he would surely snuff her without the least compunction.

The flat of his hand caught her on the side of her face, leaving its imprint, and she gasped.

“Mother-fucking whore! Daughter of a barking bitch, next time you take that name I'll cut your tongue and shove it up your wide-hot cunt!”

The moment had passed and Rakhi thanked Allah, but did not speak or make a move. There was a nothingness insides her, like dead cigarette ash, as she watched him get out of bed and start to dress. He had bent down to lace his shoes when she spoke. “You're the only man I've loved. Don't do this to me. Forgive me.”

Dara made no reply, and when he was in the doorway, Rakhi spoke again, her eyes and voice filled with pleading.

“I can love no other. You know that. What will I do?”

“Masturbate!”

Without looking back he walked down the stairs.

The aircraft tore its way through the quiet of the heavens. Inside, the passengers were falling asleep one by one, their lights dimming out like so many fireflies at the advent of dawn. Try as he might, Sirdar could not sleep. He pressed the button for the hostess, hoping for a smile, albeit a professional one, and the sway of her hips, far from being synthetic, very natural. He was disappointed by the arrival of a young steward.

“Coffee, please.”

As the steward nodded and went away, Sirdar picked up a magazine. After some time, he discovered he couldn't concentrate ...

There was a two day stint in England on this journey to America. It was more than he could bear.

Drake beaming, Juliana crying, and the baby, now three and a half years old, shy.

Juliana couldn't wait to mother him, chattering, talking rapidly, pointing out the gold necklace he had given her. She well nigh killed him by stuffing him with all sorts of dishes, and had to be almost physically restrained by Drake, who took pains to reassure her. “Easy girl – he'll come again.”

Drake was well set in a chic London school as a boxing coach, doing the job he loved and did best. He had taken two days leave of absence to show Sirdar the sights of London. Apparently Drake had not heard of Sirdar's rise to fame as Khooni Dara. When they were alone and Sirdar told him, Drake took it with a shrug, but his eyes were sad.

Juliana was very proud that he was going to The Harvard Business School, and told the neighborhood, embarrassing Drake by her naïveté. He thought it was gauche, she didn't.

This was not the only reason they disagreed. Each time they met someone, Juliana would insist “... and he was a son to us, and look at him now, isn't he handsome?” embarrassing both men.

Juliana was a woman. She knew Drake's pride in

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Sirdar matched hers, but he would not talk about it. Sirdar's need she knew by instinct, and how to meet it.

When it was time for Sirdar to board his flight for the United States, it wasn't just Juliana who cried. Little Alex added his wails under the stiff upper-lipped disapproval of the watching British.

Eleven

After the first two weeks of cultural shock, Sirdar got into the daily routine of an American student. Description of life in the United States which he had gleaned from the USIS came in handy. He avoided that most common of Pakistani mistakes when arriving at a western university – that of dressing up. He straight away settled into the jeans and jersey routine.

On arrival in Boston, one of his first investments had been two pairs of jeans, a couple of jerseys and a zip up jacket. He had no ambition to go through college as *that fuckin' nabob*.

Sirdar made no friends and lived in a rooming house run by an Irish widow who gave him a room with an attached bath plus three solid meals of 'home cookin'' every day. It was wholesome food, but still overcooked meat, flour-thickened stew, and vegetables in a puddle. He missed his beloved curries and wholewheat *rotis*. He was wary of plunging blindly into any social activity before feeling the ground. His classmates, men and women, were curious about this short, slightly pockmarked, but otherwise goodlooking, man. He would arrive early and wait in front of the classroom, greeting his classmates in his cultivated Oxbridge. Of the girls, he noticed some who were friendly, but he was wary of emotional entanglements – at least until he learnt whether the teachers would sell grades like in

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Pakistan or whether he would have to work for them as it was rumored.

Of the men, he noticed one in particular. Tall, slim, and a little swarthy with a Roman nose. Probably of Mexican or Italian extraction, he thought.

It was in the third week during a free period that Sirdar went to the cafeteria, his first time in a self-service establishment, and he missed the white jacketed waiters of the FC tuck at Lucas Center. Earlier, he had been content to sit by himself on a bench and go through the books on his syllabus, left alone by the students when their natural American friendliness was met by a studied formality. Being Americans, they took it as a rebuff. Being a Punjabi, Sirdar's formality was a measure of extreme respect.

Sirdar chose a sandwich and milk. There were some curious looks.

"I do hope there is no ham in this sandwich," he said.

"No, mister. It's prime beef – America's best."

Sitting at a table, he was just about to take a bite of America's Prime Beef when there was a "Hi there!" at his elbow.

He looked up into a pair of friendly brown eyes. He had no option but to return the smile. It was the Latin type he had noticed earlier, who now eased himself opposite with a can of beer.

"Which group are you in?" the Latin type asked.

Sirdar told him and discovered they were both scheduled to take part in the same seminar.

"Did you go to school in England?"

"No," replied Sirdar, anticipating the other's drift.

“Your accent’s very English,” observed the Latin type.

Sirdar smiled.

“Thank you.”

There was an awkward silence.

Then, because he was lonely, and because he sensed the other’s sincerity, Sirdar told the American what he was squirming to know.

“I’m from Pakistan. I went to school in Pakistan.”

The American raised an eyebrow and then his brow crinkled in puzzlement. This was followed by an apologetic smile.

“I guess I’m just ignorant, hadn’t heard of it before – say, aren’t you part of India?”

Sirdar’s ears felt hot. He cursed Pakistan’s ministries of Information and Tourism mentally, while explaining to the American about the first theocracy of the twentieth century brought into being as the Land of the Pure by a parliamentary democracy.

At the end of the briefing, by which time he had gone through his sandwich, Sirdar lit a cigarette.

The American stuck out a slim hand.

“Joseph Giuseppe Valletti, and I sure enjoyed listening about this little country of yours. You bucked a lot of pressure and got your piece of country. By the way, if it matters anything, I’m first generation Italian – Sicilian, to be exact.”

“Sirdar Ali Shah,” Sirdar formally replied, and added with a twinkle. “If it matters, I’m first generation Pakistani.”

And this was the start of a friendship that was to fill a void in what would otherwise have been a lonely life

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for Sirdar in the United States.

It developed slowly with Joseph offering Sirdar a lift in his car to Brookline. Joseph himself lived on the North Shore.

Sirdar expected to see a typical student's second hand Ford. The gray Cadillac surprised him, and then he cursed himself. Earlier, in the cafeteria when he had noticed the Omega chronometer and diamond ring, he should have been prepared for something of the sort.

As the sedan surged ahead with a silent purr, Joe questioned Sirdar, eyes straight ahead on the road.

"You on a scholarship?"

"No. My father's financing me. And you?"

"Oh – Uncle Sam's paying my fees!"

"Does that mean you're on a scholarship?"

"Not really. I just graduated from West Point," Sirdar became interested, "and was posted to the administration branch of the Army. I've been sent for a non-credit course to study the methods of The Harvard Business School."

Sirdar looked around the interior of the Cadillac and smiled.

"The American Army must pay its junior officers very well," he remarked.

Joseph grinned.

"This is my father. He likes to spoil me. You must be pretty rich."

"Allah is kind," replied Sirdar, "and we get along, but you certainly are."

They both laughed.

"Is your father some sort of *nabob*?" Joe wanted to know.

“No, he’s a businessman, though he acts like one. Yours?”

“He’s in business too. Transportation, garments, food processing and hotels.”

They had by now reached Sirdar’s rooming house in Brookline. As he opened the door to get out, Joe quizzed.

“What do you do in the evenings?”

“Well, I’ve got a map of Boston and I’m still in the process of acquainting myself with the geography of the city. Once I finish with that I’ll start on the nightlife. I have a lot to learn in America and should be grateful for any help.”

Yeah, you sure do buddy. First stop I’ll help you ditch that fag limey accent and speak plain American!

“It would be a pleasure. How about Saturday since we have no classes? I could come down and maybe we can pick up some girls and you can learn what Americans are like.”

“Yes. That might not be a bad idea. Thank you, sir, and goodbye.”

Passing through the hall Sirdar entered the dining room where his landlady was busy at her knitting. “Good afternoon, Mrs Doherty,” he said with a slight bow, and put his books on a table nearby.

She was a gray-haired, slim widow of Irish stock, charmed by the presence of this exotic young man. An Asian, she thought, of a country whose name she always forgot, but a gentleman, obviously a gentleman. She had read somewhere that in Asia, there were some families of the colored upper classes who could be admitted to society. Yes, he must be one of them.

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Now she looked up from her knitting and returned his smile with a charming, motherly one of her own. "Good afternoon, Mister Shah. Your dinner is ready. Should I serve it?"

"Please," replied Sirdar, and settled himself on one of the chairs surrounding the small dining table that seated four, while the old lady busied herself in the kitchen. Sirdar was reminded of Juliana's kitchen and her fussy mothering. Then he switched to something in the more immediate present, and thought himself lucky to have made the acquaintance of Joe Valletti. An Army Officer, he obviously came from a wealthy and powerful family in a town known for its Brahmins.

Boston, Sirdar had read, was reputed for its banking and business families of Anglo Saxon origin, apart from its tea party. An Italian who could afford to buy his son a Cadillac must be a unique feature in this clannish city of WASPs. It was also within his knowledge that the Italians were gangsters in the United States and controlled crime. If Joseph Valletti's father was one of them, then he had hit pay dirt. But then he dismissed the thought. He couldn't be that lucky. Besides, the sons of Italian gangsters didn't go to West Point. And even if Joe's father was a gangster, Joe had had very good upbringing – certainly upper class.

Mrs Doherty interrupted his thoughts with the sight and smell of mashed potatoes, chicken in gravy, baked vegetables, rolls and lots of butter.

His wholehearted devotion to the food brought a maternal smile to Mrs Doherty's eyes. English food he hated – it was insipid, while French cooking he found to be one big fuss. For American food he had quickly

developed a taste, especially fast food, and liked it, although it was much different from the rich, exquisitely prepared Royal Cuisine of India that boasts a total of three hundred and sixty five dishes. Finishing his dinner, Sirdar straightened his knife and fork, wiped his mouth ever so lightly with the napkin, neatly folded it, put his chair in place, and thanking the landlady, excused himself to go up to his room.

Mrs Doherty's defenses had been penetrated by Sirdar's simple adherence to an international etiquette for which he silently blessed his father.

Changing into his pajamas, he lay down on his bed and lit a cigarette. For the first time in his life he was in an environment where he was not kingpin.

From childhood onwards he was used to having his own way, secure in the protection of his father's muscle and money, and then later, when he came into his own, his reputation was enough. He felt uneasy and restless. Then it struck him he was out from under the protection of gun and knife. The thought that this was perhaps his only period of life away from the possibility of sudden, violent death filled his heart with some comfort, and then a sense of freedom he had never felt before.

Sirdar shook his head, threw these thoughts out. He wanted to retain his singleness of purpose. He would make a contact. He had to, and he would seek out his own kind, but not for active, immediate participation. That would get him into trouble and interfere with his plans for Pakistan. The American police, too, though not incorruptible, had some method of cutting corners for a reasonable sum, but it was different from what he was used to.

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No.

He would just penetrate the echelons of those who controlled crime, like himself and his father, and observe their methods. Whatever was good, he would apply to his own lucrative enterprise. His primary aim was, however, to obtain his degree. It would not only help him manage his business better, it would also be the strongest card for his social acceptance. This desire for social acceptance, too, had a dual motive, both of which he admitted to himself.

The first, that it would widen his contacts for eventual business profit.

And the second – at this he felt pained, but faced it squarely – was Roxanna. Not the girl herself, but her family. She was a different problem altogether but he had no regrets. He never did, less from arrogance than logic. No man can undo the past. One may only strive for the future. Then he exerted an effort of will, and shoved such thoughts out of his head.

The heart remained suspended in its bottomless void.

He slept.

Starting from the next day, Joe became Sirdar's voluntary PR man, introducing him around and making him part of the group. Sirdar discovered to his surprise the genuine open-hearted expansiveness of Americans.

Of the teachers, Professor Wheelus in particular impressed Sirdar, and they got on well.

After Friday classes, Joe told Sirdar what time he would pick him up Saturday evening.

On the crowded tram back to his rooming house,

Sirdar gathered his impressions of Joe. He trusted the young soldier as far as any man may trust another, but waited to take the measure of the American. Tomorrow evening's exploration of Boston's nightlife would reveal a lot.

Saturday evening, Sirdar shaved carefully to erase any five o'clock shadows. After showering, he ran a comb through his hair and slapped on his Old Spice Burley.

From his wardrobe, he selected a two-piece gray chalk stripe, confident of Ismail's cutting and stitching talents. Black dress shoes, red socks, a silk shirt and plain red woolen necktie completing the job.

He stood before the mirror, and liked his image in the English tradition. Although Americans were verbally contemptuous of English ways, deep down they suffered from a cultural hang up. Their landed classes tried to outdo each other in foxhunting, country clubbing, tweeding and horsing.

What the hell, why not the works? Sirdar took a red silk handkerchief, crumpled it with studied carelessness, and inserted it in the front pocket of his suit jacket.

He raised the lid of his trunk, and stood indecisive for a few seconds. His father had insisted, and he himself had agreed, to bring some sort of a tool 'just in case.' They had eventually decided to forsake the knuckle-duster for a *kamanidar*. Kala had first raised his eyebrows, but Dara explained.

"The way I see it, the Americans are not very strict on guns even after getting their President killed. So they won't go hard on a knife, especially a type

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unknown to them. I can always pass it off as a family curio. Now if I'm in a tight corner, the knuckle duster might not necessarily get me out, but a *barak* and the sound of the knife could give me just that useful element of surprise."

Sirdar now made up his mind and chose the knife. With the streetwise habits of Heera Mandi, he wrapped it in a white silk handkerchief and put it in his trouser pocket. In Pakistan, which has a strict penalty for carrying weapons for those who cannot pay the price, it becomes a reflex to wrap up a knife. This way, if chance movements expose it to view, all that is visible is a white handkerchief. Going down to the living room to wait for his friend, he asked Mrs Doherty for a glass of milk. For the Punjabi, milk is the manly drink rather than alcohol. He settled in the armchair with a newspaper. His father's words of advice about milk and liquor before he joined FC College came back to him.

"If you ever need to hold your booze, take a couple of glasses of milk about thirty minutes before. Then take your first four *tolas* of the booze straight, puffing a cigarette with each sip. Go real slow. Follow it with a glass of water, and then piss out all that you can. Go to the john, pop some pomegranate seeds in your mouth, come back to the table and then start slinging it down. You'll drink the other bastard beneath the table and stay on your own two feet."

As on earlier occasions, Sirdar was determined to experience the virtue of his father's words.

At six, the bell of the rooming house rang, and Joe Valletti was ushered in. As Sirdar rose and stretched his hand with a polite good evening, Joe whistled.

“Wow! You’re all dressed up!”

“And you, sir, are elegant,” replied Sirdar, not to be outdone.

The American was smart in a dark blue, well cut suit. He hid a smile at Sirdar’s quaint way of expressing himself in English.

Sirdar noticed about Joe what he had about Americans earlier. Most were incorrectly formal in their dress. When they changed from casual clothes into dark evening gear, they somehow managed to ‘match’ their neckties and insert glaring white socks in the gap between their shoes and trouser bottoms. Keeping his thoughts behind a polite smile, he courteously inquired.

“And what would you care to have?”

“Nothing, thanks. Why don’t we just push off?”

Sirdar would have none of it.

“No,” he insisted, “you are in my house for the first time. You will have coffee at least.”

He led Joe to an armchair.

“Mrs Doherty?” he asked the hovering Irishwoman.

She hurried off to comply with the dictates of eastern hospitality.

They reached the empty curb, and Joe explained with an apologetic air, “The caddy’s been taken by a friend. We’ll take a cab.”

They hailed a cab and got inside. Joe gave the driver the address of one of the smart clubs in the Combat Zone. On the way to their destination, Joe kept a lively conversation going, doing most of the talking, explaining American customs to Sirdar.

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“Buddy, we’re friends, so don’t mind anything I say. You better get Americanized. Like you shake hands all the time. So do the Italians, but it’s un-American to do so more than once a day. Now you say a formal good morning to the boys and bow to the girls. Nobody does that even in Japan any longer – Hiroshima and Nagasaki took care of that, and Macarthur and McDonalds did the mopping up. The girls think it’s cute and the guys find it’s quaint, but pretty soon they’ll be laughing at you. Just be casual, relax, say Hi or Hello – here we are!”

Sirdar’s hand went to his wallet, but Joe gripped his wrist.

“Tonight, you’re my guest.”

A pang of nostalgia pierced the Punjabi’s heart.

The smooth faced waiter hovered around their table, waiting for them to select their drinks from the menu card. Joe looked across the table at Sirdar. “You’re a Muslim. I don’t think you guys drink. What’ll you have?”

For the first time since leaving Heera Mandi for this vast foreign land of barbarians, Sirdar felt the feeling of inadequacy leave him. He was on home ground. This Italian American Lieutenant was in for a surprise.

Sirdar gave a deceptively modest smile.

“Occasionally I do. If it’s possible to lay hands on a well aged malt.”

“We can offer you a choice of Ballantine’s 12 Years, or Chivas’ Royal Salute,” the waiter said.

“Then make it a double of Ballantine’s, please.”

Joe added his own order to Sirdar’s and the waiter departed.

Sirdar offered Joe his Dunhills, which the latter

accepted. Blowing smoke out of his mouth, Joe puzzled over his companion, who had him completely baffled. Throughout the week he goes around quietly drinking milk and bowing around. At the end of the week he comes up with a taste for Ballantine's and a partiality for the vintage. He had heard that these Orientals were great ones for the libido, but this knowledge of whisky was puzzling indeed. And under his sophisticated formality, there was a cold, almost dangerous aura that he carried around him, quite like Vincenzo, his father's bodyguard. Yet, despite this confusion, Joe's sunny Mediterranean genes were drawn towards him. Joe sensed another side to Sirdar's nature, but could not really put a finger on it. What he saw before him was a veneer of pedigreed upbringing.

The waiter intruded into his thoughts with the drinks and salted cashew nuts. They raised their glasses, Sirdar initiating the "cheers!"

Joe was, once again, surprised at his friend's knowledge of this western custom.

Joe slowly sipped his drink, and noticed Sirdar was even slower, rolling each sip of the mellow liquid as though savoring it with an obvious familiarity.

Joe remarked, "Say, Shah, these are imported Dunhill cigarettes. Where do you get them from?"

Sirdar looked at the cigarette in his hand.

"That's something I did even before finding a rooming house. First day in Boston I made inquiries at the desk of the Copley Hotel, and I was directed to Pierce and Sons on Massachusetts Avenue."

"Hmm. They're good cigarettes. I smoke Kent. Do you import Dunhill's in Pakistan?"

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“Officially, no. Unofficially, yes – they’re smuggled. But they come via the land route from Europe – Balkans, Turkey and Iran, and by the time they reach us, they’re stale.”

“So what do you do back home?”

“Well – there’s an obliging air hostess on international flights –”

“Your father smokes the same brand?”

“No. He smokes the *hookah* – ever heard of the water filtered hubble bubble pipe?”

Joe nodded earnestly. He had no desire to seem ignorant of these mysteries of the orient.

“Well, that’s it. That’s what my father smokes. However, we do have good cigarettes in Pakistan. English brands made under license. Capstans and Woodbines and Wills and Gold Leaf and Three Castles, but none of them have toasted tobacco, except Gold Flake, but that has no filter tip. I hate to keep spitting out bits of tobacco.”

Joe grinned at the concluding remark.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “You got a point there. It’s a pretty funny thing. First you see a guy put a few inches of a white cylinder in his mouth. He sucks in his cheeks and all the while clutches and clings to it for life. Then, gratefully lets out the smoke. Right away, as though he suddenly remembers the evils of nicotine, you see that red piece of flesh sticking through his mouth, and the *phht* sound, and out comes a little piece of tobacco through his lips. The guy gives a satisfied smile like he’s just back from conquering Everest, and starts all over again.”

They laughed comfortably with the ease of friends

and signaled the waiter. This time Sirdar asked for a mixing of soda water and lime cordial, to be followed by another double of Ballantine's.

The waiter went to fill in their order and Sirdar excused himself to go to the john, smiling at Joe's "so soon?"

He understood Joe now, his earlier suspicions confirmed by the present actions and remarks. A sincere, well meaning young man still out to prove himself and make his bones according to the standards of his society. The 'so soon' clinched it.

As he drank from the tap and popped a few pomegranate seeds into his mouth he thought to himself – *all right you sincere bastard you might perhaps turn out to be the first friend in my whole life apart from Abba-ji and Drake, but first I'll put you under the table and then on my own terms maybe ...*

Sirdar returned to the table almost as sure of himself as in Lahore. He raised his glass.

"Bottoms up!" he said with a smile to Joe.

Before the surprised American could take his glass to his lips, Sirdar had laid his own on the table, empty, and snapped his fingers at the waiter. Joe finished his drink, and Sirdar repeated the earlier order.

The place had started filling up and the tables occupied by some very, very obvious pickups were beginning to catch Sirdar's practiced eye, when the waiter blocked his roving vision with the drinks.

Sirdar picked up the glass.

"Bottoms up –?"

He hid a smile at Joe's half-hearted nod.

This time Joe almost choked and he looked sickly.

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The waiter had a respectful look on his smooth face as his eyes made an inquiry towards the glasses. At Sirdar's nod, he picked them up and moved away.

Sirdar was now able to eye up the two girls. As they walked towards the table, he thanked nature for providing something common to all nations, the one great unifying factor – the world's oldest profession.

One was a redhead and the other a blonde. They were young and pretty and would have been called 'well endowed' in another time and place. Sirdar rose, seated them on the two empty chairs, and passed his professional eye over their bodies, clothes and general appearance. By the time the redhead introduced herself as Linda and the blonde as Tessa, Sirdar had concluded the merchandise was clean, expensive and efficient.

Joe ordered champagne for the ladies, looked Sirdar full in the eye, and smiled. Sirdar and the two girls knew fully well what that look meant.

Then Joe made one of those party jokes that are only funny in certain places and at certain times with a certain quantity of alcohol under the belt. They all laughed, rather loudly, attracting the looks of some other patrons. Most of them were well-heeled young people out for an evening's pleasure in Boston's Combat Zone.

The champagne arrived and they fell into the pleasant chatter of young people.

The redhead gave Sirdar the come-on and his hand went to her thigh and stroked the warmth. As the music started, Joe looked at Sirdar. They both felt horny.

"Time to move, Shah?"

“Sure!”

“You girls got an apartment?”

“You bet, honey,” replied Linda. “It’ll be a hundred dollars each. Pay when we get there.”

The businesslike tone twitched a vein of nostalgia somewhere in Sirdar.

The waiter brought the bill, and Sirdar was once again restrained from picking up the not inconsiderable tab.

Joe’s legs were unsteady, and his arm was taken by Tessa.

Outside, on the curb, there was no sign of a cab, and at Linda’s suggestion they started to walk, hoping to catch one later.

The night air hit both men. Sirdar felt pleasantly euphoric and Joe a little weavy. It was twenty minutes past ten.

A voice called from the rear.

“Hey greasers, that’s far enough!”

They turned.

About fifteen feet away there were three youths in leather jackets.

Linda urgently whispered.

“That’s a gang from the South End – The Vampires. The tall guy’s Don McCurry. He’s a killer!”

The foreigner next to her disturbed her a little. He seemed to relax.

There were few people in the street at this time, and in a flurry of footsteps, they abruptly found themselves alone and the three Vampires closer. The deserted street made the racial tone of the Vampires’ chants frightening.

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“Fuckin’ slant-eyed gooks – gooks and niggers and greasers all the same – gonna cut your dicks – what about the chicks – cut your dicks – chicks!” Chuckles – flat dry sounds which were not really chuckles.

Two of the Vampires were about eight paces behind Joe. The tall one, the leader, Don McCurry, was built like a tank, and almost on top of Joe – who was between him and Sirdar – and the way he balanced himself on the balls of his feet had the Kanjar worried. He was sure Joe was no coward, but then however fit a Lieutenant of the US Army might be, he was not trained for this type of combat, least of all when tipsy. The ball was in Sirdar’s court.

Just as Joe started a drunken, “We are not greasy–” Sirdar closed in and clipped the Vampire very neatly under the chin.

As Don McCurry started to drop and the other two Vampires moved, Sirdar added two more to the crotch and then had the knife out.

His *barak* ripped through the Puritan silence of a New England night.

To the Vampires, it was something completely unexpected. With the sheep instinct of all gang orientated toughs, they broke and ran from Wazirabad’s finest steel.

Unable to restrain himself, Sirdar whooped and performed a few spontaneous steps of the *p’hangra* with the knife raised above his head.

The girls and Joe stared in wide eyed amazement as he bent over the prone Vampire, knife in hand.

Tessa tugged at his sleeve.

“Sweetheart, the cops could be here any second. Let’s get out, please!”

“I’m going to chop off the bugger’s balls and stuff them in his mouth,” Sirdar grinned.

Joe grabbed his other arm, cold sober now.

“No, Shah. I said you’re my guest, and this is my fight, and I’m Sicilian. Don’t insult me.”

He said the right thing and Sirdar folded the knife and stood up.

A little ahead they caught a cruising cab. Tessa gave an address in the North end to the driver and as they rounded the corner, heard a police siren behind them. Joe now started pawing Linda with one hundred percent American earnestness.

She giggled.

At the neon-lit store, they stopped. Sirdar came out carrying a bottle of whisky. He had found his balance now. Things were moving.

Sirdar liked the quiet decor of the girls’ apartment.

His eyes took it in as Joe counted some notes and gave them to Linda, while Tessa brought glasses and a soda siphon. Linda left the room, probably to secure the night’s wages, and Sirdar proceeded to make the drinks.

Tessa guided him to the bathroom, where he had a luxuriously relieving pee, and popped some pomegranate seeds in his mouth.

An hour later Joe completely passed out in Linda’s arms, one hand over a delightfully bare breast, while Sirdar, himself quite hazy, was led into a bedroom by

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Tessa.

It was three in the morning when Sirdar finally reached his room, letting himself in by the duplicate key issued to him by Mrs Doherty. Before going to sleep he filled a glass with water and popped in a few dried plums and tamarind for the morning's expected hangover. As he went about his task, he puzzled over Joe's conversation over the phone while at Linda and Tessa's apartment.

"It's me – Joe. Isn't the Golden Sands club in Frank Agnelli's territory? ... It is? ... Good. Punk gang by the name of the Vampires ... A guy, Don McCurry ... you know him? Fine! They may not be good, but they were sure good enough to jump me and a pal of mine as we got out the Golden Sands with a couple of girls ... Easy now, don't bust your britches, I'm okay. This pal of mine, laid out one ... Don McCurry, I think, and the other two ran when he pulled out a knife and gave a real neat battle cry, kinda rebel yell ... unh hunh! No Apache. Pakistani, and I had to stop him cutting off McCurry's balls ... no, no, NO! Don't damage them permanent. Just lean a little and have them apologize to my friend. He lives in Brookline, Mrs Doherty's rooming house ... Yeah, yeah. Okay, thanks, good night."

When he had concluded the conversation, Linda and Tessa had exchanged a look pregnant with meaning, and then hurriedly looked away. Sirdar had been too drunk to take account of it then, and too filled with post-coital lethargy to bother about it right now.

He flopped to sleep.

Next morning he did not look a complete wreck.

However, the traces of a vigorous Saturday night were evident. When he came down, Mrs Doherty clucked in motherly disapproval to herself. Then, since he looked so sweet, disapproval evolved into a fussy series starting with black coffee and ending with more coffee. There. He looked better now. He was a good lad. Deserved a night off.

Later, Sirdar settled himself in Mrs Doherty's living room in front of the TV, sighing as he eased himself into the ample softness of the horse hair sofa.

She smiled an Irish smile. Men.

The front doorbell rang.

Sirdar stayed Mrs Doherty with a gesture of his hand and went to answer it.

As he opened the door he saw last night's Vampires – all three of them, standing rather uncomfortably. Don McCurry had an unmistakable lump on his chin, and the other two showed bruised faces. They were dressed in jeans and jerseys. Before Sirdar could say anything, McCurry spoke.

“Mister Shah, we've come to apologize for last night. We were drunk and didn't know you were a personal guest of the Don.”

They were ill at ease and plainly frightened.

Sirdar shut the door behind him.

“You are my guests now. Let's discuss this over a cup of coffee, shall we?” he suggested.

He led them towards the neighborhood diner.

On the way they said nothing. The diner was empty and as Sirdar ordered coffee for all, they settled at a corner table.

Sirdar made no attempt to start a conversation.

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Without a word he passed his packet of Dunhills around, which the hoods mutely accepted. Don McCurry swiftly produced a lighter and held it out to Sirdar, who maintained the silence.

First one, then the other Vampires, cleared nervous throats, and cast furtive looks in Sirdar's direction.

Don McCurry swallowed and took the initiative. "Reckon we're ashamed of ourselves, and you being such a hospitable gentleman."

"Yes, sir. Us too!" chimed the other two Vampires.

Sirdar nodded his cold smile.

Don McCurry continued nervously. "Mister Shah, my name's Don McCurry. This is Rob Williams –" gesturing to an almost plump thug with a sugary weak mouth, "and this is Ed Muldoon."

Ed Muldoon was tall, thin, and looked mean.

Sirdar regarded each one of them with his flat gray eyes, which they found hard to meet. Then he spoke, and his voice matched the eyes. "What *Don* do you refer to, whose guest I am?"

"I mean Don Valletti, father of the guy – sorry, gentleman you were with last night."

They were interrupted by the arrival of the coffee and when they were alone again, Sirdar continued in the same tone.

"First you said the *Don*, like a title. Are you sure you know what you're talking about?"

To the Vampires it sounded as though Sirdar meant if they had any idea of the power and status of a Don, and as he listened, he felt what he rarely felt.

“Yes sir. Sure we know what a Don is. Boss of bosses, runs the town. Nobody, but nobody crosses his family.”

His voice dropped to a whisper.

“We’re lucky we ain’t hurt permanent, or in the morgue.”

“You mean the Don’s some sort of a gangster?” Sirdar asked point blank.

The full implication of his question hit the Vampires.

They realized they had been shooting off their mouths. If this stranger did not know, then it was not the Don’s intention that he should. They looked at each other in nervous silence.

To Sirdar a street punk was a street punk, whatever his biological makeup or geographical location. He leaned his face slightly forward, his mouth wide open in a mirthless grin.

“Listen. Listen hard. I’m from Pakistan. It’s on India’s northwest. In Pakistan there’s a town by the name of Lahore. You guys think Boston’s a tough town? Boston’s a baby’s nursery compared to Lahore, and I’m Lahore’s toughest.”

Rob William’s face, white enough, had almost completely lost color.

“If you ever get the chance to travel eight thousand miles and happen to disgrace my town, ask somebody for *Khooni* Dara – and they’ll bring you to my place.”

The three Vampires were in a bind. The way this dangerous man spoke and had fought the previous night, he could only be some sort of an Asian connection of the Don’s. Else why would retribution have been so prompt and executed so personally by

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Capo Agnelli when Perrino usually handled such things? His earlier question, so brazen, could have only been a ploy to test them.

Ed Muldoon made up his mind, and spoke in a nasal tone.

“I guess you could call him a gangster, Mister Shah. Only he’s much more, owns the rackets and the gangsters, and his connections run way past the State and right up to Capitol Hill. He’s in most of the legit rackets in the State as well. His arms stretch all the way to Europe. Take us, now. We’re small timers in the show case racket, and each time we smash a shop window, we give a cut to the local Mafiosi, which goes right up to the Don.”

Sirdar was curious about the term *Mafiosi*, spoken with such respect, and then *Appalachia* and *Sergeant Shriver* flashed across his mind. Time now for the carrot.

He laid a hundred dollar note on the table.

“In my country, I too, am what you call a Don. I accept your apology, and will communicate the same to Mister Valletti. Since I have not the time to entertain you properly, take this as a token from an elder brother and use it to entertain yourselves.”

They protested, then deferred to his insistence.

Sirdar rose from the table and offered his hand.

They eagerly shook it.

Don McCurry offered in a humble tone. “We’re small time, Mister Shah, that’s for sure. But you ever need a bunch of small timers, we hang around Janowicz’s delicatessen, that’s towards the south end of town.”

Sirdar nodded and left the diner.

A horn sounded at the curb, and Sirdar went out just as a man emerged from a white Lincoln continental.

“Mister Shah?” he queried.

“Yes.”

“Mister Valletti’s compliments, sir. I’m to take you to the mansion.”

He held the door open, and Sirdar sank into luxurious black upholstery in genuine leather. He wryly concluded the chauffeur was more than a chauffeur, and, as they hissed onto the long driveway past a gatehouse and gates electrically operated by a pair of tough guards, his estimation of garlic smelling Italian gangsters went up another notch.

The sedan effortlessly halted at the porch of a graciously restored nineteenth century mansion. Joe came down the steps to welcome him, attired for this Sunday in slacks and sports jacket with open collar. Sirdar himself was casually dressed in a blue cardigan and cream slacks over dove-gray hush puppies.

He was ushered inside and introduced to the family. Joe’s mother was a well fed matron, busily preparing lunch in the kitchen. The two Valletti girls, one younger and the other older than Joe, gave friendly, polite smiles through their dark prettiness.

After the introductions were over, Joe led him to the tastefully furnished living room and switched on some music. They savored the melodies of Hawaii in silence for a while. Just as the strains died down, a tall, very well dressed, very fat man entered with a beaming face and outstretched hand.

“Hello, Mister Shah. I’m Marcello Phillippe Valletti,” he glanced at his son. “Sorry to have kept your guest

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waiting, but Brooke-Jones was here – no, not the Wall Street one, his cousin, from Providence Rhode Island,” he finished, at his son’s slight look of puzzlement.

The very fit pair of alert, hard-eyed young men behind him were impassive.

Sirdar took the outstretched hand.

“An honor to meet you, sir, or should I say Don Valletti?” Sirdar said, looking him straight in the eye.

The two young men with hard old eyes stiffened and their hands seemed to hover in the region of their armpits. Without turning his head, the fat man said, “Vincenzo, Mike, wait out on the patio.”

They obeyed orders with the discretion of English butlers in a Wodehouse novel.

Even Joe looked serious now.

Valletti gestured gracefully.

“Please sit down, Mister Shah, and tell me what you mean by *Don Valletti*.”

The Don’s beam was firmly back in place, eyes inscrutable. Playing by ear, Sirdar knew he was treading sensitive ground. For the next fifteen minutes or so, he told the Don about his own background. When he had finished, Joe looked very surprised indeed. The Don still beamed.

“Why do you tell me all this?”

“Because I believe you are powerful enough to check it all out. Our enterprises are quite similar, and I don’t want you to think I was prying. We should be clear about each other – who knows when one man may be of use to another,” he blandly concluded. He was sure his strategy of taking the bull by the horns was going to pay off handsomely.

Valletti laughed and nodded.

“You’ll go far, and it would be my pleasure to do business with you some day. Meanwhile, Joe here will tell you all you need to know about our organization at present. During your stay here, or in Europe, just give me a call if you have any problems, although you look very capable of handling most of them. We do not forget favors, as we do not forget our enemies.”

Sophia, the younger Valletti girl, announced that lunch was served. They went out on to the patio where the food was laid out with sparkling crystal ware and crockery under a smiling sun. It was a warm, family affair, designed to make Sirdar feel at home, with Joe’s mother and elder sister Claudia bustling around them.

They were on the meatballs and spaghetti when Joe’s elder brother came in and introduced himself as Eugenio. He was a muscular, quiet man with an undercurrent of lethality beneath a cloak of big brotherliness.

“How do you like the States?” he asked Sirdar.

Sirdar was thoughtful for a while, and the Vallettis, proud Americans, waited expectantly for his reply. Then he spoke, choosing his words with care.

“That’s a tricky question,” Sirdar said with a smile. “If I say I like the States, you’ll think I’m flattering you. If I say the opposite, that’s rude, especially after the best meal in my life. Let’s say I keep my opinion reserved.”

The Vallettis smiled. However, the eyes of Eugenio and the Don were appraising through the flash of well-maintained dentition.

After lunch, Joe and Sirdar were alone on the sun-drenched patio. Over coffee, Joe satiated Sirdar’s

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curiosity in a detailed account of the *Socéta Honorata* since its inception in Sicily centuries ago, and maturity into modern organized crime in the States.

Sirdar, perhaps for the first time in his life, was thoroughly impressed. He leaned forward in his chair. “Joe, I want to ask you a big favor.”

“Shoot.”

“Our operation is crude by your standards. Would you plead with your father to teach me your methods? We have the groundwork for such an organization. Counterparts of Omerta, Vendetta, family loyalties and blood ties run stronger than yours. What we need are modern methods to strengthen our organizational structure and that’s what the greatest country in the world can give us. *We*, too, would like to share in the American Dream.”

Joe’s face was thoughtful, almost grave.

“I can’t promise anything like that. I’ll try and sound out Eugenio first. I’m not a member of the *Socéta*, neither am I interested. With me, it’s just an accident of birth, and I intend to pursue my career in the Military. After all, that’s why I joined West Point, all of which doesn’t please my father.

“But Geno, no, he’s *Socéta Honorata* all the way, to tell the truth, and is very much my father’s right hand. When he got his law degree from Columbia, he was put under study with Uncle Lentini, papa’s *consigliore*. Since last year uncle Lentini has been retired, and Geno’s the full time *consigliore*. If he agrees, nobody’s going to object.”

Joe's eyes were sad, and full of regret, and Sirdar understood. They sat silently, not looking nor daring to look at each other directly.

In the next two weeks, Geno made extensive inquiries that included the Royal Oriental Society for information on the Kanjars as an ethnic group. At the end of the period, Sirdar was informed that if he took an oath of silence on his Koran, his training would commence. However, Geno would reserve the right to screen those of their operations which the Honorable Society did not consider it in their interest to expose him to.

Sirdar was delighted, while Joe experienced a sense of loss.

A closed meeting between the Don, Geno and Sirdar took place in which Joe did not take part. After the oath of silence, an agreement between Heera Mandi and Boston was reached. Sirdar would be a sleeping connection in Pakistan. Till such time as both parties thought in their mutual interest to activate the connection, the partnership would be strategic.

For training purposes, Sirdar would be attached to Frank Agnelli, one of the three capos of the Valletti family. Agnelli was forty-one, truculent, and very thin, with a discreet knife scar on the side of his neck.

Sirdar and Frank took an almost immediate liking to each other. Frank was good, a capo by dint of merit.

Throughout the long, frugal New England winter, Sirdar was kept busy between his curricular and extra curricular activities. As spring came, Agnelli commented one day, "You know, Shah, there's hardly

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anything left for me to tell you. I think you move up to Geno's class now."

During this period, Sirdar had learnt of the numbers rackets, the loans shark operations, almost similar to Lahore's Pathan money lenders, and *Hundi* operators, the gambling and the junk racket and running women. The last, the Cosa Nostra did not run directly, but merely protected. Sirdar soaked up all this practical, working knowledge in the perspective of his own business methods, crude and primitive in comparison, adding it to his knowledge of business management learnt according to the Harvard casebook method.

In the ensuing evenings with Geno, the Don's acceptable and very natural heir, Sirdar learnt the finer details of the Cosa Nostra's methods of operation. How they channeled their illegal money into legal enterprises by the judicious application of their control over the trade and business unions, and the ever present but unspoken threat of button men ready with their guns in the background. Their sophisticated bribes. Not a roll of crumpled rupees in the palm as in Pakistan. A police officer would suddenly discover the lottery ticket he had just bought was the lucky one. The garbage collector's association would deposit a large amount with the Republican Party's campaign fund, whereas the olive oil importer's association would donate an equal amount to the Democrats. Both organizations being Cosa Nostra controlled, whichever party was in power would naturally be grateful to one of its supporters.

A judge's son would win a much sought after scholarship grant from a respectable philanthropic

organization, whose source of money would, of course, be the Cosa Nostra.

Sirdar's mind soared with possibilities. The future, he was convinced, belonged to the United States of America, which would chart a New World Order.

The Vallettis treated him as a family member, taking him on their outings. The Don had recently started to play golf, and he invited Sirdar, but the latter declined. He preferred to carry on with his thrice weekly pistol firing practice at the police shooting club, rubbing shoulders with Boston's Finest. Sergeant Flaherty, a crusty Irishman, eighteen years on the force, and significantly enough, not on the Cosa Nostra's payroll, taught him all he would ever need to know about hand guns. He became very good indeed.

During the summer, he took special courses. Holidays would come later. Once every week, he faithfully telephoned his father, as well as writing regularly. He was being a good son.

The warm summer days then turned into autumn.

It was September, and the colors of the trees lining Boston's avenues brought lovers' songs to the most confirmed of bachelors.

Sirdar made his way to class across the campus, whistling softly to himself. The day before had been fun. He had cooked Pakistani food for the Vallettis and some of their relatives. They had all loved it, making a fuss over him, the older ones chattering in Italian. The memory made him feel warm.

As he approached the cafeteria, he heard the sound of a drum beating the *p'hangra*. Unconsciously, his shoulders began to twitch, and he walked with a fast

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step, smiling and shaking his head and shoulders in time to the music. The passing students gave him grins and hellos, except for some whose looks were tempered by sympathy. Sirdar responded by twitching his shoulders even more. As he rounded the corner, he came upon a bizarre scene.

Half a dozen of the Indian students, four Sikhs and a pair of small Hindus in their shadow, had acquired a *t'hol*. One of the little Hindus was lustily pounding it, eyes rolling with delight, while the Sikhs performed a *p'hangra* to the amused delight of the clapping students. The second little Hindu stood at the edge of the crowd and nodded vigorously in time to the beat.

As Sirdar neared the crowd, someone handed him a newspaper; headlines screamed:

WAR BETWEEN INDIA AND PAKISTAN
LAHORE OCCUPIED BY INDIAN TROOPS
PAKISTANI AND INDIAN IMMIGRANTS CLASH IN
LONDON

The gall rose in Sirdar's throat and he walked away, bitter.

*ROXANNA! ... Indian troops in Lahore ...
ROXANNA ... Snake-eyed Gurkhas, vengeful Rajputs
and merciless Sikhs ... Roxanna – Abba-ji – Roxanna
... Roxanna ... Roxanna ... roxanna roxannaroxanna
... who would he avenge himself on ... Ya Allah ... Ya
Mohammed ... O'Saint Sakhi Sarwar ... O'Data Ganj
Baksh save Lahore, your nagri ... O' Black Shawled
One show your power ... take all ... save Roxanna ...
Roxanna ... ROXANNA ... Roxannaroxannaaroxanna
...*

He wandered off campus, he did not know where.

It started to rain in a thin drizzle. It was cold – *RoxannaAbbaji* – he ran into cafe, his lips chattering ... a familiar face ... he ran to it ... it was Marcus Vivaldi, one of Capo Agnelli's top button men and enforcer par excellence. He was a short, cat-smooth hood with two gold capped teeth, and the only one of the Mafiosi among Sirdar's acquaintance whose breath sometimes smelt of garlic.

"What's a matta, Mista Shah? You okay?" he asked.

The words came out of Sirdar's mouth in a rush. Marcus grinned when the diatribe ended.

The man next to Marcus spoke now. He was a fiftyish black, quietly dressed – not unsurprisingly, for he followed one of those upper class professions of the low class people – he was a Roxbury numbers runner. His accent was free of the inflections of the street. Sirdar was in no state to allow his natural dislike of a people darker than him to stop him taking the conversation seriously.

"The way it happened was funny, mister," the black said. "The news agencies have made a correction. They ran the Indian press statement on the air because there was no news handout from your side. Lahore is safe, and the Pakistan army's doing well in Kashmir."

For the past few weeks, Sirdar had followed the activities of guerrillas in Kashmir with interest. The Pakistan government delightedly called them freedom fighters whose objective was to merge Kashmir with Muslim Pakistan. The Indian government claimed they were Pakistani regulars.

They talked of other things while Sirdar had a sandwich and a coffee. Then they drove down to the

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Valletti's home. They knew of the outbreak of war, and sensed his need for comfort. It was adequately met, and never forgotten by him.

Never.

Till the news of a cease-fire, he hung around the Valletti's home, telephoning Kala every day. It was heartening to hear that Lahore was safe and that Kala was making a tidy little black market profit from war material. *Roxanna – Ya Allah Shukar* – Kala also told his son that while dog-fights between Indian and Pakistani war planes took place in Lahore's skies, its people, regardless of age or sex – stood on their rooftops and cheered fearlessly.

After the ceasefire, as both India and Pakistan characteristically claimed victory in the aftermath of a stalemate, Sirdar and Joe painted the town red.

Marcus was at the wheel of the Cadillac and Joe and Sirdar in the rear seat. Both were happily drunk with the two girls in their laps giggling at the fumbling hands. By four in the morning they decided to call it a night and Sirdar had forgotten the key to Mrs Doherty's. It was decided that he might as well sleep it off at the Valletti's.

It was at ten the next day that he was woken by a gentle shake of his shoulder. He opened his eyes and his head hammered with the fumes of the previous night's alcohol. Then he blinked, shook his head from side to side, and sat up with a Herculean effort of will.

"Oh! ... good morning, Mrs Valletti ..."

She looked very serious, and her eyes were wet at the corners. She made the sign of the cross over him, and put an arm around his shoulders.

“I bring news which is not good. Your father has died.”

Six hours later, a dry-eyed Sirdar was at the airport. The Don had arranged everything for his flight back to Pakistan. The Vallettis were quiet and sad. Others of the Honorable Society who were informed were there to see him off and offer their condolences.

When his boarding announcement came on the tannoy, they all embraced him warmly. Both the Valletti girls kissed him on the cheeks, and the Don and his wife wept openly. Joe was silent, feeling an almost adolescent awkwardness.

Sirdar felt sad and hollow, but the tears would come later.

Inordinately, the Don's promise echoed in his ears.

“Go back, and don't worry. This was your last semester. I'll arrange for you to finish. If you can't leave your business to take the finals in the States, just cable me. I'll try to arrange for the US Consulate to receive sealed exam papers. About your orals, we'll see if there's some way of deferring them till you can come and take them here.

“As much as I can be, regard me as a father in the States. If a donation to Harvard can help straighten out your exam, they shall have it, and we can square accounts later.

“You, too, are one of the Honorable Men of Respect. Do not forget your oath, or the business arrangement.”

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Thirty hours later, Dara was met at Lahore airport by a grim faced S'a'aka and Jo-jo, who had been wired by the Don to meet him.

Twelve

In the Chevrolet on the way to the *dera*, S'a'aka recounted the details with the sorrow of the truly grieved. Tears ran down the weathered cheeks without restraint.

Three days before, Kala Warris' heart had finally stopped beating.

On the afternoon of the day he died, Nikka, who had accompanied Dara on his first kill, was gunned down in the street of flower vendors as he waited for his order to be met. The marigolds of tradition had been destined for the funeral of his clansman and chief. Nikka's bullet ridden body had lain across the marigolds, his blood drenching the saffron color of mourning to a frivolous red. Before Lahore could recover from this sacrilege, a bigger one had been committed.

