



Prologue

The Animal
Husbandry School



one

The Present: 21 April 2011

The desert can be a scary place at night. Darkness descends very quickly upon the barren landscape. The night brings with it a bone-tingling chill. But it is the silence that is most unnerving. The slightest noise is amplified tenfold as it echoes across the vast empty spaces. The wailing of a lonely jackal sounds menacing. The sparse vegetation casts sinister shadows and the whistling wind tosses up dancing balls of dust that look ethereal in the moonlight. In a place like this, the mind starts playing tricks on the senses. Every shape, sound and shadow brings with it an associated sense of dread.

This was especially true of the small group of policemen who huddled together over a campfire in this particularly desolate corner of the Nara Desert. Their little camp was set in the middle of two single storey buildings in the middle of nowhere. The closest signs of civilization were across the Indian border, two kilometres away. The buildings themselves were dilapidated, with

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doors, windows and all other fixtures having long since been removed. Only one room, in the larger of the two buildings, had a shiny new set of iron bars in the window. The road that led up to the encampment was little better than a dirt track. At the entrance of the compound was an old board, hanging from its hinges now, that proclaimed this place to be the Forestry Department's School of Animal Husbandry.

The sun had only set an hour ago, but already the desert was enveloped in darkness. The sole light came from the fire around which the men sat. It was the month of Ramadan, the month of fasting, and the policemen had had to content themselves with breaking their day long fast with some stale naan bread and soggy pakoras. But they were fortified by strong tea, brewed in a steel kettle over the open flame of the campfire. It was the first time in the day they had really taken stock of their surroundings. The morning had been spent in ceaseless activity, setting up the place and in resisting the pangs of hunger that the first week of Ramadan inevitably brought.

One of the men, the tallest of the lot, a constable called Peeral, noisily slurped his tea from the cracked china cup. 'This is not a good place to be in. I have heard stories about this place ... it's haunted.'

The others hushed up, looking around nervously for any sign of the supernatural. The sudden sound of creaking metal startled all of them, making two of the men spill their tea. The stoutest of the lot, a rotund man by the name of Juman, was the only one who hadn't moved at the sound. He laughed. 'You bloody idiots. It's only the back door of the pickup. You know it always creaks, we've been meaning to get it repaired for some time. All of you know this, yet you let this village simpleton scare you. Tell me something, which chutiya ghost is going to haunt an animal husbandry school?'

The others laughed uneasily. Peeral frowned. 'It's wrong to abuse them. We don't want any passing spirits to take offence.'

'Listen Peeral, the only spirit passing this place would be the ghost of a horny buffalo who died while mounting a cow. Any self-respecting ghost wouldn't be caught dead here.'

The mood lightened after Juman's comment and the laughter was much more relaxed. Only Peeral remained doubtful.

'Okay, Juman, granted it's an animal husbandry school. But that doesn't mean there were never any people here. What if one of the researchers had died here and his spirit is still wandering about?'

'And how, pray tell, would the researcher have died? Was he struck by lightning while he was masturbating a buffalo? Yes, I'm sure you're right, there's a spirit walking around here right now with buffalo sperm on its hands.'

The men chuckled again and another of them spoke up. 'It's not the dead that I'm worried about, it's the living. Arre baba, do you even know what we're doing here? Who are we supposed to be guarding?'

'A living ghost.' Juman took a sip from his tea, allowing his words to sink in.

'Who is it?'

'Do you know Sheikh Uzair?'

'Yes, he's the one who tried to kill the President. Twice. Oh my God, is it him? He's coming here?'

'Didn't he also murder that gori journalist a couple of years ago? The one who was pregnant? But I heard he had been killed in the Sher Masjid siege?'

'Yes, the very same fellow. He didn't die, he was arrested. But after Sher Masjid, his group is the biggest jihadi group in the country now. You see their recruiting centres everywhere. Last month, they even came to my village and recruited two or

three of the local boys. But this Sheikh was in Hyderabad jail. Why are they bringing him here to Nara?

Juman relit a half-smoked beedi. The raw, unprocessed tobacco was strong, and he could feel it enter his bloodstream, jolting him out of his post-fast lethargy. 'I heard something went wrong at the jail in Hyderabad. That's why they had to move him.'

'But why are they moving him here? This is not a jail. This place is just a little shithole in the middle of nowhere. And why us? We aren't some elite anti-terrorist squad. We're just a bunch of village cops. Now his jihadi friends will come after us. I knew I shouldn't have come back on duty today. Another absence and I would have been sitting comfortably in my own home.' Peeral's whining became more and more animated.

