



**THE ÉMIGRÉ, THE
SORCERER AND THE
TYRANT**

A Novel

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A novel by Hamid Atiyah

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The sorcerer will never succeed whatever he does.
The Holy Koran

SEVENTY-SIX YEARS EARLIER

Dusk was extinguishing the last lights of the day. The cemetery was now empty except for a lonely figure walking briskly on a narrow twisting path between seemingly endless rows of graves. He scolded himself for being careless, alone in a cemetery and it was almost dark. He has never experienced such silence before. The nights in his village were alive with sounds of dogs barking, owls hooting and the occasional howl of a lonely coyote. The only noises he could now hear were his labored breathing, the rustling noise of his long robe and the scratching sounds of his sandals on the dirt trail.

It was full daylight when he arrived here and while he sat at his mother's grave reciting holy verses and prayers, he could hear other people performing their religious duties, shedding tears over their beloved departed ones, and pouring water on their graves to soften the earth's firm embrace of their remains. He was hot and exhausted, and promising himself only five minutes of rest he fell asleep pillowed on his arm with only his head and part of his shoulders in the shade of the headstone. When he woke up the sun was halfway behind the horizon and the cemetery was deserted. It was not any town cemetery with few rows of graves; it was *Wadi Al-Salam*, the Valley of Peace, the oldest and biggest in the whole country spreading from the walls of the holy city of Najaf miles deep into the Great Sham desert.

The lonely mourner was a tall, slender young man in his late twenties. His skin was tanned by long hours of hard farm work under a blistering sun. He wore his best outfit for the solemn occasion: a faded black turban and a loose white cotton robe girdled by a frayed emerald-green cord from which a curved Arabian sword dangled. His calloused hands firmly clutched the sword, his long fingers repeatedly tracing the holy verses engraved on its silver hilt in enamel. It gave him some comfort, but not enough to drive away the anxiety. The old battered sword was a family heirloom, handed down from one generation to the next until it came into his possession after his father's death.

The *fellahin*, peasants in his village believe that a virtuous person listening carefully at this hour may hear the fluttering of wings as the night angels descend to the celestial borders to take over from the day angels as guardians of this world for the night. But he was not an ordinary peasant like them. He was a *sayyid*, a descendant of the blessed Prophet, and *sayyids* wore cloths like his to distinguish themselves from commoners and carried swords, a symbol of their never-ending battle against evil and injustice. Only few months ago, he took out his sword and walked alongside his uncles and cousins into the thin stretch of no man's land separating the warriors of the Azaris and Afalig tribes. The feud was in its

ninth year, and tens of lives have already been lost on both sides. Every few months, fighting between them flared and the *sayyids* had to intervene to stop the bloodshed and restore peace.

From where he stood in the middle of the battle ground, he could see on both sides the barrels of many rifles trained on them. He struggled to hide his fear but could not stop the perspiration trickling on his face and dampening his clothes. He could not help flinching when a bullet whistled past them and hit a nearby palm tree. Angry shouts rose from both sides and firing ceased. Even the most hardened of criminals would not dare shoot at a *sayyid* and go to the afterlife with the blood of a holy man on his hands, but many *sayyids* lost their lives in the heat of battle. His uncle Abbas, the eldest of their clan, pleaded with the sheikhs and warriors of the two tribes to lay down their weapons and stop the bloodshed, invoking Allah's retribution on all those who refused to listen to the voice of reason and peace. Few moments passed which seemed to last forever before Omran, the supreme Azari Chief, a tall handsome man in his early fifties, came out from behind a mud wall, his old British rifle strapped to his shoulder. The *sayyids* jubilantly shouted praise to Allah. But the tension did not recede until his rival Burhan came out from a dry canal flanked by the elders of his clan. They met in his uncle's *madeef*, the spacious bamboo and reed guest house, to discuss peace terms and haggle over disputed land and *fedia*, blood money

Daylight retreated behind the horizon like a beautiful white *huria* shyly hiding behind her black veil and the world around him plunged into darkness. It grew so dark in few moments that the graves surrounding him on all sides suddenly became indistinguishable shadows engulfed in a massive foreboding darkness.

After a while he sat against a tall headstone. He needed time to think. The cemetery lanes were like a maze and without light he could spend all night walking aimlessly in circles. Or he could sit here and wait for dawn. At least he would not risk falling in an open grave. But what if the stories he had often heard about hungry wolves and wild rabid dogs prowling the cemetery at night were true? Can he fight off a pack of wolves with his old sword in this pitch darkness? There was no sanctuary for the living in this place, a frightened voice in his mind answered him and his body responded with a shudder.

The day was the fifth of Rajab of the lunar Hegira Calendar and there would be no full moon tonight, he reminded himself. Exactly one year ago his mother passed away after a sudden and short illness. One day she complained of chest pains and an old half-blind midwife was hurriedly summoned to her bedside but all her herbal medicine, secret potions and bloodletting proved useless. Two days later her coffin was loaded on a boat and taken upriver to Shamia and from there to this place. *Sayyids* and

tribesmen from as far as Nasiriyah, a two-day journey on horseback, attended the week-long mourning ritual.

He had vowed to visit her grave on every anniversary as long as he had the strength to do so. It was a half-day journey on foot from his village at the outskirts of Shamia. He started out at dawn, stopping only once at a roadside tea shop for a light lunch of barley bread, dates and yogurt in the shade of a tall tree. The tea shop owner noticing his black turban and green belt called him *mawlana*, master, served him in person thanking him repeatedly for blessing his shop with his feet and would not have taken his money if he did not swear a solemn oath. He had planned to spend the night at a cheap inn in the holy city and with Allah's blessings he would be left with enough money to buy himself dinner and gifts of *halawa*, sweets for his wife and children. Early next morning he would pray inside the shrine and make the return journey to his village.

By now the city gates must have been shut for the night by the Ottoman sentries. The blue-eyed heartless Turks would not reopen them before dawn, but few silver coins would probably convince the *bash jaweesh*, the sergeant to make an exception. Many farmers bringing their vegetables to the city market and pilgrims like him arrive late at night and camp outside the gate. He would meet with bearded Afghans in baggy clothes, Persian zealots who worshipped all night long and Turkomans who spoke faster than a swallow. When they see his black turban and green belt, they would all rise to greet him, jostle to kiss his hand and offer him the best of their food which he would politely and gratefully decline. He will find light and company among them but first he must pray to Allah to show him the way out of this cemetery.

His mind made up he rose and began walking eastward. He made slow progress. His muscles ached from the tense walk and he stopped frequently to rest and reason with his fears. He tried to rid his mind of the childish thought that something malicious was lurking in the dark, waiting for the right moment to pounce on his back. But it came back more vividly with images of red bloodshot eyes opening in the depthless darkness awakened by the living human being invading their territory. He willed his mind to think of other thoughts. He wondered what his wife and their two sons were doing now. Having fed their cow and its new-born calf and eaten their dinner they must be already in bed. Like all children of their age, their sons loved tales of horror. On rare nights their pleadings would earn them one of their mother's macabre tale in which ordinary boys and girls confronted and triumphed over human-eating djinns and ghouls. She typically ended each with an anti-night creature incantation. "Do not whistle after dark. Ghouls, like dogs, are attracted by whistling" . And "if you see one of "them" do not panic, draw a circle on the ground around you and recite

these words: Bism Allah “In the name of God” and as long as you remain within the circle no harm will come to you” .

A growling near his feet brought him back from his thoughts. He jumped in fear as something sprinted away and disappeared to his left. His reflexes wanted him to flee but he willed himself to stop. He knew it would be foolish to panic in this place. What if he stumbled and broke an arm or a leg? The cemetery ground, having received countless corpses over the centuries, was soft and powdery in some places and may not support his weight.

He saw further ahead few graves with small domes and short minarets, the families of the dead showing off their wealth and status. From the top of a minaret he could glimpse the mud wall of the city, the fires kept burning all night by Turkish sentries and possibly the golden dome of the holy shrine. But he dismissed the idea as too reckless; the mud and gypsum minaret may collapse under his weight and if he does not break his neck in the fall, he may end up spending the night trapped with a decomposing corpse in a dark crypt.

He knew he was lost but he kept going. He had not walked far before hearing a strange sound. He stopped and listened breathlessly. It was faint and distant but he was sure it came from above. It resembled a bird’s squawk. A *Hama* would sound like this, he thought nervously. Villagers believe that the spirit of a murdered person came out at night in the form of a bird, the legendary *Hama*, haunting his grave until that person is avenged.

Walking away from the eerie sound he caught his foot on something, stumbled and fell to the ground. He got slowly to his feet, feeling a sharp sting in his left hand. At that moment he glimpsed a faint gleam of light in the distance coming from somewhere to his left. It disappeared for a second and peering into the dark he saw it again between two headstones. It was coming from a place below ground, obviously an open grave. But who would dare come out to the cemetery at this late hour? Gravediggers on a late assignment? An unscrupulous midwife burying a murdered illegitimate infant to save his or her mother from a similar fate and their family from scandal? Surely, a hungry ghoul coming out to feed on corpses would not need a light to find his or her way around in a cemetery. Shuddering, he took few steps toward the place from where the light was seeping out, stopped, and shouted a greeting. His voice came out shrill and hoarse and he felt ashamed of his apprehension. He stopped and listened but there was no reply. Instead he heard faint, muffled voices repeating some sort of a song or a chant. The great Imam buried in the holy city was reported to have said that the difference between truth and falsehood may only be three fingers wide, the distance between your eye and ear. If his eyes were not seeing the dim light ahead of him, he would have thought

the soft murmuring voices were figments of his frightened imagination. Although the dull light was thinning out the darkness in his path he approached cautiously, his heart beating hard.

He stood at the edge of the open crypt hidden from the view of those inside by a tall headstone. There was enough light to read the name carved on the headstone. It was Mehdi, the same as his. He hesitated. A frightened voice in his mind urged him to flee the evil inside because the voice was certain that some of his worst fears are about to materialize. His heart was now galloping in his chest. A strong smell reeked from inside but he could not place it. Promising himself not to linger for more than a curiosity-satisfying peek he crouched to have a better view.

Two figures in black were standing with their backs to him. An oil lantern dimly illuminated the open grave and the two women casting their long shadows on the far wall and the ceiling. They were *sufur*, their black hair and faces unveiled. One of them, an old woman, wearing her stringy hair loose and unbraided moved aside revealing a third woman laid out on a mud platform. Struggling with growing panic he watched breathlessly. The third woman bounded and stretched on the platform was a young girl in her teens, her hair pulled tight and braided in long plaits. She was completely naked and he caught a glimpse of her small standing breasts. A long glistening stretch of cloths or fat cord was laid on her midriff overflowing in long unwinding coils to the ground.

It looked like a secret burial to him. Adulterous women and illegitimate children slayed by their outraged relatives are buried at night under the guise of darkness. The wretched dead girl must have offended her family honor and these two women were paid a handsome fee to bury her discreetly. Observing the absence of tubs and water he sadly wondered if they intended to bury her without the ritual washing and shroud. Even sinners deserve a proper burial.

He then saw the gleam of a long curved dagger in the hand of the old woman and he stiffened with terror. His eyes returned knowingly to the strange coils on the girl's stomach: these were her intestine streaming down from a gap in her cut abdomen. He clamped a hand on his mouth in shock and pain. It was a scene from a nightmare, worse than any of his mother's horror tales with which she had amused and terrorized him into sleep.

He realized what was going on, right there in the open crypt in front of his eyes. The two women were what his people called hearts' butchers, evil witches cutting out the still throbbing heart of this innocent young virgin to use in their sorcery. His mind went blank as he tried desperately to remember the holy verses to ward off evil. His first impulse was to flee; stand up, turn around and run as fast as he can. But he felt paralyzed, all energy drained from his body and replaced by abject fear. He stood transfixed, unable to tear his eyes from the horrible scene. The women

moved about their labor as calmly and unselfconsciously as a butcher and his aide in their shop. The old witch addressed her acolyte who picked up a small object and placed it carefully on a plate. It was the girl's heart. They resumed their litany.

His thought went to the victim's family. They must be frantically but quietly combing the nearby fields and villages looking for her. If their search fails, they will tell their relatives and neighbors that she must have gone to the riverbank to wash a dress, fell in the rapid water and drowned. They would make up this story to protect the family's honor from rumors of elopement or abduction. No one alive except him and the two witches would know the true story.

With his fear subsiding in the background of his senses he felt a surge of sadness and anger. The savagely-mutilated girl must have been as carefree as the sheikh's favorite mare with foal strutting in his meadows before these ghouls abducted her. Not many minutes ago she was probably alive. And the noises he had heard earlier and mistakenly imagined to be the cries of a *Hama* were probably her screams for help and begging for mercy. But these witches who had sold their souls to *Eblees*, the archdevil, showed her no mercy.

Everything happened fast. The old witch suddenly turned her head around, craning her neck and peering at the spot where he was standing. An all-consuming panic overtook him. She must have sensed his presence and the other witch curious to find out what distracted her partner from their ritual imitated her. All gallant notions of courageous rescue and just retribution evaporated from his mind.

He impulsively took a step backward and the earth suddenly caved under his feet. He lost his balance and skidded forward, his hands thrashing the ground in a vain search for something to hold on to. Unable to stop himself he fell in the open grave. He landed on his back amid the gravel loosened by his fall. Through the dust screen he saw two pairs of puzzled and angry eyes glaring at him.

He lost no time in picking himself up, scrambling on his elbows and staggering slightly. The old witch took a tentative step toward him, then she caught sight of his sword and froze. She was old, probably in her early sixties. Her lined face was contorted with loathing and anger. Her acolyte was much younger, not many years older than their victim. Their faces, hands and the fronts of their dresses were stained with blood.

Panic overtook him and for a moment he was totally paralyzed. Had they sensed this, his fate would have been sealed. After the panic there came the instinctive survival need. Keeping watchful eyes on them, he edged his way back. One glance at the opening was enough to confirm that escape was impossible. Climbing out of the crypt would require both hands and a precious minute or two, more than enough time for the two witches to

pounce on his back, stab him to death, cut his heart out and bury him alongside the dead girl. He had no choice but to confront them and with Allah's grace he would come out alive. It should not be difficult, he assured himself. After all he was a man and was armed with his ancestors' blessed sword. But, unlike them, he had never killed before. His thoughts went to his wife and two sons and his determination grew stronger.

He fumbled for his sword shouting his clan's war cry "Awlad Ali" calling on all his kinsmen, the descendants of Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, to come to his aid.

The old witch was startled at first, then she threw her head back and cackled. Her partner joined her and the crypt was full of the deafening echoes of their obscene laughter.

"Our uninvited guest is a *sayyid*! What an honor *mawlana*, our lord!" the old witch bellowed. Moving her dagger close to her heart and performing a slashing motion, she added: "We don't have to introduce ourselves. You do know whom we are. Don't you *sayyid*?"

He watched her in silence.

"Didn't your blessed mother warn you about walking in a cemetery after dark!" the old witch baited him. "And look what you've stumbled into." She clucked in mock sympathy.

His back against the wall, he watched her with horror and revulsion. Her mouth was fixed in a drool, and her heavily lidded lizard-eyes were glazed. A trickle of saliva or blood on her shriveled chin glistened. Despite her age she moved gracefully as if dancing.

It was a maneuver, a sly trick to distract him and he failed to realize this until it was almost late. Their tactic was simple and clever. While his attention was drawn to the old woman's antics, her acolyte would attack him. He saw her sudden rush toward him but could not react in time. If the young woman had a steady hand and aimed her dagger carefully, she would have seriously wounded him. Fortunately, her aim was a little low and too much to the right. The dagger grazed his left shoulder missing his throat by few inches. Before he could lift his sword and strike back, she retreated cursing him in a foul language.

His shoulder was throbbing with pain and he was bleeding. He was also furious. Until now, he had expected the two women to break down at any moment, throw themselves at his feet and beg for mercy.

He edged toward the platform going after the old witch. Something brushed softly against his left hand. It was the dead girl's hair.

"Your turn now *shaitana*, she-devil," he angrily shouted at the old woman.

"You found your tongue *sayyed*! and I thought you're blessed with dumbness," she mocked him, making small threatening moves with her dagger.

He suspected a repeat of their trick, and this time he was prepared when it happened. Anticipating their bluff, he turned to face the young woman just as she rushed toward him. As he moved forward to meet her advance, he saw the malicious glee in her eyes turning into alarm and finally replaced by fear. She tried to stop herself but it was not soon enough. He brought down his sword aiming carefully and caught her right arm. She shrieked with agony and dropped her knife. Whimpering and cradling her right arm with her left she staggered back. Her shocked eyes stared unbelievably at the blood flowing profusely from the long gash.

Keeping a watchful eye on the old woman he pursued her injured partner. The old witch shouted a warning and was answered with wailings and sobbing. Swinging his sword in a wide arc as much as the low ceiling allowed, he moved closer. With her back to the wall, right hand dangling uselessly at an impossible angle, face streaked with tears and blood, eyes shut against the impending doom, the young witch helplessly waited for the final blow. The old woman watched anxiously but made no attempt to come to her rescue.

He brought down his sword but before it contacted the injured woman he swiftly turned and dashed toward the old witch taking her by surprise. His sword flashed from left to right slicing deep into her exposed neck. She gave out a long deafening scream, and suddenly stopped as he pressed hard to sustain the blow. Blood splattered his face getting into his eyes and blinding him momentarily. He blinked hard to get the thick liquid out of his eyes and watched with horror and disgust as she twisted and crumpled to the ground. A gurgling sound came out of her mouth and a pink froth colored her thin lips. Her limbs flapped, twitched and then stopped.

He turned to the young witch and she screamed and fell to her knees. But he had no intention of killing her. He would spare her life if she reveals to him the names of their cult members especially their master, the chief heart butcher.

When the young *sayyid* came out of the crypt the sky was clear, growing pale in anticipation of another miraculous sunrise. He was tired and shaken but his work was unfinished.

II

FOURTEEN YEARS EARLIER

The intercom on the large desk suddenly came alive.

“The man has arrived, Excellency.” It was the voice of his private secretary. “Would you like to see him now?”

“Yes,” the man said curtly, taking off his reading glasses and folding them neatly into their case. He believed it would not fit his image to be seen wearing glasses in public. Only his family, personal physician and few friends knew that he used contact lenses.

There was a soft knock at the door and the young male secretary entered and stood aside with his hands respectfully tucked behind his back. Two men followed him inside. The older man in front took one step inside and stopped, his haggard face registering hesitation and apprehension. A slight push administered by the man behind him propelled him two more steps forward. The military-type man in the back then stood to attention and saluted smartly, the movement lifting the right side of his hand-tailored jacket and exposing the gun tucked into his belt. He was a personal bodyguard and a distant relative of the man sitting behind the desk. The secretary retreated closing the door behind him.

“You are Farhan, the astrologer.?” the man asked.

“Your servant, Excellency.” the astrologer answered meekly, his eyes downcast.

“People claim you’re an *ustath*, a master of your profession,” the man said toying with a golden pen.

“Me, sir!” the astrologer exclaimed fingering his chest. “I am an ignorant man. My father-God rests his soul-taught me few elementary things about the planets and stars and how to use his old astrolabe”, he added humbly.

“Don’t lie to me old man. No one lies to me and lives happily ever after.” the man said menacingly and the bodyguard shook the astrologer vigorously by the shoulder to confirm the seriousness of his employer’s threat.

“*Igta lisanee!* cut my tongue if I lie to you Excellency!” the astrologer comically lisped with the tip of his tongue extended out of his mouth and his trembling finger touching it.

Suppressing a smile, the man rose from his seat straightening his silk tie and buttoning his cashmere jacket as he walked from behind his desk and stood in front of the astrologer. To the rheumy eyes of the astrologer, his posture mimicked that of the ancient king or warrior battling with winged beasts and bull-men on the frieze adorning the wall to his left.

“A man paid you a visit less than a month ago and he asked you to consult the stars about my future. Being an old and wise man, you refused at first but greed being the strongest of your qualities, you could not resist the temptation of a thousand dinars.”

The astrologer listened in silence, his bowed head trembling slightly.

“You told that man the stars foretell a *qat'a*,” the man’s voice rising slightly, he added, “A cut in my fate putting an end to my career fifteen years from now. Is this true?” The man asked, staring at the alarmed astrologer.

“I am old, sir, No one pays attention to what I say. People call me a charlatan. Even my wife says I am senile,” the astrologer pleaded.

“Look at the man standing beside you,” the man prompted. “Don’t be afraid! Jalal bites only bad people and liars.” The bodyguard bared his yellowed uneven teeth. “Don’t you recognize him? Surely you wouldn’t forget the face of a man who gave you a thousand dinars for ten minutes of your time. It’s more than what a professor in our university earns in a whole year.”

“My eyesight has withered sir,” the astrologer whined, “It’s this illness....”

“I warned you about lying to me,” the man interrupted.

The bodyguard’s hands flew to the astrologer’s neck. “Shall I strangle him sir?” he asked pleadingly, his hands flexing and relaxing around the man’s throat.

“Not yet! We’ll give him one last chance because old men tend to be forgetful. But if he lies again...” he left the threat unfinished.

Once the bodyguard released his grip, a fit of coughing and wheezing seized the astrologer more out of fear over his life rather than the light pressure applied by the bodyguard’s massive hairy hands.

“spare my life, sir. I beg you, Excellency,” the astrologer squeaked holding his throat. “I remember now. “This honorable gentleman came to me and I told him what the stars told me.”

“The stars told you that fifteen years from now I’ll lose all this!” the man said gesturing with his hands at the contents of his office.

“You said I shouldn’t lie to your sir. That is what the Big Dipper and Deneb revealed to me,” the astrologer pointed at the ceiling then hastened to add, “I could be mistaken. It happened before-not once but many times.” His eyes bounced furtively between the man and his bodyguard.

“If you’re not mistaken this time is there a way to change or stop this oracle?” The man had turned his back to them, his clouded eyes staring through the panoramic bullet-proof window at the wide river winding its way through the city like a giant serpent.

“Kismet, sir, is said, to be engraved on one’s forehead and only Allah can change or rescind it,” the astrologer droned.

“It’s also said that even when an astrologer’s *nubwa*, prophecy, is proven true he is still a liar because only Allah knows the future,” the man said heatedly and the bodyguard lifted his hands drawing his thumbs and index fingers into a ring and the astrologer cringed sheltering his neck between his shoulders.

The man chuckled at the pantomime.

“So, a person cannot change his fate, *ha munagem*, astrologer?”

“Charity, sir,” his voice faltered. He swallowed and continued. “It is written charity can save a person from ill fate.”

“And what do I have to give away to avoid losing my position, power, huh?” He paused. “Perhaps I should give up everything now so that after fifteen years I’ll have nothing to lose,” the man said arching his body forward.

The astrologer thought it wise to remain silent.

“What do you think cousin Jalal?” the man asked his bodyguard.

“With your permission sir, I would like to wring this imposter’s neck”

“No, not yet.” the man said. “Now it’s my turn to tell your fortune astrologer. It is all written here in my hand not in the stars or on your wrinkled forehead. You see it?” he said raising his left hand with his palm facing the astrologer.

“Now hear this astrologer. It is written here that if your prophecy turn out to be true my predecessor will probably appoint you as his personal star-gazer and you and your relatives will prosper. If not, I am afraid there is a *qat’a*, a cut here.” The man said mockingly drawing a cross sign on his palm.

“And you will suffer the fate of false prophets.” and then turning to the bodyguard. “Now how much did he charge you?”

“A thousand dinars, Excellency.” the bodyguard said sourly.

“I will follow your advice astrologer and be charitable. I won’t charge you anything for telling your fortune. Anyhow your poor wife and children will need that money while you or rather both of us await our joint fate.” the man said then gestured to the bodyguard who saluted and led the astrologer out of the office.

III

THE PRESENT

Thiab dreaded flying. The company of his wife Karima and their two children, Adam ten and Sarah seven did not help. Because of them, he had to put on a brave face, camouflaging his panic with a foolish grin and every now and then restraining himself from gripping tightly the arms of his economy-class seat.

Something else was also nagging at his mind and it annoyed him even more than his flying phobia. Ten years have passed since his last visit to his native country and he was reluctantly making this journey with a different passport in his briefcase. Almost four years ago he made one of his life's few major decisions so far by relinquishing his previous nationality to become a subject of her Britannic Majesty.

His mind persisted in dwelling on the worst possible homecoming scenarios. All of them invariably began with few slaps and kicks delivered in front of his family to humiliate him and terminated in prolonged agonizing death. In between there would be countless sessions at the torture chambers.

Sarah was tugging at his sleeve. She wanted him to look at her drawing. He took the sketchbook welcoming the distraction. In the middle of the sketch, the head of sinister-looking animal craned above a dense tall grass field under a smiling spiky yolk-yellow face of the sun.

He said it was very good, nodding his head in sincere appreciation. Actually, it was not bad for a seven year old whom neither of her parents were artistically talented. He asked her if it was the snake from Kipling's *Jungle Book* – he bought them the illustrated book and the video - and she answered with a shrug which was a befitting response to his superfluous question. The reptile flashed large triangular teeth with sharp points dripping crayon-crimson blood which reminded him of a line of classical Arabic poetry. It went like this: if you see a lion's fangs don't assume that it is smiling.

The embassy official who stamped the visa on his British passport also beamed a big toothy smile at him. People like you, addressing Thiab, are our country's honorary ambassadors, he said. Then his hand flying to his head as if he had just remembered something, he turned to a stack of newspapers on a metal filing cabinet behind him, and after a short search he emitted a soft vocal expression of relief and pulled out an old Arabic newspaper slightly yellowed at the corners. His finger traced in the pedagogical style of Sarah's first grade teacher the caption under a large colored picture spread four columns wide on the front page. It read: "Al -

Qaid, the leader receiving a delegation of faithful returning immigrants”. With a big smile on every face polished and relaxed by years of living abroad and enormous bouquets of flowers in the background who could ask for more evidence.

Sarah interrupted his thoughts again. This time she wanted her sketchbook back. He dutifully expressed more parental encouragement, sat back, closed his eyes and tried to relax. The incessant din made by their fellow economy-class passengers did not help his mood. The late night flight direct from Heathrow airport was crammed with families returning from shopping holidays in London. Plastic carrier bags flashing the names and logos of every known clothes shop in Oxford and Bond Streets overflowed to the aisles turning them into almost impassable hurdle courses. Glancing at the faces of passengers in nearby seats he wondered if he looked just as grim and sour-faced as them. Surely people returning home should not look so unhappy unless of course home is ruled by the sanguinary Al-Qaid and his *Mukhabarat*, security henchmen.

It was illogical, he reasoned to himself for the umpteenth time. There was no cause for his worries. He was not a political animal and they would know that. Wouldn't they? Unlike most young men of his generation he never felt the urge to join a political party, march in a noisy demonstration or experience the illicit thrill of reading an underground newspaper. His father would have been pleased to know that. Politics, the old tribal chief used to repeat, was a filthy business fit only for city dwellers, the *hudris* whom he openly despised as drinking, whoring descendants of the Mongol and Turkish hordes.

“*Hudris* are like vegetables. Their roots are shorter than an infant's finger,” He would have probably used another organ in his metaphor if he was not talking to his son. “We are the palm trees of this land,” he added proudly.

The plane bounced on the runway and few frightened passengers screamed in panic. Before it came to a standstill everyone rushed to the exit doors gripping their briefcases, boxes and shopping bags, shouting and jostling, a crowd of Jonahs escaping the whale. As they came out a small jet plane was taxiing along the runway, its red lights flickering in the night.

The customs officer impounded Karima's women magazines and his Sunday newspapers with no explanation offered and issued them a receipt for a portable AM-FM radio which he labelled as contraband and scratched a mysterious code on their expensive leather suitcases with a piece of chalk.

Thiab looked uneasily at the stern face of the young passport official who was scrutinizing every page of his British passport with what he thought was unnecessary thoroughness. The official stopped to sip his tea and resumed his slow perusal.

“You’re a British citizen, Mr. Sakar?” he asked in a heavy-accented English.

Thiab hesitated for a moment, considering whether to answer in English or Arabic.

“Yes, for the past four years,” he answered, finally deciding on Arabic and immediately regretted giving more information than was required. A simple yes would have been enough.

“And before that you weren’t?” the official asked, knotting his eyebrows.

Thiab apprehensively thought that this conversation could very well be the prelude to an interrogation.

“No, I wasn’t,” he answered briefly.

“And you’re here on business or holiday?”

The queues behind him was becoming shorter as more people opted for faster-moving queues.

“Business. I am on a consulting assignment for the cement factory in Hira.”

The official’s eyes lit up with interest or was it suspicion? Then he swept their passports from the top of his desk into an open drawer.

“We’ll call your names when your passports are ready,” and shouting at the man behind him: “Next!”

As he walked back to his family, a scratchy female voice announced the departure of a flight to London. It must be the same airplane that flew them over here, and he wished strongly they were on it.

“A short delay,” he told them with the biggest smile he could fake.” It’s the routine. Don’t worry,” he added reassuringly. But he could tell from the expression on his wife’s face that his words had the opposite effect. She fretted over this trip from the very beginning. She even called the Home Office to inquire if it was safe for her husband to make a business trip to his native country. They put her through to a junior official who advised her to contact their embassy over there in case of any trouble. She told Thiab that the word noncommittal was coined by these bureaucrats.

She sat in silence, nervously twitching her single-string pearl necklace. Adam and Sarah had lost interest in their sketchbooks and toys and were tired and sleepy. He glanced around avoiding the silent questions in their eyes. Wherever he turned he saw pictures and posters of Al-Qaid Al-Azeem. The “Great Leader” smiled, frowned or looked majestically down upon them from every wall and column posing as the army chief of staff, a fellah in traditional headdress and scarf, and a chic urbanite in a smart double-breasted jacket. He felt an intense loathing for this man and for an unguarded moment it showed on his face. This man not only brought untold misery upon his people but stood to be blamed for this delay and the embarrassment it was causing him in front of his wife and children.

Thiab's self-images included, among other things, a loyal son, a devoted husband and a doting father but for the first time he was considering if he should add to these the selfish professional. David offered him the carrot of a junior partnership but, as any donkey would tell you, the carrot always dangled from the end of a stick. His offer was of the irresistible kind.

David Longman, one of the five senior partners in the Mayfair-based thriving Techno Consultant, the second in the firm's uncharted power hierarchy and the oligarch responsible for overseas operations was his boss. And when he paternalistically informed him that he was the natural choice for the assignment, disagreeing was out of the question. So, he went out and believed the diplomatic grin of the embassy official. Honorary ambassador indeed! In the final analysis David wielded a big stick and he had a providing family man role to fulfill.

"Is this yours?"

Thiab looked up. The finger of a bulky man in civilian clothes pointed at either Sarah sleeping on a bench or their luggage stacked on the floor nearby. His behavior carried the distinctive arrogance of a *Mukhabarat*, security officer.

'she can't sleep here. This isn't a hotel, you know.'

Thiab carried his daughter to his lap. He knew it would be futile to argue with this man. It could even prolong their waiting. His embarrassment was now complete because he had often bragged about the hospitality of his people in front of his family.

They assaulted the man's back with their eyes until he disappeared behind a door on which a no-entry sign was written in big red letters.

Almost an hour later the arrival terminal of Al-Qaid's international airport was deserted. All their fellow passengers had left to the safety of their homes and the make-believe comfort of hotel rooms. The terminal's lights had either been turned off or dimmed except for a powerful floodlight illuminating a huge hand-painted oil portrait of Al-Qaid. An old man in dirty mustard yellow overall who should have gone to bed hours ago mopped the marble floor. He methodically searched the contents of every trash bin sorting empty tin cans and bottles into a plastic bag before emptying it in his squeaky cart. He moved elliptically keeping a safe distance from them, and Thiab suspected it was intentional. The man probably expected the security police to appear suddenly and escort them away and he did not want to be in their vicinity when it happened.

Karima's patience was running low. She wondered if they had forgotten them and gone home. Thiab smiled at her sarcasm and the children yawned tearfully and managed to look thoroughly distressing. Then she stood up and announced that she intends to search for a public telephone and look up the number of their embassy. Before he could muster an objection, she said emphatically 'just in case' and walked away. Few minutes later she

came back. She had located a coin-operated telephone, she said, but there was no directory and anyhow they did not have the right coins.

Before she sat down, the terminal's silence was interrupted by a sonic boom followed by static and crackles and then a sleepy sonorous voice announced something incomprehensible except for Thiab's name. Thiab did not know whom to report to; all the passport control booths were empty. Then a man appeared from behind a door at the far end of the terminal and beckoned to him.

He followed him through a long dark corridor to the tarmac, having to quicken his steps to keep pace with the athlete-built young man. They passed an unfinished multistoried terminal and headed toward a smaller building. Heavily-armed guards in combat fatigues standing under the numerous floodlights watched their procession.

The man stopped under a huge neon sign flashing 'Welcome to Al-Qaid's country'. It was his country, Thiab thought. The country belonged to the man and not the other way around. He must be the envy of all past and contemporary absolute dictators.

A guard came from inside and saluted Thiab's escort. The neon sign hummed metallicly while the guard patted Thiab's jacket and trousers looking for concealed weapons. He saluted again, pirouetted and opened the door for them.

