

A SECRET EXCHANGE

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The darkness in the alley was complete and almost continuous, only punctuated once every three minutes or so by the headlights of a car when a midnight driver rushed along the big avenue from which the alley forked. A neutral observer could have commented that this playful back and forth between light and darkness, shrouded by the remnants of a winter fog, was a curiosity in and of itself, an interesting spectacle for the especially lazy. But then, the cat rummaging through the trash can and the dogs howling at either end of the alley suddenly seemed to notice something was off, a change in the intensity of the atmosphere. They all stopped, dead in their tracks, as a tall thin man in a large panjabi, wrapped in a black shawl of invisibility, emerged at the mouth of the road.

In the fleeting headlight of a white 2003 Corolla X, one could have noticed the gash running down the man's left cheek. The wound looked new, raw and fresh. The stitches looked rushed, but they held things together. For now.

"I am here, Pasha. Show yourself."

A voice responded from behind the same trashcan that the cat (which had vanished by now) was rummaging through minutes ago.

"Is there a password, *dulabhai*?"

"If there was a password, it would be that I am not married to your sister," replied the tall man.

The man called Pasha finally showed himself, and one look at him made it clear why he could blend in so easily in this filthy alleyway in the middle of nowhere. He was dressed in rags, his hair wispy, flying everywhere. A grey stubble framed a face that might have been young in a different universe, and the stink he carried made the other man take a step back.

"So you made it. It's a great place for a secret meeting. Wouldn't you say so, Saqlain?" asked Pasha. His voice betrayed relief, along with some unexpected elegance given his physical state.

"I would've gotten here quicker, but I got recognised at the check post in District 9. What a nightmare!" Saqlain's words left him in a flurry. His demeanour seemed to have eased, but he still looked stressed. He pinched the bridge of his nose, and suddenly leaned back onto a wall. A tired smile appeared on his wounded face.

"Want to hear how I got away?"

"You know I can't say no to a good story. Shoot," Pasha leaned on the wall facing Saqlain, who had that glint in his eye that storytellers have when they have a good story to tell.

"Well, I took a motorcycle to District 1, right? It was all going well, until the bike is stopped at the check post in District 9. You know the one by the bridge, right? They start looking at the documents, and I'm trying my best to avoid suspicion, you know? Just whistling to myself and looking around. This trooper suddenly tells me to get off the bike and hand over

my bag, apparently they need to check it. Now that should be fine with me, I have nothing illegal in my bag, so I hand it over. The trooper is fishing through my bag, right, then I notice this other officer looking at me and talking into a walkie-talkie. That's when I realise I've been recognised. I look behind me to see if I can make a run for it, but they have me surrounded by now, I am well and truly screwed..."

"What the heck! How did you get out of that?" Pasha was engrossed by the story at this point. He leaned in towards Saqlain, and finally noticed the details on his face. "Hey! What happened to your face?"

"I'm getting to that," Saqlain pressed on. "So, they've got me surrounded. This

I let it hit me! The big one holding me is hit too, loses my hand, and I get thrown off and land on my face. That's when this happened," Saqlain finished, pointing to his face.

"Wait, no, you told me how you got hurt. But how did you get out of there?" Pasha asked, confused.

"Getting away was easy after that. Everyone was busy trying to stop the microbus and getting the troopers treated, right? I basically sprinted back towards the direction I came from, ran into a store, got changed into this panjabi and shawl, paid them in cash, got out, got onto a rickshaw, pulled the hood up, and got out of there."

"That easy, huh? Then you had your face stitched up?"

business, "I brought what you asked for, Pasha. Do you have the product for exchange?"

"Yeah yeah, it's right here. Let me go get it," Pasha went back behind the trashcan from which he had originally emerged.

Meanwhile, Saqlain fished inside his shawl and retrieved a thick envelope.

Pasha's face lit up as he held up a piece of paper to Saqlain's face. He used the flashlight on his ugly old phone to see what was on the paper, and as Saqlain scanned it, his face broke into a smile. Then he started laughing.

"This is brilliant! Oh, how I missed looking at these," Saqlain's eyes scanned the page again looking for details. "I'm glad you're still drawing cartoons, Pasha, no matter your living conditions." He



ILLUSTRATION: **RIDWAN NOOR NAFIS**

big mean looking one has my hands held together behind me, and another small one is trying to push me towards one of their armoured vehicles. You know it's all over if they get me inside that car, right? It's clear I need to get away before that happens."

"Did you do something stupid again?" Pasha asked, apprehension in his voice.

"Stupid doesn't begin to describe it, brother. So these two idiots need to get me to cross the street to get into the car, right? I don't resist, really, not until I get to the island in the middle of the road. First, I try to cross the road before them, and the big one holding my hands tries to follow. But then I stop, I pretend I'm scared of the microbus coming towards us, right? His right hand *juuust* loses its grasp for a second, and that's when I run into the middle of the street. There's no way I can cross the road without the microbus hitting me, right? So guess what,

"Yep. I paid a dispenser to do it. I don't think they did a good job."

"You need to be more careful, Saqlain. You can't do the sort of things you do and get recognised by the troopers, it's dangerous!" Pasha implored with genuine concern.

"What's the alternative, then? Living on the streets like a rat so no one suspects me?" Saqlain said and exaggeratedly sniffed the air, as if to remind Pasha of his smell.

"I do what I need to do to stay alive. You could've also taken a side road, wore a disguise, or just taken a walk," Pasha didn't budge.

"I wanted to feel the air on my face, okay? I miss the roads. This is my city, is it not?" Saqlain asked, and the anger in his voice lingered in the air for a while. He finally pushed off the wall and stood up straight, indicating that the time for pleasantries was passed, it was time for

finally looked up, his eyes filled with warmth, and he passed the envelope he was holding to Pasha.

"Well, it's the least I can do if you're having to get gashes on your face to write some actual honest-to-god articles!" Pasha joked, waving the envelope at Saqlain's face. "I'll pass these along to someone else once I'm done reading, okay? You do the same with my cartoons."

"Of course," said Saqlain, getting ready to leave, wrapping the shawl tight around him and making the sheets of paper disappear within the folds. "Do you think they imagined when they discovered the internet that fools like us decades later would have to share our work like *this*?"

"There's a lot happening today that no one could have imagined, Saqlain. What's your point?" Pasha concluded, turning around and disappearing just as quickly as he had appeared, behind the trashcan, or maybe somewhere else.