Kala's funeral had been scheduled for the day after his death. The Mullahs had answered a strict NO to suggestions that the interment be delayed in order that Dara might bury his father with his own hands. The clerics were compassionate, but who would dare to transgress the laws of the Most High?

One hour before the funeral, three of Kala's boys were killed as they emerged from the tomb of Hazrat Data Ganj Baksh – a saint revered by Muslims all over India and Pakistan – and Lahore reeled under the shock.

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Dara realised the full effect these murders would have: as long as a man is within the neighborhood of the tomb – Data Durbar – his life is sacrosanct.

“What made it even worse,” S’a’aka said, “was that the three were at the Data Durbar on a mission of piety. They had gone there with the express purpose of paying for the ten *deg* pots of *Pala’a* demanded by tradition to be distributed amongst the poor in the dead man’s name, plus an eleventh added for good luck, symbolizing infinity. Thus the poor would have prayed on full bellies to the dead Saint to intercede with Allah on behalf of Kala Warris’ soul.”

Dara, even in his grief, was aware that while Lahore’s Dons would stand poised to strike at the perpetrator of these horrendous crimes, they would also wait to see whether he, Kala’s son, deserved his father’s mantle. If he were found wanting then they would clean up their town, and divide Kala’s empire amongst themselves. In either case, the culprit was a dead man.

S’a’aka’s voice intruded into Dara’s chain of thought.

“His name is Jabber Ahmed – strength and cruelty that he flaunts in the face of our sobriety. He is a youthful upstart of our own *baradari* who seeks to usurp tradition. He has offended all by taking the name Jagga!”

He couldn’t have chosen a name more certain to be an affront to Lahore’s conservatives, Dara thought. He remembered hearing the stories of the period just preceding the Second World War, when Jagjit Singh of the Cheema sub-tribe of Jatts had excited the imagination of the Indian and English Press. His

exploits, and those of his pursuers – Superintendent Nicholson Sahib, Sub Inspector Sant Singh Caleb Gill and Head Constable Mohammed Hussain – were the stuff of legend in the Punjab. In his death, he had achieved a status of Robin Hood over and above that of all others preceding him – even Badrinath. In a land seething with Robin Hoods, this was no mean achievement, and the Ballad of Jagga the Jatt ranked as one of the Great Punjabi Ballads. Since the tragic demise of the Great Jagjit Singh, many an aspiring Robin Hood had taken the pseudonym of Jagga. This assumption was viewed indulgently by the old chiefs as long as the character of such a person maintained the chivalric traditions of the Mahabharata, but the affront to tradition this Jabber Ahmed, enemy of Dara's father, had caused by the four murders was a direct slap on Lahore's orthodoxy.

He portended a change in values desired by none, Dara thought, for he was the serpent as opposed to the tiger.

“For about six months before your father left us for his place in heaven, we had started feeling Jagga's bite,” S'a'aka continued. “A mugging here, a stabbing there, nibbles on Kala *Pehelwan's* territory, which the Great One, King of Heera Mandi, bore with patience. He knew he was being provoked, but he waited. He waited for the light of his eyes, Dara, to return from the western wilderness to be seated at his right hand. Then would the sword of vengeance be wielded. But it was not fated to be thus, for Allah was not pleased. Kismet took a hand, and snatched the Great One from the turmoil.

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“Like a hooded cobra, Jagga struck. And then in two swift moves he held Lahore by its tail.”

Dara knew he would now have to justify the reputation of *Khooni* Dara. He vowed not to visit his father’s grave till such time as Kala’s shoes fit well on his feet.

As the Chevrolet passed through the alleys of Heera Mandi, it left whispers in its wake. Dara’s throat tightened as the car eased into the *gallie* of his birth. It was lined with people mostly in white, but also black, the two colors of mourning for the Muslim. There were the little people whose incomes, whose very anchor, was the Kala Warris family. Dara noticed their bewildered grief being replaced by hope at the sight of him. His temples throbbed.

The car whispered to a standstill outside the steel gates leading to the courtyard of Kala Warris’ *dera*. The space was jam-packed with mourners. Dara stepped out of the car into total silence, his eyes unable to focus on any one object or person. He saw with the sight of someone who uses glasses and is suddenly bereft of their use. But if he stood alone in the midst of silence, he did so like a prince come to claim his own.

Suddenly, there was a piercing scream from one of the balconies overlooking the courtyard. Dara looked up – it was Bashiran, his father’s woman. The crowd of male mourners divided to let him pass. Women mourned in segregation.

“*Hai, hai, Ha-a-a-a-a-a-eeeeee! My diamond taken away from me – he is gone, go-o-o-onnne!*” wailed Bashiran’s voice, and the crowd took it up as a murmuring refrain.

“My crown has been taken off my head, O’Allah the Cruel, I am naked and defenseless – naked in this world. And the weight of my body is heavy – for who shall carry it now, when you aren’t here, *O’Kalay Warrisa* King of Heera Mandi.”

Walking as though on water, Dara breasted the last step to face her on the balcony. Junoesque Bashiran now looked ravaged. The once proud breasts had lost their arrogance and seemed tired. The sight of him only a few feet away checked her hysteria. The crush of women, too, slowed their screaming to sobs, as Dara approached. Bashiran’s face now took on the mask of a pagan priestess while the men massed in the courtyard below craned their necks for a better view of the dramatic scene being enacted above them.

She pointed a finger at Dara and proclaimed: “Here he comes, the fruit of the loins of the King of Heera Mandi, who was my Lord and Master, and the crown of my head. Allah’s shadow falls over his son. O’ People – look, and listen. These words come from the mouth of a sinful woman, but are true. The son of Warris Shah, Sirdar Ali Shah, has his kismet writ large on his forehead. He shall avenge his father’s enemies, right all wrongs, vanquish the evil that threatens. It is he who shall execute his father’s dreams, and give us a new regime – for peace shall reign *after!*”

And at this last she stood stock still.

Then a shudder seemed to pass through her, and leave in its wake just a tired old woman bereft of her lover. Dara walked towards her and took her in his arms, and the crowd of mourners – women separated from men, took up the wailing again.

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Very gently, Dara led her sobbing into his father's room, and sat her on the floor.

Then he put his head on her breast and wept his heart out.

Later, much later, she stroked his head and gave him details of the funeral.

“And my Sainted One, he was wrapped in a snow white cotton coffin of the best material – not in a wooden box like these heathen Christians. For when the Angel comes to take the soul to heaven, and on the Day of Judgment, when all bodies must rise to be judged, a Muslim's body should not be found in a wooden box. *Ahoe!* – and the *charpai* bed on which we carried him the full five miles to Miani Sahib to be buried beside Lahore's best – each of the mourners – each wanted to lend his shoulder and thus be honored by paying their last respects to such a great man. Five thousand mourners there were – all of Heera Mandi's aristocrats. My cousin who was there swears by all the prophets that he himself counted fifteen fist fights over this honor. And before taking him to be buried, the ritual of *Khatm-ul-Koran* had been performed.”

Without being told, Dara knew the most expensive of the Mullahs would have been engaged to recite simultaneously different passages of the Koran, so that the *Khatm-ul-Koran* – the recitation of whole Koran – would be achieved.

“My innocent one's coffin was laden with flowers and the finest of India's *attars*,” Bashiran continued. “O' my hero who was destined to go, has now gone. He

has gone for better climes and better places. O' Darae'a, my son who is not my son, my sun has set and my moon shall never again rise. I shall not hear the song of the *bulbul* in the garden, nor the *kook* of the *koel* in the monsoon. For mine with whom I partook of these pleasures is angry – he sulks, for he sulks forever where he is now, in the next world. If he sulked not, if I had pleased him, would he have left me?" Bleakly she voiced the rhetorical question through her sobs.

Dara shook his head from side to side. "You were his light, he loved you. You were his comfort, he needed you. He is happy where he is, but he misses you, companion of his long journey."

"And may I soon join him."

"May Allah will otherwise. No, I need you. This house needs you, for when I was little, who put butter on my *rotis*?"

She held him tight and sobbed even harder.

"When I needed sweet *halva*," Dara's voice gently intoned, "who brought it for me? Now who shall anoint my locks and cool my liver? Stay!"

They hugged each other in the silence of the truly grieved.

Then Bashiran spoke. "None who came to mourn is hungry, or thirsty. I have seen to that."

Her chin jutted out with the shadow of past arrogance.

"Each mouth has been fed. The *kothas* are closed and shall remain so till the fortieth day – the *chaleeswan*. But S'a'aka decided that the dance girls, musicians, bouncers and enforcers of the *kothas* all

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must be paid. I hope you agree.”

The look of fierce approval in Dara’s eyes reassured her of the rhetorical nature of her question.

“Nothing has so far been said of the widows’ and orphans’ pensions, nor the allowances for old people.”

Even through his grief, Dara warmed to this act of fidelity.

He would make the announcement, and thus only *he* would get the credit and receive the prayers of the poor.

His voice came thick with emotion. “For not one second shall the allowances of the poor cease. Things must go on as during *Abba-ji’s* lifetime. For your loyalty to my father and myself, you shall want nothing. Now I must go and see the people.”

Each of the mourners was embraced and personally thanked by Dara.

Till the evening he sat cross-legged in the courtyard amidst the throng, graciously receiving their condolences. Shortly before sunset, the last of the sympathizers departed, leaving only the hard-core of Kala’s organization. Now they all looked towards their youthful chief who bore the white man’s wisdom from across the seven seas.

Dara rose wearily.

Sala’aming the rest, he signaled to One-eyed S’a’aka, who followed him inside the house.

They went up to Dara’s own room.

It was preserved exactly as he remembered it.

For a minute they both sat silently on the bed.

Dara spoke for five minutes to his father’s closest friend and henchman using all his powers of

persuasion to override the old man's fierce head-shakings. Finally, it was the subtle employment of emotional blackmail which caused S'a'aka to acquiesce. The old warrior's word, once extracted, would be inviolate. Kala's family would not fight Jagga the upstart under any circumstances except self-defense. They would hole up and sit tight.

Then Dara committed a strange and inexplicable act.

Without a word to anybody else, he disappeared.

Yet, by the evening of the first day, word of his disappearance was out. There were whispers in the bazaar that Jagga the upstart, nay, S'a'aka himself had eliminated *Khooni* Dara. The people had expected Dara to live up to his reputation of *Khooni*, predicting he would do something – more than likely something dramatically violent, despite a debilitating sojourn in the barbaric west.

Within the next three days, one of Kala's boys was beaten to within an inch of his life – an obvious ploy to bring Dara into the open. It was a calculated provocation – right in *chownk* Heera Mandi. Twice Jagga and his boys came in a *rehra* chariot with a *t'hol* drum bearing the supreme provocation from one Punjabi to another. They beat the drum and danced the *p'hangra*, emitting *baraks* and raising their *dhotis* to display their penises while one of their number inserted a greased, wood penis up a she donkey's vagina. A Punjabi can insult a fellow Punjabi no further than by such a display of naked aggression, and the only possible reply to such a challenge is to either kill or die, for the alternative is complete social emasculation.

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But S'a'aka stoically stood his ground.

Despite protests and abuse from the boys and hidden smirks from the bazaar, he refused to be drawn out, and bolted the *dera*. He had given his word and his word he would keep with the son of the man who had never broken his.

Besides, he knew the lad's potential – had he not taught him the ancient arts of Kanjar fighting by his own hand – the art of *bhinote* – preserved by them unknown to the rest of the world which drooled on Judo and Karate – *bhinote*, which was the very forerunner of these games, retained by the Kanjars in the land of the Budha's birth since contempt for their profession had denied them the right to bear arms.

On the third day, as the sun rose over the Ravi, even S'a'aka began having his doubts.

The whole family was restless.

Jagga was a *baradari* upstart who had taken advantage of Dara's absence and Kala's policies. He had declared his life forfeit by his abominations – a life as cheap as the price of a bullet which was just a few annas.

Now the upstart had a free hand.

The Kala enforcers and even their lesser connections who paid protection wanted a showdown, sensing in the Kala family greater security, stability and lesser evil than the psychopathic Jagga who would blow over like a storm or burn himself out like a comet.

And on the third day, as the sun prepared to set over the Ravi, Dara reappeared to his leaderless people.

To the household's questions he had only one reply.

“From tomorrow, it’s business as usual.”

Next morning he was woken up by an excited S’a’aka and Jo-jo.

“Jagga’s younger brother has been killed.”

“I know.”

Dara opened one eye before calmly going back to sleep.

All day long he slept.

In the late afternoon he woke up refreshed and then lay thinking about his father.

He rose, bathed his body, and then sat cross-legged in the middle of the room on his prayer-rug, the Koran Sharif opened on its little wooden stand before him. For just under an hour, he read its passages. At last he stood on his feet, head covered all the while in respect for Allah. He lifted his eyes and palms heavenwards, praying silently, his entire will reaching up to communicate and ask for aid. This evening he would need it. Then he bathed again, and asked the bodyguard outside for a seer of *sirdai*. Almonds, melon and poppy seeds, walnuts, pistachios, sugar, pepper and mint were ground together in a delicate blend of balanced flavors with buffalo whole-milk to create this wrestler and martial artist’s invigorating drink. A seer equals a liter, and Dara drank it down. He refused an offer of food, preferring to remain *nihrr’n-e-kalaejae*, and none of the household argued.

Unlocking his desk drawers, Dara saw all his youthful tools as he had left them.

For a second, he almost broke down at their sight.

Then the iron will reasserted itself.

He brought a fresh towel from the bathroom, spread

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it on the desk top, with the tools on it, and seated himself on the chair.

Then he set to work.

He wiped the coating of oil off the custom made knuckleduster. He slipped it over his knuckles. Yes, *it'll dust*. It was a little tight now, but still a comfortable fit. The Waziri dagger needed no sharpening, and he respectfully snicked it back into its sheath. The .38 revolver he looked at for a long time before touching it. Lovingly, he wiped the grease, and dried and spun the chambers. The barrel was meticulously dried and the action checked. Each of the three dozen rounds was examined under the desk lamp. They were in perfect condition as he had left them. Every single one of the rounds of ammunition was methodically dried. Dara hefted the lethal tool in his hand. The Americans were good craftsmen, and the house of Smith and Wesson among their best. He sighted along the barrel, then spun the chamber. The blue-black steel made crazy patterns on the wall. Satisfied, he then loaded all six chambers.

Around his waist he knotted all five yards of his father's dress dhoti – the expensive, Chinese silk *la'acha* with a heavy black border. The *saluka* waistcoat fit snugly around his body. In the left hand pocket he slipped the knuckle duster, in the right hand one the loaded revolver, and added spare ammunition in both. Over the *saluka* went a bosky silk *kurta*. Slipping his feet into patent leather pumps, he casually draped a *pashmina* shawl over his left shoulder and walked past the surprised bodyguard. With a discreet gesture of the hand, he bade the man be seated where

he was, cradling his Sten-gun.

Dara came down the stairs into the courtyard, and the seven heavily armed men looked at him expectantly from their positions on chairs around a low table. S'a'aka sat by himself on a large, *charpai* bed covered by a Punjab carpet, his back resting against a velvet upholstered bolster pillow, introspectively puffing at a *hookah* water pipe. Seeing Dara, he jerked his head up.

The atmosphere suddenly seemed charged as Dara surveyed the faithful. Since the news of Jagga's brother's death, they had been tense with excitement, making last minute checks on their weapons, nervously fingering their ammunition. They expected a fast, decisive raid on Jagga's headquarters.

S'a'aka rose, eye glittering.

"Stay, O' friend of my dead father's. My eyes are thirsty for the sight of my father's bazaar. I shall go by myself for a walk, and perhaps sip a cold drink at the *chownk*."

S'a'aka's voice was flat.

"It is not wise to go unaccompanied."

Dara patted the *saluka* under his *kurta*.

"I am not unaccompanied *cha'acha* –" and as the One-eyed one opened his mouth to protest, cut off the argument with the cold announcement: "It is my decision," and walked out into the *gallie*.

As soon as his back turned the corner, S'a'aka ferociously hissed.

"You, and you, curs of the sewers!" he pointed a weathered finger at two superbly conditioned athletes. "Go after him. If even one of his pubic hairs is harmed,

you shall pay for it with your heads.”

At dusk, *chownk* Heera Mandi is like a courtesan preparing for her keeper's visit. The neon lights are switched on, yet the softness of fading natural light still bathes the *gallies*. Six *gallies* converge onto this central point. The western opening is dominated by a café, next to a timber merchant. Dara sat by himself with a newspaper on the terrace of the café. The terrace was about two feet higher than the level of the street. At the edge where he sat, *ta'alie* logs with a diameter of roughly a foot each were stacked up to a height of about four feet. If he jumped down, he would be in a natural stockade, with the logs forming two walls due to the curve of the street, and the height of the terrace the third. Behind him would be stacks of wood and the blank rear wall of a building owned and operated by his cousins. From that position, while protected from incoming fire, he could have, if and when required, commanded the *chownk* by fire and observation.

Tactically, he was secure.

Strategically, he was, by cold-blooded logic, throwing himself as naked bait.

Jagga the upstart lived not three miles from the *chownk*, just on the eastern outskirts of Heera Mandi. That morning, Jagga's younger and only brother had been felled by an assassin. The psychopath would be seething with a lust for vengeance, destabilized, his thinking unclear. Dara's public presence would be swiftly reported to him by his spies, and he would want to make a public display of revenge while eliminating the sole blood claimant to the Kala fortune. That Jagga's brother's murder had been arranged by Dara

was beyond doubt. Now the act of calmly sipping a drink and scanning a newspaper on the day of the murder, alone and unaccompanied, was a direct provocation and challenge to Jagga. The upstart would bite at the bait, and thus play into Dara's hands.

On the surface, things went on as normal in the bazaar.

It was Monday, and business was brisk. The pimps and enforcers and plain clothes cops mixed with all kinds of bazaar hustlers. They avoided looking directly at him. Dara was aware they all knew. He kept his eyes on a wide-angle focus. The odd passerby sala'amed him, and he marked the face for future reference. These were not the fence sitters, and his heart warmed over the tight knot of tension in his gut. His jaws ached, his temples throbbed, but the palms were dry, hands and knees steady.

It was as though through the back of his head he could see the stockade formed by the timber merchant's logs and tea-shop terrace while his eyes kept the *chownk* in focus and he willed Jagga to come. His senses were on fine tuning now, overcoming the knot in the stomach and the throbbing of the temples which would only be controlled, it seemed, by clenching his jaws.

A whisper rippled on the gentle breeze, people scattered and suddenly he was alone in the silence.

A grubby urchin came running into the *chownk* from the east *gallie*, crying.

"He comes, he comes in fury, Jagga with his men!" and then dived under a parked car.

Dara heard then what everybody else had heard –

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the drum beat of a horse whipped to a gallop. The sound of hooves grew louder.

He had seconds. Last-minute visual sweep of the *chownk*, the two gunmen dispatched by S'a'aka crouching with guns aimed towards the sound of hooves – he snarled: “At the peril of your lives don't shoot till you hear me!”

He rose smiling from the chair, the hoof beats turned to thunder and then they were there and in one easy jump Dara was behind the logs steadying his gun hand.

Jagga and five men were standing up in the *rehra* chariot roaring *baraks*, brandishing high their weapons. Jagga stood on the forward edge, prepared to jump off, expecting the first bullet in the horse's head. He was disappointed, for the first bullet was aimed at his heart and got him in the head, and he tumbled on the cobblestones. Switching aim, Dara put the second bullet in the driver's crotch, then fired rapidly into the other attackers whose bullets threw chips around him. The horse, maddened by whipping, and driverless, crashed headlong into the stack of logs, his legs breaking with an audible snap. The horse screamed. Dust mingled with sawdust and shouts of the bazaar people rose in a thin film. Of Jagga's men, two, including the driver and another, were killed while in the *rehra*. The remaining three had jumped before the horse plunged into the timber. The three of them were running, when one took a bullet in his spine, the other in his knee, both crippled for life. The third rounded a corner before a bullet could reach him.

The two designated by S'a'aka had not fired a single

shot, and now prepared to dash after the free man.

“Let him go!” commanded Dara. “Allah has spared his life on the battlefield!”

He turned instead, and put the remaining bullet in the horse’s head, ending the shrieking neighs of agony. Then he calmly ejected the spent shells, reloaded the revolver, and asked the café owner to come down with a dishrag. Trembling, his eyes averted from the carnage, the teashop owner gathered the spent shells in the dishrag, knotted and handed it over to Dara.

“You shall always be looked after,” proclaimed Dara, walking through the still funeral-silent *chownk* towards the *Dera*.

Of the courageous few who had declared their loyalty, as he had sat waiting for the upstart, some came forward to touch him with reverence, while others simply murmured, *Sacrifice, O’ sacrifice ye to the King of Heera Mandi ...* amidst the slowly drifting stench of death.

Dara had fully reaped the benefits of the Boston Police Shooting Club and the lash of Sergeant Flaherty’s tongue.

While walking back to his *dera*, Dara’s mind worked furiously.

He had to locate the shadow hand behind Jagga.

He did not for a moment credit the upstart with enough intelligence and vision to have planned the takeover. But no matter, he would unearth the conspiracy, and then sit back to take his revenge at leisure. The money he and Kala Warris had banked in joint accounts and safe deposits would be the determining factor in this investigation. There would be

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no legal hitches in gaining access to these funds. Indeed, their very existence was unknown to anyone but Kala and his son.

As Dara stepped into the courtyard of the *dera*, all rose to receive him. Jo-jo and S'a'aka came forward to touch his knees.

"Grace to Dara *pehelwan-ji* ..." they murmured.

S'a'aka put his hands on Dara's shoulders and looked deep into his gray eyes.

Suddenly, overcome by emotion, he hugged him tight, then, eyes wet, turned away, muttering, "... he was a brother, a father, a mother, he who has gone away and left this memory to be cherished ..."

To Jo-jo's questioning eyes, Dara replied: "Three live – one with a bullet in his spine, the other with one in the knee. They shall live – as our pensioners. Watch them closely in hospital. If they give the faintest hint of turning state witnesses, yet we shall spare their lives – their tongues, however, may be ripped out of their mouths. The sixth got away, for Allah so willed it. I stopped our two lions from chasing him."

There were murmurs of *Razzak-Allah, Allah Maula, Razzak- Allah*, from his men.

They all came forward to touch his knees and declare their unquestioning acceptance of his leadership.

Verily would he be a great chief, serving his dependants and tempering harshness always with mercy. Thus it was that Allah aided the good and the wise, for without his aid, who may win on the battlefield?

Dara continued to address Jo-jo: "As for the police,

there is nothing to worry about. My father's friends are still loyal to his memory, and I to them. Arrangements were made two days ago."

He looked at S'a'aka.

"The one that got away may live, but he saw too much. Let the nationwide *baradari* be alerted to look for him."

Three months later, this man who had seen too much was hunted down by the *baradari* in Karachi, and his eyes torn out on the waterfront by Mekrani enforcers. He was sent back to Lahore, where, along with the other two crippled survivors of the gun-battle he was put on Dara's payroll as pensioner for life.

Dara then consolidated his gains and secured peace. For this purpose, he efficiently exploited his resources.

The assassins he had hired for Jagga's brother from the bandit-infested Sakesar hills of northern Punjab were still on standby in Lahore.

Thus, within the next week, one present and two potential rivals were eliminated, and to this day, it was only an intelligent guess that pointed the finger at Dara. That, too, only since he stood to gain the most from the assassinations. None knew the actual killers, and never would. They were men of a breed which has become extinct in most parts of the world. The pedigree, however, is still in existence in South Asia. It was a breed of men that existed briefly in the Great American West, or for a much longer period in Medieval Europe of the private armies. These were men who lived and died by the sword, and their word was as good as their sword-bearing arms. When they hired themselves, they

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gave a pledge of silence, and their right hand would never know who hired the left hand, nor would past client ever be a future target. They did their work, received their hire, and withdrew, leaving in their wake no clue – for dead men, it is well known, have no tales to tell.

A shadow hand of conspiracy was unearthed with greater ease than Dara had thought possible. An old contemporary of Forman Christian College was now a budding Assistant Superintendent of Police, in charge of a special cell in the CID. This Criminal Investigation Department of Pakistan's Police is not charged with the responsibility of investigating crime but actually functions as a domestic Counter-Intelligence Bureau to harass the political opposition of the dictatorship in power. The young ASP was not on Dara's files. As a college student, he was being hunted by Pathan gunmen. Their chief's ravishing daughter – to whom he was now married – had secretly been dating the lad. Dara's intervention, bringing into play well-nigh all the resources of his family, had saved the youth's life, gained him a wife, and her father a son-in-law in the Police Force. The lad had sworn never to forget the favor. This debt was now called in, and within six days Dara was invited to dinner at the ASP's house.

After overseeing an excellent dinner of grilled frontier lamb, the ravishing Pathan beauty excused herself from the dining table.

The two old contemporaries sat on the verandah, sipping their digestive green tea laced with cardamom and fresh green mint. Then the young officer told Dara the result of his investigations.

The entire conspiracy to cheat Dara of his inheritance was the brainchild of one Malik Ashraf Ali. Dara winced when told whose grandchild this man was. The grandfather of this worthy, who had backed Jagga, had been one of the leaders of the Pakistan Movement agitating for a separate homeland for the Muslims. A very distinguished and powerful family at whose house the anglicized Barrister Mohammed Ali Jinnah had been a frequent visitor. The scion of this family, Malik Ashraf Ali, had been sent to England to do his Bar-at-Law at Lincoln's Inn like his father and grandfather before him, despite his rustication from Forman Christian College for stealing bicycles.

Both men smiled.

Another Formanite, and a senior at that!

However, Malik did well in England, and also came into contact with the leaders of the then fledgling PLO – Doctors Arafat and Habash, under the bemused noses of British Intelligence Officers in London. He was also known to have paid a visit to Cuba, and had been there for six months. It was suspected he had been instrumental in forging the communist connections of the PLO.

On his return to Pakistan, this Malik Ashraf Ali set up a law practice, which could have lifted him to the higher echelons of political power. Instead, something in the man made him seek his kismet lower down. He moved into the fraudulent studio rackets of Pakistan's garish and tasteless film industry, always a shadow behind various conspiracies. His PLO and leftist connections grew even more obscure. He flitted from the leftist dominated Pakistan Arts Council to the Studio

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World, ever discreet. The CIA Resident at the Consulate had been requested by his Pakistani counterpart to pass on any information that could be gleaned from the Agency's files. Quite frankly, the Americans were sure Malik was of that category of mercenary who prefers to find satisfaction by lifting the edge of the carpet. The CIA's own network was vast, and their information rarely faulty. This time, Malik Ashraf Ali had sought to penetrate the Heera Mandi business.

On the way back from recovering this debt from the ASP, Dara made his decision.

A man who takes his revenge before five generations is in a hurry.

According to this bit of Punjabi wisdom, though, Dara was in a veritable rush. If revenge he were to have, he would like to feel its taste on his tongue within his lifetime.

Yet he would wait.

There was extensive reorganization to be done in the family business. Through him, the Harvard Business School would reveal its skills to a Lahore that waited expectantly. And the enemy would be lulled into a false sense of security.

Let the years pass, and he would strike when least expected, relishing the sweet flavor of a relaxed vengeance. Ten years should do it ... *next time it is I who shall conduct the orchestra.*

The military side stabilized, it was time to devote himself to the economics of the business. There were twenty-four houses in Dara's *gallie*. He acted with swift wisdom. Now was the time to use the money stashed

away by father and son. For the sum of three million rupees he bought title and deed to all the houses in the *gallie*. With Jagga eliminated as a threat, none in Lahore would dare to obstruct these plans. The Dons of the crime families approved. He deserved his father's mantle.

Now that Kala's son had bought these twenty-four houses, the bazaar watched with bated breath. This man who had acquired so much education from the white man's world – what would he do next? Perhaps they, too, might follow suit. They were surprised when the houses, bought within a day, were vacated within two, and then shuttered. Next day, a firm of interior decorators, hired from metropolitan Karachi, descended on the *gallie*. Long-haired young men and vaguely 'arty' women went around with notebooks and measuring tapes.

Eyes rolled, and the bazaar buzzed. If they expected Lahore to achieve the vulgar transformation as the Asian Las Vegas, they were to be disappointed. This was the fifteenth day of Kala Warris' death. Business was announced as totally closed.

On the sixteenth day, Dara once again disappeared.

On the morning of the fortieth day of his father's death, he returned to Heera Mandi. He had found his disciples and they came with him.

His search for at least two men with some of the same coldness that was in him had been rewarded.

Had Nikka, his companion at his first kill, been alive, he alone might have been sufficient with a sidekick, and he was blood as well.

As it was, the rock of his band would be Gulloo, the

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giant Gilgity he picked up from a Karachi water front where he was a minor strong arm man for one of the Makrani gang bosses.

Lala Razzak, the tall, lean Sten-gunner, was an Infantry *Naik* – a corporal – who had deserted after killing his platoon commander. A *cha'achi* from the Kala-Chitta hill ranges of Campbellpur district in North-Western Punjab, which breeds more highway dacoits than the rest of the Punjab. Razzak was a Qutb Shahi Awan, with all the martial instincts of his tribe very much in evidence.

In both these men, Dara had glimpsed a shadow of Nikka, and time would prove him right.

To these two he added Ghani and Barkata, and these of the inner sanctum formed his hard core of enforcers. This he knew to be enough for any business man in the world.

Dara reappeared forty days after his father's death, in time to partake of the *chaleeswan* – which means the fortieth. Once again the Mullahs were invited to finish a recitation of the whole Koran, special prayers were said, and food distributed to the poor. Dara ordered one hundred and one *degs* of *pala'a* to be cooked and distributed at the tomb of the saint, Hazrat Data Ganj Baksh. Thirty-six *degs* were prepared for Heera Mandi. Yet Dara shocked the mourners as they prepared to leave for the graveyard to offer the *Fateha* prayers for his father's soul. He refused to visit his father's grave. His work was not yet finished.

However, the interior decorators were almost through.

Earlier, Dara had cynically observed Heera Mandi's

cheap attempts at modernism. Plastic covered sofas had superseded the orthodox silk covered mattresses and velvet covered pillows over rich oriental carpets. Plastic shades over electric bulbs supplanted the discretion of copper filigree *kandeels*. Even the *nautch* girls wore shalwar kameez, saris or trousers.

Some weeks after the decorators moved in, all the houses in Dara's *gallie* were quasi-Mughal in their decorations. The opulence of a bygone age was preserved with a scrupulous regard for the sense of timelessness intrinsic to the success of such an operation. He started advertising in foreign magazines. Pin-ups were circulated among travel agents of Lahore, Karachi, Islamabad and the major capitals of the western world. The ultimate Taj Mahal-class sex tour. And the bazaar, which had once again sniggered, now gasped at the dollars and rials that poured in. Even rupees, for *Darae-di-gallie* became the in place for Lahoris and visitors to Lahore, where one might have a choice selection of the best of Indian and western drinks rather than the usual tea slopping from cups on uneven saucers.

Without any fuss, with the least possible obtrusion, a new order had quietly supplanted the old.

The renovations by the interior decorators and the infusion of new enforcers was a signal to S'a'aka.

Something died in him and he knew things would never be the same. A world was emerging in which he would be an anachronism. In the thirties, as a penniless outcast from Heera Mandi, he stood in front of the famous shops selling fresh milk and buttermilk around P'ha'atti *chownk*, the same place where Dara had a

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generation later made his first kill. In those days, it was the place to be seen for all the hard men, over their hard men's drinks.

S'a'aka had always stood apart.

A very petty hire and fire strong-arm artist with more strength than art, he had gained his occasional employers' attention in a way not unusual in those days. Anyone willing to fight him was offered two annas, or the eighth part of a rupee, win or lose. After a while, he didn't have to pay, for there were no takers willing to tackle such a desperate man. Then he made the mistake of challenging a big Kanjar with very dangerous eyes. Kala Warris beat S'a'aka fair and square, offered him his hand, and took him into the business. S'a'aka had neither looked back nor regretted that day. But the world had come a long way since those dueling days and today men were talking of farming on the moon. Everybody was in such a hurry. So be it ... he retired gracefully to his kiosk.

Dara was not displeased to have him running the kiosk in the *gallie*. The old warrior was loyal to the death, and would always wish him well. To show such respect for a father's friend was to gain the respect of others. And only thus would he retain his father's spirit.

Bashiran he called to his room.

She, too, had smelt a whiff of the change, and had been tense.

"O' Bashir *Bibi*, if you do me a favor, you will have pleased me and my father's spirit. A house without a woman is like a man bereft of his manhood. You who stoked the fires of this house, will you not keep a warm hearth for me, the son of the man whom you loved

above all? Stay here, always, that your prayers of a good woman keep this house forever blessed.”

She nodded, too overcome with emotion by the graceful way in which her own heart's desire had been realized. From now on, her role would be one of chief housekeeper, but that was as she would have liked it. With her own man dead, any other arrangement would have been frivolous.

Yet not all understood the true import of these changes.

His new way of doing business inspired many others, not so wise, to imitate him.

The first imitator was his old flame, Rakhi.

She was discovered with her neck dispassionately broken by an expert strangler using the silk handkerchief of the earliest professional stranglers – the Thugs.

Dara guarded his monopoly with the strategic genius of a ruthless general well versed in Kautilya, Sun Tzu, Khalid-bin-al-Walid, Jomini, Guru Gobind Singh, and Liddell Hart.

Of his four immediate subordinates, Barkata and Ghani, hard in their own right, were nevertheless used in the primary role of a reconnaissance patrol. The liquidators were Gulloo and Razzak.

Gulloo, gregarious and full of mountain wit, slowly rose to be a mentor to many of the aspiring toughs, in and out of Heera Mandi. He was suitably modest about this status.

Lala Razzak was a killer to the core, a man of dark moods and tormented passions whose mooring place was his *Pehelwan*. In the Indo-Pak war of 1965, when

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his platoon position was overrun by charging Sikhs, he stuck by his Bren, and till a counter attack by Pakistani die-hards rescued him, he fought on. After the ceasefire, the same platoon commander who had fled under the Sikh onslaught called him a *be-ghairat* – which means one without honor. Razzak was on quarter guard duty at the time, and promptly shot him dead. Thereafter, he took to the hills, where he was found by Dara and his affair smoothed over. By the complicated processes that operate the human mind, Dara replaced the army in Razzak's heart.

If there was one thing Dara had learned from his study of the Cosa Nostra, it was the value of organizing the cells around which all great business families of the world are built.

Dara had twenty-five other gunmen on his regular payroll, and it was these twenty-five who were administered by the four of his inner guard. If required, he could raise fifty to a hundred fighting men in a day, and given sufficient time, the equivalent of a fully equipped army brigade.

Ghani was of his clan, and it pleased the rest of the *baradari* that the young heir showed proper respect for the ties of blood and family by keeping one of his own privy to the inner corridor.

Barkata was a converted Christian, and the Christian converts from the lower castes are perhaps the most effective of the hereditary groups of assassins in the central Punjab. He was a nephew of Jo-jo, and all four were proud of the loyalty they bore their *pehelwan*.

A full year after Dara's return from Boston he paid his first visit to Kala Warris' grave.

Abba-ji I've started on our plans and I haven't finished yet. This is just the beginning. Wait till I complete the documentation in my office. Another six months and I'll hire ourselves a corporate lawyer, make the houses of our gallie into a firm, and maybe go public and the bastards can frig themselves trying to sort the mess out. I'll make sure that the core of the anti-obscenity and anti Heera Mandi lobby buy shares in it, and I'll also sucker some of our top civil servants, a couple of generals and a nice handful of honest politicians – I have the stock-brokers who'll arrange this. Auntie Juliana, the kid must be going to school. Your Sirdoo's schooling has finished. I'm sorry, Auntie, but that's how it is. Damn you, Roxanna, damn you ... whereareyouRoxanna

Ya Allah! Ya Ali Maddad!

Six months later, Ravi Ltd. came on the market with Dara holding fifty-one percent of the stock and eighty percent of the votes.

He played, like his ancestors, on that fundamental human trait – greed, and like his ancestors, he won.

In exchange for the stock he sold, he didn't take cash, but stocks in legal enterprises, and had thus acquired control over several of the leading corporations of Pakistan. He bought into vast undeveloped acreage in the Pat Feeder area of Sind,

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as well as land in Brazil. It was good insurance, and if he had to liquidate his business in Lahore, he could retire to gentleman farming in Brazil with certainly a say in one of the massive smuggling operations.

Two banks, one in Switzerland and the other in Dubai, where a small fortune grew, were further insurance.

Sheikh Shahbaz Ahmed, his corporate lawyer, and Khwaja Athar Majeed, his criminal lawyer, had both served him very well. These two, and their battery of assistants, minions and colleagues, ensured further security.

There was also his sleeping partnership with the Cosa Nostra in case the Turkish White Route was ever smashed.

Dara reclined at the head of his empire, prolonging the time of his revenge over Malik Ashraf Ali.

Thirteen

Lahore – 1973

First Day

There was a knock on the door.

“Yes?” Dara asked.

“It’s me, Ghani, *Pehelwan-ji*.”

Dara slid the drawer shut, and pressed the knob concealed under the paneling of the desk, de-activating the electronic lock.

“You can come in now.”

Ghani and the American stood outside the door. After passing some instructions in Punjabi to Ghani, Dara dismissed him, while making the American welcome.

The foreigner was impressed with the set up. He was led to a corner where there were three velvet upholstered armchairs around a glass topped coffee table. They settled down facing each other. On the top of the coffee table was a silver engraved cigarette case. Dara opened it with an expert flick of the thumb, and offered it to his guest, who selected and silently lit one, followed by Dara. They both drew deeply.

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The American's glance roved around the room with deliberate casualness.

Dara had, through the years, become a master in the waiting game. Now he brought this ability into full play, and waited patiently, and in silence, as still as any statue.

The American, too, was not an unskilled opponent. An inch over six feet, he was about one hundred and eighty pounds of very lean, clean-shaven strength.

Dara remembered Tata – the older of the two intruders at his *dera* earlier this night – as saying the *gora* was a guerrilla, which meant he had served in the US Special Forces. If he had, he certainly looked it.

The American's voice cut through the almost deathly silence of the room.

"I guess I owe you an explanation."

Dara looked steadily into the other's eyes.

"My name's Barney Custer, and I served in Major Joe Valletti's Special Forces Unit in Vietnam. I was with him when he was killed."

The American looked into the level gray eyes, and was quiet. If it could be said of one who was already sitting like a statue, Dara had become even more motionless. Above all, the eyes, whose gray went a shade darker. When he spoke, his voice was flat.

"When did Joe die? I hope this is no joke."

Barney's battle hardened spine felt a sudden chill from the air in the room.

Not because of the words, but their manner of delivery. The American knew now the type of man he faced.

He had seen a couple in Vietnam, fought with them.

Some he had heard about. The ones who didn't care – they were a handful. This man was one of them.

He just didn't care – except for two or three people. The rest were statistics. Their living or dying would be of no import to this man.

The American chose his next words very carefully, and delivered them with whatever sensitivity he was capable of.

“I'm right sorry. Six months ago – it's that long ago that Major Joe died. I though you'd a known about it.”

Dara got up and the muscles of the other man contracted with tension.

It would have to be the coffee table, he thought, but then relaxed as Dara went towards the sideboard. He extracted a half-full bottle of Ballantine's from the refrigerated sideboard, popped ice cubes in two glasses, and poured in four fingers for himself, two for the American.

At the other's nod, he put the two glasses on the table.

Going back, he picked up the tray of cubes in one hand, with the other opened a small drawer in which cutlery rattled, took a pair of tongs, dropped them in the cube tray, shut the drawer, and in the same motion picked up the Ballantine's. Before turning around, he shut the side board with his knee, and, putting the tray and bottle on the table, sat back in his earlier position. All his movements betrayed the studied deliberation of a man who was upset.

Both men picked up their drinks.

“To Joe!” said Dara.

“To Joe!” echoed the American.

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Dara finished his drink in two gulps, and made himself another, while the American sipped his.

“Tell me. The whole story, including tonight’s events,” commanded Dara.

The American once again selected his words with great care. He knew he was treading on thin ice. Men like the one opposite him were coldly rational, except when you disturbed their emotional equilibrium. The news of Joe’s death had done exactly that with Dara. The American had seen his speed in drawing and handling a handgun, and it might be reasonably deduced his shooting matched this skill. To kill a man would involve no sentiment but just clinical dispatch.

Barney blew out smoke, and then said, “It’s a long story, but I’ll make it short.”

“All right.”

Barney relaxed slightly. The moment had passed, and what was important at this stage was that the man listen to him. If he listened, he would believe, and if he believed, he would help.

Picking his words with care, Barney told his story. With a soldier’s economy for words, he concluded in under half an hour.

Dara listened without interrupting.

At the end, he asked some questions, and then led Barney out of the room.

Fourteen

Barney's Story 1970 – 1973

My name is Barnabas Nicholas Custer, and my ancestor was not killed at Little Big Horn. If you called me a hillbilly, well, you wouldn't be far wrong, 'cause that's what folks in the Tennessee hills are. We're soldierin' hillmen, and with nuthin' much growin' in these hills, it's either the scrub-patches for us, or else the army. Hardly any roads or lightin' nor telephones. Clannish, suspicious, feudin' folks – just the salt of the American earth.

Four sisters, all older'n me, and a younger brother who died of the fever when he was eight. Each of my sisters just ran off from home the minute she was big enough for somebody from up the smoke to have her. Our parents thought the girls were tough and mean and pretty enough to look after 'emselves. If they want the better things in life the Good Book promises, leastways somethin' better than beans and potatoes – well, who're we to interfere in the ways of the Lord?

Mom used to tend our ten acres, and Dad helped her when he wasn't in jail, drunk, makin' moonshine, or bein' chased by an excise man.

So, bein' such a busy gent, his business activities tied him up so bad he couldn't look after the farm. I was

Flight to Pakistan

still in my early teens when he gave me a taste of corn likker, and I sure liked it. That's what started me bunkin' school, which I didn't much care for anyway. Some time later Pa started teachin' me to make moonshine, and before I was fourteen, I was a moonshiner myself, better'n my pa in my own right.

It went on like this till I was eighteen – moonshinin', brawlin', dodgin' the excise men, and a'feudin' with the McAllisters. I'd just turned eighteen and right proud of myself for turnin' so, tall and strappin' as I was, outgrowin' my sneakers faster'n they could be bought, when I went into town that summer – all of eight miles, with my jug of moonshine, which ain't much in fashion nowadays except among proud men who just figger to do their own thing, but tourists kinda always fancied it for local color or some such reason. I went into town reckonin' I could maybe make myself a coupla dollars that might come in handy at the next barn dance.

The nearest excise man was fourteen miles away, a bit of news given to me by Pa, and I'd decided I could sell my two and a half gallons before he got back. It was summer and a lot of these city folks are partial to moonshine – get a kick outa it. In twenty minutes I'd made a clean fistful of dollars on my jug.

I was just goin' back home, when I say to myself, Barney, you cob sucker, you ain't never had a middlin' good time. Now, with these bucks in your pockets dancin' and a prancin', have yourself some fun. I decide the best fun is to get myself as good and drunk as I can. I'm just makin' my way to the town's only bar, when I meet Mike, kin to me from my mother's side, the Carneys, and I tell him my intention.

He says to me: "Barney, I've a barrel of corn likker stashed away. Why do you wanna' waste good money? Let's get bombed on that."

Since he lives right in town and we don't have to go far, I agree and say it's a mighty fine idea. Mike lives right above the little handicrafts store he runs, a little apartment all to himself. Now we start tossin' it down, and when a mountain boy decides to get himself drunk, ain't nuthin' drunker this side of the world and then some. Just when we're walkin' on the moon, and beginnin' to touch the stars, we decide to go down and eat.

Mike is a little guy like all the Carneys, and like the resta his kin, fond of gettin' into fights with folk the Lord saw fit to make big enough to knock him out. When he picks a fight with this broad-shouldered tourist type, I know I gotta do all the fightin' while he did himself all the pickin'! Now my hands were big and rawboned from all that there mountain work and the experience of many a Saturday night behind me. I just upped and waded straight into Mister Shoulders. I'm tough but he's as mean as a rarin' mountain cat, and it takes three stone jugs in the head before he kisses the floor, and the way he kisses it I'm sure he's dead. He had'ta be, the way his pretty lady is screamin' "Murder! Help!"

Then I realize I ain't on the moon but back on earth and there's a man at my feet who died by my hand.

Stone cold dead as a freshly caught mountain trout. I lost my head. Then I run. Right on till the main highway, and hitched a ride to Cedar Creek on a truck. Next mornin' I don't see anythin' in the papers, but I don't aim to go back and spend time with Sheriff

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Tippette. Even if the guy ain't dead, I reckon it could still mean the county jail for me. With the money I made from the sale of my jug, I decide to light out for Memphis.

Coupla months of throwin' drunks outa bars for a livin' brings all my sins before me, and Pastor Tewksbury's sermon on drinkin' comes back to me again and again. Then I see this army poster and decide, what the hell, they're gonna draft me pretty soon anyway, so I decide to join up.

I had to be in the Marines, and that's just what I joined. It was a good life, and not hard on a mountain boy used to runnin' and diggin' and a lot more in the way of hard work. I sorta cottoned to it 'cause apart from the cussin' from redneck sergeants, I got good food – a rare change from the beans and potatoes I grew up on – good pay, and education, which I realized was necessary if I was to make the military my career. In two years I made Lance Corporal, and although some of the city boys with their high falutin' ways and fault findin' habits were better educated than me – some even right up to high school – the Captain believed in somethin' known as skill at arms and leadership, which I have. Reckon it means I get tireder less than the rest, smile and get things done faster and don't question orders. If officers had meant to have their orders questioned they wouldn't pass orders in the first place, they'd pass questions around. And if all officers were pigs, the Lord woulda seen fit to have no Captains at all – nor Joshua nor David.

So anyway, after two years service, there's this call for volunteers for the Special Forces, and I kinda

hanker to be special, and wear those silver wings and a green beret. They were supposed to be rough boys, but I reckoned I wasn't made of tar and molasses.

When I joined up for training, I found these boys were a little rougher. Not much, yet little enough to make that difference.

I made the course grade and got my para wings and put on my green beret and had a picture taken, which I wanted to send home so's it could rest above the fireplace and make my folks stand proud outside the church when service was over. But I was still blamed scared of the county jail, and just parked it in my trunk, to look at sometime. The rangy mountain boy the army turned into a clean cut American soldier.

Three months after my course was over, I made Corporal. There was this other call for volunteers, only this time it was for Vietnam, where you could get killed. I reckoned it would be a kinda change from the phony fightin' I'd bin doin' till now.

It was 'bout this time, I had some leave and I thought if the Lord wants my death to come in a heathen land, I sure didn't want to be buried without seein' my folks, county jail or no county jail. When I went home I was a little bit of a hero with the girls, 'cause us mountain folk set great store by soldiers and our girls can recognize a pair of wings when they see one. They all know they don't take just anyone in the Green Berets. I also learnt I'd had no need to run 'cause the tourist was just out cold and not dead like his missus had bin screamin' he was. When he'd come to, he hadn't pressed charges neither! Well, I'd bin too drunk to think at that time. But it didn't turn out so bad

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either since my uniform picture ended up over the fireplace, and I still might have landed in the county jail beside my Pa.