They walked through a dimly lit empty corridor, turned right and there was a large double door facing them. The man knocked and they entered a spacious air-conditioned office cluttered up with expensive imported furniture and colorful rugs. A large mahogany desk filled the rear of the room and less than five minutes later a troglodyte type of a man entered, waddled toward the desk and sat behind it. After a perfunctory inspection of the papers in front of him he raised his head and for a moment his puffed eyes studied Thiab. He gestured for him to sit down.

"Doctor Sakar. I hope we didn't keep you waiting for long." the man said politely. He continued, not waiting for a reply. "I had an important meeting. Fortunately for both of us it did not last long. You're an industrial engineer". His lower lip protruded in appreciation.

Thiab confirmed this.

"Interesting. You must be very talented. Otherwise the *Anglaisi*, the English would not have chosen you for this important assignment." Sitting up in his chair he continued. "They think that people like us suffer from some sort of congenital mental retardation." He tapped his head with a stumpy finger on which a massive gold and diamond ring sparkled.

"Our *Qaid*, leader, Allah protects him, wants the best for his people. We're still a developing nation but things have improved tremendously since your last visit. When was that? Ten years ago?"

Thiab was impressed. They were well-informed, and he had thought the security police did not keep a file on him. It must have shown on his face.

“The computer is a very useful gadget,” the man explained proudly. “But we still need the expertise of people like you.”

“I’ll do my best.” Thiab said dutifully.

“I have no doubt of that.” The security officer smiled benevolently. “I meet all sorts of people here. It goes with the job. Amazing how people can never forget their homeland! The *Angalisi* call it homesickness, eh? And how do you cure this sickness of the soul? *Basita!* easy; you go home. They stay away for years, ten, twenty, get married, have children, make millions but at the first opportunity they pack their suitcases and come back. And if they can’t do it in their lifetime, they want to be buried here so that on the Last Day they can witness the resurrection with their ancestors and kin.”

Thiab smiled and nodded in agreement.

“Even some traitors commit treason thinking that they are doing their country a service. Amazing!” he said staring at his interlocked fingers.

“Of course, you can’t judge people by their intentions. Foreigners disapprove of us because we show no mercy to traitors,” His voice roughened. “Not that we care.”

He was silent for almost a minute. Thiab waited impatiently for answers to the questions which buzzed around in his mind: why did this man want to see him? Why was he telling him all these things about traitors? What did it have to do with him?

The man looked at his watch and rose to his feet.

“We mustn’t detain you any longer.” he said almost apologetically. “We will sort out your passports and send them to your address in Hira.”

Thiab hesitated for few seconds. He could ask now or regret not doing so later.

“Can’t we have them back now?”

“Procedures must be followed, you know.” With his wormy fingers he plucked a slip of paper from a stack on his desk, wrote something on it, signed it with a flourish and stamped it.

“Here,” he thrust the paper toward Thiab. “If anyone asks to see your identification papers just show him this.”

It was an official receipt for their passports written in an almost illegible handwriting.

Thiab shook the man’s extended hand, thanked him and left.

He was escorted back to the arrival terminal where Karima and their children waited for him.

“They are keeping our passports for now,” he announced dreading Karima’s reaction.

“Why?” she said, shepherding the children out of the terminal’s sliding door.

“It’s the routine. That’s what the man in charge told me,” he answered, staggering under the weight of their luggage.

“I don’t like it.” she said moving briskly toward the taxi stop. The hot air was pungent with the smell of fumes.

They checked in the airport’s motel, a shabby one-storied structure. The signs in the lobby advertised the excellent services and cuisine of an oriental restaurant, a cocktail bar and a garden tea shop. All of these were closed for the night, the somnolent motel reception clerk informed them. There was no bellboy around and the clerk, probably an underpaid government bureaucrat, gave them their key, wished them good night and disappeared inside a back room.

Thiab lay on the double bed, his hands crossed under his head, watching the ceiling fan circulating the hot fetid air in the room. Adam and Sarah were sleeping on the other bed. They were too tired to change their clothes or eat the sandwiches which Karima had prepared from their lunch leftovers on the airplane.

Karima came out of the steaming bathroom with a wet towel around her and sat on the bed. He watched her toweling her short brown hair. Their children have the same color of hair. She pulled on a T-shirt, switched the fan to high and laid down beside him. She looked subdued and a worried expression clouded her eyes.

Tomorrow morning, she would wake up aching all over because of the fan. He knew that from previous experience. It was that or suffering the suffocating heat all night long. He considered putting the choice to her, wavered for a minute and then noticed she had fallen asleep.

The events of the day were still fresh on his mind. After a long and unpleasant wait, he finally fell into a disturbed sleep. He was later roused by a nightmare. It was still nighttime, and he could hear Karima breathing evenly beside him.

He let them sleep until mid-morning. Karima got out of bed in slow motion, complaining of muscle aches blaming the lumpy mattress for it.

After a hurried breakfast, Thiab hired a taxi to take them to Hira. The driver demanded thirty dinars but Thiab haggled with him and they finally agreed on twenty-five. The car had no air-conditioning and although it was not noon, the heat was suffocating.

The car headed east on the new airport road. More pictures of Al-Qaid were splashed on every telephone and electricity poles and the odd trees on either side of the road. They must spend a fortune on printing his pictures, Karima observed loudly. Thiab was horrified by his wife’s blatant indiscretion. He had warned her about talking politics within earshot of total strangers in this country. The taxi driver could well be a police

informer and may have been taught enough English to understand Karima's disrespectful remark on their revered Al-Qaid. If he could somehow warn her without attracting the man's attention. He had read about telepathic communication between husband and wife but if it was real and not something popular psychologists made up especially for women magazines, he had not personally experienced it. Finally, deciding on the easy and tested method he turned his head, winked at her and for good measure he bit his lower lip.

"What?" Karima asked with a puzzled look.

"Stop it Sarah!" Thiab said looking straight ahead.

"What did I do?" Sarah complained.

"Just don't talk too much. Words that fall off your mouth are not yours anymore. They belong to other people's ears and you cannot take them back," he said cryptically.

Thiab held his breath at an intersection where a slogan exalting Al-Qaid's wisdom and leadership charisma was hanging listlessly across the road. Karima did not utter a word and he sighed with relief, the message was received and understood.

The traffic became heavier as they entered the outskirts of the city. The taxi edged slowly past a huge mosque with an oval dome and a long slim lance-shaped minaret, past the national museum with two bearded and winged Assyrian bulls guarding its modern façade and a colossal bronze sculpture of Al-Qaid on horseback.

"I've already seen more than enough of this Al-Qaid character," Karima protested, her voice barely rising above the traffic noise. Thiab seethed with irritation.

So, this is the capital of the Arabian Nights, Karima thought disappointedly. Her eyes searched for relics of the golden past, anything remotely reminiscent of the majestic palaces, gardens as beautiful as the *fardos* of heavens and enchanting streams where Sinbad, Aladdin and other exotic heroes in afternoon shows at the Odeon battled with evil sorcerers and tyrannical viziers, discovered mythical treasures and rescued scantily-clad *huris* in distress. Even the ruins must have been torn down to make space for these drab cement buildings lacking in taste and color and which from the roofs of some rose the obscene muzzles of anti-aircraft guns, grim reminders of the country's recent border wars.

The traffic inched forward unmindful of horns blared by irked drivers. A new shiny Mercedes with tinted windows shot through a red light. No one paid notice, a sign of a subdued population.

At the perimeter of the city, they turned into a wide motor way and headed south toward Hira. The high-rise buildings and elegant villas gave way to clusters of mud and reed huts baking and rotting under a scorching sun. Thiab said it was a two hour-drive.

“It is not going to be a vacation.” These were her husband’s exact words back in London. However, he was not really trying to discourage them from coming along. He needed his family’s support and that is why she is here. And if she had made the wrong decision, it was for the best of reasons.

Karima tried to push these thoughts out of her mind by watching the fleeting scenery. It was different from the familiar English countryside. There were no rolling meadows, trimmed hedges and white painted fences. It was ugly, dusty and cruel. Large tracks of abandoned barren fields stretched ahead toward distant mirages, the horizon undulating with heat waves and the hot breeze blowing dust and tumble weed across the dry plain.

The people looked poor and miserable. Children in dirty rags playing in dry mud holes stopped and hooded their eyes with their hands to gape at them. Occasionally they saw a small boy or girl herding cows or sheep.

“Look Mom! It’s snow!” Adam said excitedly pointing left at a stretch of land covered with a mantle of muddy whiteness.

Thiab smiled.

“It never snows around here,” he said.

“This is salt. Too much underground water. The water comes up to the surface. The heat evaporates the water and leaves the salt behind.”

“Can they cook with it?”

“Sure. They used to. Now they prefer to get their salt from sea water.”

They drove past a small town made up of two thin ribbons of small look-alike houses on both sides of its main and only paved street. In a vain attempt to break the gray monotony, doors and windows shutters were painted bright red, green or yellow. The metallic short minaret of the small town mosque glinted in the noon sun, intensifying Karima’s sensation of the heat.

The town seemed devoid of life. Nothing moved or stirred. The shops were closed. Tables at the tea shop basked in the sun with bamboo chairs turned upside down on top of them. A half-starved donkey stood in the shade of a mud wall, head bent and looking thoroughly exhausted.

The stopped at a gas station and the suffocating smell of gasoline wafted inside the car driving Karima to roll up the windows in the back. A young boy in a stained shirt and tattered jeans dropped a rubber tire tube he was patching and producing a filthy rag from a trouser pocket began wiping the windshield. The driver shouted at him and he walked away.

They drove through more sleepy towns with impossible names to pronounce: Mahmoodia, Mahaweel, Khan Al-Nis.

Sarah said something about birds. Karima followed her pointing hand to large nests on the roofs of low mud houses. They were at least six feet wide with thick branches sticking out of them, obviously the nests of large birds. Karima thought of the Rukh, the legendary bird of the Arabian Nights attacking and sinking Sinbad's ship with boulders. Thiab was explaining to Sarah that these were storks' nests. It is a sanctuary for storks, he told her. People around here never hunt them or disturb their nests.

"Is it because they bring babies?" Sarah asked.

Thiab laughed and Karima smiled.

"Don't be silly," Adam said and Sarah mimicked him.

"Storks are beautiful birds. They look wise and sad, their necks bent down like this. People say to themselves: it is not right to hunt these beautiful birds." Thiab said wiping the perspiration from his face with a paper tissue.

"I don't like it when I am sad," Sarah said.

"Nobody does. It's just something you can't help feeling sometimes." He paused. "Would you like to hear the story of the *laklak*, stork and the snake?"

"Yes, we do," they all answered in the back.

"Then listen carefully. A long, long time ago, the stork used to build his nest in the open fields or in the marshes. At that time all God's creatures lived in peace with each other. So, the stork built his nest anywhere he liked. He was a king of the birds."

"I thought the eagle was the king of all birds." Sarah said.

"Don't be silly. It's just a fairy tale," Adam said.

"Don't call your sister names." Karima admonished her son.

"I think I can explain that. We have a queen in the United Kingdom, don't we? And there is a King in Spain and another in Jordan and many more Kings, Sultans and queens all over the world. The same thing with birds. The stork was and is still considered one of the feathered royalties."

"I understand now" Sara said.

Thiab turned his head, smiled and said: "Good." The look on Karima's face said: "Are you making this up?"

"All the animals were happy with this situation except the snake. He was full of venom." Giggles rose in the back. "One day while king stork was cooling his feet in a lake the snake sneaked into his nest and stole on of his chicks. When the *laklak*, stork, discovered this he was furious and swore to get even. He hunted that snake for months until he found it. He poked at its head, body and tail until it could not tell whether it was coming or going and fell in the river and drowned. Since that day storks have built their nests on the tops of buildings. That's the story of *laklak* and the snake."

Karima was awakened by her husband's voice.

"We're here," Thiab had said. She stirred and asked: "Where?"

“We’ve reach Hira.”

Karima looked around and saw a different terrain. It was green and lush with palm trees lined up densely on both sides of the road. A large sign greeted them in misspelled English: ‘Wellcome to Hira’.

She then saw the checkpoint. The driver slowed down and stopped the car behind a long queue of passenger cars and trucks. Three men in civilian clothes were checking papers. After a short wait it was their turn. A young man approached, thrust his pock-marked face through the open window, one hand resting on the roof of the car and addressed Thiab who gave him the receipt for their passports. The man examined the paper lackadaisically, turned it over, scrutinized Karima and the children then walked back toward a small pre-fab cabin.

She could never endure this kind of excitement, Karima told herself. She wondered how local people could go on living, doing the mundane things they usually do as if nothing was out of the ordinary. Not many meters from the checkpoint people unconcernedly worked in their fields and orchards. A female figure in a bright-colored dress appeared from inside a palm grove adding a touch of red to the dark green surroundings only to disappear again. A pair of young boys walked behind a donkey staggering under a heavy load of brushwood, one of them stopping briefly to collect a dry cow dung. The hot baked air carried to them the smells of animal, dust and recently irrigated fields. Finally, the man returned, handed the paper back to Thiab and ushered them forward.

Half an hour later, Karima was sitting at the dining table in the company villa which was going to be their home for the next three months. Not the house of any person’s reasonable dreams, she thought with distaste, running a finger through the dust film on the table. It was the best available accommodation, the company’s public relations manager assured them earlier. The polite, grey-haired man, dressed in a frayed double-breasted blue suit, was waiting for them at the factory. He apologized repeatedly for not meeting them at the airport but gave no reason for not doing so. He drove them in his car through the factory’s gate and turned into a country dirt road. It was a short bumpy ride and soon they came in sight of a large house partly concealed by a row of tall palm trees.

They pulled up in front of the house and climbed out of the car. Strands of barbed wire and jagged bottle glass grew out of the top of the high wall making Karima feel even less secure. The man unlocked the ornate wrought iron gate on what he called the river side of the house. He pushed against the gate that swung open slowly, its rusted hinges producing a grating wail. The children ran inside squealing with laughter.

Two oval windows in the house’s second floor looked down on them like huge open eyes. The dry skeleton of a giant ivy creeper drew a wild pattern on the front wall.

“It needs a fresh coat of paint,” Sattar, the public relations manager conceded. Other than that, the house is in good condition. They don’t build them like this anymore.”

The paintwork was battered and, in some places, it was completely peeled off exposing the ugly cement underneath. A spacious front garden was overtaken by shrubs and grass. The tall grass was flattened in some places as if a large animal or loves had rolled and laid in it. It would take a very long time to get this place in shape, Karima thought wearily.

On the ground floor, a heavy sliding door led from the entry to a large reception room. The velvet-cushioned seats needed upholstering, the springs in few of them were peeking through the material like some burrowing animals. An unused large marble fireplace stood in the middle of one wall.

In the dining room, an antique brass lamp was hanging over a twelve foot long table. A matching sideboard was stacked full of chipped crockery and discolored silver bearing witness to the sumptuous meals consumed in this room. Adjacent to the dining room there was a bathroom with a wood-fired water heater and a foul-smelling oriental toilet with no toilet seat.

Thick Persian carpets covered the floors of the four *haram*, women’s rooms at the back, their beautiful colors and intricate designs obscured by a fine layer of dust. Spring-cleaning had been obviously skipped for at least a couple of years, Karima observed to herself.

The children raced ahead of them on the marble staircase. One of the steps was dangerously chipped and Karima made a mental note to warn the children about it.

On the top floor, a spacious hall led to three bedrooms and a bathroom. A four-poster brass bed filled the middle of the master bedroom. Thiab remembered his parents sleeping in one like that. In the summers, they used to hang a mosquito net over the bed and he spent hours sitting inside pretending that it was a ship and he was its captain. In that vessel of his imagination he sailed anywhere he wished and in no time at all returned to the safety and comfort of home and family but now when he wants to be somewhere else, he has run out of ships, real and imaginary.

They stood on the balcony overlooking the back garden and the dense date grove farther beyond. Under the wide umbrellas of palm tops, orange, pomegranate and lemon trees stood in neat rows. Thiab told Sattar that the house is unmanageable without the services of a maid and a gardener, and the public relations man promised to do what he can.

Thiab left with Sattar to buy lunch and groceries. When he returned Karima was in an old T-shirt and jeans scrubbing the upstairs bathroom. The children were exploring the house after promising not to go into the garden until they made sure no snakes or scorpions were nesting in the tall grass.

The grilled meat he bought was as chewy as rubber erasers. Karima opened a can of processed cheese and made sandwiches which they ate ravenously at the dining table.

“Your mother should be given a cordon blue for her cheese sandwiches,” Thiab said with a full mouth. Karima threw a crumpled paper napkin at him missing her aim. The children tittered. Thiab thought: such moments of shared domestic bliss kept him going against overwhelming fears and self-doubt and he silently thanked his creator for them.

There was no television set in the house and Adam and Sarah finally noticed this late in the afternoon, the usual time for viewing their favorite programs. Thiab’s promise to buy one as soon as possible did not help to cheer them up and they finally settled down to a gloomy and dull evening.

IV

Despite the muggy heat, buzzing mosquitoes and strange beddings they slept until mid-morning. Thiab woke first, tiptoed out of their room and went to check on their children. They were still asleep. From the window overlooking the front of the house he saw a small car parked in the driveway, its driver sitting inside smoking a cigarette.

After a breakfast of more cheese sandwiches and tea, Thiab left in the company car. The General Manager was waiting for him, his male secretary informed him before ushering him in, a hint of reproach in his voice. The factory's senior executive was a short man in his forties, his face haggard as if he had lost weight lately because of an illness, and his black hair was turning gray at the temples. The wall behind his large desk displayed a picture of Al-Qaid inaugurating the factory and two charts depicting fluctuating production and sales figures.

After the usual greetings he called his secretary on the intercom and instructed him to send for the heads of departments and a round of tea. The security chief was the last one to arrive. His name was Asswad and he had a grim face to match his unsavory occupation. His left cheek was disfigured by the deep circular scar of a large boil that did not heal well. His arrogant high-bridged nose reminded Thiab of an overbearing uncle. Every time Thiab looked at the man his eyes obtrusively wandered to the miniature extinct volcano and he imagined the unhatched larva of a ring worm squirming underneath the sallow skin. Thiab toned down his instant dislike for the man with genuine sympathy for his deformity.

The deputy general manager for operations, a stocky jovial man in his middle forties, introduced himself as cousin Hadi. The name and face drew a blank from Thiab's memory but he must have at least two dozen cousins and could not be expected to remember all of them. After fifteen minutes of boring small talk and two rounds of strong tea sweeter than waffles syrup, Hadi suggested taking him on a tour of the factory and he gratefully accepted.

As they came out of the office, Hadi admitted that they were not actually cousins but kin. He persisted, however, in introducing him to everyone they encountered as his cousin, the foreign expert from overseas, openly enjoying the surprised doubtful looks it provoked.

"When you mention a foreign expert," Hadi explained. "the picture that comes to their minds is that of a white American or European who can't speak a word of their language. They still find it difficult to accept a Japanese as such."

"That's not very encouraging," Thiab said anxiously.

Hadi grinned.

“The local vocalist does not sound as good as the one from the next village,” he said wisely.

“I can’t sing-not even in the privacy of my bathroom,” Thiab said humorously.

“Every soprano, baritone and tenor in this place had his chance to sing away this factory’s problems with little success. Most of them would love to see you booed out so don’t expect much moral support. But if you hear the odd clapping it would probably be your cousin Hadi.”

Thiab laughed. He was ready to accept Hadi as likable decent fellow and a potential friend but he can’t trust him, not yet. He could be a party member and from what he knows about this country it would be extremely difficult for someone who is not a party member to reach a senior position such as Hadi’s unless he is exceptionally talented. And as anyone here could tell you, party members are loyal first not to their families or friends but to their leader Al-Qaid.

“You should also know that Asswad was against the idea of inviting an outsider to meddle in our affairs as he put it. He is not against you personally but he is the security chief here and a senior party member. It’s his job to suspect everyone and everything.” Hadi stopped, looked around and then continued in a voice barely above a whisper. “In the first year of the first war this factory was assigned a high national security classification. You couldn’t enter, move around or go to the toilet without a clearance. Everything that came out of here went straight to the front. Security regulations have been eased somewhat but for some unknown reason that nobody knows or dares to ask about, this establishment is still considered vital for our national security.”

Thiab frowned

“This is not going to make my task any easier,” he said.

“It hasn’t been easy for any of us including Asswad,” Hadi said throwing his head upward.

They were walking through the hallway when a tall middle-aged man in dirty blue overall burst through the front door. Dark smudges covered one side of his face and a nasty gash ran the length of his forearm. He looked as if he had just walked out of an accident or a scuffle. He shouted at the receptionist demanding to see Asswad, the security chief, immediately. The alarmed receptionist shot a furtive glance in Hadi’s direction and the man turned his head and saw them.

“*Ustath*, sir,” he shouted walking toward them.” I can’t go back there. Please tell them not to send me back,” he stammered, gesturing wildly with both hands.

“Calm down!” Hadi said tapping the man lightly on the shoulders. “Tell me. Aren’t you with the transportation and cargo people?”

“Yes sir. I am a lorry driver. My name is Naif, Sir, your servant,” the man said meekly, his eyes downcast.

“I know you Naif. You’re a good driver,” Hadi added pointing at the man’s hand. “You should go to the infirmary and have the nurse put a bandage on this.”

“It’s nothing, just a small cut and bruises. But they said it would be worse, much worse, next time,” Naif spluttered out.

“Who are they? Who said this nonsense,” demanded Hadi.

“The Azari farmers, sir. They attacked me. At least five of them. I was driving through the Azari land. I have done this hundreds of times before. A man was standing beside the dirt road waving at me to stop. I thought he wanted a lift to his village.” He paused to catch his breath. “I know it’s against regulations but we, all the drivers, do it. You know, trying to be friendly with the local villagers. Before I even stopped the lorry, they were all over it, like monkeys. They must have been hiding between the reeds. They were armed with daggers and sticks. One of them did this to me,” he said raising his wounded arm for them to see.

“Are you sure you did not do anything to provoke them?” Hadi asked.

“I was just doing my job. I swear by all the holy Imams. They said we’re stealing their land and threatened to kill all trespassers in the future.”

“Have you seen these men before?” Hadi said.

“I can’t tell. I only saw their eyes. The rest of their faces were covered with their *yashmags*, headdress,” he said and then added pleadingly” Mr. Hadi, I don’t want to go back there. I have a family and two small children. Who will look after them if something happens to me?”

“What’s wrong Naif?” an authoritative voice demanded. They turned and saw Asswad coming toward them. “Why are you making all this racket, huh? he asked, greeting Hadi and Thiab with a curt nod, and immediately assuming the posture of a cockerel in charge of the hen coop.

“I was just telling Mr. Hadi, *ustath* Asswad, sir. Five Azari farmers attacked me less than an hour ago. They knocked me down, cut my arm and broke the headlights in my lorry. If you come back, they threatened me, you’ll be sorry,” he said, nodding his head emphatically.

“They won’t get away with this. We’ll find them and soon,” Asswad said menacingly.” Don’t worry. Next time you go out there an armed guard will be riding next to you.”

“No, no, please *ustath*, sir,” a panicked Naif pleaded.” This is the Azari land. They are a dangerous lot. If the guard kills or injures one of them they’ll come after both of us.”

“Stop it!” Asswad shouted angrily at Naif. “Do you think this is a personal feud between you and a gang of tribesmen. If what you’re telling me is true then this was a serious incident, an act of insurrection. Our government would not tolerate this I assure you.”

“I’d rather resign my job than go back there and orphan my children,” Naif said defiantly.

“Go ahead and resign. Of course, it’s my duty to notify the local *Mukhabarat* branch and they’ll invite you over to explain to them why you had to resign,” Asswad said.

The alarmed look on Naif’s face reflected his keen awareness of the implicit threat conveyed by Asswad’s words. He turned to Hadi for support.

“Please Mr. Hadi. I don’t want to go back there. I’ll work as a janitor, sweep the floors, anything.”

Thiab felt sorry for the man. Such concessions made obsequiously to a younger man was the ultimate humiliation for a proud tribesman.

“Look!” Asswad said heatedly. “Neither Hadi nor anyone else can do anything about it.” He glanced sideways at Thiab to indicate that this included him. “Now stop complaining like a small boy and come along. I want to hear the whole story.”

Asswad turned and walked slowly toward the elevator with the dejected Naif trailing behind.

Thiab and Hadi walked out of the building into the noisy sun-drenched yard. Thiab inhaled the hot dry air. It felt as if scorching metal rods were forcing their way up his nostrils. All around them misty tendrils of hot air rose from the jungle of crisscrossing pipes and large tanks.

“Our relatives, the Azari are angry because we’re skimming the topsoil off their precious land and dumping our industrial waste in its place,” Hadi said squinting in the bright sunshine.

“Do you blame them!” Thiab stated strongly. “How about compensation?”

“Not much. But that’s not the issue here. you know how much value our people put on their land.” He continued, ticking on his fingers. “First comes the land. It has supreme value as you know. A cow, another life-sustaining asset, comes second. Sons are third in importance and finally daughters and wife or wives. When you take away a man’s land you literally deprive him of the ground upon which his whole life stands.”

Hadi stopped to shake hands with an elderly worker and ask about his health and family. The man was obviously pleased with the attention.

“He is one of them, the people I was talking about. He had been a farmer all his life and one day an insolent government official came and threw him and his family out of their ancestral land telling him that it was in the public interest. But he does not understand what that means. He only knows that without a land to cultivate he has no alternative but to accept a menial job in an office or a factory taking orders and abuse from someone whom he does not recognize as socially his superior.” He stopped and sighed.

“They’re still Bedouins at heart and haunted by visions of the desert where they answered to no one except God and their tribal *urf*, customs.”

Half an hour later they stood in the shade of a building and Hadi announced that it was getting too hot to continue and suggested postponing their tour till the afternoon. Thiab agreed and they silently walked back to the administration building. Straight ahead thick ropes of smoke spiraled upward from three of the four huge chimney pipes. To their right a gang of workers hauled cement bags into a lorry while a long queue of trucks awaited their turn. The men moved languidly in the stifling heat, stopping frequently to take a break and wipe the sweat off their faces with their hands. The temperature must be over forty-centigrade, Thiab thought. People around here do not believe weather bulletins but when the *simoom*, blistering wind blowing from the desert fill their mouths and eyes with sand, and tar bubbles appear in the street and their shoes or sandals get stuck in them they complain to one other: "It's hot today. What sins have we committed to deserve Allah's wrath." And then go about their business.

In the afternoon Hadi called to say that he was caught up in an unscheduled meeting and would he mind if he sent someone in his place. Thiab wanted to inspect the cooling system in one of the production units and the eager young engineer deputizing for Hadi escorted him.

Thiab was carefully climbing the narrow metal staircase, his hands firmly clutching the rails. He did not fear heights. In his childhood, he used to compete with other children in his village in climbing tall palm trees. He was good at it but not good enough to attempt the leper trees. These were tall diseased trees, their thin trunks so smooth and slippery that only an expert climber could reach the top and come down without the help of a harness. After a neighborhood boy fell from a tall palm tree and broke his back, his mother made him swear a solemn oath never to climb a tree. She threatened him that if he ever climbed a tree, she would gasp so loud that all the sonless women in the village would hear me and say *weeh*, poor woman and then I would keel over and die. Mothers in their village cursed and beat their children for the slightest misbehavior but not his mother. She never laid a hand on him and instead she slapped her thighs if she saw him doing something wrong. To stop him from disobeying her, she would say to him: “if you do this, my heart will burst and I’ll shut my eyes tightly and die,” or “if you disobey me the angel of death will come to me in my sleep and in the morning when you try to wake me up you’ll find me as cold as these floor tiles and they’ll bury me in a dark grave where the worms will devour me and in the night darkness you’ll wake up and look for me but I’ll be gone forever.” Her manipulation worked every time; he would cling to her dress and tearfully shout his solemn promises to do or stop doing whatever she wanted. He always believed that his overprotective mother

did this out of love and he still does regardless of what Freud and his students believe.

Reminding himself that this was not the right place for nostalgia he resumed his climbing.

He was halfway up the staircase when he heard the thunderous noise. At first, he thought it was an explosion. He stopped and looked up and saw a dark object hurtling down toward him. It was going hit to him and he was going to die, his mind screamed in panic. There wasn't enough time to climb down the fifteen or so rungs he had climbed and no place to hide in from the gravity-propelled death. Instinctively he hugged the staircase flattening his body on the hot metal and closed his eyes. Another thunderous noise sounded ominously nearer. Few seconds later he felt and heard the rush of air as the object tumbled down hitting the concrete with a loud clatter.

He waited a moment before opening his eyes. Looking downward he saw a pipe section lying on the ground about three feet from the base of the staircase. It must have hit the landing above him and fell sideways missing him by inches. He began to descend the staircase. It was a slow and painful descent. His legs were shaking and he clung to the railings for dear life.

Someone offered him a hand and he leaned on it to climb down the last step. A small crowd of concerned and curious faces gathered around him. Then he heard Hadi's voice.

"Are you all right?" Hadi asked, a worried look on his flushed voice.

Thiab took a deep breath and found his voice.

"I'm fine, a little shaken. That's all." He chuckled nervously. "I thought it was the end. There wasn't even enough time to see my whole life in a flash," he added in English.

"Damn, damn!" Hadi shouted angrily and addressing the crowd: "Doctor Thiab is safe and sound as you can see. Thank you for your concern. Please go back to your work now." The men dispersed quietly.

"This stupid engineer should have known better. A maintenance team is working up there. And the fools were supposed to cordon this area off. I swear one day they'll give me a heart attack and I'll die on the concrete floor before the ambulance arrives." he complained, reminding Thiab of his mother's manipulative threats and he smiled.

"Accidents do happen," he said in a near normal voice.

"We have had more than our share of freaky accidents lately. Asswad suspected sabotage in every case but he sees saboteurs in his wet dream. Last year, he had two workers arrested by the local Mukhabarat branch pending further investigation, poor bastards. Don't be surprised if he drops by to discuss this incident," Hadi said.

Thiab hid his shaky hands in his trousers pockets.

“This reminds me. When can I have a look at your accident records?” Thiab asked.

“I can have them delivered to your office within the hour. But why the hurry? My advice to you is to take the rest of the afternoon off and go home,” Hadi said looking at him closely.

“I’m fine.” Thiab insisted. “I am going back to my office now.”

“As you wish.” Hadi shrugged. “I heard they gave you the Badiri’s mansion.”

“You mean that old derelict house is considered a mansion,” Thiab said sarcastically.

“It has its history.” Hadi said vaguely. “I hope you’re comfortable in it.”

“I expect we’ll have it dusted and the cobwebs removed before the end of summer. Other than that, it is adequate.”

“Good, good, I’m glad.”

Thiab stopped. “Wait! Did I see a strange look in your eyes or was it my imagination? What’s wrong with the Badiri’s mansion? Is it haunted? The children would probably love to see a ghost, something interesting to tell their friends about when they go back.”

“No! no. There is nothing wrong with the house. And now before we part ways, how about lunch this Friday? Nothing much, just our usual weekend meal, grilled fish and a bushel of onions. And no excuses please. These were my wife’s instructions.”

“We’d love to but this Friday we’re going to see my uncle Noor.” Thiab explained.

They set a date for the following weekend.

V

The sight of his uncle Noor sitting between Adam and Sarah brought back fond memories. Childhood's scenes he had not remembered for a long time suddenly surfaced in his mind. In one of them, he saw his uncle in overalls standing at the helm of a riverboat. Noor lost interest in farming after the death of his father who wasted his short life toiling on the landlord's farm for a small share of the crops. At that time, landlords bought tractors and water pumps and had to employ city people to work on them. Noor told him about the long hours he spent watching these skilled people operating the new machines. Tribesmen avoided them because they were city people but not Noor. They were grateful for his gifts of dates and yogurt drinks and patiently answered his questions about their machines. It took him one summer to learn all he needed to know to qualify as a *dra'wheel* or operator of water pumps and tractors. Landlords hired him to repair their precious machines and in time he saved and borrowed enough to buy a used riverboat. He ferried farmers and small loads to and from the town until his retirement.

His uncle has grown older and thinner, his shoulders stooped and his hair turned gray. The lines around his eyes deepened when he smiled but it was still his radiant sayyid's smile, as his mother used to describe it, and he felt a rush of fondness toward the kind old man. He watched him bury his hand deep into his pocket and bring out two pieces of wrapped toffee which he offered to Adam and Sarah. He chuckled saying that his grandchildren love them but his younger daughter who washes his clothes disapproves because she must scrub hard to remove the stains and stickiness.

Noor had invited them for lunch at his house in Shamia but first they would make a short stop at Wadi Al-Salam cemetery to pay their respects to Thiab's parents. As they walked into the front veranda, two crows flew from the garden, squawking in panic, and their wings flapping audibly as they struggled to gain altitude. Karima glimpsed a small furry red mass at the spot from which they flew, probably the carcass of a small animal. His uncle offered to remove the remains of the dead animal but Thiab wouldn't hear of it.

