

## BOOK FOUR: A New Beginning and a Sudden End

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October 15, 1998: A chorus of cheering men, ululating trills of joy, violin, flutes, tambours and drums accompanied the wedding caravan on the old road to R'hamna.

'Here he is coming slowly with a dark eye and golden color.  
Here he is self- satisfied from *Sidi Makhouf*.  
Me, I want to go there too, but it's far away.  
I want to go there but it's far, far away.'

On a white stallion, Radouan sang as he rode along.

'What happened to those beautiful eyes?  
What could have happened?  
Why didn't it happen?  
*Sharia* and the law, even after you get full of women, they allow you four.  
But he who wants to marry, nowadays they ask him for a certificate of work!  
Ask him for a million and a villa!  
Who has money is majesty and will live like a king.  
But he who can only watch this scene, it's better for him to go away.  
I never thought incense could remedy me,  
But I know death is after me now and it eases my pain.  
Oh *Sidi Mahjoub Soussi* with the big time piece... it's like that... it's like that!'

( translation of lyrics by the *Haouz* group Asari)

The morning was clear and cool. Proud camels carried the wedding party to R'hamna and *Sidi Makhouf*, carrying Hafida with her mother; her sisters, her aunts and cousins; carrying Toni and

Delphine, Francesco Monte and Nicholas K Brady III - proud camels, their liquid, lash-veiled eyes glancing disdainfully from side to side, their elegant gait in time to the music of the *Haouz* - Omar and his brother Mahjoub the spy; Houcein, J.W. and Mokhtar with the brothers of Radouan and Hafida, all walking along beside them on the old road to R'hamna.

Radouan and Prospero, nimble outriders, smiled at the world, their horses prancing up and down the line which stretched to the horizon.

Radouan: all morning he'd been drinking sweet juices and smoking *kif*.

'Oh my gazelle, come let us go,' he sang.  
 'I won't forgive those people who made me suffer!  
 It's like that, oh my pigeon on the roof;  
 Me, trying to catch you in my hand.  
 Come my gazelle with your black eyes,  
 You who makes fire in my body with no smoke,  
 Tomorrow I promise I will leave.  
 But now, please be tender with me,  
 Please make it easy for me,  
 Don't make me suffer and don't worry;  
 Both of us will have our pleasure.  
 Look! Look!  
 That guy over there he's eating artichokes...'

Bring *b'kour, jouie*, frankincense, ambergris' and myrrh,  
 for I am trapped in the *maji* of Hafida...Hafida...

Hip hup, hip hup, hip hup.... Ayeeeeee!  
 I am lonely and unknown.  
 How my heart faints of sufferin'  
 I am burnt, I am cooked,  
 And I'm callin' in my sleep for Hafida. Oooo!  
 Ooo...ooo...  
 Who can cure me of Hafida?'

(IBID Asari)

Within their curtained *haoudaj* Hafida's sisters ululated in reply. Passers-by stopped and stared, crowds gathered at cross the roads, children ran along beside them and hovering above; a Press helicopter was transmitting the event to the world. Now that Radouan was a rich man the world was interested - the irony, the hypocrisy, of it all was not lost on him. Shaking his fist at the chopper, he reached Pero on his cell phone: 'Tell them to take that fuckin' machine away, it's cuttin' all the good vibrations. Tell them to join the party... not to break our mood.'

'Oh say to my mother, and say to my father, be tender  
with me... Oh oh...  
Nobody enjoyed life like our Caid Al Ayadi...  
Count seven, yes, the seven men of Marrakech...  
But don't care about the future or the days what they  
will bring...  
Where now are your shepherds with their blessed  
faces? Where the harvesters? Where the  
Wednesday market?  
Has our feast become a Theme Park?  
Oh where are those days, the days of wealth for  
R'hamna; Those days of Sidi Bou Othman - spring all  
year long.  
Where is your crazy freedom, oh people of R'hamna?  
  
Is there no remedy... no satisfaction?  
Oh where are the days of the village courtesans...  
Days of the wine bearers and dancing girls... where are  
they?

