

Hamarabi Avenged

An old man bent over his laboratory apparatus. It was a splendid, sunny day in southern Italy, but he was indifferent to weather. He watched the mice in two wired in cages.

“Well, Luigi, what are we in for today?” he said aloud, taking a sip of coffee so thick that it looked like syrup.

The speckled black and white rodent stood on its hind legs and peered at the man. It looked like it needed spectacles, squinting, front paws crossed, a quizzical look on its pink face. The man laughed and turned to the other cage.

I

Hassim Gandhi was nervous, heartbeat deliberately controlled as the taxi approached the airport. He had prepared meticulously for this trip from Kabul to Paris.

Armed military men with dogs and rifles were everywhere. He had his papers at the ready. His clean shaven face belied his appearance the day before. His hair was fluffed with pomade, beard gone, utterly gone he thought. I will never again be able to be seen with a beard. His three-piece suit seemed right for a low level dispatcher representing the new, contrived American appointed and controlled, government. Afghanistan was in shambles in spite of the well-oiled propaganda. Hassim seethed when he thought of the promises of these sanctimonious “liberators” that were no better than the Soviets before them or for that matter, Hamarabi two millennia before. We will never be free, he reflected angrily. It is always someone.

As the taxi inched its way to the guard check, he composed himself again. Nothing to declare except the small bag with Hanes underwear, three shirts, a cosmetic bag with Gillette “Mach IV” blades and his inconspicuous faux-leather briefcase containing the courier material sealed with official wax and ribbons.

The taxi stopped. A young man in fatigues and rifle pushed his face through the window and asked the driver for his business. He looked in, saw Hassim sitting in the back seat and waved them on. So far, so good, he thought. The taxi was waved over to a small side spur before they could get to the terminal.

Another young man with stern face shouted for everyone to get out. Hassim waited patiently for the taxi driver to get out, walk back and open his door.

“Your papers,” the soldier almost shouted. Hassim handed over his visa and passport. “Who do you represent...what is your business?” he bellowed.

“I am being asked to deliver these documents to Monsieur Fontaine of the American Embassy in Paris,” he explained. “They are needed to complete a business transaction involving mining rights to precious metals in Afghanistan.”

The soldier looked at Hassim intently. “Lieutenant!” he shouted. “Frisk these guys.”

Another young soldier with a British accent came over and escorted the taxi driver and Hassim to a room in the metal half moon quonset hut next to the spur. It was brutally hot. A civilian Afghani, dressed in short sleeves and shorts and a pencil thin mustache, addressed them. “I am sorry for the inconvenience, gentlemen, but you can understand security precautions in these times, I hope.”

Hassim was asked to undress to his underclothing. Every square inch of his clothes, travel bag and portfolio was carefully prodded, x-rayed and repacked. “Again, I apologize for the unfortunate annoyance. Please return to your vehicle. Everything seems to be in order,” the man said.

Hassim and the driver walked past the pleasant looking Brit soldier and the other belligerent guard settled themselves in their seats and began to drive on. Hassim caught some mutterings by the guard, not at all complimentary, but he had passed the checkpoint with minimal effort. He exhaled fully, took another deep breath and quieted himself with a brief yoga meditation.

Checkpoint three coming up, he thought as he paid the taxi driver. A porter appeared out of the shadows and took his bag. Hassim held on to his briefcase tightly and followed the porter to the ticket booth.

Much had changed in the previous year. There seemed to be a semblance of order at last after the turmoil of invasion. Military passengers, even tourists were milling around the terminal lobby.

He talked pleasantly to the young lady at the Afghan Air counter. She looked at his passport and excused herself. "I'm sorry, sir, but I need to check your papers for a moment. I will return in a short time." Hassim began to sweat. What if the CIA or some other agency had played games with computer morphing software and showed him sans beard? He looked over to his right. A civilian American looked as if he was reading a newspaper, but glanced over the top several times and caught his eye. To his left several soldiers with weapons at the ready seemed to be scrutinizing him with inordinate interest. All may be lost, he thought.

The young lady reappeared with a bright smile. "I'm sorry for the delay, sir. Everything appears to be in order. Here is your boarding pass. Please go to gate F-16 and I hope your flight is to your satisfaction. Thank you for flying Air Afghan."

Hassim exhaled slowly, thanked the girl and walked deliberately to the escalator. Checkpoint four coming up, he knew.

He sat down in front of the boarding door and began reading a newspaper, aware that he was being scrutinized by one of the clerks looking over the boarding manifest. After a few minutes, the clerk picked up the microphone. "Mr. Henderson. Mr. Henderson. Please come to the front desk."

It took Hassim a few seconds to recognize the name. He arose from his seat and came to the checkout counter. A scowling flight attendant, tall with a military bearing looked up. "Excuse me, sir, but would you come with me for a minute? There seems to be some small concern regarding your trip."

Hassim used every bit of his lifelong meditative training to maintain his composure. "What seems to be the matter," he asked? "Just come with me, please," the man said. Hassim followed the clerk to a side door. A man seated behind a large, mahogany desk in a huge, ostentatious leather chair waved him to be seated.

"Mr. Henderson, please tell me why you are going to Paris. I know of no 'deal' going on between my government and any business involved with mineral rights." The man sat back, hands folded on his abundant stomach, rocking slightly on his throne.

Hassim looked at him shrewdly and said in measured tones, "I am not surprised, sir. This is a very important involvement and it is imperative that

nothing leaks to the press. The company that has asked permission is well known throughout the business world. I have been asked to never divulge the name to anyone for fear that the transaction will not be consummated. It means billions to our country. This arrangement alone can reconstruct much of the destruction of decades. I am very surprised that Mr. Karsai himself hasn't informed you of the consequences of a leak of any sort. Are my papers not in order? Please call Mr. Karsai immediately to verify the importance of this mission for our people."