It was a short ride to the cemetery. They drove through the shade of a thick palm grove to a wide desert road. In the horizon, a golden dome glinted.

Karima had seen nothing like it. It was the size of a small town. Rows and rows of graves of different shapes and sizes extended in every direction, interspaced by slender short minarets and green or white domes with Quranic inscriptions.

Adam and Sarah have never been in a cemetery before and she wondered what questions and thoughts were going through their curious, immature minds. Thiab saw nothing wrong in children visiting their ancestors' graves. It was too morbid for her but apparently not for those living in this country – including her husband - where many old people refused to go anywhere without their shrouds and some even wore them under their clothes. She herself felt uneasy on her irregular visits to her parents' graves in the small cemetery east of London. And this cemetery is so different. There were no trees, flower or grass, and graves were brick and mortar structures mushrooming in the middle of a vast wasteland.

They stopped the car to make way for a burial procession. A turbaned man leading in front of the casket carried by several pallbearers intoned some words in Arabic which the mourners behind him echoed. A group of wailing women in black followed them from a distance. Men jostled to carry the casket hoping for divine favor as Thiab explained. The procession veered to the right and disappeared behind a cluster of graves leaving behind it a contagious feeling of melancholy.

The scene brought to Karima's mind memories of her father's funeral. It was a short parsimonious ceremony attended by a handful of close relatives and elderly friends. He died a miserable man in a strange bed alone at night in an old people's home exactly two months and six days after his admittance. He died peacefully, the manageress assured them, and she angrily asked her how she could tell if she was not there beside him when it happened. The unperturbed woman stood in her beige flannel suit, her head slightly skewed, neutralizing Karima's anger with a smiling mask on her face sympathetically reserved for remorseful bereaved relatives on the verge of hysteria.

Her father regularly complained of the staff, food and other residents. He pleaded with her mother to take him back but she refused saying that she was old herself and could barely look after herself. And to justify her decision to Karima she told her about her senile father urinating in the corners of their bedroom, behind doors and cupboard, and once in her precious Limoges porcelain souprière, chipped in two places when it was bought from a local antiques shop for sixty two pounds ten years earlier. She had brought him chicken soup in it.

"I thought he didn't like the soup and to show him that it was good I served myself a spoonful and he stood there watching me and did nothing to stop me." Karima felt like laughing and crying at the same time. Her mother infuriated by her father's behavior swore at him and when he returned the insult, she hit him with the back of her hand. She brushed aside a tear that escaped out of her eye and faintly smiled at Thiab's worried look.

Thiab and Noor stepped out of the car and walked toward what appeared to her as a half-buried small room. Thiab had not asked her to accompany them, and after a moment of hesitation she followed them. They were standing in front of an iron gate, their hands raised skyward in supplicant prayer. When it was over, Noor produced a key chain from his pocket and chose an old fashioned key with which he opened the rusty padlock.

She followed them through a dark short corridor to a vault. She caught her breath at the faint smell of decomposition. It was more spacious than it appeared from the outside. At least two dozen rectangular slots extended deep inside the walls on either side of them. All of them were empty except three. Thiab crouched near the sealed slots, resting his forehead on the rough wall and after a moment his body heaved sobbingly. Noor also crouched and covered his face with his *yashmaq*. Karima quietly retraced her steps back to the car.

Not far from where the car was parked three women in black squatted near a grave. One of them poured water on the grave from a green plastic pitcher, her lips moving in prayer. It must be an offering, Karima thought and reminded herself to ask Thiab about it. Few minutes later, one of them an old woman of indefinite age, walked to the car carrying a large flat loaf of bread. The driver was frantically gesturing to the woman to go away but Karima took the bread thanking the woman in Arabic. The crisp bread was covered with specks of minced meat and onion and after tasting it she gave Adam and Sarah each a small piece but the driver declined waving his hand and shaking his head vigorously. When they came back a grim Thiab took away the bread from the children telling them they shouldn't eat before lunch. He later explained to her that charity bread is an offering for the salvation of the dead person's soul and for poor people only. And as some local people believe, if you pretend to be poor God may decide to grant you this wish and make you destitute.

After a twenty minute drive on a modern motor way they reached a wide river which they crossed on a pontoon bridge. As the car edged slowly on the single narrow lane the bridge swayed and creaked under them. Adam and Sarah found the experience exciting but not Karima who shot frantic sideway glances at the strong current. Two or three more feet to the right or left and the car would plunge into the river. An old woman walking in the opposite direction stopped and held the thick cord running the length of the bridge with both hands. She was still there rooted to the spot bobbing up and down with the motion of the bridge when they reached the other bank.

The swamps on the other side of the river were alive with the deep monotonous sounds of insects. Cranes, swans and sandpipers waded in the shallow water, their heads bent down and beaks serenely pecking at the water. They seemed like peasants working in their rice paddies.

“Look, mom! *Laklak, laklak*, storks!” Sarah shouted pointing at the beautiful birds.

Reeds stood still in the windless air. In the far distance to their right bulldozers and heavy trucks moved to and fro like frenzied pre-historic monsters.

Noor said something to Thiab and they both looked to their left. Black thick ropes of smoke rose sluggishly from beyond the horizon. Two Toyota land cruisers raced ahead of them blaring their horns and frightening a flock of birds out of the marshes.

The car slowed down to negotiate a difficult curve and they came upon a roadblock. Three cars straddled the narrow road and a group of men in jungle warfare uniforms stood nearby. Before the car came to a stop two of them walked toward it clutching their Kalashnikovs. One poked his head on the driver side and barked an order at the driver who fumbled behind the sun visor and handed the man the car’s papers. Noor was showing his identification papers to the other man. Thiab was nervously searching his trousers pockets.

“I must have left the receipt in my other trousers.” he said to Karima in English, then he addressed one of the armed men who shook his head motioning him to get out of the car. Thiab opened the door and stepped out.

Karima watched incredulously as the man searched her husband for concealed weapons, then took him firmly by the hand and marched him toward the parked cars. Noor said something to her but she caught only one word, *milishia*, the militia.

Thiab was standing close to a new shining black Mercedes talking and gesturing at someone sitting inside. She could not see the man but her mind conjured up the image of an ugly obese man with cruel features toying indifferently with his silver worry bead. Her thoughts uncontrollably raced through a terrifying scenario: the man, a Mukhabarat official would refuse to believe Thiab’s story, put him under arrest and have him transported to their local branch. And would they release him if they brought the receipt? It would be a horrible ordeal for her husband, and all of them, if he had to spend the night in jail.

Their faces turned leftward as more Toyota land cruisers appeared on the dirt road parting the swamp land. They stopped at the roadblock and more armed militia men poured out of them, laughing and embracing each other. Two of them joined hands and lifting their weapons above their heads performed a war dance. Karima looked with open revulsion at the primitive exhibition. Thiab was also watching. To her surprise she saw him raise his hand and shout a greeting at one of them. One of the new arrivals looked in Thiab’s direction and then walked toward him.

The sound of gunfire startled her and she protectively hugged her children. For a moment she could not see Thiab and she panicked. Then she saw him talking to the other man. Thiab pointed at their car and the man peered at them. She began to breathe more easily after Thiab shook hands with the militiaman, turned and walked back, a relaxed smile on his face.

“His name is Asswad,” Thiab said after the car was moving on the road again. He is the security chief at the factory, and a senior officer in the local party militia. Lucky for us he was around or...” He left it unfinished and smiled at the worried faces of Adam and Sarah.

His relationship with Asswad has not advanced beyond polite nods and curt greetings in the factory. He did not like the man and he never thought he would need his help.

He signed and said: “poor Azaris.”

“Who are these Azaris?” Karima asked. He turned eastward. A breeze has risen and the smoke lines were now traveling erratically.

“This is the homeland of the eastern Azaris. The party militia you saw at the roadblock had just returned from raiding their village. That’s what Asswad told me. They must have set fire to their huts and probably their fields also.”

“But why?” Karima asked, a horrified expression on her face.

“The factory needs the Azari land and the Azaris want to keep it. The other day a group of Azaris beat up a factory driver and Asswad hinted at some reprisal action, but I never imagined something that harsh.”

“You mean brutal, savage,” Karima said heatedly. “They could have arrested the responsible people and put them on trial.”

“And they should have a democratic system of government, free elections and a due process of law. But as any old sailor could tell you: the wind does not always blow favorably.”

Karima raised her brows and rolled her eyes in a show of exasperation at his bucolic wisdom. Thiab thought she looked endearing even when she made ugly faces at him.

“All right! The bottom line is that if you dare go against Al-Qaid and his party they’ll make you pay a heavy price. They were not just punishing a bunch of hot-headed farmers back there. They were setting an example for all to see. You lift a finger against us and you are liable to lose both hands.” He paused for a moment. “They had to work hard to subdue these people. Honor and dignity for these people are measured by the sweat on your forehead. They call it *haya* water. For every insult you take lying down you lose a drop of *haya*. It evaporates and can never be replaced. And one day you may wake up with a forehead as dry as a sheepskin at the tannery.”

“I thought *haya* means life?” Karima asked.

“Yes,” Thiab answered.

“I don’t like them. They frightened the birds. Sarah complained.

“You were also scared,” Adam teased his sister.

“No, I wasn’t.” Sarah insisted.

“We were all scared. It’s only natural,” Karima stressed.

“And so were the Azaris for their life and *haya*.” Thiab said reflectively.

They entered the outskirts of a small town. Mud huts gave way to small austere brick houses punctuated by few modern buildings with the usual Al-Qaid’s pictures and political slogans defacing their fronts. Before reaching a bridge, they turned right and drove alongside the river, past thriving tea shops, an elementary school where Thiab said he spend few years and an old mill. A group of women sat on the riverbanks scrubbing rags, pots and pans. Nearby small boys swam in the river, their deeply tanned bodies scarring the river’s silvery face.

Thiab sent Karima off with a nod and an encouraging smile. She followed Noor through a long corridor to the women’s quarters. Noor stopped in front of a door and coughed in his fist announcing his presence. The door opened to a large hall in which ten women in black sat on mattresses on the floor. They rose to their feet murmuring greetings and one of them, an old matriarch walked toward her, kissed her affectionately on both cheeks and led her by the arm to the other women.

Karima sat with a fixed smile on her face. They whispered and gestured toward her and generally made no attempt to hide the fact that they were discussing her. One of the three comely girls, sitting opposite her, could have been Thiab’s wife and she, a foreign woman, had taken him away from them. She would not be surprised if they resented her. She would if she was in their place but not her children whom they considered their kin regardless of whom their mother is. Sarah sat between two young women who tweaked her cheeks, examined her hair and every now and then hugged her. One of them put her finger near her daughter’s eyes and then on her own eye pointing out the resemblance. Karima smiled and nodded her recognition of the genetic imperative.

Finally, Noor came and took them back to the men’s reception room. Thiab said he liked her perfume. She sniffed herself and smelled the women’s scent of attar and jasmine.

An old silver sword hanging on the wall near the mandatory Al-Qaid’s picture caught her attention and she asked Thiab about it.

“It’s an old sword.” he said, bringing it down. He tried the handle and it slid out of its sheath easily.

“Careful! You’ll cut your hand,” Karima warned.

“It’s a rusty only thing.”

“It’s beautiful!” she said. “It must be worth a fortune.”

“I don’t think they want to sell it. Every sayyid has one like it, the sword of justice and virtue. Noor could tell you few terrifying stories about it.”

Noor bouncing one of his grandchildren on his knee looked at them and smiled. Every few minutes the toddler would deliberately drop his pacifier on the bare floor, grumble and frown and Noor would obligingly fetch it, wipe it clean on his robe and put it back in the open mouth. They both appeared to be enjoying their little game.

Lunch lasted more than an hour. After the main dishes they were served homemade dumplings and delicious watermelons. They left after the customary two rounds of tea.

Noor insisted on coming along. The driver took them by a different route. It was a long drive on a bumpy dirt road and countless makeshift bridges on small canals. Karima did not mind the discomfort if another encounter with the obnoxious militia could be avoided. She was a little apprehensive at one point when an armed man on a handsome Arabian horse came out of a thick palm grove barring their way. He turned out to be one of Thiab's numerous cousins and they climbed down to greet him.

It was late in the afternoon when their car stopped in the house's driveway. Karima never imagined she would feel so relieved to see the shabby edifice. She was so exhausted that she did not bother to ask Thiab about the parcel he brought into the house. She assumed it was a gift from Noor and he would eventually tell her about it.

She was lying down in her bed when Sarah came in babbling excitedly about her father taking a shovel and a plastic bag out to the garden to remove a dead rat. Observing her mother's discomfort, she went on describing in gruesome detail the mutilated carcass. Her mother threw a pillow at her and she ran out giggling.

VI

Karima has never in her life bought so many books at one time. When Thiab told her that they were spending the summer in a small rural town with no cinemas, theaters or decent restaurants, she went out and bought two dozen books, most them bestsellers. She packed them in a small suitcase with an assortment of non-prescription medicines for upset stomachs, insect bites, fevers and colds. Ten days have passed since their arrival and so far, she had not made much progress in her reading. She blamed the heat which sapped her energies and the endless house chores. While Thiab was at work she was busy cleaning, tidying up and preparing food for Adam and Sarah who appeared to have sublimated their childish need for play and amusement with a gourmand's appetite. They complained of boredom and more so after few hours of watching the public television channel on the television set delivered by a public relations employee. Every night they were treated to hours of Al-Qaid's long speeches and daily activities. They were also unhappy because the garden was still forbidden territory to them. Sattar, the public relations manager, told Thiab he was still looking for a gardener and a house cleaner. One morning, the dejected looks on her children's faces sent her out to the front garden equipped with a shovel, a hoe and an old manual lawn mower she had discovered in the servant's quarters. After an unproductive hour of work, she came inside complaining that the top of her head would melt down before she could accomplish anything.

On an unusually mild afternoon Thiab suggested exploring the fields and palm groves around the house. He, acting the role of the expedition's leader, said they would take a straight course to the river and instructed the children to keep their eyes open for anything suspicious and report it at once. They laughed at their father's act, solemnly saluted him and then laughed again.

Thiab was the games master in the family and he never tired of making up games to amuse them. Last evening while sitting in the front veranda, he suggested a game of counting shooting stars. Adam saw three and Karima two but a disappointed Sarah reported only one. There were so many stars shooting in the clear black sky Karima thought making a wish was even more childish than usual.

They walked on a thin dry path alongside a small canal feeding the rice planted fields. Cutting through an abandoned field they saw a couple of sheep browsing in the grass. The children ran ahead chasing butterflies. Karima stopped to shake her dress loose of a thorny shrub and shouted at her children to be careful.

The air grew more humid and Thiab said the river was near. High-up in the treetops tow wood pigeons sang to each other. Thiab stopped and asked them:

“Do you know what one dove says to the other?”

Sarah laughed and said: “Doves talk!”

Adam said:” Tell us *Yaba*” He has been lately using *Yaba* instead of dad or father.

Thiab cleared his throat and sang in colloquial Arabic to the tune of the pigeon’s song:

Ya gogti fi al-Hilla

Wa ish takul?

Bagila

Wa ish tishrub?

Mai Allah

The children applauded and he took a bow.

“And now I translate for your mother’s benefit,” he added:

My sister in Hilla (Babylon)

What do you eat?

Beans!

What do you drink?

God’s water!

Karima said she never knew pigeons liked beans and Thiab said it was probably the favorite food of the person who made it up.

The palm trees thinned and cleared slightly and they came to the river. They stood in the thick shade of the trees facing the river. Adam picked a flat stone and threw it in the river. Karima wondered why people felt an urge to throw stones at rivers and oceans. Thiab was telling Adam to look for pebbles and he and Sarah walked around, their head bend and their eyes searching the ground. Sarah ran back with two small pebbles and Adam had a handful. Thiab told them these would not do; the pebbles must be flat and smooth. He picked one from the ground and showed it to them. Then he threw it and it flew over the water bouncing over the surface twice before it disappeared. He knotted his brows in disapproval, picked another pebble and threw it. This time it traveled almost midway across the river slashing through the water. Adam and Sarah clapped and he beamed, with self-approval. Thiab said they called it ‘walking the stone on water’. Adam soon became good at it, Sarah retired after a luck throw and Karima discovered she had the natural skill to walk pebbles on water.

On their way back a stray old dog followed them from a distance and Karima was worried it might be rabid. Thiab obligingly chased it away. They passed a palm tree trunk laid across a canal and Thiab told Karima that when he was a child, he could not cross palm bridges on his own so his father hired a village man to carry him on his shoulder. The man hated

his job and he vented his anger and frustration on his charge. Every time they crossed a stream on one of these bridges the man would whisper to him:” You can’t stay perched on my shoulders forever Thiab. You’re a big boy now and you should cross the bridge on your own. When we reach the middle of the bridge, I’ll put you down and you can continue on your own.” And if he protested or cried the man threatened to drop him in the river to drown. Then one day the man left to work in another village and his ordeal came to an end. Several years later he saw the man. He was walking down the road with a woman and two small children. He felt very angry and vengeful. He picked up a large stone and followed them for some distance until they came upon one of these bridges. And he saw the man lift one of his children and put him astride his shoulder, the same way he used to carry him, and then walk precariously on the thin trunk. Thiab said he wanted to throw the stone at him but he hesitated wondering if he could be mistaken and this may not be the same man and how would he feel if the stone hit the man or his child and they both fell in the stream and broke a bone or worse. When the man and his family reached the other side, he dropped the stone and walked back home.

The following day was a Friday and they were invited for lunch at Hadi’s house. Karima was upstairs when he arrived. Earlier a frightened Karima ran barefoot out of the bathroom screaming that a big lizard was inside the tub. It took Thiab ten minutes and delicate maneuvering with a broom to coax the equally frightened reptile out of the tub. She had finally taken her bath after washing the tub with a strong disinfectant and hot water, changed into a flowered white dress and was now sitting in front of the mirror debating in her mind whether Thiab would disapprove if she lightly touched up her lips. She did not use any make-up when they visited his uncle last week. She finally wet her lips with her tongue, pouted her mouth and recapped her lipstick.

When she came out into the front veranda, Thiab was talking to a middle aged man. Hadi turned and introduced himself, the bald spot on his head glinting in the sunshine. He was telling Thiab about his excellent gardener and promised to lend them his services if one cannot be found soon.

Hadi drove them in his old American car. Karima asked him about it.

“It’s the latest DeSoto,” he said humorously. “Only forty years old but not ready for the junkyard. They stopped making them after this model,” he added hitting the steering wheel with his hand.

“It’s a museum piece,” Karima said.

“You suggest then I should make enquiries at Christies.”

“Don’t hold your breath. There must be dozens of them around.” Thiab said.

Hadi’s two storied villa at the northern outskirts of Kuffa was smaller than the house in which they were staying but it had a large back garden

overlooking the river. Before the car stopped in the driveway an elegantly dressed woman came out of the front door followed by two teenage girls. Mona, Hadi's wife, had delicate features, black eyes and thick black hair. Karima was impressed with her fluency in English and Mona explained she held a degree in English literature and taught English at a local girl's high school.

They drifted into the kitchen where her two young daughters helped a woman cook their lunch. Mona told her that the main dish was grilled freshly caught river trout.

Karima followed her into the sitting room where an antique bookcase stocked with English and Arabic books filled one side of the room. On the opposite wall, a beautifully framed black and white picture of an old man who had Hadi's bulbous nose and soft brown eyes was hanging next to Hadi's engineering diploma. The old battered furniture was the kind that encouraged one to put his feet up, relax and feel at home.

They walked into the back veranda and saw Thiab and Hadi sitting on aluminum garden chairs in the shade of a tall eucalyptus tree. Adam and Sarah loudly discussed plans for a sandcastle on the thin stretch of sandy bank. Beyond them the metallic-colored river sparkled. Upstream few boats bobbed at the small dock. Shrubs and tall grass grew on a wedge-shaped isle formed by the river silt.

A scroungy old man standing knee high in the shallow water near the opposite bank was casting his net. Karima hooded her eyes against the blinding sunlight bouncing off the water surface and watched the man posing for another throw. He coiled his upper torso in the familiar pose of a disc thrower and threw the net propelling it several feet forward into the water. She wondered about the invisible well from which the old man drew so much strength. He waited few minutes before pulling in his net, his biceps bulging at the strain and he looked like a caricature of the strong man at the circus.

Thiab and Hadi were discussing one of the males of the specie's favorite topics-beside women, that is cars. Hadi said that one of the unadvertised benefits of owning an expensive car such as a Mercedes is that you can break every clause in the traffic code and get away with it. Someone had told him a story about an accident involving a black Mercedes and another car. Although it was the fault of the Mercedes' driver, the traffic policeman fined the other driver and suspended his license.

"If you're driving in one of these cars don't be amazed if you see people stopping and spitting in your track. I sympathize with their sentiment but I don't approval of their way of expressing it." Hadi said.

"I understand the feeling. I felt the same way the other day."

They looked at her expecting more.

“We were going to Thiab uncle’s place and there was a roadblock set up by the local militia. Thiab did not have the receipt for our passports on him and he was trying to explain this to a man in a black Mercedes. I couldn’t see the man but I felt an intense dislike for him and everything he stands for.”

“It’s normal” Hadi said nodding his head then turning to Thiab! he added” You didn’t tell me about it.”

“Not much to tell really,” Thiab shrugged. “I had forgotten the passport receipt as Karima told you and if it wasn’t for Asswad they would have probably detained me. He was with a group of party militia just back from burning the huts of some poor Azari farmers. I assumed it was in retaliation for beating up that company driver-what was his name?”

“Naif. I do not think you know the whole story. Two days before the raid Naif was returning home on the factory’s bus. Now I come to the part which I don’t, want the children to hear,” he said gesturing toward the children. Karima told Adam and Sarah to go and play inside.

Hadi resumed his narrative.

“When the bus stopped in front of Naif’s house he asked the driver if he could wait for a minute so that he can fetch his friends some of the pastries his wife had baked yesterday and which they sampled with him at lunch. Two, three minutes went by but Naif did not come out and the driver said he could not wait for more than another minute. Someone joked about Naif’s wife and children eating all the pastries and Naif feeling embarrassed to come out and tell them. And before they finished laughing Naif stormed out of the house babbling and crying and dashed wildly down the middle of the road. Some of the men climbed out of the bus and gave chase”.

Hadi stopped to sip some water.

“When they finally caught up with him it took three strong men to restrain him and march him back. But he refused to go inside the house and would not say why. So, one of the men went in and a moment later came out and told them about the horror he had seen inside. Naif’s wife and their two small children were all dead, their bodies mutilated and blood all over the place.”

Karima gasped covering her mouth with her hand.

“Whoever did it had not only brutally killed them but also cut open their chest and,” he paused for a moment,” their hearts were missing.”

“God! Who could do a thing like that?” Karima asked.

“Nobody knows for certain. The police detained Naif, considering him the most likely suspect, but released him next day. Their suspicions then shifted the Azaris, assuming that they had an interest in scarring off the company drivers.”

“And that’s why they raided the Azaris.? Thiab asked

“It was a massacre. The militia said they were conducting a routine search for runaway conscripts and illegal weapons when they were shot at but the Azaris deny it and insist it was unprovoked. Of course, everyone believe the Azari’s claim that it was a premeditated raid. They ransacked and torched everything, houses barns and fields. Two girls were raped and later mysteriously disappeared.”

Hadi was looking at a spot above the treetops, obviously moved by his story.

Mona got up and said: “You’ll need a cold drink after hearing this story.”

“If our kinsmen claim they were innocent who did it then?” Thiab asked.

Hadi shrugged.

“Old people believe *qassas qulubs*, a heart butcher did it,” he said.

“What? This is absurd,” Thiab said incredulously

“What is this heart butcher?” Karima asked.

“It’s a character from a fairy tale they used to scare us with when we were children. Do not go out at night or a heart butcher may get you. Do not talk to a stranger or he may turn out to be one of them heart butchers. He is the village bogey man,” Thiab said dismissing the idea with a shrug of his hand.

“People still believe that heart butchers exist,” Hadi said seriously.

Mona returned with a jug of lemon juice.

“I hope Hadi hasn’t been telling you more of his horror stories in my absence”.

“He was telling us about heart butchers,” Thiab smiled.

“There are so many frightening things around here, real and imaginary,” Hadi took the heavy glass jug from his wife and filled their glasses.

“All these years you spent abroad made a skeptic out of you, Thiab. It wasn’t the first time. We had a string of similar cases recently. The victims were mostly children. They were found murdered and their hearts carved out. Who and why?” He challenged Thiab.

“Perhaps the psychopath who murdered children for some sick reason is exploiting this myth to keep suspicions away from him,” Thiab argued.

“It makes sense if this was New York or Chicago,” Hadi paused to take a sip of lemonade and then continued: “but not Shamia”.

“If you go on like this, we are going to lose our appetite,” Mona complained. “Don’t you think it’s time you started grilling some fish for our starving guests.”

“Isn’t she the perfect hostess,” Hadi said rising to his feet. He walked toward the riverbank, capped his hands around his mouth and shouted:

“Lukman! Lukman!”

The old fisherman who stood on the small isle looked in his direction and waved.

“What if he hasn’t caught any fish yet?” Thiab asked.

They laughed

“Lukman has been casting his net since dawn. He has already netted three big trout.” Hadi indicated their length with his hands. “He also offered to help me in grilling them.”

Lukman was using a long bamboo rod to push his boat into the river. When the rod sank completely in the water he sat down and picked an oar. Adam and Sarah stopped building their sand-castle to watch the fisherman as he paddled vigorously. Before the boat touched the bank, he jumped clear of the water. He walked toward them carrying a thick string from which four large trout dangled. The fish fluttered, twisted and slapped his hand in protest.

Lukman’s odor of musty sweat and fish whiffed toward them. He shook hands with Hadi and Thiab but kept a piously respectful distance from the women. Hadi gingerly poked a fish with a finger pricing the catch and Thiab joined him in saying that two of them would be more than enough to feed all of them. Lukman modestly dismissed their compliment reminiscing about the good old days when fish was so plentiful that a boy could put his hand in the river and catch one and some of the fish was so big that it took two grown-up men to pull a net out of the water. Hadi invited Lukman to join them and he sat cross-legged on the grass, a polite smile fixed on his chiseled tanned face.

Adam came and asked his mother if Lukman could show him how to cast a net. Karima said the net must weigh a ton and told him to go and play with his sister and he walked away sullenly.

“Lukman wouldn’t mind taking them for a ride in his boat if you don’t mind,” Hadi suggested.

“I don’t know if it’s a good idea. The current looks very strong and the river must be deep and that boat - I do not know how he manages to keep his balance on it,” Karima said.

“Karima reminds me of my mother, God rests her soul,” Thiab said. “She never allowed me to go near the river. That’s why I never learned how to swim.”

“I don’t believe it!” Hadi exclaimed. “An Azari who spent his childhood in this place where you can’t walk a hundred feet without coming across a canal.”

Thiab smiled. His mind went back to the old days of innocence and true friendship. His friends were thrashing the water sending sparkling droplets in the air while he sat on the bank full of envy. One of them shouted: “*Ankaboot mai*, water spider! Watch me! I’ll become a better swimmer than a trout.” He picks something from the water and pushes it into his mouth, making chewing and swallowing movements. “Liar! your hand was empty.” someone else shouted, and they began splashing each other with water. “Come on Thiab, have a water spider. Don’t you want to become a

good swimmer like us?” Thiab enviously looked on tearing tufts of grass from the bank in frustration and embarrassment.

“Hadi! do you remember the little water insects we used to call water spiders, and how everyone believed that if you swallowed one alive you can swim like a fish.”

Hadi nodded, sipping his lemonade.

“Obviously you didn’t swallow one,” Karima said to Thiab.

“Would he tell you if he did?” Hadi asked.

“I don’t deny being tempted on several occasions but I just couldn’t.”

The old kitchen help came out of the house carrying a large aluminum tray on which the four fish were laid on, their descaled and cut bodies topped with onions and tomatoes. Lukman took over, arranging the small twigs he had earlier collected in a heap, spearing the sides of each fish with two sticks and placing them firmly on the ground. He put a match to the dry twigs and soon a small fire was leaping toward the suspended fish without touching them. The smell of wood smoke filled the air.

“Lukman used to fish with a spear.” Hadi said watching the old fisherman intently.

“I remember him standing on his boat, his trident poised for the throw and that mop of white hair glowing in the sunshine. He looked like a statute of Neptune come alive.”

“I guess he is too old to do it now!” Thiab commented.

“I don’t think so. He gave it up after he speared a man. It was in self-defense, mind you. The man threatened him with a rifle and Lukman threw his trident at the man’s leg. He never intended to kill him. The prongs went right through the thigh just above the knee.” Hadi pointed the spot on his leg. “Very messy, lots of blood. I saw the injured man when they brought him into our front yard. My father took him to the local infirmary in his car. After the incident Lukman vowed never to use a trident.”

“He does not strike me as a violent man,” Karima said.

“You’re absolutely right.” Hadi agreed enthusiastically. “He is nice, polite and a very helpful – a gentleman, but he has a fiery temper which gets him into trouble sometimes. Few years ago, he got into an argument with two militiamen who were used to getting things without paying for them. He said no and they became abusive so he sets his dogs on them. The next day the Mukhabarat men were looking for him and it turned out that the two militiamen had said they heard him cursing Al-Qaid. By law, you get the death penalty for reviling our great leader in public and life imprisonment for doing it in private. Lukman fled to the *Ahwar*, the southern marshes. His trial was in absentia. Luckily, one of the two men had second thoughts and refused to testify under oath that he had heard Lukman cursing Al-Qaid, and Lukman was acquitted. But for almost two years Lukman lived as a fugitive in the marshes, dodging army and militia

patrols in the daytime and coming out at night to catch a fish which he some days ate raw because a fire would attract the patrols. But he survived.” Hadi paused” His friends call him laklak.”

“Stork!” Karima exclaimed.

“Yes,” Hadi said rising to his feet. “I’ll go and see if our lunch is ready.” Instead of going around the flower garden he walked straight through it frightening two hens which were scrounging inside.

Ten minutes later a foldable Formica table was brought out, a nylon cover was placed on it and then the grilled fish. Karima noticed that Lukman was missing and Hadi said he prefers to eat alone. Mona and Hadi managed to eat only few mouthfuls because they were busy most of the time trying to stop the buzzing flies from landing on the food and keeping away the half dozen stray cats attracted by the fish.

It was late in the afternoon when Hadi drove them back in his car. Mona and her two daughters saw them to the front door. A glum Sarah asked her mother when they are going to see ‘aunt’ Mona and Laklak again. Mona laughed, hugging Sarah, and offered to take them sightseeing in Kuffa the next day. Karima gratefully accepted.

VII

Karima woke up cheerful and relaxed after a deep and dreamless sleep. The light breeze blowing through the open bedroom's lattice windows promised a mild day ahead and she looked forward to spending a pleasant morning with Mona and the children. After Thiab left to work she changed into an ankle-length dress, tried covering her hair with a silk scarf and discovered that it accentuated her nice profile, and then wore her comfortable walking shoes. Adam and Sarah were already dressed and impatiently pacing the front veranda. Mona arrived on time in Hadi's antique De Soto.

In brilliant sunlight, they walked down the main street in Kuffa. On either side, rows of small brick houses stretched forward, their only artistically interesting features were the arabesque designs painted in bright colors on their front walls and doors. Music bellowed from inside dimly lit tea shops where old men sat puffing on their water pipes, flicking their worry beads and gawking at the traffic passing by. Half a dozen raggedly dressed boys kicked a flaccid football and Karima watched with apprehension as one of them darted in the middle of the crowded street after the ball.

From a side street rose the voices of street peddlers hawking their wares. Two of them were apparently making brisk business selling cosmetic jewelry to a crowd of women. A blind old woman sold straw baskets. Karima sadly stared at the woman eyes, two silvery coins deposited by untreated cataracts. Blue colored tattoos covered the woman's prominent chin snaking down her neck in intricate floral and abstract design and disappearing under the lace collar of her black dress. Karima bought a small colorful basket for half a dinar.

At the gate of the Grand Mosque, Mona asked her if she wanted to go inside and Karima said yes and wondered if they would let them in dressed like this. Mona was prepared; she produced two *abas*, black silk robes, from her large patent leather handbag. She showed Karima how to hold the *aba* firmly under her chin to stop it from slipping to the ground. Adam and Sarah giggled at the sight of their mother in black, and a turbaned man glanced at them disapprovingly.

Mona gave them a ten-minute summary of the mosque's fourteen century history. She then led them to a low stone fence overlooking a wide dark pit where relics of Noah's Ark are said to have been found. Karima stared in the darkness but saw nothing.

They followed Mona into the shrine where a small crowd worshipped or paid their respects to the martyrs buried there more than thirteen centuries ago. The marble floor was cool under Karima's bare feet and her eyes were

dazzled by the light reflected repeatedly by the thousands of small mirrors pasted to the walls and ceilings. A turbaned man offered her a green string and Mona told her to make a wish and showed her where to tie the string.

They were walking back to the car park when Mona said:

“Don’t look back now but I think we are being followed.”

“Why?” Karima asked.

“I’ve lived here for years and no one has followed me so he must be interested in you.”