The party had reached a small village where an advance platoon of cooks had been sent to prepare lunch. The scent of cumin, ginger, cloves, citron and burning meat rose in plumes of blue smoke across the Village Square. Two young women brought fat loaves of bread hot from the oven and bowls of olive oil to dip it in and then poured a sweet green tea, *Tkhalet*, of fresh *Abda*, *Salmia*, *Aquatque*, *Fliyo*, *Chiba* and *Mardouch*.

Gathering at tables on the veranda of an old cafe around the fathers of Radouan and Hafida, invited notables from the towns of the

South paid their respects; offered congratulations, joked and exchanged gossip.

Meanwhile, the women had retired inside the café to loll upon soft carpets and pillows, while a young man with a falsetto voice, accompanied by a lute serenaded them.

Lunch arrived. Barefoot youngsters scampered here and there bringing tempting morsels of food to low round tables set for ten. Guests ate with their hands as was the custom, breaking bread, picking at the meat with nimble fingers, sopping up the juices with the warm bread.

Delphine, who was having a problem managing her food, speculated about what the Moroccan women would be thinking of them.

‘Not to worry,’ Toni whispered confidently, ‘that’s all been arranged. They’ve been told you are Francesco’s wife and I’m married to Nicholas. Harmless deception, darling, otherwise I’m afraid we couldn’t have come. You wouldn’t have wanted to miss this, would you?’

Delphine gazed at her grimly, ‘Perhaps I should have.’ She examined her food stained hands ‘Where do we wash up... do you see a toilet anywhere?’

‘Over there,’ Toni gestured, ‘but don’t worry, when they realize I speak their language, you’ll see we’ll all be great friends.’

After lunch they rested under feather light white wool blankets from the village of *Bzu*, and were awakened at four as tea and steaming cups of coffee, sweets and fresh *majoun* were passed around. Outside, the ratcheting of helicopters announced the arrival of more guests and later a line of European sports vehicles pulled up in the village square with Rupert and friends who had driven down from Zaragoza in Northern Spain. Everyone waved enthusiastically.

Toni glanced at Delphine, ‘My ex-husband... late as usual.’

Then an announcement from a bull horn in several languages: Everyone must now please leave their vehicles and mount camels for the last three kilometers to R’hamna. There was no choice. The road ended here where they had stopped and only a sandy path lay ahead. After some problems with guests who thought they could make it with their four-wheel drives, the party set off again in high spirits.

A chorus of mounted horseman shaking *tam tams*, trotted along beside them...

'From where am I,' they sang. 'From where are you?  
I'm comin' from the *Haouz* of Marrakech.

You said to come... ay-wah... but you left me in my pain.  
Oh my God! Oh my God!  
Oh you riders of horses... you fake cavaliers.  
We slept one whole night and a day... now we must  
enjoy.  
God save me, God control me.  
Hey women with tattoo; come here, let's repeat those nights of  
hugging and kissing...  
Come along with us to Sidi *Makhouf*.

'If I went away, Look, I'm back!  
If I wept, still my tears are on my cheek.  
Look! How thin I've become.  
Look! How I am losing color like a wilted flower.  
I told you... please give up scaring me or our friendship will kill  
me.  
By God, you say you slept, but you never did -  
You who won't console me in my loneliness, you unbeliever.  
Take care for the *Banu Hillal*, for the *Brotherhood of the Moon*.

Forget enmity, forget differences...  
Sidi Mohammed is dear to our hearts... '  
The name of the Prophet is beloved:  
the owner of the woodlands, of the horses,  
He remedies lovers and will save us from sufferin'...sufferin.'\*

( IBID Asari)

The caravan came to a halt. The afternoon had faded away, shadows lengthened and the near hills had gone deep purple. Far away, towering majestically, the Atlas Mountains caught the last rays of the setting sun. Accompanied by barks, groans and gnashing of teeth, the camels knelt down and their passengers debarked.

'Now what?' Nick snickered, 'you think we've run out of gas?'

Youths bearing trays of hot tea appeared. Francesco chatted with a Moroccan cameraman he'd hired to tape the event, looked at some of his footage and was impressed. While the men struck off in various directions to relieve themselves, Delphine and Toni joined a queue and waited their turn at a women's comfort station. A few minutes later, prayer rugs were distributed and as the *Muezzin* sweetly chanted the evening prayer, everyone faced east and bowed down toward Mecca.