The official looked down at Hassim's papers one more time, swallowed once and said, "Well, of course I am well informed. I am just being careful. These days, you never know. Please proceed to the plane. It is in the process of embarkation."

As Hassim stood, shook the hands of the official, he felt immense relief. All checkpoints had been met with dispatch. It is good the official did not call the office of the Prime Minister, he mused. Mr. Karsai might have had a little trouble remembering a Mr. Henderson. A Mr. Gandhi, on the other hand, would be quite memorable.

He took the first class seat on the aisle. A boy, no more than fifteen Hassim guessed, sat next to the window already asleep. Hassim took out his newspaper and began to read.

The captain announced that the plane was about to taxi and wished all passengers a wonderful flight to 'gay parée'. The boy next to him began to cough explosively, wiping his nose with his sleeve. Then he sneezed several times spraying everything within a radius of five feet with germs. Jesus, Hassim thought, I get to set next to the fucking plague. He turned away in his seat towards the aisle, closed his eyes and drifted asleep as the plane shot down the runway and lifted gracefully into the air, to Paris, to the future.

II

Hassim was dreaming. He was standing in Times Square, hands on hips taking in the morning air. Auto and bus fumes. Coffee. Aromatic foods being prepared for the luncheon crowd later. His white tunic and cap caused no interest from passers by in this city of strange and exotic visitors. He watched the moving headlines on top of the building across the way. Once there had been a giant billboard with an advertisement for Camel cigarettes blowing giant

smoke rings in the air. The headlines moved across the building top. An accident on a northern California highway. President Bush was making a speech at the University of Texas. The Dow Jones had closed at 11,355, up 123 points. A slow news day, he concluded with a smile. He glanced around the Square. Taxis shot through, people of every imaginable color, size and peculiarity were hustling to work. Hassim walked over to a small bar with several tables on the sidewalk, sat and ordered an espresso coffee and Danish, opened his New York Times and scanned the international section. It was 8:14 AM by his watch.

And while he took his second sip of coffee, he turned to face south, down 8th Avenue. To his back he heard the noise of a whining jet, an American Airlines plane shrieking overhead, passing to the west of the Empire State Building. Passersby looked up while crossing with the changing traffic lights. Hassim put his coffee down, leisurely lit a French Galois and leaned back. He could see the tops of the World Trade towers in the distance. He glanced at his watch once again. 8:15. The top of the West Tower exploded into flames. He paid his bill unhurriedly, turned and went back to the hotel.

He awoke with a start, the boy next to him in the middle of a paroxysm of coughing, hacking. He called the attendant and asked if he could move to another seat. "I'm sorry sir," she said. "This flight is packed. We won't be long, though. We will be landing in forty five minutes."

Thanking her, he turned to the aisle once more and removed some papers from his brief case. They were already familiar. Time lines and activities carefully coded so that the average reader would think it was some kind of business case. Spread sheets and charts in the report. He began to think of the coming meetings and mentally visualized the Tour Eiffel, Saint Paul's Cathedral and the Bank of England. Smiling, he replaced the report and sat back awaiting the landing.

III

"It's impossible, Hassim. Nine-Eleven alerted the world. In a sense it was too damn successful. Regular flights are being canceled right and left. The intelligence organizations of most of the western world are working together for the first time since World War II. How you managed to arrive here is a mystery to me. You are among the most wanted men on Earth. You can tear

up our plans. For the time being we can fund insurgents in Iraq, but that is about all we can do. Be patient. Our time will come again.”

They sat in the lounge area of a large suite at the Grand Hotel just down from the Opera. Hassim looked at the man over his cognac snifter. “To answer your question, I had an expert forge my documents and I simply don’t look very menacing to western eyes without a beard. I was always light skinned....they just never noticed. Why not rent or steal smaller planes, Jacques?”

Jacques Fontaine was elegantly dressed in a very expensive, pinstriped suit, exquisite hand crafted shoes. How he was able to dress like this while an employee of the American Embassy was due to inherited family wealth, he knew. There was nothing of Monsieur Fontaine that Hassim didn’t know. His ancient Arabic ancestry. His stature among France’s highest echelon of nobility. His prominent position in the American Embassy that made access to highly secret information a gift from the gods. He spoke English with the obligatory, charming accent.

“A small plane couldn’t get within a hundred miles of any major city in Europe or the United States, Hassim. They are now under orders to shoot first and ask questions later. Even the Italians are vigilant if you can believe that. They seem to be afraid that someone will bomb their Coliseum. My God, the Italian ego.”

“How about pipe lines, atomic energy plants, dams? They are far away from dense populations. Why couldn’t a Lear jet ram into the Aswan Dam?”

“That’s possible,” Fontaine said, “but not disruptive enough to be worth the risk. A small jet would not be able to destroy a dam, just damage it. Even disabling the Alaska Pipeline wouldn’t keep oil out of America...just alert them to the risk. If we are to do something again as spectacular as nine-eleven it has to be potentially crippling. We nearly toppled the world economy with the World Trade success. Airlines went out of business. Tourist trade stopped for over a year. The stock market plummeted. Our next act must be even more dramatic.”

“Let me think about it, Jacques. Something that happened on my flight here has been incubating in my head all day. I believe I may have an answer. Let us have dinner tomorrow evening at the Tour d’Argent. If what I have in mind will work, we need the finest meal in Paris to help us congratulate ourselves.”