“I find that hard to believe-a pretty woman like you.” Karima protested.

They laughed. Karima felt like a teenager again walking back from high school.

VIII

In the evenings, they usually went out to the front veranda to catch the mild humid breeze blowing from the direction of the river. And just as it mysteriously rose a short time after sunset it suddenly stopped. Karima sat on a wicker chair listening to the endless chirping of the garden insects and the spatter of water dripping from palm trees which Thiab had earlier sprinkled lavishly with the garden hose. Adam and Sarah whispered and gesticulated at a palm tree where they said they saw an owl perched on a high branch and heard her hooting. Before that they were interested in a pair of geckos darting after insects on the wall.

They heard a car approaching and moments later they saw its lights bouncing on the walls and the high branches. A small car stopped in front of the gate, its motor dying out in a rattle, and three figures climbed down of the car and walked inside the circle of hazy light thrown by the front gate's globes.

Thiab identified the short figure of Sattar, the factory's public relations manager. The other two figures were introduced by Sattar as Kamila, their made, and Marhoon the gardener. He vouched for their honesty and said their wages were very reasonable. Marhoon was told to sleep in the servant's quarters, a two-room annex at the other end of the front garden.

Karima took the shy Kamila by the hand and led her inside. She was a sensual dark-haired girl in her early twenties, neck long and slender and eyes large and dark. Her skin seemed to glow in the faint light and she had the finely shaped body of a farm girl who never ate enough or sat idly long enough to put on an ounce of excess fat. Why a girl of such rare natural beauty would need to work as a maid when she could live the relatively pampered life of a rich farmer's wife mystified Karima.

Few days later Thiab was the first to wake up as usual. He walked out of the room and stopped at the door listening to the silent house. Across the hall the door of the children's room was wide open. The sun was peeking through the curtain laying a strip of broken light across a sleeping Sarah's face and shoulders. Her forehead and neck glistened with perspiration. As he drew the curtain across the window he glanced onto the garden. Two figures stood close to each other at the far end of the garden, partially hidden from view by the dense branches of an old fig tree. At first, he thought they were intruders, then the one closer to the house moved sideways and he saw the thick hair and high forehead of Kamila. The other figure was Marhoon. Their heads were bent close toward each other, almost touching and they appeared to be having an intimate

conversation. Kamila then shot a furtive glance at the house and playfully pushed Marhoon away.

Thiab heard the faint footsteps and turned around to see Karima standing at the door yawning and looking very girlish in her pink cotton nightgown. Over breakfast, she told him about her gardening project. She planned to turn the house's front and back gardens into show pieces and she would devote all her time to it. Marhoon will be entrusted with the heavy work while she planned and supervised. Before start she wanted to take pictures of it in its present 'before' condition and more pictures when her project is completed so that when they leave, she can take back with her an album full of pictures as evidence of her creative summer gardening. Thiab was relieved to hear that all that was required of him were two rolls of films for the camera and he readily promised to get them on his way back from work.

Later that day Karima searched the kitchen for Kamila but she was not there. She could hear music coming from the front of the house. She had earlier seen her with a portable radio. She came out on the veranda where the music was louder. The source was the servant's quarters.

She gingerly walked across the lawn, her eyes vigilantly searching the tall grass for any sign of creeping danger. She stopped at the window of Marhoon's room and peered through the dusty iron mesh into the dimly lit room. Marhoon sat on a thin mattress, his back to the wall and in front of him a small glass full of tea. He was smiling and clapping with the music while Kamila twisted and undulated her body. Karima watched breathlessly. It was a scene from the common man's fantasy of how a wife or a legal concubine entertained her man in the orient. The girl was a natural dancer, her dancing more lascivious than any belly dancing she had previously seen on film. Few moments later Karima, embarrassed by her voyeurism, retraced her steps to the house.

She was angry at them, especially Kamila. She was deceived by the girl's appearance, her shyness and the firm hand with which she clutched her aba under her chin into thinking that she was another rural virgin who has never shook hands with a man. And she does not recall Sattar telling them that they were married or engaged. She debated in her mind whether she should tell Thiab, and after some thought she decided against it because she did not want to be the cause of their dismissal.

She also forgot to tell him about the two mysterious small pouches she found sewed inside Adam and Sarah's pillows. Her curiosity led her to cut open one of them with a scissors and found inside a folded paper on which Arabic words scribbled in a bad handwriting and different geometrical shapes were drawn. At the sight of the paper Kamila recoiled and retreated out of the room puffing and babbling. Puzzled by the maid's strange behavior Karima asked Adam about the meaning of the word the girl had repeated: *siher*. He told her it meant magic. Karima wondered if this was

some sort of local magic and whether it was good or evil. Although she was not a superstitious person, she felt a little uneasy. Resisting the temptation to throw them away she put them in a drawer intending to show them to Thiab when he returned from work but by the end of that eventful day, she had completely forgotten them.

Karima, mystified by the magic pouches, sat to write letters to her friends. She remembered Thiab warning her repeatedly that letters may be intercepted and read by the Mukhabarat. Adam and Sarah came and nagged her to let them go with Kamila on a picnic to the nearby fields. Kamila promised to look after them, patting her chest and pointing at her eyes which Karima interpreted as a promise to look after them as she would for her eyes. She reluctantly gave her consent and they left.

Later that morning she came out into the front veranda looking for Marhoon. The garden was empty and Marhoon's gardening tools were neatly stacked in a corner. He had earlier left to town with a long list of plants, pots of various sizes and other requirements for their-gardening project. Marhoon proved to be a hard worker but an inexperienced gardener who could not tell a carnation from a margarita. In the few days since his arrival much had been accomplished: the weeds have been pulled out, the hedges trimmed, the lawn mowed, and the bricks and stones which littered the front and back gardens cleared.

Kamila and the children were gone for two hours now and she hoped they would be back before Thiab returns. She remembered Kamila telling her about finding an opening in the storeroom's floor. Adam, interpreting for them, insisted she said a 'hole'. Afraid that Adam or Sarah may wander into the storeroom and fall inside it she decided to go and see for herself.

The kitchen was spotlessly clean. The dishes have been washed and were neatly stacked in the dish rack. A door to the left led to the storeroom. Inside she smelled the faint odor of grease and old food hanging in the air. The 'hole' was a trapdoor and she had not seen it before because it had been hidden under an old-fashioned ice-box. Kamila must have moved the ice-box to clean under it. She wondered how that thin girl managed to shift the heavy ice-box. It must be with muscles developed from frequent belly dancing for her gardener beau, she thought smiling at her joke.

But why was the trapdoor hidden? And where did it lead to? And why was it secured with a heavy padlock? To keep out curious people like her and her daughter! The house was theirs for the summer and this included the trapdoor and what was hidden behind it. Don't they know that padlocks on trapdoor only raised the curiosity of people like her.

Under the wash basin she located a box of tools and rummaging through it she found a crowbar. It took all her strength to break the rusty lock. But the door refused to budge. It was stuck shut. She went on all four to remove the small pebbles lodged in between the door and its frame. She tugged again and the door opened with a loud thud. She took a step backward covering her mouth and nose with her hand as the pungent fetid air rushed from inside enveloping her face.

It was dark inside and she could barely see the faint outline of several steps leading to a small landing and more steps disappearing into pitch darkness. She tried all the light switches near the storeroom door but no light appeared from the underground staircase. She went back to the kitchen to fetch one of the flashlights Thiab had bought last week after a night-long blackout.

Standing at the edge and pointing the light toward the dark inside, she had a clear view of the metal staircase and a reflecting surface beyond. There was water inside. She moved closer to have a better look and caught her foot on the crowbar propelling it forward and it fell inside and rolled down the steps thunderously.

She watched the crowbar in dismay debating whether to descend the twenty or so steps and bring it up or leave the job to Thiab and Marhoon. If she were to consult her husband, he would say that this was a man's job and it takes a man to do a man's job and that is why she decided to go down and do it herself.

She took a long look at the staircase, inhaled deeply filling her lungs with the storeroom's stale air, and gingerly lowered her left leg inside the pit. The foul stench suffocated her and she felt nausea rising in her throat. She hesitated for a moment then firmly holding the iron railing gingerly continued her descent. After her head cleared the trapdoor, she stopped and pointed the light around. It was a spacious cellar and must have been originally used as a cold storeroom before it was flooded. Surrealistic growths of molds and mildews covered the walls.

She counted in her mind twelve steps before reaching the landing. She looked down but the water line did not look any nearer. She continued her slow and careful descent, one hand firmly clutching the rail and the other directing the thin light on the damp and slippery stairs in front of her.

She stood on the last step and studied the cellar. At the far end she saw a corridor veering to the left and she thought the darkness over there was thinner. The floor was not completely inundated and a dry path ran the length of the opposite wall to the corridor. She was tempted. If she walked on that path, she would not get her loafers wet and after finding out where that tunnel led to, she can walk back, pick up the crowbar and climb back with a story. She could almost see the eyes of her husband and children lighting up as they listened with awe to her account of the mystery of the hidden cellar uncovered by her.

She had to walk close to the damp wall, her shoulders brushing frequently at the slimy substances on it but she told herself it was a small price to pay for a good story. She was halfway inside the corridor when she heard the thud and the light behind her suddenly disappeared. She quickly turned around and gasped. Except for the faint light of the

flashlight the darkness would have been complete. Someone has closed the trapdoor, she thought in panic

“Kamila! Marhoon! I am down here. Open the door!” she shouted, her voice reverberating through the cellar. No one answered her.

She ran back unmindful of where her feet landed, stepping in the water and splashing her feet and trousers. She recklessly climbed the stairs in a hurry stopping only under the trapdoor. It was closed. Then in disbelief she heard the repeated clicks of a door being closed and locked and she knew it was the storeroom’s door.

“Kamila! Marhoon!” she called but no answer came back.

Kamila or Marhoon must have seen the light burning in the storeroom, went inside to turn it off, found the trapdoor, closed it and went out locking the door behind her or him. It was the logical and safest thing to do and she would have been grateful to whomever did it, if she was not locked inside. But there was no cause for panic, she assured herself. She only has to lift open the trapdoor, climb out into the storeroom and sooner or later someone was bound to come into the kitchen, hear her calls and open the door.

She tried pushing at it with one hand at first but the heavy metal door refused to move. Then she tried again, using both hands and wedging her foot against the rail. She managed to lift it an inch or two before it came against an obstacle. She lowered it back breathing rapidly. The icebox! she thought. It must have been pushed back on top of the trapdoor. And it meant that she could not leave the cellar without help.

Her sweaty hand gripping the flashlight she descended the staircase in haste. She was now afraid that the batteries in her flashlight may suddenly die out leaving her in total darkness. Only few steps from the floor she must have misjudged the distance in the faint light because her balance suddenly gave way and she slipped, and with eyes wide open with shock and disbelief she fell headfirst.

Her right hand flailed trying to get hold of something and it hit the railing hard. Sharp pain shot through her wrist like a knife and then more pain vibrated inside her head as it banged repeatedly on the metal steps and finally there were no more steps and she hit the pool of water with a splash. The stagnant filthy water filled her mouth and nose and she pushed her throbbing head up gasping for air. She spat and spluttered but the foul taste clung to her mouth lining and tongue and for the first time her mind considered with revulsion the possibility that this was sewage water.

She sat up and wiped the sludge out of her eyes. It was so dark she could not see a thing. Her hand was still clutching the flashlight but there was no light coming out of it. After several failed attempts to turn on the flashlight she angrily hurled it away and heard it crashing on the opposite wall.

“What am I going to do now! It’s very dark in here,” she whispered to herself. She was a little girl frightened by the dark and a heavy metal door separated her from her husband and family. She could be trapped here for hours before they noticed her absence and decide to look for her in the storeroom but not in the cellar because the trapdoor is now completely hidden under the ice-box. Finally, her mind could no longer deny the unthinkable: they would look everywhere except in this cellar and in few days, she will starve to death and probably lose her sanity before that.

Exasperated with her morbid thoughts she held her head with both hands and assuming the meditation position she had seen on a television program she willed her mind to think positively. There was a bright side to everything, even to this huge dark grave: she was unhurt and that was a small miracle after her nasty fall on the staircase.

“God! what am I going to do now?” She whispered to herself in desperation. “That will not do,” a strong voice echoed in her mind. It was her mother’s voice. “Stop behaving like a silly little girl!” Her mother’s voice continued to berate her. “You’re a resourceful woman now, think and you’re bound to find a way out”. Her mother is right and there must be another exit beside the trapdoor. She then remembered the tunnel and wasn’t the darkness thinner there?

She rose to her feet and with hands extended in front of her she began feeling for the nearest wall. Studying the layout of the cellar in her mind she concluded that the wall must be somewhere to her left. Slowly and carefully she waded in that direction, her legs thigh-deep in the water. She had taken a couple of steps when heard the faint noise, barely audible, and she froze listening breathlessly. It came back again, louder and amplified and although it lasted only few seconds, she was sure it was the sound of someone giggling, probably children, not Sarah or Adam for sure. And it was coming from somewhere behind her. Then the idea dawned on her that whoever is giggling could also hear her.

“Hello!” She shouted and listened but no reply came back.

“Kamila! Adam! help me. I am in the cellar under the storeroom,” she pleaded.

The place was silent except for the faint noises made by the movements of her legs in the water.

“I can hear you. Why don’t you say something,” her voice came out shrill and shaky.

The sounds she heard this time were of small children crying. The heart-rending sobs of helpless children to which she normally reacted with deep sadness and compassion now horrified her. She felt relieved when the sobs turned into distant murmurs and finally faded.

She moved her hands in front of her as if trying to tear the curtain of darkness aside only to find another black curtain behind it and then coming

back again hoping to see light behind the last curtain. Then her hand came against a wall. Edging closer, her hand scraped the rough wet surface loosening the slimy flakes which fell softly into the water.

When the silence was shattered again, she did not hear giggles or sobs this time but the sound of music: a fast drumbeat accompanied by a mournful flute and finally joined by the sonorous voice of a local male singer. And immediately she knew it must be Kamila's radio. She is back in the kitchen, she thought with renewed hope.

"Kamila!" she shouted. "Help me *hona!* here down here in the storeroom."

The sad voice of the singer went on, crooning incomprehensibly. Another male voice rose almost shouting, vying with the high volume of the radio to be heard. And she thought it must be Marhoon, Kamila's boyfriend.

"Marhoon, Kamila!" she shouted repeatedly until she discovered her voice was barely above a whisper. Finally recognizing that she was on her own, a sob escaped her throat and for few minutes she wept lamenting her bad luck and occasionally making accusatory gestures toward the ceiling. Eventually her fit of self-pity subsided and she began thinking calmly of finding her way out.

With her left hand brushing the wall and her right hand stretched out in front of her she resumed her search for the tunnel. After few steps her right hand met another wall and she knew this was the tunnel. With both hands now touching the walls on either side of her she was bound to bump into the wall in front of her. The pain caused by the unexpected collision was soon forgotten displaced by the crushing thought that three walls on three sides meant one thing and only one: a dead end. The word dead morbidly glued itself to her mind like a bad omen.

Her sobs were burning up her throat again and panic building up behind the last floodgate of her will power. But she fought back hard. She took a hesitant step to the right, her arms out sensing and feeling. She was afraid of doubling back and ending up in the wide end of the cellar again. Another step and she was now certain that the tunnel was narrowing and veering gradually to the right. She went on slowly, relying on her sense of touch completely. Although she could see nothing in the black ink darkness, she kept her eyes open. When she began seeing spots of light dancing ahead of her, she thought her eyesight must have been strained by the effort. The spots refused to disappear even after squeezing her eyes shut for several times. And then her mind conjured the image of a train thundering inside a tunnel and there further ahead was the light at the end of it, and she shouted with joy. She dashed forward, the water and mud squelching under her feet certain that the light was real rather than proverbial.

Her heart was beating fast when she reached the coin of light peeking through a small crack in the wall. She crouched putting her eye at the opening and her heart leapt with joy at the sight of grass blades, murky water and further back palm trees as elegant and dignified as English old ladies carrying parasols.

She brushed with her hand the slime and mud from her lips. If this is mud then the wall is not made from solid bricks and she could dig her way out, her mind reasoned. She clawed the wall with both hands and was rewarded with small chunks of mud under nails. Underneath the wet surface layer, the mud was dry and hard but she continued digging and pushing with both hands, breaking three fingernails in the process. When her hand touched wet mud again, she knew her ordeal was almost over.

‘Salam! Everybody,’ Thiab called as he stepped into the sitting room startling a wood pigeon from the back windowsill. Karima’s apron was hanging on a chair. In the kitchen he found Kamila picking black stones and seeds from a tray full of uncooked rice. She had no idea where Karima was. On the back veranda Adam and Sarah were trying to entice a kitten to eat cheese from their hands.

At the foot of the stairs he stopped and called his wife’s name. He wanted to tell her the good news that their passports have been returned and were now at the factory for safe keeping. He ran up the stairs taking the last half dozen steps in two leaps. But she was not there either.

He returned to the ground floor when the doorbell rang shrilly. He came out into the front veranda at the same time as Marhoon was opening the gate to let their unexpected visitor in. An astonished Thiab saw Karima walking in. She looked up, called his name and broke into tears. He ran down to meet her, taking her in his arms and holding her tightly. She was sobbing, her thin dress soaked wet and dirty. He kissed her muddy face removing strands of slime and grass from her forehead.

‘It’s all right. You are home,’ he whispered to her soothingly and more muddy tears flowed in rivulets down her cheeks.

She walked up the stairs leaning on him. He helped her to change her dress and her skin felt cold and clammy. He sat beside her while she lay down on their bed, her small hand cradled in his. At the sight of a puzzled Adam and Sarah, Karima opened her eyes and smiled feebly to show them that she was all right. Thiab fought with his brimming curiosity and kept silent.

She slept for two hours, her legs curled up in a fetal position. She woke up with a start and began to tell him about a trapdoor in the storeroom and how she was trying to retrieve a crowbar when she got locked up inside. She was incoherent and her eyes seemed far away still observing a recent horror.

‘You must rest,’ he said leaning toward her to kiss her but she pushed him away saying:

‘Don’t touch me. I’m filthy and I stink.’ She sighed, closed her eyes and was almost immediately asleep. Thiab sat beside her watching her breathing becomes regular and wondering about the ordeal she had been through and how it has turned her rosy cheeks into wilted petals.

Thiab found the trapdoor under the old ice-box. They had one like it in their house at Shamia. He remembered his mother refusing to part with it after his father brought a gleaming white American refrigerator from the

capital. There was a power failure one day and he found her standing in front of it studying its dark interior and she turned to him and said triumphantly.

“You see son. It’s dead!”

He pushed the ice-box aside and found the trapdoor. A fetid smell rose from inside. He saw a metal staircase, a landing and more stairs disappearing just above a pool of water. At the far end there was a tunnel from which a faint light seeped. Karima must have gone down the stairs and exited through the tunnel.

Holding the hurricane lamp brought by Kamila in one hand he carefully descended the staircase. The girl stood at the storeroom’s door and watched. At the bottom of the stairs he stumbled on a hard object and regaining his balance he glimpsed the crowbar rolling down the final step and plunging into the water. He raised the lantern and saw the muddy surface of the water, the stained damp walls and further back the tunnel disappearing to the right. The flame flickered and smoked and shadows jumped and danced on the walls. He shivered and looked up and saw Kamila’s big eyes staring curiously at him. Clenching the railings, he began climbing, relieved to be soon out of this wet foul smelling place. After replacing the trapdoor, he looked the storeroom and pocketed the key.

Walking back to his wife, Thiab tried to figure out why the previous owner of this house needed a cellar. A storage room would not have a tunnel leading to the outside. And a *serdab*, or an underground cool room to which the family escaped on hot summer days is not usually built under the storeroom. This left only one explanation: it was an escape tunnel. Either the owner was paranoid or had many enemies.

Thiab found his wife sitting in bed, propped on several pillows. She had showered and changed her clothes and the bed linen. After listening to his short account of what he saw in the cellar she yawned, not bothering to cover her mouth, and closed her eyes. He thought she wanted to sleep but then she opened her eyes wide and her hand flew to his seizing it firmly. He wanted her to get more rest but she insisted on telling him what happened to her in the cellar.

After she had fallen asleep again, her head sideways on the pillow and her hand slack in his, Thiab sat thinking of what she had just told him. She heard voices, children, not ours, giggling then crying. He said it must have been a play or a children program on the radio but she looked skeptical.

Thiab expected his wife to insist on leaving the country without delay or at least refuse to stay in the house another night when she woke up. He was surprised by her reply when he suggested she and the children could go back to England. She squeezed his hand and smiled.

“No way. I admit I was frightened silly. I never liked this house and now I hate it but when we leave, we’ll all be going together.”

“Are you sure?” Thiab had to ask

“I can’t risk it.” she said with a smile.” How can I be sure you won’t take a second wife after I leave?”

He laughed

“You’re putting ideas in my head.”

“We’re definitely staying.” She sipped some water and continued. “I had a stomach full of the filthy water in the cellar. I hope I won’t get sick.” She grimaced and examined her hands. “My fingers are a mess. I had to dig for more than half an hour. Why would anyone build that tunnel and then have it sealed with a mud wall?”

He shrugged and said:

“To keep floodwater out.”

“I don’t think so. There was a stagnant pool on the other side but no danger of flooding, and it looked to me as part of a clever camouflage to hide the opening. You would agree with me if you saw it. It was so small you wouldn’t notice it. Unless you knew where to look and there was a wire mesh to keep large animals from getting in. And why was the trapdoor hidden under the ice-box?”

“Maybe they weren’t trying to hide it. They just wanted to keep children and curious people like someone I know from wandering inside.”

She was silent but the looks in her eyes told him that his reasoning was unconvincing.

The next day, Sattar sounded genuinely surprised when Thiab told him about the escape tunnel. Over lunch he told Hadi about it. Hadi knotted his brows and said nothing. Thiab persisted asking him about Badir, the house’s previous owner. After an unsuccessful attempt to change the subject he told him Badir’s story. The man was a rich landowner who owned thousands of acres of rice land and orchards but still wanted more. He stopped at nothing to achieve his ends. He bribed government officials to forge land registry certificates, evicted small farmers by force and burned the houses and fields of those who refused to sell. Jabbar was one of Badir’s stubborn neighbors who would not part with their land at any price. Badir persisted and he even proposed to one of Jabbar’s daughters and was turned down. Few months later, Jabbar and his whole family consisting of his wife and six sons and daughters were found murdered along with two maids and a bodyguard. It was a massacre. Everyone suspected Badir and his henchmen but no one had any real evidence until weeks later, when someone came forward claiming that he witnessed the murders and accusing Badir. It was a hot summer night and he was sleeping in the garden when he saw Badir and five of his men force their way into

the house and when Jabbar came out to investigate they shot him in cold blood.

Badir was arrested, swiftly put on trial, convicted and sentenced to the gallows. His friends in high places managed to delay the execution until there was a new cabinet - this happened in the monarchy's days more than forty years ago - and Badir was granted a full pardon. Badir nicknamed 'the butcher' as everyone was set free.

Hadi pushed his empty plate and resting his elbows on the table.

"I must have a cup of tea after lunch or I'll be drowsy and useless all afternoon. Would you like to join me?"

Thiab agreed and Hadi snapped his fingers trying to attract the waiter's attention.

"Jabbar's relatives were outraged. Anyhow, less than a month after Badir's release, he and all members of his family disappeared without a trace. Since it was not like Badir to run away and leave everything behind him: money, clothes, furniture and most important of all his cherished land, everyone believed that Jabbar's brothers must have finally taken their revenge and got rid of the bodies somehow."

"What did the police find?" Thiab asked.

"Nothing" Hadi answered." This is a miraculous brew I'm feeling revived already," he added between sips.

"I understand now why Badir had that escape tunnel built in his house. But why was it blocked? Not by Badir, I assume."

"It's possible that whoever killed Badir and his family threw their bodies in the cellar or found them hiding there and blocked the exits."

"Your theory can be easily verified."

"I wouldn't do that if I were you. Suppose you find one skeleton or two down there, you'll have to call the police and for weeks they'll be crawling all over the house. Can you imagine the inconvenience to you and your family?"

"You're right," Thiab agreed nodding his head. "But how do you explain the voices Karima heard?"

"There must be a logical explanation, a farmer's children playing near the tunnel exit or a radio's program." He then checked his watch, whistled softly and picking his papers he declared he was late for a meeting.

Hadi and Mona paid them a visit in the evening. They sat on the front veranda and discussed the suffocating heat wave and Hadi's plan to resign his job and buy a farm. No one mentioned Karima's ordeal in the cellar.

XI

Thiab came back from work few days later to find a cheerful Karima in her gardening thick gloves pruning a rose tree. As they walked into the house, she reported to him on the progress of her gardening. The garden was certainly tidier and he was glad because it kept her mind off that horrible experience in the cellar.

He was washing his hands when a frowning Adam stood at the door and complained that his sister was lately behaving foolishly. Every morning she went up to the roof to scatter some rice all over the place believing that hungry storks flying over would notice the food, come down and build their nests on their roof. She became angry with him when he told her that wood pigeons ate the rice. Karima came out of the bedroom and accused Thiab of putting that idea in his daughter's impressionable mind by telling her that story about *laklak*, stork and the snake. He smiled and promised to have a talk with Sarah.

The whole thing had slipped his mind when later that day Sarah asked him:

“Why don't storks build their nests on top of our roof?”

“I don't know sweetie. I am not a stork,” he said leafing through a report.

“We have a large roof, bigger than those we saw in the other town. You remember? If I were a stork and flying over our house, I would come down and build my nest on this roof,” she said staring at him with her big black eyes.

He put down the report, picked her up and sat her on his lap.

“If I were a stork, I wouldn't have this beautiful daughter,” and putting on a sad face he added, “and I would be very glum. But if I were a stork passing by and looking down to see a nice little girl standing on a roof waving at me, I would say to myself by my grandfather's beak this looks like a nice place to put some twigs on, he means a nest, of course.”

She smiled and holding his head with both hands she said.

“And I would ask him why you have such a funny beak?”

“And I would answer you with a big peck on the neck,” he answered leaning toward her with open arms and she squirmed trying to avoid his pouting mouth.

“Stop it stork!” she yelled giggling.” Bad stork! Why don't you eat the rice?”

He was unsure whether storks ate rice or not. He always thought that fish or frogs were their usual diet.

“I think I like fish better,” he said continuing their game.

“The river is not far from here and it is full of fish.”

“You’re right. A stork would never go hungry around here.”

“We could even buy fish for him from that fisherman we saw at Auntie’s,”

“You mean Lukman. He is a stork, *laklak*, too. I think all respectable storks prefer to catch their own fish.”

She climbed down from his lap, a thoughtful look in her eyes. The following day he saw her carrying a bundle of twigs. She was building a nest for the storks, Adam told him, shaking his head disapprovingly.

The day was a Thursday and it was very hot. The morning at the factory was uneventful except for a surprise visit by an over friendly Asswad who crudely and ineffectively tried to wheedle information from him about the outcome of his work so far. Thiab was puzzled by his persistence. Was he worried that Thiab might uncover some of their dark secrets? And how would he react if he knew that enough has already been found to embarrass many.

It was a half day work and he had an early lunch with his family. Afterwards he had a nap on the sitting room’s sofa. When he woke up, he suggested a stroll by the river. Karima declined saying she wanted to do some gardening and Adam and Sarah were uninterested so he went alone. He walked slowly through the green fields. The muggy air was redolent with the aromas of vegetation and distant human habitation.

The first explosion was loud enough to send a flock of wood pigeons put of the frees. He absentmindedly dismissed it as the sound of a car backfiring. A second bang that sounded louder and nearer than echoed through the fields and he realized that this could not be a car backfiring because the only car which used the dirt road was the one assigned to him by the factory. These were gunshots which unmistakably came from the direction of the house. A hunter shooting at wood pigeons was the only logical explanation he could think of. To calm his worries, he decided to walk back and investigate.

At the sound of a short burst of automatic gun fire he froze for a couple of seconds and then he ran thinking that his family could be in danger. He prayed he was wrong and it was just a farmer testing his weapons.

After running for a short distance, he felt exhaustion setting in. He was panting, his leg muscles ached and sweat was streaming down his face. But he ran on, his mind whipping him with horrible images of his family being attacked by intruders, and his wife abducted by thugs interested in the fair woman.

Karima was tidying up the master bedroom when she heard the first shot and she instantly dropped the blouse she was folding and ran downstairs calling on her children. She was running toward the kitchen when the second shot was fired and was immediately followed by the sound of glass shattering. The kitchen was empty. She looked through the window, her

eyes frantically searching the veranda and the back garden but saw no one. She ran back toward the front of the house. She almost jumped at the sound of automatic gunfire. Cautiously she walked toward the window overlooking the front veranda. She glimpsed the sandaled feet of a man lying on the veranda floor. With rising panic, she craned her head to have a better view. The man lying face down was Marhoon and he was wounded. His gray robe was stained with blood. She opened the window and he must have heard her because he lifted his head, opened his mouth trying to speak and then his head slumped forward and he must have fainted.

Thinking only of her children's safety she shut and secured the window. Then she heard noises coming from the direction of the kitchen and she ran back. At the sight of Adam and Sarah coming through the back door with Kamila behind them she shouted with relief. She hugged them tightly while Kamila babbled incomprehensibly. Adam said that armed men had broken into the back garden and were shooting at the house.

Karima looked through the kitchen window and saw a dark figure moving through the trees toward the house. She spied another man behind a palm tree and watched him with horror and disbelief raise his rifle aiming it at the house and she shouted:

“Stay away from the window!”

A terrified Sarah buried her head in the front of Karima's dress crying: “Mummy, mummy!”

Thiab ran frantically. He must reach the house to protect his wife and children from something terrible, he told himself. His trousers caught on a branch but he raced on letting the cloth rip. Despite his balancing act he lost his footing on the muddy ground and fell. His cheek stung and he rubbed it and his fingers came back covered with blood. Blood was also pouring down his face from a cut over his ear. Shivering Thiab got to his feet wiping the mud and blood from his eyes. He tried to run but managed only half a step before staggering and falling. He winced from the pain shooting from his ankle to his hip. He sat for a moment to catch his breath and he thought how silly he would look if he goes back with a broken leg and find his family safe and sound.

His feet splashing in the muddy puddles, he started limping toward the house. He had lost a shoe in the fall but he was not going back to look for it. After a while his feet became numb and he no longer felt the pain as he stepped on sticks and stones. He staggered through the field's praying for the safety of his family.

Karima was running through the ground floor's rooms closing windows, pulling curtains across and locking and bolting doors behind her, Adam and Sarah on her heels. Kamila was instructed to do the same in the upper floor.

Karima was dashing into the last room in the back when she almost bumped into the man. She stopped and felt her children sheltering behind her. The man held a rifle and it was aimed at her.

Thiab limped toward the rows of palm trees which marked the borders of the field and beyond that there was the dirt road and then the house. Before he reached the trees, he heard a sound. He stopped and looked. He saw movement behind a tree further ahead a hand rising in the air. He skirted the place, moving cautiously. He saw Karima before she saw him. She was sitting on the ground, her back to a tree and her hand clutching at a large stone. Then their eyes met and her hand sagged dropping the stone. He hobbled to her side, scanning the red stains on her face and clothes. She was unconscious when he reached her.

Thiab carried Karima inside the front gate. He found Kamila on the veranda crouched near Marhoon applying a wet rag to a long gash on the back of his head. Marhoon pushed aside Kamila's hand and lifted his body on his elbow. Kamila stood up and wailed tearing at her hair and Thiab's heart sank thinking that his children were hurt.

"shut up woman!" Marhoon shouted angrily at Kamila.

"The children. They took them."

His legs almost buckled under him and Kamila took a step toward him as if to lend a hand. Regaining his balance, he limped through the veranda door and laid his wife down on the sofa by the window. Kamila followed him inside.

"They hit the lady, your wife. They had rifles and machineguns. They took the children and left. She ran after them trying to stop them," she told him between sobs.

"We must get Karima to the hospital," he said holding his throbbing head with both hands. He lifted the telephone from its cradle but the line was dead.

"I'll go," Marhoon stood in the doorway leaning against the door's frame. His face was ashen and a trickle of fresh blood oozed from behind his ear.

"No. You're hurt. I want you to stay here and protect Karima and Kamila. Do you know how to use a gun?" Thiab said.

Marhoon nodded his head and collapsed on a chair.

"I'm all right. Stay with the lady!" he sternly ordered Kamila who had rushed to his side.

"There is a revolver and a box of bullets in the cupboard in the master bedroom," Thiab said. "I'll call an ambulance and come back". He walked out.

Thiab hobbled on the dirt road leading to the factory. He had only one thought on his mind. Finding a telephone to call an ambulance and after

that he must alert the police to search for his children. He jumped with surprise when suddenly a large sheep dog came from inside a thick palm grove and started barking and snapping at his heels. He picked a stone from the ground and wildly pitched it at the dog missing him by yards.