In 'Nam I got assigned to a group operating with the Montagnards in the Viet highlands with a 'Yard (which was our shortened way of sayin' Montagnard) village where a chopper couldn't land. The nearest helipad was ten miles away, the jungle bein' so thick. At the helipad I'm met by a detachment of 'Yard scouts and this rangy blond sergeant from way down Texas with a red neck and cracker drawl through his nose which informs me I gotta walk ten miles and I'm assigned to him for special dooties.

Yeah, I knew what the special dooties would be. I had bin rated with an A in night work, sabotage and CQB – that's Close Quarter Battle.

Then I met the ten 'Yards who'd come to escort me. Little guys in loincloths and bare feet who gave me monkey grins and a handshake each.

They're not much for size, but I reckon they make up for it with their ropey muscles and the way they handle their M-16s. The Sarge, Andy Jackson is his handle, tells me to chamber-round my M-16, keep a thumb on the safety catch and look sharp. So I mosey along with 'em makin' like I'm on a 'coon hunt, watchful for a 'Cong ambush or a claymore mine that can rip your balls out.

All around us was thick green bamboo jungle, which we crossed by a narrow track that couldn't take more'n a single person. We come short of a hill, and I was just goin' to suggest to the Sarge that we keep beneath the crest, but then I kept my hillbilly's mouth shut in case

the Texan thought this mountain boy was scared. Besides, I guessed he knew what he was doin', him bein' a veteran and me not yet seen no combat. The forward scouts, both of 'em, looked around from the rise while the rest of us took a lying down position on both sides of the trail, and then they signaled with their rifles and we moved on up. Behind the scouts were two 'Yards, then me and the Sarge, the wireless man right behind us, and the rest in double file formation followin'.

The wireless operator was an educated kinda 'Yard. Had some English and French, probably from some mission school. We topped the rise, Andy giving me the low down on the little village of 'bout five hundred 'Yards who lived in bamboo stilted huts. The Beret team had 'em build a bamboo stockade around the village and in their five months stay had trained the 'Yards so well they were usin' their own mortars, and not only not scared of the 'Cong, but willin' to go ahead and conquer their neighborin' tribes as well! See, a Beret team was made up of an officer, Captain or Major, a medical Non Commisioned Officer, a Communications NCO, an NCO and two men or junior NCO's I Team, coupla training NCOs, and a General Duties NCO which meant me, doin' all the dirty tricks on the 'Cong. The Team goes out to remote Vietnamese villages, mostly with the highland 'Yards and motivates 'em and trains 'em in the use of American arms and equipment. When they were sufficiently trained, these guys carried out search missions leavin' the destroyin' to the US Marines, and brought prisoners and other intelligence. There would be some destroy missions, but very small. Usually just

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rece, confirm the info, a lightnin' raid or ambush, and then back to the village. It was pretty effective in the beginnin', but it didn't work.

To get back, we just topped the rise and there was just Andy's soft Texan drawl in the air which couldn't be heard more'n five yards away, when all hell broke loose.

From a hill five hundred yards to our south there's a single shot and we all hit the dirt, me hardest of all, keepin' a tight hold over my asshole to keep the fart from comin' out loud, and I just ease it gently, hopin' to God nobody'll smell it. I look towards Andy, and he's down with his brains blown out, and his wireless man's right beside me. Then a machine gun starts firin' long bursts and I can feel the 'Yards waitin' to see how I'll react and I'm shittin' inside and this is worse than I ever thought it would be. The machine gun is firin' from where 'bouts the rifle shot came. N'go, the wireless operator, is also interpreter and I pass an order for small bursts of five to seven rounds in the direction, while I take some time to get my guts back and think a little. Three of our 'Yards are pinned down, and the seven of us left after Andy, open fire all together on my "FIRE!"

A coupla seconds of intense automatic fire, with the M-16 buckin' in my hands like a colt at a rodeo show, and I got me the notion to "repeat the dose till the patient dies," only now it's the MG that's pinned and the other three 'Yards have shifted positions to join us. For the next few seconds or so, we remain where we are. The machine gun is silent now and I reckon the 'Cong's had pissed off. It was typical of the murderin' gooks to

shoot from far off, get an officer or NCO team leader, and fade away. Hardly ever saw neither hair nor hide of one of 'em. These were their main grand tactics in a conker shell. Shoot from afar, make us deploy, and fuck off, till they wore your nerves down.

I looked over at Andy now. There was a small hole in his right temple, and his brains had blown out the other side.

Fuck the 'Yards and what they thought, as my stomach came up into my mouth. I hadta let it out, and did it right there at the edge of the jungle with the 'Yards watchin', sayin' nuthin', not even on their faces. Then I shook my head to clear it, and I guessed I felt okay, and looked at Andy more closely. From the size and type of the wound, I guessed – rightly as it turned out – that it came from a 7.62m Warsaw caliber AK-Fuckin' 47 Kalashnikov Russkie commie rifle with a sniper scope, since the first shot had found its mark at five hundred yards.

As we started off for home base, I told the operator to raise control, so we could tell 'em they're one white Caucasian male and three stripes short, and some mother-fuckin' staff officer sittin' in some sister-fuckin' air conditioned room way back, sippin' at a cold can of Schlitz could make a mark on a score board. But then and only then does the little fartin' pea pod bit of rice eatin' shit discover there's a bullet hole in the set and it ain't gonna work none.

So I clenched my teeth and figgered it wasn't part of the Lord's plan to let us raise control, and give the signal to move.

Two hours later, we were in the clearin' and it was

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just the way Andy had described it, except for the defenses – they were better. First, the bamboo punji stakes and mines for a depth of fifty yards all round. Then the barbed wire concertina, behind which was a five feet high bamboo stockade, which covered the fightin' trenches with fire slits at ground level.

There was one entrance to the bamboo stockade and an LMG Det coverin' it with fire and observation.

Passin' through the village, the 'Yards waved at me and I waved back till they saw the stretcher and fell grim, most of 'em trailin' behind. The dames gave me shy grins, and sirree, they were real pretty with half their boobs stickin' out like newly ripenin' fruit in spring. The kids were latchin' around my legs, and I thought, hell, they think I'm a hero, or some kind of a godfather, till they noticed Andy's busted brains on the stretcher and fell quietly behind us.

We went straight to the center of the village where there was a three room hut which wasn't on bamboo stilts and I reckoned this must be where the American team hung out. My guess was right and N'go told me to go in and report to the Major. I pushed aside the bamboo slat and made my way inside, where there was a crude table and three stools, all made of bamboo. Behind the table on another stool there's a swarthy, lean, hook-nosed American who smelt all of spaghetti and meat balls and garlic with some salami and pasta added in for flavor. He was in a tiger suit with no rank or stripes, and behind him the wall was covered with maps under the usual army talc coverin'. I figgered this was the Eyetie Major, Joe Valletti, Andy had spoken 'bout. I'd heard talk 'bout him in Saigon, that his father

was a Cosa Nostra hood, but then the guys were always quick to add that no matter, this guy was on the up'n'up, an all right stand up guy. Good soldier, good fighter, and looked after his men, which made him as good an officer as you could come by accordin' to the enlisted man's book. His brown eyes were hard and looked at me with a straight measurin' look which as I'd come to know by now was the kinda look an officer gave who was gonna prove to be a good officer.

He came around the table and offered me his hand, and I saluted and stuck out my own and came out as smart as I could – we were Berets, but he had that kinda effect on me.

“Corporal Barnabas Nicholas Custer reportin' Major Sir, ex of the US Marines.”

He replied real nice, not like one of the West Point Protective Association's hoity-toity, but like some of the better ones from the Officer Training Schools – just one man to another. No sir, not at all like most of the pigs I ran away from for the Beret screwin', where, officer or no officer, you're a man in your own right – period.

I gave him the patrol report and he went quiet, offered me some 'Yard rice beer. The others in the team came in and I was introduced all around. Joe Hawkins, Sam Cummings, Janek Polaski, Guthrie Hamilton, Dod McGillicuddy and the doc sarge, Dave Stowe.

Six months later, the team was ordered to shift to the Mekong delta for operations as a Green Beret combat group. We were no more advisors, and I was glad to be

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outa the bitchiest, screwiest, fuckinest six months of my miserable little existence. Many was the times I had wished for the county jail. It wasn't so much the fightin' as the other things. Abraham's bosom didn't scare me. I just don't like my word broken on account of it not havin' bin my fault.

That lousy bunch of farts on Capitol Hill couldn't keep their word to a bunch of 'Yards. What the 'Yards saw was a small group of American soldiers who'd say one thing at lunch time, then speak on the wireless and change it by dinner. Now back where I come from, a man breaks his word, come Sunday, he ain't allowed to enter the church – and that's for sure – yes sirree.

We'd ask headquarters for chemical fertilizers for our gooks and we'd get an okay and tell the little runts they'd get it. That'd send 'em grinnin' from one ear to the other and givin' us looks like we were gods, and they'd start preparin' their fields. Well, come plantation time, we'd get a message sayin' sorry, no fertilizer, and the Major, he'd switch off the set and just go sorta quiet. Then he'd gather the 'Yard elders and spin some cock and bull yarn, which they'd nod to politely 'cause they knew the Major didn't lie to 'em. Their faces said plainly they didn't believe the yarn he spun 'em, but understood that as his country's responsible officer, he couldn't call his superiors farts. He had to give a reason smart enough to explain their fartin'. The bile rose up in us when we learnt our 'Yards couldn't have it and their babies would die of undernourishment again this season 'cause some politically important ARVN General had to have the fertilizer for his plantation – yeah, politically important enough to screw the

American taxpayer for free goodies which landed up not on his plantation but in the black market alleys of Saigon.

It was these times when me and the Major sat real close, and he spoke 'bout this friend he had, a Pakistani guy, some hood who'd come to the States to learn business administration from Harvard University to smarten up his racket back home in the backwater he came from. Sirdar Ali Shah was the guy's name, and whenever he got mad he'd cuss and say: "Shah – shit, no, even my own father's mafiosi are better than this bunch of clowns, drinking Schlitz with their asses growin' flat on staff chairs."

See, he knew we all knew 'bout his family, so he didn't bother to hide it.

After he'd got the cussin' out of his system, he'd start talkin' 'bout this pal of his, who'd saved his bacon on the street in Boston one time. If I was ever in trouble any where near the Middle East, I just had to drop Major Joe's name with him, and I'd get all the muscle or whatever it was I'd need to pull me out of whatever mess I was in. And one day he got so blamed sentimental he made me write down the guy's address in my notebook and promise if I was ever near Pakistan, I'd go callin' on this gent.

When I'd done that, it kinda made the Major feel better.

He was gettin' maudlin as time went on. It wasn't the combat gettin' to him – he was as good or as bad as any other Beret, and that's among the best in the world. Nosir, it was the way the US of A was comin' to look in the eyes of these guys we were workin' with. The US of

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A was gettin' littler and littler and the Major didn't like it – you can bet your sweet kissin' ass he didn't like it one little bit. I remember him talkin' just before he made me take down his Pakistani's address:

“Barnabas!”

“Yessir!”

“Barney!”

“Yessir!”

“Corporal Barnabas Nicholas Custer!”

“Awaitin' your orders, Major Suh!”

The Major was drunk.

Maudlin drunk, as we faced each other on bamboo stools in the coolness of his hut, the rice beer burnin' our guts.

“No orders – no orders, Barney,” he sighed. “Man looks for somethin' all's life – all's life – does he get it?”

“My parents took me to Church, taught me good Catholic habits at home – and then I learned that my father's a hood – a one hundred percent red blooded American hood – a HOOD – do you know what a HOOD is?”

I nodded.

“Good. Cosa Nostra. M-a-f-i-a.”

His eyes glazed, then refocused.

“Then I looked for America. I saw America in the Marines. Sheee-iiit! Gung-ho, Gung-ho, pray for warr. Ambush is murder and murder is fun. Hunh. CRAP!”

He looked around him, then went on a little more calmly than before.

“I ran from these slogans and looked for America in the Special Forces. God help our little brown brothers – New Frontiers shit. And our little brown brothers don't

want to be helped. Where is America, and where is Rousseau's noble savage – you heard of Rousseau?"

I cleared my throat. That's neither yes, nor no. Fuckin' fancy names he throws at me in the middle of a 'Nam jungle sittin' on a bamboo stool!

He went on.

"Jefferson and company, talkin' of the same thing as Rousseau. Noble savage. Where is he? Some of the gooks here, before they get hooked on American dollars – but they're not the genuine article I thought they would be – Barney, Corporal Custer?"

"Yessir."

"Fuck sirrin'. You listenin'?"

"Yessir. You're talkin' 'bout savages."

"That's it – Rousseau's Noble Savage. In the 'Nam jungles, and rice paddies – not a hope."

Then his eyes turned crafty. His voice lowered.

"I seen one. Sssh! I seen one. Write his name down. Write his name down. My frien'... my best frien' ... my brother ... yesss! You know who?"

"The Pakistani?"

"Barney, you're smart. You guessed it! You shoulda been at West Point!"

"Yessir, Major."

"Shut up. Shudup! We're friends – no sirrin'! All three of us. You, me, Sirdar. Write his name and address."

I had faith in Major Joe, and thought I understood the mood he was in. I wrote the name and address in my notebook.

The Viets, however, had started losin' faith in us, and we started losin' faith in ourselves and in our

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screwball government and our rat-assed society. Junkie kids with jeans and long hair cussin' us for bein' killers.

It was luck we got out of the Mekong when we did, on account of soon after we left there was this revolt by the 'Yards, who thought they'd bin gettin' the short end of the stick for more time than they cared, and there were some advisors and loose-assed ARVN troops killed.

I was battle hardened by then and we were known as the Green Mob 'stead of the Green Berets on account of Major Joe's family background. I was known as the Button Man. Bein' on the Intelligence Staff, me and Major Joe took easy like to quiet night work. Some headman informin' to the 'Cong needed to be removed, or some known informer needed to be brought in and broken. Like unofficial hangmen.

Many times in the night I woke up with nightmares and sat long after that in bed, just reasonin' 'bout my life and what I'd made of it. What really made me think was what I'd do with it for the rest of my days, if I lasted that long. I was straight enough with myself to know I'd never make it to OTS – not on my life. So I'd just go back to my Tennessee hills with a sergeant's pension and set on my porch on a rockin' chair and tell stories and be the local nut 'cause no one would believe 'em, and if somebody did, who would wanta listen?

I could be a hit man with one of the mobs, and maybe survive for some time, but for how long? These were thoughts I had never given mind to, but now I did, 'cause I knew it could never be the hills for me, not now that I'd seen half the world and most of its misery.

Back down in the Delta we had another surprise waitin' for us – American doughboys not actin' American at all. But then after some time when we saw what they'd bein' seein' for a lot longer than we had, the team all got the same way, 'cept for the Major and me. We stayed off hash and pills but started goin' heavy on the pussy and the booze. It was a dirty, silly war we couldn't win. It wasn't our war, but I don't wanta argue that point, on account of there's no sense votin' a government in power and then not listenin' to it. The right thing is not to let others do your fightin' for you while you screw around on pills and junk and shout NO WAR, but to try and change the government legal like.

The guys we thought we were helpin' double crossed us, the 'Congs and even 'emselves.

Boobs and booze and bar-room brawl-ups and then our period was up and it was our last patrol and we all prayed it'd be over so's we'd go Stateside in a coupla days. Durin' our year's stay a lot of buddies had gone back in wood boxes, in various pieces, and this night I again wondered what, if I came back alive, would I do with my life? I was sick of soldierin' and couldn't think of what else to do, less it was makin' moonshine.

Hell, to get back to the story.

It was our last patrol and it was very excitin', so excitin' that the Major made his last and only mistake. Three hours before the fifteen man patrol was due for final orders from the Major, he called me.

I was told that this bein' the last patrol and a routine one and since things had bin quiet for some time, the boys could each take a coupla drinks before settin' out. It was against orders to drink six hours before a patrol's

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Time Out and Major Joe was normally a stickler for this one regulation. The fifteen of us, all veteran Berets now, really started drinkin' till briefin' time, me specially.

I'd just made my third stripe a month back, thanks to Major Joe and the others and the war. My education, civil and military, couldn't even fit me as a Corporal. So now I was pretty tickled on two counts – bein' sarge and goin' back to the States, and did I hit the bottle? I hit it hard!

When we were called over for Verbal Orders, we could see that even the Major was drunk. He just grinned at us and said foolishly:

“Guys, this is another routine Preventive Fightin' Patrol. Same route, same logistics – same ammo scale – pouch – same weapons. Time out 2030 hours. Time in 0230 hours. RV present location. Password: combination of nine. Code word: negative. Extreme emergency proword: Mayday. Callsign: Whiskey Hotel. That's all. It's 1800 hours now. You can go and chow till time out.”

By 2030 hours most of the guys were unsteady and bleary eyed, but Major Joe didn't seem to pay much attention. We started off on the dot, with only leadin' and no flank scouts. This was a route we'd bin over many times before. The area around was populated with people livin' in farmhouses.

Startin' from base, our first direction would be North-East, then North-North-East, South-West, North-West, South, South-East, and down South to base. Each of these seven bounds was a mile plus, give and take some. At every bound the patrol would take a rest and look around for commies. The area was not so active

and nuthin' had happened for the last four weeks, which we shoulda taken as a danger signal, but didn't. The total distance came to 'bout twelve miles, and we checked up the three hamlets en route. The mission was just preventive to sorta police the area, and let it be known that we were 'bout.

Well, we were all drunk and not careful. Between the fourth and fifth bounds the ground was rather tricky. The direction was North-West. We had passed by a hut and were goin' to the fifth bound, a small hamlet by the name of N'goc Linh. Eight hundred yards short of it there was this piece of high ground to our left, 'bout ten feet high, and a hundred yards wide – sort of a ridge runnin' North-West to South-East. Just a raised freak in the ground. Two hundred yards to the right there was a clump of trees. The 'Cong used to lay a kinda ambush we called a Sudden Ambush.

When a patrol went along the elevated bit of ground dividin' one paddy field from another, the 'Cong would open up from long range with a Light Machine Gun. Naturally we'd jump into the paddy field to take cover so the bit of earth we were walkin' on would be between us and the 'Cong. Either we'd find that side of the field laid with mines and punji stakes, or else the guy with the LMG would be in wireless contact with a party sited behind our exposed backs. Minute we got settled and started returnin' fire, the first bastid would stop, and a whole patrol hidden at our rear would start pumpin' 7.62mm Warsaw fuckin' rounds right up our asses.

Now we were headin' towards the hamlet through the paddy fields along the path dividin' 'em, with that

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ridge to our left and the clump to our right. We always either took the longer route, keepin' one of the two features between us and the other, or else sent out flank scouts.

But not this night.

As the second in command, I was supposed to be at the tail end, and the Major at the head somewhere. But we were just one behind the other. Just when we were sandwiched between the clump and the ridge, an LMG starts chatterin' from the trees.

It's like instinct.

Somebody fires at you, and you can't help but jump behind the nearest cover. All of us friggin' veterans make a dive for behind the path, and I hear the Major yell "*O Christ!*" Couple of others shout curses. I don't know if they're hit or not 'cause with my M-16 I'm busy restin' my elbows to the flash of the LMG. We loose off a few bursts each, and I think we're all cold sober by now. Then from the tail end of the patrol there's a shout, *Major it's a Sucker!* and the voice is cut off and turns into a high pitched scream from the shootin' that starts at our rear.

We didn't know what hit us. There was the god awfulest din and some shootin' on our side but mostly cusses, screams and as I turn 'round to shoot back, it's that damn ridge from where all scientific shit is breakin' loose from hell. It's 'bout a dozen LMGs and Kalashnikovs but right then it sounds and feels like twenty dozen, and, mister, just as I loosed off a burst at the ridge, the shit starts fallin' from the sky – sixty fuckin' millimeter mortars. I duck back again and all of godamned Asia seems to go CARRAACK-THUMP-

WHOOSH! A flare lit us up like daylight and I saw the paddy field red with the blood of half a dozen of our guys in it, some screamin', others silent. The rest had scattered so I couldn't see 'em, but they couldn't have bin far away, I knew. Then my eyes fell on Major Joe next to me sprawled with his legs in the paddy field and his upper body over the path. The light went out and I grabbed his pulse. He was hurt, but breathin'. He musta stopped the first burst.

All of a sudden the shootin' let up. In the dead silence followin' I heard a word of command shouted in Vietnamese. That meant the gooks were satisfied with what they'd seen from the light of the flare round and were 'bout to move in to mop up the leftovers.

Forgettin' the others, 'bout whom I reckoned I couldn't do much, I did what the 'Cong did when stuck like we were. As I heard sounds of their beginnin' to move, I broke two reeds. One I stuck in my mouth, the other in the Major's, and before duckin' myself and the Major under I grabbed his mouth and squeezed his nose shut. This would force him to breathe through his mouth even when under water and unconscious. I prayed all the while that he wouldn't come to and start splashin' the water which would attract the gooks to us.

They were above and around us for a couple of minutes pickin' up weapons and ammo and boots and papers – if any – and finishin' off what was left of our boys. I didn't hear more shots so they musta bin usin' cold steel. I gave 'em another five and cautiously stuck my head out of the water. It was clear as far as I could see, so I dragged the Major out, who was still unconscious, and looked him over. The quiet was

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erie, and sent chills up me. Almost nine minutes ago we'd bin a happy drunken group silently walkin' in the moonless Vietnamese night, with no sound but the crickets and the soft slarpin' made by fifteen pairs of jungle boots on wet mud, and now, here we were.

Major Joe had his right side shot up for him. So I left him for the time bein' and went over to the others. There were six of 'em, and now none would get to the States the followin' day, includin' the wireless operator with no wireless set – it'd bin taken by the 'Cong. None of 'em had any first aid kit either. Taken by the 'Cong again. I had me a shell dressin', and that was all. I searched the Major but he was also without it. So I decided to wait right there for two reasons.

First, I was scared of movin' him. He was breathin' real uneven, and I figgered him for a goner.

Second, I knew a chopper would scour the countryside come daylight, and I could wave to it.

I ain't worried 'bout the commies any longer 'cause they know this is an area we're strong in, so they won't be eager to hang round. I sorta gradually moved the Major behind some bushes and propped his head on a pillow made from my flak jacket over soft mud. Then I tried to stop the flow of blood as best I could, with the shell dressin'.

When that didn't work, I stripped my dead buddies of their uniforms and used those. Then I lit a cigarette, cuppin' it in my hands so's the light wouldn't show. Three cigarettes and an hour later the Major's eyes opened and he tried to sorta get up. I grabbed his arm gentle like and told him to take it easy.

He says weak-like: "Barney ... Barney ... you

sonovabitch ... how ... how bad is it?"

He was the kinda officer you don't lie to, and I told him: "It's as bad as it could be."

Then, since he was still the patrol commander and me his 2-IC, I gave him a full report. He listens, and despite the pain, his eyes are intelligent. They got a different kinda pain when he hears 'bout the casualties. For a few seconds it's just like that, quiet, with both of us soldiers doin' our mournin' right there. Then he starts speakin'.

"Barney," he says, "I know I'm gonna die ..." and it seems strange, that soft New England accent in a 'Nam rice paddy from an Italian mouth. He was fancy and Ivy League and West Point and rich. He was all that and more – he was an okay guy all the way. He goes on.

"... you know I'm a Cosa Nostra Don's son, the whole army does and I know you guys called me Torpedo Joe, but I didn't mind 'cause it was all in good faith ... uhh ... shit! Hurts ... okay, okay ... when I lit out of the family they were disappointed but I was proud ... real proud. I'd made West Point and later the Berets without any mob connections. When Papa finally accepted it he gave me a suitcase full of gold. It was hijacked from the Arabs when some kinda deal with 'em went sour ... somethin' 'bout a Pakistan Connection involving Arabs, the Cosa Nostra, arms, the CIA, and keepin' the Russkies outa Afghanistan ..."

I take a long look at his eyes, and they're feverish, and I reckon he's delirious and don't know what he's talkin' 'bout or to whom, really. There's a queer kinda feelin' inside of me, and I don't want him to stop or die on me.

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I want the whole story.

“Papa said for me to keep it for a rainy day. I stashed it in a safe deposit box and entered West Point. I never meant to use it, but I kept it so’s not to hurt my father’s feelin’s and also to remember him by. When I graduated from West Point I was a little wiser and older and maturer and thought what the hell, it just might come in handy some day. One of my instructors there had served in the Office of Strategic Services in World War II. The OSS became the CIA, and shit – who hadn’t heard of Sarge Rockwell. One of the world’s top six men in booby traps – none better in the States. Sure, he set up the dirty tricks boys when the OSS became the CIA, and then asked for a cushy job, and they stuck him at West Point where he could help make men outa faggot college boys.” Sure, Sarge Rockwell, Mr Booby Trap himself! This was gettin’ more interestin’ by the minute!

“Rockwell – reckoned one of the world’s top six experts in explosives demolitions with an absolute mastery of booby traps – boob – boob ... UuuunhhhHH!–”

He gave a groan and flopped back. I almost farted. Shit, I wanted the whole stuff from him. I splashed some water from the paddy field on his face, and slapped his face gently so’s to revive him. Didn’t work. I put my hand on his neck.

“UUuh! ... gimmicked ... sarge ... die ... died ... later week ... week after booby trappin’ the suitcase sarge died and then I put it in a safe deposit in Detroit ... anybody openin’ without the key gonna die ... die ... diiiiiee! I’m gonna die – I’m gonna die – I’m Diein’ – I’

DYIN' – PAPA ... MAMAAAAA!" – he rose full up, gave a gurglin' kinda sigh, and dropped back.

His eyes were dead and fixed and I had seen too much death not to recognize it when I saw it. I took my hand off his neck, checked his pulse and heartbeat anyway to make sure.

I guess the Lord had wanted it that way.

Major Joe was dead on the hoop.

For a long time I just sat there smokin' and thinkin' of the knowledge I'd suddenly acquired and what it might mean. What a turn my luck had taken! While he was ramblin' I was sayin' to myself maybe this here's my chance to beat the rockin' chair in the hills and make somethin' of myself – hey, maybe I could go to College, just like that, to look at things like and just sit in class? That's if I could get my hands on that there gold which didn't rightfully belong to nobody. But just as the Major was 'bout to blurt out somethin' he upped and died.

I was certain 'bout one thing, though.

The suitcase full of gold was booby trapped by Sergeant Rockwell, who died a week after booby trappin' it. So's there was only one person who could open it – the guy with the key. And the guy with the key was layin' right there stone cold dead at my feet.

Holy crap.

I was damn near finishin' my third cigarette when I got the glimmerin's of an idea. In such a case a guy would have the key round him somewhere – his luggage someplace – unh – unh – unhunh! – and then it hit me. Yeah, on his body, – *the medallion locket*.

Round the Major's neck hung a fair sized square

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locket, and I reasoned, if I ever thought 'bout it, that it musta carried his girl's picture – officers were keen on that. The cigarette hissed in the wet ground and my hands trembled as they fumbled for the locket at his neck. I got it off, and passed my hands over the outer edges. There was a kinda pimple at one end. I tried to shift it right and left and around and it wouldn't budge. I cussed. I pressed it down, and it went down but wouldn't budge. *Shiiiiit!* I kept it pressed down and shifted it left. It slid, then right, and it slid again, and I had it open! In the faint starlight I could see two keys – they hadta be keys by their outlines. I laid it flat on the ground before me, and took a lyin' loadin' position with it right under my face. Then, cuppin' my lighter, I clicked it on. Yep, there they were, two keys, one of a safe deposit, and the other kinda slim and ornery and long, with a bit of writin' on it – things like 1-L, 2-R, and I figger these are instructions to make turnin's of the key so you don't blow yourself up, and then my Beret training takes over and I realize this is a key for a self destruct mechanism you either open properly or blow yourself up with. And another thing – with these keys you can't never tell whether it's just to hide the fact of it's bein' a combination lock. See, fella thinks that the lock is gonna open with a key, so he puts it in, and the first instruction being written on the key as 1-L, he makes the turn to the left and that's the last thing he knows! Then again, the instructions on the key might just be a code; like you add a figger or subtract a figger to get the number of turns right. But you still didn't know if it was a key lock or a combination one – cute, ain't it? That's Sergeant Rockwell and the OSS

and CIA for you – I'd heard tell this Rockwell was a mountain boy himself. All these complications I'd figger out when the suitcase was before me. For now, I thought I'd got it made. Godamn! This mountain boy made his smartest move when he joined up for the US Marines. Look where he's got to!

Then I set on my heels in the dark and did myself some figgerin'.

The important question to be figgered out first of all was – would the Cosa Nostra know 'bout this or not? I mean 'bout Major Joe havin' the keys in his locket? Finally, I reasoned they wouldn't know.

Next question.

The keys were taped lightly to the inside rubber linin' of the locket. If I removed the locket, and threw it away, it would mean I hadn't held him under water, which was gonna be the strength of my story. Then it struck me. Why the hell did I have to make myself into a hero? All I hadta do was to say he copped it with the first burst, and I dived under water when the search party came, knowin' the rest were dead, and the search party probably took the locket away! Easy's makin' pies!

I dug a hole with my knife 'bout a foot and a half and buried it.

In the quiet of the night I sat listenin' to crickets and frogs and nuthin' much of anythin' else. I felt kinda strange. Here's this guy, a millionaire many times over since his birth but he gave it all up 'cause he's shy of bein' a hood and wants to be one hundred percent American 'stead. More, he gives up all the power that goes along with it. He was no natural fighter, but he had guts and was a good leader and not scared of dyin'

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which we all are and maybe me most of all. And he gives it all up for a government with a hole for balls and monkey's balls for brains and a people he fights for who hate his guts 'cause his brand of freedom is slavery for 'em. I ain't much for philosophizin', but there I sat in the quiet dark night in a rice paddy thousands of miles away from my own Tennessee hills and philosophized 'bout these things.

Dawn was just breakin' and I was still sittin' and seein' all those guys I drunk and whored with, and fought with, lyin' dead in the beautiful Mekong dawn, the gold of the sun and the green of the shinin', dew-coated rice stalks and the smell you get to like, when I heard the sound of a chopper.

I keep my white vest ready to wave, but I also take cover with the safety catch of my rifle in the off position, 'cause if there's any 'Cong round when a chopper is within range, the sons of bitches shoot at it. Sometimes they hit a patrol, and then lay around waitin' for the chopper that'll come to pick casualties, and they hit it too.

This time I was lucky. I waved the vest, the Chopper circled and finally landed. The pilot was Nate Sanders, a big red-haired son of a bitchin' pal of mine from Kansas, and the rescue team.

While the guys load up, Nate offers me a drink, and as I'm sippin' it, tells me that the rest of the guys from the patrol that'd scattered after the first burst – which is the anti-ambush drill – had made it to the patrol RV which the Major had given at Base Camp. The story is out that all of us guys had bin drinkin' and there'll be hell to pay now.

And that's exactly what I hadta pay.

Fuckin' brass got their heads stuffed full of brass ball bearin's. If we'd bin under operational command of our own Special Forces Headquarters things would of bin different. This doughboy foot slogger of a One Star General – he was camp commandant and was our operational commander – this fat assed shit thinks this here is his big chance to play down the Berets. Major Anderson, my defendin' officer, was a Beret down to his balls, but the case was open 'n' shut. They got 'em a notice that since I was second in command I shoulda advised the Major 'gainst the drinkin'. They kept throwin' the question round the courtroom like a football – did I or did I not advise? I wasn't gonna crap on the Major's corpse, but I told 'em the truth, which was that, nosir, I hadn't given any such advice.

Anyhow, they busted and dismissed me, and I thought to myself it's better'n endin' up in Fort Leavenworth. I got some money from the army – back pay and stuff like that, and then the boys were okay. They insisted on gettin' me a first class ticket for Stateside. The fuck of a commander ordered I wasn't to be given a farewell party, but things by then had changed in the Army, particularly, what with the niggers puttin' up pictures of Malcolm X in their bunkers and settin' in the same buses in the States, so, after a slap up night of drinkin', I shook off my hangover in the first class section of a Boeing.

I had fifteen hundred dollars when I landed in the States, and Major Joe's key, and the knowin' itself was

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good enough. Gave me a funny feelin' still. *Two turns of a key and you're a millionaire!* Like some kinda American dream commercial. I planned on waitin' for some time before approachin' that safe deposit box. If any one of the mob was suspicious, it would throw 'em off. I'd pick a job somewhere, wait for a few weeks or months, till I had me a gut feelin' 'bout it, and also made some contacts to dispose of it.

I was home for a week, gave my mom five hundred dollars, and then lit out for Vegas.

I was hard, and I was mean, and when it came down to it, just a hired enforcer for Uncle Sam. Way I figured, Vegas and the mobs runnin' it could maybe use somebody like me. If I was lucky, I could make it to bodyguard for a big shot, which could put me close to sources who might help me dispose of the gold.

I'd also had enough of gook pussy, even though they were great lays, tight and sassy all the way, but all they did was giggle. Now I thought of redheads, and brunettes and blondes, and boobs, real hundred percent All-American boobs, not like the gook boobs with black nipples – some pink ones! Christ, it was so bad, I even had me a coupla wet dreams.

First three days in Vegas I just went round gettin' the feel of the place, with my old S & W thirty eight in a shoulder holster. The third night I just decided to get into the big league a little bit, and go to the Silver Streak I'd heard tell 'bout. I got in with my olive green combat jacket and *soldier* written all over me, and I see the hustlers markin' me down as a discharged sucker, and some of the kids with long hair givin' me the dirty. I ignore the baby-killer whispers. Bein' in a combat zone

I hadn't bothered 'bout clothes, and hadn't figgered on bein' court martialed, else I would of got enough money from the army to get me some decent clothes which wouldn't have made me look like a freak.

The gun was kinda heavy on the armpit, but it gave me a sense of security. I went straight to war from the Tennessee hills, and my first time on the streets of this great big country gives me the same feelin' I had when I went out on my first fightin' patrol.

I walked inside, turnin' from the pavement into the small hall, while the doorman gave me the once over, and then I turned right. The place was so fancy I felt the fanciness even below my guts, lower down, you know where. On account of the place, and what was in it, I also felt out of place, in a way thinkin' of me with the 'Yards, and then the commies, and paddy fields and the last time I had bin in one. All this was in my head while my eyes roved across the low ceilin'd smartness, 'bout thirty feet square. One side's a bar counter, L-shaped, with one leg for servin' and the other where they got some kind of gear for cookin'. There's 'bout ten tables, real low, and around it are Eastern kinda stools to squat on, four to the table and oriental carpets and low lights in brass oriental shades. It's like somethin' out of Arabian Nights or Alladin starrin' Charlton Heston and Yul Brynner. I guessed this was what was known as the New Look.

I went to the only empty table in a corner and squatted on the low seat that just looked Eastern, only they're Americaned with foam paddin' which goes nice and easy on an ass used to hard ground. I looked around and they were all couples – young and rich and

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most in Indian shirts and jeans and beads and charms around their necks and arms, Rama and Krishna poppin' outa their dumb ears.

Then my eyes went back to what had bunged me like a side neck chop when I first entered the place, and I can feel the Mex waiter's eyes bore into me, but what the hell? This is a dream – the Great American Dream of a hillboy just back from the boondocks.

There's this sugar daddy in a suit, short and smooth and pudgy, and on the wrong side of fifty. But what's with him is neither short, nor pudgy, nor anythin' to do with the number fifty, but sure enough smooth. A dish, a real hot momma. About twenty-five, I guessed, and blonde, as blonde as they come, with blue eyes. Her nose is short and a bit ski jump, but it makes her look like she's askin' for you know what. The mouth is sexy like Brigitte Bardot's, only more so, over a dimpled chin. And the rest of her wasn't made nor intended by the Lord, I'm sure, to ever be anywhere but in a bed on her back. The way she's squattin' she's got her side to me. She's wearin' a baggy silk shirt, with nuthin' under it, and when she breathes, those big knockers go knock-knock – up 'n' down, real slow like, just like they were fruit on an apple tree and a breeze is blowin' gentle like – artistic, if you understand what I'm tryin' to say.

Below the shirt she's wearin' a baggy silk skirt, and sittin' cross legged with it hiked up to mid thigh. And I can notice she's seen me, and later I was proved right; she'd started givin' me the look the minute I entered the place. Then I glanced up at the waiter and his eyes are kinda sympathetic. I ask for a double of Old Grandad's, and go back to the tomato. She must be 36-20-36, as

fancy as the fanciest Hollywood broads, in fact fancier. The fat guy and her are drinkin' Champagne. The fat guy is droolin' over her, and what tickles me is every time he looks down at those creamy smooth, soft thighs, she looks at me!

Barnabas Nicholas Custer, the paddy field killer, ex-sergeant and present hillbilly drifter. I guess I musta had a sex appeal I wasn't aware of, even though I say it myself.

And then I know what she reminds me of.

In the Mekong Delta, before the sun rose, there useta be a red glow, and the way it played on the rice shoots, makin' the dew drops glisten like cute little diamonds, and the dew on the cobwebs, and it's all quiet, 'cept for the birds singin', and I'd say to myself, Barney, I'd say, you go back home and find a broad as pretty as this here sunrise and get her in the hay and bang hell outa her and that would be livin' and then some.

So, here I am, not in the hay yet, but not too far off, the way she's lookin' at me in her green outfit and blonde hair as pretty as a 'Nam rice paddy in the dawn.

It was my fifth double and I felt like I was in a C-130 with the doorway open ready to jump out. It's the same feelin' of fear and excitement which makes you lick your lips and the same time sing your favorite song, only more so. By this time, sugar daddy is strokin' her thigh beneath the table with a fat paw.

Each time he looks down at her thighs, she smiles at me!

I reckon she must be tired of ballin' up an old man, and wantin' someone more vigorous, and what's more

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vigorous than a sex-starved soldier back from the wars?

Then the fat guy signaled to the waiter, and so did I.

We paid together almost like clockwork, thanks to the Mex waiter who understood my problem.

The fat pig gets up and waddles out, with the broad behind and me followin'. The broad certainly does not waddle. She don't walk neither. Like the writer fella said, she don't glide smooth neither. It's a mixture of all this, and that round ass of hers got a rhythm to beat any of these rock groups. Seems there's a bunch of rattle snakes writhin' beneath her silk, only I know it ain't no rattlers. It's just round, white creamy smooth ass full of pulsing life on a leash waitin' for a mountain boy to come up and let it loose.

Thinkin' of these things, I follow 'em out of the hall. Reachin' the street door, the broad and the guy are together, and me a pace behind. The doorman opens the frosted glass doors with a *Good evenin', Mister Shriver*, and Mister fat slob Shriver slips him a note and steps out with the broad into the almost empty street.

By empty I mean that there wasn't much traffic movin' 'bout. Cars were parked at the kerb, pretty spaced out. It was 'bout thirty minutes past midnight.

I also stepped outside and it happened.

Danger.

I can damn well smell it, havin' lived with it for so long. Maybe it was that the car had no headlights, and the way it just sprung up from nowhere, but mostly instinct. The fat slob gave a kinda squeak and dropped flat. I grabbed the dame and threw her on the sidewalk with me on top of her and as we went down and the big

black car roared almost opposite, I saw a snarlin' white face aimin' the rod at me. The thirty eight came into my hand and I thumbed the hammer, but before I could shoot, two shots zipped past my head. Just as the car went past, I squeezed off two shots, one of which hit the trunk of the car, but it kept goin'.

And then in the silence I realized what I was lyin' on.

When I threw the dame down I kinda half turned her. In fallin' she musta completed the turn 'cause now she's lyin' lookin' up at me and me lookin' down at her. I can smell the dame smell and some sexy perfume and she's breathin' hard and I can feel her right through her silk clothes. I almost forget where I am when she moves her body beneath me and opens her wet mouth, obviously enjoyin' the way we were.

And the fat slob moved to my left, tryin' to get up from the sound of it, and that broke it up.

I got up and helped the broad to her feet and she stands real close to me.

"Thank you, you saved my life."

Her voice is low, and husky, just like all the dames who came to me in my dreams – wet and dry.

What with all the excitement and the booze and this dame beside me I was feelin' horny as hell and couldn't think up any corny thing to say like John Wayne woulda. From my side pocket I scooped out a coupla shells and shoved 'em in the cylinder, and while puttin' the gun back, I turn to Sugar Daddy Shriver.

"Are you hurt, Mister Shriver?" I ask, havin' noticed his sweatin' and scared looks.

What with all the noise in gamblin' establishments and they bein' soundproofed to boot, and with no

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people on the street, and the enemy usin' silencers, and me havin' just got out two shots, nobody had noticed anythin'. It was funny, in the middle of a big huge town, there's almost a killin' and nobody seems too bothered.

"No-o-ooo, thank you," says Sugar Daddy, and turns to the doorman. "Jack, you didn't see nothin' unnerstan'?" he says real educated like, and with a lotta confidence.

The doorman, an old guy, gulps and nods and he knows it's okay on account of there was nobody in the street then and nobody now. The attackers had a silencer and my own two shots coulda sounded like a backfire to anybody who *did* hear 'em. I was gettin' good and nosy now, 'cause Sugar Daddy didn't seem eager to get the cops, which would be the right and natural thing for a normal citizen of the States. Which meant Mister Sugar Daddy Shriver wasn't a normal citizen. Now a citizen of the largest gamblin' town of the United States who gets shot at and doesn't want the cops to know, can only be one kind of a not normal citizen, and that's the kinda citizen I was lookin' to make contact with.

Then he turns to me. "What's your name, Mister?"

After I tell him, he looks me up and down and goes on: "Mister Custer, I can't tell you how grateful I am to you. Vietnam veteran?"

"Green Berets."

His eyes light up.

"If you have nothin' better to do, could you oblige me by doin' another favor?"

“Sure, fire away. I just got discharged, and got nuthin’ to do.”

He looks satisfied.

“These men were after me, not after Miss Webb. I’ll wait here inside and send for some ... unh ... help. Could you escort Miss Webb back to the apartment and stay with her till I come down or send somebody?”

That’s it, and there’s one mountain boy in the whole United States who thinks he’s the luckiest American that night. Do I agree? And how!

So I told him straight: “Mister Shriver, if you really wanta return the favor, I’ll give it to you without frills. I need a job real bad, and that’s what I came to Vegas for, thinkin’ maybe somebody could use my Special Forces skills.”

Naturally he says, yes, and he looks as pleased as I feel at that time, and so I reckon he was also lookin’ for a guy like me. Now this is what I call luck. All I do is fire a couple of shots over that soft body, and look where it gets me. The promise of a job from this fat hood, and a trip right to her apartment. I offer her my arm, and she takes it real lady like and we start walkin’ for some cruisin’ cab, and every few steps she kinda rubs herself against me and wow!

A little bit ahead and feelin’ like a right horny hillbilly not sayin’ anythin’ I came out with, “Miss Webb, you’re what I used to dream ’bout in the paddy fields and jungles of Vietnam.”

“Thank you, and my name’s Mary-Jo for my friends. And after what you’ve done for me, we’re more’n friends.”

’Cause of what she says and the way she says it, I

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almost grabbed her right in the street, but just that moment I saw a cruisin' cab so I hailed it. I tell her to give the cabby the address, but she says, "Have you had dinner?"

"No."

She's so close I can feel her breath on me. "Then we'll have dinner first."

I say to myself, *somethin' else for dessert.*

"Call me Barney, Mary-Jo."

"Barney, nice name, but you don't look like Barney Bear at all!"

We both laugh and the ice is broken as they say.

"How hard was it in Vietnam?"

I grinned.

The night air hit me through the cab window and Old Grandad did the rest. I felt confident of myself for the first time since gettin' my rank busted.

"Not now, baby. You said dinner first. Durin' the afterwards I'll tell ya," I said and leered at her.

She laughed, low and husky. "You're drunk, tough guy."

"Sure," I said, and leered some more and grabbed her hand, but just then the cab stopped. We got out. I paid off the cabby, then we walked into this little Chinese place and ordered hot and sour soup, chicken fried rice, sweet and sour beef and fried prawns. I hurried with my food and lit a cigarette while she was still eatin'.

"You eat fast, soldier."

I grinned and gave her a look.

"Sister, I'm a little anxious for the afterwards!"

She laughed and brought her knee close to mine. I

was gonna take my hand to her thigh but there were some people in the place so I just rubbed my knee with hers and took another drag.

After she finished, I snapped my fingers for the check, but she wouldn't let me pay for it. I let her, in case she sassed out on the afterwards.

In the cab on the way to her apartment, I sat up close to her and all the while she's lookin' at me and just breathin' hard, her nipples goin' up and down pressin' against the silk sendin' field signals. I put an arm around her shoulders and she comes tight into my arms, and I can feel her breasts strainin' even through the poplin of my jacket to the skin of my chest. She parted her lips and I brought my own down on hers and we stayed like that for the remainder of the journey, our mouths kissin', her arms around my neck and my one arm on her tits and the other on her thigh, and then the hand was right on her slit caressin' the silky bush between her thighs.

The cab stopped and we come up for air and got out. As I paid off the cabby with a nice tip, he winked at me, a man to man wink, and I winked back. We went up in the elevator, and it was even better, my hand strokin' her slit with a bit of a finger startin' a second American Revolution inside of her, and her givin' soft kinda sighs.

The elevator stopped and we got out with our arms around each other's waists. We went along to the third door on the right, and she takes a key out of her shirt pocket – she hadn't no handbag – and opened the door. We stepped into the livin' room and she turned to lock the door. I took her in my arms but she says, "The

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bedroom!” and takes me by the hand next door.

Next mornin’ she woke me up with the smell of fryin’ bacon and eggs.

I jumped outa bed naked and went to the kitchen, where she was in a quilted housecoat, stirrin’ the fryin’ pan with her back towards me. She looked over her shoulder. Her eyes went wide at my mornin’ erection. She turned, reachin’ for it, and her hand came down.

I put my hands on her bare boobs beneath the housecoat. She shivered. My mouth sucked her nipples, red tipped and stiff, as she worked with her hand below my waist. She slid down, her mouth closin’ my prick. I grabbed her hair. She moaned. Then we were down on the bare kitchen floor, her mouth suckin’ me, my tongue in her slit, both buckin’ wildly. My hands went to her ass, grabbin’ the twin cheeks. Her body shuddered. She screamed like somebody was tryin’ to cut her throat, only it was her come. I couldn’t hold myself back any longer, and came in her mouth. She drank it up greedily, makin’ a suckin’ noise and thrashin’ around. I was sweatin’ and groanin’ like an animal, and she drank me off. I was still hard, and she said wonderin’ly: “Fuck me, Barney, fuck me hard, in the cunt, N-a-a-ow!”