With that, Fontaine stood up, shook hands and gave Hassim an elaborate bow. Hassim, in turn, bowed, said something in Farsi and translated for his colleague. “ ‘May your forbearers keep you safe and in good company for all your life.’ As you know, this is from our Koran.”

“Yes, a fine sentiment,” the Frenchman said.

“If what I have in mind can work, it may need to become true,” Hassim said in perfect, unaccented French with a smile.

Jacques’ mouth dropped open. “I didn’t know you spoke French,” he said.

Hassim, showing him the door, returned to English. “There are many things you may not know about me, Jacques. Some of them might actually delight you.”

IV

Hassim drove his rented car slowly through the Bois de Bologna. Freakland, he thought. When Hassim was a boy he went here with his father to be deflowered properly. The experience later in the very same hotel he was now staying was astonishing and life changing. His father warned him, however, never to try it on his own. “Unimaginable people inhabit this place, Hassim. Women dressed as men. Men dressed as women. Both sexes dressed in every kind of costume. Animals. It is possible to be seduced by many women at the same time for a price, but the danger of life threatening disease is very high. Never go here without me.”

Except for one event, Hassim heeded his father’s warning. He had seen friends die horrible disfigured deaths from liaisons not carefully researched. Muggings. Knife stabbings. Bad place altogether, he knew from experience. Several weeks after this wondrous encounter with the prostitute he went to the Bois to seek her out again. He had enough money in his wallet and prophylactics to prevent disease. At the last minute he put a small revolver belonging to his mother in his pants belt. Parking his car, he went into the very same spot between a clump of trees where his father had gone. Suddenly a bright flashlight was shined in his face. Surrounded by an astonishing array of bizarre men and women, he panicked, drew his pistol and shot one dressed in an ape costume in the leg. He screamed. The rest of the menagerie quickly dragged the wounded man away yelling insults and shaking their fists. Hassim had run

headlong to the car and tried to start it as he heard whistles and shouting. Gendarmes were headed on foot to where he had been. The freaks were now in the opening pointing to his vehicle. Finally the engine started. He floored the accelerator, tires screaming, lights off. Days later he was confronted by his mother.

“Where were you on Tuesday evening, Hassim,” she asked? “I know you were not at Raul’s house...I called his mother.”

The interrogation continued. “And my gun has been fired. I never use it and your father has his own weapons. Servants wouldn’t have the nerve.”

His father got into the act. By now he was cornered. The shooting made big headlines in *Le Temps*. His punishment did not fit the crime, he remembered, but he never made a mistake of that kind again. He was not allowed to use the auto at all. He was not to visit any of his friends to stay overnight. He was to come home directly from school. He was to accompany at least one of his parents wherever they traveled so that he would not be left alone. He was in a prison of his own making for a year.

Confession might or might not be good for the soul, he reflected as he parked in a very dense part of the Bois. His informant had given him explicit instructions. Hassim walked past the freaks and down a side path into the densest part of the park. On the way he looked at the show, the most unimaginable dregs of mankind parading around looking for whatever they were looking for.

Dwarfs in g-stings. Animal costumes. Seven foot women. Teenage children in diapers. A huge woman tattooed all over her body, not a square inch without some picture or saying. He could see a large one on her thigh in English: “Jesus is coming”. She seemed to be all greased up and totally naked except for absurdly high heels and transparent pink panties with spangles. Ugh, Hassim grunted.

Turning left at a large fountain, he walked cautiously, hand on the pistol. This time a silencer would take care of noise if that should become necessary. A Metro stop was within short running distance. The car was untraceable. He sat down on a bench and waited.

Soon a young man came out of the night and sat down. He was not dressed at all strangely. Slacks, clean shirt, proper attire in all respects, Hassim observed.

He appeared to be in his early twenties. “Shalom,” the boy said. “Shalom alaichem,” Hassim answered. “Are you Mr. Henderson,” he asked? “Yes,” Hassim answered.

They did small talk in French for a few minutes. The young man said his name was Robert. No, that wasn't his real name. He had been born in Persia but his parents left when the Shah died and had grown up in Paris. He spoke five languages: Persian, French, American English, German and Italian because he liked the sound of the language, he said. Talk to me in English, Hassim said. The young man continued to talk without changing gears in perfect colloquial American. How had he learned to speak so fluently? He went to the American School of Paris and went on holiday around Europe with American friends, picking up the accent and the odd idioms. He said that things were “all fucked up” now in Europe, French young men were “dweebs” and the women of Paris were “tight assed bitches.” Hassim liked the young man immediately.

“So why would you like to go to America, Robert” Hassim asked?

“For adventure. I have studied American history, American literature, American music....American culture is my passion. I hate living in France now. I want to live in New York City for a year.”

“Well, New York isn't really representative of America, Robert,” Hassim responded, “anymore than Paris is France. But it has its own charm, I must admit.”

“Why have you sought me out this way,” the young man asked? “This is the creepiest place in the world.”

“I am a very cautious businessman, Robert. I knew we could not be overheard here and even if we were, no one would believe one of these creatures if he, she or it would try to make some profit from our conversation. I have a proposition for you, but I think we need to get to know each other better before we make any plans. You might find me strange or just someone you would not trust or like. I might discover that you just don't fit my business model well in spite of your obvious linguistic success. Let's play it by ear for a month or so. I have introduced myself to your parents and they seemed ok with our meeting...though I did not, of course, tell them where we were to meet. Perhaps we can take a trip to Italy together, to Amalphi, Positano and Capri. Why don't you meet me for lunch by the Trocadero at the bistro on the

southwest corner of Avenue Vienna tomorrow at, let's see, 1:00 PM. We will continue to talk there.”