He quickened his steps when he saw the light at the factory's gate. An armed man standing guard at the gate raised his automatic weapon and ordered him to stop and identify himself. Thiab obeyed shouting angrily that his wife was hurt and needed medical help. His eyes wandering between Thiab's torn clothes and bloodied face the man insisted on seeing some identification. Seething with anger and frustration Thiab contemplated rushing the sentry, wresting his gun out of his hand and beating him unconscious with it. With the last thread of self-control, Thiab pleaded with the guard to let him use his telephone to call an ambulance. The guard hesitated for a moment and then said he would ask the night manager. After listening to Thiab's story the man offered to drive them to hospital assuring him that it would be faster than waiting for an ambulance.

Marhoon was standing guard behind the gate, his hand clutching at the gun. Thiab carried his unconscious wife to the car and they were off. The man from the factory drove skillfully on the dirt road. He then took a right turn and entered a paved road. In the distance Thiab saw dots of lights spread out in a wide arc and the man cheerfully said: "Kuffa."

The hospital was a small one-story structure surrounded by a large garden. An old matron dozing behind the reception desk woke up with a start, took one look at Thiab carrying his wife in his arms and was shouting orders to the crackling intercom on her desk. A moment later two sleepy orderlies hurried into the hall carrying a gurney between them.

XII

Karima fought hard and long to stay awake telling herself that she must stay awake to help Thiab in rescuing their children from the kidnappers. She remembered them walking into the garden shooting at the house. She was all alone when they came in. Kamila was upstairs and Marhoon was hurt and unconscious. She begged them to leave her children, offering them money and her jewelry but they pushed her aside. She then tried to stop them and one of them raised his gun and all she remembers was the pain in the side of her face and then she was staggering backward, felt a jab of pain in her side and fell to the floor and must have fainted for only few minutes. When she came around, she got up and ran out of the front door. But the kidnappers and her children were gone and she collapsed near a tree. Later she heard someone approaching and then she saw Thiab.

She awoke on a hospital trolley. The bright light shining in her face forced her to shut her eyes again. Someone dressed in white was holding her hand and then she was being lifted. Her eyelids must have weighed a ton because she could not keep them open for long. Before she blacked out again, she saw the figure in white and the long tube coming out of his arm and she panickily thought of the angel of death siphoning her soul out.

Thiab refused to leave his wife's bedside. A doctor arrived wearing a white robe over his pajama's trousers. After examining Karima, he took him aside and solemnly told him she was suffering from shock and concussion but her condition was stable. The doctor then looked him over and said he would examine his foot. Thiab was surprised by the sight of his bare, muddy and swollen foot. He could not remember whether he had lost his shoe or taken it off himself. Later, a police officer came to take his statement and before leaving instructed him to remain at his house in the morning.

All night long Thiab sat and then fell asleep on a metal chair at the foot of Karima's bed so that she would see him when she opened her eyes. Before he fell asleep, he thought of nothing except his children's kidnapping. Are they after ransom money? he asked himself. A middle-class salaried employee like him was not a likely target for kidnappers. Their entire fortune was modest by any standards. They had a little over sixteen thousand pounds in a joint saving account and few hundreds or more in a current account. A quick sale of their other assets, a mortgaged house and a three-year old Honda, would not raise more than fifty or sixty thousand. So why would kidnappers risk their lives for seventy or eighty thousand when they could extort twice the amount from a rich landowner-unless they thought he had more, much more. He would pay any amount

to get his children back. He would find a way to raise the money even if he had to beg for it in the streets.

He felt as if he had no more than few minutes of sleep when a nurse came into the room. The sun was brewing another hot summer day outside. Karima was still asleep. It was not a comma, he kept repeating to himself and soon she would open her eyes and ask him the question which he dreaded: where are my children Thiab?

He went out to wash his face and a stranger walked toward him, shook his hand and asked about Karima's condition. Thiab then recognized the face of the factory's night manager who drove them to hospital last night. The man gave him a lift to the house.

Kamila and Marhoon were gone. They had left during the night taking their few belongings with them. The floor of the front veranda had been thoroughly washed with the garden hose leaving no trace of Marhoon's blood on it. On a small table in the reception room he found the gun and the bullets. Nothing was missing: his wife's jewelry and spending money were untouched in their bedroom's cupboard.

He was sitting on the bed staring at the open jewelry box when the front bell rang. A police jeep was parked outside. Thiab's short account of the kidnapping disappointed the eager police officer. His eyes lit up with interest when Thiab mentioned that their gardener and maid left soon after the kidnapping. After questioning him at length about Kamila and Marhoon he departed, apparently convinced that they were the kidnapper's accomplices.

Thiab did not stay alone for long. Half an hour later Hadi arrived. A weary Thiab recounted to him what he had already told the police. Hadi paced the sitting room repeating that it did not make sense. The bell rang again and Hadi went to open the door and came back with Noor and his eldest son, Thamir. Thiab hugged his uncle barely controlling his tears.

Everyone said they were shocked and puzzled by the kidnapping. Noor looked at Hadi and asked if perhaps someone at the factory held a grudge against his nephew. Hadi said everyone there thought highly of Thiab. Then they considered every possible suspect and motive: a conspiracy by Thiab's relatives to lay their hands on his land, *Kawilias*, gypsies intending to sell the fair children or use them in their entertainment business, or a simple case of kidnapping for ransom money by local criminals.

Thamir suggested hiring a tracker. He had heard of a skilled tracker, a Bedouin who had tired of his nomadic life and settled down in a nearby village. Thiab readily gave his consent. He was willing to try anything to find his children. Hadi, probably, more out of sympathy rather than conviction said it was a good idea.

Hadi drove him to the hospital after Noor and Thamir left. Karima's condition was unchanged but stable, the old resident doctor assured him.

He then turned his attention to the two interns accompanying him on his round and delivered a short pedagogical statement on Karima's case to which they listened attentively.

Hadi called a friend who knew someone at the police department. After a while the mutual friend called back and told Hadi that the police are giving the case top priority. Marhoon and Kamila were suspected of aiding the kidnappers and a warrant for their arrest was issued.

After Hadi's departure, a nurse brought him food on a tray: a leg of chicken in white sauce, white rice and jelly. He told her he was not hungry. An hour later she came back, shook her head in disapproval at the congealed sauce and looking at him reproachfully took the tray away.

XIII

Noor and Thamir were back again after the noon prayer. A tall sinewy man stood beside their hired car. Noor introduced him as Muharib, the Bedouin tracker. He sat in the back seat between Thiab and Thamir, his eyes fixed on the worry beads dangling from his hand.

They stood back and watched the tracker at work. His face was inches from the ground, intent on his search. Every few steps he would stop and with a long branch he had earlier found he drew a circle on the ground. Ten minutes later he straightened up and beckoned to them.

“Look at these prints!” he said pointing his stick at one then another circle in the manner of a staff general explaining a military plan to subordinates.

“Where?” Noor asked peering at the spots.

Thiab saw vague lines in the dried mud.

“There!” the tracker said impatiently indicating a circle. “These are footprints. Notice their size. Back there I found smaller prints. You can see for yourself,” he said haughtily.

“How can he tell that these prints are not ours?” Thiab asked Noor in a low voice.

“He knows,” Noor assured him.

“By just looking at these prints he can tell you the approximate age of the person who made them whether he or she is fat or thin, man, woman or child,” Thamir confirmed enthusiastically.

“Don’t hold too much hope for him finding them!” Noor cautioned Thiab. “Some tracker work with thieves, sharing with them the reward money they get for stolen valuables,” he added in a whisper.

“Not this one,” Thamir said. “He is honest.”

The tracker was heading toward the river, stopping every few steps to examine the path, nodding his head few times and then walking on. He stood in the shade of a palm tree and waited for them to catch up with him.

“I found only adult prints over there,” he said pointing with his stick, “but here smaller prints appear. Two children, a boy and a girl, wearing shoes. They must have carried them from the house to this spot, over there. Then they put them down and pulled and dragged them in that direction,” he pointed at the river.”

“You said they dragged them?” Thiab asked anxiously.

“Yes. Your children must have resisted their kidnappers,” and turning his back on them he added: “Don’t worry. They were not hurt. You have brave children.”

They followed the tracker to the river. After scanning the muddy bank for almost five minutes he told them the kidnappers had boarded a motorboat taking the children with them.

He put his hand on Thiab's shoulder and stared at him.

"This is all I can tell you," he said apologetically.

"I was hoping I could find them for you. I'm sorry. Your children could be anywhere by now. I can tell you this, however, there were three of them, the bandits. As for the woman, your maid and the gardener, they left in the opposite direction. Unless it was a ploy to confuse us, I don't think they were going to the same place."

His disappointment at the tracker's failure astonished Thiab. He had - against all odds - expected him to lead them to Adam and Sarah.

"I wish I could have been more helpful, but there are two places where the skills of a tracker are useless: the graveyard and the river," the man said and Thiab felt that the man shared his disappointment.

"Thank you."

"I have never seen anything like it-not the work of ordinary criminals for sure. It can't be, no money stolen or jewelry. Most unusual," the tracker was shaking his head. "Who would want to hurt you and your family *dakator*, doctor? Your father was an Azari chief respected by all the tribes as far as Samawa. Your uncle *mawlana* is a sayyed. This is very strange."

"I wish I knew," Thiab muttered.

"I know the style of every thief and petty criminals in this area. Some of them would kill for a thousand dinar but none of them is capable of this. Someone must have a grudge against you or your family, a very strong one indeed. I may be wrong but my heart tells me your children are not far."

The tracker refused to take any money saying that it would be *haram*, illegal money because he failed to track down the children. After the man left, Thamir said:

"I've made some inquiries. There is a *Kawilia*, gypsy camp twenty miles south of here. If we start at sunset, we should be there before dinner prayer."

"I'll go alone," Noor said. "I'll talk to them and find out if they are keeping Adam and Sarah."

"They will deny it. They may even kill you," Thamir said heatedly.

"I'll offer them money," Noor persisted.

"The *Kawilia* is not a tribe *Yaba*, father. They don't respect our customs. They are vicious and evil, their women more violent than the men. One of them almost gouged out Kubar's eyes the other day."

"I'll come with you," Thiab said.

Noor and his son turned and looked at him.

“You’re tired Thiab,” his uncle protested.” You need to sleep and look after your wife. We’ll go and do whatever is necessary. If the Kawilia have them I won’t come back without them. I promise you that.”

“I must go with you. They are my children.”

“*Yaba!* we can’t go there without a plan,” Thamir said. “They are a dangerous lot and we must be armed.”

Thiab raised his hand.

“ I don’t want you to risk your life. I’ll go there alone. Thamir can show me where the Kawilia camp is and I’ll know how to deal with them.”

“Why is it that no one listens to me? Thamir was losing patience with them.

“You want to go alone. Go ahead. Don’t say later I didn’t warn you.”

“You can come along,” Noor conceded. “But only Thiab and I are going inside their camp. And that’s final.

“What if we don’t find them?” Thiab asked.

“We’ll think of something,” Noor paused for a moment and then added mysteriously, “We’ll go to them but now we’ll take you to your wife.”

Karima’s condition was unchanged. On her bedside table a huge bunch of flowers, white and red carnations and pink roses were neatly arranged in a cheap glass vase. A card was propped up against the base of the vase. Thiab read the get well soon note from Mona and put it back.

The flowers painfully reminded him of Karima’s gardening project on which she spent numerous hours designing, drawing sketches of the flower beds and supervising Marhoon’s work. Like their life it has been interrupted. And it was his fault. If he had not brought them along because he cannot bear the loneliness, they would have been safe back in England. If this is fate, the inevitable kismet, then he was its instrument. Tears of frustration signed his eyes.

XIV

It was dusk when Thamir parked the car and they stepped down. The air was warm and humid. They set off on a deserted path lined with dark palm trees, Thamir in the lead. Their progress was slow because of the dense undergrowth. They walked through waist-high grass, their blades dark green and fragrant. Later they came across a stagnant pool and they had to wade through it. When they came out Thiab's trouser legs were coated with a film of algae. Dogs barked in the distance.

"How far is it?" Thiab asked.

"We should be there in about fifteen minutes, if they haven't decamped already. We could have taken a shortcut but we want to surprise them." Thamir answered.

Thamir sounded as if they were going to raid the Kawilia camp and Thiab wondered if he was armed and whether Noor knew or approved. He had always thought the Kawilia were a peaceful people. Like their cousins the gypsies they are nomadic. They pitch their camel hair tents in the open fields not far from their customers in nearby towns and villages but not too close to offend religious people who strongly disapprove of them and their colorful way of life. When a child went missing the Kawilia were the first to be suspected of kidnapping him or her especially if the child was good looking. If Adam and Sarah are not with the Kawilia this will be their second night away from home, Thiab thought mournfully. A sharp crack on his left startled him, a branch snapping under Noor's foot. Above their heads the sickle moon peeked through the high palm branches.

This was going to be his second visit to a Kawilia camp. His first was at the age of seventeen. He was leaving soon to the university at the capital. A school mate suggested a farewell party at a nearby Kawilia camp and everyone agreed. To avoid their snide remarks on his then untested masculinity he accompanied them.

While his friends ate, drank, told obscene jokes about the dancers and singers and seemed unable to stop laughing at anyone and anything he sat in their middle camouflaging his restlessness and guilt feelings with a silly grin. One of them forced a glass of a local strong drink on him and he sniffed it and immediately felt nauseous. On that night he even felt some resentment toward his mother. He had lied to her by making up a story about staying late at a friend's house and she said she would not go to sleep until he came back.

Late that night, it was his turn to go into the back tent. Inside the tent, a Kawilia woman was lying on a mattress on the floor. Her naked body glistened with perspiration, hers and that of other men, he thought with revulsion. The women's eyes fluttered and her lips were parted by a sigh

but otherwise she remained listless, probably enjoying the unexpected short break before another demanding client showed up and threw himself on her. He sat on a chair near the tent's entrance and ten minutes later returned to his friends.

Thamir suddenly stopped.

"We're here," he was pointing at a faint light further ahead. The distant sound of music drifted to them.

"I prefer to go alone but if Thiab insists he can come along," Noor said looking pointedly at his son.

Thiab wished there would be no repeat of the afternoon argument between Noor and Thamir.

"You really think you can deal with these people," Thamir said.

"We'll take our chance." Noor said.

"You think they'll call you *mawlana*, our lord, kiss your hand and give you back the children."

Noor's patience with his son appeared to be inexhaustible.

"If we are not back within an hour you come and rescue us!" Noor terminated the argument walking in the direction of the camp. Thiab was restrained by Thamir's hand.

"Put it in your pocket, quick before he sees us" Thamir whispered.

It was a gun.

Noor turned, his eyes looking suspiciously at them.

"What is going on?" he asked.

"Nothing uncle. Thamir was just wishing us good luck," Thiab lied.

The Kawilia tents were spread in a wide circle, its center occupied by a larger tent from which the sound of music and singing bellowed. A man suddenly appeared from a ditch pointing a flashlight at them. Thiab saw a dagger at the man's waist. Noor shouted a greeting hooding his eyes against the blinding light. The man hesitated as if debating in his mind whether the old man and his young companion were here for the entertainment or some other purpose.

"Salam! please come this way," the man said finally and led them toward the large tent. To one side a group of old women were cooking in large pots on an open fire. They waved at them and laughed.

Two large lanterns illuminated the entrance of the large tent. Their escort lifted the flap at the entrance and Noor walked inside followed by Thiab. In the light of several lanterns hanging from the tent's poles, Thiab saw several groups of men sitting on mattresses. There was food and drinks on colorful straw mats in front of them. At the rear end of the tent a four man orchestra played while a middle-aged woman sang in tune. The main attraction, however, was the four girls dancing in the middle. Their sequin-covered scanty dresses twinkled and glittered as they vigorously threw their long black hair backward and forward, shook their breasts and gyrated

their pelvises. They were all in their teens and for a terrifying moment Thiab imagined his shy Sarah performing this lurid routine watched by several pairs of hungry covetous eyes.

“Sayyid!” Someone whispered in surprise. Noor peered at a group of men and asked:

“Who is it?”

“Salman, *mawlana!*” A tall man said hoarsely rising to his feet.

“Salman ben Humood! What are you doing here? Shame on you. You should be with your wife and three children.”

“Yes, *mawlana!*” Salman tamely said turning his face sideways so that Noor would not smell his breath.

The place reeked of cheap alcohol and stale cigarette smoke.

“Your father - God bless his soul - was my friend, a saintly man who never missed a prayer. We made pilgrimage to Najaf and Karbala together. Why can't you be like him?” Noor admonished the man.

Salman squirmed and shifted his feet like a chastised child. Noor sighed and said:

“Where is the headman of these Kawilia? I want to talk to him.”

Two men armed with daggers came forward. They were probably the Kawilia's bouncers, Thiab thought apprehensively. Salman intercepted them:

“It's all right. This a sayyid Noor. He wants to see chief Mansoor,” he said pointing at a far corner.

The men eyed them suspiciously, their hands resting on their daggers. One of them turned and walked away. Few minutes later a corpulent man, his robe stretched tight over his distended girth, approached flanked by two armed guards. He shook hands with Noor and Thiab.

“Our humble tents are always open to you *mawlana,*” he greeted them. “Please join me!”

“Thank you chief Mansoor. Isn't there a quieter place where we can talk?” Noor asked.

Mansoor hesitated for a moment then nodded his head.

“We'll go to my tent. Come this way please!”

The chief's tent was spacious and richly furnished. They stood in front of the tent while a thick hand-woven carpet was carried from inside and laid on the grassy ground and then several colorful woolen cushions were thrown on it.

“We'll sit outside, sayyid. It's cooler,” Mansoor beckoned to one of the men. He whispered few words in his ear and the man hurried away.

“Chief Mansoor! I am sayyid Noor.”

“I'm honored sayyid.” The chief lifted his hand to his head in a show of respect.

“And this is my nephew, *dactor* Thiab.” Noor continued introducing Thiab.

The chief peered curiously at Thiab.

“*Dactor!* Is he one of the health people?” the chief asked suspiciously. Before Thiab could answer, Noor said:

“No! He is *muhandis*, an engineer. He lives in the *Anglaisi*, English country.”

Thiab felt resentment at being treated like a child, the elders expecting him to remain respectfully silent while they discussed his affairs.

“I’m honored. Last week a *dactor* and two nurses came from Shamia and before the women and children even saw their syringes they ran and hid in the palm groves and ditches,” Mansoor chuckled. “The *dactor* was angry and threatened to bring the police with him next time.”

Two large aluminum trays full of several dishes of rice, meat and stews were brought and placed in front of Noor and Thiab.

“If we have known of your visit beforehand, we’d have slaughtered a sheep,” Mansoor apologized in the proper way prescribed by tribal customs.

“You’re very generous chief Mansoor,” Noor returned the compliment.

“You eat first then we talk.” and turning to one of his men “*Walad!* boy. Bring water! and take some food to our other guest!”

“I believe the man waiting in the palm grove is with you,” Mansoor addressed Noor gesturing with his head in the direction of the place where Thamir was hiding.

“He is my son,” Noor said shyly.

“There is no need for him to stay in the dark grove,” Mansoor said smiling.

“He insisted on coming along. You know how disobedient children these days are.”

“I know *mawlana*.” Mansoor sympathized. “It’s one of the signs foretold by your holy ancestors. Doomsday is near.”

A large winged insect bombarded the hurricane lamp with a loud hiss and fell down writhing on its back.

“You’re my guest *sayyid*. Anyone who dares to harm you will answer to me,” Mansoor said in a voice loud enough for the others to hear. Thiab thought the well-mannered chief could turn into a ruthless opponent if the need arises.

They ate little so as not to embarrass the chief and thanked him repeatedly. Mansoor clapped his hands shouted: “Now we drink, *walad!*” Noor looked uneasy, probably thinking that the chief was going to order alcohol.

After the customary rounds of tea Noor cleared his throat and said:

“Now we talk chief Mansoor, with your permission.” and not waiting for Mansoor’s response he continued, “my nephew works for the government. He is living in Badir’s mansion with his wife and their two children, a boy and a girl. Two days ago, a gang of armed men attacked them in broad daylight, knocked his wife down - she is still in hospital - and kidnapped the children,”

Mansoor looked at Thiab thoughtfully.

“I am sorry to hear that.” A look of genuine sympathy appeared on Mansoor’s face. “It must be hard on you *daktor*, he added, addressing Thiab for the first time.

Thiab sighed.

“I lost a son few years ago. I sent him to buy provisions from the bazaar and he never came back. Some villagers killed him.” Mansoor said.

“Allah will reward you for your patience,” Noor intoned.

“So, you suspect us of kidnapping the *daktor*’s children,” Mansoor said looking intently at Noor.

“I don’t judge people without evidence.” Noor protested.

“But whenever a little child goes missing or a cow is stolen and we or any other Kawilia clan happen to be in the neighborhood they accuse us,” Mansoor voice rose in anger.

“You are a wise man, Chief Mansoor.”

“I’m an old man *mawlana* who has a very difficult job to perform. I have to look after the interests of my people and protect them against so much hostility and resentment.”

Mansoor picked up a packet of cigarette, shook one half out and offered it to Noor first then Thiab. They declined gratefully. He took it out, lit it and inhaled deeply.

“Some people accuse us of corrupting the youth, destroying marriages and selling bad alcohol. You know *daktor*, the Kawilia did not spread *arak* and other alcoholic drinks among the southern tribesmen. It was the *Angalisi*. Their clubs sold *arak* and beer in every city and town to anyone who could afford their prices. Kawilias never do their business inside towns.” He paused for a moment. “As for kidnapping I don’t deny this may have happened in the past. Kidnapped children were sold to Bedouins, but not anymore and certainly not by my clan. I swear it on everything sacred and you have my permission to search our camp and if you find your children *daktor*, I’ll shave this,” he said heatedly, putting his fingers on his bushy mustache.

Thiab tried to imagine a clean-shaven disgraced Mansoor and his heart sank in despair. The man was telling the truth when he said they did not have his children.

After silencing his murmuring men with a glare, the chief turned to Noor:

“You mentioned that the men who attacked your nephew’s family were armed. And they did this in daylight. You ask anyone if this is how the Kawilia work,” Mansoor said putting out his cigarette in the dirt.

“We believe you chief and we are grateful for your hospitality and help,” Noor said and turning to Thiab he added, “We must go now before that son of mine does something rash.”

“Before you go sayyid here is something that your nephew mislaid.” One of the Kawilia men put a gun in Mansoor’s open hand. It was the gun Thamir gave him, Thiab thought. His ears burned with embarrassment.

“One of my men was keeping it for the *daktor*,” Mansoor said with a sly look on his face.

Noor looked reproachfully at Thiab.

“I’m sure it wasn’t my nephew’s idea. It must be Thamir’s, my son.” Noor apologized and added, “one last thing chief before we leave. Can I have few words with one of your men. His name is Marhoon,” Noor said it casually.

Mansoor stared briefly at Noor then gestured to one of his men who walked away. Few moments later a man, much older and shorter than Marhoon, came forward. Noor said he was not the man they were looking for.

Chief Mansoor and two of his guards escorted them to the camp’s perimeter. A worried Thamir was impatiently waiting for them.

They drove to the hospital where Thiab stayed for ten minutes before going back to the house. At the gate Noor said:

“You get some rest now and tomorrow we’ll look somewhere else. We’ll find them. Don’t worry.”

“I don’t suppose you’ll need me. Thamir asked.

“No! You have caused us enough embarrassment already. We’re going to see someone outside Kuffa. He may know something about the children. I’ll tell you all about it when we’re back.”

Thamir pursed up his lips sullenly.

Thiab watched the red specks of their taillights disappear in the darkness and he felt terribly lonely. The porch lights were switched off and he carefully walked inside, closing and latching the door behind him. A shadow was moving on the dark veranda and he stopped and shouted:

“Who is there?” his voice crackling with tension.

“I’m Kamila, Sir,” the figure responded walking toward him.

“Kamila! where have been? Why did you run away?” Thiab almost shouted.

“We had to. If we had stayed the police would have arrested Marhoon,” she said, her face unseen in the dark.

“Why? Because of the kidnapping!”

“No. My husband is a deserter. He was a conscript soldier and one day he got into an argument with an officer. Marhoon hit him and ran away. That’s why.”

“Where is he now?”

“Hiding in the palm grove south of the house.”

“Tell him I want to talk to him.” and walking inside he added “I’ll be waiting.” He left the door open and switched on the veranda’s lights.

Less than ten minutes later Thiab heard a soft knock on the door and Marhoon stepped inside. The bandage on his head was dirty and he had a dark stubble on his chin.

“Salam doctor!” he said standing at the door.

“Salam Marhoon. Sit down!”

Marhoon sat on the sofa near the door, perched on its edge and Kamila squatted on the floor near him.

“Why didn’t you tell me? You should have trusted me,” Thiab said reproachfully.

“I didn’t want to get you into more trouble,” Marhoon examined his hand awkwardly.

“We didn’t even know you were married. We thought you were having,” Thiab paused briefly, “an affair.”

Kamila blushed and covered her face with her *aba*. “Oh my God! What shame!”

“We got married three years ago,” Marhoon said.

“And how long have you been on the run?”

“Almost a year.”

“And how long do you think you can go on like this?”

“Kamila refuses to go and live with my parents, and I can’t go back to the army. They will torture me and then hang me as a deserter and a traitor.”

“For hitting an officer! I doubt that.”

“He is a political officer and he swore I would never leave the army alive and I believe him.”

The tone of panic in his voice sounded genuine enough to Thiab.

“You may stay here if you like. I don’t think the police will come back looking for you. They believe you’re involved in the kidnapping.”

“That’s unfair,” Kamila protested.

“I should have stopped them. It was my fault,” Marhoon said sadly.

“You did all you can. You were hurt.”

“He took me by surprise. I was watering the plotted plant on the veranda when I heard movement behind me. I turned and he was standing there with a rifle in his hand. He hit me with it and I fainted,” Marhoon said feeling the back of his head.

Kamila took over the narrative.

“Two of them scaled the back garden fence,” she said. “They had rifles and started shooting. I brought the children inside the house and we all hid in the kitchen, the dear little ones were so brave, but the men were already inside.”

“And you haven’t seen any of them before ” Thiab asked.

“No. One of them spoke with a strange accent.” Kamila said.” He was a *hudri*, a city dweller. I am sure.”

Thiab sat forward, his interest aroused by Kamila’s revelation. He wondered why a man from the city would kidnap his children.

“They weren’t ordinary thieves,” Marhoon said emphatically.

Thiab already knew that much.

“They were not thieves, Marhoon! They didn’t steal anything.”

“What I meant is that a thief, or any criminal would not behave like this. He would be cautious. These people just walked in, shooting their guns in every direction, took the children and walked away. They were...” Marhoon briefly paused searching for the right word, “daring. It’s so unusual.”

Thiab shrugged, losing interest in the conversation which he thought led nowhere. He felt tired and wished they would go to their room and leave him alone.

Marhoon persisted.

“At first I thought they were military policemen coming to arrest me. They certainly acted as if they had their power.”

“They had their power.” These were Marhoon’s words, Thiab thought, and he probably meant authority.

“You mean authority as if they were obeying the order of someone in authority like when soldiers obey their commanding officers?” Thiab asked.

“Exactly,” Marhoon answered, “that’s why I said they reminded me of the arrogant military police in my regiment.”

It was inconceivable that people with authority should want to kidnap his children, Thiab thought. Such people could do anything they like in this country. They could break the laws or make new laws and no one would dare make a murmur unless he is a suicidal case.

Later that night Thiab was back at the perimeter of the Kawilia’s camp. Thamir was walking alongside him hidden from view by the thick shadows of palm trees when they heard the dogs. Thamir shouted a warning, turned back and started running. Thiab followed him. But the dogs were faster and they were closing on them barking wildly and snapping at their heels. Then he lost sight of Thamir. Suddenly a large tree barred his way and with one leap he was hugging its thick stem with all fours and clambering up. A hand was thrust down near his face and he raised his eyes expecting to see his cousin’s face but instead the disfigured face of Asswad was looking

down at him. He was urging him to take his hand. Thiab hesitated because this would be Asswad's second favor to him and he didn't want to be in debt to this man. But after watching the Kawilia vicious dogs leaping to reach his feet, their eyes red embers glowing in the darkness he knew he had no choice. Asswad's grip was firm but his hand felt clammy and he imagined it covered with the blood of Azari farmers and other victims. He looked up just in time to witness the small volcano on Asswad's cheek erupting and the ugly head of a large pink worm forcing its way out and he was sure that any second now it would release its coils from its cocoon of human flesh and fall freely onto his face.

He woke up with a start. It was morning already and real world was even worse than his nightmare.

Kamila brought him breakfast on a try. She said they were almost out of groceries. Marhoon, however, could not go to town and risk getting arrested. Thiab said he would do the shopping.

Noor arrived in a chauffeured hired car. He refused to go inside.

“Can you drive?” he asked.

“Yes!” a puzzled Thiab answered. “Shall I bring my international driving license,”

“No need. Let’s go.”

At the outskirts of Najaf, Noor asked the driver to stop in front of a tea shop. The owner sitting at the door of his dingy establishment greeted them with a smile. Noor told the driver to wait for them there.

“Where to?” Thiab asked starting the engine.

“The western desert,” Noor said. “Drive on and I’ll tell you where to go.”

The traffic was light on the twisting two-lane road. Thiab was doing fifty miles an hour when he saw the lorry speeding toward them. The lorry’s driver clumsily negotiated a sharp turn and was now moving thunderously on their lane. Noor was frantically shouting: “look out!” and Thiab at the last moment regained control of his paralyzed hands and swerved the car sharply into the other lane barely missing collision with the lorry.

“He was going to kill us,” Thiab said, suppressing the long list of insults at the tip of his tongue. He held the wheel firmly to stop his hands from shaking. “He must be drunk,” he added.

“No. He takes pills so he can workday and night. Many lorry drivers are doing this now,” Noor said. “Everybody wants to become rich overnight.”

Twenty minutes later Noor told him to turn left into a desert track. The dirt road twisted and began to go gently downhill, and after few miles they drove into a vast arid plain punctuated by clumps of thorns. A line of wide tipped hills rose slightly on their left. Noor after scanning the terrain for about ten minutes told him to stop the car near a footpath spiraling upward.

They stepped out of the car into the stifling desert heat. Noor gave him a handkerchief to cover his head with. He led the way picking his path carefully between jagged rocks. The ascent was difficult. Thiab was watching his steps on the rough path and did not see the man coming out from behind a tall thorn tree. Standing with his back to the sun the man’s face was a dark mask shaded by his headdress.

“Follow the man’s orders!” Noor told Thiab without looking back.

Thiab heard Noor asking the man for an audience with the dervish. After listening to the man’s reply Noor took off his headdress handing it to the man who tied it around his uncle’s head blindfolding him. The man then

beckoned to him. It was his turn. He fought with panic as he felt the man's callused fingers on his head, tying the handkerchief into a blindfold. The man then took his hand and placed it on Noor's shoulder.

They shuffled forward, two blindfolded men led by a stranger in the middle of nowhere. Thiab wondered if his uncle knew what he was getting them into and anyhow who was this dervish they were going through all this trouble just to see him and can he really help them to find his children.

Few minutes later a hand pushed his head down. He felt the space around him suddenly shrinking. They were entering the confined space of a cave or a tunnel. It was much cooler inside. A hand removed his blindfold. After his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he saw his uncle. He was smiling at him reassuringly.

The man walked ahead of them, holding an oil lamp. The cave ceiling was low and Thiab had to walk stooped. The path twisted and they came into a large chamber with a higher ceiling. An old man facing the rear wall was praying.

The man finished his prayers and turned around. He had a small figure and his face looked emaciated. His pale skin had obviously not seen the sun for a long time.

"*Salam alaikum!* peace on you," he greeted them. He had a mellifluous voice. "Please sit down," he added indicating a woolen rug.

"Thank you *mawlana*, our lord," Noor sat and Thiab joined him on the paper thin rug. "We apologize for interrupting your prayer and meditation."

"A little interruption now and then helps to remind me of the impermanence of all worldly things," the dervish said gesturing with his hands.

The guide appeared noiselessly from somewhere behind them, placed two clay jugs in front of them and retreated.

"Please forgive the improper hospitality of a poor dervish," the man apologized.

"You were extremely generous by agreeing to see us," Noor said. The exchange of amiability's continued.

Emulating his uncle, Thiab lifted the jug to his mouth. The rough clay surface felt cool under his fingers. It was full of fresh spring water, slightly sweetened and scented with rose essence. He sipped leisurely savoring the refreshing taste and aroma.

Noor interrupted the silence.

"I'm sayyid Noor bin Hassan and this is my nephew, Dactor Thiab."

"I am honored *mawlana*," the dervish said, touching the top of his head and rising slightly to express his respect.

“Something very tragic has recently happened to my nephew and his family. My nephew’s children, a son and a daughter, were abducted by unknown persons. We hope you could help us.”

The old dervish was silent for a moment.

“I’m truly sorry to hear that. I have not myself experienced the bliss of fatherhood but I can feel with you. You have my heartfelt sympathies. Children are the most precious gifts from Allah but many parents belittle this blessing” the dervish addressed Thiab.

Thiab mumbled his gratitude.