'That's probably why they moved him here. *Because* it's such a shithole. And that's also why we're guarding him. What connection can he have to a bunch of country bumpkin cops like us? At least that's what ASP sahib's Reader explained to me.'

'Where is ASP sahib anyway? I haven't seen him since iftar. He broke his fast with a couple of dates and took a swig of water, and then he disappeared.'

'You know how he is. He has to check everything five hundred times. He probably went to check the barbed wire fence again.'

'But why did they have to pick us, yaar? ASP sahib always gets us stuck in the worst possible assignments.'

'Shut up and stop whining, Peeral. You think ASP sahib had any say in this? If it involves Sheikh Uzair, the instructions must have come from the very top. Arre baba, he's one of the most wanted men in the world. I have heard the Americans are offering a bounty for him, but the government wants to put

him on trial. Apparently, they consider him second or third in importance after Osama.'

'How much do you think the Americans will pay?'

'Enough for you to buy a plot of land and as many cows as you like in your village.'

From where he stood, just outside the encampment, ASP Omar Abassi could clearly see the men laughing at Juman's light-hearted remark. He put his hands on the new coil of barbed wire, checking its sturdiness and the sharpness of its edges. He had decided to inspect the perimeter of the camp again after the fast, even though he had done it twice already in the day. But Omar Abassi had been known in the Academy for his conscientiousness. Well, some termed it being conscientious. Others, who were less kind, called it anal retentiveness.

Unfortunately, there had always been plenty of those in his life. Omar Abassi had never been good at making friends. He had never had any time for camaraderie, always maintaining a laser-like focus on the work in front of him. The son of a humble village schoolmaster, he had been a scholarship boy all his life, attending some of the country's most prestigious institutions, but always remaining an outsider. His classmates, all scions of rich and powerful families, had nothing but contempt for him. They may have shared a bench with him in school, but for them he would always be the village schoolmaster's son which, in the rather rigid class structure of rural Sindh, was no better than being a peasant. His father had nursed dreams of him becoming a doctor, but the scholarships finally ran out in his second year of medical school. Abassi was left with the choice of slinking back to a life of mediocrity in Larkana, the provincial town where his father lived, or trying to pry open the one door that was left for him: taking a long shot at passing the civil service exams that would enable him to break out of

his circumstances. He took the long shot and succeeded, getting a commission in the police.

But the social awkwardness that had plagued him throughout his academic years reared its head again at the police academy. His colleagues may not all have been the heirs to landed aristocracy, but they were all his social betters, and never missed an opportunity to remind him that he was an unsophisticated provincial oaf, who didn't even know which fork was to be used at dinner. As if an intimate knowledge of cutlery was all that was needed to become a good police officer. He didn't help matters with his aloof manner, never seeing the lighter side of things and never participating in any of their banter. And so, while they advanced their careers by endlessly networking with politicians and senior officers, he kept his focus on becoming the best trainee in the batch, never late for parade, excelling academically, always ensuring that his uniform was immaculate. He never figured out that getting the trophy from the chief guest on graduation day didn't necessarily mean he would get the best posting. All his colleagues managed comfortable postings in the big cities, thanks to the connections they had nurtured while he had been bent over his books. When Abassi's turn came, there was no place left to go but the wilderness.

And Nara really was the wilderness. They said that a directly appointed ASP had never been posted here before Omar arrived. Most self-respecting ranker officers avoided the place like the plague. In fact, the post had lain vacant for a couple of years, before Omar was granted the final indignity of drawing the worst subdivision in the country. He also drew the worst boss. His district SP was the archetypal caricature policeman come to life. He was short, squat, corpulent, and didn't have an honest bone in his body. His uniform was always sloppy, his belly protruded over his service belt like an overhanging cliff,

and he took genuine pride in the fact that he had never let go of a single opportunity to make a dishonest rupee in his entire career. He believed that the police force of the district existed to aid him in his personal enrichment. Unfortunately, having an idealistic young ASP under his wing was an encumbrance, one that he soon got rid of by restricting Abassi to this little patch of desert.

Stuck in this predicament, Omar responded in the only way he knew. He worked conscientiously and diligently at every measly task that his overbearing boss assigned to him. He kept working, as if it were the most important thing in the world. He tried to bring a semblance of professionalism even to this place, where he had been dumped and forgotten. It was the only thing that had kept him sane these past fourteen months.