She moaned and we changed positions. I was inside her and it was warm, oh so warm. I tingled from the tip of my prick to the hole of my ass and then some. I banged away into the mother softness of her and wanted to stick into her all I had – wantin’ it to come out right through her mouth. She’s scratchin’ my back and shudderin’ with her come, and it’s one of those multiple ones, but I’m holdin’ back. She’s yellin’ things and so

am I, but I keep on, pumpin' my waist into her – thinkin' if I ever get to heaven this is what it's gonna be like. She's comin' for the third time when I grab her tits and she moans louder, mashes her lips with mine, and grabs me from the buttocks shovin' her crotch against me, and movin' around in a circlin' movement. I can't hold it back any longer and I come and I come and I keep comin' with the longest come I've ever had. Somewhere in the rooms there's trumpets and music and the sweetest noises I ever heard – it hadta be angels all singin' *God Bless America*.

Coupla hours later I was in Shriver's office, as fancy as you can imagine it could be. After a drink he tells me.

“Barney,” he says. “I'm not a real hood. I was a lawyer for these hard boys. I was clever and they were stupid. I bought 'em out and bought in on some muscle of my own. Now these boys think I pulled a fast one on 'em, and they're after me. I ain't worried 'bout myself 'cause I got some good hard boys around me, but that night I wasn't expectin' things to hot up so soon. Mary-Jo is a different proposition. If these guys gunnin' for me were family – you know – Cosa Nostra – there'd be an eight to one chance they wouldn't try to get at me through her. Italians leave women and children out of such fights, but these boys are all American. Now the bigger problem is Mary-Jo herself. I can't trust a guy around her. Not that I don't trust *her* –” I hadta call up all my Marine discipline not to laugh in his face, “– but she bein' so attractive, I can't trust a guy. You risked your life for her and for me out of the blue – a good

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soldier and I can't imagine you misbehavin'.

"So here's what I want you to do. I'll give you three hundred dollars a week to guard her. You both shift to this apartment I have at another place."

He gave me a set of keys and an address already written on a slip of paper.

"Pass yourself off as Mr and Mrs Custer. I'll keep visitin' you occasionally. After this thing blows over, you take over as my bodyguard for the same pay and a piece of the action at the casino."

On the way to my roomin' house, I laugh to myself.

This fat slob, he's played a lot of people for suckers, but he ain't so hot himself. He's gettin' played for one by a mountain boy turned Marine turned Commando 'bout to turn millionaire. The shit he dished me 'bout his havin' bin clever and taken over the business all legal like I didn't buy for one second. Nosir, I know a crook when I see one, and I saw plenty in 'Nam in the junk racket. The guy was a shyster all right, but he wasn't a two-bit shyster and he sure musta grabbed the dough and the business from the guys who was gunnin' for him.

Such a smart aleck and as big a sucker when trustin' his hot dish with this hillbilly. Me, I'd have kept that dame in a strait jacket and only taken it off to pry open her thighs. When he talks 'bout his piece of tail who's bin with me in the sack all night and not two hours since I came over to his fancy office, he's plain in love with her. Look how he's worried 'bout her safety and a body guard with morals! 'Cong shit! I ask you, what morals can stand up to a body like that? Boobs that got GRAB ME written all over 'em.

My morals had already broken down, but I was no sucker. Mary-Jo was a hot dish and the greatest lay in my life, but I wasn't sucker enough like Mister Sugar Daddy casino owner, and God knows what else, to fall for a piece of tail, whatever the taste. And this taste was sure good.

By the evenin' me and Mary-Jo were settled down with lotsa supplies and plenty of booze. I told her 'bout my adventures in 'Nam, some real and some I made up for her. Now don't get me wrong. There's all kinds of broads in this man's world. This was the kind who'd strip her pants for the first gung-ho soldier type that crossed her track and to keep such a broad's thighs parted for you, you gotta give her what she wants. What she wants is lotsa violence and hard sex and if the violence wasn't real she'll settle for violent talk like this magpie in my lap with my prick in her hand droolin' and pantin' and askin': "Then, Barney, how'd you kill him?"

I'd spin her a cock 'n' bull yarn and she'd open her legs wide and say, "Bang me, honey, bang me hard!" and we'd screw each other's brains out.

She was an Iowa farm girl, and I understood where she got that great body from, and that skin and her healthy passion for the Lord's greatest sport designed for men and women. She ran away from home at sixteen for the Hollywood route and didn't make that, but did make a Grade-A stripper in a fancy joint right there in Vegas. Then she met Shriver who lost his head over her and stashed her away in an apartment with a promise of marriage after his business affairs were fixed.

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We went on like this for weeks. Eatin' and drinkin' and screwin' and Mary-Jo floors me in the third week by tellin' me that Sugar Daddy ain't screwed her even once yet, he's waitin' for the weddin' night, wants to keep her pure and all for the kids he's gonna bang outa her. She tells me this when I'm inside her, then I screw her real hard thinkin' *you hot pants bitch – you godamn gold-diggin' bitch* – but I like her all the same 'cause she's the best roll in the hay I ever had.

Why is it people, and broads especially, are so dumb? They reckon 'cause a guy like me – a soldier, from a hillbilly background – can't speak fancy la-dee-da that he's gotta be stupid. But it's really these folks who're dumb, 'cause they under-estimate a guy like me, and then end up on the losin' side. Intelligence and education ain't always pals. This broad was makin' the same mistake. She thinks I'm dumb just 'cause I'm rough. She really expected me to fall for such a sucker story like Sugar Daddy Shriver not screwin' her! What's her game, I wonder? Maybe she's in love with me, or else is thinkin' of a future revolution in the Shriver empire, and wants me for an ally. In any case, if she thinks I'm hick enough to believe she ain't bin laid by Shriver, I decide to let her. This makes *her* the real hick.

Shriver phoned 'bout three or four times a day, and visited a coupla times, not without phonin' to clear if there's a watch around the place or somethin' which gives us time to dress proper. When the bell rang, I'd go real careful like to the door with gun in hand and open it, and he'd be pleased seein' how good I was protectin' his piece of tail – Barney Custer the Moral

Minority of One! Each time I see him I think it's funny. All along he's bin thinking I did it for him although it was the magpie I done it for, and my soldier instincts. Anyway, he leaves his two Cuban bodyguards – Eduardo and Pedro – outside – and every time he does so, I can see from their jealous looks they're just waitin' to stick a knife in my guts and twist it some. And they almost got their chance Monday of the third week.

It was around three in the mornin' and I was on top of Mary- Jo, both of us naked and me poundin' at her innards when the door opened all of a sudden, and there's a hoarse kinda cry and I seen Ron Shriver in the doorway with his mouth open. I roll over Mary-Jo and the bitch starts screamin', "He raped me, I tried to stop him but he forced me to –"

The money diggin' whore!

Then he rushed me, Mister Sugar Daddy Slob, tryin' to hit me. I jumped off the bed and busted him with a left in the belly, then slapped him down, and he yells, "Pedro, Eduardo!"

His hand goes for his gun in a shoulder rig.

I grabbed my gun from beneath the pillow and that stopped his hand where it was.

Just then Pedro came through the door, chargin' like a fool with his flick knife, thinkin' maybe I was a piece of window dressin' and would be as easy to slit up.

I was stark naked and the bastid made a slash straight for my balls. I didn't wanta shoot and attract neighbors so I just stepped aside and as his head went past me, rapped him twice with the gun-butt like a boxin' double punch, at the same time stompin' on Ron's belly to keep him from tryin' anythin'. Pedro was

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down, and very quiet. I reckoned on him bein' so for some time.

Now Eduardo came chargin' through like this was the Bay of Pigs. He stopped when he saw the hole of the thirty eight waitin' for him. He raised his hands and looked over at a point behind my right shoulder, but that's an old comic book punk trick.

'Stead of lookin' back I just cocked the thirty eight and for extra insurance stomped on Ron Shriver again, without takin' my eyes off Eduardo. This time the old man yelped.

I told Eduardo to turn around and knocked him out with a rabbit punch. Then I stepped back and told Mary-Jo to tie 'em up and gag 'em, with my gun still on her. I was good and mad now. When she'd done the job with strips of a torn up bed sheet on Sugar Daddy and Eduardo, she asks, "What about Pedro?"

"What 'bout Pedro?" Then I notice Pedro's eyes starin' very hard outa his head, and I get it. There's a cold feelin' inside my gut when I realize he's starin' hard at nuthin' 'cause he's as dead as cold mutton. I musta really hit him hard, and it's the cops for me, that's for sure.

I felt the soft press of tits on my left arm. She was still naked and when I saw her eyes I knew all the violence had turned her on. First I thought, what the hell, till the old middle leg started makin' signs all on its own. One parta me says she's a bitch, but another tells me she's insurin' her weddin' ring and what would she get outa me except for a good toss in the hay?

I went and locked the entrance door. Sugar Daddy and Eduardo were still out, gagged with their socks –

expensive socks, and they didn't smell. Then I propped up Sugar Daddy and Eduardo and gave a look over the room. Mary-Jo was watchin' me, lickin' her lips with a hungry look in her eyes. I laid the gun on the dresser and threw her on the bed.

After I finished, I rolled over, and lit a cigarette. Shriver had come to. I could see his eyes and knew he'd got the joke. This hot mamma just couldn't lay off sex, and Shriver had heard and seen the way she enjoyed it right now and then knew I was no raper. He'd hate me, but he'd hate her more, and that would be a good thing for him. He'd get her, and might forget 'bout me.

On the third drag I laughed out loud. I couldn't help myself. The bitch was lyin' with her eyes half shut and still sighin'. I started to dress. I put on my shoes and was gettin' into my shoulder holster when she understood.

Her eyes opened wide and she started cussin' me.

Real mean, filthy, sergeant major's cuss words only a Marine Sergeant or a tin can alley cat would know. Since she wasn't a Marine Sergeant Major, which don't mean any Marine outfit woulda refused her, I reckoned she was the other, and it didn't make me feel bad at all 'bout what I done to her right then or was goin' to do.

I raped her across the mouth.

"That first night it was you that raped me."

Ron Shriver's eyes almost popped out his head.

"Since then it's bin the same. Today when you see your chances of a weddin' ring slimmin', you up and call me a rapist. You're so hot for it you forgot your future husband's right in this room with a dead man

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layin' at your feet, and all you want is my hard prick between your legs. He's seen what you are now, and you can kiss that weddin' ring goodbye and shut up or else I'll mark up that pretty face for you, you ornery bitch."

That did shut her up, and after tyin' and gaggin' her I went through her place and the hood's wallets. I made a total of seven and a half thousand dollars, which would last me some time.

Then I lit out.

I figgered to have a few hours' lead on the cops and bought me some hair dye and a pair of sunglasses. I dyed my hair in a public john, and shucked the combat jacket in a corner dustbin and got in a blue high necked jersey. Then I hitched a ride to the first little town on the highway and hid all day in an old buildin'.

Next mornin' I made a careful check of the newspapers. There was no news of the killin' of a Pedro Gonzalez, or any hood of Cuban origin, nor of any one killed in Vegas that night. I breathed a little easier. Now I'd only to look out for some of Ron's hoods, and not the cops at least.

All of a sudden I thought of Major Joe's father. Maybe knowin' I tried to save his son's life, he'd help me. But then I go cold. What if he don't buy my story of not knowin' of the gold, and doesn't believe the dead Major's locket was taken by the 'Cong? Or maybe if he don't know 'bout the keys bein' in the locket, he believes I know where they are anyway, havin' bin closest to his son. Besides, almost all of Vegas is Cosa Nostra, and the way I am, I reckon I just might be dead. But if I go to the Don, I'm dead for sure. Eyeties got

long memories. I decide that I ain't just not ringin' the Don, I ain't goin' near anythin' Eyetie, no pizza, no spaghetti.

I figger it's time for this mountain boy to take the gold and get outa the States.

Then I get a brainwave – the Pakistani whose address I got – Major Joe's friend!

He's got nuthin' to do with the American Cosa Nostra. If I could reach him, he'd be sure to help me. We could split the gold and then he'd have a stake with me. For that much, he'd be sure to cut me in for a piece of the action, and Beret brains sure could come in handy to a gook hood. I could set myself up real good with a Man Friday and lotsa Paki pussy in 'em Saris. Yeah, the more I think over it, the better I like the idea. Then I decide – yessir. Pakistan and Sirdar Ali Shah are my best bet. The decision made, I start workin' on the logistics.

I ain't got no passport and no time to get one legal like, on account of SOB Sugar Daddy who musta surely put out a contract for me. Bein' very careful, I get me an airline bag that's enough for what a simple guy like me needs. With that over my shoulder, I kinda pussyfoot to the railway terminal.

I can't see no hoods nor no cops around, so I get me a train ticket straight for Detroit. I'm thinkin' of takin' complicated evasive action like I was taught to, but I reckon that one other thing I was taught is perhaps more useful – KISS – Keep it Simple Stupid. There ain't no news report, nor I guess will there be, on account of Sugar Daddy woulda had a lot of explainin' to do. Musta got rid of the body, so it means I just got the mob

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to worry 'bout, and I'm careful, but not scared.

A trained guerrilla who's experienced for himself the truth of his instructors' teachin', doesn't get impressed by size. It's like the old movies where a guy takes a sword and stands on a narrow stair. Only one man can come up at a time, so when he's attacked by a thousand, it's still only one man against him. While he's fightin' he's retreatin' back a step till he reaches the castle wall and jumps on his horse parked below.

I reckon the mob can't send more than two or four men at a time to hit me, provided they locate me first. Well, these hoods are tough and they're mean, but the combination of Marine and Special Forces is tougher and a whole lot deadlier.

Reachin' Detroit, I go straight to the Manufacturers Bank Building, get the suitcase, with no questions asked, and book into the Pickford-Shelby nearby, for lotsa reasons.

Firstly, it's nearby, and the suitcase is heavy. Then, in a place with class, you got the protection of a hotel's reputation and it's security staff. Thirdly, I kinda hanker to have me a bit of class before I die, in case my luck runs out right on United States soil. And then, anythin' with a hyphen stuck up its middle is surely classy.

I checked in and it was all I thought a classy hotel should be like.

First off, I wanta open the suitcase. When I'd got the two keys out of the Major's locket, I wasn't sure which kinda tricks Sergeant Rockwell woulda played in booby trappin' the suitcase. Well, one thing is clear right away. The suitcase works on a combination, 'cause there's no hole for the key, but a round, plain, smooth knob. My

heart's beatin' as fast as a Huey's rotor blades under fire from the 'Cong, and I sit on the bed, forcin' my nerves to relax. I gotta be very cool now, cool like real cool, man. The key's obviously just a code for instructions on how to turn the knob. What if it's bin done on a numerical code? That would mean Abraham's bosom right here and now. So I set there, thinkin' some, and smokin' some. Then I just come to the conclusion that this here is one big setup. It was done by one soldier for another, and it's got to be on the KISS principle. If so, then old Sarge Rockwell and the Major figgered IF anyone ever got their hands on the gold, they'd look at the suitcase and think if all it had was a clear simple combination knob, then the instructions must be numerically coded. Godamn it! This had to be their game. Well, I'd soon find out.

I said my last prayers, stubbed the cigarette, and followed the instructions on the key. They worked.

The gold was there – all of it, in little biscuits – and I can't find the words to tell you what I felt right then but if you've never had anythin' in your life but hand-me-downs and only seen the good things in pictures or from afar off – of folks enjoyin' 'emselves and worked like a dog and tried in your own way as best as you could to be a good person accordin' to the Good Book and your parent's teachin' and the preacher's words, then you might understand a little of how I musta felt.

Then I shut it like it was and flushed the key down the toilet. If I forgot the combination, well, then I didn't deserve the gold. But I didn't want no mother-fucker gettin' the combination. Okay, if somebody tried without the combination, he'd just end up with a one hundred

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percent lesson on life after death.

I was happy with the suitcase. When I'd passed my hand over the lining inside of it, I recognized it for what it was. A metallic foil, one of those NASA by-products, that the CIA had a sole right to. Wasn't no mother of a machine invented which was gonna beep 'bout the gold to a customs officer. Nosirree – not with this foil which we'd bin shown but never issued in the Special Forces. That was for the guys only when attached to a CIA operation – that's if they were to need it. One up for Sergeant Rockwell's CIA contacts – may his soul rest in peace – and Major Joe's too.

I had a quarter bottle of Old Kentucky and some steak sent up to my room, after which I forced myself to get some sleep.

Around six I got up and drank a little more and then just lay down on the bed smokin' and thinkin' 'bout what to do next. Around eight I felt hungry and ordered dinner. I didn't go out no place on account of I figger it's safer inside, and as it turned out, it was the right decision. Dinner was a whole barbecued chicken, after which room service came to take the plates away, sirrinn' me like I wasn't me but somebody else.

I'm just at the end of my cigarette when somebody rapped on the door again. Like I'd bin doin' the whole day, I held my gun in my fist and went to the door and stood behind it.

“Who is it?”

“Room service, sir – left a salt cellar behind.”

Now I knew there was no salt cellar left behind, but I like to meet trouble head on. Besides, if I had a prisoner, I'd know what the enemy were plannin'. I

flattened myself next to the wall where the door openin' inside wouldn't cover me. I turned the key with my left hand, extendin' out the arm with the gun in my right fist. Just as the key clicked, the knob turned real slow, and I brought my hand away fast. Then the knob completed its turn and the door banged open and a guy jumped in the room with gun in his hand.

He musta seen me out of the corner of his eye, 'cause he tried to turn, but I laid the barrel of the thirty eight across his neck, and this time didn't repeat the dose till the patient died. He went down. I looked out into the corridor and it was empty, so I shut and locked the door. Then I took out the guy's bootlaces, and tied his thumbs together, which is always more effective than tyin' wrists. I propped him up on a chair and tied his feet to the chair legs with a bit of curtain string from the bathroom window. The torpedo was out, and would be for some time. I looked at his gun. It was a 9mm Hanyatti, with a long silencer. My guts turned a double somersault when I checked the ammo and found it frag; shi-i-iitt! My heart and insides went cold. With a couple of well planned frags inside of me, Pa and Ma Custer woulda refused to recognize their little Barney's baby face with 'em innocent blue eyes.

Then I went mad.

Not crazy mad, though.

Mad enough to slap the guy and to go on slappin' him, sane enough to do it after gaggin' him proper with a hand towel and his own handkerchief, which was silk. Yeah, in a trench, or on a patrol, you get shit before, durin' and after the fact. Yessir, that's what you get for bein' a hundred percent American soldier. That and the

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title of baby-killer. But if you're a hundred percent hood with Cosa Nostra connections, you get a silk handkerchief, and the Cosa Nostra calls you a *soldier* – yeah, a soldier with a silk handkerchief and a mag fulla frag rounds for your fancy handgun which even has a meter to tell you how many rounds you got left and a caddy for your ass and gold and silver cigarette cases and lighters and five hundred dollar suits.

As I slapped this Cosa Nostra *soldier*, I looked the bastid up and down, sideways and forwards. *Know your enemy* – fag smooth voices from West Point, the cocksuckers' academy.

An oily little spaghetti eatin' hood dressed like a torpedo from a thirties movie – a Little Caesar kinda character in a cheap gray suit, black shirt, white silk tie, black and white shoes and no hat.

Then the slaps open his eyes and he looked at me spittin' hate. I was silent, and the hood couldn't speak, nor did he try. Goin' through his pockets, I didn't come up with nuthin' to identify the little prick, except for a hundred dollars in small bills, two spare loaded magazines, and a mean little switch blade, only four and a half inches but it coulda ripped a guy's whanger off.

“Now you listen to me real good, Mister Hood. I'm gonna loosen your gag and ask you some questions. If you try and scream, I'll crease you out permanent. I've killed more men and more men have tried to kill me than anyone in your fuckin' hood organizations. So don't get it into your head to yell. I'll do you with this little popgun you brought for me, and I don't reckon you fancy a couple of your own frags in the crotch.”

His eyes hated me even more, but he understood all right.

“So don’t go screamin’ ’cause I’d hate to kill you before I’d had some fun.”

I ease off his fancy silk handkerchief and pop the first question. “What’s your name, Mister Hood?”

’Stead of replyin’ he gives that silent look fulla hatred and pride. I ask him a couple of times more, and he gives me the same treatment. I figger Sicilian moms ain’t very hot on teachin’ their young ones any good manners. He don’t reply at all, and the Lord don’t seem partial to bad manners either.

I slapped him, and he spit right into my face!

“Now that’s downright unfriendly, Mister Hood. You’ve bought yourself a packet of trouble,” I say to him.

Never let it be said that Barney Custer did somethin’ without properly warnin’ first.

These kinda guys I know.

If I could break the commies, this one’s pea soup – a joke.

Just another Italian American hood with a heavy gun and a little knife that make him feel big. I was wishin’ for a rat or a lizard. Then I woulda really whaled it outa him and taught him the manners his mom didn’t. If you put a lizard or a rat in a cage with no bottom, on a guy’s head, he’ll soon talk. His head becomes the bottom of the cage and the lizard or rat runs around till it reaches the brains. The maximum was a record thirty minutes by a North Vietnamese Captain, but in the end he broke. I just looked around the room and my eyes sorta came to rest on a little line of black ants. Some bit of

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food musta dropped on the carpet, and ants bein' ants, sprung up even in the Pickford-Shelby in the heart of downtown Detroit. Hear tell ants got more brains than humans, and if they weren't such little guys, we humans woulda bin ants and they'd a' bin rulin' mother earth. Lookin' at 'em I hoped some of their brains would rub inta mine and I'd find some interestin' way of makin' this punk talk 'stead of a dull way like squeezin' his balls or heatin' his soles or pullin' out his fingernails. After all, I had a rep in 'Nam for bein' a man of imagination and I woulda liked to've preserved it. Besides, Berets are supposed to be intelligent. I got to wishin' I was an ant, a big ant, so's I coulda bitten the punk's head off. Then it hit me. Here it was, all in fronta me and I was moonin' around. I start openin' the guy's belt and he just stared at me. I pulled down his pants and underpants as well, and threw him on the bed, keepin' sure when I untied his legs and tied 'em again that he didn't get no chance to land a kick on my head. Then I gagged him.

There was a sugar cube left over from the afternoon coffee. I wet it with my lips, and stroked his prick. From his eyes I could see his surprise. I didn't look like a fruit, but I was sure actin' like one. Well, he'd soon get over this notion.

I picked up a glass and trapped a couple of ants in it, and his eyes are grinnin'. When I upend it over him, he stops grinnin'.

The first bite and his face goes white and I ask him, "Enjoyin' yourself Mister Hood?"

He squirms and bucks as the ants prance around his dick, bitin' at the sweetness, and his groans come fast.

Five minutes later and the sweat was runnin' down his face and his eyes buggin' out and I hadta use my full strength to keep the glass in place on account of he was like a full strength horse buckin' its rider off. I put the barrel of the Hanyatti on his temple and the meanin' is clear. Then I remove the gag, and the glass.

He was breathin' unsteady and hoarse now, gaspin' real hard.

"Are you gonna spit, or spill, Mister Hood?"

He's still gaspin' and croaks, "Gimme a drink!"

I slapped him across his pan, turnin' his face the other side. Then I laughed. When he opened his mouth, there was gold fillin's and his breath smelled of garlic. A real movie hood from a back street, and I wonder 'bout all those guys in business suits The Godfather showed.

"No drink, talk first, then maybe if I like the sound of your singin'—"

He talks.

His name is Marcus and somethin' else which ends in a vowel. He croaks that out, then gasps.

I yanked his hair.

"Talk, you mother fuckin' little fart, unless you want me to serve you your balls on a platter."

Through his croakin' Brooklynese, all I can make out is this. A big shot front man for Marcus' big shot has put out an open contract on me for ten thousand dollars. His own big shot has given out the word that there's

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twenty thousand, but only for Marcus' bunch, and guess what?

The twenty thousand isn't for killin' me. It's to get a black leather suitcase with studs on it, obviously the suitcase with the gold. And you can guess who Marcus' big shot was – Don Valletti of Boston. Don Valletti's bunch were also warned the suitcase had bin gimmicked by one of the world's top six explosives men in booby traps, a man who was now dead. Anybody without the combination was likely to blow himself up along with the gold.

Godamn – have I landed myself in a mess now.

I go for a piece of tail, and the piece of tail lands me in the Cosa Nostra's lap. In my schedule it woulda bin some months before I went anywhere near that gold. And I woulda gone to it with a Swiss bank account and passport and air ticket. Hand over the gold, get an okay from the bank that they'd got payment for the gold, and vamoose. Do a couple of changes of identities, lay half a dozen false trails, and this Beret would have bin sittin' pretty with the easy life in Pakistan.

It all means the Don musta somehow known where the Major'd stashed the gold. When his son upped and died, he probably had the place watched. It musta bin someone in the bank, 'cause if it had bin a surveillance team, this Little Caesar woulda had a half dozen of his spaghetti pals flashin' their gold fillin's in the corridor outside.

I had a choice now.

I could go to the Don, give him the gold, and hope he'd help me settle down to a nice job.

Or else I could carry on with my plans to die rich. I

thought for a while, ignorin' the little piece of garlic gaspin' on the ground below. Then I came to a decision.

I'd die rich.

Way I saw it, the gold wasn't even the Major's rightful property, let alone his father's. It was hijacked stuff, and finders keepers, and I was damn well goin' to fight for it. I figger if I can make it, I'll be a millionaire in some quiet little place in Pakistan up in those Karakorams from where I can look up each day at the most magnificent mountains in the world. If not, then I'll die young and poor, 'cause it's better to die young and fightin' than to sit eatin' your guts out on a rockin' chair on the porch of a Tennessee mountain cabin. I stuffed the gag back in the guy's mouth and pushed him in the wardrobe. I reckon he'll be found come mornin' and a night in a wardrobe ain't gonna hurt him much.

I packed up and got out through the fire escape. It was 'bout nine and I saw an open store after walkin' five blocks. I'd changed from the blue jersey into a green one, which was my last. So, thinkin' I'd need another change – and soon, I got a cheap windcheater, a pack of bandages, and a roll of adhesive tape.

Two blocks ahead I saw a public lavatory and went inside. By now I was pretty tired luggin' the suitcase and the shoulder bag. While takin' a breather in the lavatory, I bandaged my face and head so I wouldn't be recognized, and walked out with a limp, reckonin' this was disguise enough to get me to Miami at least.

I'd taken a little risk in abandonin' the case full of gold in the lavatory, lockin' it from the inside and jumpin' over the partition, leavin' an extra pair of

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sneakers from my bag below the toilet seat. The description of the suitcase was out, and I didn't want some bounty hunter fingerin' me from it. I went around a corner and into a hardware store and came out with a traveler's bag with wheels, big enough to shove that case of gold inside. I collected it and the sneakers, then walked out and hailed a cab.

I was headin' for Miami on account of it was a place with a coastline and boats and Cuban refugees and CIA agents and smugglers and passport artists.

From Miami you could get a fast boat for the Bahamas. If the price was right, the same guys would fix you with papers. All through the flight I tried to sleep, but couldn't. I grabbed a cab from the airport and mostly my life depended on this decision. Not havin' any knowledge of Miami I didn't know nuthin' 'bout it 'cept for what I'd heard. I'd made up my mind to do it through a cabby, for which cabby worth his salt don't know his town inside out?

I got into the cab and this one asks me where to? Now this black boy is 'bout nineteen or twenty but he looks like he's bin the whole route and I tell him right away.

"You want to earn five hundred bucks, just drive around and listen."

Without so much as a blink, which is what I liked 'bout him, he goes into a U-turn and outa the airport. When we're well away, he says outa the corner of his mouth, just one word.

"Talk."

"Buddy, I'm in trouble, and I need help. Don't worry, it ain't cop trouble, some guys after me who don't

cotton to my looks. Now if you don't like the sound of this, you can drop me off right here."

He half turned and grinned, and I could see his white teeth shinin' in the street light.

"Bo, I don't care none. The cops, the mob, what the hell. I got no ties – an orphan, and I'm a two-time loser. Nuthin' nor nobody scares me, includin' the gun I'm sure you got lined up on me, if you're half the man I think you are."

I laughed.

This black boy was all right, and I eased my hand off the gun in my pocket.

"How'd you guess about the gun?"

"I ain't no punk kid, mister. If you're buckin' boys hard enough to chase you right out of the States, it can only be the mob, and if you didn't have a gun while runnin' from the mob, that's the first thing you woulda asked me for. So I figger you're heeled, and since you are, and the way you're talkin' to a stranger, you would have your hand on your gun."

We talk some more, and the next evenin' I'm in the Bahamas.

Just like that. He fixed me up with a Cuban for another five hundred and the guy took me out. I checked in at a hotel in Nassau, and looked around for a fast connection to Pakistan. The airport says there's one for Beirut that evenin' but none for Pakistan till next day.

Damn!

I've taken off the bandages and the dye from my hair and I'm lookin' my real self and sweatin' besides on account of the fuckin' delay with a hand on my gun

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and blue eyes rovin' around for young men with hard old eyes wearin' clothes out of their class. Of course this is Cosa Nostra territory, but then again I figgered this would be where they'd least expect me unless the black bastid and his black pals sold me out. The way I've soaked up knowledge 'bout hoods in the last three weeks, I feel as smart as a dictionary of crime.

This time I don't figger 'em to send a member of the garlic brigade but the real McCoy – the fancy assed Ivy League types in business suits. I spot a couple but they turn out to be cops, so the friendly barman tells me. Cops in plain clothes don't look much different from the real classy hoods.

It happened in the evenin'.

I'm just goin' from the bar up to my room when I notice a coupla guys in a corner booth. Young, with old men's almost rheumy eyes. You know, quietly dressed and for all purposes mindin' their own business, but when I glance their way they make a point to look away. Just as I go outa the door, I kinda turn to look outa the corner of my eye, and they're signalin' the waiter. I go to the lobby and inta one of the phone booths and ring up the airport. When they're on the line I tell 'em to get me a seat for the Beirut connection. In know I'm gonna leave a trail a mile wide behind me, and that the Cosa Nostra is known to have connections in Beirut, but what the hell can I do?

I went to my room to pack up my few belongin's, all the while cussin' that black bastid in Miami and his Cuban pals. One or all of 'em musta talked and sold me out. Just as I reached the ground from the fire escape, I see one of those two guys roundin' the corner of the

buildin'. Usin' a bit of shadow from the light near the wall, I take a lyin' down position behind the gold, and draw my gun. He was 'bout ten feet away from me when I cocked the thirty eight.

It was a quiet Bahamas night, and this tourist hotel was near the beach with shrubbery around. Maybe that's why the click sounded so loud. Maybe 'cause it broke the tension, kinda. Mostly 'cause of the way this guy froze. That's it. Just froze.

"Come up close with your hands high, buddy," I said softly and stood up.

I wasn't bothered 'bout the other since I figger he must be right at this moment tryin' to pick the lock of my room. When this hood got close, but outa range of a gun-grab, I tell him to turn around, knock him out cold and slide him to the ground. Easin' the hammer in place careful like, I put the gun back, and hitched the bag on my left shoulder and suitcase in the same hand, keepin' the gun hand free. It was eight-thirty and the flight was due to board at nine. It gave me time to reach the airport, and 'em too little time to counter-react.

Fifteen hours later I was three hours short of Beirut, tired, fuckin' tired, when I just thought over an idea and started fartin' at the thought. The airlines are strict 'bout guns with those machines at every customs counter, so I'd chucked mine in an open manhole near the airport. Like a double damned fool I'd forgotten the linin' around the suitcase that coulda taken the gun. Now the receptionist at the desk knew the connection I was on, and what with cables and telexes and telephone across

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oceans, the Cosa Nostra connections in Beirut coulda laid out a reception party for me – twenty-one gun salute and all.

Right at that moment I reason the brass was right in throwin' me out. Me, I'm the original bonehead who could win the first prize at the Mister Dumbell Corn Festival.

Since there ain't nuthin' I can do, I just sit with a tight ass which gets tighter as I keep waitin' for customs to clear me, when I fall into luck again. I reason immediately there's somebody up there who loves me.

A little fly-boy sergeant I knew in 'Nam.

Short, tough guy but funny lookin'. Nobody coulda mistaken him for anythin' else but real Irish – still got potatoes stickin' outa his ears – red haired and freckled and court martialed on account of opium smugglin' in his chopper from 'Nam to Hong Kong. He's got a brogue you coulda sliced with a knife and still come up with leftovers for dessert. And crookeder'n a French corkscrew, but he meets me with a nice warm welcome, and I wonder what he's doin' standin' inside the customs area, and the hair on the back of my head rises – maybe he's workin' for the mob. Shit, I got no place else, and I decide if I faze out, he's gonna finger or hit me anyway. If I make like I'm not suspicious of him, it could buy me some time, and if he's clean he could maybe help me.

So, right away I broke line and took him aside and told him my problem – just that I was on the run from some trouble in Vegas, and that I needed a secure base for a while, till I did a change of ID and got me a gun. I tell him straight off it's the Cosa Nostra, and he

just takes it in his stride. He knows the customs people and they wave me through with a smile.

Out in the lounge we buy a coupla cups of coffee in paper cups and get in a little corner to talk. Lenny – that’s the Irisher’s name – Lenehan Breen.

“I’m here on a friendly flyin’ visit from Iran – I work for the Shah now with the rank of Lieutenant. This evenin’ I’ve got a meeting with a Sheikh.”

He took a small notebook and pencil and scribbled down an address, then tore out and handed me the scrap.

“This is my hotel. Ask any cabby and he’ll take you there. Hole up tight and wait for me. Then we’ll see what we can work out. I’m leavin’ tomorrow and if we can work out somethin’ you could maybe hitch a ride with me.”

Iran ... shit ... that’s next to Pakistan!

“What do you do for the Shah of Iran?”

He laughed.

“I never seen his mug. I fly a chopper and train others to do it, attached to SAVAK. That’s the Shah’s domestic counter-intelligence set up by the CIA.”

“I don’t wanta put you to any extra bother, but I ain’t heeled. I’d be mighty obliged if you could do somethin’ ’bout that.”

We go into the men’s room side by side with me not lettin’ go of my luggage at which he gives short dartin’ looks outa the corner of his eye and is curious as hell. I make like I ain’t noticed but I can just see the crooked little cogs of his twisted brain cork-screwin’ ’emselves out almost straight.

The place was empty, and we stand side by side at

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the urinals. As I open my fly I realize my bladder is full to burstin' – and full of the fear that I piss out with some satisfaction. Lenny is givin' me understandin' old buddy grins, and passes me a small automatic, a twenty five with a silencer. It's little, but better'n just fists. I looked at him with narrow eyes.

He grins and says, "SAVAK," and the silencer figgers.

He winks and hands me a coupla spare magazines. I let him go out, makin' signs of goin' to the shit pot. The booths were empty, no shoes visible. I checked all were the same. Clear. I parked the suitcase in a booth, sat on the toilet seat with the cover down, and made a check on the gun. Many's bin the guy got suckered by a gun with everythin' in it but the firin' pin. The slide mechanism's okay and the firin' pin was in and functionin'. I screwed on the silencer, chambered a round and fired it into the toilet bowl. It fires all right and the rounds aren't dummies and nobody woulda noticed the sound of a twenty five anyway, not with the planes comin' in and takin' off all the time. I reckon Lenny's on the up 'n' up – so far. What he'd be like if he knew what I'm carryin' is anybody's guess.

The hotel was a fancy place with an air conditioned room, taped-in music and a color TV with a bed fit for three. I ordered lunch and a bottle of Wild Turkey Bourbon.

Three doubles and a rare to medium steak with hot rolls, baked vegetables and tossed green salad and I felt a whole lot better.

I was fast asleep – right hand curled around the gun beneath my pillow, and a chair propped up against the

door to the bathroom and corridor outside. A light tappin' brought me to my feet with the twenty five in my fist. I put the towel over the gun hand, and removed my chair. Standin' away from the door and not beside it, I said, "Come in, the door ain't locked."

It was Lenny and all alone, and I was relieved. My mind was in the red alert state. This time I figured if somebody came tryin' to kill me, I'd sure welcome him in. No more gaggin' and no more tyin'.

I'd kill.

I was all set to even hijack a plane if I hadta, though then Pakistan would be out. It would have to be either some Commie country or one of the other half cocked ones like Algeria. Not one of the crazies. Libya, or Yugoslavia, more'n likely. Not some place where they'd jump my gold, like they would in Albania. Or even some of the less crazy ones, they'd still jump the gold, give me a little apartment and a piece of commie tail who'd preach me Lenin each time she orgasmed, and threaten me with exile, or – shit – even make me work! The Tito guy I cottoned to. Commie enough to keep a hijacker or two, capitalist enough to open trade with the west, so he wouldn't mind the gold nor fear that I'd pollute his fuckin' proletariat. It would mean goodbye Sirdar Ali Shah and Pakistan, but would I have a choice if it came to that?

I grinned at Lenny, he winked back and shut the door, bolted and locked it, and sat down on the bed.

I settled in the armchair opposite, and put the gun on a little side table on my right, from where I could pick it easy enough.

Flight to Pakistan

“Barney, you old prick, what’ve you been thinkin’ ‘bout?”

I scratched my head.

“Could you really take me to Iran without me havin’ to get my passport stamped?”

“Plannin’ to disappear?”

“Shit, no. Just coverin’ my ass. Now, ‘stead of givin’ me that Irish grin, why’n’t you tell me if you can do it or not?”

“Sure and I can. I was waitin’ for the askin’ of it from you.”

“When do we leave?”

“Tomorrow, seven sharp. Now don’t be so tense lookin’, and let’s get dressed and hit the town. Ever seen a belly dance?”

“No ...”

If I hesitate to his next offer, which is gonna be an invite to town, he’ll surely lay the cause of my runnin’ to the suitcase. If I leave it, it’s open for takers. I make a lightenin’ decision and decide it’s okay and that gives him a point.

“Now why don’t we take in a show and watch some jigglin’ juggy boobs and get some of that Lebanese food in our guts?”

“Sure, Lenny, any time. Take my mind off things. Let me get a nice warm bath first. We ain’t in no hurry, are we? Reckon you’d be feelin’ like it too.”

He took the bait, hook line and sinker as they say.

I wanted time to stash away the suitcase. Soon’s he was out, I lay back on the bed and set my bone head to work.

The back window of the room, eight stories high,

looked out over the big city. Below it was a ledge 'bout two feet wide. I leaned out, then looked up. Yeah, each floor had this ledge juttin' out, 'cause that was the way the hotel was built, floor by floor. The drainpipe looked like it was pre-cast concrete, and it ran through a hole in each ledge, which retained it. Besides, the length of pipe between the two ledges was secured by cast-iron collars. The ledge was wide enough, and the drainpipe solid. There was a strengthenin' pillar between the drainpipe and the window of the room next door, and the same for the window on the other side. Good concealment. That's where I parked the suitcase, and tied it to the drainpipe with two straightened out wire coat hangers, twistin' 'em several times to make sure they'd hold. No gust of wind was gonna fuck up my gold. There's a simple rule 'bout heights. Don't look down and you won't feel scared. I didn't look down, and it was as easy as pie, and then I had the bath I told Lenny I was gonna have.

I put on my denims and jersey, stuck the twenty five in my waistband and settled down to wait. Half a cigarette later he knocked and called, "It's me, Lenny."

I still don't reckon on takin' chances and follow the earlier routine. For all I know he's got a gun pressed up his ass, but it's okay and there's no cause for alarm. He's in a neat gray suit. He flashed the left side to let me see the forty five in a shoulder harness, and I tied a thread to the door jamb so's I'd know if I'd had any visitors while I was out.

Then we go down to the lobby and outside there's this fancy powder blue and silver caddy, with an Arab driver in western clothes.

Flight to Pakistan

I whistled.

“Belongs to this Sheikh pal of mine,” Lenny said, as the chauffeur opened the door and we sank into air conditioned comfort.

We move off and there ain't hardly no sound of the engine, it's so quiet and soft. Makes me feel small inside and I say to myself, Barney, you moonshinin' prick, what in hell is a hillbilly like you doin' in this fancy caddy when your greatest thing was runnin' down the mountainside to watch the passin' Grayhounds? I'm sittin' kinda huddled up in the velvet upholstery and my ears are hot, when I feel an elbow nudgin' me in the ribs.

“Better'n fuckin' paddy fields and 'Cong, buster?” he asks and I grin and relax and light a cigarette and so does Lenny. We took a few drags in silence, and stopped by this classy store. I raised my brows at him.

“Reckon if these are the best clothes you got, they ain't good enough. Decided you need a suit. I can't bluff you into Iran tomorrow lookin' like a hippy. You okay for bread?”

He's got a point.

“Sure I'm okay for bread.”

We go inside and Lenny knows his way around and is recognized by the sales people. While tryin' on clothes, I tried to ask him 'bout this Sheikh who was pally enough with him to lend him his chauffeur driven caddy for the evenin'. The way he winks, I'm sure now this Sheikh, or whoever he is, is just a smugglin' crony of Lenny's who's figgered out the Middle East angle as well. I pick me a cream and blue cotton shirt. Then I kinda lean towards a gray, plain gray tweed jacket and

a plain black suit which I like more. I like it more 'cause firstly I never bought a suit before, and, second, when I was bouncin' drunks in that Bar before joinin' the Marines, I'd see the rich guys in black suits and ties and think that that's the clothes a guy oughta wear but then I got into the army and never had a chance. I took the clothes to the dressin' room and tried 'em on. Godamn – they looked no more store bought than I did. These were like hand-made clothes by a real tailor – clothes that looked like they were made for you and not that you just got into 'em.

I stood before the mirror and I sure liked what I saw. Lenny gave another, fresh wink and we went down with the rest of the stuff packed up in one large box, which I carried in the crook of my left elbow, my right arm hangin' loose by the side for a quick draw on account of in such a big crowded place you never can tell. Even Lenny Breen, I could see, was walkin' on red alert, his eyes dartin' around, his hand loose and also ready.

Back at the car, the chauffeur was holdin' the door for us and gave me a more respectful look. Lenny gave him an address in English, and we moved off. I thought to myself – these guys he's in with are big time and no mistakin' it. On the way he keeps pointin' sights to me like I was a green horn tourist, which of course I was.

It was a back-water kinda place, or so it seemed from the outside. Just a narrow alley, and we parked the caddy outside in a parkin' lot and walked in. Then I noticed the people. They were from all over the world, some broads, mostly men, and some cars, those who risked 'em, bright American sedans, and then the neon signs. Hell, this was one of those belly dancin' streets

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I'd heard tell 'bout – full of luscious, movin' flesh. I felt happy then. Lenny leered at me, and I leered back. He led me inside a place on top of which was a sign in English sayin' BIG BELLY DANCING and a neon broad in a G-String and skimpy bra and sweet nuthin' else. We went inside and it was a fair sized place with 'bout twenty tables. Half of 'em were occupied by some of the same mixin' of nationalities I'd noticed in the street. The place was two steps down from street level with wood panelin' on walls and a wood ceilin'. The Arab guys were smokin' water pipes and the tables and stools were low like that place in Vegas where I'd met Mary-Jo.

The smoke from water pipes and perfume sticks and the dim lights over bead curtains with low talk and waiters in Arab night shirts made it look like a costume movie.

Lenny and me, we went and sat at a table near the corner with him facin' the entrance and my back to the wall. It was around eight-thirty by my watch and folks were tricklin' inside in twos and threes. First of all we had some Arab coffee which I ain't never had before and sip it in little cups. It ain't much like coffee, least ways not like what we're used to – a whole lot bitter. I just had it 'cause it seemed the thing to do. After this we got down to the likker. Both of us bein' bourbon drinkers, a bottle of Jack Daniel's did us just fine, drinkin' some and talkin' some, mostly 'bout old army buddies and gripin' 'bout the brass that court martialed both of us.

After some time there was a weird kinda music, and then this belly dancin' I'd heard tell of started. Fucks,

was it somethin'? Man, it was more'n somethin' and then some! This big dame, and I mean big, not fat or anythin' – little waist, long smooth legs, and boobs and hips and ass that hit you like a 60mm mortar bomb and made the middle leg make moves all its own. She was blonde, one of those Scandinavian imports. And the music, with the booze already inside, made you wanta get up and grind with this big blonde tomato with the diamond in her navel. She was wearin' a fringed skimpy bra and panties and a sheer billowin' trouser outfit that 'stead of hidin' her legs only showed 'em better .

It was wild and it was great and me'n Lenny, two old soldiers, were tappin' our feet and shakin' our heads. Then it was over but it had just started, the evenin' for us, that is.

After the blonde, there was this red-head, and wow, she jiggled, then the black haired one, and she jiggled too, then, believe me, an orange head even!! These Beirutians seemed to have a warehouse of stacked hot grindin' mommas.

It was a couple of hours and I don't know how many mommas later that the bottle finished and we sent for a half bottle more. That emptied, we sent for grub. First, there was a big platter with little dishes laid on top of it, 'bout a dozen of 'em – the starters. *Mazae*, they're called. Then Pilaff, and every time you put a spoon in to turn it, steam smillin' of spices went straight to your head through the likker. This was served with a chicken curry, and it was great to follow up on the booze. Rolled over your tongue and in your mouth with the hot Arab chillies cuttin' the taste of booze. And that roast leg of

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lamb beat the best beef I'd ever had in my short life, and it does make a guy wonder, why're these guys from these little countries askin' for dollars?

Then I had a smoke, draggin' it deep down and right there in that place, this little hillbilly from the back woods of Tennessee felt like one of these Sultan guys.

It was late by that time and we were feelin' sleepy so we decided to call it a night. I was gonna pick up the tab, but Lenny again gave me that Irish wink of his, so I let him cover the check, which was pretty heavy, though worth every cent of it.

I stepped out into the street, with Lenny behind me.

There were still folks out, but not as much 'cause they were mostly inside the joints. Opposite there's a couple of Arabs in western dress sittin' on a Honda 350cc. Not with the bike on the stand. No sir. They're both astride it, and the one in front has got both hands on the handle bars. Seein' me, he presses the self starter, and at the same time I noticed those eyes, they were killer's eyes and lookin' at me and the guy on the back threw his hand up in a salute only I saw the round object and me'n Lenny we both hit the dirt, as the bike moved off with a roar.

I had my head in my arms, and ass held tight as I could, waitin' for it. I counted five thousand and it didn't come. Delayed fuse. Come on baby either way forcrissake! Another five thousand and I reckon it's a delayed fuse. Another two thousand and I summon the nerve to control my joints which are like yogurt.

Nobody had noticed anythin', and there's this olive green thing lyin' between us and folks grinnin' at us, thinkin' it's a coupla American tourists havin' 'emselfes

some fun. Fun my ass. We were both cold sober and got up. Lenny gives me a weak grin this time.

“Move over, and let me take a look at this momma.”

He moved over, and I sat on the heels of my feet, and handled it like china clay. Hell, to tell the truth, I handled it like it was one of my family jewels dropped off and made of porcelain. Very carefully, very lovin’ly, keepin’ it as far away from my face as possible. I unscrewed the base plate and grinned in relief. Then, again very carefully, usin’ the index finger and thumb of my right hand, removed the fuse and put it in my breast pocket.

“HE-36 British type hand grenade. The fuse was in and okay but these boys forgot to wipe the grease.”

Lenny shook his head from side to side as I pocketed the pineapple and we started towards the car.

“Damn bunch of amateurs,” I swore in relief.

Lenny is cold serious now.