“I would like to help you if I can. But as you can see a dervish like me is out of touch with the rest of the world and has no influence over its events.” He paused briefly.” People make up all kinds of unfounded stories about the supernatural powers of dervishes. We’re good at one thing only - praying.”

“But you’re the head of all the dervishes.”

“The dervishes are not a clan and we don’t have a government. I’m neither the wisest nor the most devout of my brothers,” the dervish said humbly.

Thiab listened and drank more of the water. He felt relaxed and wished he could stretch his legs in front of him instead of folding them in this uncomfortable position dictated by customs.

“We are not magicians. Some people confuse us with street performers and charlatans who claim to possess magical powers.”

The man’s sweet voice went on. Thiab heard the words but felt unable to follow their meanings. He was conscious only of the dervish’s eyes on him. He stifled a yawn, blinked away the tears that filled his eyes and looked. The eyes were still staring at him but the sympathy and compassion he had earlier seen in them were gone, replaced by hostility and loathing. And although he could see nothing but the eyes he knew for certain that this was not the dervish glaring at him. He was in another place, a much darker place, and he felt the man’s hostility toward him intensifying. He opened his eyes wide to free his senses from the grip of this dream or hallucination.

His attempts to escape the disturbing vision were ineffective. He flinched under the fierce stare and hot tears rolled down his cheeks. The eyes watched gloating over his frustration and pain. Thiab felt powerless to meet the evil challenge. He was weakening fast, his body sapped of all energy. He nodded off and slowly slipped into a void. Someone knew him down there in the darkness because he distinctly heard his name being called. For an instant he was sure it was Sarah’s voice who was, like him, frightened by the malevolent eyes. He wanted to turn his head and search for her but his neck muscles were paralyzed.

“Thiab!” the voice went on, now pleading, then anxious.

“Thiab!”

He could not remember if his daughter sometimes called him by his first name.

“Thiab!”

And he woke up and saw his uncle’s anguished face.

“What?” he said sitting upright.

“You must have fainted!” Noor was saying

Thiab rubbed his face.

“I dozed off. It’s the heat,” and addressing the dervish: “Please forgive me.”

The man smiled at him and Thiab thought the man knew.

“I saw him.”

“What did you see my son?” the dervish asked.

“I saw only eyes. They were hateful.”

“Yes! Go on!”

“He was staring at me but I was not alone. I felt the presence of my children around me. I couldn’t see them but I heard them crying and calling for help. And I sat there and did nothing to help them.”

“Anything else?” Noor asked.

“No. That’s all,” and turning to the dervish again he asked: “Does it have any meaning mawlana? what I saw”

“Only Allah knows for sure,” the dervish said raising his brows and right hand. “I am not qualified to interpret such visions. I can only pray for the safety of your children and your wife’s health.”

Thiab was confused. It was so unlike him to fall asleep like this. Well, it finally happened, he told himself. Any explanation such as suspecting the dervish of being somehow responsible for his fainting or sleeping spell sounded extremely unlikely to his rational mind

“I don’t know where to look for them?” Thiab finally voiced his despair.

“Search with your heart and mind, and with Allah’s guidance you’ll find them. Have no doubt!” the dervish said and rose to his feet.” you must excuse me now but it’s time for my meditation.”

They thanked the dervish and again submitted to blindfolding at the hands of his steward. When their blindfolds were removed, they were back on the hill and the time was not noon yet.

“Who was that man?” Thiab asked walking behind his uncle.

He is the Grand Darwish. They are visionaries,” Noor said in awe. “They can make you see visions, anything they wish. He could conjure the vision of a ferocious lion and you’d actually see a lion attacking you.” He stopped to catch his breath.” But it isn’t real, of course. It’s just an image, a picture like the one you see on television. But it is life-like. When the senior dervish dies the dervishes congregate to elect his successor. They

test each other's abilities with visions and the one who makes the most convincing vision is chosen."

They continued their descent.

"Is it some sort of magic?" Thiab asked.

"No, practicing magic is forbidden in our religion." He answered emphatically.

They reached the car. Thiab opened the door and rolled down the window to let the baked air out. The hot steering wheel scorched his fingers.

"It is a special gift. They are very pious people and don't use their power to harm anyone or earn money."

Thiab suddenly thought he knew what happened to him in the dervish's cave. He almost ran the car over a large boulder.

"I was hypnotized."

Noor did not know what hypnotism was. Thiab tried to explain to his uncle something which he had read about, watched demonstrations of it on television but did not really understand how it happened.

"You mean the dervish put you to sleep and then made you see this vision." Noor sounded skeptical.

"Frankly I am not sure but it's the best explanation I can think of. The man must be a powerful hypnotist." Thiab paused briefly. "Didn't he say he was going to pray for my wife's health? Did you mention that she wasn't well when I was unconscious?"

"I don't remember. I don't think so."

"If you didn't tell him and I am certain I didn't then how did he find out?"

Thiab and Noor glanced at each other and said nothing.

They picked up the driver and drove to the hospital. Thiab tiptoed into Karima's room. Fresh flowers were placed in the vase. Karima's face was pale and full of sadness. He stayed for few moments and then went out to the visitors' lounge. Noor sat on a dilapidated sofa reading a newspaper laid on a low table in front of him. A large picture of Al-Qaid was splashed on the front page.

"He is touring our district," Noor said and glanced furtively right and left. "If he comes to the factory, you could speak to him about the kidnapping or present him with a petition. If he wishes he could have every policeman in the country looking for them."

"Why should he care?"

"Your wife is an *Angalisi*. The *Angalisi* and *Americanis* were his friends and allies. They gave him money and sold him weapons."

Thiab thought of his uncle's suggestion. So far, he had tried everything: the police, a Bedouin tracker, the Kawilia and a visionary dervish so why

not add Al-Qaid to the list. And if he visited the cement factory, he would have a good chance of meeting him.

XVII

Noor dropped him at the factory's gate. He went straight to his office. The surprised look with which his secretary greeted him told him that he was not expected. By now everyone in the factory, if not the whole district, knew about his children's abduction.

He sat behind his desk wearily regarding the stack of files and folders on it. Turning around this factory must wait until his own problems are solved. Even then he wondered if he could stay to finish the job.

There was a soft tap on the door and he looked up and saw Asswad entering his office.

"Doctor Thiab. I am glad to see you," he greeted him. They shook hands.

"Any news about your children?" he enquired.

"Nothing. The police failed to find the kidnappers trail. We haven't received a ransom note. I still can't believe it really happened." Thiab summed up his despair.

"I am sure the police are doing everything possible to find your children."

"I thought something like that doesn't happen in this country."

"They won't get away with it and then they'll have a taste of our swift justice." Asswad lit a cigarette and continued. "When this is over, I expect you'll be in a hurry to go back to England."

"I'll still have a job to do here. I'll send my family back and stay until it is done."

Asswad rose to his feet and walked to the window.

"You were very busy before the incident. I was watching you," he said smiling.

Asswad was fishing for information again, Thiab thought. He had the nerve to admit that he was spying on him. He decided to parry his questions with another.

"What do you think Mr. Asswad? You seem to know everything that goes around here."

Asswad was trying to remove a tobacco speck from his tongue. His attention returned to the irritating speck. After trying unsuccessfully to spit it out he inserted two fingers into his mouth and brought it out. He examined it briefly near his nose and then flicked it away.

"You are the expert doctor," he said. The sarcasm crudely disguised as flattery angered Thiab. "So please tell us what's wrong with us? What is your diagnosis?" Asswad put out his cigarette.

"I am not supposed to say before submitting my report."

“Don’t forget that I am the security chief here.” He paused. Thiab tensely waited for the man to threaten him. “Your secrets are safe with me.”

“Secrets!” Thiab chuckled. “I am sure my findings are no secret to you. Indeed, most of them are common knowledge: low productivity, poor quality, bad maintenance.”

“We know that,” Asswad interrupted, offering Thiab a cigarette. He declined. The match flared and the small volcano on the man’s cheek appeared to come alive. He exhaled the smoke through his nostrils. A small cloud of smoke was forming under the ceiling fan.

“You could also benefit from better community relations.”

This must have touched a raw nerve in Asswad.

“These stubborn people,” he spat. “They are illiterate, stupid and arrogant. They refuse to understand that we can’t have a modern country and strong economy without an industry. For a country like ours surrounded by hostile states it’s a matter of life and death.”

Asswad’s strong words brought to Thiab’s mind images of frenzied young people, wearing gray or black shirts, marching for hours carrying banners and torches, listening adoringly to hateful speeches by mad men and mercilessly beating up innocent people.

“How can you make these illiterate peasants understand these simple facts. Using force may not be the best way but it is the only way sometimes.”

Asswad paused briefly. Thiab wondered if he was trying to justify his participation in the raid on the Azari farmers.

“And believe me it’s not something you enjoy doing,” he continued.

Anyone who saw you on that day laughing, dancing and brandishing you Kalashnikov would believe otherwise, Thiab thought. And he pretended to be concerned about his children’s fate when he was only interested in the contents of his forthcoming report. Thiab felt an intense dislike for this deceitful person and an irrepressible urge to annoy him.

“I can tell you this-but please, no one else should know of it. You are aware that this factory has a high rate of wear and tear. It’s unacceptably high even in terms of local standards so I decided to look deeply into it. And you can never guess what I came across.” He paused for effect. “A shocking discovery. Serious errors were committed in constructing these factory -not tolerable deviations from specifications but serious ones. I don’t understand how the contractors got away with them.”

Asswad was obviously surprised.

“And it’s all there in your report? he asked gesturing at the papers in Thiab’s desk.

Thiab never thought of himself as a spiteful person but Asswad brought out the worse in him.

“That’s not all I am afraid. Did you know that the site on which this factory was built is riddled with subterranean cavities.”

“The engineers and surveyors must have studied the site before approving it. They wouldn’t overlook something so serious,” Asswad asked incredulously.

“They didn’t but they thought the risk could be minimized by strengthening the foundation. What they didn’t take into consideration is the rising water table.”

“These are serious allegations,” Asswad interrupted.

“Facts, not allegations.”

“The government put millions of dinars in this factory and thousands of people work here. I sincerely hope you’re wrong.”

“I wish I were.”

“Let me finish. I am sure our engineers did not miss any of the things you mentioned but they saw no reason to sound the alarm.” He paused briefly. “Anyone listening to you may get the impression that you want this factory relocated.”

“Only as a last resort,” Thiab said defensively.

“Your kinsmen, the Azari, would like that, wouldn’t they?” Asswad smirked.

Thiab was stunned by the man’s suspicious mind.

“You are wrong Mr. Asswad. I never let my sentiments influence my professional opinion,” Thiab said angrily.

“You admit that you sympathize with the Azari outlaws.”

Thiab’s stomach muscles tightened.

“Look! when you read my report....”

“No!” Asswad said raising his hand. “I’ve heard enough.” he added, turned and left the room.

Thiab stood up and paced around the office. He was angry with himself for discussing his work with Asswad. He was probably racing to his office to write a report to the security police. He should have been more careful and avoided making an enemy of this dangerous man. He should have watched his tongue as his mother often advised him. Your tongue, she used to say, is like your horse. If you ride it carefully it will take you to wherever you like but if you give it free rein it will carry you to your doom. And why should he care about this factory when his children were kidnapped and his wife was seriously ill.

He felt terribly alone. He called Hadi’s office.

Hadi answered.

“Where have you been? I have been calling your house and the hospital all morning.”

“I’ve had an extraordinary morning. I’ll tell you about it when I see you.” Thiab said massaging his temples.

“Any news?”

“No, nothing.”

“The police are still looking for Marhoon and Kamila. I called them this morning.”

Thiab wanted to shout that he was harboring these two fugitives suspected by the police of kidnapping his children.

“Asswad just left my office. We had an argument...”

Hadi understood the hint.

“I am coming over,” Hadi said in English.” You know how telephone lines get sometimes entangled and you end up with two mouths and three ears sharing in a telephone conversation.”

Hadi refused to sit down saying that he has a meeting after fifteen minutes.

“He is afraid you may find something important that he hasn’t already reported to his superiors at the Mukhabarat. Don’t forget he is the arch snooper around here.”

“He is insane! He practically accused me of conspiring with the Azaris against the factory and by substitution the government.”

“If Asswad discovers his parents talking behind closed doors he would suspect them of conspiring against his beloved Al-Qaid.”

Thiab laughed. Hadi later left complaining that his work here was made up mainly of tedious meetings interspaced by other minor duties.

Thiab tried to concentrate on his work. It was early in the afternoon when the telephone rang. He lifted the receiver and listened to the clicking and static noise of the long distance call.

“Hello Thiab! Can you hear me?” It was David Longman’s voice.

Thiab was surprised.

“David! How are you?”

“Fine, fine. I’ve just been informed about Karima and the children. I am shocked. I don’t know what to say. We had a meeting today and everyone here was deeply saddened -shocked and saddened. Has the police discovered anything?”

“No, nothing so far. They’re still looking in the wrong places I am afraid.

“I am sure they’ll find them. If there is anything we can do here...”

“Thank you David”

“I don’t know if it’s the right time to mention this. Anyhow you’re entitled to hear some good news. We discussed the proposed junior partnership today and there was a near consensus on you.”

A near consensus is good but not good enough, Thiab thought.

“Look Thiab! I hate to bring this up but I have just received a long and boring call from the Director General at your end. He sounded more than a little apprehensive about the contents of your forthcoming report.”

So Asswad has been ringing bells of alarm all over the place, Thiab thought.

“Was he more specific?”

“Actually, he was over dramatic, almost hysterical. Apparently, you mentioned something about irregularities in the design to one of his men and he is worried that people may misinterpret your comments. You know he was the chief resident engineer of the project before he became D.G.”

“I see,” Thiab said. Now he knew the real reason why Asswad had almost a fit in his office.” What would you like me to do now?

“I have full faith in your good judgment. We don’t want to make a tower of Babylon out of a mole. Ha ha! You were born and raised in that country. I don’t need to tell you what to do.”

Thiab thought for a moment.

“I’ll tell you what I am going to do. I’ll sit with the D.G. and discuss the whole thing with him. I promise to keep an open mind but no cover-up job.”

“Don’t say that Thiab!” He paused.” Is this line safe? Never mind! Just sort out things amicably with the man. I don’t have to remind you that a partner is expected to give the firm’s interest priority in his thinking.”

“I thought professional ethics came first!” Thiab said slyly.

David chuckled and then abruptly stopped. Thiab heard muffled voices in the background. David removed his hand from the receiver and his voice came back warm and cordial.

“Thiab! Thiab! you know you are the only wolf I like as my son.” It was their private joke. Thiab means wolf in Arabic. “I am throwing the whole business in your lap. You have my support whatever you decide. Now before I hang up are you sure there is nothing we can do over here. Would a call to a man of some influence in the Foreign Office help?”

“Thank you, David, not now anyhow.”

“I’ll keep in touch and if there are new developments, I’d like to be the first to hear the good news.” David said and clicked off.

He sat motionless for a moment listening to the monotonous purr of the dial tone. He finally put down the receiver and sighed. They wasted no time, he thought. Asswad must have gone straight from here to the D.G who in turn called David to enlist his help. The vicious circle that spanned two continents would not be complete without his cooperation. And if he blows the whistle on them not only the consensus needed for his appointment as a junior partner will never be reached but he may even lose his job.

How can he explain to David Longman and his partners at home and abroad that a self-respecting man cannot live with a broken face? He remembered his father’s rage when a distant relative was accused of raping a peasant woman. He kept repeating that the man broke our face. Like a

mirror or a fine porcelain dish a broken face can never be put together again because it falls to the ground where people will trample on it. He looked at him intently as if trying to etch his words on his memory and said: a man with a broken face is better off dead. Few days later the rapist was found dead shot once in the face.

A loud siren suddenly went on interrupting his thoughts. He was at the window just in time to see the factory disgorging its human elements. The Director General came out first and drove off in a new Mercedes followed by a procession of smaller and less expensive cars. Finally, it was the workers' turn and thousands of them swarmed into the waiting buses and trucks or walked out through the factory gate.

When Thiab stepped out of the Administration building the parking lot was empty. He waited for the driver to show up in the car assigned to him but after ten minutes he gave up and decided to walk. He smiled wondering if it was the General Manager's idea or Asswad's. They were treating him like one of their subordinates; they took away the car as a warning and to make him stop and consider his position. And if he does not step back in line soon, other privilege will be withdrawn.

Back in the house he called the hospital before going into the shower. The nurse who answered his call had nothing new to report on Karima's condition. He dully chewed and swallowed the chicken meat and saffron-colored rice cooked by Kamila and watched the news on television. The broadcasters face blinked out and a motorcade appeared on the screen. Strings of cheering people stood on both sides of the street. Many of them carried Al-Qaid's pictures and slogans. A large Mercedes stopped and Al-Qaid alighted out flanked by bodyguards in civilian clothes. He took few steps toward the crowd waving both hands. A woman in black suddenly broke out of the police cordon but was immediately intercepted by the bodyguards. Thiab held his breath and watched. The smiling Al-Qaid beckoned to the bodyguards who escorted the woman to his side. She bent down and kissed his hand while he patted her head with his other hand in a pontifical gesture. Thiab switched the television off.

He could not sleep. He was overwhelmed by a childish fear of the dark. The corridors were long and silent and he went around turning the lights on. He took his papers with him to bed. Sometime later the words and figures faded and he fell asleep.

XVIII

Karima woke from a dream which slipped out of her memory as soon as she opened her eyes. She found herself in a strange bed. The faint milky light seeping from under the closed door softened the claustrophobic darkness. The air smelled heavily of a strong disinfectant. She was in a hospital. Everything came back to her mind in a rush: the armed men firing their guns at the house, Kamila running from one room to another closing windows and locking doors, Adam and Sarah pale with fright, crying and clinging to her dress, and finally Thiab's worried face hovering over hers. She remembered it in torturing detail, the last horrible moments painfully imprinted on her memory. She was lying on the floor stunned by the man's blow to her head. Just before the terrible pain dragged her into oblivion, she heard Sarah's frantic calls, loud and incessant at first and faint and distant later and she was powerless to answer them.

She sat upright. She must find out if her children are back. She blindly searched for the standard buzzer on the wall near her bed, squeezed it and waited. No one came. She tried again and again then gave up. She threw the sheet off and swung her legs over the edge of the bed. She took a deep breath and tried to stand up. The room swirled and she had to grab the bed for support. Slowly and cautiously she took her first step.

She could not find her shoes. Standing barefoot on the cold tiles she shivered. She walked down the dimly lit corridor. From behind the closed door of a room the sound of coughing rose incessantly. An infant wailed, a sleeping voice whispered to it, and then they both fell silent. A digital clock on the wall flashed the time: 10:37 am.

In a small lounge at the end of the corridor a nurse and an orderly sat in front of a black and white television set watching a local drama show. The nurse sensing a presence turned and saw her. A broad smile instantly lit up the matron's face. She stood up and hurried toward her, shaking her head disapprovingly and babbling incomprehensibly. Taking her by the arm she tried to lead her by the arm she tried to lead her back down the corridor.

Karima resisted feebly and said: "Telephone."

The nurse paused briefly, her hands beating the air like an orchestra conductor, searching for the right word.

"Broken, sorry!" she finally said smiling pleased with her accomplishment.

Back in the room, the nurse using sign language asked her if she wanted to eat. Karima shook her head. The nurse tucked her in bed, gave her and the room a patronizing smile and sidled out of the door.

Karima resigned herself to a long and sleepless night. Questions for which she had no answers nagged at her mind. Have they found Adam and Sarah? Are they all right? How long has she been unconscious? She thought of Thiab and the sleepless nights he must have spent alone in the big house thinking about them. He was the worrying type and this rendered the heavy burden of a family and two children even heavier on his shoulder.

Her memory went back to the day they met. Shaking hands with him for the first time she grudged him his big black eyes. Such eyes belong on a woman's face, she thought not without envy. They were students in the same university. He was a doctoral student looking for someone to type his dissertation. She was an English literature undergraduate with a lot of spare time and moonlighting as a typist. A mutual acquaintance brought them together. His handwriting was legible but the text was full of long tables and complicated formulae and he kept dropping by to edit her typing. On these frequent visits he apologized profusely for troubling her when she should have for making so many typing errors. And when he finally mustered enough courage to invite her to dinner she agreed readily.

Inside the shy introspective Thiab she discovered a person thirsty for company, friendship and love. He treated her with old-fashioned politeness, respecting her wishes and never making any demands on her in return for his attention. And when that attention later developed into mutual deep affection the new effervescent, passionate Thiab amazed and delighted her.

She smiled to herself remembering a conversation they had on their third or fourth date. She was his guest for dinner in an expensive French restaurant.

“Do you mend socks?”

The unexpected question surprised her and for a moment she was speechless.

“Well! Do you, or don't you?” he repeated looking very serious in his tweed jacket and woolen ties.

“I don't understand. Why do you want to know” She was puzzled.

She assumed he was making a joke and decided to go along.

“You mean men's socks, of course. The answer is no.” She hesitated briefly. “Actually, I don't know. I haven't tried it. I don't know how to. My mother usually does the mending. Perhaps I am good at it. It's one talent I haven't yet discovered in myself.”

“Good,” he said nodding his head.

“Good! I take it that you approve.” He shrugged and said nothing. She continued. “Aren't you going to tell me why? Are women in your country forbidden to mend socks?”

“Don’t be silly. We don’t discriminate against women, not when it concerns mending socks at least.”

“I don’t think you’re the type of person who has his socks mended,” she said reflexively.

“Oh! What type of person do you think I am?” he asked leaning toward her.

“The type who would throw away a sock with a hole in it.”

“Perhaps I need someone to look after my socks and mend them when necessary,” he said staring at her intently. He had the deep and focused stare of a hypnotist.

“Don’t count on me. I don’t think I am good at it.”

“Congratulations. You pass the test,” he said taking her hand in his and pumping it.

“Oh! I didn’t know this was a test?”

The waiter came with the menus and she impatiently waited for him to go away.

“Well. Aren’t you going to be more specific?”

He shrugged.

“It’s nothing important,” he said without lifting his eyes from the menu.

“I want to know,” she insisted.

He put down the menu and smiled at her.

“All right. I’ll tell you. My compatriots here, seeing how timid and inexperienced I am, offered me an advice. They said I must watch out for local girls who suddenly take an unusual interest in my laundry and socks with holes in them and offer to cook my dinner some nights. They call it rehearsing the wife part.”

She hesitated unsure whether she had just been insulted and should react with anger or take what he said as a joke and laugh at it.

“And what makes you think I am interested in this part,” she finally asked breaking the silence.

“I am at least as eligible as the next bachelor,” he said and added: “Are you ready to order now?”

“It’s in French,” she complained closing the menu.

“Would you like me to translate?”

She met his staring eyes with a little smile.

“I may not be good at mending socks or reading French menus but I can do all your typing, free of charge.”

“What?” It was his turn to be puzzled. And suddenly they were laughing raucously unmindful of disapproving glances from neighboring tables.

Six months later they were married.

She moved her hands to ease the tension in her shoulders. The waiting would be less painful if she had her wristwatch on her. It was an

engagement gift from Thiab. Her mother neither approved of him nor of his gifts.

“Why not?” she said giving the expensive diamond-encrusted gold watch a cursory glance. “He can afford it with all the ransom money they get for innocent hostages.”

“Mother! he has a doctorate in Engineering and he is the nicest person I’ve ever met,” she protested.

Her mother turned down her lower lip and said nothing.

“His people have been mistreated for centuries,” she pleaded for her mother’s sympathy.

“So have we in this great democratic country,” she retorted tucking her Irish henna red hair under her knitted hat.

Thiab’s repeated attempts to ingratiate himself with his mother-in-law met with stubborn rebuffs.

“Why can’t he be like Sadat!” Before meeting Thiab, Sinbad and Sadat were the only she knew of his people. And in her eyes, Thiab did not measure up to either of them. Later when they had Adam and then Sarah, she stopped worrying about Thiab taking a harem and replaced her intense dislike of him with inconspicuous disapproval.

“God, I hope when I see him in the morning, he will tell me that everything is all right, and that Adam and Sarah had been found unharmed,” she whispered to herself. Feeling her hair, she added. “I don’t look my best. My hair feels like a matted broom and my skin is sticky with sweat and I stink but I don’t think he’ll mind because he loves me.” Sometime later she was overcome by sleep.

XIX

He was drinking his morning tea on the veranda when they came. A dusty Toyota cruiser drove parallel to the house and stopped in front of the gate. Three men alighted from it, slamming doors behind them. An inner feeling told Thiab that they came for him but he strongly wished his intuition was wrong this time.

They did not ring the bell. One of them pushed his hand over the top of the gate and freed the latch. The three men marched inside uninvited. Thiab stood up and walked down the few steps from the veranda to meet them. The man in front told him that he was wanted for questioning.

A hand pushed him into the back of the car and two men climbed after him. He was not surprised to see Asswad in the front seat. He turned, gave him a brief contemptuous look but said nothing.

He debated in his mind if he should protest his innocence. An innocent person is expected to shout his innocence and demand to know the reason for his arrest or everyone would think he was guilty. But these people would probably react angrily, giving him few slaps and kicks to shut him up. At least his arrest did not go unwitnessed. And if the sight of the Mukhabarat men at their doorstep does not send Marhoon and Kamila scurrying for a hiding place, his uncle or Hadi would eventually know of his arrest.

He finally broke the silence with a question.

“Why are you arresting me Mr. Asswad?”

“If you were under arrest, they wouldn’t have treated you so nicely,” Asswad said without turning around. The two men sitting on the opposite seat sniggered.

They drove in the direction of Kuffa and then turned left at an intersection heading toward Najaf. The car stopped in front of an ugly concrete building. A hand roughly pushed him out and he jumped landing on the asphalt. He inhaled the air of the holiest city in the land and smelled incense burning in old houses to drive off bad spirits, rose water sprinkled in large water jars offered to thirsty pilgrims, and more closely the foul odor of his fear. He glanced around. The street was deserted except for an old woman sitting on the opposite side in the shade of a crumbling ancient mosque.

They led him down a dark filthy stairway to a basement floor. The place reeked of the smells of unwashed bodies and human feces. After walking few steps in a narrow corridor, he was suddenly pressed into the wall by the man behind him.

“Stand against the wall!” the guard barked. A shape moved past him in the darkness.

“Walk!” the guard commanded.

Thiab saw heavy metal doors on both sides of the corridor. Armed guards pacing the corridor glared at him.

He was ordered to halt near a door and a guard standing on watch frowned and took out a key ring.

“Another one!” he protested. “We don’t have space enough for another mouse – and certainly not a rodent in a suit and tie.” They laughed.

Thiab was roughly pushed inside, and stumbling he fell across somebody’s foot. He heard the heavy thud and clicks of the door being shut and locked behind him.

He sensed rather than saw shapes moving to make room for him. He crawled on the hard floor until he found an empty space where he sat, his arms hugging his drawn-up legs. A shape on his left crept on all fours toward him.

“My name is Murad,” the shape whispered.

“What is yours *akhi*, brother?”

“Thiab. Thiab Sakar.” he answered speaking awkwardly to the darkness.

“I like your name. I wish we’d all turn into *Thiab*, wolves and *sakars*, falcons,” someone said enthusiastically.

“What are you here for brother Thiab? Did you forget to hang a picture of Al-Qaid in your guest room?” another voice asked.

“No! I don’t know what I am here for. They said I am wanted for questioning.”

“Don’t worry. You may be out of here before sundown prayer,” a soft voice assured him.

“Don’t listen to him,” someone shouted. “He has been here for over three years and everyday he thinks they will release him before sundown.”

“Did you see someone outside the building?” A man asked. He felt his breath on his face.

Thiab hesitated briefly before answering.

“Guards. I saw many guards,” a puzzled Thiab said.

“I know there are guards. What’s wrong with you man. Are you stupid?” the man said angrily. “Besides guards, did you see anyone else?”

“Leave the man alone. He hasn’t been here for more than five minutes and you’re already pestering him with your questions,” a strong voice commanded.

“I just want to know if he has seen her,” the man pleaded.

Someone sniggered and he was immediately rebuked.

“You know very well they don’t let people near this place.”

Thiab’s head turned right and left in the direction of the voices. It felt as if he was watching an invisible tennis match.

“I used to cross the street and walk on the opposite pavement whenever I came this way. I never imagine I’ll end up inside one day.”

Thiab cleared his throat.

“I saw an old woman sitting on the opposite pavements,” he said.

“Yes, yes,” the man urged him breathlessly.

Thiab wished he had more to tell the man.

“That’s all. She just sat there. I couldn’t see her face clearly but it appeared she was watching the Mukhabarat’s building.”

“That’s her,” the man moaned. “Why doesn’t she go home? What is she waiting for?”

“I don’t know,” Thiab answered assuming the question was directed to him.

“It’s his mother,” a voice whispered. “She comes every morning and sits there all day long. Poor woman. The Mukhabarat men tried to scare her off but she keeps coming back. One of the guards said she begged them to put her in prison with her son.”

The son was sobbing while voices tried to comfort him.

“They don’t allow visitors here?” Thiab asked.

He realized it was a silly question when someone chuckled and was answered by a muffled titter and gradually the whole room joined in a roar of laughter. It was the nervous laughter of persons who have not laughed heartily for a long time. Their laughter went on as crude and grimy as the water that came down from a gurgling tap that hasn’t been turned on for months.

“They like us so much they may even grant us conjugal privileges,” some said between laughs.

And their laughing reached a crescendo. Peals of laughter as sharp as knives tore at the darkness ineffectually. Thiab felt a little apprehensive. His mother would certainly disapprove of this overindulgence. He imagined her shaking her head in disapproval at this display of arrogant defiance to the eternal law of balance. “Don’t rip your sides with laughter today,” she would advise him, “Tomorrow you may cry your eyes out.”

The cell’s door suddenly opened and the guard’s silhouette filled the opening. He banged his machine gun on the door and the laughing died out.

“And all the time I thought it was the radio,” he shouted angrily. “Tell me the joke so that we could all laugh,” He paused briefly. “Never mind I know a funnier one and I am not selfish like you. I’ll share it with you. Next week or the week after we are staging a family reunion. Surprised, aren’t you? We’ll invite your wives, sisters and even the old woman sitting across the street and we’ll have a party.” The guard made a vulgar gesture with his hands. “What do you say Murad! Are you going to laugh just as

loud when you see me doing this to your sister.” The guard repeated the obscenity.

Two men to his left were physically restraining a third. He was probably Murad. Thiab heard breaths being sucked and held in anger, like metal coils pulled tight, winded up to the limit, the inmates sat in silence vibrating against the torturous stress of self-restraint.

“The next *Eid*, feast is canceled.” The guard barked before slamming and locking the door behind him.

Thiab waited for tempers to cool down before asking his neighbor.

“What did he mean?”

The man sighed and answered him.

“Every four hours we have fifteen minutes of light. We call it the *Eid*, feast. That’s when the latrine bucket is emptied. By the way it is over there in the right corner.”

The man shifted his position and fell silent leaving Thiab to his thoughts and the unique melancholy of his first day in prison. Sightless in the total darkness he closed his eyes and his mind went searching for a glimmer of hope. He had no cause for worry, he assured himself. Soon they would discover their mistake and send him home with apologies. They need only to take one good look at him to see the insecure frightened child hiding inside the flabby middle-aged body. The child that cringed at the sound of his father’s voice still experienced the same apprehension and racing heartbeats in the presence of authority figures. And twenty five years ago, when that child grew a beard to mark his passage into adulthood, a sour-faced embassy official gave him a choice between shaving it or losing his passport. At that time, religious fundamentalists and hippies shared the custom of growing long beards and his government disapproved of both groups. And some dissenters were known to have been kidnapped by security agents working under the cover of diplomats, crated and then shipped on the national airliner. He chose the easy and humiliating alternative and shaved his beard.

He has always been a weakling, he admitted to himself. As a child, he was small, frail and often sick. He seldom engaged in sports to avoid the roughness. His first experience of intense pain was at the age of six. It was a harrowing experience still deeply etched on his memory. His father added deceit to horror and pain by telling him it was a sweet shop. It turned out to be a dentist clinic. The unlicensed dentist extracted two of his teeth without anesthesia. The inside of a clinic still fills him with dread regardless of the number of its owner’s genuine certificates hanging on the wall. His regular dentist recently mistook his macho tolerance of pain for having what he called a high pain threshold. Whether it is high or low they would make sure he would reach it. He wondered how much painful and degrading torture he can bear before begging them to kill him. And what

was their favorite method of execution nowadays? Roasted alive in a kiln, thrown into a tub of acid or poisoned with a slow venom. He crossed his arms tightly around his chest to stop the shivering.

His attention was drawn to a heated discussion between two inmates.

“They live in the comfort of their homes with their wives and children while we rot here,” and angry voice complained.

“Our people do not lack courage. But it takes a long time to build enough anger to revolt. When you put a kettle on a stove does it boil immediately? No, few minutes go by before the lid begins to rattle and perhaps five or may be fifteen years are needed for a country to build enough steam for anger,” a voice argued persuasively.

Suddenly the light went on blinding him. Minute replicas of the powerful floodlights were exploding on his retina. He opened his eyes and for the first time saw his cell’s mates clearly. More than two dozen pairs of eyes stared back at him.