That had all suddenly changed two days ago. He had been sitting in the shack that passed for his office, performing all sorts of calisthenics to ensure that the sweat that dripped from every pore of his body in the 110 degree heat did not smudge the paper on which he was so painstakingly writing another of the reports that he knew would get filed in some drawer by his boss without ever being read. His two assistants were bent over an ancient air conditioner, trying to coax it to life. But the machine only made things worse, spewing out hot air that made the room feel like a boiler. The office's solitary phone started ringing suddenly, which was an event in itself, since the only person who called was Omar's boss, and he too had stopped bothering altogether about three months ago.

But it wasn't his boss. Instead, it was a man from the Interior Ministry. When the voice on the line told him about the nature of his assignment, Omar, at first, thought it was an elaborate practical joke that some of his course mates were playing on him just to rub salt in his wounds. He hung up and thought

nothing of it, until his boss showed up an hour later, ashen-faced, holding a written confirmation of the orders. He stayed only long enough to hand Omar the orders, and to inform him that he was proceeding on a month's medical leave and that Omar would now be in charge of the entire district in his absence and would thus have sole responsibility for the assigned task. When Omar asked for further instructions, his boss replied that he could utilize whatever resources there were in the district as he thought best, just as long as Omar promised never to contact him on any account. Having absolved himself of any responsibility for the affair, the SP then proceeded to zoom off in his shiny red jeep.

The orders from the ministry weren't very illuminating either. They simply stated that he was to take over the Forestry Department's School of Animal Husbandry, which was the largest and most isolated facility in the area, and to secure it immediately, so that Ahmed Uzair Sufi could be detained there for an unspecified period of time.

Sheikh Ahmed Uzair Sufi. The orders contained no further information on him, but of course, like every other person in the country who owned a television set, Omar knew who Sheikh Uzair was. Who could forget the horrific images of the Sheikh beheading the female journalist? TV networks had replayed the video clip that his group had posted on the internet again and again for months afterward, paying no heed to the propriety of the images. Omar closed his eyes and played the scene from memory. The woman, a foreigner, so obviously pregnant that her swollen belly was visible even from under the filthy shawl that she had been wrapped in, terrified, sweating, clutching a newspaper that showed the date, pleading with her eyes, unsure till the very last moment whether she would be allowed to go free or not. He stood behind her, his tall frame filling the picture

on the television, wearing an elegant maroon turban, his dark, piercing eyes staring straight at the camera, besotted with an Olympian calm as he waited for his accomplice to finish reciting the list of their grievances against the State. While the speaker raised his tone to an ever passionate crescendo as he exhorted true believers to join the Jihad against the Crusaders, the Sheikh raised his blade high above the woman's head, and as soon as the recital ended, he brought it down onto her neck in one smooth motion, severing the head cleanly from the body. Even his preaching colleague seemed to stumble from his text as the blood splattered onto his pristine white shalwar kameez, and perhaps the enormity of what they had done sunk in. But the Sheikh was unwavering, unblinking, the only visible emotion was in his eyes, those smouldering black eyes that burned with a fire that surely must have been forged in the depths of hell.

Omar remembered another TV image of the Sheikh, from the day he had been arrested. The police had captured him after launching the largest manhunt in the country's history that culminated in a siege of a madrasa complex in Karachi. When his accomplices had been dragged out of the building by the police, their clothes were ripped to shreds, their faces and hair covered in dirt and dried blood, and the pungent odour of tear gas, all rotten onions and sharp ammonia, hung heavily over them. They all looked like a thoroughly pathetic and defeated bunch of individuals. Only *he* remained defiant. He had emerged from the building with his head held high, staring directly at the dozens of TV cameras that he knew would be there. He did it deliberately, so that they could capture the ferocity etched on his face, and those black eyes burning without a hint of remorse. At the time, watching on TV from the comfort of the police academy, Omar had wondered what it must have taken to have so much hate in those eyes.

Despite the paucity of official information and the magnitude of the task, Omar had stuck to it in his usual dogged manner. He had worked day and night the past two days, marshalling all the resources at his disposal, and attempting to transform the dilapidated group of sheds into something resembling a maximum security prison. Looking down on it now, he could breathe a small sigh of self-satisfaction. A double-barbed wire fence had been laid around the entire compound. Searchlights taken from police pickups had been hastily put up on the roofs of the sheds. Omar had even persuaded the electric company to reopen the electricity connection to the school that had long lain dormant. It hadn't been easy. Initially, the chief engineer at the company had been unwilling to even speak to Omar. But a quick visit to his house in the middle of the night by the local police station in charge had brought a radical change in his demeanour. Overnight, lines had been laid and connections reset. The lights weren't working yet, but the engineer had promised to have them up and running by the following day. Omar was confident that it was a promise that would be fulfilled. Workers had come in and given one of the sheds a quick makeover, installing iron bars on the windows and repairing any wear and tear on the structure. Omar had deployed police checkpoints in a 1 km radius around the school.