“Ain’t no bunch of amateurs. These kids are Black September. This was a warnin’ to you. Blah-blah-blah, or else –!”

He was scared and he was worried – Black September were the guys who’d wasted the Israeli athletes at Munich. If Lenny was worried ’bout his own skin, mine wouldn’t be worth a counterfeit cent, and it’s high time to tell why.

In ’Nam, Lenny was co-pilot on one of those big birds, and while carryin’ wounded, his chopper was hit. It started sinkin’ and listin’ badly, and the only solution to save the chopper was to lessen the weight of the machine. Without so much as a by-your-leave from the pilot of the bird – a Lieutenant – Lenny threw out the

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five wounded GIs. They were at four thousand feet at that time and the 'Cong musta' picked up that bunch of GIs with chop sticks. The Lieutenant was terrified of Lenny, and didn't dare speak. Lenny was in the drug racket, and his pilot a junkie, so it was easy to see how Lenny had a lock on him. Still, the word was out, somehow, in some circles, like ours, and a week later, the Lieutenant was lyin' in a Saigon alley with an overdose of heroin in his veins. Nuthin' was ever proved but the talk got stronger.

Barney Custer's blood was runnin' cold now, colder'n an ice floe, man.

I knew this bastid would save himself and ditch me. Fuckin' nationalists ain't like crooks – can't be bought, least not by money nor greed – not all the time. Talk, yes. They can be bought by sweet fancy talk, with rhymin' slogans, and me, I'm just a hillbilly on the run, and Lenny, he's the son of a County Cork potato farmer who came to the States to make an honest buck. If there's anythin' that can help Lenny through his fear and me from endin' up like those five GIs, it's money.

"Don't worry, Lenny. Just get me outa here and it's worth four thousand dollars to you."

He just looks straight ahead and whistles.

"You'll get it before I step into your chopper tomorrow."

He gives me a wink and keeps whistlin'.

This time the wink was neither Irish, nor drunken, nor laughin', nor solemn. It was shrewd.

Then he grinned. The grin was like the wink.

Shrewd and crafty as a Saigon pimp's.

“Why, did you think I would of thrown you to these nigger wolves?”

The bastid wasn't just a bastid, he was a diplomatic bastid. Two could play the game.

“Lenny, I didn't think for a second you'd ditch me, after you'd gone all this way for me. The bread is just to tell you I appreciate what you've done and you are gonna do.”

“Hell, any guy woulda done as much. Ain't we buddies?”

“Buddies we are – the gun, the hotel, and now the pineapple. You've helped me more'n a buddy.”

As we got into the car, it struck me he hadn't actually refused the bread. When we moved off, the question came all of a sudden. The timin' was perfect, the wordin' terrific. The tone was just as if he was askin' the time of day. Pat, and beautiful. Only thing, I was ready for it and the bastid didn't know. He wouldn't have slipped on this, only thing was the army'd changed his brains. It becomes a habit for these fly boys and engineers and others in the technical arms of the service to think that Infantry's dumb, and the Special Forces only claim to bein' special 'cause of the special pay they get. Years of this kinda talk and thinkin' was, I reckon, what had made the little bastid think he was smarter'n me. Another thing, these sharp little guys sorta presume they've bin given more brains by the Lord on account of he made 'em little, while big guys all got their brains in their fists.

“How much have you got stashed?” he asked casual-like.

Just like that. Quiet and simple, with no fuss.

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“Hah! Just a couple of biscuits of gold in my stuff. Picked ‘em up in Saigon.”

The little prick nods and the road is quiet and deserted so he rolls down the window and puts out his hand.

“Let’s toss the pineapple out.”

Now I got this instinct, and it tells me to hang on to it.

“Shit, Lenny, I’d like to keep it as a souvenir, if it’s okay with you?”

“Sure it is. You wanna keep it, go ahead.”

’Cause I’m thinkin’, this here gold was Arab gold to start with, as told to me by Major Joe, and the Arabs are now after me. Well, with this little pineapple to keep me company, I’d be a little harder to kill.

He rolls up the window and we talked of this’n that till we reached the hotel. I checked at the desk, but no, there’d bin no visitors but this only means there weren’t none that passed the desk. The elevator had nobody but myself. Steppin’ into the corridor, I looked up and down but it was clear. At the door I drew the gun, keepin’ it beneath the jacket in my left armpit, and placed the parcel of clothes on the floor. The thread was okay, but I wasn’t takin’ no chances. I eased the key in, turned it, and waited with a hand on the door knob. A second’s pause, then I quickly turn the knob, push open the door in the same movement, jumpin’ in and to the right, landin’ on my feet spread apart and crouchin’ low with the gun fannin’ the room and eyes sweepin’ it.

It was empty.

I was still wound up, and went back to the door with

my face towards the bathroom and gun drawn, coverin' it. With my foot I kicked the parcel of clothes inside, shut and locked the door. I kicked off my shoes and walked barefoot across the carpeted floor of the room to the bathroom. I entered it the same way I'd entered the room, and it was okay. Then I breathed a little easier, and fetched the suitcase inside.

Back in the room, I made some paper wedges and shoved 'em under the door, then dragged the heavy chest of drawers against it. I shucked off my clothes, and had me a hot bath, keepin' the gun on a little table right next to it from where I could grab it in a hurry. It wasn't very likely right now, but I was takin' no chances.

Then I lit a cigarette and set to thinkin'. By the time the smoke was finished, I was cussin' myself silly. Major Joe had told me the gold was from some Arabs. Now I knew the gold was more than from 'some Arabs' – it was fuckin' well PLO gold, and Black September to be exact. Those boys would go through hell to get it back. I didn't want to end up like the athletes in Munich. Tomorrow, I would be in Tehran, where the SAVAK ain't so hot on Palestinians, but I wasn't so hot on this SAVAK contact of mine. Soon's he knew what and how much of it I was carryin', my life wouldn't be worth more than a bullet in the back. But from Tehran, it would be just a few hours flyin' time to Pakistan, where I could see how good a pimp this Sirdar Shah was. He was a strictly personal pal of the Major's, with no Mob connections, else the many times the Major talked of him, he woulda mentioned it. This move would also give me a coupla false trails. My entry into Iran would

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go unnoticed on account of there was gonna be no customs or immigration. I'd make my entry into Pakistan an illegal one as well. If these gooks were sentimental as I'd heard tell, I had a good chance of makin' it out with this Sirdar Shah.

Two days later, holed up in Lenny's apartment in Tehran, I was waitin' to be flown out to Pakistan. For the four thousand dollars I'd promised him, the Irisher would turn his chopper over Baluchistan and drop me by parachute. He'd also give me a coupla thousand Pakistani rupees. After some proddin' and pryin', Lenny had upped and told me 'bout his angle. His chopper crew were in on it. While on a routine flight, they'd steer the chopper towards Pakistan. Over the Baluchistan hills, they'd paradrop a load of French chiffon and Spanish saffron they picked from Tehran. It was cute. Real cute. They made this trip once every coupla weeks and the payment was made half in advance right after the flight, the rest after a cable confirmed the stuff was all right.

The plan for my entry into Pakistan is like this:

Flyin', just scrapin' the hills and ground, Lenny reckons he can drop me over the Koranga Lora at night without fearin' the Pakistani radar. In case he's asked, he's got a bogus flight manifesto and flight number for the Paki Control. There's a revolution goin' on in Paki Baluchistan, and the Shah is scared it might spill over into Iranian Baluchistan, and his own Baluchis might start askin' for their piece of cake. That would be just the Russkie and Iraqi dreams come true. So the

Iranians're helpin' the Pakis out with their choppers, flyin' recce missions and doin' some troop carryin'. 'Cept for their generals' fat asses, the Pakis got no choppers. If Lenny's asked, he's got a code that identifies him as a secret SAVAK chopper on a black mission for the joint Pak-Iran operations against the Baluchi guerrillas.

This Koranga Lora's a seasonal stream with a dozen channels snakin' their way – really a series of dry streams cuttin' a desert plain of around five square miles surroundin' the Quetta-Chamman road. From there I can hitch a ride or walk into town without seemin' suspicious on account of the folks are used to hippies.

I spent a day and a night at Lenny's apartment, and the night of the second day, we took off for Pakistan.

Lenny had dropped me in his Toyota 'bout ten miles from the base in a deserted meadow. He'd given me a torch with the glass painted red, to signal with. For an hour I crouched in the wet grass, and it was cold right to my godamn gonads, yet I was sweatin'. I had the suitcase with me, the gun by my side, and unknown to Lenny, the grenade – primed and ready – this time with the grease wiped off. If the Irisher had guessed or had bin approached 'bout the gold, which wasn't very likely 'cause Iran and the Shah aren't partial to the PLO, this would be it. My nerves were all on edge, and I was wishin' I had me the sight of an owl or else infra red equipment to pierce the darkness around me. The night was quiet, with no hootin' nor howlin' of an occasional animal, nor frog nor cricket, and me with a million dollars load of gold beside me. Then I heard it. Far off,

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and it gave me some comfort; the faint sound of a chopper.

I gave the signal, two longs, two shorts, till the chopper touched down. I shoved in my suitcase and shoulder bag, one of the Iranian crewmen gave me a hand up, and we were off with the shatterin' noise of the chopper's wings almost tearin' my head off. The crew grinned and in the darkness indicated the parachute to me. It was one I was used to. T-10 Main, and twenty seven pounds. This was like old times. I stuffed my clothes bag into the kitbag of the chute that would be in front of my chest, adjustin' the harness clamps to accommodate the extra bulge. The pineapple was in one of the front pockets of the new field jacket picked up for me by Lenny from a military store. One of the crew men took over the flyin' controls, and Lenny came over, his wink shrewder'n ever. He held the chute, in its packin' for me, like accordin' to the buddy system they teach at para school. He handed me the left leg strap, shoutin' in my ear LEF' LEG STRAP and I caught it, put it through the leg loop, and snicked it into the Quick Release Button – the QRB.

The same with the right leg strap, and then I clicked the QRB, and clapped on the safety fork. I stamped my legs, and just then the chopper rolled a little and I steadied myself with a hand on the wall of it.

Lenny grinned.

I grinned back, as he picked the emergency chute from its carryin' handle in one hand, and the belly band of the harness of my main chute with the other. He passed the belly band through the reserve chute's loop, and fitted its clips to the rings of the main chute

harness, and ended up by makin' a quick release of the belly band at its endin'. Then he stepped back. The chopper was goin' almost rock steady now. I moved my legs to test the tightness of the straps around my crotch. I didn't wanta end up in Pakistan with a load of gold and no balls. It was a perfect fit. Not so tight as to crush my balls. Not so loose as to take 'em off entirely. If the straps woulda bin too tight or too loose, either way, good bye screwin' for Barney Custer.

Lenny tied the suitcase on me with a nylon line which, when released, would throw the case from me and hit the ground half a second before I did, to save me landin' trouble and also prepare me for the ground comin up in the dark.

Lenny grinned again.

I grinned back.

We both knew how I was feelin'. A godamn jump is a game to those who do it for fun in clubs with fancy toggle lines to fuck around with.

Guys like us gotta jump with a certain kinda chute 'cause that's the only one suitable for a tactical jump. Secondly, we jump inta fire and shellin' and God knows what else we gotta do once we get down alive. So there's always the feelin' – what if this time the friggin' thing don't open? What 'bout high tension wires? Kinda ground to land on – enemy below – waitin' or not waitin' – or a pathfinder – alive or dead or captured and broken by the enemy and the Drop Zone compromised?

And the mother fuckin' height phobia in all of us.

My stomach was queasy, at the same time there's a strange kinda excitement in my chest. This feelin' of

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fear and excitement either brings a song to your head which you hum while lickin' your dry lips and swallowin'. Else you tap your fingers and force a grin on your face for the boys. Some fart, and the plane always smells of 'em before a jump.

Most guys on trainin' jumps just yell 'emselfes hoarse shoutin' "AIRBORNE." Me, I useta just force myself to grin.

The only door in the chopper is the left door, so Lenny hands me the static line over my left shoulder. Then he rechecks it all, gives me a tap on the hip and settles down on the canvas bench seat. With me beside him, he lights a couple of cigarettes and hands me one.

That makes me feel much better.

I finish it and doze.

Then an elbow in my ribs pokes me awake. I look at my watch and read 0100 hours, which means 0200 hours in Pakistan. Godamn – most of the flight time I was just kinda dozin'!

Lenny winks again, and signals me to "STAND UUUUPP!"

At a hand signal from one of the crewmen, Lenny gets into an emergency chute, which is good basic drill before openin' the door of an aircraft in flight. While he's busy, the crewman is back near the pilot.

Then Lenny gives me another hand signal.

He fiddles near the door with his hand, and then eases it open.

Man.

Outside it's as black as my mom and Preacher Tewkesbury say hell is gonna be, although there's

some stars out. The wind is rushin' by with a terrific roar and I'm half shittin' almost. The wind won't come inside 'cause this bird is modified for a para jump and has got wind deflectors – but there ain't nuthin' to deflect the noise from a flyin' aircraft's open doors invented yet.

The chopper goes into a slight roll, and I brace myself and flex the knees and that's enough to keep my balance. Lenny signals with his fingers.

Height nine hundred feet.

Not bad, I think, but we don't know what the wind is like below on the DZ – Drop Zone.

He gives the jump command.

Only a jumper could understand and appreciate what I felt at the signal, "STAND IN THE DOOR."

This is it, Barney boy, take it or leave it. You asked for it, and this is where it's got you to.

Lenny's lookin' out at the night and the crewmen are occupied, so I think this is as good a time as any. Movin' to the door, I take the HE-36, remove the pin with the right hand, put the pin back in the pocket of the field jacket, and hold the grenade in my left hand which is helpin' my balance on the chopper walls while I shuffle ahead the few steps to the door. Right next to the door is the bench seat, above which is a grilled luggage rack. If the pineapple is rolled on this to the rear of the chopper, there won't be no time for anyone to catch it and throw it out. While in the apartment in Tehran, I made some adjustments to the fuse. It's usually a four second fuse, but that would make the explosion too close for comfort. I didn't fancy bein' peppered by a buncha fragments or havin' my chute

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fucked up and my soul watchin' the gold land in Pakistan.

At the door, Lenny grins and again gives a wink, takes the static line hook, and hooks it on the aluminum rail of the luggage rack. The chopper didn't have no cable adjustments like in a C-130 Hercules, but that didn't matter. All you need for a static line jump is anythin' fixed to the aircraft on which you can hook your static line long enough for it to extend to its full length, pullin' the chute open with it. Minute the chute opens, it just fills up with air. After that, the weight of your fallin' body and jerk of the chute will be enough to break the cord with which the static line is tied to the bridle loop of the chute at its apex hole. This bridle loop has a breakin' strength of only thirty-two pounds. So, the static line goes taut, the canopy fills with air, your body weight snaps the bridle loop. The static line stays in the aircraft, and the jumper floats down.

I stood in the door with knees bent, right foot slightly out, and hands on the wind deflector – the right one holdin' the grenade with the pin out. It wasn't as stupid as it sounds. The chopper was dark, and Lenny was on the other side of me, and my fist was closed over the pineapple. My projectin' right foot would keep my body from goin' into a spin as soon as I stepped out. The chopper was flyin' rock steady now, the blades above shatterin' the night with their chatter. Below me and to the right, I could see the lights of a town – probably Quetta, if this Irish prick had brought me over Quetta and not over Hades, which he was surely capable of.

I'm all tensed up with waitin', and then I get the tap on my ass.

I took a quick glance inside, rolled the grenade and jumped up and out.

That's it.

Up and out, "*HIT IT!*" just like the fuckin' Sarges useta bawl at us outa the blue in para school.

Knees straight, eyes on your extended toes, elbows close to the body, hands over the reserve ripcord handle, head down with chin on chest and back bowed over, countin' "one thousand – two thousand – three thou—" and there it was.

In the sudden quiet away from the shatterin' racket of the chopper there was the thankful jerk and I looked up. The chute was open and the chopper movin' away, way up, and there was no kinda partial malfunction I could spot – not even a twist in the suspension lines. The wind was only a light breeze fannin' my face and it was just a piece of my old life back again. The stars in the black desert sky so low I felt I could touch each one of 'em, and the lights of the town down and away, and me gettin' no swings at all.

By instinct and trainin' I went through the rest of the drill. Look left, look right, look down, and after doin' it, I grinned to myself. There wasn't no other jumpers to look out for. This was just the Sarge's good teachin'. *Keep a sharp look out durin' descent* was what the trainin' manual said, and Sarge Baedecker of the 82nd on attachment to the Special Forces woulda felt proud of recruit Custer right this minute. Just at that second the chopper blew up.

I looked above me.

Over my head and to my right there's this big orange ball of fire, and the big bang, and the blast of

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wind, then fallin' debris, and a kinda sigh, and then silence and goodbye Mister Irish Prick, if you've done your informin' this is what you really get for it. If you ain't, then you was sure goin' to, as soon as you got back, so you got yours either ways.

This time I bin smart.

I bin layin' trails wide enough for any goof to follow, but this time I ain't done myself too bad. Now it's me and Major Joe's friend. This is gonna be the end of the road. This is where this Custer is gonna make his last stand.

I uncovered the canopy release cover. This was essential on account of if the wind was strong down below and I got dragged I'd need the cover off to unclip myself from the chute, unless I wanted to be dragged right into Quetta or whatever that town way off was. I unclipped the suitcase in its bag attached to the D-rings in fronta me, and felt the tug of the nylon line as it played out its full length and was brought to, with a jerk, by the weight of the gold.

I tightened my knees and ankles and pointed my toes to the ground with the knees bent so's my heels were beneath my ass, just like Sarge Baedecker had taught me – the universal Parachute Landin' Fall – PLF – practised by troopers all over the world, with both hands on the front risers.

Down here the wind was crazy mad and I started feelin' the cold. I musta bin 'bout five hundred feet off the ground when I came into it. Colder'n any Tennessee wind and roarin' screamin' at twenty-five knots. I'm gettin' the God-awfulest swings, left to right and back again.

Man I'm shittin', really shittin', and rememberin' all the stories of all the fey Irishers, and figger maybe that fuckin' Irish prick put a curse before he went to Abe's bosom. Shi-i-i-t!

This is worse than any paddy field and I cuss Major Joe and me, and the gold, and blonde cunt, and Sirdar Shah, and the Irisher, and just 'bout everyone else I know.

My head is spinnin' with the fear and I'm feelin' cold inside. It ain't just the wind – Kandahari they call it 'cause it comes down from that place in Afghanistan.

Oh God forgive me, but I hadta try, I tried my best I don't know no better tryin' than I tried.

The sound of my two farts were loud in the dark, enough to bring me back to workin' normal, though the fear didn't go. I wet my finger. The wind was left to right. It would have to be a right side PLF, and God, what did the Sarge say when I useta malinge and dodge? Yeah, the fuckin' five points of contact and when they showed the dame's thighs and ass and tits I whistled loudest and shouted "AIRBORNE" loudest – toes – calf – thighs – ass 'n' shoulder. This was awful damn you Sarge Baedecker, you sonovabitch, you said wind could be bad; you didn't tell us it would be this bad.

I was almost hysterical and half sobbin' but the Sarge's right side PLF was drummin' in my head through all that fear numbin' it and then the ground came up. I landed with feet closed, on my toes, fell to my right on the side of the calf, missed the thigh, felt my ass bang on soft soil, twistin' my godamn body to take the shock on my left push-up muscles and all the

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while my elbows were together in my belly over the reserve, and head down and then I finished the roll with the left part of my body hittin' the ground as the twist of my abdominal muscles brought my legs over the left shoulder and it started.

I was gettin' dragged.

The drag is the most dangerous part of a para jump and what scares a jumper most. Worse than bullets bein' fired at you. I kept my head down with chin tucked in to save the neck from bein' broken and my knees and feet off the ground to take the drag on the fleshy parts of my back. The ground was flashin' past me at what looked like a speed of a hundred miles an hour, since a chute in these cases is behind you and draggin' you backwards and you're facin' away from the direction in which you're goin'. I crossed my hands over my chest and brought 'em on to the riser clips on the shoulder thinkin' all the while, *don't panic, Barney boy, don't panic or else this is goodbye and you get to see the Irisher*. Then I pulled off the covers of the clips.

Jesus! Here it was!

With the forefingers and thumb of each hand I pressed 'em – and pulled, tensin' myself for the back roll which would come if I pulled it off.

Of a sudden, I felt no pull and then kept my head tucked in my shoulders with the chin right on the sternum and straightened my legs by jerkin' the knees as they came over my head and then opened 'em as they came down to the ground and then there I was. Standin' up in that ice cold wind in Pakiland with the panic over, and the reaction settin' in with my knees shakin' and thinkin' now 'bout where I was at, and

thought of recoverin' the chute, which was gonna be a bitch.

I removed the safety fork while turnin' around to see the chute, hit the QRB, unlocked it, and shucked the harness, where I reckoned the weight of the suitcase wouldn't let it fly away. I double timed after the chute in the soft sand and it was tough after the shakes I'd just bin through. Soft soil pulls you down and my shoes got full of dust and just as I thought it might get away, it stopped.

I came up to it.

My luck was back, it was caught on a piece of cactus, so that is that for Barney Custer. Now I had a lead on anybody followin' me on account of even if they learnt where I took off from, they wouldn't learn where to, till they connected me with a wrecked chopper and even then they wouldn't know where I'd gone to from Quetta.

I caught the bridle loop of the chute canopy in the apex hole at its top, and shook it loose, straightenin' it out full as I did so, and then givin' a circular motion to my hand so's to wind it up like spaghetti. Then I folded it over both arms to make a figger eight, and finishin' that, rolled a rock over it. The parachute was then covered from any casual observation.

Goin' back to where I'd made the right side PLF I brought the rest of the stuff forward and put it 'side the chute and looked around. I located the north star, and looked at the lights of Quetta. I was south of the town, and a good eight miles away. Carryin' the gold in the shoulder bag was gonna be like bein' back in the fuckin' Marines. Lenny, the poor prick, had told me

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'bout a road near by, but at this time there were no passin' lights of vehicles to indicate which way it was and there wouldn't be many for the rest of the night, far as I could see on account of not even a crazy bastid of a trucker would move in this cold. I'm standin' on the bank of a dry ravine and go down to have a look. I bend and take a handful of earth and it isn't no sand. Just soft kinda dust. The ravine ain't no ravine but the bank of a dry stream which I reckon must be terrific in a flash flood. The bank is 'bout fifty feet high and the bed another fifty wide, and damn me if midway down the almost sheer bank I don't stumble into a cave. It ain't no real cave, just a hollow made by wind and water. I figger it'll do for the night – whatever there's left of it. It's well sheltered from the wind and I'm tough enough to spend the night here with comfort. Come mornin', I'll get my bearin's. I got the stuff down, and recovered the chute from under the rock to spread for a cover with the shoulder bag for a pillow. After a smoke I felt better. I slipped a second jersey over my head and felt okay. This was gettin' to be more like a cowboy movie than shades of 'Nam.

Lenehan Breen – I hadta kill the poor bastid and the two Iranian crewmen.

More'n likely, he'd have guessed 'bout the gold. He must have informed, though. If he'd recognized the two Arabs who'd rolled the grenade our way, they'd have recognized him. Now he woulda wanted no unnecessary enemies, and woulda informed just to clear himself. If not, the PLO boys, or even the Cosa Nostra, woulda picked him up and put a razor on his balls and made him talk. This is the Golden Crescent,

as they like to call it. Maybe the largest drug growin' center of the world – Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan. Their biggest market has got to be Western Europe and the United States, and if that is so, we've gotta Cosa Nostra connection so big nobody seems to notice it. Hear tell the US Bureau of Narcotics is tryin' to get the Pakis to grow strawberries 'stead of Opium!

The sun was already up when I rose next mornin' and I yawned and looked around. My guess was right. This sure was Marlboro country. To the east I could see Quetta, and all around was dry bleak Arizona kinda moonscape hills reachin' out like fingers into this plain or valley or what have you. Then I quickly got back down and started diggin' with my hands and a piece of wood I found. Pretty soon I had a big enough hole and I buried the T-10 Main, Reserve, and harness. It's a sure enough guess, somebody'll discover it in a day or two, and report it soon, but that's enough for me. All I want is time to get the eight hundred miles into Lahore and contact Sirdar Ali Shah.

Then everythin' should sort itself out.

Climbin' onto the bank, I top the hill rise 'bout thirty yards ahead towards Quetta, carryin' the suitcase in my left hand and bag slung over the left shoulder, and beat me if the fuckin' little metaled road ain't just beneath it! Well, there was Barney Custer too scared to move at night and sittin' right on the road.

But I reckon it's a good thing.

I mighta just got lost in this Paki Arizona cut all over by dry stream beds. That Kandahari wind I'd heard 'bout is blowin' somethin' terrific and bitin' almost through my field jacket, so I quicken my pace. Pretty

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soon, 'bout a furlong ahead, I see some military type barracks surrounded by barbed wire and I tense up. This was the angle to Lenny's droppin' me. These little tin panney gook countries are sensitive even to the security of their fuckin' tube wells and courts, so I've heard and experienced. I don't want no trouble with these guys. They start a job on me, they're sure to finish it.

Nearin' 'em, I see a sign, POW CAGE, but no guards, just some guys in civvies. Then I get to thinkin'. The sign's old and weather beaten and it must be a relic of maybe Pakistan's wars with India, or even World War II. The guys just grin and don't bother me as I go on ahead. Lenny was right – they just thought I was a crazy hippie roamin' around, workin' off a hangover of hash or booze. A mile ahead and I was tired and sweatin', even in the damn cold, and I hit the main road.

I musta bin walkin' on a branch road. At the L-crossin' there's some wooden kiosks and rough lookin' bearded types havin' tea and listenin' to some kinda weird music on a radio. I was hungry, so I went over. The tea shop guy was middle aged and his eyes twinkled when he saw me.

By signs I got through to him and had a buttered bun with a cup of tea. That perked me up. I finished and was gonna light a cigarette when the guy says, "Hush-hush, usmoke?" and I was floored.

After he repeated it a coupla times I got it. Guy's askin' me if I wanta smoke hash! He musta memorized this for hippies, and I say to myself, what the hell. I ain't hooked on it, but I've tried it – everybody has, ain't

they? Besides, it makes for good cover so I grin and say, "Yeah, sure!"

He hands me a reefer from a pack which has the picture of a stork with a title in English proclaimin' KING STORK. Then the resta the guys gather around me to watch. One of 'em's got a shavin' set and looks like a mobile kinda barber with an old fashioned cut throat razor, so I got through to him and had myself a shave. The way those rough neck Baluchistanis were lookin' at me, I was scared they wanted the guy to slit my throat. Then it's over and he's done and all the guys clap.

Hell, they looked like bad guys out of a western – but they were real straight and friendly. The reefer did its job and I was floatin', man, floatin' up high. There was a truck parked and the trucker through sign language asks me, *Quetta?*, and I say yes and we push off with four of us in the driver's cabin.

Funny thing 'bout these Paki trucks. Decorated all over with colored lights 'n' tinsel and colored plastic and writin' all over in Arabic kinda script, and when I point at it and raise my eyes one of the guys next to me says Koran. I reckon it's verses from their Bible, meant to bring good fortune.

Can you beat it? I never had so much luck in my short life. A few miles ahead I can see a sign – AIRPORT – pointin' at a road goin' right and the truck turns that way. The trucker's grinnin' and from the few words of English and signs I understand they got some stuff to pick up from the airport. Well, I tell 'em, the same way, that that's where I wanted to go anyway and we all laugh.

The airport is 'bout three miles ahead. I get inside,

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and I'm shittin' 'cause I ain't got no passport but nobody asks me for it 'cause it's a domestic flight, least of all the pretty dame with nice boobs sittin' at the desk from whom I buy a ticket and a guidebook. Most of the guys there are in western clothes and closed collars but no hats and they're all better dressed than ex-Sergeant B. N. Custer – ah well, blacks comin' up all over the world! It's a funny country though. Ten minutes back I'm sippin' tea and smokin' a reefer with primitive tribesmen, and here I am surrounded by the same sorta guys, only talkin' better'n me in English! Pretty soon my flight was announced and I was ushered into the tourist section by a little china doll kinda stewardess with good English and a heavy fag Brit accent.

The old Fokker took off with a bump, and it was bumps all the way.

I had coffee, and from my window seat, looked down. There were just patches of countryside and the rest was mountain desert – dry and bleak, or else flat desert cut by washes and ravines. It was a cruel land and it helped me understand the tribesmen at the kiosk and in the truck. Some time later we left the desert behind and I can see a plain below me. Just a sprinklin' of trees around, and some clumps, but mostly flat, wide open wheat country. The guidebook I got from the airport says this is the Punjab. The villages I can see are flat topped, made of mud, but the major thing is this is just farmin' country like in Iowa and an Iowan woulda bin mighty pleased to see this land. For me it ain't so hot. I'm just a hillbilly on the run. I dozed off, and was woken up by the voice tellin' me I'd better get my seat belt tightened. Hell, Lahore so soon, and I tighten my

ass. The end of the road, win or lose.

Lookin' through the window, I can see a big city spread all over the plain by the side of a meanderin' river. Looks like the Lord upped and threw down a bowl of his left over makin's in the Punjab, and the left over makin's kept spreadin' till they were stopped by the river I can see, a brown windin' kinda river, yeah, the Ravi, accordin' to the guidebook.

I step outa the plane and it ain't so cold here, thank the Lord, it's a lower altitude. I pick up my stuff and grab a cab outside.

"Waldorf Hotel, Gulberg," I say, thanks to the guidebook.

The little fag limey Morris, in which a red blooded American wouldn't have put his cat in, moves off with the radio switched on.

The cabby's as tough lookin' and tough talkin' as any of New York's finest, only thing is he's wearin' baggy trousers and a blanket around his shoulders with a spotted silk head band or scarf around his head like an Apache brave. Soon's we move outa the modern, crowded airport, he steps on the pedal and starts singin', watchin' my reaction in the rearview mirror. I winked at the reflection and he laughed delightedly, and then yelled a kinda battle cry, gut deep from his throat, and just missed bangin' a motor rickshaw.

We were passin' through the Army base and I was lookin' things over with a soldier's critical eye. It's possible to tell quite a lot 'bout an army by takin' a look at its GIs and bases. I could tell they were probably good, and their Military Police I wouldn't have wanted to argue with.

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We passed over a bridge coverin' a railway track, and down a smooth road, elegant and fancy, and then turned left and all around there's these big beautiful mansions and limos passin' by us, and I say to myself, ain't this supposed to be one of those poor countries the United States keeps sendin' dollars and powdered milk to, and hand me downs? Then I reckon the old things we give 'em must be so good they can make huts into mansions and turn little skinny guys into these tall well fed types I bin seein' so far. Man, the miracles of US Aid! This is sure a bunch of gooks poor in things but rich in spirit! Godamn, they even got 'emselves a golf course. Play golf, and you don't feel hungry. Hear tell in these climes man don't feel hungry if he plays golf, drives a Toyota and lives in a mansion.

We go along a boulevard with a well maintained grass patch runnin' down the middle. What surprises me is the barbed wire around it – fuckin' blacks goin' high-tech now. The fancy livin' sector of this burg keeps fuckin' barbed wire around public grass – somethin' to write back to Preacher Tewkesbury. Maybe there's gold growin' on this here grass, and folks might just steal it, and that would mean more US Aid – hmm – figgers. If this fenced grass is the source of this country's problems, I can sure sympathize with the sorry buncha gooks and the US State Department.

The fat cats here are just like the fat cats in Saigon, and the little people on bicycles are also just the same as in 'Nam – veins standin' out, cheeks hollowed in, and no-hope Loser-Larry written all over their faces.

We make a turn off to a big marketplace built in a circle around a grass garden, this time with steel grilled

spikes, and I figger this here is some more of that Problem Grass.

The Waldorf Hotel is at a corner of the market and I pay off the cabby with the Paki currency given to me by Lenny. Then I book a room and go up the stairs with a bellboy carryin' my stuff. The room isn't much, with a thin rug on the floor, and a granny bed with a headboard and a cotton wool mattress. There ain't no phone, but at least the bathroom is clean and the taps work. I don't see no toilet paper, and remember that these guys wash their asses with water – they figger paper is dirty, it don't clean proper! Washin' your ass with water!

Shit!

Well, the bellboy speaks a bit of English, broken like, and I tell him to get me a tooth brush and a tube of paste, handin' him a ten rupee note. Then I shucked my clothes and had a cold shower on account of there bein' no hot water. I felt much better after that. There's a knock on my door and I say Yes without a hand on my gun 'cause I feel it's okay and I've bought a bit of time. It's the bellboy with a small tube of Forhans and a medium hard tooth brush. He offered me the change but I let him keep it. I see his hesitation by the door and he's starin'. Maybe it's cause I'm only wearin' a towel around me and nuthin' else.

"Yeah?" I asked.

"*Sahib*, gurul, durink, hush-hush?"

Well, this is gettin' to be like Saigon.

I shook my head and the guy shrugged and went outa the door, closin' it behind him. I called out and he came back very fast with an eager expression:

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“Gurul, durink, hush-hush?”

The guy sure was as determined as we were told a Green Beret oughta be on a mission.

“No. Lunch.”

“Beefburger?”

“Hamburger?”

“No, *sahib*, no Ham – Beef. Beefburger.”

“Okay!”

Dumb Pakis don't know that hamburgers are made outa beef and known as they are 'cause of a town in Germany – blacks got no sense.

He went out and I sat on the bed, waitin', after changin' my clothes.

I decided to have lunch, sleep, and in the evenin' contact this Sirdar Ali Shah. If he weren't available, well, I'd just hole up some place and wait for the bastids to come and take my chances with a gun.

The bellboy came up with a tray which he put on a low table in front of the only armchair in the room. I went over to the armchair and settled down, lookin' at what these guys called a “beefburger.” It was all there – the onions and tomatoes fried, the French fries and the salad with what was probably supposed to be French dressin'. Two things wrong. No mustard, just a bottle of Catsup, and a knife and fork! That was okay, a fork came in handy to pick up the salad and French fries, but when I picked the thick hamburger and bit into it the guy was lookin' strangely at me. Maybe he expected me to eat the hamburger with a knife and fork, like that crazy Paki was doin' aboard the plane.

Funny.

With a blunt knife he'd carefully lifted the bread

coverin' off the hamburger and laid it aside. Then he'd gone red in the face and struggled to cut it. Then he wrestled with the meat and his face got redder and he almost bust himself at the lower seams, with the bottom half of the bread. He'd take a deep breath, spear each of these in turn with his fork and pop 'em in his mouth, puffin' his cheeks some. And as if somebody was holdin' a gun on him, he'd rush in the French fries and salad and his eyes would be dartin' around. Last I remembered of him before I slept on the plane was that he hadn't even reached mid-base.

So, I thought, let this little prick of a bellboy frig himself watchin' me.

I grab me a mouthful of it, and except for no mustard it was all right, and soon's I finished I lit a cigarette. This guy put a check in front of me on a little saucer. Just as I was gonna tell him to put it on my hotel bill I read what was on the check. *Eskimo Hideout Coffee and Snack Bar*. I figger this is where the Eskimos hide out when it gets too cold up north!

The check says six and fifty, which is 'bout sixty-five cents, and not bad. I give him a dollar, tell him to go fuck himself, get into the quilt which smells nice and clean, and set to thinkin' 'bout these guys – funny people in a funny land although I bin in it only some hours ... I drifted off to sleep.

It was dark when I woke up.

I yawned and looked outa the window. I could see lights in houses and on the street and it was slightly cold though not as cold as Quetta. I splashed some water on my face, dried it, and got dressed. I put on the suit I'd bought in Beirut. It was wrinkled some, so I took

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it off. In the jeans and field jacket, I felt more like my old self.

I was just decidin' on whether or not to pack the rod, when there's a knock on the door. Must be the bellboy I thought.

I drew back the bolt, and then all merry hell broke loose.

Luckily I was standin' to one side, outa habit and not caution. Just as I drew back the bolt, the door was pushed inside. If I'd bin in front of it, it likely woulda busted my nose. As it was, it almost busted my arm. I felt the pressure and by old instinct moved my arm away. As a guy rushed in with a drawn gun, I chopped his wrist and grabbed him by the Adam's apple and threw him into the guy behind. They both went down, and without waitin' for the gold or the gun which was the best way to get shot right then, I jumped over 'em. My room was next to the landin' on the first floor. Twelve feet below me was the lobby and the desk. Without hesitatin' for even a second, I jumped the twelve feet, makin' a right side PLF on the carpet just as a shot rang out and hit the wall above me. I dived through the doorway, grabbin' a cutlery knife off a tray bein' carried by a waiter.

Leastways somethin'.

Runnin' out, I saw a motor rickshaw, jumped in, waved a fifty rupee note under his nose, yellin', *Heera Mandi, Sirdar Shah!*

The guy, whose engine was already tickin', started off like a bolt of lightenin'. A big, fat, cussin' cabby. Good guy, at least for a fifty rupee bill.

I turned to look behind me, and see the same two

guys runnin' out, and two young toughs waitin' at the kerb, who gave me long hard looks. They coulda bin Arab. Looks as though Lenny musta done himself a sight of informin' all over the place, sellin' me down the drain.

Well, he got his.

The other two guys – ones that'd jumped me in the hotel – start off on a 175cc Honda and just as they do, a waitin' cab with another two gooks makes a fast U-turn and takes off at the rear.

I'm gettin' to be a regular pied piper.

A little ways ahead the punks in the cab scrape the Honda with their fender. It turns turtle, with the two punks who'd rushed me back in the room, under it. Now it appeared that two parties were after me. Count the two Arabs outside the hotel, and that would make three gangs after me, or else two gangs with one havin' sent out two parties. I didn't have the gold, but I was still the only one with the combination which put me in a strong bargainin' position as long as I was alive and free. This much those guys all knew. The way the suitcase was gimmicked, without the combination it was nuthin' but a high class bomb.

We're goin' hell for leather now, and I thank my stars, Mom and Preacher Tewkesbury's prayers, Sarge Baedecker's trainin' and the 'Nam experience which had helped me survive so far. I was still clutchin' the knife as, a couple of miles later, the cab draws nearer. The knife would be small protection, but better'n nuthin'. Then the cab drew back, and man, this mountain boy's luck seems to be perkin' up again. The SOB cab's runnin' a slow leak. Shows how even a new

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Toyota can't go over thirty MPH on a slow leak.

If nuthin' else, for the moment I've bought some time.

We're streakin' down the kinda broad boulevard no hillbilly had a right to be on – not with a bread knife in one hand and a couple of creeps behind on a slow leak in a Toyota cab. It's a broad road, divided into two lanes, each side lined with mansions and trees and hedges and walls. Pretty soon we cross a poplar lined canal in which the reflection of the lights and trees makes a pretty picture.

It's the same ahead.

Hushed and quiet and graceful, well lit up with plenty of fast movin' traffic but no jam up at all and the creeps chasin' me all the time and my hand on that piece of cutlery I'd grabbed.

We go past a big hotel, with a sign sayin' HOTEL INTERCONTINENTAL – yeah, accordin' to the guidebook, this ought to be the Mall. But no, man, where's the shops that are supposed to make it a shoppin' center too? The air through the open sides of the rickshaw is cuttin', so I lit two cigarettes, givin' one to the cabby who took it without sayin' nuthin'. Then we hit the shoppin' center part of the Mall, and it was the same as in any big city, neon and traffic and lights and busy folk. All the while the cab's behind us but wobblin' a little. We go right to the other end of town through the old city through a mess of traffic – cars, trucks, hand-carts, bullock carts, spit'n dust – the lot! Then the rickshaw driver stops in a sorta uphill square, with guys in all kinda dress standin' and loafin' around, and it's like the red light district of any town anywhere. Just as the cab

pulls into the square behind us, my cabby shouts to a guy, and all I can make out is *Dara* – somethin'. He musta bin a local pimp and grabbin' me by the hand he took me into the right hand alley and pointed out a door. I got inside, and there's these musicians in a corner and I see a guy and he must be Dara.

A loner.

I could smell that, see it in him. I seen a couple in 'Nam. Dangerous guys on a delicate balance. Disturb it, and you've had it. Use it, and you won it. He gives me a smile but his eyes are cold. They always would be cold. Maybe one or two people had seen his eyes smile, not more, and 'em too, not for long. He was like that. Just as I shook hands while he switched on a grave kinda professional smile, I noticed the dancin' girl puttin' bells on her ankles, and me'n Dara, we exchanged a few words, and I just dropped Major Joe's name when the door opens and the creeps with the slow leak come in.

I drew the bread knife but what they do next just floors me. It's somethin' I ain't never come across before.

They open big knives with a strange cracklin' sound and yell battle cries like that cabby on the way from the airport to the Waldorf. Everybody got shook up and froze. One of 'em yelled somethin' and the other moved towards me. I got set for all the tricks I knew and sneaked a look at Dara.

He's smilin'.

His move is so fast I couldn't follow it with my eyes, except I saw a snub nosed thirty eight in his hand. He says somethin' to the hoods in foreign, and they drop

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the knives and then he turns to me.

“That includes you, Mister Custer,” and I drop the cutlery.

Major Joe’s reference makes no difference to this cold blooded classy pimp.

Then four guys, three with guns and one with a Sten, British type 9mm Mk III with a wooden butt, rush in.

Dara’s gun does a disappearin’ act beneath his silk night shirt and he says somethin’ to a huge giant with a ring in his ear and western clothes, and we’re all taken upstairs to a bare room.

We sit quietly with the two creeps sorta beggin’ the big guy as I can make out from their expressions. I can’t understand a word of the nigger they’re speakin’, but it *is* musical. The big guy gives ’em a shut up call. Except for the guy with the Sten, all three of Dara’s cuties keep their guns drawn. I seen a 9mm Luger and a coupla 9mm Hi-power Brownin’s. These boys are big league. Quietly professional and very cool.

Especially for a bunch of pimps.

Dara comes in and there’s a long conversation with one of the creeps who was chasin’ me. It’s obvious he’s tellin’ how he happened to be stickin’ to my ass. The way he pleads and begs I can make out that in this town it’s Dara who wears the pants. Then he says one word, very quiet, and the guy shuts up. The two creeps are sent out, and I can hear blows in the corridor outside. Then he turns to me, with his limey accent, and asks me to go with one of his enforcers. He gives separate instructions to this enforcer in nigger or Pakistani or whatever they want to call their nigger.

Ghani, that's the guy's name, and he can speak a bit of English, takes me down the stairs. 'Stead of goin' back to the dancin' room, he takes me out of another door into a lit courtyard. Now I see that the rooms are built around this courtyard, at one end of which is a garage.

In one corner of the courtyard is an auto which is half Jeep and half '58 Chev Impala. Fancy wheel caps and lots of decorations made of tinsel, colored plastic fringes and little lights on chrome bars. That was a real nigger pimp's set up straight out of Harlem.

Ghani opens the garage door, and what is inside ain't nigger nor Harlem. It's a black Mercedes Benz 380 SL. Then he goes and opens the gate, and I see it leads out into the street. Ghani takes out a set of keys, gets behind the steerin', which is on the right, this bein' a left side drive country, and leans to unlock the door on the other side for me. When the door opens the automatic light goes on and I see the upholstery is real leather, red leather, and a red carpet on the floor.

Boy, this bird is sure big time and like I said before, Old Barney Custer ain't nuthin' but a hillbilly on the run.

The car is facin' the alley gate, parked backwards, which means it's always ready for a fast exit. Neat, very neat. Ghani moves out slow, blowin' the horn, and eases out into the alley. As we go outa the district, a lotta guys wave and bow respectfully and give politely curious looks. Then I notice the car's very expensive stereo console.

Big potatoes mister!

Coupla miles out and we still ain't spoke to each other. In a little alley, Ghani stops the car, gives me his

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blanket, and explains that I must crouch beneath the dashboard. Then he drives on and some time later we stop. I don't know where we are on account of the blanket is all over me and I can't see nuthin'. I hear Ghani blowin' the horn, and the sound of a gate openin'. We move some, then stop. Ghani taps me with a hand on the shoulder.

"Get up!"

I throw off the blanket, look around, and get it. I'm gettin' more'n more impressed with this gook buncha asswashers livin' on US Aid.

We're back in Dara's place.

The idea is simple. I was seen comin' in. Then I was seen goin' back out with Ghani. Then Ghani drove back without me. Which means, to an observer, that there's no Custer at Dara's place. Cute and simple. No. Not simple or cute. Professional.

Ghani locks the car and garage, and then I notice the room with a window next to the gate of the house. There's the other quiet guy in it who opened and shut the door. We went up the same stairs to the second floor, past the room we'd sat in. It was a strange contrast. The dancin' room was like Arabian Nights, and this room with a coupla chairs and a bed, and the Mercedes and the bastidized Jeep down below; I couldn't figger out this guy's operation.

Well, I'd find out. Few steps ahead was another door. Ghani stopped and knocked on it. Dara's voice came from inside and Ghani said somethin'. Then the door opened and I walked in and Man – I was floored again.

This was a night fulla surprises.

It was an air conditioned, wood paneled room, with the kinda fancy desks advertized in slick magazines. Fatso Shriver of Vegas had nuthin' compared to this baby. Even a likker cabinet and Ballantine's 12 Years Old. He said he hadn't known Major Joe was dead, and by the time I finished, he was half way through the Ballantine's while I just had a coupla doubles. When I finished he's quiet.

That's it.

Just quiet.

All along, his expression had bin the same. Just no expression at all and yet it was more to me like any other emotion he coulda showed. As I said, I know his kind. Half a minute later he spoke in that fag limey accent of his, only comin' from him it don't sound faggy, it's like the slitherin' of a jungle snake.

"Mister Custer, you've taken Major Joe's name. He was my friend and if you were his friend, you are mine. We will take the gold back from these people, that I swear by the Holy Koran."

I breathe a little easier.

The Koran is their Bible, see. Hear tell a Muslim guy sets great store by it when he uses it to swear on.

"When I said we will get it, I meant I will. You will be with me just in spirit. In the flesh you shall stay at my residence as an honored guest. Food, drink, female company, that's my duty by our laws of hospitality. Your only duty is not to move from your room till I tell you to. You've had a rough time. Just relax till this job is over."

It was on the tip of my tongue to say thanks, but I shut up. That's with these kinda guys. You don't say thanks and you don't say sorry to 'em. You don't say

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thanks 'cause you feel it wouldn't be enough. You don't say sorry 'cause if you've done somethin' to be sorry for, you're too dead or too crippled to say so.

He gets up, takes me outa the room, and then into another one a few rooms away from his office. He switched on a light and I see it's very fancy inside. Double bed with spring mattresses, air conditioned, with gold colored carpet, ankle deep pile. Coupla leather armchairs, a coffee table of inlaid ivory, two side tables that match, and a Dutch dresser with a large mirror. He switched the air condition' to heat.

Before goin' out he said, "For your safety, this will be your prison for the next few days. Somebody'll bring you night clothes."

The lightin' in here ain't concealed but the shades on the bulbs are sexy batik. Then I do some more noticin'. It's done up in dove gray, and the walls are bare, but it's still rich and comfortable. I open a door set in a corner and it's the bathroom. Pink tiles and shower and a long bathtub, only it's a squat down gook lavatory seat but I don't mind that really. It's havin' no paper I mind. I figger to send for it from whoever comes with my night clothes. There's silk sheets on the bed, and a velvet quilt, big enough for two.