The door was opened and a guard entered.

“The new prisoner. out!”

Thiab’s heart sank. He must be the new prisoner because he was the last one admitted in this cell.

The guard consulted a piece of paper in his hand.

“Doctor Thiab Sakar!” he read

Thiab rose and walked slowly, careful not to step over hands and feet crowding his way to the door.

“He is a doctor,” someone whispered.

“*Yellah*, come on!” the guard ordered impatiently.

The guard grabbed his sleeve and threw him out. He was led to a closed door. The guard tapped at the door, paused briefly and opening the door he pushed him inside. He staggered inside the windowless office followed by the guard. In the faint milky glow of the neon lights Thiab saw a desk at the rear end and the diminutive shape of a man sitting behind it. The guard gave him another push forward.

The man switched on a brass desk lamp and its light illuminated one side of his beefy face.

“Do you remember me?” the man asked.

Thiab thought the man looked familiar but he could not place him.

“No, I am sorry.” His apology rang hollow. Who had ever heard of a prisoner apologizing to his guard?

“Never mind,” there was almost a note of disappointment in the deep voice. “I remember you well. You arrived here less than a months ago with your wife and two children.”

“Yes, I remember now”.

He was the security officer who interviewed him at the airport, the troglodyte.

“You see we were right in suspecting you.”

Thiab was stunned, unable to express his objection.

“Why?”

“Our great leader, Al-Qaid Al-Azeem, says that he can tell if a person is guilty or not by simply looking into his eyes. Of course, he is blessed with *firasa*, insight. He is a gifted leader, a unique person. Don't you agree?”

“Yes,” Thiab lied.

“And since we are simple people not endowed with *firasa* we need information. I assured them you'll be very cooperative and tell them everything you know. I hope you won't prove me wrong.”

“What do I know that could interest you?” Thiab asked, a measure of calm returning to his voice.

“Everything. Don't keep anything from us. I am giving you this advice because you are different from the garbage we collect in our cells. You're an educated, intelligent man. Give them what they need, names, places, activities and you'll leave this place a free and healthy man.” the man advised.

The man turned sideways to spit on the floor or in a garbage bin and his face was lost in the shadows.

“I am grateful for your advice,” His throat dried up again. The nightmare would never end. “You know that I have been away for more than ten years. I have never joined any political party and I have no friends in this country.

“I am innocent. I am ignorant.” the man mimicked. “I must have heard these words thousands of times in offices like this all over the country. And I must send these innocent people to another office and sooner or later they are bound to change their minds. They pour out their souls and would sign any confession we put in front of them.”

Thiab realized this may be his last chance to plead his innocence.

“But I am innocent. I don't even know what I am accused of.”

The man sighed.

“The head of the Mukhabarat himself signed the order to detain you and he must have a good reason for doing that. Now this puts us in a very awkward position because we don't know what this reason is. This is our district and we are responsible for all security matters involving its residents including visitors like you. Now, do you understand our difficult position?”

Thiab nodded.

“Fine. Now we need you to tell us this reason.”

Thiab wanted to shout at the man that this was absurd. You should tell me why I was arrested not the other way around. He thought for a moment.

“I am not sure but it may have something to do with my work at Hira's Cement factory. I have uncovered instances of mismanagement...”

“Enough!” the man interrupted him smashing his fist on the table. He opened a file in front of him, pulled out a single paper and lifted it high for Thiab to see.

“Look! It’s all written here,” he shouted backhanding the paper.

“This warrant is classified top national security. This is preserved for spies in the service of a foreign enemy, people accused of organizing subversive movements or something equally serious not of corrupt or inept bureaucrats.”

Thiab was stunned. His mind was spinning aimlessly like a malfunctioned machine.

“sit down!”

Surprised at finding himself standing Thiab slumped in his chair.

“ I don’t believe this. There must be a mistake. There must be other persons called Thiab Sakar.”

The man frowned and raised his hands.

“ I don’t want to hear any more of this.”

His hand went under the desk. A moment later the door was opened and another guard entered.

Thiab was led to another dimly-lit room. He saw three men inside. The man behind a desk raised his Mongolian round face and watched him with slit-opened eyes. Two men encircled with their fat thighs a small coffee table covered with half empty plastic dishes. They glanced at him impassively between mouthfuls, their cheeks puffed tight with food. The stale air smelled strongly of grilled mutton and onion.

“Sit down!” the man ordered him indicating a wicker chair near his desk. “Here are some papers and pen. I assume you know how to write doctor?”

The men chuckled and one of them coughed once.

“Write down everything you know. Don’t leave out anything.”

Thiab picked up the cheap fountain pen, gazed at the white paper for a moment and then lifted his eyes and asked the man.

“What would you like to know?”

“Everything! In case you don’t know. This is one of the interrogation rooms in this branch and the two gentlemen over there and I are interrogators.”

Fifteen minutes later Thiab was finished. He reread the two pages on which he had written a concise autobiography, signed at the bottom of the second page and handed them to the man with the Mongolian features.

The man read leisurely, his lips moving with the words. His face was blank revealing no emotions. The other men had finished their brunch and were now smoking and whispering. Music suddenly bellowed from somewhere in the building and then stopped. The man put down the paper and looked at Thiab.

Karima woke up after seven, ate very little of her breakfast and waited for Thiab. At eight thirty a doctor came and after examining her he confirmed that she has made significant progress. Impatiently she let him reminisce about his three years in a London hospital for few minutes before asking him about her husband and children. A painful look replaced the broad smile on the old doctor's face. Watching the ominous transformation her heart sank assuming the worst. She listened breathlessly while he told her that he had no information about the children but her husband showed up every day and spent long hours sitting on the chair beside her bed. He had one bit of good news: the telephone lines had been repaired.

She waited another hour before calling the house. She let it ring for a minute before hanging up. She then tried the factory. The switchboard operator put her through to Thiab's secretary who informed her that Thiab has not arrived in his office yet. She put down the receiver thinking of where her husband might be. Resting her head on the pillow and closing her eyes she told herself to think positively. Her husband was probably on his way to the hospital and when he walks through that door and sees her awake and well, he will be very happy.

When she woke up again Thiab was not sitting in the chair beside her bed as she had expected. It was almost noon. After hearing the same regretful response from Thiab's secretary she asked him to put her through to Hadi's office. Hadi excitedly promised to drop everything and start looking for Thiab. He humorously added that after telling him the good news he will demand the *halwa*, the sweet or other reward traditionally given to bearers of good tidings. She then asked him about Adam and Sarah. And his voice lost its cheerfulness telling her that they had not been found. He went on, adding something about Thiab searching for them but she was not listening anymore. After putting down the receiver she covered her face with her hands and her tears poured down between her fingers.

In the afternoon, Hadi and Mona came and Noor followed them. None of them saw Thiab today. Hadi and Noor whispered to each other and then went out and few minutes later Hadi came back alone. Half an hour later, Noor came back and beckoned Hadi to follow him to the outside.

The worried look on Noor's face alarmed Hadi. They walked silently to the visitor's lounge. Noor sat heavily on a chair and stared at the window. The wire guard at the window bulged inward under the pressure of a tree branch trying to make a forceful entry into the lounge.

"Thiab had been arrested," Noor finally said.

Hadi was stunned.

“What? When?” he asked sitting opposite Noor.

“Today, this morning,” He paused briefly. “I rang the bell repeatedly but no one answered. I then tried the door and it was open. I found a woman hiding in the garden. She told me she was the maid. She said Thiab had taken her and her husband back.”

“And they actually saw the security police arresting Thiab?”

“She said three men came in a Toyota and Thiab went along with them. They came early in the morning.”

“Then they are not sure whom these people were.” He stood up and looked thoughtful. “Perhaps they were the kidnappers and he went with them to see his children and negotiate the ransom money.”

“The maid said her husband was sure they were from the Mukhabarat.”

“I don’t think we should tell his wife right now. She had not recovered fully.”

“She must know eventually.”

Hadi paced the room.

“I still cannot believe that Thiab has been arrested. It doesn’t make sense. What has he done?” He hesitated briefly. “Are you sure you’re not keeping anything from me *mawlana*?”

“We have nothing to hide from you or anyone else.” Noor protested, twisting his worry beads.

“Then could you please tell me what you and Thiab have been to during the last two days. Someone may have seen you going into the wrong places or talking to someone suspected by the security police.”

“No, I assure you. We went to a Kawilia camp to inquire about the children and then we visited a dervish.”

Hadi raised a bushy eyebrow.

“A dervish?”

“The great dervish in the Sahla desert.”

“Thiab went to see a dervish! Anyhow I don’t think the security police would arrest him for going to the Kawilia or consulting a hermit living in the desert.”

“We’ll have to tell her something,” Noor said looking in the direction of Karima’s room.

“We’ll wait a day or two and if Thiab doesn’t show up, we’ll tell her.”

XXI

The man with the Mongolian features threw his hands up in exasperation.

“What shall we do with you, doctor. This will not do. I am disappointed.” He chuckled in disapproval.

“What do you say men? Could you help us here?”

Thiab was thinking of a suitable reply when hands lifted him from his seat and forced him to turn sideways. He found himself facing one of the two men. His breath reeked of onion and something even more fetid he ate or drank lately.

“You came here to help the opposition, didn’t you? Don’t deny it!” the Mongol said.

Thiab turned to protest his innocence and a fist struck him on the face knocking him back on the chair. He struggled with pain and anger. He wanted to exorcise his humiliation by hitting the man back but he was afraid of what they would do to him.

“Confess now and we’ll be lenient with you.”

“Leave him to us sir. We know how to make him talk until his jaws ache,” the man who hit him said eagerly and addressing Thiab he barked “Get up!” Before he got to his feet, Thiab felt the man’s fist in the pit of his stomach. He doubled with pain and all the air in his lung escaped in one breath.

“Tell us about your friends in the resistance,” the Mongol said dully. His voice was a distant echo rising from the depth of a well. Thiab’s mind confused by present and expected pain was numb. The man’s massive hand moved toward him threateningly.

“Nimr! Give him a chance to answer!”

Thiab’s tongue labored hard to control the lump of saliva and blood loose in his mouth. He finally swallowed noisily and felt a sharp pain traveling down his throat.

“I don’t know anyone in the resistance.” he spluttered. “Why don’t you believe me!”

The Mongol made a signal to his underling.

Two pairs of hands picked him up from the floor and pushed him toward a dark corner. Thiab staggered a couple of steps and fell on his knees. A hard pointed object instantly smashed into his back sending shards of pain up and down his spine. Thiab shrieked in pain, stiffened for a moment and slumped forward.

“Get up!” the voice was sinking deeper into the well.

They picked him up and dragged and lifted him between them. With one open eye he saw where they were taking him: a table on which a large

metal container was placed. It was half full of a foul smelling dark liquid and he thought with panic that it could be acid.

“No!” he shouted.

Hands gripped his shoulder from behind and forced his head into the liquid. He gasped and the rancid water filled his lungs. His lungs was about to explode when their grip loosened. He came up gasping for air and retching.

“Are you ready now to tell us about your fellow conspirators?” the voice rose up from its deep watery source.

Thiab’s tongue lolled uselessly inside his mouth but no sounds came out. He managed to shake his head once between gasps.

“He has nice buttocks, like any *Angalisi*,” one of his torturer said. Feeling his behind. The other one tittered.

His stomach heaved once and a thin jet of vomit gushed out of his slack mouth splattering the table and raining inside the water tank.

“Didn’t the *Anglaisi* teach you not to throw up in your drink?”

And the strong hands pushed his head under water again. He tried to hold his breath and discovered that he had no control over his lungs. It will be over soon, an inner voice told him. Any second now his heart will burst under the strain and he will die. His half-submerged head bobbed up and down like a piece of cork discarded by a child and swept away by the current. Very soon the current would pull him down to the dark bottom.

Death has finally lifted its heavy hand off him. He was now a martyr and the angels will soon arrive to escort him to Paradise. A hand suddenly tugged hard at his hair forcing his head out of the water. He coughed and spluttered as air tried to push its way in against the water and vomit rising from his stomach and lungs.

“Who gave you permission to die?” This time the voice came from a different world and he felt no urgency to answer it.

His head was pushed down again with such a force that the pain flared briefly and then faded.

He later drifted back into consciousness and he felt pain that was so terrible that he thought he was being skinned and butchered alive. Someone was dragging him on the rough concrete floor and he wished they would let him die in peace.

When he woke up again his whole body ached. An image of his uncle Noor’s face sprang to his mind. He was peering at him, head bent down and saying: “Didn’t I tell you not to come near that machine. I told you it could kill a man. Now, was I telling the truth or not.” And the image went out.

Later he thought he heard soft groans coming from the darkness to his left but he could not move to see its source. A strong putrid smell was in the air and the floor under him was wet. He winced with pain as he felt his

swollen face. I must look like the Mongol now, he thought and he felt like laughing.

He slept fitfully because of the pain and nightmares. In one of them, his children were running, trying to escape huge saucer-shaped eyes that followed them everywhere. He watched them from behind a tree, frightened and full of remorse.

XXII

Adam had never experienced so much fear in his life. Sarah was even more terrified and she hugged him all the times crying and calling on her mother incessantly. It was a nightmare that went endlessly on and on, daylight just beyond the horizon cruelly refusing to appear.

He shivered remembering the armed men scaling the fence, the deafening gunshots, Sarah's shrieks and his mother holding their hands and running for safety. He would never forget the face of the man who hit his mother with his gun and the rage erupting inside him and then he was shouting at the top of his voice, pummeling the man with his fists and kicking his legs. But he was no match to the older, stronger man. More armed men came and they carried them out of the house and through the fields toward the riverbank. He expected his father to suddenly appear from behind a tree and rescue them. He said he was going for a walk to the river but they reached the riverbank without meeting him.

The men brought them by motorboat to this house. A tall man was waiting for them in the doorway. He dismissed the men and scrutinized them with his piercing eyes for a while. Sarah howled when the man put his hand on her head and he seemed to be feeling her hair. He shouted at the man to leave his sister alone. The man angrily turned around and his ugly face looked even uglier. He raised his hand and slapped him. His cheek stung but he fought back the tears. The man then gripped his wrist painfully and tore off his digital wristwatch. It was a birthday present from his mother.

They took them down a dark stairway to this room and locked them inside. Sarah calmed down a little but she followed him around the room like his shadow.

Hours later the door was unlocked and a young woman came inside carrying a tray. There was food and water on the tray. His anger returned.

"We're not going to eat your food. How do we know it is not poisoned." he shouted, his hands crossed on his chest.

The woman shot him a brief angry look then she shook her head and smiled.

"Don't be silly! My master doesn't poison his guests. Here, I'll prove it to your suspicious small brain."

She squatted, picked up a spoon and tasted all three dishes and sipped some of the water.

"Do you believe me now fair boy," she said winking at him.

He felt his cheeks and ears reddening and his resentment for the woman who embarrassed him multiplied.

The woman then sat beside Sarah and tried to feed her with the same spoon. Sarah looked at him tearfully and pursed her lips tightly, occasionally darting her tongue briefly to lick a stray tear.

“Sarah is not a baby. She can eat without your help and switching to English he added:” Stupid woman.”

The woman gave him a reproachful look, sighed and left the room.

Adam avoided looking at the food, refusing to give in to his hunger. He was thinking of another heroic escape plot when he felt Sarah tugging at his shirt sleeve. She said she was hungry and asked him if she could eat some of the food. After hesitating for a moment, he nodded his agreement. They ate little of the greasy food. The woman later returned and took them down a long corridor to a dark filthy toilet.

They slept on the mattress laid on the floor. Sarah moaned and turned in her troubled sleep and kept him awake for a long time. He listened to the faint noises of people moving and talking in the house until he fell asleep. They did not stir when the door was opened and the tall man stepped inside. He watched them for a moment and then retreated silently.

XXIII

Two days passed with no sign of Thiab. Hadi, Noor and even Mona were behaving strangely and Karima suspected them of hiding something from her. She sat in bed, her eyes fixed vacantly at the opposite wall. The dim shadows of leaves merged and parted in the soft light. All the dark thoughts that crossed her mind fleetly in more than ten years of marriage suddenly sprang back ready to lose their dullness on the grindstone of her doubt and frustration. The idea was absurd, she admitted to herself. She got out of bed and started pacing the room concentrating on the pain aroused by her brisk walk to take her mind off her suspicions.

She walked into the bathroom and switched the light on. "Thiab would not do it!" she argued loudly with her reflection. The shadows in her eyes dispersed and regrouped again. A black spot on the mirror looked distinctly like a mole. And it had a voice. Did she really know her husband? a man who grew up in this mysterious ancient country. Flesh and blood formed behind the mole and it spoke persuasively. Who said cultures are the great divide? A mathematician perhaps. Two parallel lines may be a fraction of an inch apart but can only meet in infinity. And where is that infinity? A face appeared behind the mole and it was her mother's. She had a large mole on her left cheek and at the age of fifty five she suddenly had it removed. "I should have done it a long time ago. For fifty five years I stared at that mole daily but refused to admit to myself that it was ugly and spoiled my looks," she said coming out of the doctor's surgery, a flesh-colored plaster covering the spot where the mole had been. It makes me sad to think that one day you'll stop and after reconsidering your marriage reach the same conclusion."

"Don't you ever give up, mother!" she addressed the spot on the mirror.

When they became engaged her mother went out and bought three paperbacks on Middle Eastern culture and society. She read them from cover to cover underlining in red ink sentences and whole paragraphs which she later showed to her hoping to change her mind. Harried by her mother's crude attempt at brainwashing her, she sought understanding and encouragement from her friends. She had few and they all sincerely wished her good luck. One of them said she envied her because oriental men are reputed to have inexhaustible libido. "It's all that sun and fresh air," she said and then excitedly asked her: "But what if he wants something kinky?"

Worried by the iron law of parallel lines she decided to take the difficult step of jumping into his world. She began wearing a bra again, made a serious but unsuccessful effort to learn his language, and warded off her mother's relentless attacks on her marriage life with her gifts of golden

crosses for the children, miniature Santa Clause statues for the mantelpiece and frequent questions and remarks about polygamy and harems intended to embarrass and annoy Thiab.

Two years ago, she discovered that Thiab's world was as wide as Asia and as mysterious as, well, the Orient, of course, what else? The real Thiab has always there beneath the thin mantle of fashionable clothes and other minor concessions to the western society in which he studied and lived. She had not looked closely enough before to see it. The reawakening began when he stopped drinking and refused to allow alcoholic drinks in their house. The sacrifice was not great. She was a social drinker herself and they did not have much of a social life to begin with. More changes followed. Instead of laughing at his favorite comedy shows as he used to, he frowned and groaned in disapproval at their profanities. Six months ago, he became so obsessed with the corrupting influence of television nudity and violence on their children that he went out and bought a video cassette recorder and a collection of Walt Disney classics.

Would Thiab take away Adam and Sarah from her if he thought it was in their best interest? She finally considered the question that troubled her all morning long. How else can the absence of a ransom note and Thiab's sudden disappearance be explained? Is this why he came back to his old country? The thread of her suspicious thoughts twisted and turned in her mind and became hopelessly entangled.

She turned on the tap, cupped her hand under the water and splashed it on her warm forehead. Her hand returned and this time she tried to wash off the spot on the mirror. She scrubbed it with her fingers but like her suspicions it refused to disappear. She returned to bed, a miserable woman.

Next morning her suspicions were laid to rest by Hadi. Listening to him telling her about her husband's arrest her tears rolled down in hot and big drops. She wept in shame and grief while Hadi stood by the windows with his back to her.

Her tears dried up and she told Hadi of her intention to leave the hospital immediately. He said she must not hurry things up and went out to consult the doctor. Ten minutes later he came back with her discharge papers.

Hadi drove her to his house. Mona and Karima cried in each other arms like two sisters. Mona acting the role of the elder sister insisted that she should stay with them. Karima dreaded having to spend another night in Badir's mansion and she readily accepted.

Mona and her daughters showered her with attention. They showed her to the guest bedroom, ran a bath for her, and brought her several of Mona's dresses to choose from. When she later joined them in the sitting room her mind was made up. She will go to the embassy in the capital to ask for their help. They made plans to make the trip the next day.

Before sunset they drove to the company house. Karima's heart tightened in her chest as the car cleared the palm trees and the shabby edifice loomed behind the high fence. A tearful Kamila opened the door for them. Karima embraced her and climbed upstairs to pack their suitcases. She moved mechanically, tearing clothes from hangers, collecting books from shelves, looking under the beds for stray toys and then cramming everything into their suitcases. Fifteen minutes later Marhoon carried the bulging suitcases to the car. They said farewell to Kamila and Marhoon and drove off.

After dinner Hadi excused himself and left in his car. Karima and Mona went out to the front porch. They sat facing the river, two cups of lemon tea on the small table between their wicker chairs. A dog barked in the distance breaking the silence. Karima shivered. Mona saw her.

"Would you like us to go inside?" she asked.

The porch light was a lonely speck in the dark night.

"No. It's cooler here but it's dark," Karima said.

"Yes, and very depressing. But when you have lived all your life here, I guess you get used to it." She paused briefly staring at the darkness. "Some people find such nights beautiful and romantic and write poems about them."

"Do you think I could get used to it?"

"Why? Do you plan to stay here when it's all over?"

"I don't know. I am not sure what Thiab wants, and we must think of what is best for the children and their education. Anyhow I am not going anywhere without my family."

"I am sure everything will be all right."

"I hope so. I don't know what else I can do if the embassy people can't help me. I feel so helpless," She sounded desperate.

"Things will work out," Mona repeated. "You know the saying: It gets very dark just before sunrise."

Karima stared at the dense shadows across the river where trees stood in the daytime, at the dark water running silently like snakes slithering southward their scales glinting dully, and finally at her life lately and she thought it couldn't become darker than this.

XXIV

Thiab awoke with a splitting headache and a bitter taste in his mouth. It took him several minutes to become fully awake. He was lying on his back in a different cell. He tried lifting himself on one elbow but his head swam and he felt nauseous. He lay on his back panting.

With an effort he opened his eyes again. He remembered Hadi saying that Al-Qaid does not have enemies because they are all either dead or buried alive deep in the security police dungeons. His difficult journey in the dark hours of Al-Qaid's night has just begun. And when he reaches the highest point of exhaustion and despair in this journey, he will yearn for a quick end that would soothe all his pains and terminate his suffering.

The noises at the door interrupted his thoughts. He listened. The door was briefly opened and an object was thrown inside. A voice shouted: "lunch" and the door was closed again. Thiab hesitated debating in his mind if the morsels of food would be worth the effort of searching for them in this dark cell. Several minutes passed before he willed himself to move. He crouched on all fours, his hands feeling the dark wet concrete around him. He almost gave up after bumping his head hard on a wall. But he persisted and his efforts were finally rewarded with a loaf of bread and a cucumber. The bread was stale and his jaws ached after chewing on a small piece. The cucumber tasted muddy but it was soft and cool on his palate. He ate slowly and after he finished, he slept.

Thiab was later awakened by a sharp pain in his side. The light was switched on and the huge shape of a guard stood over him, prodding him with the point of his shoe.

"Get up!" the guard ordered him.

Thiab stumbled to his feet. His legs were bloodless and too weak to support his weight. The guard swore at him, put his hands under his armpits and pulled him to his feet.

Thiab expected with a dread a repeat of his earlier visit to the torture room and he was deeply relieved when the guard marched him inside the office of the man from the airport security, the troglodyte.

He shook his head in disapproval when he saw him.

"Look at you! why didn't you follow my advice Thiab?" The man continued not waiting for an answer. "If you had cooperated with the interrogator none of this would have happened."

Thiab felt a dizzy spell. He leaned on the man's desk to support himself. He wished the man would not object.

"I told them all I know," Thiab said feebly.

"Pity!" The troglodyte sighed. "Anyhow, you're being transferred."

Thiab opened his eyes wide, daring to hope.

“Where to?”

“You’ll soon find out,” the Troglodyte said curtly, and addressing the guard he continued: “Let him wash first.”

“Good-bye doctor!” he shouted behind him.

The guard led him to a stinking bathroom where he washed his face and brushed off the crusts of dried vomit from his clothes.

In the spacious underground garage of the security branch, a Toyota land cruiser was waiting for them. The guard pushed him inside the back and followed him. Thiab could not see where they were taking him. The back windows were tinted and a metal partition separated the front and back seats.

He guessed they had been driving for almost half an hour on a paved motor way before turning into a dirt road. They continued for another ten minutes before the car stopped and the back door was opened.

In spite of the two armed guards and the chained vicious-looking dogs, the small house flanked by palm trees looked more like a farmhouse rather than a Mukhabarat branch or prison unless it is one of their secret safe houses. He inhaled the warm air enjoying its sharp freshness. The humidity told him that the river was near. His mind made a calculation. Their journey lasted less than an hour and if he was not wrong this place should be somewhere south or southeast of Kuffa, not far from the factory and Badir’s mansion where all his recent sufferings began.

A guard pushed him toward the house. The dogs growling turned into a frenzied barking and snapping and the guard leading him pointed his machine gun at the dogs threatening to shoot them. A sentry laughed and shouted at the dogs.

The mate was coarse and thin but it was a luxury compared to the hard concrete of the Mukhabarat cell. It was the only furniture in the small basement room. He fell asleep and sometime later he was startled out of his sleep by the sound of a child crying. The sobs turned into whimpers and it finally stopped. He went back to sleep.

Hadi parked the car in a nearby street and they walked to the embassy. Two men standing in front of a newspaper kiosk lowered down their newspapers and watched them openly. Hadi whispered that they were security policemen.

A small crowd of visa applicants blocked the embassy's entrance. To attract the attention of people inside, Karima lifted her passport high over her head and shouted that she had urgent business. A minute later, a uniformed man parted the crowd and escorted her inside. After twenty five minutes and two recounts of her story to two different officials she was finally ushered into the large office of the chargé d'affaires.

Karima anxiously waited for the man's response. She looked at the impassive face of the sexagenarian man sitting comfortably in his leather chair under a modestly-framed picture of the Queen. He had listened patiently to her story, interrupting her only once or twice to ask for details.

He broke the silence with a deep sigh.

"This embassy was attacked and ransacked once. It happened many years ago. But I was here when it happened. We thought the mob was going to kill all of us. We hid in one of the back rooms and barricaded the door and windows with every piece of furniture. And then we waited for a miracle. Some of us, who could remember how to, prayed while the rest listened with rising horror to the loud racket outside. Then we heard banging at the door and an axe appeared through a broken panel. We all thought our end was imminent just before an army officer poked his face through the opening to tell us that the rioters had been driven off. He paused briefly. "That's why I am an incorrigible optimist."

"I am not leaving this country without my husband and children," she said firmly. Tears threatened and she raised her moist eyes to the picture of the Queen. The royal face smiled at her benevolently.

The man nodded his head.

"That's laudable. I would expect my wife to do the same if she was in your position. But I am afraid there is little you can do. The local media is owned by the government so there is no hope of getting your story in print. Everything is under Al-Qaid's thumb: the courts, the lawyers and even the law itself. I think it is best that you leave the whole matter in our hands. We'll make inquiries through the formal channels and they are obliged to give us a reply."

"And what then?"

"It depends. If we conclude that your husband is being unlawfully detained, we shall do our best to have him released."

“And how long will this take?”

“Again, it depends on Al-Qaid’s men. If they are in a cooperative mood it shouldn’t take more than few days.”

“And in the meantime, my husband stays in jail.” She stopped to blink away a tear. “They could be torturing him.”

“They are not idiots. When they receive our formal letter of inquiry, they will think twice before harming Doctor Sakar. Al-Qaid’s regime may look formidable but he needs us.”

“And if they deny holding my husband?” It was Hadi’s idea to ask this question.

“We are not helpless,” he assured her. “We have been here for almost a century and we have made few friends.”

He stopped briefly. A clock on his desk chimed the time.

“Do you plan to remain in...” he stopped and after consulting a paper in front of him added: “Kuffa?”

“Yes. I am staying there with friends.”

“It would be more convenient if you could move to the capital. If you like we could find you a suitable accommodation here.”

“I can’t. You’re forgetting my kidnapped children. The police may find their trail. The kidnappers may send a note.”

“You’re right. Did your friends come with you?”

She nodded her head

“You’re fortunate to have such loyal friends. They are taking a serious risk by helping you.” He smiled at her and continued. “Well! we have your address and telephone number and as soon as we have information about your husband, we’ll contact you.”

Karima rose from her seat, shook hands with the man and left.

“They promised to do their best and told me to wait and be patient.” Karima told Mona and Hadi outside the Embassy. She realized she has come out empty-handed and her throat seized with suppressed grief.

“The charge d’affaires told me you are taking a risk by helping me. I would never forgive myself if anything happens to you on my account.”

“Nonsense,” Hadi said, driving the car along a crowded street.

“Your charge d’affaires is more paranoid than us,” Mona said.

“We’re not breaking any law,” Hadi protested.

“I could stay at a hotel,” Karima offered.

“Out of the question. You are staying with us until Doctor Thiab and the children are back,” Hadi said.

They had lunch in the expensive restaurant of a modern large hotel. The service was excellent and the food was delicious. Karima did not feel hungry but she felt obliged to force some food down her unreceptive throat.

In the afternoon they drove back to Kuffa. Passing through Shamia, Thiab’s hometown, Karima’s attention was attracted by a group of women

waiting outside a small house. They all wore black as if in perpetual mourning.

“They are waiting their turn to see the local sorcerer,” Mona explained.

“A sorcerer! You mean a witch doctor?” Karima asked looking back.

“Something like that. He has remedies for every kind of illness, love potions, anything you need.” Hadi said looking at the rear view mirror. “He makes more money than most people I know. He is famous for his senility potion.”

“What’s that?” asked Karima, her curiosity aroused.

“They call it the “donkey brain.” It’s a secret potion, of course. But they say it would turn Socrates into an imbecile.”

The car drove over a bridge and Hadi signaled a right turn. Karima was thinking.

“Does he also find missing people ” She asked.

Mona and Hadi exchanged side glances.

“We’ve tried everything.” Karima added.

Mona turned her head back.

“You want to see the sorcerer?” she asked

Karima averted her gaze.

“I know it is ridiculous. I don’t even believe in such things.”

“A little faith can be useful most of the time,” Mona said. “I don’t see why not. We’ll go to the sorcerer. I have a question or two I’d like him to answer for me. How about it Hadi?”

“Now!” Hadi said slowing down the car.

“Today is the women’s day,” Mona said.

Hadi made a U-turn and headed back.

The sorcerer’s door was half open and the woman at the head of the queue was admitted inside before it was closed again. Mona asked one of the waiting women who answered her at length and then pointed at a boy pushing a brand new red bicycle.

“He is the sorcerer’s youngest son,” Mona said in English. “I’ll see if we can jump the queue.”

The boy answered Mona’s question with another question. He kept pointing at Karima and repeating the word *agnabia* or foreigner. “Yes. She is my friend,” Mona answered him. The boy wore a white T-shirt and navy blue shorts. Then Karima saw his wristwatch and her heart skipped a beat.

“Mona! Ask him about the watch? she said breathlessly. Where did he get it?”

“What? Why?” Mona turned to her, a puzzled look on her face.

“Just ask him! Please!” Karima pleaded.

“He says its *agnabia*, foreign-made,” Mona translated unable to understand Karima’s interest in the boy’s watch.

“Yes. I know that,” Karima said impatiently. “Ask him how and where did he get it from.”

Mona humored her.

“He says it’s a present from his father, Nimrud.”

Karima took a deep breath.

“It’s a Swatch. Adam has one just like it. I bought it for him for his last birthday almost three months ago.”

Mona opened her eyes wide.

“Are you saying that this could be the same watch?”

“I don’t know. It’s the same brand, same color and has all these dials inside. But I am not sure. It could be a coincidence.”

I remember seeing a picture of it in a magazine, but I don’t think it is sold in my country.

“Are you sure?”

Mona turned to Nimrud’s son.

“We’re in luck,” Mona said excitedly. “He said his father bought it from the government store at the end of the street.”

The bored-looking salesman lifted his head briefly to watch Karima and Mona entering the store and then returned to his cross-word puzzle. The man told them all they needed to know. It turned out that only four brands of watches are imported by the state commercial monopoly. The man, enjoying the opportunity to impress the two pretty women with his wealth of information, named each brand, its country of make and retail price. Swatch was not one of them.

“Nimrud lied to his son,” Mona said as they came out of the store. “I wouldn’t trust him to foretell my future.”

“It’s Adam’s watch. I am certain. God, I hope they’re all right.”

Karima was on the verge of tears.

“Cheer up Karima! We have something now that could lead us to the children.”

“Shall we go to the sorcerer and ask him where he got the watch?”

“Let’s hear what Hadi makes out of this first?”

Karima agreed and they walked back toward the parked car.

Listening to Mona telling him about the watch, Hadi almost jumped out of his seat in excitement.

“I told you something would come up,” he shouted hitting the steering wheel with his hand. “I knew it.”

Karima was moved by Hadi’s enthusiasm.

“It’s an act of providence,” Mona said. “If Karima did not suggest going to the sorcerer, we would never have found the watch. Don’t you think so Karima?”