Delphine looked embarrassed 'What are we supposed to do now?' she whispered.

'When in Rome,' Toni sighed... 'I suppose we'd better get down and pray we get through the night.'

As they finished praying and got up, many of the older guests, including several Saudi and Gulf Region Princes, looked exhausted and Toni worried about the accommodations which might await them at R'hamna.

Delphine shrugged her shoulders and stared vacantly into space. 'Long ago, I suppose travelling was always like this.'

'Not so long ago,' Toni replied.

'And with huge herds of animals,' Francesco observed.

'And swarms of flies, I'm sure,' Delphine winced.

'This dust is killing me, really, you'd think they could sprinkle some water,' complained a famous old New York hostess who had joined them from a helicopter after lunch.

'That's what the veil is for, my dear,' Toni said dryly. 'Just cover up your face with something and you'll survive.'

'I hope there'll be somewhere to bathe,' the woman said, holding her dark glasses as she surveyed the scene, 'rather like being on some Indian reservation out in Arizona isn't it?'

Toni was furious. 'I'm afraid I wouldn't know,' she replied, 'I've never been to Arizona, but they've been organizing this fete for three months now so I'm sure...'

'They're all so stoned, how could they possibly organize anything?' laughed a young Austrian aristocrat with a thick Teutonic accent.

'But it's the way of life here,' cried an eighty-year old Russian Prince with a carefree shrug, his hands fluttering imperiously.

'My body is aching all over,' Delphine complained, 'I hope someone has an aspirin.'

'How much further do you think it is?' Toni's ex-husband Rupert complained. 'I dislike riding these camels, you know, fleas and all that? I'm afraid my people are a bit knackered.'

'We're all knackered, darling,' Toni ground her teeth. 'Don't complain!'

'We should have helicoptered in,' Rupert persisted grumpily. 'One must avoid these ethnic events at all costs.'

'All very colorful but not very comfortable... Eh?' tittered a fashionable young Moroccan matron.

'You're so spoiled,' her fashion plate Lebanese husband said dismissively, 'this little trek is nothing. A hundred years ago we traveled like this over vast distances... your grandfather... my grandfather...'

'A hundred years ago I'm sure there were trains,' his wife clucked.

The sudden high-pitched drone of horns followed by clashing symbols and drum rolls interrupted them. At last the waiting was over. Urging the guests to remount their camels, boys ran here and there in the twilight with portable steps while the beasts complained loudly.

'Only a little farther,' Nick shouted, 'that's the word.'

Then Prospero trotted up, followed by Radouan, veiled and turbaned in the Tuareg manner. 'Ayyah...waha waha,' he shouted prancing along beside them, his eyes glittering. 'Are you all right? Don't worry it's going to be a great evening... look at the moon.' He blew kisses at the rising moon and saluted Toni and Delphine in their *haoudaj*.

'Look at him,' Toni whispered, 'just look at him! Our Husband! I mean... What DO I mean?'

'That he's too much... like an over dose of something,' Delphine replied, 'too handsome... too outrageous!'

'And remorseless,' Toni added.

Delphine rolled her eyes, 'Yes, and guiltless.'

‘And don’t forget recklessly ferocious,’ Toni laughed, ‘and perfidiously cruel.’

‘It’s hard to believe only three months ago he was falling apart in that horrible jail,’ Delphine observed.

‘Because that’s the past,’ Toni nodded, ‘he’s changed... can’t you see? He doesn’t live in the past anymore.’

‘He doesn’t live in the future either,’ Delphine observed.

‘Always in the present,’ Toni sighed, ‘physically and mentally. It’s a problem for him and for those around him... that’s why he’s dangerous... and why he’s a great polo player.’

Delphine studied Toni’s face, ‘So what are we supposed to do, divorce him?’

Toni shrieked with laughter. ‘Are you mad? Of course not; where would we ever find a man like him again? All the others would seem boring.’