“Robert” agreed and they parted, the young man to the shadows, Hassim back to his auto, past the circus of creatures. He noted that the fat woman was not there this time. Who would want some of that, he wondered. I would like to meet the man or woman that took on that mountain of flesh. What a challenge.

V

“Yes, something like that could be purchased, but at what a price, Hassim,” Jacques said over a plate of splendid truffles at the Tour d'Argent, “and it would be impossible to keep secret.”

“Please, Jacques. My name is Philip Henderson. I assumed as much. I will need to travel for a bit. There is a man I know, a very old friend who is now retired in Capri. He was also my tutor at the University of Cairo when I was there. While I am gone, you will need to get for me impeccable documents for a young man that I will introduce to you when I get back. He will be going to New York as a ‘technical assistant’ to the president of our company.”

“Our company,” Fontaine questioned, eyebrows lifted over his glass of 1941 St. Emilion from the Cheval Blanc wineries?

The wine had obviously been hidden from the Nazi occupation during the war. Jacques estimated the worth of the bottle they were consuming with their delicacies. At least nine hundred dollars. He noted with approval how Hassim smacked his lips in pleasure with each sip. A true wine connoisseur, he concluded. Hassim had guessed correctly the very vineyard the wine came from as well as the year. An astonished Jacques listened while he told an old joke, though not old to the Frenchman.

It seems that a man came into a good restaurant and ordered a glass of exceptional vintage by name, Hassim related. When the bartender brought it to him, he made a bargain. Bring me a glass of good wine, red or white whenever I am finished with the previous one. If I can guess the exact wine name, its vintage, the region and vintner, I get the glass free. If I guess wrongly, I pay you ten times the price you charge your customers. What a sucker, the bartender thought. But after six glasses of his best wines were ascertained perfectly, he became angry. For the next offering, the bartender went behind

the bar and urinated in the wine glass. Bringing it over to the table, the customer sniffed it, swirled it around the glass. Taking a large mouthful his eyes widened and he spit the contents all over the table. He shouted, "This tastes like piss." "Ah, yes," said the bartender, "good guess, but whose and what year?" The Frenchman laughed heartily.

"Of course 'our company'," Hassim answered. "It is a fully registered, privately owned pharmaceutical business called Aries Industries. A.G. There is a sales office in Manhattan, San Francisco, Tokyo, London and of course, Paris. We manufacture specialty drugs regarding fertility, male impotence and other sexually helpful medicines, some quite exotic distilled from plants in tropical areas of the world almost uninhabited by man. It brings in a tidy profit. We advertise occasionally on ITV in England and virtually all major stations in the United States and Japan. It is quite respected in some circles. The Germans hate us because they have not been able to copy our products...and believe me they can copy anything.

"So I want you to begin to put together identity papers. I will give you the name you must use. The person will be of Swiss origin on approved business for Aries with university credentials in chemistry, biology and environmental sciences...though not a PhD. Perhaps a bachelor degree in one and a master's in another, I don't care."

"May I ask where this is leading," Fontaine asked pursing his lips?

"Not at this time. Details need to be worked out and the fewer that know about this the better. Believe me, torture is not out of the question in our business, as you know. You are much better off having as little information as possible until I am finished."

The rest of the evening passed uneventfully. Hassim was pleased with everything so far. What he had in mind was foolproof.

"How about a toast, Mr. Henderson," Jacques asked?

"Hmm. Let me see. How about a moral from James Thurber's famous story about the Unicorn in the Garden: *'Don't count your boobies before they are hatched?'*"

The Frenchman looked a little perplexed, but clinked his glass with his host. "Here's to the Unicorn," Francois said.

“No,” Hassim contradicted. Here’s to the ‘boobies.’” Now Fontaine was fully mystified.

VI

The drive down to the Amalphi/Positano coastline was leisurely and satisfying. Hassim called himself Philip Henderson, owner and Chief Operating Officer of Aries Industries. From time to time Hassim would switch languages to see how facile the boy’s mind was. He was impressed. The family had already named the children westernized names. Alice, Rosanna, and the youngest, his companion on this trip, Brendon. Brendon Kali. Indistinguishable from any western European family. Well done, Hassim thought.

“If you really would like to work for me, Brendon, you first of all need to call me Philip and you might have to change your name. Your Arabic origins might be sticky with the new procedures the American government has put in place. Remember, your grandfather fought with the Egyptian army in the Arab/Israeli conflict of 1968. He was convicted *in absentia* at a trial in Tel Aviv after the war for war atrocities. I know the accusations were not valid. I have checked it thoroughly. But his name, your name, remains on the suspicion lists of the intelligence agencies. Would that bother you?”

“I’ve never had any problems at customs in any country I’ve traveled, including a six month stay at a kibbutz in Israel,” the boy answered.

“Yes, but that was before nine-eleven,” Hassim said.

“Let me think about it, Mr. Henderson. I am proud of my name. My family roots can be traced back over a thousand years with very honorable traditions and history. My grandfather was the fall guy of that war. Let me think about it.”

They passed Monte Circeo and Terracina on the way south. Monte Circeo was the mythical home of Circe, the Greek goddess of harvest. It wasn’t really a mountain, rather an out of place large hill sitting down by the sea separated from its brother hills by at least fifty miles of flat valley villages. Perhaps a billion years past the Apennine chain of gentle mountains, not gentle at that time, craggy jagged peaks looking like the Pyrenees or Alps of today, got squashed in some volcanic upheaval. What remained was this elongated fertile valley, Further south was the archway on the main road at the village of Sperlonga, little rabbit warrens of shops and homes on the side of the cliffs. In

Roman times, the archway was a checkpoint for travelers north and south. Identities were scrutinized for possible undesirable agents from enemy countries. Just like US customs at JFK, Hassim mused.