“Yes,” Karima answered absentmindedly. “What shall we do now?”

“Go to the police immediately. They would know what to do.”

Karima did not share Hadi's confidence in the competencies of the local police but she remained silent.

The duty officer wrote down the name of the sorcerer and said they would make the necessary inquiries. He then rose from his seat and began to shuffle around the files and papers on his desk. As they came out of the station building, Hadi remarked that the officer must be in a hurry to go home for his dinner.

"I don't trust them to do anything right. They still suspect Kamila and Marhoon," Karima said. "I'll go back to the sorcerer myself and ask him about the watch."

There was a tone of determination in her voice that Mona and Hadi had not heard before.

"What if he is behind the kidnapping or involved in it somehow. He would go to any length to cover their trail. And if he gets rid of the watch the police will have nothing to work with. This is the last thing we want to happen!" Hadi argued.

Karima admitted to herself that Hadi made sense. If the kidnapers become desperate, they may decide to get rid not of the watch only but all incriminating evidence. The idea chilled her heart.

"Tomorrow I'll go to Shamia. Someone may have seen or heard something about Adam and Sarah. There is not much that goes unobserved in a small town. My guess is that they are being kept in Shamia or a place nearby," Hadi said.

Karima reluctantly agreed to wait and see what Hadi's discreet inquiries will uncover. The remaining few hours of daylight felt like a life sentence, the passing of every hour an agonizing experience. Her anguish must have surfaced on her face and in her eyes. They tried to distract her with conversation, drinks and food but her mind resisted painfully ticking away the minutes and torturing her with horrible thoughts. In the privacy of her bed she tossed and turned for hours and finally slept fitfully.

Next day, Hadi left early to Shamia. He was back before noon. Karima and Mona almost ran to the front door when they heard the distinctive rattle of his car. He looked tired, sweaty and empty-handed. None of the people he met in Shamia heard anything about Adam and Sarah. He slumped in a chair complaining that his mouth tasted like a samovar in a bazaar tea house after the countless number of cups of tea he had to drink in the houses and shops he had visited. Observing the disappointed look in her eyes he hastened to add that he will resume his inquiries in the afternoon.

Less than an hour later the doorbell rang. Karima was absentmindedly leafing through an old magazine when Hadi showed Lukman into the sitting room. The old fisherman raised his hand in greeting and chose a seat in the far corner of the room. Hadi sat beside him and they appeared to be having a private heated discussion. Suddenly, Lukman slapped his

forehead audibly shouting "Ya Allah, my God!" Hadi shot a glance at her and returned to their whispering. Unable to control her curiosity she asked.

"What's going on? Did Lukman find something?"

Hadi stopped and turned his head. She saw hesitation in his eyes.

"I was just telling Lukman about Adam's watch," Hadi said.

Karima sensed that he knew more than he said.

"Why did he slap himself? Please don't keep anything from me! I must know. They are my children," she pleaded tearfully.

Hadi was up on his feet walking toward her.

"I am sure they are all right. Lukman has no information about them. But after hearing about the watch he thinks that the sorcerer, Nimrud, is keeping them." He paused. Mona appeared at the door, wiping her hands on her apron. She regarded them anxiously. "He is not one hundred per cent sure, of course. It's just a guess," Hadi added.

"Does he know why Nimrud kidnapped my children? Does he want money?" Karima asked.

"I am afraid Lukman does not have all the answers. But he says that Nimrud or his accomplices are hiding them somewhere and he promised to help us in finding them. Fishermen know everyone and everything that goes on in this countryside. Everyone is bound to go to the river sometimes: to drink, wash or go somewhere by boat. And they build their huts on the riverbank or near it. He'll ask other fishermen and he is confident of coming up with something."

"I hope so," Karima mumbled to herself and turning to Lukman she said: "*Shukran*, Thank you!"

The old man smiled and rose to his feet. Hadi escorted him to the door.

All afternoon long the telephone and doorbell conspired to keep her nerves on edge. Finally, Lukman returned and Hadi took him out to the back garden. Karima and Mona watched them from the French window in the sitting room.

"I wish they'd tell me everything they know," Karima said anxiously.

"I am sure Hadi is not keeping anything from you or me," and smiling she added: "Don't look at me like that! if I knew I would have told you."

Karima sighed.

"I am sorry. I can't help worrying."

"I understand."

At this moment Hadi and Lukman walked into the room. The expression on Hadi's face told them that he has something to announce. Karima waited breathlessly, her heart beating rapidly.

"Lukman found Nimrud's secret place. It's a farmhouse few miles down the river." He pointed southward. "He suggests that we should go to Nimrud and ask him to hand back the children."

"And if he denies having the children," Karima asked.

Hadi glanced back at Lukman.

“I asked Lukman the same question and he said we should force our way into the house if necessary. He wants to take along his son Hamza and Thiab’s cousin, Thamir. We shall go by boat.”

“I’m coming along.” Karima said.

Thiab dreamt he was a child again and inside Noor's old boat. Someone was holding his hand firmly, pulling him toward the machines. A deafening noise suddenly rose as the machines were switched on. He was frightened and wanted to plead with the unseen face behind the strong hand to let him go. Instead he watched with silent panic the belt moving and turning, slowly at first and then fast and faster, crackling and whipping the wheels into a frenzy of rotation. His hand was being tugged forward, toward the belt and he tried to resist because he knew that when his hand touches the belt it would grip it and drag him into the lethal jaws of the machine. And his death would be imminent because as Noor told him it would kill a horse or a bull? Anyhow he was certainly much smaller and weaker than either of them. He opened his mouth to yell for help but no sound came out. Then he woke up whimpering.

He was lying on his back, the uneven surface of the straw mat under him pressing hard on his spine and ribs. Straight above him, the huge eye of a circular neon light stared back at him. He squinted and saw that the pupil of the neon's eye was made up of countless dead insects, their charred little bodies piled thick in their plastic coffin. Realizing that the light was switched on, he sat up thinking it must be the *Eid*, feast already.

He winced with pain as he tried to stretch his arms and legs. Slowly he got up to his feet and walked to the door. He tried the handle and it was locked. He fought with the urge to kick the door and bang his fists against it. Squatting he put his eye to the keyhole but saw nothing. Somewhere a door creaked. He listened, his ears straining for more. The sound of voices rose briefly and then silence returned. He thought he heard footsteps approaching and he scurried to the mat.

He sat thinking of his situation. Appearances could be dangerously deceptive, he reminded himself shutting out the hopeful thoughts that came knocking at the doors of his mind. Although this place was more like a farmhouse than a prison and this room looked like any other dusty unused room, he was still a prisoner in the hands of the dreaded Mukhabarat. He remembered the words of the Mongol back at the Mukhabarat branch:

“This is just *mukabilat*, hors d'oeuvres and by the time the table is cleared your brains will be cramped inside a pickle jar in a science laboratory.”

He has heard stories of the Mukhabarat donating the bodies of their torture victims to the dissecting tables in medical colleges and their corneas to eye hospitals. He wandered if the recipient of the cornea transplant

would give a thought to the innocent man or woman who by violently losing his or her life restored to him his eyesight and many of the good things in life: red roses, blue skies and a smile on a beloved face. Perhaps that lucky person would shed a tear for him and then wonder whose tear it was.

The voice startled him.

“You’re awake *daktor!*” The door was wide open and a tall man stood inside. Few steps behind him two guards watched them.

The bones on the man’s emaciated face jutted out under the dark bluish skin. His hair gave a henna reddish glint under the harsh light. He advanced a step toward Thiab.

“You’re probably wondering about this place and me?” The man lifted his hands pulling his camel hair *aba* close to his body.

Thiab remained silent, his face an impassive mask.

“Would you believe that I have been waiting for this moment for many years.” The man smiled and Thiab recalled the main character in an old horror film called *Sardonicus*.

“Why? I don’t know you,” Thiab said

“No matter. I know you and your family very well. you see we grew up in Shamia. We must have passed each other numerous times in the streets. And now we are destined to meet again.”

“I don’t understand. Why did they bring me here?”

“I guess you’re entitled to an explanation. As a wise man once said: today’s garment is woven by yesterday’s hands. That’s why our story begins more than seventy years ago when my grandfather was attacked and savagely murdered by a mob of villagers who also set fire to his house. My father who was a young boy then lost his eyesight in the fire. After my mother’s death I took care of him and for over twenty years I fed him, took him to the outhouse and washed him.”

Thiab could not bring himself to praise the man’s filial loyalty.

“I swore to avenge them.” He paused briefly. “Don’t you agree that murderers must be punished?” The man stared at him, waiting for an answer.

“It happened a long time ago.”

“How could you say that? You’re a tribesman! Whether you are a *daktor* or an illiterate peasant it doesn’t make a difference. We all live by the old Hammurabi code. An eye for an eye and a life for a life.

“Our religion preaches forgiveness,” Thiab protested. “Anyhow I don’t see how your feud concerns me.”

“But it does. The man responsible for the brutal murder of my grandfather and the blinding of my father was your maternal grandfather, *sayyid* Mehdi. He told the villagers that my grandfather was a sorcerer.”

Thiab’s pulse quickened.

“Was he?”

“Does it matter? It shouldn’t have concerned your grandfather. My grandfather’s business did not harm him or his kin in any way. He had no right to appoint himself judge and executioner.”

Thiab stopped himself from telling the man that if his grandfather had not practiced black magic he would have lived longer and his son would not have lost his eyesight.

“Among the few things I inherited from my grandfather were his books. Most of them were old manuscripts on traditional medicine and herbal prescriptions. One of them was a treasure by itself. It was a book on sorcery. I spent years of my life studying it and practicing the art. And since some potions and spells require human organs as ingredients. I became what is commonly known as *gassas al-qulub*, heart butcher.”

Thiab’s heart tightened inside his chest. His apprehension must have surfaced on his face because the man chuckled feebly.

“Don’t worry. I don’t intend to use your heart in my magic.”

The man lit a cigarette, exhaling the smoke through his nostrils.

“Let me finish my story. My dabbling in sorcery did not go unnoticed. People disappeared mysteriously in the district and one of them, the killing and mutilation of a mother and her children was traced to me. I was apprehended and the security police was notified. Eventually my case came to the attention of a very powerful man in our country. This man had a problem and needed my help to solve it.”

The man threw his cigarette on the floor and stumped on it.

“His problem was unique and called for unique talents. This man was told by a soothsayer that a major calamity will put an end to his remarkable career. He believed it and was looking for a way to stop it when he found me. Almost five months remain before the prophecy is due to be fulfilled. He believed in my skills and that I could help him so he ordered the police to halt their investigation, gave me lots of money and arranged for these nice people to help me.” He gestured with his head toward the guards in the corridor.

Thiab’s thoughts raced in his head. This man whom the sorcerer is working for must be very influential, a senior party member, the head of the Mukhabarat, or even one of Al-Qaid’s half-brothers.

“You killed a mother and her little children and cut their hearts out?”

The man shrugged casually.

“People die all the time. Anyhow, after tonight there will be no more sacrifices and I can tell my benefactor that he has nothing more to worry about. The *qata*, break in his fortune will be removed.”

The man turned to the guards and motioned to them. A guard stayed at the door, his finger on his Kalashnikov’s trigger while the other guard

stomped inside and ordered Thiab to stand up and turn around. He roughly pulled his hands behind his back and handcuffed him.

“It’s just a precaution. I don’t want you to try anything rash and foolish and end up as the dogs dinner. You belong to me,” the sorcerer said.

“For God’s sake be reasonable. This is the twentieth century. If you want *fedia*, blood money I’ll give you any amount you name.” Thiab shouted.

“There is not enough money in this world to pay for the suffering of my family.” The man spat the words shaking with anger.

He turned and walked down the corridor and the guard pushed Thiab forward.

They stopped in front of a closed door. The sorcerer produced a key from his pocket and opened the door. He stepped inside and switched the lights on.

“Welcome to our tabernacle,” the sorcerer said. His angry tone belied his greetings.

The tabernacle was a large sparsely furnished room which must have served before as a dining room. At the far end a six-chair dining table stood, its plastic cover dotted with dark stains.

“Sit down *daktor!* and observe a rare event that you’ll not live long to tell about.”

The guard, following the sorcerer’s instructions, pushed him down on a chair.

The other guard then came inside. He was not alone. A young woman entered cradling in her arms what looked to Thiab like a small child covered with a sheet. Thiab held his breath as the sorcerer unwrapped the sheet revealing the naked boy underneath. The woman laid him down roughly on the table but the boy did not stir or wake. The boy was unconscious, probably drugged, Thiab thought.

Until that moment Diab’s mind had simply refused to believe that this man killed people to use their hearts in his sorcery. It was illogical, fantasy stuff that subconscious minds turned into nightmares and story tellers spun into fairy tales and horror stories. He waited for the man to turn around and reveal to him the purpose behind this charade by giving him a choice between confessing his sins against Al-Qaid or having the boy killed in front of his eyes. They expect him to fall for this old trick. The boy is probably the young woman’s son if not the sorcerer’s himself.

But when the man took a dagger out of the folds of his robe and raised it high in the air Thiab could not stop the shrill scream that tore out of his mouth.

“No! Don’t!”

He tried to get up but the guard’s hands held him down firmly.

The dagger shimmered in the light as it came down. Restrained by the handcuffs Thiab shook his head violently not wanting to hear the flesh-

shredding and bone-breaking noises that followed. Then it was all over. The woman covered the boy's body with the sheet. The sorcerer took a step backward and turned. His hands and face were smeared with blood and there was blood on his sleeves.

"Murderer!" Thiab hissed repeatedly.

The sorcerer wiped his face and hands on a large handkerchief and walked toward Thiab. They glared at each other, their eyes bonded by mutual loathing. They turned at the sound of footsteps approaching. The door was thrown open and a familiar face appeared. Thiab opened his eyes in surprise and he jumped to his feet with one idea in his mind: rescue at last. The elation almost instantly turned into pain and then oblivion as the trained guard's reflexes were alerted and interpreting Thiab's sudden move as a potentially life-threatening action directed at his master, he skillfully administered a karate chop to Thiab's neck.

XXVII

Thiab wished whoever was using his head as a rattle would stop and let him sleep. He knew that if he opens his eyes, the pain will be worse. The shaking and urgent voices continued. Finally, he opened his eyes slowly, almost wincing before the sensation of pain. And then he saw the best sight in almost a week: the faces of Adam and Sarah gazing anxiously at him.

“You came! You came!” Sarah shouted burying her face in his neck” I told you. Father will come and take us back. I told you.” she repeated to Adam.

He hugged and kissed them repeatedly, fighting hard with the tears and losing.

Adam stared at his father’s swollen face, a knowing sad look in his eyes.

They sat on the thin mattress, Thiab in the middle, his hands hugging them.

“I miss my mother,” Sarah said forlornly.

“And she misses you a lot. Very soon we’ll all be together,” he said lifting his daughter’s hair from her face. Her eyes were closed. He shifted his position pillowing her head on his thigh.

“She hasn’t slept much. She was frightened and cried all the time,” Adam whispered. His face was pale. The cries he heard last night must have been Sarah’s Thiab thought. How could his heart be so blind?

“Did they mistreat you?” he asked.

“No. A woman looked after us. She brought us food and water.”

Could she be the same woman he saw at the insane sorcerer’s tabernacle carrying that little boy to Satan’s altar.

“We’ll find a way out of this place.” Thiab said.

“I am not afraid.”

Thiab hugged his son.

“You are a true Azari. All the Sakars, the falcon clan-the chiefs of all the Azaris and the holy sayyids, my mother’s people, are proud of you,” he said kissing his son’s forehead.

XXVIII

They made their way toward the river. Lukman went into the boat, followed by his son Hamza and then Thamir, Thiab's cousin. Hadi gave his hand to Karima to lean on and they got into the boat. The boat's bowels were wet and Lukman spread a canvas for her to sit on. Lukman and Hamza picked up the oars.

The men were silent, their faces solemn and tense. A few feet from the bank the current took hold of the boat. It drifted in the dark water and Lukman and his son began rowing and maneuvering the boat closer to the bank.

After few miles the river became narrower and they seemed to be moving rapidly. They passed under a bridge, the boat rocking in the churning water. Lukman and Hamza worked hard with the oars to keep the boat from hitting the concrete columns.

In the silent darkness nothing was heard except the soft splashing noises of the paddles.

"Look! a flying fish," Hadi whispered.

"I saw it," Karima said.

Lukman made a hushing motion. They followed his gaze at the dark bank. A group of men sat around a small fire. One of them shouted a greeting, his voice sounded friendly and cheerful. Lukman answered him.

"*Asdika*, friends," Lukman said

Almost fifteen minutes later Lukman whispered.

"We're close."

A man coughed once. It sounded from somewhere very near.

"*Sukut*, silence!" Lukman hissed pointing at a high point on the bank. They lifted their paddles clear of the water. Karima stared into the darkness and saw the shape of a man. He was smoking. The ember of his cigarette went on and off as he drew on it. Karima's heart tripped, her thoughts racing in her head. They were drifting toward him and in few moments, he was bound to hear their boat. About fifty feet from the river the gray outline of a brick and mortar house stood partly obscured from view by the high bank.

The man drew on his cigarette and threw it. Karima saw it fly in the air, its lit end tracing a wide arc in the darkness before it fell in the water. It burned for another second.

At that moment the man saw them.

Everything happened fast. The man was shouting at them and Lukman was answering him calmly. The man was armed and he reached for his gun shouting: "Stop! stop!" Lukman rose to his feet and she thought he was going to plead with the armed man but he was carrying a long oar in his

hand and then she saw him throwing it at the man. And it was not an oar but a trident. She turned her eyes to the bank and watched in silent horror the armed man collapsing backward. She heard his grunts and groans and saw his hands flying to the stem of the trident, pulling at it uselessly and then he went into death throes.

“*Yallah*, come on!” Lukman commanded them.

“He killed the man!” A stunned Hadi said to her and then turned to Lukman and repeated his words in Arabic. Lukman answered him harshly pressing a dark object into his hand.

“It’s a gun!” exclaimed Hadi.

“*Yallah!*” Lukman repeated.

“Was the man wearing a uniform?” Hadi asked.

He stared in shock as Hamza and Thamir took out automatic machine guns from the dark bowels of the boat.

Lukman climbed out and they followed him. Karima slipped on the muddy bank and righted herself. She paused to disentangle her foot from the grass. Drenched with sweat, her feet wet and muddy she took Hadi’s hand and he pulled her forward to the high ground.

They lay on the dry ground. The men spoke in whispers, clutching their weapons and scanning the house and its surroundings. No sounds came from the house. No one moved.

His gun strapped to his shoulder, Thamir got up and started running, bending low close to the ground. At the wall he paused for a moment and then jumped and was on top of the wall.

They rose to their feet and moved parallel to the house taking cover behind a dense line of palm trees.

Suddenly Lukman hissed an order motioning them to get down. He was pointing to the right. A figure was standing close to the wall.

The man shouted: “Omar!” He walked toward the spot on the bank where the body of his comrade lay. He could not miss it. He stopped abruptly, his hand fumbling at his automatic weapon. He pointed it right then left searching for the unseen assailants. Karima saw the man pull the safety bolt and start firing at them. He fired hastily without taking proper aim. Bullets were hitting the palm trees in rapid succession. A bullet raised the dirt near Hadi’s feet and he crept behind a tree swearing loudly.

Hamza ran to the left throwing himself behind a tree. Chips of the tree’s trunks flew in the air. They returned fire.

Karima prostrated herself behind the trunk of a fallen tree, a stone stabbing mercilessly at her thigh. She covered her ears with her hands but she could still hear the thump-thump sound of bullets hitting the earth as if someone was buffing a pillow with hard smacks.

Shouts rose from inside the house, men calling to their comrades. Karima heard a grunt from her left and she saw Hadi drop his gun, and

slump to the ground. He was holding his thigh and groaning. She crawled toward him. A bullet has ripped through his thigh and his trouser leg was stained with blood. He squirmed in pain while Lukman checked the wound.

Hadi opened his eyes and saw her.

“It’s only a flesh wound,” he said breathlessly. Lukman pulled a branch off a short palm tree and made a tourniquet few inches above the bullet wound in Hadi’s thigh.

A bullet whistled past them and they crouched.

“*Saida*, lady!” Lukman was whispering and gesturing for her to stay with Hadi. She nodded in agreement.

She glanced around and saw Hamza lift his gun and take aim. A shriek of pain rose from the other side. The back door was opened and she expected to see more guards coming out. Instead Thamir came out and taking aim at someone to his right he opened fire. The return fire stopped.

Lukman and Hamza dashed forward toward the back door where Thamir waited for them. One by one they went inside. Lukman was the last to disappear inside. Moments later a loud explosion was heard and a section of the wall was demolished by a fire bowl.

Hadi opened his eyes wide and asked.

“What was that?”

“A rocket launcher, I think.” Karima answered

Beads of sweat stood on his forehead.

“I hope not. They are all inside the house.”

The air was thick with dust and the smell of cordite.

“He knew,” Hadi coughed once and continued: “The old fisherman knew this could happen and came prepared but he didn’t tell me.”

“I am grateful to him...to all of you.”

Hadi gestured feebly, dismissing her gratitude as unnecessary.

“We’re Thiab’s brothers, all the Azaris and sayyids. It’s our duty.”

“They are coming back.” Sarah shouted in panic burying her face in her father’s side. Thiab hugged his children. The machine gunfire sounded very near. The sorcerer’s house was coming under fire and his Mukhabarat’s guards were returning fire. He stopped himself from hoping for rescue. Even in the unlikely event of the police stumbling over the sorcerer’s responsibility for the children’s abduction they would not do anything. At the sight of the Mukhabarat guards they would scuttle away. This left only one possibility. One of the several resistance groups must be staging a hit and run attack. Very soon they would stop the attack and vanish in the palm groves and marshes. It was far more daring than spitting at Al-Qaid’s picture hanging in your reception room but not enough to worry Al-Qaid and would not probably result in their escape. But it was their last chance before the mad sorcerer fulfill his vengeance vow by killing him and his children.

Suddenly the door was thrown open and a guard stepped inside, his machine gun pointed at them. He was going to shoot them, Thiab thought in despair. Then a loud explosion shook the house for a long moment loosening the ceiling plaster and sending small chunks of it to the floor. The surprised guard turned around at the sound of the explosion and his back was to Thiab. Thiab knew it was now or never. He leapt to his feet lunging at the guard in a wild tackle. The man fell face down his gun slipping out of his hand. Thiab was on top of the stunned guard, pinning him down with his weight and pummeling him with both hands. He was driven by a furious urge to hurt the man who wanted to kill them, to render him unconscious or even kill him if necessary. But the man was twice his size and a professional soldier. An unexpected bucking movement threw Thiab off and he fell backward on the hard floor.

Thiab got up but the guard was faster. His strong arm closed around Thiab's neck from behind and he was choking him. Few more seconds and he would lose consciousness. With the last vestige of strength left in his body he raised a leg and kicked back. The man grunted, his hold loosening. Thiab's neck was free and he could breathe again. He paused to catch his breath and immediately knew it was a mistake.

"*Yuba*, father. Watch out!" Adam shouted.

The guard had regained himself and was fumbling at his waist trying to pull a pistol from under his belt. Thiab thought this was going to be the end. Nothing could save them now. The guard grinned wickedly as he aimed his pistol at him and then a gunshot echoed very near. The guard's eyes bulged in shock and disbelief and his face was contorted with pain. He swayed for a second and fell heavily forward. Behind him the anguished face of Thamir broke into a grin.

Thiab and Thamir embraced and Adam and Sarah ran to them.

"I like your timing. A minute later you would have found us all dead." Thiab said in a shaky voice.

"Thank Allah you're safe. We came for the children. We never expected to find you here."

"The sorcerer. Did you find him?" Thiab asked picking the slain guard's machine gun.

"No. But I think we neutralized all the guards. Do you know how to use this?"

"All conscripts are taught how to use a Kalashnikov. Remember nineteen seventy. We were both conscripts then," Thiab said releasing the safety catch on the machine gun.

"Who came with you?"

"*Um Adam*, Adam's mother and Hadi are waiting outside. Lukman and his son Hamza are upstairs."

They walked out of the room, Thamir leading the way. At the end of the corridor Thiab saw two sentries lying on the ground. One of them was listless, apparently dead, the other wounded in the stomach. The wounded man screamed with pain. He turned on his side and vomited then he collapsed moaning.

“Thamir!” A voice whispered from the top of the staircase.

“Down here,” Thamir answered.

A figure moved cautiously down the stairs.

“Daktor and the children! Allah be praised.” Lukman said.

They embraced.

“Um Adam and Hadi are outside. Let’s go!”

“We must find Nimrud first,” Thiab said.

“Let Thamir and Hamza do it.”

“No. It’s my fight. He wanted to kill me and my children. I want to send the *shaitan*, devil to hell myself.”

“I understand,” Lukman said” I’ll see the children safely to their mother.”

Sarah asked Lukman taking his hand.

“You’re *laklak*, the stork,”

Thiab heard his answer as they went up the stairs.

“Yes!”

“You came to kill the snake?”

And they reached the landing, turned right and disappeared.

“He must be hiding here in the basement. His tabernacle is down this way,” Thiab said pointing at the other corridor.

They moved cautiously, Thamir in front and Thiab two steps behind. Thamir stopped and gestured at the open door of a room. He slipped inside not waiting for Thiab. The room was dark and empty. They were coming out of the room when another door further down the corridor was violently opened and the tall slightly-stooped figure of Nimrud appeared in the doorway. He fired his pistol just as Thamir’s arm came out of the dark and pulled him inside. Nimrud’s bullets hit the door frame sending bits of wood flying in the air. Thiab crouched and squeezed the trigger of his automatic machine gun. Almost immediately he heard a shriek of pain and the thud of something heavy falling to the floor.

“I am hit. Stop shooting,” Nimrud pleaded.

“Throw down your weapon!” Thamir ordered harshly.

“All right. Here!” And they heard the clanks of metal on the floor coming toward them.

Thiab rose to his feet.

“Careful Thiab. It could be a trick.”

Thiab picked up the revolver. Thamir must have found the light switch and turned it on. In the glow of the neon light Thiab saw Nimrud sitting on the floor, his back propped on the closed door. He was wounded in both

legs. A kneecap was torn to pieces, a white cartilage or bone jutting out of the gaping wound. His eyes rolled up for a moment and only the whites showed. He was in a state of shock, shivering uncontrollably.

Driven by intense hatred for the man who had caused him and his family so much anguish and suffering Thiab clutched his machine gun tightly, his fingers twitching at the trigger. Thamir watched silently.

Nimrud lifted his head, eyes fluttering.

“Don’t kill me. I can lead you to him.” he pleaded.

“Is he still here?” Thiab asked.

Nimrud nodded his head once.

“Yes. He is in this room, behind me. He is unarmed and alone.”

“What is he talking about?” Thamir asked puzzled.

“Let’s kill him and leave before more guards arrive.”

Suddenly Thamir began firing at Nimrud and Thiab looked and saw his body sagging sideways to the floor, a small revolver in his hand.

“*Qassab*, Butcher!” Thamir shouted. “You murdered children,” he repeated emptying his gun in the dead sorcerer’s. Nimrud was riddled with bullets. A bullet hit him in the head exploding out his brain and fragments of gray matter flew from his shattered skull splattering them.

Thiab was nauseated. He leaned on the wall and retched. Thamir was tugging at his sleeve. He had pulled Nimrud’s body from the doorway leaving a bloody puddle on the floor tiles.

Thamir lifted his leg and kicked the door. It flew open hitting the wall inside with a loud bang. A man stood in the middle of the room. He wore a suit and a tie. At the sight of Thiab and Thamir he took a step backward.

“It’s him!” Thamir whispered.

Thiab stared at the man and said nothing.

“Al-Qaid!” Thamir repeated.

“How dare you,” Al-Qaid bellowed “You will not get away with this. You all your kin will die a horrible death. I promise you that,” Al-Qaid boldly threatened but the twitch of his pointing hand told them he was scared.

“Suppose we take the children and walk away right now, huh?” Lukman’s voice came from behind them. They turned and saw him clutching his trident.

Al-Qaid seemed to be considering Lukman’s proposal.

“In this case I will be inclined to grant you a full pardon.” He paused briefly. “Yes. I don’t see why not. You came to rescue the children. Didn’t you? I understand your motive.”

“We must hurry,” Thamir urged them.

“You are an educated man doctor, a true son of Mesopotamia. You understand that without a strong man at the helm this country will sink fast into chaos,” Al-Qaid argued.

Thiab searched his heart and found nothing but hatred for this man.

“Don’t you see! He is trying to delay us,” Thamir said. “Any minute now his elite Republican Guard will arrive by helicopters and massacre all of us.”

“Don’t listen to this man. He is an *ajmi*, a foreign enemy,” Al-Qaid shouted.

“He is my cousin and a holy sayyid,” Thiab said.

“What shall we do now *daktor*?” Lukman asked banging the stem of his trident on the floor.

“We don’t have a choice. It’s either him or us,” Thiab said.

“No. You don’t have to kill me,” Al-Qaid pleaded. “I’ll resign all my posts. Give me a piece of paper and I’ll write down whatever you dictate.” He paused for a breath. “If you kill me thousands, tens of thousands will die and their blood will be on your hands.”

“Shut up!” Thamir shouted and Al-Qaid cringed in fear. It was a scene they never dreamt of witnessing, Al-Qaid frightened and shivering.

“We killed Nimrud because he murdered a dozen people but compared to Al-Qaid he was an angel,” Thiab said.

“You can’t kill me!” Al-Qaid said defiantly. “The prophecy. I still have five more months.”

“What is he talking about?” Lukman asked.

“Nimrud told me about the prophecy. It predicted that Al-Qaid’s reign will last fifteen years.”

“Hijra, lunar years?” Lukman asked

“Yes!” Thiab almost shouted. “Lunar not Gregorian. Lunar years, Your Excellency, are shorter and if I am not wrong your fifteen years are already over.”

“No, you’re wrong,” Al-Qaid hissed, his face contorted with loathing and fear.

“You’re not as smart as our *daktor*, Al-Qaid,” Lukman said contemptuously. “I am enjoying this, the great Al-Qaid shivering like a leaf in the wind. I can even smell the foul sweat of his fear.”

They all stared at Al-Qaid.

“A child just asked me: laklak! stork! she said. Did you come to kill the snake and I said: yes, my girl. It’s a bad snake which has poisoned our lives and dreams.”

The old fisherman then lunged forward stabbing Al-Qaid fully in the chest cutting his shriek of terror into a long-drawn groan. He collapsed backward, his hands flailing at the trident. The three prongs were fully-embedded in his chest. The hands sagged and a gurgling sound came from his throat bringing up a bright red foam to his lips.

Thamir opened fire.

“Don’t aim at the head,” Thiab shouted and began firing himself.

The wicked eyes glazed over and Al-Qaid was dead.

“Quickly!” Lukman shouted freeing his trident and stamping toward the stairs. “We must leave before his guards arrive.”

“They can’t help him now,” Thamir said.

“Yes, but they can kill us,” Lukman said.

They were waiting for them at the riverbank near the boat. Karima and the children ran to Thiab and they all hugged each other.

“Hurry, hurry! They’ll be here any moment,” Lukman shouted.

Hadi was getting into the boat with Hamza’s help. He raised a hand in greeting.

“It’s just a flesh wound,” Hadi said shaking Thiab’s hand.

“Thank you Hadi! Thank you all.”

“Al-Qaid is dead,” Lukman announced, picking the oar.

“What? Who killed him? How did you hear about it? Hadi asked, jerking his leg and wincing with pain.

“He was in there and we had to kill him,” Thiab said.

“My God!” Hadi said

“Good riddance!” Thamir said.

They heard the distant drone of helicopters. Lukman and Hamza worked hard at the oars.

“We’ll cross the river and walk back home,” Lukman said.

They reached the riverbank just as a helicopter flew low over the sorcerer’s house, its floodlight searching the ground.

Epilogue

They went straight to Hadi's house. Mona bandaged her husband's wounded leg but he refused to stay in bed. The men sat on the back porch listening to the radio. There was no mention of Al-Qaid's death on the midnight news.

Hadi fidgeted and then asked.

"Are you sure he was dead?"

"He is dead," Thiab assured him.

A long silence followed.

"If this regime is not overthrown, the Mukhabarat are bound to come after Thiab," Thamir said.

"We'll smuggle him out of the country." Lukman said.

Hadi dozed off in his chair and Thiab helped him to his room. When he returned Lukman and his son had left and a camp bed had been brought into the reception room for Thamir to sleep on.

Karima was still awake when Thiab entered their bedroom. The children were sleeping together on the double bed. He put his arms around his wife's shoulders and they sat on the bed. Karima looked at Thiab's haggard face and she thought the questions could wait.

They were awakened by the incessant shrill ringing of the doorbell. Thiab hurried out of the room and found Hadi limping in the corridor.

"It's in the news," Lukman announced breathlessly as Thiab opened the door.

"The army has taken over control of the country and they are rounding up Al-Qaid's men. A general amnesty has been declared."

The men and women shouted in joy and their shouts were echoed all over the country.