He paced by the barbed wire, trying to read the file in his hand by the distant glow of the encampment fire. To fill the gaps in the official information flow about Sheikh Uzair or the reason for his presence here, Omar had attempted to compile a dossier, asking a friend in Hyderabad to print out whatever was available on the Sheikh on the internet. Wikipedia had a particularly detailed entry on him. Omar was surprised to learn that the Sheikh had attended one of the best schools in the country. Referred simply as 'The School', as if that were

sufficient for anyone to recognize it, it was called ‘the Eton of the East’. Omar knew from personal experience how difficult it was to get admission there. A cousin of his had just spent most of the past year jumping through all sorts of hoops to get his son enrolled, and had still failed. It was not just a question of money, which his banker cousin had plenty of, but more about the fact that The School was indeed a meritocratic establishment who looked for ‘the right sort’. It was unfathomable how Sheikh Uzair could ever have been considered ‘the right sort’.

The Wikipedia entry contained a couple of pictures, one that was his trademark picture from the day of his arrest and another that was apparently from his schooldays. The school picture showed a youth, dressed in the school uniform of white shirt, grey trousers, and a striped blue and red tie. He had the slightly bored expression of a teenager trying to act cool in front of the camera. He was a lean, athletic-looking boy, tanned like only a sportsman can be, and in a further affectation of coolness, his school tie was loosened and drooping close to his belt. Only the dark eyes gave him away as being the younger version of the man who had walked out of the devastated madrasa. There was another boy in the picture, with his arm draped around the Sheikh, wearing cricket whites. The boy was around the same height, but with a much darker complexion than the Sheikh. He too seemed to be affecting a cool image, but a lot less self-consciously than Sheikh Uzair. He wore wraparound shades that covered half his face, had his collar turned up, and with the red patch on his slacks that indicated where he had been polishing the cricket ball, he looked like a professional fast bowler who had just completed his spell.

Had it not been for the boy’s piercing eyes, Omar would have assumed that someone had made an incorrect entry on the page. The rest of the entry dealt with the Sheikh’s known

career, how he had been trained in Afghanistan, gained notoriety in Kashmir by kidnapping western tourists, and, of course, his infamous cases, the murder of the journalist and the attacks on the President. Omar just could not reconcile the first paragraph of the entry with everything else. How could this boy in the picture, wearing the uniform of the most prestigious and anglicized educational institution in the country, who looked as if his only concern was to look cool in front of girls and play cricket, have become the bearded, turbaned decapitator of a pregnant woman?

There was no information about the reason for his shift from Hyderabad. Although Sheikh Uzair had been arrested in Karachi, he was considered such a high profile prisoner that the authorities had decided that he would simply act as a magnet for his fanatical followers if he were to be incarcerated in the metropolis. There had been some talk in the intelligence community that his followers were preparing to launch a wave of suicide attacks to force the government to release him. That was the reason why he had been incarcerated in Hyderabad in the first place. Tucked away in a little corner, away from the media spotlight that he craved so much, everyone hoped that he would soon become a forgotten man. Obviously, that hadn't happened, thought Omar, otherwise there would have been no need to push him out into an even smaller and far more desolate place than Hyderabad.

Presently, a stream of flashing lights became visible in the distance. A convoy of police pickups and jeeps were driving at breakneck speed towards them. As the vehicles came closer, the wailing of their sirens became louder. Omar started walking toward the front gate of the compound and reached just as the motorcade entered the gate, sending a cloud of dust in his direction, coating his uniform with a layer of dirt. For a man

who took pride in the fact that his uniform was normally as fresh and neat at eight at night as it would be at eight in the morning, this was a considerable irritation. His mood only grew worse when he saw the motorcade up close. Apart from the official licence plates on the vehicles, there was nothing to identify the men who got off as police officers. None of the men wore uniforms, choosing instead to dress in a variety of costumes, some wearing combat fatigues, some in shalwar kameez, and some in T-shirts and jeans. But all of them were armed to the teeth, carrying an assortment of weapons, including AK-47s, MP-5s, Glock pistols and even a couple of sniper rifles.