Then the girl came through the door.

Same girl who was startin' to dance down below when I came in. She smiled and said, "Haelloe!" with a pretty lilt.

She's in a woolen housecoat, red silk baggy pants, and woolen slippers. Over her left forearm is a silk sleepin' suit, and in her right hand a pair of slippers. This baby I notice for the first time it seems. Guess

downstairs I was too scared. She's slim, but not skinny. Stacked all right, this writhin' graceful Paki tomato with Mex skin. Her hair is black, hangin' loose till her hips.

Her forehead is wide and clear, her eyes heavy lidded and sultry and black and smilin' at B. N. Custer. And the little mouth like a rose bud with the pointed chin, and I say to myself, this here beats a barrel of corn likker any day.

I smiled and said to her, "You speak English?"

She answered in a broken liltin' accent which came musical and sexy to my ears. "Yaes. Aiee am maetreec. You poot pajama and bathing?"

"No bath honey. Thanks. I'll just change."

Her voice sounds like a nightingale's, and she smiles up at me. I tell her what I think of her voice, and she still smiles. Then beat me if she don't start to help me off with my jacket. I take the pajamas and move to the bathroom, but she comes real close to me. I like the smell of spicy perfume comin' off her.

Sinbad all over again. Things are movin'. She puts a soft hand on my chest.

"Fisst you say don't bathin'. Where you are goin' now?"

"Change, baby."

She laughed, and she was soundin' more'n more like a nightingale than anythin' else, and she's even closer to me now. She arches her body like Robin Hood's bow on TV, and her tits are basketball firm, a thought which sends a sudden rush of blood to my gonads.

"Aiee am babee? Na'at babee. Changin' clothes and I see who ees babee!"

Flight to Pakistan

I grabbed her and threw her on the bed.

It was wild, and it was sweet at the same time, and I poured all the shit and sweat and piss I'd bin through inta her and she seemed to understand and make motions with her body that told me to keep pourin' it all out in her. She beat the shit outa every Saigon alley cat and even that blonde bitch in Vegas. All I can say is, she gave me the most lovin' I've ever had and as I rolled off her for the fifth time, I felt clean and like a man ten feet tall and not like a hunted animal and my last thought was for this kinda lovin' I'd even use water ...

I woke up around ten in the morning with that lovin' Lahori flesh beside me under the velvet quilt. She's drippin' out and crazy mad to please her *Peהלwan's* guest. Major Joe sure made himself a good pal. This joint is sealed tight, and Perveen – the momma in my bed – is asleep, lookin' like an angel with all that black hair spread over the golden silk pillow framin' that dark mysterious face.

I can't figger it out. Guess it must be her professional trainin'. She's given me the most lovin' in bed I ever had. Seein' her now makes me horny. I kiss her awake, and she goes mmmm aaaa uuunnhh and puts her arms around me and rolls on top and makes love to me. She really and truly made love to me, so gentle like, and so soft, not lettin' me do a thing, lowerin' herself on me, her cunt lips softly enclosin' my prick, takin' it inta her, archin' her back and juttin' her tits to me, not lettin' me feel a bit of her weight even, takin' my buckin' in her stride. Kama Sutra, baby!

Man, bein' a whore out here is really like bein' a social worker.

We have ourselves a hot shower after which she switches on the radio, and tunes into some Paki music which ain't bad, but kinda weird like all foreign music. The room bein' cozy, we both just set on the edge of the bed in our birthday suits and kinda move to the sound of the music, touchin' each other now and then – shoulders and tits and floatin' hair and warm hungry thighs.

Pretty soon she gets up. I tried to grab this mamma but she slipped away.

“You are na'at hungree, *jani*?” she laughed.

“Sure, I'm hungry for you.”

I made a face like a tiger, and she laughed real loud and nice. She liked it. See, I got this sense of humor but it ain't everybody got the sense to appreciate it.

“Eet is not batter to eet and loving?”

Okay. I liked that idea too, on account of at least one hillbilly's stomach was rumblin'.

“Fine. But I get a kiss first.”

She came over to me, and it wasn't a firecracker like they write 'bout. This was a 155mm Heavy bang on target.

She got into her housecoat, and that shape went out the door leavin' me with two great hungers.

Pretty soon she came up with a tray and put it on the table. There was a strong spicy curry, Paki bread, a glass of orange juice and lotsa tea. The curry, I learnt, is called *nihari*, and the bread is *kulcha*. She gave me an impish look.

“*Nihari* is good. Make you sutra'ang fa'ar whan we making the love!”

I leered at her and drank the glass of orange juice. It

Flight to Pakistan

was made from fresh oranges. The *nihari* thing was just great. It was shin bone beef, bone marrow, brains and trotters cooked all night over a slow fire in a clay pot with a curried sauce so rich, it stuck to the fingers. With that, we both had a couple of flat bread *kulchas*, washin' it all down with a lot of cardamom-laced tea, and lit our first cigarettes of the day. Godamn – eatin' good food like that was almost as good as layin' a broad.

“Sweetheart, how much do you get paid?” I asked casual-like.

I was curious how these gooks in baggy pants with Sten-guns and Mercedes' ran their racket. Hell, this thing was gonna pull off and I wouldn't mind settlin' down right here for a piece of the action.

She just smiled, but her eyes were careful and the smile professional.

“Whyee you talk-it beeznuss with me? Feenish ceegrutte, back to bed – Okay?”

“Hey, you lovin' canary. I'm just askin' 'cause a package like you must come expensive. I want to know how much Dara is losin' while you're here.”

“Wa'at looseng and package canary? Speak sulow English so I am also understanding – I am matreec!”

“Sister, what I mean is, Dara's a helluva friend – good friend.”

She nodded her head.

“When you ain't dancin', he's losin' money. I feel bad, kinda, on account of me bein' the reason he's maybe losin' money. So I wanta know what I cost him. See, baby?”

And all the while I bin strokin' her thigh. She's

reactin' by movin a little and sighin' some to the hand, but not to the questions. She says: "Aiee am nut knowin'. And iee am na'at babee, beeg gurl. See?"

She shucks the gown, and before I can explain to her what an American means when he calls a girl like her baby, she's pushed me on the bed, ripped off my pajamas and climbed on top of me. She makes love slow, real slow, and this little hillbilly is still a hillbilly but he don't feel like he's a hunted animal any longer. I feel like a rooster come home.

Then we have ourselves another shower and get into the quilt, just smokin' and listenin' a little to the weird Paki music. We talk a little too. She tells me she was into this. Far back as she could remember, her hearin' from her mother, this was a family profession and the old dame last night in the dancin' room downstairs is her mother. But each time I try to get some business details 'bout their set up, she smiles and turns away from the topic.

"Honey!"

"Mmmmm," she rubs herself against me.

"Be a good girl and tell Dara I'd like some kinda gun to protect myself with."

She shot straight up in bed, the quilt fallin' down over her shoulders and tits. Her eyes, they had a kinda dangerous look.

"Wa'at fa'ar you are needin' a gun?"

"Last night, well, you know what happened. You were there."

And then I saw the strength and pride of these guys. By the way her face was set, and by the way her back straightened. Her eyes flashed, and when she spoke I

Flight to Pakistan

knew from her tone there wouldn't be no arguin' with her. Barnabas Nicholas Custer wouldn't even get a pen knife.

“You don't know us. It ees insult if you thinking we are coward and not protecting you. Why you come to Dara *Pehelwan's dera*? Whyee nut Shahyya'as *dera*? Whee na'at Amin Butt? Whyee? No any one touchin' you, comin' near you. *Puls cumm, puls muqabla.*”

The way she said it, her nipples erect and her tits thrustin' out like a Marine sergeant's chest on dress parade, it turned me on again.

Fifteen

Lahore – 1973

First Day

Dara shut the door to his guest's bedroom and stepped out into the corridor. It was cold, and he felt it. Cold and empty inside. The whisky could not fill that emptiness.

"Gulloo," he shouted into the night.

"Coming, *Pehehwan-ji*."

"I'm in the office!"

Dara entered, leaving the door unlocked. He went to the liquor cabinet, made himself another drink. On the second sip Gulloo entered without knocking and stood quietly.

"Gulloo, it's one thirty now. Go to the University Campus. You've got a line on those two Arabs' rooms – the ones seen outside the Waldorf Hotel?"

The Gilgiti nodded and Dara continued.

"Snitch their passports and plant something in their rooms. Enough to put them away for a week at least. Then give me a call. I'll be on the phone till you do so."

"I'll use Nuri's boys from Shah di Khuee. It's their territory and they know it."

Flight to Pakistan

Gulloo the giant was turning to go when Dara again spoke. "Send Ghani."

"He's on guard duty."

"Okay, Barkata will do."

When Gulloo left, Dara picked up the phone and dialed a number. After a few rings at the other end, it was answered by a sleepy voice.

"Hello, Butt Sahib. This is Dara," Dara said.

The sleep vanished from the other end of the line.

"Yes, Shah-ji!"

"At five thirty raid the foreign students' hostel at the New University Campus. Room 36, shared by Fawwad and Harris, a couple of Arabs. They won't have passports and they've got drugs stashed in their room."

There was a second's pause at the other end of the line. Then the voice came on.

"This is dangerous ground. Islamabad is touchy about foreign students, especially Arabs. The PLO consulate is on campus."

"Frig Islamabad, Butt-ji. Five thousand and you've caught yourself a couple of illegal entries with international drug connections. You'll be investigating their links. They'll give you the Punjab Police Medal and send you to the United States on a course."

Butt chuckled.

The Americans had just recently given Pakistan a few million dollars and vehicles of a single make and model as part of the war against drugs. It was a current joke that the Pakistani Police attached to this drug preventive force were having a great time at the expense of Uncle Sam's myopia.

"Okay," the Deputy Superintendent of Police agreed.

“I’ll line up a raiding party.”

No hesitation now. Dara replaced the phone on the cradle. *Bastard!* For five thousand, Islamabad didn’t matter. What angered him was the system, just the way it had his father, Kala Warris. For five big ones the bastard would sell his soul and then issue a statement to the press about his vigorous anti-crime campaign.

Now Barkata made his quiet entrance into the room. He was the second of the two leading gunmen who had burst into the dancing room below. His eyes were brown and watery.

“*Barkataea*,” Dara said in Lahori. “There’s a Royal Park lawyer named Malik Ashraf Ali. He’s a smart lawyer covering the studio rackets. I want to know every second of his activity for the last thirty-six hours. I repeat – every second of his accounted for during the last thirty-six hours. I want this information by morning.”

“By your deadline it may be cutting things a little fine, *Pehelwan-ji*.”

“Difficult, but not impossible. The studios are still open. They’ll remain so till morning. Take the Jeep, and whatever money you need.”

Barkata nodded and went away.

Dara finished the drink and made another.

He lifted the receiver off its hook and dialed. This time the telephone gave several sharp rings before it was picked up.

“Braganza,” the sleepy, sing-song, second-hand Welsh of the Anglo-Pakistani.

“Good evening, or rather morning, Mister Braganza. Get to your office an hour earlier. Dig up all you have in your records and in those of connected departments on

Flight to Pakistan

Malik Ashraf Ali. His office is in Royal Park.”

“Some things I can brief you on now, you know. He’s an excellent Barrister an’ all, but the black sheep of an old, aristocratic family. Incapable of sticking to straight business. Suspected links with Cuban, South American and Middle Eastern terrorist bugger types. Covers the studio rackets n’ all and one or two others besides. He was also suspected to have been involved in the killing of Rana Qudrutullah –”

“All that I’ve know about for years. Tell me more – I’m interested in the Pen-Profile made by your Department’s Psychiatrists and the Special Cell’s report on his current activities –”

“Ah now, Shah Sahib, what you’re asking me is to face life imprisonment –”

“I’ll make it worth your while. Name your price!”

There was no price for the pleasure of revenge. There were a few seconds of silence, while Braganza soaked this information in.

“Twenty-five thousand – in dollar bills, Shah Sahib.”

“Done. Anything else you can tell me off-hand?”

“He operates like an intelligence hand, which he might be. Fronts, dummy offices and cutouts –”

“Yes, yes, Braganza sahib. I know all this.”

“Well, then the rest you can have tomorrow. Usual rendezvous?”

“Yes. Good night then, and sorry for having woken you up.”

“No problem. Always at your service, Shah Sahib. Good night.”

Dara replaced the phone.

His mind went back to the Rana Qudrutullah murder

case mentioned by Braganza, in which Malik Ashraf Ali was suspected of having had a hand. This Rana Qudrutullah was a Member of Parliament who had made vociferous speeches against obscenity and plagiarism directed at the film industry, ending up by forming an anti-obscenity league. Four months ago, while driving along the canal, he had been riddled with bullets by unknown assassins. Dara knew who they were: tribal Niazis on a contract assignment for an anonymous employer using a complicated system of multiple cutouts. The anonymous shadow employing them had been Malik Ashraf Ali.

Seven years of peace, except for a minor interruption, and now fate had taken a hand.

He had, at the time of Malik's last probe on his patrimonial rights through Jagga the upstart, decided to wait for some years before exacting revenge.

Today was seven years since his return from Harvard.

During those years, Dara had closely followed the activities of his adversary who had sought to steal his birth right. None knew of the existence of this adversary. To the world it had been Jagga and Jagga was dead, but Dara knew otherwise. With the mastery of a gifted general, he would go through the man's current dossier compiled by Intelligence experts. In the next few days, Malik Ashraf Ali would be sorted out, and with the sweet taste of revenge in his mouth, Dara could once again distribute alms among the poor that they might pray to Allah on his behalf.

Later, he would see. Perhaps the time was nearing for him to consider a pilgrimage to Mecca and have the

sins of his past life atoned for.

Yes, as soon as Barkata and Braganza put him up to date, he would finalize his plan. Dara was not a trained Intelligence operative. However, his upbringing as a Kanjar, his father's training, his own highly developed animal instincts, and his vast reading of intelligence and military strategists, combined with a knowledge of Islamic history to make him a master of deception and deep cover. His mind worked furiously at this marvelous unraveling of Allah's plan.

In one stroke, he would avenge the insult to his family, pay a last tribute to the memory of his dead friend and at the same time further consolidate his position.

It was two-thirty when the phone rang and Dara answered: "Yes?"

"Gulloo, *Pehelwan-ji!*"

"All set?"

"Yes, *Pehelwan-ji*. Their passports I've got, and left two *seers* of hashish and a revolver in their place."

"Good. You can come back and rest now."

Without relinquishing the receiver, Dara depressed the cradle knobs and dialed Butt, the Deputy Superintendent of Police he had rung earlier to raid the Arabs' rooms.

"Hello!" said the voice at the other end.

"All set, Butt Sahib." He replaced the handset without waiting for a reply.

From the description offered by Kaka, one of the two hoodlums chasing Barney, he had recognized the two Arabs outside the Waldorf as the representatives of Black September in Pakistan, with rooms on the

University Campus complete with telephone, telex, and wireless links. He had had them in his files. Now the police would keep the PLO connection out of his hair for at least a week.

He lit a cigarette and relaxed.

Two pieces of information have upset my equilibrium tonight.

The news of Joe Valletti's death and the intrusion of Malik Ashraf Ali into tonight's affair.

This Malik is a cancer, a blight on Lahore's moral order.

I, Dara, had not harmed Malik, or his family. Yet, with a total lack of scruples, on my return from Harvard, Malik had attempted the Coup d'État on Heera Mandi, trying to steal an orphan's inheritance – to wrest from me my birthright. The murdered man, Rana Qudrutullah, had been a well intentioned man – a good father, husband and son. Such a man was better bought off than killed, his eloquence to be used rather than silenced.

Malik is a disgrace to his family.

Instead of attending classes and bringing distinction to his parents, he had chosen to steal bicycles from Forman Christian College. In England, he had preferred to involve himself in the affairs of leftist revolutionaries – and did he not try to arrange his mother's marriage with Castro, when he visited Cuba?

Granted the Palestinians were Muslim brothers, but they associated with the atheist communists, extorted money from the oil Sheiks, looked down on honest

Flight to Pakistan

Punjabis, and bleated about their woes to a world from which they expected a living.

And they were now stirring up trouble in Afghanistan.

Dara lifted his palms heavenwards – O’ Black Shawled one, whisper in Allah’s ear the name of he who stands for Haq – the right – in this fight – then to him give *Zulfikar* – Allah’s sword – that he may cleanse the sewers of this beautiful piece of earth. Just revenge is your promise to the faithful, O’ Lord among 140,000. The words of a *quwwali* choral hymn hummed in his mind – *Hundreds of thousands of Sala’ams to you, O’ Black shawled one. Sala’ams, in their hundreds of thousands!*

For the fourth time since Barney’s entry that night, he dialed a number. This time it was to dictate a long telegram, with a simple message, the contents of which would mean something else for the recipient in Boston. He ended it with a *make it Express-Immediate please*, and put the phone down.

Thirty minutes later Gulloo arrived.

“I tried to give five hundred to Nuri, but he wouldn’t take it *Pehelwan-ji*. Said to just give you his respects and say he’s always at your service.”

Dara nodded, satisfied.

“Nothing else for now, Gulloo. Except tell each one of our boys, particularly the ones that live in our *gallie*, even the musicians, to sleep, wake, walk, even shit with a gun on them till further orders. Any suspicious characters around the bazaar, I want an immediate

report on. Pick them up quietly, without any Lahori dramatics. Any of them who try to enter the *gallie*, nab them, and take them to Tibbi Police Station for a taste of chillies up their asses. The old routine. Charged with vagrancy. Give the SHO and the staff an extra bonus.”

Gulloo nodded and went out.

Dara dozed with his head on the desk.

Even when asleep, his senses were always attuned to any noise out of the ordinary. It was the opening of the door which brought him instantly awake, the thirty eight in his fist.

Then he relaxed.

It was only Barkata, standing as still as a dead man. Keeping the thirty eight on the dark-visaged enforcer, Dara spoke coldly: “Knock. You could get killed.”

“My mistake, *Pehelwan-ji*. I wanted to wake you up gently.”

Dara lowered the gun to the desk, then smiled.

Outside the sun was coming up, and his eyes widened.

“You’ve been up all night. Sit down and tell me what you’ve learned,” he said to Barkata, his tone gentle.

For an illiterate man, Barkata’s report was detailed, precise, and to the point. It was also very boring, except for one very small bit of news. Within the past twenty-four hours, Malik Ashraf Ali had received a telephone call from Algeria, one from London, and had been visited by Fawwad and Harris, the two Palestinian commandos who lived on the University Campus. The pair who had been seen outside the Waldorf, and were now in Police custody. He was pleased with Barkata’s thoroughness.

Flight to Pakistan

“Okay, Barkata, have breakfast and rest. Send Lala Razaak up to me.”

Barkata nodded and went out.

There was a knock and Razaak entered. Unlike the night before, he was without his Sten-gun.

“Sar!” he stiffened.

“Sit down,” Dara said. “Those two cousins who ran with Mohammed Khan the Dacoit of Dhurnial, what are their names again?”

“The third and fourth sons of my mother’s second cousin are called Allah Dad and Khuda Dad, Sar.”

“Take a taxi for Campbellpur today. Bring both the boys and install them in one of our safe houses. You will not travel together.”

“Correct Sar. It may take two days, however. Last I heard they were in the Kala Chitta Hills, but you never know where the *pulsias* might have hounded the poor lads to.”

He shook his head sadly at the attitude of the police towards his cousins persecuted for high spiritedness. Between them, they had only five murders to account for, all committed to preserve the family honor. The sixteen buses held up on the Federal Highway were an indication of high morale – besides, one fourth of the loot had been meticulously shared between the keepers of the tomb of the local saint and a good number of widows and orphans.

Dara respected them as lads of honor and integrity, besides being crack shots of approved discretion.

“Okay,” he said, “tomorrow evening latest. Take whatever money you need and bill it to the office later.”

Razaak went out without a change in his expression.

A hot bath, shave, *nihari* and *kulchas*, two cups of cardamom laced tea and three hours later, Dara stepped out of his Mercedes in flannels and a gray herringbone tweed. Adjusting his woolen tie, he stepped into The Pak Tea House, occupied an empty table, and ordered tea.

At this time, there were few people. Braganza, the Police Records Officer at Special Branch – domestic counter intelligence – had been as good as his word. Trust an officer of the Punjab Police for that.

Among other details in the Pen-Profile made by the Professor of Psychology who had directed the Psy-War Cell during the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965, it was revealed to Dara that Malik Ashraf usually dropped in at The Pak Tea House to catch the political gossip at this hangout of professional party workers striving for revolution over cups of strong tea.

The professor's Pen-Profile was no different from Dara's own conception of Malik Ashraf, but confirmation from Special Branch was excellent and worth the price.

When Malik Ashraf entered the tea house, Dara was still smiling to himself. He recognized the Barrister immediately from his photographs.

So this was the enemy.

A tall, fair-skinned man in his fifties, clean shaven with a large nose and a paunch that was slightly obscene to the eyes of a scrupulously fit person. His

barrister's black coat and striped morning trousers were well cut.

Just as Malik Ashraf laid his expensive briefcase on a table, Dara went over to him.

"*As-Sala'am Aleikum*," Dara said, adding, *Malik Sahib*, after an infinitesimal, calculated pause. He extended his right hand.

Malik took the hard, dry palm in his slightly moist, soft one. Their eyes met. Dara's were, as usual, expressionless.

Malik's were piercing in their observation.

"*Wa Leikun As-Sala'am*. I'm afraid you have the advantage over me. Have we met before?" Malik replied in English.

Dara continued in English. "Even if we haven't met before, we have now. Are you free?"

Malik sneaked a glance at his watch. "After another thirty minutes, yes."

"Do you drink?"

"As a habit, not this early."

"If you would consider changing this habit for an odd occasion, we could meet in the Gulrang Bar of the Inter-Con. I'll wait there."

Malik nodded and Dara snapped his fingers at a waiter, paid for the tea he had ordered, and walked out.

It was only after Dara had left that Malik reflected on the smoothness of the approach and exit. This cold-eyed man, whom he had recognized immediately from a photograph in his possession, either sought a confrontation or a deal. Hmm. He would soon know.

Forty minutes later, Malik entered the Gulrang, where Dara was waiting for him at the bar. The latter got up and came forward, led Malik to a booth, and snapped his fingers for a waiter.

When they were seated opposite each other, Dara asked, "What would you prefer?"

"Draught beer, please," Malik said. "You still haven't told me your name, sir."

The conversation was conducted in English. There is the successor to Macaulay's Indian who can converse with greater ease in English with his fellow countrymen than in his own language. Then, again, it is the *lingua franca* of men of affairs and business, and of unpleasant topics.

"Sirdar Ali Shah is my name. I live in Heera Mandi."

Another would not have, but Dara certainly did notice the wariness that appeared behind Malik's eyes. He licked the foam off the tumbler and took a sip.

"And you would like to engage my legal services, is that it, Shah Sahib?" The Oxbridge accent was as clipped as Dara's own.

Two could play this game, and I better than a fancy born cunt, Dara thought. "No, I just heard about you and decided to make your acquaintance."

"You have honored me. What have you heard about me?"

"Nothing bad. Mostly good."

"Yes. There will always be people who gossip. It is only by Allah's kindness that I am spared from being the subject of bazaar talk."

"Ah! We must always thank Allah. He is truly Beneficent and Merciful."

Flight to Pakistan

In the brief silence following, they both contemplated the Qualities of the Most High.

It was Malik's nerve which broke first. "How's business?"

"Very good, by the grace of the Almighty."

Another period of silence followed, during which Dara's gray eyes bored into Malik's, who lowered his gaze, cleared his throat, and once again broke the silence. "If I can ever be of any service in my humble capacity, you're welcome Shah Sahib."

"Hmmm. Now that you mention it, maybe you can."

Malik waited, obviously very alert, all his senses on edge. He sat in a position of complete stillness and concentration with his head cocked to one side, probably a courtroom technique that failed to impress Dara.

"Last night an American came to my *dera*. I threw him out."

Malik sat like a watching snake, his hands resting on the table. "And how may I be of help to you in the matter of the American?"

"He said somebody stole his luggage. A suitcase."

"If you threw him out, why then this interest in his luggage?"

This was what Dara had been waiting for.

The way Malik asked his question was the final confirmation of the essential truthfulness of Barney's account. Barney's assailants at the Waldorf were definitely Malik's men as well as the two creeps who had chased the American to Dara's *dera*. The tactic was commendable. If those attackers had succeeded, well and good. If not, they would have had the effect of

driving Barney right into the arms of the other two. But for the timely slow leak in the taxi, the plan would have succeeded.

In the light of all available sources of information, Malik had shadowy leftist connections, and was certainly under contract to the PLO for this operation. Barkata's information revealed a visit from the two PLO men, a phone call from Algeria and one from London. Algeria was a known command center of the PLO, whereas almost every organization of international significance had a link in London. Thus, the two PLO agents outside the Waldorf were personally ensuring the success of the operation. Dara's decision to get them out of the way was wise.

Very cleverly, Dara had as much as told Malik outright that Barney was under his protection. It had been a deliberate move.

"Oh, just thought you might know about it, you being such an influential man, and so well connected. See, he's a foreigner in our country – a guest," Dara said coolly.

This statement constituted a carefully thought out declaration of war by Dara.

"Shah Sahib," Malik responded, "I admire your patriotic sentiments, and sense of hospitality, but I'm afraid I can't help you. Why don't you try the police?"

"No thanks. I thought with your connections in the studio world and with our Arab brethren, you might have heard something."

Malik's ears went red. His armor had been pierced. He gulped down the beer. His voice, however, was still calm, despite a slight hesitation in delivery. "Shah

Flight to Pakistan

Sahib, I don't know what connection a foreigner's suitcase, the Arabs, and studios may have, but I am unable to be of any help to you in your inquiries. I'm a busy man, and if that's all, I beg your leave."

Dara was now very sure of himself.

His opponent was all brains – and that was it. He grinned – his Heera Mandi grin. Cold. Mirthless.

"Stay put, Malik. You fuckin' well know who I am and why I'm here. You can go, but pay the bill first."

Before the Barrister could reply, Dara poured the remnants of his beer into Malik's lap, grinned even more widely into the frightened face, and walked out.

He was confident of the outcome of this affair. Malik might have the suitcase, but he held the only man in the world who could open it and get the gold without blowing it up.

Malik Ashraf gathered the remnants of his dignity as best as he could and eased his gray Corona out of the Intercontinental along the length of the Mall.

The unobtrusive man on an equally inconspicuous Vespa Sprint was no longer waiting at the service road in front of the Administrative Staff College. That meant Dara's black Mercedes would be tailed. Good – the thought pleased Malik. Then he felt the wetness of the beer in his crotch and his mind clouded. Instead of going to the High Courts, he went in another direction. It was imperative that he change his suit – *damned Kanjar*.

Sixteen

Lahore – 1973

Second Day

Dara slid the Mercedes into the parking lot of the Alfalah building, locked it, pocketed the keys, and bought a ticket for it. Whistling tunelessly, he walked towards the elevator with one hand in his pocket. He was unaccompanied, which was not unusual when he had an important caper that demanded his personal attention.

He entered the offices of Alam Import-Export, gave his name to the male receptionist, and waited in the tiny lounge on a chair, idly turning the pages of a well-thumbed English magazine.

Khurshid Alam, proprietor of Alam Import-Export, was on Dara's files, and he was well aware of Dara's hold over him. There was ample evidence to convict the man for the illegal export of bonded labor. Although the Police file listed Khurshid Alam as a suspected associate of Malik Ashraf Ali's, Dara knew it for a fact. Actually, they were so close in their association, that the best way to plant false information in Malik's ear

was through the medium of this Khurshid Alam.

The receptionist returned to the lounge, deferentially led Dara along an inner corridor, and held open the door into Khurshid Alam's spacious, elegant office, furnished in leather upholstery. Khurshid Alam, a small, sharp man with a wizened face and manners of a twittering bird, came from behind his desk with both hands outstretched. His mouth was open in a smile, his eyes shifty and very alert as he greeted Dara.

"Come, come, Shah Sahib. Allah O' Akbar and *As-Sala'am Aleikum* to you. This is a great honor indeed. You should have just walked into the office!"

Dara shook hands, and sat down in a comfortable armchair, with Khurshid perched on the edge of the chair opposite.

"Tea or coffee, Shah Sahib?"

"Coffee, thank you."

Khurshid went back behind his desk and pressed a button. When he was once again seated an office peon opened the door.

"*Ji Sahib?*"

"Unh – Ramzan, coffee, with cream – and make it quick."

The peon shut the door.

Khurshid turned his attention to his guest. "How is business these days, Shah Sahib?"

"Fine, fine, and how about yours?"

"Ah!" he sighed, "same as usual."

"Any trips to Karachi lately?"

Khurshid reacted as though he had been physically pinched, and adjusted the knot of his yellow knitted silk necktie.

“*Ahem!* Karachi, yes. Yes, sir, on occasions, when business so demands.”

“And how was the weather at sea? – Sorry, I forgot you supervise the departure of others, the less fortunate. You don’t take personally to the sea.”

“Yes,” Khurshid said and squirmed.

“And for the Frontier bordering Afghanistan?” Dara continued, “How’s business in Swat? Good land, good girls?” He was referring to Khurshid’s purchase of girls from a poverty stricken region for eventual sale to the jaded harems of oil rich Sheikhs in the Persian Gulf.

“Shah Sahib, you know all about me. I am your humble servant and forever in your debt.”

Yes, lick of your mother’s asshole, Dara thought, eyeing his quarry speculatively, and said, very gently. “Nothing of the sort. Don’t embarrass me” – Dara didn’t appear to be in the least embarrassed – “Friends, we are, friends we were, and friends we shall always be. Friends are, after all, supposed to help one another out of trouble, that’s all.”

“Very right, Shah Sahib. How true and how wise a statement. May the Prophets be praised for friends like you, and Allah has blessed me with a few, but very good friends, like yourself.”

They were interrupted by the arrival of the peon with a tray. He laid two steaming mugs of coffee on the low table in front of them.

“Sugar, Sahib?” he asked Dara.

“One,” and the other put in one spoon of sugar for Dara, two for his employer, stirred the mugs, and left the room. Dara helped himself to a generous lacing of cream, lit a cigarette and sat back.

Flight to Pakistan

“Khurshid Sahib, it is the generosity of your own nature and your fear of Allah which makes you say these kind words.”

“Not at all, Shah-ji, not at all,” he twittered, washing his hands with imaginary soap. “Truth is truth, and will not be hidden.”

“Verily said. Truth has become a scarce commodity these days.”

“How right you are. It is, after all, the fourteenth Islamic century and does not the Koran say it is in this very century the Day of Judgment must come?”

“Yes. And in the fourteenth century, it is said friendship shall be reciprocated by betrayal.”

“Not so, O’Sayyed King, Shah-ji,” protested Khurshid Alam, plainly agitated now. “That’s going too far. Sometimes one never gets a chance to return a favor.”

“For instance?”

Khursid sighed in relief. “For instance, myself, I have not yet been honored with an opportunity of repaying you.”

Dara paused deliberately before speaking. “I might give you the opportunity you thirst for in a few days.”

Khurshid Alam leaned forward.

“By the Grace of Allah the Almighty,” he said in a sugary voice. “That will be a fortuitous day for me. May it dawn soon. May I be informed of the nature of the honor, that I may be well prepared to bear it?”

“Well, I think you had better wait till I’m ready.”

“Come now, I’m a discreet businessman, but very sentimental and tender hearted, particularly towards you. It would do me greater honor than the impending

one if you tell me in advance.”

“Khurshid Sahib, you are such a sincere and sweet friend, that to refuse you anything would equally hurt my feelings. I am hurt and depressed that in my helpless state I cannot oblige you.”

This was the most crucial part of the game Dara was playing. Were Khurshid not to feel he had himself maneuvered information out of Dara, he would doubt the veracity of such knowledge and Dara’s trip would have been in vain – rather failed, as it would backfire on him. For in order that false information may be passed as authentic, it is necessary that such information be drawn out. If the act of drawing it out is easy, then the accuracy of such information comes under doubt. However, Dara had no need to worry on this score. Khurshid Alam’s next words clinched it.

“Ah, Shah Sahib,” he sighed, “I am but a poor man compared to you. In power, wealth and status. Besides, you have a hold over me strong enough to ruin me. Yes!” he sighed again. “How can a child of yours – which I am to you – compel you to trust him? I had hoped to be a friend of yours, as you are to me, but Allah does not wish it. I must resign myself to my kismet.”

Dara looked rather embarrassed and visibly touched.

“Khurshid Sahib, kismet and the will of Allah do not negate man’s free will. Many are the occasions when man has been known to make his own destiny. Let us not forget Iqbal, the Thinker of the East, who gave us the concept of our beloved Pakistan – whose very name means the Land of the Pure.”

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“Yes, our beloved Pakistan, may it live long and survive to rule the world ... may we continue our efforts as patriotic Pakistanis to make it great and strong.”

“You’re a friend and an equal, not a child of mine, although the love I bear you is as strong as a father’s. Please try to understand my obligations.”

“Of course, of course,” Khursid sighed.

With each repetition, the succeeding sigh became louder and tinged with a groan. Coming from an apparently harmless, wizened creature, it was heart breaking. Dara thought it was magnificent. He reached across and laid an arm about Khurshid’s shoulder.

“It breaks my heart to see you so sad, my friend, without myself doing something about it. It’s like this. In a few days, three to four at the most, I shall be coming into a large consignment of gold. I want to land on the Gulf – Dubai, to be exact.”

“Is that all, Shah-ji? This is just routine for your brother. How much – no, I won’t ask you that. But I must say you were very secretive about such a small matter.”

“That is but natural, Khurshid Sahib, when you consider that I shall require a launch to myself.”

Khurshid whistled, then chuckled to himself while shaking his head.

“I must tender my apologies for misjudging you. I should have known that there was a very sound reason which made you hesitate to tell me.”

“Well, man is a puppet of his mistakes, never mind,” philosophized Dara.

After another five minutes of verbal sparring and probing, Dara shook hands and departed, the trail of

false information trimmed to perfection.

Immediately the door to his office shut behind the broad back of the retreating guest, Khurshid Alam went to his desk and dialed a number. Hearing no reply, he tried again. *Damn!* The news he had was hot. His master, Malik Ashraf Ali, would be most interested to hear it. Then he rang two more numbers successively. There was still no reply. Now a little frown of worry creased the already well wrinkled brow of the little man, and he drummed his fingers on the desk. He would have liked to communicate this small but extremely important item of news immediately.

Dara's step was firm as he walked out of the Alfalah towards his Mercedes. The information was planted. It would now serve to precipitate action in the enemy's camp, which had two advantages. Firstly, the initiative would revert to Dara. Secondly, the affair would be tied up faster.

Then Dara stopped dead in his tracks, and stood as still as an intelligent man does at gunpoint. Eight years of his life spun in his mind like the movie projection of a man losing his mind, finally focusing on the sun dappled winter afternoon with the fresh leaves dancing to the wind in the sunlight when he had lost the last vestiges of his youth.

ROXANNA!

She stood waiting at the curb – for a taxi – or her husband? Her profile was turned towards him. Matured and ripened into a poised beauty, yet *Roxanna!*

Dara almost ran to her, as the defenses of years crumbled like the over extended ash of a broodingly smoked cigarette. For the first time in his adult life he

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almost lost control of his iron will. He checked himself and tried to struggle back into his suave shell. The only sign by which he betrayed any inner turbulence was the lighting of a cigarette as he walked back towards the innocence of his boyhood.

Roxanna brushed back a strand of hair from her forehead with the back of her hand. In red silk sari, black tweed coat, plaited hair still reaching halfway down her back, and very light make up, she looked exactly what she was. An emancipated, upper-middle-class girl.

Seventeen

Roxanna sensed somebody at her elbow. She turned to look into the secure world of her girlhood.

He just stood there, smiling into her eyes with a cigarette between his lips. Her eyes widened, and his own searched them and it was just like the beginning of the last time.

In this center of the town with the rush hour at its peak they were in a world of their own which stood still for them.

“Oh Sirdoo! Hello!”

The words were no more than those of a young woman greeting a male acquaintance. But for Sirdar, one word held the world.

Sirdoo!

“Roxanna, it’s a pleasure after all these years. You were always a very pretty girl, and you’ve matured into a beautiful young woman.”

She blushed, almost like a school girl.

“Oh really, Sirdoo! But what’s happened to your nose?”

The gray in his eyes darkened, then cleared. He cursed himself. No, it wouldn’t be like last time. He wouldn’t let her suffer for an outburst. Nor himself.

The gray twinkled now.

“That’s something to tell a girl over a cup of tea. It’s a real blood curdling story.” Then he just looked

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hungrily into her eyes, and she giggled.

“But I’m a working girl now. We’ll split the bill, American style.”

“That’s blackmail.”

“How?”

“Ruining my male chauvinist ego for your women’s lib!”

They laughed.

“Should we move?” Sirdar said.

“Let’s wait for a taxi,” Roxanna countered.

“Taxi be damned. I’ve got a car.”

“Okay.”

She exclaimed when she saw the Mercedes. “You must be rich. Are you in some business?”

He checked the bitter twist in his breast.

“Yes,” he replied almost curtly as he eased the car into the mainstream of traffic, then queried. “Where to – Inter-con?”

“Oh no Sirdoo! Some sweet little place like the Go-Go.”

“Come off it, Roxanna. That’s a kid’s hangout. What’s sweet about it?”

“Use your head, silly. Aren’t kids sweet?”

“If they are, then you’re the biggest kid in Lahore. Kid!”

“Shut up and drive to the Go-Go.”

“The Go-Go it is, ma’am!”

And they laughed again.

Arriving at the Go-Go, they discovered they were the only patrons. They went to a corner table. A waiter flitted by and discreetly placed a menu card before Sirdar, which he slid across to Roxanna.

“Order whatever you want.”

Without bothering to glance at it, she looked up at the hovering waiter.

“Coffee, please, with cream.”

The waiter nodded deferentially, picked up the menu card, and padded towards the counter on silent feet. Sirdar leaned on the table, resting his elbows on it, and asked, “How are your parents, Roxanna?”

“Fine. I don’t live at home though.”

“Really? Where do you live then?”

“I teach Sociology at Kinnaird College and stay in the Professors’ hostel.”

A slow excitement started building in Dara’s heart. “Why don’t you live at home?”

“I had a terrific row and for the first year my people didn’t speak to me. Then Mehmood and Niwaz *bhai*, my brothers, came back from England and patched it up.”

She went on to recount the family fight.

Sirdar’s heart was on his lips. “Then you really don’t intend marrying at all?”

They were treading on thin ice now, and the preliminary banter was over. She looked squarely into his anxious, hungry eyes.

“You should know,” and when she saw the whipped look in his eyes, Roxanna felt petty for the shabby revenge she had unconsciously exacted. Before rage could overcome hurt, she deftly turned the conversation. “Forget matrimony. You haven’t told me about yourself. How did you spoil your nose, although I admit it makes you look ever so romantic and adventurous.”

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She cursed herself again. *Allah!* The more she tried to be the sophisticate the more she made a fool of herself.

Sirdar had lowered his head at her question.

He lit a cigarette while the waiter put two mugs of coffee before them. As Roxanna's well bred hands stirred sugar and cream in the two steaming mugs, Sirdar spoke. He was fighting for control now, and chose his next words very, very carefully.

His tone was gentle. "You asked me about my business earlier – just as we got in the car. I'm still in the family business and you know what it is. I was at Harvard doing my MBA. No, don't feel so pleased. Whatever I may be considered, I'm not a hypocrite. I was studying Business Administration to modernize the family business. My father died while I was in the final semester at Harvard, and I had to come back and take over. And in our business, taking over means by blood and sword, I had to fight for my birthright by methods you can guess at. By very special permission indeed, I was allowed to take my finals at the US Consulate, and then made a quick trip some time later for my viva. A couple of years after, I was trapped by rivals. They lost, but left me this legacy."

He touched his nose with a brief smile.

When their eyes met, Roxanna's were regarding him curiously. She reached out and gently stroked his nose with a finger.

"Is that your world, Sirdoo, winners or losers?"

"What else? I was born into it. All I am doing now is following my destiny."

"How can you be sure about your destiny?"

“Okay, forget it. Let’s not make it like last time.”

They were both silent then, sipping their coffee, through their private, individual thoughts.

Sirdar lit another cigarette, and broke the silence by asking Roxanna about their old classmates, then other banalities till Roxanna looked at her watch.

“Time to go, Sirdoo. I’ve got to catch a class at one forty-five.”

Their eyes met, held.

“So when do we meet again, Roxanna?”

“Should we?”

“Shouldn’t we?”

She tossed back her head. “Of course, why shouldn’t we! Drop in at my hostel around six thirty in the evening tomorrow.”

“No restrictions?”

“Certainly not. We’re all over twenty-one.”

“Are you?”

“You’ll find out tomorrow!”

“What else will I find out, and how?”

“Shut up stupid!”

Then she looked down and her ears felt hot by the intensity of his gaze.

Outside, she refused a lift in his car. “I have to stop home for a few minutes. I’ll get a taxi or a rickshaw.”

Both returned to their separate worlds.

As Dara drove down the main Gulberg Boulevard, he felt exhilarated. Well, who knows, maybe. There’s always a maybe.

Dara gunned the car, and the powerful engine

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surged. He shifted into third, gunned it up to seventy, then gave the engine a breather and let it into fourth. He straightened his hunch over the steering wheel and inserted a cassette.

The desert strains of Reshma's *Shahbaz Qalandar*, the racing of the powerful machine and the meeting with Roxanna had half stoned him. His lips were drawn back over his teeth and he didn't bother to glance in the rear view mirror. If he had, he might have noticed the same Morris taxi behind him which had earlier been in front of the Go-Go at Liberty Market.

At the crossing where Dara was waiting for a red light, he observed a traffic sergeant of the Lahore Police on a Harley Davidson, with another tall, slim man in civvies. The sergeant appeared to be having an argument with the driver of the taxi. Satisfied, he walked back to where the man in civvies was waiting near the motorcycle. The sergeant said something to the tall, slim one, with a long-featured face over the bones of which the skin was stretched noticeably tight. This person darted a quick look at Dara. Then the light changed, and the black Mercedes swung towards Zafar Ali road, with Dara rolling his head in a slow *t'hamal* in time to Reshma's mystical melody. The taxi went straight towards the canal bridge and the beefy, grim faced sergeant with small marble eyes cut his machine behind the big black Mercedes which shot forward to take the crossing. The sergeant leaned low over his bike, and as he gave it full power, the rear passenger tightened his knees around the driver's thighs. The sergeant's eyes were half shut, screwed up against the 65, then 75 mph blast of wind he faced at this speed.

The poplars lining the road seemed to recede and his universe was concentrated on the black blur in front of him, as he gained on it, focused into the rear portion of a black Mercedes with its driver still in the throes of a *t'hamal*.

The sergeant opened his siren and throttle. He gained on his quarry, then slowed as he saw the brake lights of the car glow, and the speed visibly slacken till it braked to a halt on the side of the road. With a flourish, the police officer swung the Harley Davidson in a tight arc and braked under the nose of the car. He activated the side stand of the motorcycle with a cocky flick of his heel, and followed by the tall slim man in plain clothes, approached Dara standing quietly at the pavement.

The cop's eyes bored into Dara's, who just stood still and returned the stare impassively.

"You were speeding. I'd like your driver's license, vehicle registration and insurance."

"I'm sorry, I do realize my error."

"Your papers," the sergeant repeated.

The man in plain clothes suddenly had a small black automatic in his hand. "Hands up! Face the car and rest your hands on the hood."

Dara did as he was told.

The slim man walked towards Dara's rear and stood with his side towards him, the pistol well back and out of grabbing range in his right hand, his left frisking expertly, emerging with the police positive, which he dropped in a pocket.

"You may turn around and put your hands down."

Dara did exactly that.

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The sergeant watched the thin faced man with grudging approval. There was respect in his eyes.

“The speeding was an excuse, Shah Sahib. I’m from the ISI – Inter Services Intelligence – and we’d like to talk to you. Here’s my card,” said the thin-faced man, showing Dara a laminated rectangle.

“All right, Mohammed Hussain. Where do we go?”

Mohammed Hussain now returned the pistol to a shoulder harness.

“We’ll drive in your car and I’ll tell you where to go.”

He turned and shook hands with the sergeant and got in beside Dara.

“Go towards Samanabad *chownk* and I’ll give you further directions from that point. We maintain a safe house there for such meetings.”

Dara slid the car into gear, and as he picked up speed towards Samanabad, his mind worked furiously. The all-powerful and shadowy Inter Services Intelligence of the Defense Ministry would only wish to speak to him in one of two instances. Either Malik had finked about the gold, or else they genuinely needed his help in some affair. If the latter, then it could only serve to profit him. If the former, then this put the entire Barney affair in a different light. And most important of all was the matter of a debt owed to Malik for seven years.

From *chownk* Samanabad onwards, Dara steered the machine under Mohammed Hussain’s direction. The speed with which Mohammed Hussain had drawn a gun from a shoulder holster, and the professional frisking, had impressed him.

Well, he would take what came. Allah in his

Greatness would decide his fate.

They entered the driveway of a house with eight feet high walls and an iron gate of the same height, opened by an obvious guard, and promptly shut behind them as they drove through. Dara turned the car in front of the porch, then reversed and parked alongside another car before Mohammed Hussain could say anything.

The car's dashboard clock showed 1415 hours.

Constructed to the demands of the late fifties, the large villa was a little shabby now with a marked absence of paint on its outside. There had once been a sunken lawn which was now over-run with weeds and knee-high grass.

As they approached the door leading to the hall, Mohammed Hussain motioned for Dara to precede him.

Dara opened the door, looked into the dusty bare hall, then the floor, and then nothing, only a vast expanse of emptiness.

His head felt tired, and it seemed as though at least a dozen little men were having a merry ball on the top of his skull with steel hammers. He tried to open his eyes, but they would not focus. Gray-faced walls, gray-faced people, and gray faces reeled around him swimming like the scattered stills of a movie projection. He shut his eyes, and it was slightly better. He tried to move his arms, but found the exercise impossible. He was too securely tied. With an effort he opened his eyes again, but the gray misty haze that surrounded him refused to go away. Once again he shut his eyes and counted up to one hundred. This time it was almost all right. What

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he saw through pain-racked eyes sent a cold, crawling feeling up his spine.

In the almost bare room, Mohammed Hussain sat on a chair beside the man who had opened the gate. Behind a desk sat Dara's old adversary, confident of the upper hand – Malik Ashraf Ali, in his barrister's morning pants and black coat and large hooked nose.

"Are you awake, Shah Sahib?" Malik's voice was treacly with triumphant delight.

"Can't you see?"

"Ah, anger! Don't lose your temper, Shah Sahib. You owe me for the dry cleaning charges to remove the stains of the Inter-con's draught beer."

"Look, Malik, let's make it short and snappy. What have you brought me here for?"