He had a few minutes of apprehension at the Italian boarder. Were his papers still in order? Had there been some leak? A woman came out of the kiosk and asked for his papers. Hassim had a very high regard for the intelligence of women, much more than men as a matter of fact. They are nosy and observant, two very dangerous attributes but gender notwithstanding, susceptible to a little flattery.

She looked at him longer than he thought necessary, but he smiled and in perfectly accented Italian, said, “*Una bellissima paese, signorina.*” He knew she was well past the signorina stage of life. He extended his arms towards the heavens as he finished his little Italian speech. She smiled and returned their papers and waved them on.

Finally as they arrived at a small dusty road near Capri, Hassim turned off the main road. Miles of dust and Italian scrub bushes to the coast. Coming out of a sharp turn at dusk was a house, a palazzo, a wonderful expanse of architecture, a blend of countryside colors of various hues of magenta, soft brown and pastels. The sun was hovering on the horizon, fat, red and wandering relentlessly to the gods of night.

Hassim stopped the car just off the tiled approach leading to, he remembered, a fully automatic garage/alarm/weapons system of immense sophistication. He pushed a small button on his mobile phone and a door began to slowly open. He drove the Ferrari in and parked very carefully on lines his ultraviolet sensitive glasses detected. The door closed behind them. He could hear the young man’s breath intake as the car began to drop as if on a cloud, down, down and rested finally on a new surface. Hassim nudged the accelerator forward and stopped just short of a wall. Motors whirred and the virtually invisible platform they were on returned to planet earth.

“So, my young friend. What do you think of this,” Hassim asked? Brendon was swiveling his head as if a child just entering Disneyland. Good Lord....what in the world have I gotten myself in for, he wondered.

VII

They walked the beach together each morning. Hassim liked this boy, no, this man he had to remember, more and more. He seemed sensitive. He was exceedingly good looking. He had things to say. He had, unexpectedly, read some great literature. They discussed Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and Theodorakis' *The Last Temptation of Christ*. They talked about their respective ancestors.

Hassim made up stories, wonderful stories about his ancient warriors, his evangelists, his heroes and favorite grandparents. None of these, as far as he knew, ever existed. Brendon, without any guile when unguarded, told real adventures, back to Mohammed, to the tragic split between the progeny, to the Crusades, to twentieth century heroes and heroines. A distant aunt had died saving his grandfather from discovery by putting him in a shallow crypt-like shallow grave in her back yard while Israeli young soldiers, lustful for vengeance, searched the premises. Real heroes, Hassim thought many times during their strolls down the Mediterranean coastline, gulls announcing their displeasure with the world, terns bobbing for tiny sea creatures all over the shallows of the receding tides. Hassim was at peace, the kind of peace that occurs during those rare times between other things.

“And your feelings about Paulo,” he asked?

“I have never met anyone like Paulo before,” Brendon almost shouted over the nose of the angry gulls. “How old is he?”

“I'm not really sure, Brendon. I think he is at least 91. I have known him all my adult life. Of all the men I have met, my father included, I love him, I depend upon him. I have no idea what I will do when he goes. He is special. Would you like me to tell you his story?”

They stopped at a seaside café. Brendon sat and ordered a café espresso. Hassim ordered a local red wine. The veranda overlooked the famous Blue Grotto, splendid emerald water caressing the dark rock of the island.

“Paulo,” Hassim began, “is an orphan. He was one of the homeless urchins that roamed the streets of Turin stealing, working, doing whatever he had to do to survive. He knows nothing about his ancestry. He says he doesn't care. I met him in graduate school. Ramrod bearing as you have observed, even at his age. No nonsense. Over the years he has shared his life with me. He fought

with the Turks in World War I. He was a legendary warrior, known on both sides for his cunning, reckless courage and complete disregard for his own life. He thinks that his youth and stupidity probably saved his skin many times over. The Australians wrote songs about him that are sung even today in the bars of Brisbane. Between wars he acquired a doctorate in biology, another in chemistry and a third in philosophy. He studied under Bultmann for some time for 'theological seasoning' he said and, believe it or not, with he Nazi sympathizer, Heidigger.....to learn the dark side of our souls. When Paulo speaks about 'the meaning of life,' something we tend to joke about, he is not joking. Ask him about his notion of God sometime. It will amaze you if he chooses to tell you. During the second War he disappeared entirely. As far as I know he served no country. One day in 1946 I answered a knock on my door in Kabul. There stood Paulo, older, smiling, bald head shining, a bottle of amazing wine extended. He knows more about viral technology than any man alive but since he doesn't publish, I am among only a few that know that.

At the university I did a series of experiments that were so untrustworthy that when I presented the results he sent me packing without a word. Incompetent was what he said. I didn't even have the opportunity to defend myself. I was crushed, resentful and for a time dropped out of the university. I was sure I would never deliberately see him again.

"And then, several years later, a graduate of the university at that time, I was teaching biology at the Polytechnique in Turin, Italy's equivalent to high school. The door to my classroom opened unexpectedly. There was my school superintendent and a visitor. Behold the man. Paulo di Torino stood, bald head shiny as always, small ingratiating smile on his sharp, northern Italian face. He walked in as if he owned my classroom. He began to talk as if I wasn't even there. Talk about resentment. I was seething. This gnome was taking over my property. I was just about to say something when he turned to me and said to my entire class, waving his right arm towards me, 'This young teacher is one of my mentors. He taught me much and I am so grateful.'