This motley crew took position around the central vehicle in the motorcade, an Armoured Personnel Carrier with just the narrowest of slits for windows. As the men prepared themselves, Omar was even more shocked to find that none of them paid any attention to him. None of the men had bothered to even acknowledge his presence, much less salute him. Omar was about to walk up to them and demand to see their supervisory officer, when someone tapped him on the shoulder. He whirled around, infuriated by the impudence, and came face-to-face with a rotund, jovial looking man in a safari suit. Instead of being cowed by Omar's fierce expression, the man grinned even wider as he made an attempt at a greeting that was somewhere between a salute and a casual wave.

'ASP Omar Abassi?' The fat man spoke the words with such mirth, that one would have thought he was relating an exceptionally funny joke.

'Who the hell are you?' The words tumbled out of Omar's mouth, his exasperation at the level of impertinence dumbfounding him.

'Oh, so sorry. Inspector Shahab. CID. Quite an impressive job you've done with this place in such a short time, ASP Abassi.'

I used to have a cousin who worked here once upon a time. I came to see him here once. Place used to be a complete dump. There was a hole in the wall that the buffaloes used to just walk through. My stupid cousin was always chasing them around in the desert. But you've really improved it. Yes, most definitely.'

'The hole has been covered up. What does all this have to do with me?'

'What? Oh nothing really. Sorry, I always ramble on.' Inspector Shahab gave another approving gaze and took a leisurely stroll round the compound as if it were the most natural thing to do. It was a good five minutes before he finally noticed the apoplectic look on Omar's face and smiled sheepishly.

'Oh, so sorry ASP sahib. I got distracted out here by the open air. I don't get out of the city much, you know. One should enjoy such opportunities when they present themselves. But you must be waiting to receive your guest.' Shahab took another look at the compound. 'Uh, you have, I am sure, prepared a room or some sort of cell for him, right?'

'Yes, of course I have. Some of us take our responsibilities very seriously, Inspector.'

'Oh, of course, of course. A thousand apologies.' He signalled to the men who were surrounding the Armoured Personnel Carrier, and they turned to open the back door of the APC. A uniformed officer emerged from within, holding a chain linked to his belt. At the other end of the chain was a man, wearing an ancient pair of shackles.

At first, Omar didn't recognize the manacled figure that emerged from the APC. The Sheikh Uzair on television had seemed taller. This figure appeared bent over. He wore a simple prayer cap on his head, and the black, bushy beard had been reduced to a neatly trimmed two weeks' growth. He still looked young, not older than mid-thirties, Omar guessed. His eyes

were shielded behind a pair of spectacles that gave him a sort of middle-class respectability. He was dressed in a plain white shalwar kurta and wore a pair of plastic blue flip flops on his feet. As he slowly raised his gaze from the ground, he seemed to lock onto the young, uniformed ASP. Omar noticed that the Sheikh ignored the rest of his surroundings, but kept staring straight at him with a kind of quizzical expression on his face.

‘Uh, yes ASP sahib, just a couple more things before we hand the prisoner over to you. If you would come this way, please.’ Shahab had noticed the interest that the Sheikh seemed to have taken in Omar, so he walked a little distance from the rest of the assembly, and lowered his otherwise jocular tone. ‘I don’t know quite how much our superiors have told you about this affair, but I would guess that they would have pretty much kept you in the dark about things.’

‘Well, they haven’t told me anything. I don’t even know why he’s being brought here, or what I’m supposed to do with him.’

‘Ah yes, well that’s typical of them, isn’t it? The first part’s the easy one. You obviously know who he is. After his arrest, he was shifted to the maximum security Hyderabad Jail, because it was thought that his presence in the jail in Karachi would attract too many of the crazies who worship him. In any case, there are a lot of these jihadi sorts in Karachi, so he would have plenty of the wrong sort for company. Hyderabad was supposed to be out of the way, isolated, a place where we could dump him and forget about it. Unfortunately, it didn’t work out that way. You see the Sheikh is a particularly charming fellow. He started preaching to his guards about how meaningless the comforts of this world were, and that their true calling was to work for God. He brainwashed them completely in a matter of weeks. It started with them growing their beards. Then, they began shunning western dress, refusing

to wear even their uniforms to work. The jail superintendent didn't make the connection, thinking that maybe they were just peculiar, so he allowed them to wear their ankle high shalwars. But that wasn't all the Sheikh was making them do. He was passing messages to his comrades on the outside, using the stupid guards as couriers. We found out purely by chance, when we happened to arrest one of his followers and found a message in his possession. They had been making plans to blow the jail up and help the Sheikh escape. The plan had been in quite an advanced stage. That's when the alarm bells started going off and the government decided to shift him to the most isolated location they could think of.'