The wedding *harka* wound its way up a dry *wadi* onto a broad plateau. Pink clouds melted against blue twilight under a butter colored moon. From a distance came the sound of large drums, the camel men lit torches, and ahead on hilltop after hilltop fires tended by men in blue burst into flame, fountains of golden sparks shooting high into the night sky.

A chorus of mounted singers and musicians galloped by, singing an Arabic version of Frank Sinatra’s “I Did It My Way”.

Then another group of horsemen rode up and guided them down through gently sloping plantations of fruit trees, palms and roses, to R’hamna, its ancient walls burnished by the moonlight, herds of camels, sheep and goats bedding down for the night outside the great gate.

Boys in white *jallabas* were there to meet them, brass lanterns in hand, their eyes glittering shyly in the lamp light, white teeth flashing smiles.

Radouan’s mother, very chic in a pale blue cashmere *jallaba* with brocaded scarf, descended from her *haouda* and hailed Toni and Delphine.

‘You’re sure she doesn’t know the truth about us...’ Delphine whispered urgently, ‘I can’t believe...’

‘She’s inviting us to accompany her to the *hamam*...’ Toni winked, ‘says our husbands are being taken off to the men’s *hamam*.’



'Thank God,' Delphine groaned, 'I'm covered with dust and God only knows what else.'

They dismounted and walked through the big gate into a square and down a narrow lane between high walls of polished clay pierced by narrow windows and massive doors of carved cedar wood. Joined by Radouan's female family members, those of Hafida, and all the other female guests, Radouan's mother pointed out how the village had been transformed since Radouan's trial. For the wedding, all the walls had been repaired, all the drains and sewage pipes replaced and the broken mud lanes redone with paving stones from France. They passed by the entrance to the house of Radouan's paternal grandmother, which would be his someday. A few steps further at an intersection of two lanes stood a large cube like building topped by a pyramid of Celadon green tile

'The new *hamam* for us women,' Radouan's mother announced proudly, 'before we had only one *hamam* which we had to share on alternate days with the men. Now, thanks to God above and Radouan here below, we have this new one for ourselves.'

Entering through a mosaic framed door they came to a reception room which gave way to a large changing room tiled lavender, pale green, marigold and sky blue. Around them milled women of all ages in various stages of undress, some completely naked. Removing her clothing Radouan's mother stripped down, and encouraged Toni and Delphine to do the same.

Self consciously, Toni struggled to hide her discomfort, her real anxiety at undressing in front of other women - something she had always managed to avoid.

Delphine, on the other hand, 'The Venus of Arles' as the tabloids had dubbed her, was reveling in it. Naked in her high heels bending this way and that, inspecting herself and pretending to look for blemishes; all eyes were secretly upon her and it was obvious she was exciting some of the younger women.

'What a scene,' she whispered to Toni.

'Yes... very nineteenth century,' Toni observed, 'an Orientalist painting.'

'You'd think they'd give us robes,' exclaimed the famous New York hostess, irritably, 'it's very hard... just look at some of those fat ones... really they should cover up.'

'Darling, you must adore them...' Toni laughed gaily, 'they make us look good.'

Beyond the changing rooms were three bathing rooms, the *loula tepid*, the *oustantia* hot, and the *s'kouna* hottest. They sought out the *oustantia*. Everyone wore flip-flops. There were family groups including grandmothers and babies, clutches of old crones being scrubbed by attendants, and teenagers scrubbing each other with loofas and strong black soap, made from olive oil, the consistency of English toffee.

From time to time, Toni picked up snatches of conversation, bits of gossip and comments, about the foreign women and Radouan's mother:

'Everyone knows she's a famous *maji*, why has she brought all these foreign women to our *hamam*, what is she up to?'... 'The English one is showing her age.'... 'The French one is *zween*, *tres bonne*'... 'But why are they so underweight?'... 'It's very sad especially as some people are saying they're so rich!'... 'How can this be?'

After being rubbed and scrubbed, they followed Radouan's mother into the *s'kouna* where clouds of steam enveloped them. Toni had been addicted to *hamams* in Marrakech for many years and was impressed by the style, attention to detail and cleanliness of this one.