"Ah now, Shah Sahib. Let's talk of more pleasant things. Like how I managed to have you brought here."

The man is a megalomaniac. Better to lead him on.

"Yes, please go ahead and tell me."

Malik smiled a secretive, amused smile as though enjoying some sort of private joke.

"I know what you're thinking, Shah. That I'm a madman who wants to boast. But you would be wrong of course."

The conversation was conducted in English.

From Mohammed Hussain's expression it was apparent he understood English and could more than likely speak it with a significant degree of fluency. The blanketed, nondescript man in *shalwar kurta* who had opened the gate sat glumly, obviously unable to understand a word of what was being said.

Malik went on. "I want to tell you about myself so

that any delusions you may have concerning your unique business approach as opposed to mine are dispelled. I was practicing the very methods you now follow when you were in short pants. Only better, because I am still not known, whereas you are. So, you see, I am not a rival to your monopoly, but the other way around.”

“Keep talking, you bastard!” Dara said as the other paused.

Malik smiled. “I shall shortly repay your insults. Seven years ago you merely won a battle, not the war. Be patient and let me finish what I was trying to tell you.

“On my return from Lincoln’s Inn, London, I received my licence to practice law. I immediately branched out. I shall leave aside the details, which are, you might say, a professional secret. My present situation is that I control several enterprises, the ownership of which can never be traced to me. For example, your *baradari* exports dancers under contract. I cater to the perversions of the oil rich sheikhs. You get a share of the profits accruing from the earnings of a film star if she happens to be one of your girls. I, however, skim the cream.

“Then there is the Durra Monopoly. Arms used by so many of these terrorists are not Russian made. Do you seriously think that the Soviets would flood the market with Kalashnikovs in such a quantity that they could then be associated with international terrorism? It is our Pathan artists at Durra Adam Khel, by the borders of Afghanistan, who are continuing their hereditary manufacture of small arms, copying every make under the sun to perfection. My clients include Basques, IRA,

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Frelimo and what have you. That, my dear man, is the Durra monopoly.

“When the Russians invade Afghanistan, as they shortly will, it’ll be jackpot. As the fundamentalists of Pakistan encourage the government to obtain the Islamic Bomb with petrodollars, the US will look the other way – the price of blood the Pakistanis will shed in their place. Great fortunes will be made.

“You went to Khurshid Alam with a proposition. You poor fool, what you didn’t know was that Khurshid Alam is just a servant of mine. The minute you left his office, he informed me.”

Minor consolation now, but the fact that Dara’s ploy of planting false information had succeeded did not fail to please him. A reaction he had hoped for, and a reaction he had certainly got – *within hours!*

“Your only edge over me are your contacts, but they can’t help you here.”

A gesture of the hand emphasized Dara’s present impotence. He impassively heard Malik’s voice continuing.

“Do think over another thing. I’m smart enough to get ISI cards, something no forger would dare touch. And that sergeant of police who stopped you – he isn’t a sergeant at all. Just a studio extra dressed as a sergeant. I can conjure police sergeants and intelligence officers at will,” he mocked.

“Now, Shah Sahib, you have five minutes to think over what I’ve said. If you do not ring your boys to hand over that American dung, I shall have to help you change your mind. Unpleasant methods, Shah Sahib,

and reprehensible, for men of education like the two of us, but necessary.”

He smiled, and left the room followed by his two henchmen.

After the door shut behind them, Dara tested his bonds.

It was catgut twine, and as far as he could see, there was no way of getting out of them. The old desk was made of steel. When he looked up, he could see no sky-light.

He shivered.

He thought over what Malik had told him. Added to his own information about the man, he had no doubt that it was true. The Middle East connections had probably picked up the rumor about the gold. Supplying prostitutes might not, but gun running certainly *did* make you a confidante of your clients. Well, maybe this is farewell to all of you – *ROXANNA – Auntie Juliana, give the kid my love.*

SHIT NO!

The door opened and Malik entered, preceded by Mohammed Hussain. The third man was left outside. Malik once again seated himself behind the desk.

“So, Shah Sahib, are you going to hand over the American or not?”

Dara, though past caring about the consequences, yet retained control of himself.

“I’m handing you my prick and a fistful of pubic hairs,” he responded calmly with a cold smile.

For some odd reason, the smile chilled Malik. Then the Barrister mentally reprimanded himself. The man was tied, with a guard, a highly efficient and ruthless

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guard, over him. Moreover, he was a Kanjar – lowest of the low.

Malik smiled back. “You may take over now, Mohammed Hussain.”

“Yes, sir!”

Dara was looking towards Malik, and sensed, but did not see, the blow coming at his face. It was a slap. Back handed, short traveled, and brutal. It exploded on the left side of Dara’s face, just below the cheek bone, and the force of it turned his head the other way. Mohammed Hussain came and stood before him, his sneer fixed on a controlled, vicious mask.

Then it started.

Open handed, biting slaps jerked Dara’s head from side to side and made the room spin. It was about two minutes later that Mohammed Hussain stepped back, rubbing his smarting palms. Malik once again felt a chill when he saw Dara, who retained a cold, confident smile.

“So, Shah Sahib, changed your mind?”

“The answer is still the same.”

Ya Allah! A decade ago he tried to steal my birthright.

Malik motioned to Mohammed Hussain.

This time the henchman nodded, fished out a packet of Wills, and lit one. Dara understood what was coming when his shirt was brutally ripped out from his trousers and drawn up around his neck, exposing his belly.

Mohammed Hussain took a deep puff, and flicked a quarter inch of ash on Dara’s navel. Then, extending his hand, he lightly touched the glowing end of the cigarette on Dara’s naked belly.

The smile did not leave Dara's mouth. The eyes changed, and a light danced in the gray depths.

Malik spoke. "Shah Sahib, this is a sample of stage two. Mohammed Hussain is an expert at his job. Before coming to me, he was a special interrogator for the Intelligence Bureau, and was discharged for excessive brutality. He is the man who broke the East Germans in 1948."

Dara's mind immediately registered the affair Malik referred to.

Following Pakistan's independence in 1947, there had been an attempted penetration by three highly placed Intelligence officials from East Germany using West German passports, followed, a few years later, by a coup attempt known as the 'Pindi Conspiracy, after which the communist party had been banned.

Malik's voice continued with pride. "He specializes in a total of five stages. Believe me, nobody in Mohammed Hussain's experience has even managed to survive stage three without opening his mouth. If you want to add to his experience, please do so. But I advise you as a fellow businessman, that since it is a foregone conclusion that you will talk, why not talk now, and save yourself the pain, and me the heartache."

Dara's short, succinct reply reflected on the Barrister's ancestry.

Then it really started.

The soaring, agonizing pain. A tattoo beat in his brain – *no compromise no talk no compromise no talk*

...

But he had come too far, traveled too long to listen to this voice. There were other voices to listen to.

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For a couple of seconds, it stopped, as Mohammed Hussain paused to thrust a gag in his mouth.

Then it started again.

Again and again.

The glowing cigarette end ground in the soft skin of his hard, muscled belly. The pain tore through his crotch to his very toes. And all along, the pain was accompanied by the gentle, cajoling voice – *talk and it'll spare you further pain.*

He groaned occasionally, and bucked constantly – an involuntary muscular spasm that did not shame him for he recognized it for what it was, and his groans for what they were.

Then he passed out into a peaceful blackness.

Mohammed Hussain took a deep sigh and stepped back, surveying the bloated circles of charred flesh rising over the ribbed belly, and delicately sniffed the stench of his scorched handiwork.

“He’s tough. Tougher than the East Germans and commando officers of the ‘Pindi Conspiracy. But I’ll break him, don’t worry, Sir. Couple of hours and he’ll be fit for stage three.”

Malik got up.

“I didn’t think he would be so tough. For years he’s had other people do his fighting for him. Never thought a Kanjar – in the female racket – would be so hard.”

They both left the room, bolting it from the outside.

Dara finally regained consciousness. The room slowly came into focus through his gasps and pain filled blinks. He was alone. His belly was an inferno of pain, but at least he was alive.

Then he took stock of his situation, and an idea

slowly formed in his brain, took root and grew larger and larger till it engulfed him and he grew desperate with the thought. *He must get back to the dera!*

He guessed what Malik's next move would be.

It was vital that he return to the *dera*. Then he turned his mind to the cord binding his hands and feet. It was catgut. Maybe he could unknot it with his teeth. He bent his head, then straightened up with a grunt as the sweat broke in beads over his forehead. Even this slight movement of the skin over his stomach was almost unbearably painful.

A few seconds, and it felt better.

He took another breath – a deep one, gritted his teeth against the impending ordeal, and bent down. The emasculating blackness came in waves, he fought to control the nausea that rose in him, and kept his head bent. A few seconds later the bubbled patches of skin re-adjusted in other positions, and he went to work with his teeth on his right wrist tied to an arm of the chair. Several minutes and bleeding gums later, the wrist was free.

It was numb, and he flexed it several times, forcing himself through the stinging needle point agony of returning circulation, and repeated the process with the other hand. His Rolex had been left him – Malik was no thief.

The time was 1900 hours.

When he bent down to free his ankles, the pain was so fierce he had another few seconds of blackout, but held on, fearful all the while of a re-entry by Malik or by one of his men. Then his ankles were free and he exulted at the prospect of attacking – somebody,

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something – to vent his tremendous rage.

He squirted his urine into cupped hands and splashed it over the burns, an old Punjabi treatment for preventing infection, and re-tucked his shirt in his trousers, straightened his necktie, and cast his eyes around for a weapon.

There was none.

He would have to create one.

His eyes fell on the naked bulb seven feet above the floor.

Dara looked at it thoughtfully, and made up his mind.

Putting the chair below, he stood on it, reached up and removed the bulb very carefully. Using his jacket to minimize sound, he shattered the glass of the bulb in a single, expert movement, leaving a jagged end. Holding it from the socket in front of him like a knife, he felt more confident. It would have to be the first blow, and very fast.

The middle aged man was bubbling over the *hookah*, ruminating on his past. Jailed for life on a murder charge, he had killed again in prison. Penniless, he had resigned himself to the inevitability of the hangman's knot, until Malik Ashraf Ali had him released and engaged him as a bodyguard.

Malik-ji, you gave me my life back, now it's yours, to use as you wish, in the palm of your hand.

He was jerked from maudlin reminiscences by a strange noise from inside the prisoner's room. It was as though a piece of wood was being thumped on the

inside of the door. He listened carefully, then it dawned on him. The prisoner, he knew, was Khooni Dara, the Heera Mandi Don, reckoned the best and the hardest in the business. Maddened by the rage and pain of his torture, he must be trying desperately to open the door, having dragged himself there still tied to his chair. It never occurred to him to reflect that Dara's hands might not be tied.

From beneath his *kurta*, he had the common sense, though, to draw his 9mm Mauser before going to the door. With one hand on the bolt, he was suddenly overcome with a feeling of shame.

He was, after all, a Chib Rajput from the Mirpur hills, and did not need a 9mm for a tied up, broken Kanjar. Besides, Malik Sahib's orders were to keep him alive till further orders.

The door to the prisoner's room opened outwards in the hall, where the guard now stood.

He confidently eased back the bolt – the door made sudden and violent contact with his face, cracking the nose and staggering him as his blood gushed over him.

Through the tears in his eyes, he vaguely sensed a blur of white.

Then he screamed, as it entered his left eye and twisted. The searing pain brought an animal scream to his lips. As he clapped a hand over the bleeding empty socket that had been his eye, his mind dimly registered animal-like growls. He was simultaneously hit in the crotch and a thumb gouged at his other eye, sending a comet of panic ripping through his nervous system.

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He collapsed and lay there, heels drumming the floor as the hands clawed unbelievably at the empty holes of total blackness.

Dara stood over the fallen Rajput with dispassionate eyes.

He threw away the dripping red light bulb and knelt over the prone body on one knee. The action had taken a lot out of him, but he was not yet finished. Confident that there was no other guard, and that the gate was locked from the inside, it was obvious that any new arrivals would have to announce themselves.

He took the enemy's hands by the wrists and drew them away from over what had been a pair of eyes. There was no resistance, except for a *hai-hai!* The Rajput muttered to himself in Punjabi, in a tone of disbelief.

"I can't see – *Ya Rasul Allah!*"

"No, you can't see because Khooni Dara has taken out both your eyes," cooed Dara, quiet and menacing.

The Rajput screamed – a long, brain chilling shriek – cut off when Dara stuffed a corner of the blanket in his mouth.

The man tried to remove the stuffing, but his hands were restrained by wrists more powerful.

Holding the Rajput's wrists in one hand, Dara searched the enemy's *saluka* waistcoat and came up with a 9mm, and a razor sharp knife. He tied the Rajput's thumbs with the same catgut that had been used on him.

Then he took up the gun, checked that it was cocked with a chambered round, put the safety catch on, and gratefully lit a K-2 from a packet retrieved from

the prone Rajput who was still groaning and drumming his heels and shaking his head from side to side. The urgency of the earlier tattoo had given way to a resigned rhythm of fatalism.

Dara laid the pistol on the ground within easy reach and, resting back against the wall, allowed the blisters to adjust to new positions of pain.

When he was half way through the cigarette, Dara spoke quietly. "You sister fucking son of an unvarnished sow and an aubergine fucking dog, after I've finished this cigarette, I'll stub it where your right eye used to be. I'll do you a favor and leave you your balls to play hop scotch with – I'll just shove your syphilitic cock in your mouth. Then your cock sucking Malik can come and take it out for himself. Think over what's going to happen to you."

While Dara had been in mid-sentence, the prone man had started emitting a gargling sound from within his throat. Dara calmly continued to smoke. There was a desperate urgency in him to return to the *dera*, but he knew the task at hand was equally important. This was to be the final instrument by which to slip under Malik's skin and destroy his will to fight. To garnish a kill with a flair for the dramatic was merely to warn, prevent and pacify.

What he was going to do to Malik's henchman was, of course, a necessary operation. It would contribute towards settling an old account.

His cigarette was nearing its end and the time was 1945 hours.

"Here goes another flute fucker," he said softly to himself, and ground the stub in the empty eye socket,

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then twisted it, hearing the soft hissing with satisfaction.

The Chib Rajput from the Mirpur Hills arched his back like a bow releasing its lethal message before he passed out.

Then Dara went to work with the knife.

Eighteen

Mohammed Hussain flexed his muscles. He would need them for this evening's job. Six months ago he had cased Dara's *gallie* on Malik's orders, and had discovered a weakness in Dara's well organized fortress.

This, Malik had done as a routine for the past few years. Whenever he felt so, once a year on the average, he had Dara's organization brought up to date.

The back of Dara's *dera* was only six feet from the back of Shehzad's *kotha*, the six feet gap being the breadth of a *gallie*. The defenders had looked at the six feet not as an easy jump, but a lane full of passing people – *Khuda da na'an jae* – a whole lane away!

To Mohammed Hussain's practiced eyes, it was just a six feet jump.

He had carefully started cultivating Shehzad's trust with free spending, liberally losing at the card games. As a result, after Kamli, Shehzad's niece, had concluded her dance and song routine, he was often allowed to go up to her room as the favored guest of an accomplished courtesan. On occasions, this privilege was extended to include his friends.

Kamli's room was on the top floor, from where it was one easy jump to the roof of Dara's house.

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Mohammed Hussain did not agree, but Malik insisted that the American was still in Dara's *dera*.

At 1900 hours, with a woolen jacket over his corduroy trousers and polo neck jersey, Mohammed Hussain locked the door to his flat and came down the stairs that led into Gulberg Market Main, hailed a taxi, and got out at Regal *chowk*. From this crossing he walked to Kala Khan's *samosa* and tea shop. Standing at the open counter of the shop, he was half way through his second *samosa* when Ahmed Ali strode up.

Ahmed Ali was that morning's imposter in a police sergeant's uniform, now dressed in an ill-cut brown suit. Between the bottom of his waistcoat and the waist band of his trousers were three visible inches of cotton shirting. The small ends of his shirt collars were turned up at their tips, around a thin necktie, the knot of which had very obviously been tied many moons ago and never untied for fear that the retying would be an impossible operation. If one stood very close to him, one did not require a savage's keen nose to detect the rancid odor of stale curds emitted by his armpits. This was one who clearly disobeyed the Holy Prophet's order for all good Muslims to shave their armpits and perform regular ablutions.

They greeted each other, and Ahmed Ali refused the offer of a *samosa*.

Too keyed up to eat, noted Mohammed Hussain with slight disapproval. He was rather proud of his own ability to stay cool. This was a job, and what was there to worry about when they were adequately

recompensed?

They got out of a taxi at a motor workshop on McLeod Road. This was another of Malik's lucrative enterprises. A place where stolen autos were altered sufficiently to pass inspection. The thirtyish, handsome Kashmiri, had a nondescript Fiat 600 waiting for them.

"Souped up, to your specifications. She'll top a hundred and ten on the open highway. Anything else?"

"Unh-hunh, that'll be all," Mohammed Hussain said and got in beside Ahmed Ali who had already taken the wheel.

As they stopped in front of Shehzad's *Kotha*, Ahmed Ali put the car in gear and left the keys in the ignition for a quick getaway. They entered through the street door into the dancing room, which was typical of contemporary Heera Mandi. Bare painted walls, a white sheet over the thickly woven homespun cotton yarn rug, plastic shaded bulbs and a plastic covered sofa set with 'teddy' legs along one side of the wall.

As they entered, the *naika* said *As-Sala'am Aleikum* in her husky voice, hoarse with age.

Kamli smiled and she nodded her pretty head.

The old harmonium player, his pupils red and dilated with a sizeable dose of hashish, raised his index fingers above his head from where he sat cross legged, and said, *Zahid Badshah-ji*, greeting Mohammed Hussain with the name by which he preferred to be known at this establishment.

Mohammed Hussain reciprocated the gesture with the exclaimed *Allah Badshah bawa-ji!*

At this, all present, hearing the name of Allah chorused *Allah badshah – God the King !*

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The pimp put out to pasture came obsequiously forward and hung the traditional garland of flowers around Ahmed Ali's neck, and pocketing the tip, did the same with Mohammed Hussain. As he was going back to his corner, Mohammed Hussain called out to him and, handing him a hundred rupee note, asked for change. The old man went out and Mohammed Hussain turned a flirtatious glance to Kamli, while the *naika* and the musicians looked on with amused eyes.

The old man came back with a stack of mint crisp rupee notes. During the course of the dance, the girl would coquettishly come close to pick the notes one by one. A handful might be thrown overhead or flung at her feet, whichever way a customer wanted to satisfy his fantasy.

The music started, exploratory at first, then harmonizing with Kamli's voice which picked up the melody of *Pyar jad hoya na'al téré*.

Each time she raised her eyes and smiled, Mohammed Hussain threw one rupee at her feet where she sat cross legged, moving her upper torso gracefully, bringing her artistic breasts into focus, without the slightest hint of lasciviousness.

By the time the song ended, half the stack of notes was gone.

"Would you like me to dance?" Kamli asked Ahmed Ali.

At his nod of assent, she started to tie on her *k'hungroo* dancing bells. The organ swells of the harmonium filled the room and joined the beat of the heart throbbing *tabla*. Kamli started stamping her feet on the floor in time to the music, and Mohammed

Hussain handed the stack of notes to Ahmed Ali, displaying the customary regard for a guest brought to a *Kotha* for an evening's entertainment.

When the song ended and the musical notes floated away, Mohammed Hussain caught Kamli's eye. She led the two upstairs to her room, telling the old man to get tea and a betel-leaf pan, specifying *ilachi-sipari-long* for herself, the traditional throat cleanser for the entertainment profession, and *mitha* or sweet for the guests.

Before they went out of the room, Mohammed Hussain dropped another hundred rupee note which fluttered at the *naika's* feet.

They went up the stairs and along a gallery, entering a well-lit room on the topmost floor. Kamli entered ahead of the two guests, and immediately plugged a heater into an electric outlet, giving the room a cozy glow. It was a well furnished bedroom with a sofa set beside a wall.

Just at that moment Mohammed Hussain glanced at Ahmed Ali.

"Let's just go up to the toilet, shall we?" he suggested, and the other nodded.

Both excused themselves from Kamli, who was settled in an armchair, and went up to the roof. Customarily, in *gallies* where the houses are stuck to each other and the *gallies* are themselves bottle necks with dubious drainage, the only logical location for a lavatory is on the roof, though separate bathrooms may be located on each floor.

It was dark upstairs and they could see the lights of the city from their perch, twinkling in the slight breeze

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from the river Ravi. In a few hours it would be foggy.

Mohammed Hussain cautiously made his way towards the rear of the roof and peered across the four feet high parapet at the roof opposite. The gap was six feet, and he could not see the cobblestones of the *gallie* below. There were apparently no windows on this side of Dara's house, for he could see no light, and the roof, too, was dark. From all around the bazaar, faint strains of music floated up to his perch.

He motioned to Ahmed Ali to step closer.

"Hope your bulk can clear the gap."

"Don't worry," the other reassured with a set face.

Both drew revolvers from their waistbands. The weapons were identical, light, point three-two of Durra make, and ideal for a night's work. Afterwards, they could be ditched without regret. They had been tested for accuracy and their nuances adapted to. Both handguns had sound suppressors screwed to the barrels.

They checked the chambers, snapped them shut, put them back in their waistbands and jumped.

Both landed on the roof opposite on their toes, with feet together and knees bent, going into a low crouch, drawing and fanning their hand guns over the darkened expanse of the rooftop.

Like the French at Dien Bien Phu, Dara had failed to appreciate his neighbor's rooftop as an approach. Like Giap, Mohammed Hussain had appreciated exactly that.

The rooftop was clear.

The surface was unplastered brick, and the minuscule sound of twin thumps had been drowned by the sound of music pervading the bazaar. It was a

clean roof, and its only distinction from others in Heera Mandi was the absence of a lavatory.

They walked softly to the inner edge of the roof, and carefully peered over the parapet into the courtyard. It was vacant, its emptiness glaringly evident under the light from two powerful bulbs. The corridor below them was empty. From the first floor they could hear the sound of cooking, and a woman's voice. Some rooms on all floors showed a light.

Otherwise it was quiet.

Ahmed stayed peering over the parapet into the house, while Mohammed Hussain went to the door of the *mumty*. He tried the door knob, but it was locked. He had his first worry when he discovered it to be a Yale tumbler type, and silently cursed Dara's stint at Harvard. Another would have been content with an iron bolt but not this fancy swine. He had to have imported locks to make it harder for an honest man to earn his living.

Then he grinned to himself, laid the revolver on the ground beside him, went into a kneeling position, and opened a folding knife with curiously shaped blades. He went to work, and after a few careful tries, settled on a particular blade. A few minutes later the door swung open to reveal an unlit landing with stairs going down. He whistled softly, and Ahmed Ali flitted to his side. Guns in fists, pupils dilated, both catfooted down the stairs, Ahmed leading the way.

Dara was as close to desperation as he had ever been. His stomach still burnt, but he did not stop at a

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chemist's, even for a salve to soothe his agony. He was glad to have been able to join the ignition wires of the Mercedes and start it. As he gunned it and weaved in and out of traffic, people scattered. Some waved their fists and shouted curses at him. Fortunately, the primitively equipped and equally corrupt police force of Pakistan was the least of his worries.

Missing carts, tongas, pedestrians and motorists by inches, he thrust his way towards Heera Mandi with a foot jammed on the pedal. As he drove, he forced his mind to concentrate on the dense traffic ahead of him while expertly weaving the broad black snout.

As he swung into main Heera Mandi from the Lahore Fort entrance, his hand was on the horn. The sight of his car and the sound of the horn worked like a police siren as people made way.

He entered the *gallie* with the horn beating the air.

It was 2000 hours when he braked outside the gate, and, leaving the engine running, sprang out and entered the *dera* through the gate held open by Ghani.

Ghani looked anxious.

"All OK, *Pehelwan-ji*?"

His eyes narrowed on seeing Dara's face.

Ignoring the question, Dara asked, "How's the *gora*?"

Ghani leered. "Half killing himself in Perveen's crotch!!"

Lala Razzak was in the room that looked out into the street and the courtyard.

It meant he had executed his mission earlier than expected.

Gulloo emerged from an inner room.

“Lala!” ordered Dara crisply. “Put a silencer on your Sten. Anything fishy, shoot. Gulloo, Ghani, you too. Give me a silencer and a gun and follow me.”

Within seconds Gulloo and Ghani expertly screwed silencers over the muzzles of their guns, and Dara was handed a silenced revolver by Razzak.

Dara leading, flanked by Ghani and Gulloo, they mounted the stairs. They had asked no questions, and all three muzzles were pointing skywards to prevent an accidental shot from either being fired and alerting the enemy, or else hitting one of them. Dara’s gun, being in the lead, pointed forward and towards the head of the stairs.

They turned from the stairs into the corridor and went to Barney’s room.

Dara knocked and waited anxiously.

There was no reply and he put an ear to the door. The faint sounds of squeaking bed springs, a soft grunt of animal pleasure and a sigh of ease came to his ears. He was reassured and grinned to himself. The American was not only alive and vigorous but in very good arms. He was just turning to go back when he heard Gulloo’s hammer cocked and his voice, not very loud.

“Who’s there?”

A series of flickering fast actions went into simultaneous projection.

Dara saw Ghani and Gulloo from the corner of his eye, facing the entrance to the stairwell, just as an angry bee zipped through his hair and smacked in the wall behind him, showering chips of plaster on his head.

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He completed a turn and fired two rapid shots at the pair of wraiths that seemed to be suspended in the entrance of the stairwell.

Ghani and Gulloo's guns plopped.

One of the wraiths fell into the throes of a weird dance, then pirouetted down.

The other vanished.

With Gulloo leading and Ghani in the center, all three dashed towards the entrance to the stairwell, behind the thump of retreating footsteps mounting the stairs. Gulloo pounded up the steps, followed by Ghani and Dara who paused to pump a bullet each into the prone body. Dara burst onto the roof just in time to see Gulloo leap the gap between Shehzad's and their *kotha*. As Ghani and Dara followed, they heard a girl scream from within Shehzad's *kotha* while they were in midair.

Landing on the opposite rooftop on both feet, Dara paused for a second to clear the blackness which rose before his eyes. His raw burns had been jarred with the shock of landing, and in the pause Ghani again took the lead.

Dara followed him down the stairs as fast as his searing belly would permit. On the floor down below he saw an open door with light and Ghani's voice streaming out of it. He went towards it and called out to prevent being shot by mistake, and entered the room to find Ghani bent over Kamli.

She was prostrate and her mouth was bleeding.

Mai Rasoolan, the *naika*, was bent over her.

There were footsteps outside and Shehzad and Gulloo came in.

Shehzad was in his early forties, but looked very well preserved. He was known to prefer virile male company.

He looked terrified as Gulloo brought him in by the scruff of the neck.

In spite of the cold, the usually svelte Shehzad was sweating and seemed about to faint. Gulloo gave him a hard shove, which sent him sprawling at Dara's feet.

Shehzad clutched at Dara's feet and blubbered.

"None of my fault, O' Emperor and protector of the weak. The sister fucker deceived us, we who are the dogs of your courtyard and feed on the scraps from your table."

Gulloo kicked him in the buttocks.

"Shut your barking, bitch."

Ghani added another kick on the luscious, carefully nurtured buttocks, Shehzad's pride and joy.

"Don't soil the *pehelwan's* feet with your semen laden hands, cocksucker. Rise!"

Shehzad rose shakily to his feet and stood looking down.

"The niece fucker got in his mother's cunt and ran off. I couldn't shoot at his souped-up Fiat in the street," reported Gulloo.

"Good," commented Dara, and slapped Shehzad in the face – not the full hand, just the four fingers to sting and shame.

"If you can't satisfy me as to how and why your house was used for this insult to my *dera*, I'll have your entire family of faggots hacked to pieces and fed to the crocodiles in the Ravi. Your house will be burned to the ground."

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The tone was conversational.

Its effect was not.

Mai Rasoolan, standing behind Dara, started sobbing.

Without turning around Dara said in a tone of mild annoyance:

“Stop play-acting and shut your mouth woman, or I’ll have your tongue cut out and shoved up your cunt.”

The sobbing stopped.

Dara seated himself on one of the armchairs and instructed: “Gulloo, go back via the roof and guard the guest. Ghani, light a cigarette and hand it to me, and you, son of a cock sucking dog, start barking.”

Shehzad started talking desperately fast, licking his lips from where he sat on the carpet at Dara’s feet, while Kamli, now conscious, was being ministered to by Rasoolan.

“*Huzoor*,” trembled Shehzad, “this man betrayed us. Six months ago he started visiting our *kotha*. As with all regular customers, I had him followed. His real name is Mohammed Hussain and not Zahid, as he told us, and he is an ex-*Sukwaerty wala*. He lives in Gulberg Market in one of those flats above the shops. I picked up a rumor that he might not really be discharged, and then another had it that he worked in the stolen car racket for some *pehelwan* who was not named. O’ Presence, following our way, I let him think we didn’t know about him, for is not the comfort of a customer our first concern till he proves otherwise? Besides, till this evening, begging your pardon, merciful one, he was a good customer, and played cards with me, and usually lost. I used to let him take Kamli to a movie, or a

shopping trip – of course with Rasoolan in attendance for the sake of propriety. Whenever he came he spent good money, and after the song and dance *mujra* routine, we let him go up to Kamli's room.

"This evening, owner of diamonds and pearl-like government, he brought a friend. They heard one song, saw a dance, and went up, ordering tea and pan. Just as they entered Kamli's room, both the mother-fuckers say they want to pee, and go up to the lavatory on the roof. When they took more time than was necessary, Kamli went up, looked around, and then saw the pair of them on the roof of your *dera*, fiddling with your *munty* door. She ran down to tell me. Sheeda and Meeda, my two lion-like brothers, were out, otherwise I would have made my beloved *Pehelwan* a present of two bodies. You know I'm not the fighting sort. I'm a man of peace, my sainted one."

"Yes, the *Pehelwan* knows what you are. Get along with your story."

"Lion-like brothers indeed," Ghani sneered, about the two enforcers who were his cousins.

Shehzad swallowed, nodded, and continued.

"Well, I swear by all the prophets and Almighty Allah that I sent Rakha, my *tabalchi*, to inform your *dera*. He must have done so – you can ask your men at the *dera*, O' supreme governments. Then some time later I heard Kamli scream. I was going up to check when this Zahid – I mean Mohammed Hussain – came down running with a pistol in his hand. I ducked beneath the stairs, and he ran past me into the street. Then Gulloo *badshah-ji* – what a magnificent man ..." his eyes fluttered modestly, "came running with a pistol in his

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hand. Gulloo-ji ran behind the bitch till the street door, looked out, and came back inside. I heard a car start and move off. It must have been the bastard without a father in all thirty-six districts who has brought this shame on my house, may he roast in hell, and his soul be never saved.

“Then Gulloo-ji the King, being a king in his own right, though much smaller than you, slapped me and caught me by the neck, and now I am at your mercy, O’ King of Maharajahs, and my miserable little existence in your merciful hands.”

“All right,” said Dara generously, “I accept your story so far.”

It was evident what his neighbor told was the truth. Dara now turned his attention elsewhere.

Kamli was propped up against a big pillow with a quilt over her, the bleeding in her mouth stemmed by a *dopatta* veil.

“How do you feel, girl?” Dara asked her.

“Better already, *Pehelwan-ji*.”

“Tell me what happened.”

“After I told *mama’an-ji*,” referring to Shehzad, her maternal uncle, “what I saw, I came back up to my room. I heard footsteps and saw Zahid coming down the stairs with a gun in his hand. I knew he wouldn’t suspect me, so I went up close and then grabbed his wrist and screamed. He hit me in the mouth with his fist, and that’s all. When I came to, I found a tooth broken.”

Dara had no reason to doubt her story either.

A plucky girl with a tomboyish childhood, she had matured well in her profession. She would always be

loyal to her own, and within a few years, might even be considered for management of one of his houses.

"I'm sorry, Kamli, but don't worry. I'll get your tooth fixed even if I have to send you to Europe. That's a promise," he concluded patting her cheek, and left.

She was mollified now. Dara's word was good. If he said he would get her tooth fixed, her tooth would be fixed, even if it entailed a dentist losing his in the process. Her mind filled with exciting visions of all that she had seen of London, Paris and Geneva from movies, TV and magazine pictures. She hoped – no she was sure – no Pakistani dentist was capable of fixing her tooth.

Dara went out the front way and walked back to his *dera*, flanked by Ghani.

The bazaar people respectfully sala'amed, while outsiders gave him varying looks.

He went straight up to Barney's room.

Barney and Perveen were both in their quilts, and Dara briefly recounted the abortive attack which was clearly an attempted abduction. Then he went out, and Ghani led him to the same room where Tata and Kaka, the two hoods who had been chasing Barney, had been interrogated.

Ahmed Ali's body was stretched out on the *charpai* bed. Dara recognized the face of the sergeant who was not a sergeant but a studio extra, who had stopped him earlier that morning. Dara's and Ghani's *coups de grâce* had made a mess of the body. However, it had been a tactical necessity. For, while they continued chasing the other intruder, what if he had still had life in him, and caused mischief at their rear? In the dark, it

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was not possible to know whether he was dead, fatally wounded, or just grazed. And in the heat of the chase, they could have ill afforded one of their number to stay behind and guard him.

The ice cream factory Dara owned would come in handy now.

“Get our ice cream delivery van from the factory. Chop up the body to eliminate chances of identification, put it in the van, and feed the bits to the crocodiles in the Ravi. If he had any family, forty days hence send them compensation.”

Ghani nodded.

The *Pehelwan*'s decisions were as just and wise as practical.

The Happy Mart truck, favorite of middle class suburban kids, would be ideal cover.

“I'm going up to my room, Ghani. Send me some food – *siri payae* from the bazaar – and then call a conference of the *pehelwans* who owe allegiance to us. I want them here within two hours. Call in more muscle. Three boys on the roof with silenced Stens and plenty of spare magazines. If they sleep during the night, fry their balls and serve them to me for breakfast. Gulloo and another boy are to stay outside the *gora*'s room till I give the order – personally. Tell Barkata to relieve Razzak, who is to come up to me immediately. Send someone to our doctor for the best salve for burns. Is all this clear?”

“Yes, *Pehelwan-ji*.”

“Repeat the instructions!”

He did so, perfectly, then said: “Here's a telegram for you, *Pehelwan-ji*.”

Dara knew this must be Don Valletti's reply to his inquiry two days ago.

Back in his bedroom, he was pleased to see that a servant had a wood fire blazing in the hearth. He skimmed the contents of the telegram rapidly. Then, to be sure, he painstakingly decoded it. Yes, Don Valletti's reply left him in no doubt. The affair was delicate. To conclude it successfully demanded discretion. So be it. He ran a lukewarm bath and felt better.

Opening a cupboard, he took a Police Positive from its packing of silica gel, wiped it with a dry cloth, spun the cylinder, checked the action and sighted along the barrel, which had had the foresight filed off for a fast and unrestricted draw. Then he loaded it, dropping it in the pocket of the Chitrali *farghal* he used as a robe. He settled in the leather upholstered armchair by the fire to go through the contents of the telegram he had read earlier.

This time his expression became even more thoughtful.

He went through it a third time, committing the contents to memory, then burnt it. As the flames danced in the crystal ashtray on the coffee table, his face seemed to be carved in stone.

There was a knock on the door.

"Yes?"

"Me, *Pehelwan-ji*."

"Come in."

It was one of the house servants, with the medicine.

After he left, Dara went through the lonely agony of applying the balm. During the process, Razzak knocked but Dara told him to wait.

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After he had completed the operation, he permitted Razzak to enter.

He came in, mentally and physically stiffening.

The *cha'achi* was a soldier to the bone. He needed the emotional security provided by a commanding officer. His CO's tribe or profession was immaterial. It was enough that he deserve his command by dint of merit, and not ball sucking. It was good that he did not stamp his heel and come to 'shun, for if he had, this CO would not have known what to do. Razzak loved his CO.

He had no desire to embarrass him.

Now Razzak sat on a chair indicated by Dara, a quiet and watchful part of the background, till one noticed his eyes.

Dark brown eyes.

They were the eyes of a dead man, and shocked those who happened to look into them. To a knowing man they were a killer's eyes. Razzak retained his Sten beneath the blanket. It was his substitute for the two stripes of a *naik* he used to wear with fierce pride.

"My cousins from Kala-Chitta are here, sar, stashed in one of our Gowalmandi safe houses," he reported.

"Good!" Dara said.

There was an almost imperceptible change in Razzak's expression.

Dara gave him detailed instructions, and at the end asked, "Any doubts?"

"No, sar. I'll repeat what you ordered except for the details of Mohammed Hussain's house which are simple. For the rest, I go to his flat, wait with my silencer on the Sten. When he comes in, I give him two

full magazines, all of 36 rounds, one horizontal stitch followed by a vertical. All thirty-six rounds to mark every part of his body. For transport, I'm on my own. One of my cousins I take as back-up."

"That's right. Now get moving."

"Right sir. Two points. You know I don't need to, but for a recce it wouldn't be bad if I took the second lad along. It'll help him to understand our operations in Lahore."

Dara agreed and smiled inwardly at Razzak's delicately expressed point.

He sensed the soldier's need to impress his country cousins.

"Second point?"

"Ghani would like to talk to you."

"Tell him to come up after I've eaten."

Razzak went out and Bashiran came in with a steaming tray of *siri-payae*, accompanied by *roghni na'an*.

His heart warmed.

She kept the household running like clockwork, and a woman's presence was necessary if it was not to degenerate into a high-class hotel.

She laid the tray on the table before him and sat down to watch him eat.

Throughout the meal neither spoke, each content to get a personal pleasure in a very personal, private way.

Dara, by nourishing his famished body under a maternal gaze, and Bashiran, by watching her man's spawn and his living souvenir eat.

To Dara, she would always be a part of old Kala Warris. S'a'aka was still spry at his kiosk, but Jo-jo had

died his natural death six months after Dara's gun battle with Jagga. He had been buried like a member of the family. Now Barkata, Jo-jo's nephew, continued in Dara's employ.

Dara had displayed proper respect for old values while meeting the demands of a changing world. For all this, he had received nods of appreciation from across the subcontinent.

After he finished the meal, Bashiran took the tray and went out.

A few minutes later he let Ghani in.

In a concise summary of straight monologue, Ghani confirmed the information in the Special Branch file.

Only with information from all corners and sources would Dara strike.

Now the Barrister would feel the bite of a Kanjar.

Consulting the Special Branch file, he dialed various numbers.

The fourth responded.

"Malik Ashraf Ali."

Dara spoke in Lahori, for the full blast of intimidation to penetrate through the Barrister's sheen of courtroom polish.

"Malik, this is Khooni Dara, speaking from my *dera* in Heera Mandi. Your sergeant of police has four bullets in his corpse, your guard in Samanabad is worth seeing. Your precious Mohammed Hussain is on the run. You put one finger up my ass seven years ago, and another yesterday, without measuring your own ass to be sure it could take an arm. However, I'm not going to just shove my arm up your ass and open all

fingers wide. I'm going to wipe you off the face of the earth."

Without waiting for a reply, he put the receiver down and crawled beneath his quilt to get as much rest as he could before his *pehelwans* came for the conference. He could almost taste the anticipation of revenge on his papillary glands.

Shortly after receiving the call, a badly shaken Malik Ashraf Ali was at the quiet house in Samanabad. The sight of his bodyguard caused his eyes to bulge in their sockets. His throat gagged, and he was seized by a violent tremor in his body. Then the bile rose up from his stomach, and he sat on the edge of the run-down lawn till he had vomited his guts out. Even after they emptied, his stomach continued retching in uncontrolled spasms. Still trembling, he half ran from the place. The guard was dead, and there was nothing he could do about it. Essentially, he was one of those men who rely absolutely on their brains, and while ordering violent and cold blooded acts, detest all forms of physical violence unless they are performed on others in a state of helplessness. He firmly believed in the might of the pen over the sword, and cunning over intelligence. He would have made an excellent politician.

Mohammed Hussain gunned the souped up Fiat through the Heera Mandi traffic. As an elite, clandestine operator for the Pakistan government, no operation of

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his had backfired. For his private employer, this was the first botched up mission. It was just as they taught at the Kuldonga Farm Intelligence School in Murree. You can make the best of plans, but it is always the unpredictability of human nature that upsets them. If you lost control of an operation, it was sunk.

Defeat had the taste of stale cigarettes, he discovered over the coldness of fear in the hollow of his gut.

Malik had taken on a demon.

Only a few hours ago Dara had been securely tied to a chair, bound hand and foot in post stage two condition. The Rajput guard must have let him out for a bribe. Fuckin' Chib! That was it! Although he was loyal and tested, you could never tell with these criminal types from the scrub-strewn foothills of Kashmir. When Malik had expressed his decision to hire him as a personal valet cum bodyguard, Mohammed Hussain had objected, preferring to recommend an ISI veteran of black operations in Kashmir and elsewhere. However, Malik had overridden the objections.

Now the fat was in the fire.

From the beginning, he and Malik had appreciated that the strength of their operations for the next two years lay in a religious adherence to anonymity. If all went well, then perhaps after two years time they might challenge Dara directly once again. When they hit Dara and his mainline *Peheiwans*, they would do it in one night, using strike teams of ex-commandos led by old ISI hands. The gold caper was an intrusion, which could have been handled differently ... now, however, it was too late.

Mohammed Hussain fully realized the awesome power of the retribitional apparatus Dara would bring into play.

It was time to cut and run. There would be opportunities in plenty for him, he had no worries on that score. The Gulf Sheiks, SAVAK, Somalia, or any of a score of such agencies in one of the emergent nations whose despotic rulers feared their own people more than any foreigners – or Libya. Yes, he would slip out to Libya. An artist with his talents was sure to be well received there. That was it – Libya!

There was no pursuit by the Kanjars that he could see in the rear view mirror, and he was thankful for that at least.

Amin Butt's workshop was still open, and Butt himself was sitting inside his well heated office.

"Butt, ditch the car. The *phudda's* misfired!"

"What happened?" Worry and curiosity mingled in the interrogative lift of Butt's brow.

"Don't ask me, do as I tell you," Mohammed Hussain said, and walked out.

After some distance he caught a motor rickshaw for Malik's residence to make a report and receive his share of Malik's displeasure.

He missed Malik by a full five minutes.

Continuing in the same rickshaw, he dropped off at Gulberg market, and entered the dining hall of Zonobi's. The leisurely dinner and green tea, he consumed on the theory that in the immediately precarious future a good meal was not guaranteed. It took him a whole forty minutes to consume. On reflection, he was glad now that he had missed Malik.

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He felt unsure of the barrister's reaction, for this was a person without conventional scruples and with no experience of aborted clandestine operations that involved violence. In the past, Malik was known to have punished failure with death, administered by Mohammed Hussain himself.

He was still undecided whether to report to Malik before vanishing, or just disappear now, when he opened the door to his apartment.

Mohammed Hussain stopped dead in his tracks.

His mouth opened to speak, and the first silenced burst went through it. It was grotesque, as though he had opened his mouth merely to receive bullets, and he fell backwards – half in and half out of the doorway. Razzak did not get up from the straight backed chair. He spaced his succeeding bursts of five rounds each, stitching the body exactly as he had been ordered.

Putting in a fresh magazine, and pocketing the spares, he looked out into the corridor with the weapon beneath his blanket. It had been silent work, and in the bitter cold months of the Punjab winter nobody is anxious to leave a warm room for a corridor.

It was empty.

He jumped agilely over the mangled remains of Mohammed Hussain and went down the stairs with a light step of satisfaction. He came from generations of mercenary soldiers who killed efficiently for officers they valued.

The light knock woke Dara, and his hand instinctively curled around the cold butt of the thirty eight beneath his pillow.

“Yes?”

“The *Pehelwans* are waiting for you, *Pehelwan-ji*.”

“Are they being looked after?”

“Yes, *Pehelwan-ji*. Two bottles of Chivas Regal.”

“Right, I’m coming.”

Dara got out of bed, and dressed in a white *shalwar*, bosky *kurta*, and warm flannel lined slippers. He shrugged into his *farghal* with the revolver in one pocket and went downstairs to the *baithak*, or drawing room. It was tastefully furnished with wall to wall Persian carpeting and velvet upholstered furniture in contemporary western style. The light bulbs were softly shaded, with the walls and ceiling done up in cream colored emulsion. The paintings were originals by Pakistanis like Sadequain and Chughtai, selected with care by Dara. At one end of the room was a large TV set. As he entered, all four men rose from their seats.

They were an odd mixture.

Nuri, from Shah di Khui, a village next to the New University campus on the banks of the canal. He was a tall young Gujjar, from the tribe of milk sellers, with heavy lidded eyes over a flourishing moustache.

Waheed Dar, alias W’heeda, from Garhi Shahu, who, despite his slight paunch, looked like the ex-national weight lifter he was. The fair Kashmiri was not tall, but very powerfully built.

Ghulam Mohiuddin, alias P’hola Teep Ta’ap – the Naïve Toff – was a tall, slim, greasily elegant man, as always dressed to the height of fashion in expensive

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silk *shalwar kurta* and gold embroidered shoes. He owed his nickname to his fastidiousness in dress. The careful smoothness of his wheatish complexion was maintained by expert barbering and lent a slightly effeminate air to an otherwise vigorously masculine personality. In ruthlessness, he stood second only to Dara. P'hola Teep Ta'ap's territory was Delhi, Taxali and Mochi Gates of the old city.

Shahbaz Butt, alias Gata, or even Shabaza Gata. Translated into English, it means Shahbaz the Neck. He was an ex-wrestler in his fifties with a huge belly, a cauliflower ear and reputedly the strongest neck in the Punjab. Even now, it was pure corded brutality.

These, then, were Dara's arms, and their obligation to Dara lay in his handling of their protection and planning while laundering their earnings.

They believed him to be a genius.

The operations of these four *pehelwans* were in no way specialized. Each, in his own territory, was a Don of all illegal activities, and before Dara had taken them under his wing, they were just feuding factions. By his intellect and far-sightedness, Dara had wielded them into well-knit machines organized on modern lines.

He returned their greetings and bade them be seated with a graceful gesture. The open bottles of Chivas Regal were laid on the coffee table with a large platter of chicken *tikka*, *dahi* chutney and tomato ketchup, enough to subvert the loyalty of an American submariner. Ghani attended to the guests, who were already munching and sipping.

The only one of them who was in western clothes was Waheed Dar. The others were in *shalwar kurtas*

under very expensive cashmere *pashminas* which they had discarded on the backs of the chairs due to the warmth from two large gas heaters.

After the traditional banalities of inquiring about the welfare of their families, Dara spoke in a measured, matter of fact tone for a full ten minutes. His audience looked grave, all except P'hola Teep Ta'ap, whose expression was wolfish at the prospect of action. At the end of the briefing, Dara paused for a gulp from his glass, and lit a cigarette.

"All right, now repeat your missions. Waheed –?"

"I rub out Amin Butt and burn his workshop to the ground. Down to the cleaning rags. No shooting: knife-work."

"Good. Shahbaz –?"

"Good Luck Studios destroyed. It's to be a WAPDA short circuit. We'll aid it by liberal doses of gasoline."