"Of course I had taught him nothing of importance. He made me feel as if I were a king, a great person. I was neither king nor great person. Paulo is exceptional. I hope you get to know him well while we are here."

"Why was he so hurtful to you when you were his student," Brendon asked?"

“I was on to something he didn’t want to deal with at the time, as rudimentary as it was, and, well, that is how we all react to bad news unless we are properly prepared. Don’t you agree, Brendon?”

The young man didn’t respond. They returned to the cliff home together.

VII

“You will think this impossible,” Paulo said to Hassim, “but look at the statistics. These rats on the left have been injected with a serum of my invention. It takes about 24 hours, but then they begin to cough. All dead in minutes. The death is transmitted by a virus. All are dead, but the virus itself becomes inactive in a relatively short time. All rats that come into contact with the virus within approximately 24 hours die. They drop like stones. But the virus seems only to infect the first and second generation of exposure. When a third population is introduced while the first or second group is still alive but close to the end...well the virus seems to degrade in virulence and the new group either is not infected or the effect is so mild that it doesn’t kill. The original carriers and the first generation of contacted populations all die. The rest...well you can see the results. The serum, the viral culture, is constructed from the obscure plant you mentioned in your school thesis.

“They have been carefully circling each other. Small groups came together gradually. I don’t know the full consequences yet, but they seem to have been working out something for some days now. No deaths. Nobody harmed. Many meetings. Today I noticed that the white ones and black ones have mingled. They seem to like each other, if indeed, rats ever ‘like’ other rats. Who knows? The plant you used in your thesis got me started. It enraged me. I vowed to find a toxin at least, or at least a serum that would curtail the vicious nature of our species. What I have discovered is something so wonderful, so completely unexpected, that you will weep. Your young man has been helping. Brendon can’t possibly be his real name. Tell me his story.”

Hassim told his mentor everything that he knew about Brendon and his family history. “I shouldn’t get too attached to our young friend, Paulo. He is an integral part of our experiment.”

The old man turned abruptly and began to protest but Hassim stopped him with a raised palm. “Not now. We have much work to be done. We can discuss the details later. Prepared one way, the virus is a short term

catastrophe. Prepared at a different, cooler temperature, it seems to induce peaceful, harmonious behavior. Amazing.”

VIII

Brendon could not believe his good fortune. To escape his family prison was a miracle all on its own, but to find out that Mr. Henderson knew his family and approval given to travel with this worldly and....and what? Brendon couldn't put his finger on it, but certainly Henderson was competent, shrewd, witty, clever, almost an uncle. His father had said to him as they left for Italy, “Brendon, trust this man with your life. He has saved mine several times. Go with my blessing and go with God.” And for the first time in his memory, his father kissed him full on the lips and embraced him with strength.

And meeting Paulo. This ancient man was wise, brilliant and avuncular, someone Brendon could learn to follow, to...love. Together in the lab, the two of them spent sometimes thirty or more hours together, measuring blood samples, observing the mice, taking prolific notes. He was lost in time. Sleep was unnecessary. Sleep happened when it happened, otherwise the two of them worked almost as lovers. Never had he ever felt a sense of fulfillment like this.

And the experiments. Rats becoming democratic. Rats becoming demons. Brendon wondered about what would happen if the colonies were mixed. Paulo was very adamant about that. “We don't know enough, my young friend. Watch for coughing...that seems to trigger a bad reaction. They might kill each other, they might love each other, they might look at us, gods to them perhaps, and kill us. Quen Sabe? We are scientists, not socialists. And we don't know whether rats and humans are in the same boat. Patience, patience, Brendon.”

Occasionally, Hassim, “Mr. Henderson”, would come down to the lab. It was obvious that this man knew what they were doing. He asked intelligent questions, sometimes took notes, often engaged them both in spirited discussions about the experiments. He named all the rats and could accurately distinguish them. “Ralph is my favorite rat,” he said one day. Brendon asked him who and why. “Ralph is the one with the big red spot on his side. I like him because he is not part of any pact. He is his own rat, that is for sure.” And he laughed at his own remark.

One afternoon with Hassim watching, Brandon and Paulo, hunched over a colony of rodents, became alarmed. Ralph began to expulse air rhythmically, coughing convulsively, wheezing. He seemed to go to sleep but his vital signs were all within tolerance. Within hours, all rodents were dead. This was the social, benign group. Paulo explained that the serum had been prepared meticulously at the proper temperature. He could find nothing out of the procedure he had been using for months. Ralph, though, weak and unlike his normal persona, seemed dormant for long periods. At last, he suddenly died. The entire colony had succumbed within hours. Paulo and Brandon spend the next few days dissecting the tissues of the rats, especially Ralph. Hassim also worked with them trying to understand what had gone wrong. They never found out. Some combination of serum, antidote and ambient toxins produced a freak result. They were never able to duplicate the same laboratory circumstances. All they could determine was that the first indication of this catastrophe began with one rat coughing.

After a sixty hour non stop investigation by the three of them, exhausted, they slept. Hassim said the next morning that it must have been some prohibitively small variable, that we should continue according to plan. That said, Hassim, just before falling asleep, remembered the young man on the flight from Kabul to Paris. Coughing.

Evenings were spent together, servants bringing in meals slowly, wine, primo plate, secondo plate, changes in wine, ensalata, fruta, grana to cleanse the palate. Brendon had never experienced the sophistication of conversation, splendid food and wine with adults of this caliber. These men made sure that Brandon was part of the after dinner discussions. Sometimes they centered on the experiments. Sometimes the discourse turned to life, values, importance of virtue, priorities, often entirely over Brendon's head, but they always paused even in the middle of intense argumentation and asked his opinion. For the first time in his life he felt....adult.