In the hot room they sweated and doused themselves with the hottest and coldest waters, back and forth splashing each other, finally giggling and shrieking with laughter.

'This water comes from a spring inside the village,' Radouan's mother explained through the steam, 'naturally warm and somewhat sulphurous as you can tell... passes first through a fire which heats a huge communal oven where we bake our bread... so while we are bathing our bread is baking.' Her eyes sparkled mischievously, piercing eyes that stole glances but never stared.

Suddenly Toni understood what temptations, what Oedipal complications, Radouan must have encountered with this woman; careworn at fifty-one, yet still beautiful. Beckoning Toni and Delphine to sit down on stools she poured hot water over them and scrubbed their backs. Soon Radouan's sister Fouzia joined them; Fouzia, who must have known they were both married to Radouan!

The loofa was harsh and Delphine flinched, glanced at Toni who seemed to be having some problems herself and worried that her skin might be seriously damaged. Fouzia's hands massaging her shoulders were like weapons; was it subconscious revenge? But no, how could that be when Fouzia and her mother were constantly

laughing and chattering? Obviously their actions were automatic and when at last she began to relax, Delphine felt quite remarkable, like a rose slowly opening. Was it the *majoun* she'd had with her tea, was she tripping? It was like that, but it wasn't because everything was so real!

Meanwhile, Toni was speaking Marrakchi Arabic with the whole family. As Delphine watched, she was certain they all knew she and Toni were married to Radouan - and that perhaps they didn't care? It was in their eyes: a certain gaze, a body language, which wasn't hostile but knowing, unexpectedly friendly and inquisitive. As though the women here had something going between them just like the men did, a whole world of friendship and intrigue that had nothing to do with the opposite sex.

After the scrubbing they rinsed themselves, spread towels on tile niches and lay down to rest. Soon Radouan's mother came over, squatted down beside them, and tried to explain how grateful she was for all the help and assistance they had given her son. 'You have steadied him,' she smiled... saved his life, saved all our lives... believe me we all love you and hope you will always feel as sisters to us...'

Embarrassed by the frankness of her own confession, she looked away. Never had she spoken like that to another woman, let alone two foreign women! Was she losing her mind? As a descendant of *Marabouts* and Sufi saints, she needn't offer explanations or express gratitude to anyone; yet she could not ignore the truth. 'You have steadied and supported him through many hard times...' she whispered, 'I thank God for you every day!'

'Then you know everything,' Toni said, a quizzical smile spreading over her face.

Radouan's mother nodded enigmatically, 'I am his mother after all, how could I not?'

'And you don't mind?'

'Not at all, not at all. Generally it doesn't work out too well.' She rolled her eyes and smiled mischievously. 'More than one wife I mean... too hard for the man. But it's really not for me to say... it's his affair... in this case I approve, however, and by God All Mighty, the Compassionate and All Knowing I am thankful!'

'What about Hafida?' Delphine asked her.

'Hafida,' she said mysteriously, 'she holds the destiny of this family in her hands, probably she knows in a vague way, but she is

very young. If you were Moroccan, she would be furiously jealous but as you are not I'm sure she will never mention it. She is so happy that God has chosen her for Radouan... and that you have brought us all such good luck. Be assured, she will never say a thing. She could be jealous at some point, but having children will calm her down... it will calm Radouan down too and then, *Inch Allah*, we will all calm down.'

'For years now, at least four generations, our lives have been so insecure. Girls like Hafida, really they do not expect to see their husbands that much... but they think of the children they will have... insurance for their old age. Who else will care for them? We have no organized, what you call public welfare system... only Religious Charities from whom we must beg; looked after by corrupt administrators who swallow most of the money. So our children they are a benediction... our salvation; or our ruin as God wills!' She cradled Toni's hands in hers and kissed them, then Delphine's and pulled herself together. 'Come, she said, 'now we must go back to the *oustania* and bathe Hafida... in a special niche there for brides called *Beit Lararaysat*... candles in niches... come and see... we will wash her there.'

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Not far away in the men's *hamam*, Radouan was hosting a bath for his male relatives and friends.

Pero and Nick helped Rupert and Francesco strip down and tried to explain why men kept their shorts on while women went naked.