'Who the hell would have thought of this godforsaken place?'

'Ah, well, for that, I confess my guilt. You see, that's where my cousin comes in. I remembered this place from when he used to work here, and I suggested it to the higher ups, because I couldn't think of a more ideal place for the Sheikh.'

'You said the second part of my question was harder. Why?'

'Well, in a way. I guess it's not difficult to figure out what to do with him. Basically, do whatever you feel is appropriate under the circumstances. Had this place still been functioning as an animal husbandry school, you could have put him to work inseminating the cows, I suppose.' Shahab guffawed at his own joke. 'No, the difficult bit is *how* you go about handling him. You see, after the episode in Hyderabad, we've figured out that the Sheikh can be extremely persuasive. So we don't want him becoming too chatty with anybody. The prison guards weren't some green youths on their first job. They were men with fifteen or twenty years' experience, and they had been used to guarding high profile, dangerous prisoners. But he flipped them as if they were children. So, now we don't want him talking to anybody. You have to ensure that.'

‘How the hell am I supposed to do that? Whoever came up with such a stupid plan?’

Shahab smiled for a moment at Omar’s outburst, nodding thoughtfully in the manner of a parent trying to explain something to an errant child. ‘ASP sahib, I’m sorry. I think perhaps I haven’t been able to convey to you the seriousness of this situation. We recovered large quantities of C4 explosive, sewn into a jacket, from one of the prison guards we arrested. The Sheikh had convinced the man to become a suicide bomber and blow up the prison. The man was willing to take his own life, as well as the lives of dozens of his own colleagues whom he had known for years, just to get the Sheikh out of prison. Another of the guards had prepared lists of his co-workers’ families, along with their addresses, to pass on to the Sheikh’s followers so that they could take them hostage. Can you imagine the level of diabolical genius required to convince men to do things like that? So please, please, take what I am saying to you very seriously. On no account are you to allow any kind of fraternization between him and your subordinates. It helps that, out here, most of the guards probably only understand Sindhi, which he can’t speak. But nevertheless, you have to ensure this. And you yourself are also not to communicate with him either, except when you want to command him to do something. I know him, and I saw the way he was trying to size you up right now. He will try to charm you, try to be friendly, but you are not to respond. Just keep in mind that whatever he says or does, his only interest is to try and get out. This man has no value for human life. Now, if you could just point my men in the direction of his cell, we’ll escort him there and leave you to it.’

The story had made an impact on Omar. He would have been loath to show his reaction in front of Shahab, but the change in his attitude was evident. So far, Omar had been happy to

carry out his task without question because after having been ignored for so long, he had been thrilled to have finally gotten an important assignment. Of course, he hadn't been naïve enough not to understand that such an assignment would obviously have an element of risk. After all, that was exactly why his boss had disappeared and left him in charge. But this was the first time someone had actually spelt out the dangers in such an explicit manner. He offered no more rebukes to Shahab, but turned and silently led the group towards the old shed that had been prepared for the Sheikh.

Sheikh Uzair had observed the exchange between Shahab and Omar in a kind of disinterested manner, preferring to take in his new surroundings. As Shahab's men started marching him towards his cell, a few metres from the shed door, he hesitated and cleared his throat.

'Assalam Alaikum, brother.'

Involuntarily, Omar froze. He glanced sideways at Shahab, who had turned his head and was glaring at the Sheikh. He signalled to his men to prod the Sheikh to move. The Sheikh himself had a disarming smile, as if he were oblivious to the mischief he was causing.

'Forgive my impudence, brother, for speaking in English, but I noticed from your shoulder decorations that you are an ASP. I figured you must know English. I haven't spoken it in such a long time, that I could not resist it. I was wondering if you would know the result of the Pakistan India cricket match.'

Shahab grunted his disapproval. 'Keep walking. No one speaks English over here.' He uttered the words in Urdu. One of his men prodded the Sheikh a little harder to push him along.

The smell hit them with the force of a physical object. The old shed was pitch dark, and so Omar had to feel his way forward, until Constable Peral came up behind him with a