One evening before the giant fireplace, warmth oozing out of the opening, toasting their feet, exactly three coffee beans in their Sambucca, one for 'pane' one for 'amore' and one for 'fantasia', Hassim, asked an impossible question to Brendon. "My young friend," he paused. "Can you think of a circumstance where it is justifiably moral to kill a fiend? For example, if you could somehow, with the aid of a time machine or something of that kind, you could know what Adolph Hitler was going to perpetrate, would your conscience be clear murdering him in cold blood at, let us say, dinner?"

Brandon always thought questions were tricks, so he was cautious. “Several tried to kill Hitler, as I recall. Millions would have been saved. On the other hand, Hitler had surrounded himself with Hitlers, so another, perhaps even more rabid dictator, might have taken over after an assassination. If the succession maniac happened also to be an engineer, the ‘bomb’ and the only means to deliver it would have been unleashed on the world. We might all be speaking German now. But to answer your question, I am not smart enough to know the answer.”

Hassim smiled. Paulo looked at him. They raised their glasses. Paulo said, “Atrocities of unimaginable proportion have all been justified by scripture. What do you think of our experiments, Brandon? Tell us what you think they might portend for our species if the results can be duplicated in humans.”

He closed his eyes. He could see Palestinian leaders and Israeli leaders dancing, feasting, embracing, agreeing, even loving the challenge of making bad, good. “I would gladly die to make that happen,” he said finally.

They were all silent. Paulo proposed a toast. “To Arthur Clarke and Childhood’s End.” They all crunched the last coffee bean, took a last sip of Sambucca and retired to their rooms to sleep.

IX

But Hassim didn’t sleep. He sat in the garden alone, smoking a Galois and looking at the skies, vigilant as always. At last, he was about to return to his room for the night when he saw a shadow pass by the laboratory window. Motionless, he watched. The shape sat on its haunches watching for some time and showed only some small hand movements that Hassim saw. As the shadow passed just feet in front of Hassim, he saw that it was one of the servants that tended the garden. Hassim’s danger alert sense was ringing off the hook. Ever vigilant, Hassim followed the man for some distance down the beach being very careful not to be spotted. Turning into a small alley way, Hassim continued to follow at a safe distance.

This was familiar territory, he knew. For the past several weeks, Hassim had walked the entire compound and village, marking in his memory the names of streets, prominent buildings, details, details. The man stopped at a house, looked both ways and knocked on the door. He entered. Hassim waited for more than an hour.

Finally, the servant exited the house. He is no rookie, Hassim thought. The man was very careful. He lit a cigarette and waited, seemingly taking in the night air. At last, he walked down the street. As the man turned a corner, Hassim, already positioned in the shadows of a large tree, said, barely audible “Quo vadis?” The man looked up, startled and then sighed as the knife went between the ribs, into the heart. Hassim felt the embrace in a convulsive, dying spasm. “Go with God, my unfortunate friend,” Hassim whispered. His momentary lover left this world with a whimper, gasping something not quite intelligible.

Dragging him into the dark, Hassim searched his body for any information, any sign of this intrusion, anything that might enlighten this disastrous turn of events. A small leather pouch rewarded his care. He pulled the body as far from the road as he could, spent several minutes locating stones and leaves to put over the body. Then he spread some ten thousand Lire notes around the area.

Back at Paulo’s palazzo, Hassim sat in the garden examining the dead man’s pouch. On a small piece of paper was a telephone number. Hassim recognized the area code. Washington D.C. The passport seemed in order until he paged through the pages, crammed with stamps, wax seals and signatures. Right there on the last page was a customs seal of the United States, stamped and signed at Dulles airport. Now is the time, he concluded. He pushed a button on his cell phone. “Yes,” came the voice, thick with sleep? “Paulo, meet me immediately in the lab. Do not wake the servants. Something has happened.”

X

“We must leave immediately,” Hassim explained to Paulo after telling the events of the night. “The Policia will be everywhere tomorrow. It will look like a robbery, but I can’t take a chance. I need all your notes, the serum and antidote and, above all, my friend, your trust.”

The old man sat, listening intently. “His name is, was, Alessandro. I know his mother. I had him checked out thoroughly. Except for his absence last week for, he said, illness, he had been an exemplary servant in every way. I had no reason to find him suspicious or unusual. When I moved here twelve years ago, I had established myself as an innocuous, though eccentric, old man, retired by the sea. I was not under any cloud of suspicion. I can only speculate

that your escape from Afghanistan or possibly Paris must have leaked, Hassim. Leave now. You know what the serum can do. The antidote is debatable at this stage of experimentation. You are a scientist. You know that this is the most risky experiment in the history of our species. The explosion at Bikini Island was nothing compared to this. We don't know what will happen. Your young man...is he worth the price? We will never meet again in this world, my friend...nor, if my belief prevails, the next. Go while you still have a chance. By tomorrow I will have destroyed all evidence of our work. The lab will look like an agricultural experiment. I will give Brandon an injection tonight, but they must be given at eighteen hour intervals for eight days. Is he the right person?"

Hassim didn't answer. He looked at his friend, hugged him, kissed him on both cheeks. He embraced him again, reluctant to leave. Finally, he let go, looked at Paulo squarely in the eye, hugged him one last time and left abruptly. Much needed to be done.