"Yes. P'hola –?"

"This Khurshid Alam. He gets both arms and legs broken. Compound fracture, and his nose cut off – each scrap of paper in his Alfalah office to be burnt to ashes."

"Huh! Nuri –?"

The young Gujjar cleared his throat and stroked his moustache. A totally illiterate rural gangster, he always felt a little overawed in the presence of Dara. He spoke in his gruff voice.

"Me, I kidnap Khwaja Iftikhar Sajjad, owner of Good Luck Studios and the English movie magazine, lock him up in my *dera* at Shah di Khui and ... get him bugged?"

"No, you don't get him bugged," cut in Dara firmly.

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The Gujjar looked hurt. He was just trying to express his love and loyalty. Besides, what was the use of kidnapping an enemy and just wasting food on him?

But then Dara *Pehelwan* was a *wilayat* pass. His arguments were many and his arms very long. If he was not to bugged the enemy, then it was for a reason. He would obey orders, for before he had acquired this special relationship with the *Pehelwan*, what was he but a rural bandit? However, he was compelled to ask the next question. After all, sometimes Dara *Pehelwan* was receptive to new ideas.

“Then you’ll let me cut his balls off?”

“No, nothing of the sort,” said Dara firmly.

Touched by Nuri’s crestfallen look he conceded. “Okay, you can rip off his pubic hairs.”

There was a suppressed smile from Teep Ta’ap, but Nuri’s face was complacent. The *Pehelwan* did not turn away his suggestions in the presence of others.

“That’s all, gentlemen. Now get cracking, and give me a ring when you’re through.”

Dara went back to his room.

It was twenty-four hours since he had properly rested. With his lacerated stomach, he was feeling the strain, but knew he would get no rest for the next twenty-four hours – perhaps even longer. From his night table he extracted a couple of Aura tablets and swallowed them. Then he snuggled under the velvet quilt with Liddel Hart’s *Why don’t We Learn from History?*

Sometime later he glanced at the bedside table which showed 02:00 hours. He tuned into a station transmitting mountain beats of some central Asian

culture. He did not understand one word of the language, but enjoyed the rhythm.

Now Dara had only to wait for further developments. He had put his well oiled and tested machine into operation. The results, he was sure, would be positive.

There was a knock on the door and Razzak entered to make his report. After he had concluded, Dara said.

“Tell the accountant I authorized a bonus of ten thousand for tonight’s job. Now take your two cousins to Gulberg.”

He gave the address of Malik’s mansion.

“I want Malik Ashraf Ali under constant surveillance. Are your cousins’ arms licensed?”

“Yes, sar, the minute I brought them to town. Two point three-tuos.”

Dara’s lawyer always had a few valid arms licenses, with blanks for names, for use in an emergency. The actual holder of the license would be a front man and the enforcer’s name would be added as a carrier. After use, both barrels and firing pins would be changed.

Although Dara had nothing to worry about from the dilapidated eyewash of the police laboratory malfunctioning in the Civil Secretariat, he was a man of methodical battle drills.

“Okay. Issue them those little Japanese wireless sets, and you function as control, with a phone beside you. When I give the word, Malik is to be rubbed out. How long will your cousins take to learn the use of the sets?”

The *Cha’achi*’s back straightened imperceptibly.

“No more than two minutes. They’re both army, sar. One of them was an infantry signaler.”

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“That’s all. You’ve put the cousins into motion, get some rest.”

After Razzak gently shut the door behind him, Dara picked up the telephone and dialed.

“Malik Ashraf Ali.”

Dara switched over to Lahori.

“Liked what you saw of your bodyguard? Take a look at Mohammed Hussain. His body’s in his apartment,” and immediately put down the phone.

He smiled gently to himself and picked up Liddel Hart.

It was six in the morning before he received the last confirmatory call. It was Nuri, phoning from the University campus, where the phone nearest his village was located.

All the night’s operations had gone with clockwork efficiency.

Dar reflected wryly that the Punjabi was a highly efficient operator once he put his mind to a job. *Ask the British*. The stage was now set for a last phone call.

He dialed a number.

No response.

He dialed another number.

No response.

Another.

“Malik Ashraf Ali?” Dara said softly

“Khooni Dara! Listen to me, listen Shah Sahib. Listen hard. You’ve ruined all my operations. Okay. You still don’t get the gold. Kill me, and the gold dies with me. Let me live and you still won’t get the gold. I swear you won’t.”

Dara laughed gently at the man’s hysteria.

“Come now, let us reason together. I don’t want to kill you – am I a killer? You tried to kill me – starting seven years ago. Did I seek revenge? No!

“This time again, your hired men came to my *dera* – then you had me kidnapped. I’m just a businessman trying to earn my bread and butter in the only way he knows how. Anyway, we are both alive, and may thus negotiate like civilized men. I have, of course, ruined you, that I admit with pride. Your stolen car business is finished, Khurshid Alam is through, and Khwaja of Good Luck Studios, your financial partner, is in my hands. Neither the influence of his brother – the provincial governor who was in power for a day, nor the clout of his magazine are going to save him. He knows it, and so do you. I’ll get you killed by your own people if you continue to be difficult. Once I get word to that former governor that you’re the reason his brother is my prisoner, he’ll have you butchered. With Khurshid Alam finished, your Karachi connection is squashed. You never *were* more than a petty broker between the Arabs and the Durra Arms Chain, and that too only because of your pinko flirtations. The PLO needed a rag tag second hand crook like you. They are much more mature now than they were when you were in England. I think they’ll prefer to do business with me. Direct, not as a broker. These people don’t like failures, and right now you’re an embarrassment to someone’s judgment somewhere. *I did not commit aggression.* You and your greed started it. Seven years, isn’t it? So give it to me straight. Do we make a deal or not?”

“Yes ... what do I get out of it?”

The voice, even through the anonymity of a phone

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line, came across tired.

“Your life, and a hundred thousand rupees – non-traceable and tax free.”

There was silence for a few seconds.

Dara waited, supremely confident.

“Okay. Where and when?”

After fixing the rendezvous and method of operation, Dara hung up the phone. Razzak once again entered to report the surveillance was in place. The subject was holed up in his mansion and was likely to remain there.

Razzak had had some rest. Dara now gave him further instructions. These instructions were very explicit, very precise.

It was forty-eight hours since Dara had taken sufficient rest. The swelling of his face that had been the result of Mohammed Hussain’s slow slapping session was almost gone now. The belly still ached, and would do so for some time. He brushed his teeth hard, had a heavy breakfast of fried eggs and *maghaz*, *parathas* and tea, and chain-smoked four cigarettes.

Then he slept.

It was late afternoon when Dara woke, feeling much better and rested for the evening’s activities. He had slept through lunch, and now, after a bath, he sent for food.

Bashiran’s feminine instincts had prepared a delicious lunch. *Nargisi Kofta* – meat balls with whole egg filling in a rich Mughal curry, dripping *k’aeo* – rarefied butter – and spices, fried rice, *chappaties*, yogurt, fresh greens, followed by half a dozen oranges, which he sucked for good digestion.

Barney was still under guard, and by the last report,

it was apparent that the American was stoned out of his wits by Perveen's expertise, and that was good.

The *gora's* insatiable bedroom gymnastics impressed the household. The average westerner being presumed uncircumcised, his sexual prowess is looked on with suspicion, perhaps a comforting thought for the emasculating effect of British colonialism.

After the meal, Razzak came in with a briefcase and the morning's papers.

The briefcase was a slim, smart affair in simulated black leather, popularized by the James Bond movies, marketed as a 007 briefcase, and patronized by Lahore's young business executives. Razzak opened it, and explained its functioning to Dara.

Dara appeared satisfied. He was more satisfied when Razzak told him that his uncle, the Warrant Officer of Engineers who had prepared the briefcase, was the same technician attached to the Special Services Group who had successfully completed the mining of the Baramula Bridge in Kashmir in 1965.

Razzak was very proud of his uncle's handiwork, and Dara had every reason to be confident that it would function like clockwork.

The cousins were on the job, and reported no change since the last report.

Dara now turned his attention to the newspapers. He studied the leaders with a smile.

MYSTERIOUS HELICOPTER CRASH OVER QUETTA.

LAHORE RIPPED BY GANG MURDERS.

The major papers, bound as they always were under semi-official censorship, gave dark hints that the

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crash might be linked to Russian and Afghan intervention under the guise of the demand for autonomy by the Pathans occupying the hills between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Army and Police experts, it was reported, were investigating.

About incidents in the city, the Police had issued strongly worded threats against criminal elements. The editorials, too, came down heavy on this issue. The Senior Superintendent of Police had sworn a campaign against *anti-social elements*.

It did not disturb Dara.

On the contrary, it rather pleased him, for in a stable society, people felt secure, and it was just such an atmosphere that encouraged economic growth.

Besides, this SSP was Rauf, the Don Boscoe bully he had beaten, befriended, put in his files and presented with a gold Rolex when he cleared his civil service exam, a diamond ring when he passed out from the Police Academy as an Assistant Superintendent, and on his first posting, promptly put him on a monthly retainer.

Dara's mind once again went over the events of the last two days. He ticked them off one by one, weighing the entire operation in his mind. If Allah so willed, success would be his, and tonight.

Then he allowed Roxanna to enter his mind.

He savored her name, rolling it over and over in his thoughts, enjoying this platonic luxury. Yes, Roxanna, if Allah so wills ... and then he shook his head. Images of his youth flashed before his eyes ... *his father ... Juliana ... Roxanna ... Juliana ... Father ... Juliana ... Roxanna ... Roxanna ... Roxanna*. He closed his eyes,

shut them tight, and sat like that for a while. Slowly, gradually, the shutters of his mind rose and sunlight entered to the soft flapping of a dove's wings. Yes, he was going to see *Roxanna* this evening. The excitement now became a slow burning fuse. If a man goes to see his woman, advises a Punjabi proverb, then may he go well.

He rose, went before the mirror, and stripped to his underpants, examining his body with a critical eye. It was stocky, but the musculature was still lean and hard, the result of regular workouts.

His belly looked ravaged.

He made a couple of one-two passes at himself in the mirror – see *Abba-ji, even with a burnt belly I can still punch – snort – one, one-two – snort-snort that's it! Drake's sharp voice – snort ... one-two-one – Abba-ji – Auntie Juliana – Roxanna – Abba-ji – Auntie Juliana – Roxanna* – he snorted and shadow boxed to a rhythm of his own, and he seemed to rise and float. Then he winced, winced again and stopped, breathing hard. The burns hurt and he laughed to himself – but then again, why not? He was excited.

If a man goes to see his woman, may he go well!

At 1730 hours Dara started to dress. He picked his clothes with care. Light blue silk shirt, with a dove gray knitted silk tie and beige doeskin waistcoat. The dark gray leather buttoned suede jacket was snug around his body, except where it flared out in a perfect riding cut, over trousers of cavalry twill and handmade custom brogues from Hopson's, the Chinese shoemakers.

He lightly dabbed some cologne on a red silk

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handkerchief and carefully crumpled it in the front breast pocket of the jacket. Then he surveyed himself in the mirror.

The gun in his armpit was *snug as a bug in a rug*, and he smiled inwardly as the innocuousness of a childish phrase seemed to spring naturally to his mind this evening. He breathed a silent prayer for his father's soul for having introduced him to the subtleties of tailoring. Allah certainly made man, but it took a good tailor to make him a gentleman. A packet of Dunhill's extracted from their cellophane wrapping went into his breast pocket. On some odd quirk, he changed his old Ronson for a box of matches, rejecting the idea of Must de Cartier as foppish.

Dara entered Barney's room without knocking. The *gora* was in bed with a drunken, beatific smile on his face.

"So, Mister Custer, I trust you are comfortable?"

The commando appeared totally unembarrassed.

"Man, this is a dream. I keep thinkin' it ain't real, especially this hothouse tomato here."

He indicated Perveen who was lying asleep at his side.

"I'm sorry I was busy and could not inquire after your welfare personally."

"Well, I was busy too," and they both smiled at each other – man to man, and friendly.

"Hope none of your guys are hurt on account of the gold? Why'nt you use me? I'm a mean old coot, even though I say it myself."

"I have no doubt, Mister Custer, that you are a mean old coot as you prefer to describe yourself," Dara

agreed dryly. “But no, thank you. And though none of my men are hurt, the enemy have suffered casualties. I am hopeful that, with Allah’s aid, the gold will be recovered tonight. Then I shall brief you about the details of the operation. As for not employing your talents, it is no slight on your abilities, but for two separate reasons.

“First, and foremost, please do realize that by virtue of being a guest in the name of Joe Valletti, you become a sacred trust.

“Second, I would be disgraced if it were said I had to use an American for my own fighting – and, moreover, a guest and the souvenir of a departed friend, may Allah rest his soul in peace.

“Besides, officially you don’t exist in Pakistan. It is easier to keep you hidden than to have you on the streets with false documents. And your value to yourself cannot be underrated since you hold the secret to the suitcase.”

Barney scratched his head thoughtfully, and gave Dara an appraisingly shrewd glance.

“Man, I’m impressed. You know what? I like the way you run your operation – maybe once we got the gold I’d buy into a piece of your action – and this tomato.”

Dara smiled without commitment, and went down the stairs to the courtyard, where Ghani was standing over the Mercedes parked outside the garage. Two youths in greasy overalls, who were standing a little back, sala’amed Dara, their eyes shining with curiosity. They vigorously rubbed their hands down the sides of their overalls before eagerly taking his proffered hand.

Dara examined the serviced car with a critical eye.

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It was gleaming and the mechanics anxiously tracked his eyes. He opened the door, eyes piercing each nook and cranny. Then he straightened, with the door to the driver's side open. The two young mechanics could tell nothing from his face.

"Good job, lads. Are they from Mistri Mustafa's?"

"Yes, *Pehelwan-ji*," replied Ghani.

"You want a screw, lads?"

They were teenagers. They exchanged looks and blushed. Then the smaller and grubbier of the two plucked up his nerve, swallowed and spoke in an exaggeratedly bold voice.

"Yes *Pehelwan-ji*," looking straight into the cold gray eyes.

Dara laughed.

"Ghani, send them to Saloo's brothel as my guests. And if you guys ever have a problem, tell Ghani. Be good boys, respectful to your parents, loyal to your employers, and faithful to Pakistan. A good Muslim goes far, I can tell you."

Dara nodded when they crossed both palms over their hearts to show how dear was the *Pehelwan's* magnanimity to them and then raised their forefingers and arms aloft with a trance-like gesture of their slowly rolling heads to convey the traditional sentiments – the Greatness of Allah, and thanks to Him as a Great Provider, whose instrument for provision on earth for them was right here – Dara, King of Heera Mandi.

He drove through the gates and Ghani handed the two boys over to Quddus, one of Barkata's minions.

He's a God fearing man – you know he prays five times daily and keeps all the thirty fasts in the month of

Ramazan? Friend of the poor and enemy of all fat cats!

Thus would the legend of Dara continue to grow as they swaggered with the pride of being one of the *Pehelwan's* people.

The entrance to the Lady Professors' hostel of the Kinnaird College is from one of the canal banks, through the dense vegetation of the surrounding nurseries bordering a ribbon of mysterious tarmac. It cuts through fifty yards of dark wooded shrubbery, a grilled iron gate, and then, with palms and tropical plants on one side, leads to a manicured circular lawn with immaculate flower-beds, beyond which are the tennis courts.

At 1825 hours, Sirdar parked his Mercedes in the porch and went up the three steps of the plinth to the verandah. He turned right through the corridor, watching the serial numbers of the rooms, and knocked softly on the right one. A passing middle-aged English woman in jersey and slacks gave him a mildly curious look.

"Please come in!" called out Roxanna's voice from the inside.

Sirdar opened the door and entered the sparsely furnished, white-washed sitting room, from which a window opened outwards. The wood framed prints on the walls were Van Gogh and Constable, cut from magazines in a desperate attempt at *culture*. Over the red jute matting a few old armchairs were scattered around a brass centerpiece on a stand cradling a bowl of fresh red roses.

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Through the closed door of the adjoining room Roxanna asked: "Who is it?"

"Sirdar!" he replied, settling on a chair.

"I'm coming. *Amah! Ama-a-a-h!*" she yelled, and through the yell Sirdar heard mysterious slithering sounds of her dressing. Slipped feet neared in an unrhythmic slap in the corridor outside. They stopped, and then an old maid servant in a long hand-me-down overcoat and gray shawl entered, giving Sirdar a hard, curious look from her eyes over a gossipy tight mouth.

"Yes, *bibi-ji?*"

"*Amah*, my *mama'an's* son is here. Please get us some tea."

Curiosity whetted rather than appeased, the gossip waddled off after darting another sharp look at Sirdar.

It would never do to admit a male visitor into an unattached girl's room except under the guise of some sort of relation without inviting rumors about *fast* women ... *mama'an's* son would mean that of a maternal uncle's.

Roxanna entered and Sirdar rose.

The faint scent of *khas attar* insinuated his nostrils with its gentle assault upon the senses.

Sirdar stared.

It was Roxanna, but not as he had imagined her.

The flared white trousers of a rich material hugged smooth thighs over a jersey cloth shirt bound at the waist with a silken cord, while over her arm was a white cashmere shawl embroidered in gold thread. She was more than just a grown woman.

This was a ripe woman, aware of herself and of her effect on male eyes that now held a look as old as time.

Yet beneath it all, when Sirdar saw her eyes, the shyly hesitant eyes that gave her away, and the lips slightly parted in hopeful expectation, he realized what it meant – the eyes through the façade. A slow smile crept from the corners of his mouth, spread, and very gradually reached his eyes.

Roxanna watched in wonderment. Then, after seeing him smile, really smile with his soul in his eyes, for what was certainly the first time, and perhaps the last, she understood what it meant, and what he meant by it. It was *her*. She alone had the power to make him smile like that. She realized this naked smile devoid of defenses bestowed on her a power and an accompanying responsibility. In a flash she understood all this as it went through her mind, and when it did and she was aware she wanted to cry – she wanted to cry! *Ya Allah!* He would always resent her a little for having bestowed on her this power and responsibility: a bestowal he had been powerless to avoid.

“Sirdoo ...” she whispered in a pained voice and sat opposite him with her head at an angle. Her eyes were round and wet.

Sirdar lit a cigarette.

“Don’t Roxanna. It’ll spoil your make-up.”

His eyes were still defenseless.

“Oh, Sirdoo ... let me be!”

The old maid came through the door with a tray. Roxanna waved her away.

“We don’t want the tea now, *Amah!*”

“But *bibi-ji*, you sent for it!” she protested, shrewd, hesitating eyes darting from Roxanna to Sirdar and ears alert for gossip for the servants’ quarters.

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This would be news.

Bibi Roxanna who had never received a male guest meets her smartly dressed cousin who arrives in a big black car, then orders tea and when the tea comes sends it away. *She did look upset!* With a scandalized shutting of the door, she walked away, her head held high, nose slicing the air with a heavenward sniff.

“Stop it ... please,” insisted Sirdar more gently than before.

“You don’t –”

“Yes I do. I do understand. Now wash your face. Your mascara’s run down. Wash up and we’ll go out.”

She nodded, sniffed like a petulant child with a running nose and came back with the shawl around her, her face scrubbed school-girl clean.

“That’s better. You’re more your own self,” Sirdar said. They both laughed, gazes locked, and they were in each other’s arms.

“Sirdoo, Sirdoo this is wrong,” she sighed but made no attempt to pull out of the embrace. Dara’s mouth closed on hers and suspended eternity.

When they parted, Roxanna was smiling to herself.

Her body seemed to radiate a suffused light.

“Let’s go.”

“Where?”

“Anywhere. The car is heated. We’ll just drive around and park at some quiet place. Talk ... hunh?”

They remained quiet for a long time, letting the silence soothe them, even while Sirdar had driven and parked in the deserted stretch between Model town and the

New University campus, where the fog was thick and visibility only fifty yards.

The interior was cozily warm and both felt a snug contentedness in being together. Sirdar had forgotten to switch the music on. He had no need of it now. He turned off the ignition, lit a cigarette, and looked towards Roxanna.

“Should I turn on some music?”

She looked long at him and slowly shook her head from side to side. There was compassion in her eyes and he looked away.

“Do we need music?”

Her voice brought his head back, and they were again in each other’s arms. Roxanna sighed while Sirdar’s hand gently stroked her thigh. She moaned softly and her hands went over his chest and shoulders. His hand cupped her breast, she shivered, and they parted. The dropped cigarette had burnt a black hole in the red carpet. Dara stubbed it out with the sole of his brogues, lit another, and abruptly asked, “Would you ever marry me?”

“Sirdoo, I don’t know.”

“Don’t you love me?”

“Don’t be a bastard and try to insult me like you did that last time.”

“What is it? Are you afraid of your family?”

“No!”

In an instinctive flash Sirdar understood.

He was fighting for his life. He knew words were of no value at the moment. In the single most intelligent decision and greatest dramatic performance of his life, he opened his waistcoat and pulled up the shirt.

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She gasped.

“Cigarette burns, Roxanna, only twenty-four hours old.”

“They must have ... must still be hurting terribly.”

She raised her head and at their corners the large almond eyes were wet with an unspoken question.

“This is my world, Roxanna. I was born into it, just like you were into yours, with its own set of morals, own standard of values. I run a dirty business. Who is clean ... what is clean? Yes, I have killed. I know that makes you go quiet. But if I don't, I get killed, or end up selling *cha'at* fruit salad on a street corner. There are sins greater than the mere act of taking human life – and we all know about them.

“I can't sell *cha'at* on a street corner. I won't do that. I can't give up my world. Be fair. I've never expected you to give up yours. You can teach, live the way you want to, keep your own friends.

“Let me live my life. I promise I won't create a fuss about any children we might have. We'll get a house outside the Bazaar,” his eyes held a dream now, “some quietly respectable place like the cantonment. An old house with tall trees. If a child wants to go into the business, let him. If not, I won't force him. Let them study and even settle in the white man's world. For in this world they would never be accepted as anything but Kanjars, despite whatever they might make of themselves. Neither will you be, for that matter ... but Roxanna, you just said we need no music ... just the two of us and the world be damned.”

He no longer looked the dreamer.

His expression was fierce, almost demoniacal as all

the while he looked far away from her.

“I have plenty of money stashed away abroad, for my getaway or any other eventuality. Roxanna, Roxanna, it’s an accident of birth, Roxanna, damn everything, your clan included.

“You think even with my MBA from Harvard some firm would have given me a job? Hunh! Nobody called you a Kanjar to your face, Roxanna, because, by an accident of birth, you were the daughter of Jatts. You never saw the sneering, loathing look in the eyes of the bully as his mouth spat the word while you stood in your school blazer in the dusty yard with a blank mind. You never bashed the living daylight out of him and cursed, cursed everything, even Allah, may He forgive me. You never curried favor with the bastard later because his father was the Deputy Commissioner and the boy himself a future officer who could be useful at some time.”

His face dropped the adult mask. The bewildered schoolboy in the dusty courtyard was starkly visible.

His voice now took on the urgent pleading of desperation.

“It’s up to you to either listen to what people say about me, or else judge for yourself. All I can say is I never hurt any bastard that didn’t deserve hurting. If I get my gut burned, I burn two guts. Somebody’s nice to me, I lick their feet. Somebody’s a bastard, then I’m the bigger bastard.

“That day, a decade ago, you thought I insulted you by thinking you thought I was from a respectable-chic family. As Allah is my witness, I didn’t want to give you the burden of such a decision because that’s what it

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would have to have been. I hurt you to save maiming you. I can't change my world, Roxanna ...”

He looked like a soul in torment with the smoke swirling around his face in the darkness of the car.

Then he turned to face her full in the eyes.

“I'm not asking you to marry me tonight. Let's see each other first. We have all those missing years to make up for, but if you will have me ... would you ... could you take me on my terms as I take you on yours? If not, then this is the parting of the ways.”

When she gently took his face in both hands and kissed him on the lips, long and deep and soft, he knew the answer. He knew he would never need the stereo, never need anything but the transistor radio his father had bought him.

By twelve thirty the fog was thick. Gulloo guided the wheel of the cream colored Mazda 1500 through the grayness, inching it along, his eyes straining to keep the wheels on the track. Dara was in the back, with Razzak at his side huddled in a thick brown blanket with the flat briefcase on his lap. It was the same one Dara had approved of earlier that morning. It was supposed to contain the 100,000 Rupees promised to Malik for the return of Barney's suitcase.

Even the firmly rolled up windows could do nothing to keep out the vein-piercing cold from penetrating the interior of the Mazda. Dara sniffed wetly and wiped his nose with a white silk handkerchief. Their breath came out as thick grayish smoke, misting the inside of the windshield. Razzak bent forward and wiped it with the

corner of his blanket, sniffed and huddled back again. Gulloo smiled lightly at the Punjabis' sniffing in the cold. *He* was a Gilgiti, born in the Karakoram, with the largest number of glaciers in the world outside the polar regions, where if a mountain is under sixteen thousand feet, it is not named. Then he, too, sniffed, and Razzak glanced at him. Gulloo's eyes strained even further in completely simulated ignorance of his having succumbed to the apology of cold that he considered the Punjabi winter to be.

As they turned from Multan Road onto the beaten track of the tree-lined canal, they entered even thicker fog. The car slowed a little more, and the *cha'achi* chuckled.

Dara was curious.

Razzak, otherwise always bubbling with army jokes, rarely laughed in Dara's presence. It would not have been seemly for an OR to relax in his CO's presence.

"What's funny? Share the joke," said Dara.

Though abashed, he still could not repress the next chuckle.

"Sorry, sar, but I can't help it. It's funny. For a caper Gulloo picks the Chief Justice's car from the Gymkhana Club. The function finishes at three thirty, and till then nobody'll miss it!"

Dara was amused and Gulloo grinned.

The big Gilgiti's humor was rarely without fringe benefits, and almost invariably at someone's expense. Even if the car was seen and the number taken down, nobody in their right mind would question the Chief Justice. It would be passed off as a mistake. Besides, in another thirty minutes, the car would be quietly

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replaced with no one the wiser.

“The sister fucking watchmen were all inside around a fire. It was a dish,” commented the giant’s husky voice, and then they saw twin headlights piercing the fog, and Gulloo eased his foot off the pedal.

Dara looked at his watch.

Twelve thirty-five on the dot.

Malik Ashraf Ali was on time, at the arranged place, the first canal bridge coming from Multan Road. Dara could make out the faint outlines of the bridge as Gulloo braked without switching off the ignition, and the other car came abreast and stopped, its engine idling.

Through the rolled down windows, Dara and Malik looked impassively at each other.

Barney’s suitcase and the 007 briefcase changed hands through the windows and both cars moved off in opposite directions. Inside the Mazda, all were tense, but only Dara was able to mask his feelings and light a cigarette with nerveless fingers.

The explosion came with a sudden deafening roar, shattering the silence and lighting up the thick grayish blackness with the impetuosity of a soldier’s act of rape under the stress of combat.

Dara smiled in triumph. He turned to watch the blazing ball of fire burning like an inferno and his smile grew wider as his eyes followed its crazy erratic course in the final plunge into the canal. He raised his palms heavenwards, and first thanked Allah for aiding him in his just revenge. Then he muttered the *Fateha* prayers for the dead, and passed both hands over his face. An old debt had been erased this night.

Another one, that of friendship, would shortly be cancelled.

The silence descended heavily, and the only sound was the sizzle of a well tuned engine. The faint glow of Dara's cigarette reasserted itself in a darkened world.

"A hundred thousand in hell," he said softly, and turned his head back.

Near Shah di Khooi bridge Gulloo braked, and before Razzak got out he repeated instructions like the efficient NCO he had been.

"Nuri lets the producer go tomorrow without any ransom. That's all, sar?"

"Yes, except don't forget to thank your uncle for the briefcase. Tell him to stop worrying about the mortgage on his house."

"Sar!" came back Razzak's reply and then he was swallowed up by the fog as Gulloo engaged gear and slid the machine ahead.

It was 0115. Dara sat behind his desk to pay a last homage to his friend's memory. Ghani ushered in Barney, in a robe and slippers, looking tousled and drunken. He gave a small wave of the hand to Dara.

"Hiya! What's this, a pajama party?"

Dara's manner was urbane, emanating a polished sheen.

"Please sit down, Mister Custer. Care to smoke?" and at the latter's negative shake of the head lit his own.

"I am sorry to have disturbed your sojourn with what you are pleased to call a hot tomato. Please look

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behind you, Mister Custer.”

The American turned and Dara dismissed Ghani with a gesture of the head.

Then Barney turned to look back at Dara.

Most of the drunkenness was out of his eyes.

“Well, well. So Major Joe was right about you. Man, Oh Man! Let’s open it and you can take what you think is your share. There’s enough of it, and you’ve earned it. Then you can tell me how you got it.”

On the same table around which they had sat two nights ago when they had met was an open bottle of Ballantine’s, two glasses and salted cashew nuts in a small crystal bowl.

Propped by the table on the carpet was the suitcase.

They went and sat on the same chairs as before. Barney knelt and fiddled with the lock for a few seconds, his brow wrinkled with concentration.

Dara’s body tensed.

If the American made one wrong turn of the tumbler, they would both be blown up.

There was a series of clicks, and the suitcase opened to reveal neat rows of ten ounce gold bars in individual cellophane wrappers. Barney’s breath hissed through pursed lips.

The American looked up at Dara and grinned. Dara’s smile caused a vague stir somewhere deep down, but he could not define what it was.

Then he dismissed it.

“Just look at her! Ain’t she great! Grateful to you, Mister Shah, mighty obliged. Say!” he continued excitedly, “is it okay then? ... you take a share and cut

me in for a piece of the action? I'd like to settle here. What do you say?" he concluded with bright, almost feverish eyes.

Dara nodded with the same indulgent smile.

"Later, Mister Custer, plenty of time later, and please don't thank me. It was for Joe. It will be for Joe always. Let's celebrate with a drink."

Barney's drunkenness was now replaced by excitement, and his eyes were shining as he sat opposite Dara.

Sirdar Ali Shah measured four stiff fingers in each glass, and raised his, followed by Barnabas Nicholas Custer.

"To Joseph Valletti, Mister Custer, may his enemies perish, and bottoms up," Dara toasted, echoed by Barney who finished his drink first.

Dara downed his own, smiled even more widely at Barney, and smashed the heavy crystal glass full in Barney's face, stunning the American.

Before Barney could react, he gaped into the anxious black hole of a thirty eight, which its owner cocked with a casual thumb, his smile even wider now.

"That was for Joe, with the compliments of Don Valletti."

Barney sat very still, his hands on the armchair, visibly frozen.

"What the fuck is this, a double cross?"

"No, Mister Custer, the frustration of one. You may call it a twist of fate, your fate, to be precise. Get up very slowly, turn around, and no Green Beret tricks. I know a few more, and we wouldn't want to embarrass the gentlemen who teach you applied mayhem at Fort

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Bragg or wherever it is your athletic young men are taught their trade.”

Dara produced a pair of slim handcuffs and clicked them on Barney’s wrists.

“You may turn around and sit as before. I shall shortly appease your curiosity.”

The American’s face was still, bitter.

He spat on the carpet.

Dara smiled.

Reaching beneath the desk, he pressed a buzzer.

Ghani opened the door and stood framed in it. Dara said something in Punjabi. Ghani nodded and went out, while Dara sat sipping another drink, sampling it, savoring its mellowness.

The door opened again and Barney’s face went ashen as Dara rose to greet his guests.

“Marcus, Mister Hoveida, please sit down.”

He shook hands warmly with Marcus, his old Cosa Nostra guide in Boston, assigned to him by the Don, and the middle aged, nondescript Arab whom he would never have noticed in a crowd.

Ghani served drinks, and Barney, looking at Marcus, clenched his jaws.

The latter gave him a long, thoughtful look, and then uttered two words.

“Hiya, bastid!”

Barney again spat on the carpet, and all present grinned.

“Now, Mister Custer, the explanation,” Dara said.

“I’ll make it as brief as I can. When I heard your story, not being your complete rice paddy gook, I made at least the minimum semblance of confirming it. What

is more logical than to cable Don Valletti? What Joe didn't tell you, because he himself didn't know, being unconnected with the family business, was the deal I made with the Don to supply the Cosa Nostra with heroin base if the Turkish White route ever dried up. Well, last year, for twenty-five million dollars of American aid, the Turks declared poppy growing illegal. Earlier, the Marseilles or French Connection, had been smashed by a Franco-American operation. That automatically activated the Lahore Connection.

"I wasn't told of Major Joe's death. The Don didn't have the heart to tell me. The very night of your nimble arrival, I sent a cable to the Don. We have our own code, and yesterday I received the reply and also the news of Marcus' expected arrival, among other details. Mister Custer, your simple backwoods accent just doesn't click with us. We are the Kanjars of North India – professional liars, cheats and murderers by heredity, not wet-eared officers from West Point whom you managed to fool in the US Army. This evening, or should I say yesterday evening, since it is a quarter to two in the morning now, I met Marcus and Mister Hoveida before I called you. You were only kept alive since the receipt of the cable in order to open the suitcase. After Joe, only you knew how to open the case without exploding it.

"The Cosa Nostra and Palestinians have made a deal. They realize it would be futile to waste men and material, so they split fifty-fifty."

Barney had an opening. He craftily inserted: "What do you get out of it – peanuts?"

"Not so crudely, Mister Custer. You're lost and

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expendable, but don't be crude. Go down with dignity," Dara suggested gently, measuring himself another drink.

Barney's next words came in a rush. "Look, why'd you let 'em split? You're king pin here. Why'nt you keep the gold for yourself?"

Dara sipped his drink and continued, while Marcus grinned, showing his gold caps.

"Mister Barnabas Nicholas Custer, you son of a dirty, mangy, mongrel bitch, there's something known as a man's word. You see, Joe could never have promised you the gold. The Don knew about it and after his death it belonged to the Valletti family. That's why, within a few hours, Marcus was in your room. It is safe enough to assume you never tried to save Joe's life, but merely took advantage of a dying man's delirium to perhaps, by accident or design, hasten his death."

"That's a lie!"

"What's a lie?" Dara's voice dropped to a whisper. Then he saw Barney's face. "You squeezed his neck, didn't you?"

The answer was plain on Barney's face. The room had gone deathly still.

"P'haen chode – madre chode kutti da puttari! You killed him and then stole his heirs' inheritance. You killed your officer, dullae da puttari!"

"Yeah? Okay! They're a bunch of hoods. They hijacked it from the Arabs."

Barney was as white as flour, but he looked Dara in the eyes.

Dara slapped Barney's face with the sharp crack of a whiplash, turning it the other way. Then he grabbed

him by the hair and turned his face up.

“Quite right. Finders keepers. Survival of the fittest – eh? That’s what justified your taking it. Then that’s what justifies our taking it back from you. As for hijacking, you poor, misbegotten, second-hand hillbilly, there is a background to it. An official of the Palestinian underground made a deal with the Don for the purchase of a shipment of arms, and instead of putting in half of what is now in the suitcase as agreed, he embezzled the whole amount. The Cosa Nostra, in revenge, swore to take twice what they had been rightfully promised, and they did. Only a week ago, the man was caught selling secrets to the Israeli Mossad, and under interrogation, also admitted having been the cause of the mis-understanding between the Cosa Nostra and the Palestinians. So they have now compromised. The Cosa Nostra gets its rightful share and Mister Hoveida collects the PLO’s share. Both organizations can again do business when the opportunity arises.

“What do I get out of it? I get the Durra Monopoly which formerly belonged to Malik Ashraf Ali.”

“What’s that?”

Dara again smiled. “Wait. Be patient. Mister Hoveida, should we start?”

“Yes, *blease*,” said the Arab in a thick accent.

Ghani brought a steel case, and under the practiced eyes of Dara, the gold bars were equally divided.

Hoveida took leave, politely declining Dara’s offer of an escort. He had complete confidence in the two young, superbly fit desert guerrillas waiting for him outside.

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As the door shut behind the Palestinian, Dara spoke. "The Durra monopoly is what was held by Malik Ashraf Ali as a go between for the Arabs and the Pathans."

"What's that?"

"Never mind. You obviously don't know your Kipling, and it's too late to introduce you to him. Suffice it to say I also get fifteen thousand dollars from both sides – the Cosa Nostra and the PLO – for expenses incurred in the recovery of the gold. That comes to three hundred thousand rupees – tax free. Even after three fourths is divided up between my men, it leaves me a tidy profit.

"Then there is my relationship with Joe. I owe him a debt of friendship.

"As for the rest, die a curious man, Mister Barnabas Nicholas Custer. In the next world, which you will join shortly after Marcus and I personally skin you alive, all secrets are laid bare. Ask a demon about the Durra monopoly. *Be-ghairat, namak haram gashta.*"

Barney's face went gray. He licked his lips.

Marcus produced a flat bladed Green River skinning knife and nonchalantly caressed its razor sharp edge with his thumb.

"Look, shoot me and get it over with," Barney pleaded. "Not this. In the name of Christ, *or your Allah!*"

Marcus spoke now – raging, vicious. "When youse putta the ants on my cock, did youse give me a chancet? Was youse sayin' the Hail Mary and rememberin' the Virgin? Mother-fuckin' SOB, I didn't beg! I'm gonna enjoy this, Mister Shah, just youse wait!"

"By all means, my dear Marcus," Dara agreed,

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“compliments of the house. The room is sound proofed, and he’s an illegal entry. Officially, he doesn’t exist. Anyway, his own mother wouldn’t miss her greatest mistake. When you tire, I and Ghani shall lend you a hand.”

Ghani stood in detached silence.

Dara took another sip of whisky and raised the glass in a graceful gesture, absorbed by the amber lights dancing in the liquid gold of pure malt.

The End

Glossary

- Abba-ji*: form of address for father, with the respectful suffix *ji*.
- Ahoe*: yes.
- Al-hamd-Allilah*: Allah be praised.
- Allah badshah*: Allah the king, or Allah is king.
- Ba'u*: Punjabi derivative of *babu*, an Indian clerk of the British Raj. Since then, used by a countryman for a town dweller, or in a town, for anybody in western dress with a literate air about him.
- Ba'u-ji*: see *ba'u* and *ji*.
- Badla*: exchange, word used for revenge.
- Badshah-ji*: King my spirit, king sir.
- Baradari*: clan or extended family.
- Barak*: full throated roar. Prelude to attack, victorious epilogue, sheer spontaneity.
- Bari veena*: refers to a musical instrument and also the main course in a formal meal.
- Be-ghairat, namak haram gashta*: dishonorable, traitor to the salt consumed, whore.
- Be-ghairat*: dishonorable.
- Bhai*: brother.
- Bhayyas*: brother in Urdu, the mother tongue of Uttar Pradesh (India) Muslims who immigrated to Pakistan. Since they call each other *bhayya*, the Punjabis disrespectfully refer to them as *bhayyas*.
- Bhinote*: martial art of Uttar Pradesh, India.
- Bibi*: madam or miss.
- Bibi-ji*: see *bibi* and *ji*.
- Budmash*: word used for a hoodlum. See *goonda*.
- Bulbul*: small bird.
- Cha'acha*: respectful form of address for father's younger brother.
- Cha'achi*: one who originates from between the Jhelum and Attock rivers.

Cha'at: fruit salad: fruit salad with crudities, potatoes, and chick peas. Street food.

Chaleeswan: the fortieth day of mourning among Muslims.

Chappal: sandals.

Charpai: string woven cot.

Chicken musalam: chicken slow cooked in a thick masala sauce and whole spice.

Choti veena: refers to a musical instrument, and also to the first course dish in a formal meal.

Chownk: a town square.

Darae-di-gallie: Dara's lane or alley.

Darshan: paying one's respects to a saint, his descendant, or his tomb.

Deg: a big round bottomed cooking pot with a small neck, often made of copper.

Dera: homestead to isolated farmhouse. Also a hoodlum's or a businessman's headquarters in town or country.

Dhoti: add three more yards of cloth, and a dash of grace to what Ghandi wore.

Dhuzun: the sound of a gunshot.

Dopatta: veil. May be used to cover the head, face, or just thrown over the shoulders covering the breasts.

Dullae da puttari: son of a pimp.

Falooda: thick, hand-made vermicelli, cooked, then soaked in a syrup of perfumed sugar, nuts, cream and *khoya*, a milk residue obtained by simmering and constant stirring. Served cold.

Farghal: long robe, also known as *chogha*, made from *patti*, a tweed woven in the upper Himalayas and Karakoram.

Fateha: Muslim prayers for the dead.

Gallie: lane or alley.

Ghazal: a seven to twelve couplet love poem in the same meter. Opens with a rhyming couplet rhyme repeated at the end of the second line in each succeeding verse.

Goondas: word used for a hoodlum. See *budmash*.

Gora: white, used for a white Caucasian.

Hai: onomatopoeia of pain or pleasure.

Hain: the exclusive Punjabi tag, terminating with a nasal sound.

Flight to Pakistan

Haleem: mixed lentils and pulses with crushed wheat, mutton shanks and chopped mutton head, spices, onion, garlic and ginger root, simmered all night in a sealed clay pot.

Halva: semolina fried in *k'aeo*, rarefied butter, with nuts and raisins, with milk or water added to soften it.

Happy-buays: distortion of *hippy-boy* for a hippy.

Harmonium: the *orgue expressif*, a foot-powered positive pressure reed organ adapted as an instrument of Indian classical and semi classical chamber music.

Hazrat Jabraeel: the archangel Gabriel.

Hookah: water filtered pipe to smoke tobacco placed over hot coals in a clay pot.

Hujra: small chamber, used as a male living room or study.

Hundi: also known as *hawala*. Centuries old system of transferring money without going through the formality of banking procedure.

Huzoor: respectful form of address – O' Presence.

Ikhlaq: etiquette, and more, manner of living. Code of conduct.

Ilachi-sipari-long: cardamom, betel nut, and cloves.

Jani: my life. An endearment within the same or opposite sex.

Ji: respectful suffix, heart, spirit, also for "yes".

K'a'afi: form of poetry composed by Punjabi Sufi Saints.

K'aeo: also called *ghee*. Rarefied butter for cooking.

k'hungroo: dancing bells, ankle bells.

Ka'udi: also known as *kabbadi*. Combat sport of one from each team required to go the one hundred meters or more into the opposing team's territory, like the single combats of chivalric India, touch an opponent and return to his own side. The defender may grapple his opponent, and try to delay him for a specific period of time, determined by a drumbeat. However, touch has come to mean blow. The most common blows are delivered by the heel of the hand, edge of the hand, fingers, and eardrum-shattering slaps. Usually a good *Ka'udi* player is expected to be able to knock down a much heavier person with just one open slap. Grappling during the game, on the other hand, is not much gentler, and often results in broken bones or dislocated joints.

Kamanidar knife: fish shaped folding fighting knife. The gears

between handle and blade emit a loud rasping noise when the knife is opened.

Kandeels: filigreed brass or copper lampshades.

Khair, khair, Darae pehelwan di khair: praises, praises, and praises to Dara Pehelwan: title of wrestler, also accorded to a crime Don.

Khas attar: the extract of a fragrant reed as perfume.

Khatm-ul-Koran: a ceremony in which a number of people read different passages of the Koran so that the entire Book is finished in a single session.

Khooni: one whose hands are bloodied, and is liable to shed more blood.

Kismet: pre-ordained destiny.

Koel: small bird.

Kook: the sound of a *koel*.

Kotha: roof, also the establishment of a prostitute, or a dance house. In summer, dancing sessions take place on flat topped Indian roofs.

Kulchas: leavened white flat bread kneaded with yogurt and milk, baked in a clay oven – *tandoor* – dusted with sesame seeds and glazed with butter. Popular for breakfast.

Kurta: very long, loose flowing shirt worn with the tails over a *dhoti* (see *dhoti*), or baggy trousers – a little like a night shirt.

Kutae ma'ar: dog-death, name given to illicitly brewed liquor.

La'acha: a silk *dhoti*, see *dhoti*.

Ma'afi: forgiveness.

Maghaz: brain.

Mama'an: form of address for mother's brother.

Mem: a white woman.

Mitha: sweet.

Momin: the pure.

Moon-bola: brother or sister by parole, not a blood relation.

Moon-boli p'haen: sister by parole.

Mujra: traditional song and dance sequence performed by a professional in private session. May be arranged for parties and weddings.

Mura: a reed or rattan stool or armchair.

Nagri: town, dwelling place.

Nahin-ji: no sir.

Flight to Pakistan

Naik: corporal.

Naika: madam running a dance house or a brothel.

Nargisi Kofta: the narcissus koftae. Eggs in a mince meat shell, sliced length-wise, represent the narcissus. Served in a very rich, thick sauce known as a *musalam*. Garnished with nuts, raisins, and gold or silver foil.

Nautch girls: dancing girls.

Nautch: dance.

Nihari: beef shank, tongue and trotters simmered all night with spices.

Nih'r'n-e-kalaejae: on an empty stomach.

Ohae: hey you!

P'haen chode – madre chode kutti da puttār: sister fucker, mother fucker, son of a bitch.

P'haijan: form of address for older brother.

P'hangra: Punjabi harvest dance, and the most popular form of corporal expression to express joy or victory.

Pala'a: basmati rice cooked with meat and in meat stock.

Parathas: unleavened whole wheat flat bread fried in *k'aeo*.

Parna: a head cloth.

Pashmina: cashmere.

Phudda: a hassle, even fight.

Pothohari goondas: hoodlums from the salt range plateau – the Pothohar.

Puls Muqabla: police combat.

Pulsias: cops, pigs.

Puttar: son.

Pyar jad hoyā na'al téré: when I fell in love with you.

Razzak-Allah, Allah Maula, Razzak-Allah: expressions of praise and thankfulness raised to Allah.

Rehra: two wheeled horse-driven chariot without seats used to transport goods. May be used as private transport as well.

Roghni na'an: nan bread kneaded in *k'aeo* and eggs.

Rotis: unleavened whole wheat flat bread.

Sala'am aleikum: peace be upon you.

Saluka: cotton waistcoat with many pockets, usually worn beneath a *kurta*.

Shalwar: long baggy trousers, often using up three to five yards of cloth.

Shanakat: identification, judgment.

Sirdai: a drink made from crushed nuts, mainly almonds, poppy seeds, cardamoms and cinnamon added to milk.

Siri payae: trotters and head of lamb or beef.

Sitar: stringed instrument of Indian classical music.

Sukwaerty wala: an operative of one of the security services.

Ta'alie: North Indian hardwood – oak.

Tabalchi: *tabla* player, see *tabla*.

Tabla: very precisely; tunable North Indian percussion instrument.

Tauba: sound of penance.

Thaekas: stills or sale points for illicit liquor.

Theek-tha'ak: good form.

T'hol: a double ended barrel shaped drum.

Tolas: traditional unit of measure, less than a gram.

Umreekan gora: American white man.

Wa Leikun As Sala'am: reply to *sala'am aleikum*, wishing each other peace.

Wala: a suffix indicating a person's trade or vocation.

Ya Allah! Ya Ali Maddad: O' Allah, help me O'Ali!

Ya Rasul Allah: O' prophet of Allah (i.e. Mohammed)

Yakka: a two-wheeled horse-drawn racing chariot.

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