XI

Brandon slept on the flight to New York. In his dream he was in the laboratory at Capri with Hassim and Paulo. The mice were scurrying all around their cages acting...differently. Hassim was shouting something to the old man but Brandon couldn't make out what he was saying except for the unmistakable fact that he was very agitated. As always, Paulo was calm, listening, then reached into the cage and took one of the rats in his hand. In a split second he took the head in the other hand and wrenched it, breaking its neck, killing the rodent instantly. Then he put it back in the cage. All the other rats stopped their random motion and surrounded their comrade.

He awoke trying to wipe the sleep out of his eyes. The air in the Aeroflot plane was so dry. He blew his nose and coughed, settled back and thought about the events of the past day.

After his last injection administered by Mr. Henderson...he couldn't bring himself to call him Philip or Phil...he was taken to the airport in a taxi. They sat and talked for some time before Brandon got out, embraced the older man and went on his way to customs.

"Brandon, are you sure you want to go through with this," Hassim asked him? "The serum is actually a virus. When activated it will 'infect' others. Our hope

is that the gene that causes our species to be so violent and treacherous will be adapted, spread to others. It can be spread through the air. The experiments with rats seem to show that behavior modification is possible with this approach, but of course it is in an early form and we don't know everything about it yet."

"Mr. Henderson, Phillip, " he responded familiarly at last, "If this can work everything is worth the sacrifice." To spread a 'peace virus' seemed preposterous, but he had witnessed the transformations with his own eyes.

Now he concentrated on what he must do when he arrived at JFK. Mr. Henderson had instructed him to begin coughing as if he had a cold and not to try to block it with a handkerchief or anything. "Breathe on as many people as possible, Brandon. The virus will do all the work after that. I would not be surprised to see an entire city become lovers instead of fighters within a week."

Brandon was coughing anyway. It must be the dry air, he concluded. The man sitting next to him turned away not wanting to catch a cold. Not to worry, Brandon mused. You won't get a cold.

The captain called attention to the impending landing. New York, Brandon thought excitedly. Where I've always wanted to go.

XII

Hassim, in the villa he had rented in the suburb of Saint Germaine, a suburb outside Paris, relaxed in the overstuffed chair with a cognac, watching the news on television. CNN was always to be relied upon to get the first whiff of scandal or disaster. He felt very satisfied with himself. Paulo was safely in his retreat in St. Galen, Switzerland. His lab had mysteriously burned to the ground several days ago. The body in the ashes was assumed to belong to Paulo. The fire news had to share the murder news for a day or so, but since no motive was discovered for either crime they would both be history in a week. Goodbye, Paulo. We surely will never meet again.

In the middle of the morning news with Solidad O'Brien there seemed to be some commotion in the newsroom. He remembered the look on Matt Lauer's face when the first plane struck the North Tower. This was the same look on her pretty, innocent face.

“We are interrupting the newscast for this breaking story. JFK is closed. We are being told that all incoming traffic is being diverted. It is reported that dozens of people in the International Terminal have apparently collapsed. One moment they are coughing, the next they are on the floor, felled as if by an axe. Gina Mendez is coming in from JFK. Gina...what is going on?”

A slender blonde woman came into view with a mike. “I don’t know, Solidad. The terminal is strewn with bodies. Oh, God, a man hurrying by just fell. Police are running around. I can’t show you the rest. Oh, dear God..” The screen went blank.

Solidad said, “Wait. Bob Ingram, our roving reporter in Times Square is on the spot there. Come in, Bob.”

Hassim watched the reporter on television. He was holding a handkerchief to his mouth and was coughing. “Soledad, it is bedlam here in Times Square. Several taxis have gone out of control. There are many people on the sidewalks that have fallen to the pavement. My God! A bus has smashed into the theater across the street. Jesus, I have never seen anything like it.” The picture went out. He said, “I am not feeling well, myself. Gonzo, the cameraman has just collapsed.” The mike went dead. The picture went back to a horrified Soledad.

Hassim sat changing channels. Tom Brokaw, wide eyed, nasal voice wavering as he described events. The consummate professional, Dan Rather was stammering as he described what was happening. Peter Jennings on vacation in Vancouver seemed to be sufficiently distant from events that he was able to give a clear picture of this Armageddon.

New York City was dying, he knew. Three hundred fifty disease carriers on the 747 Aeroflot flight were running around the city coughing and breathing on others. The effects would be short lived if evidence with the rats could be believed, but by the time the infection died of its own accord, New York City would be a ten million person graveyard in days. Brandon was already dead, getting, in a sense, his wish. He never suspected the serum made at the wrong temperature. An idealistic, brave young man, Hassim thought. He felt genuine regret about that. He had developed real affection for Brandon. Gullible youth, gullible parents, gullible beloved old man. It is a pity that Paulo’s wish won’t happen, he thought, but nice, peaceful Americans might be more dangerous than dead ones. Besides, as he thought back on the social rat group

with Ralph, even the ‘good’ virus can go bad and who knows what effect that might have on the entire human race.

Such a simple idea. Hijacking planes and driving them into tall buildings was so complicated. The planning. The logistics. How had they pulled off such an unlikely drama? He thought of Ata and his friends with admiration.

But this was so much simpler. Discover a communicable disease. Infect someone, place him on a plane. Murder undercover. Nobody would suspect someone with a cold. The ultimate secret weapon. Ebola that could be caught by breathing. Recirculating air on a large commercial jet liner infects everyone. Hundreds of carriers. A whole city brought to its knees. Hiroshima with stealth.

The President of the United States was speaking on all channels. “Do not panic. Stay indoors. Everything possible is being done.....”

“Top that for impact, Jacques!” Hassim said aloud, raising his fist.