'What's hidden is Sacred, must not be seen...evil eye and all that.'

'Iss the size problem, I'm sure,' Francesco observed, 'Nobody wants to get into that!'

'The guiltless Greeks and Romans bathed naked,' Nick smiled cheerfully.

'How would you know?' Pero laughed nervously.

Lord Jim, who had come down from Paris for the occasion, joined them. Radouan pointed out the gleaming stainless steel lockers imported from Germany and the mosaic murals copied from the Palace of Minos in Crete by an artist from *Asilah*.

They went on into the *loula* and the *oustantia*, where they found Radouan's father, his uncles and cousins, various army officers, and local police captains mingling with big city movers and shakers, and not a few, survivors of the boulevards of Marrakech. Presided over by Radouan's avuncular friend J.W. rose colored glasses of tea laced with brandy were being passed around.

Venturing into the *s'khouna*, Radouan helped his father sit down and began to bathe him. Various family members, notables and erstwhile friends came up, said hello and kissed his hands. Despite his frail condition, the old man seemed to be enjoying himself. Now all these people who had avoided him for years because of his wild ways, now they had to suck up! '*L'hascapa, Intikam h'sifa!*'. Indeed, it was a sweet moment of revenge; at last the ways of the world in which he had so carefully instructed his beautiful son, at last that training was bearing fruit.

After bathing his father, Radouan moved back into the *oustantia*, where he was to be installed in the Bridegroom's niche, the *beit laaris*. A fight developed between the village boys for the honor of scrubbing and anointing him with oil. As everyone was in a good mood, however, the dispute was quickly settled and faithful Mokhtar stood by supervising, He was happy now, Mokhtar; not only because Radouan was marrying Hafida, of whom he highly approved, but because Radouan had not abandoned him, and had promised to create a job and find him a wife as well.

While he was being scrubbed, Radouan had a long conversation with Rupert who congratulated him on his victory over the forces of evil and humiliation!

'*Hamdu'lla,*' Radouan smiled stoically, 'Allah is Merciful.'

'God is Great!' Rupert nodded.

Radouan thanked him for assembling the legal team that saved him from the jaws of the law.

Rupert, a stocky handsome man with long hair tied in a bun, mad grey eyes and a determined jaw - perhaps more horse than man - Rupert was anxious that his sudden arrival might have put Toni out of sorts.

'You have all us men here to protect you,' Radouan grinned. 'Don't worry, you are our brother, *akhouia*, nothing will happen to you.'

Nick came up with buckets of hot water and supervised the scrubbing of Rupert.

Francesco took Radouan aside and commented on the excellent quality of the brandy.

'What did you expect?' Radouan gestured across the room through the steam and sighed. 'Jus' look at all these guys... all my life I've been keepin' them in separate pockets, now they're all here together... it's embarrassing.'

'Everyone's going to be drunk tonight, so don't worry.' Francesco stared at him meaningfully and whispered, 'You remember our agreement don't you? Any time... any place? Well, tonight I want to make it with you before you go to her... *droit de seigneur avec toi... ius primae noctis...* Tu connais? We have a solemn agreement... you must think of some place where we can be alone for a few tender moments.'

Radouan's cheeks flushed: 'Stop talkin' like that,' he hissed, 'think where you are!'

Francesco snorted and moved away; engaged Radouan's father and uncles in conversation, and soon had them roaring with laughter.

Radouan eyed him implacably.

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After the bath, strong coffee was served; J.W. had everyone leave their clothes in lockers and supervised the distribution of new undergarments, fine *jallabas* from *Bzu* and new *babouches*. Then leading the way, Radouan and Pero escorted them to a series of tents pitched in a field adjoining the family compound.

In one tent, a bar for the men had been set up. Facing each other across an open space reserved for dancing and entertainment, two larger tents were set for dining: one for men and one for women; lavishly appointed with low carved tables and silken cushions piled high. In a fourth tent, the *Tente de Cuisine*, a small army of cooks was preparing the wedding feast, while nearby, from several dome-shaped clay ovens, built for the occasion, the pungent scent of roasting camel meat floated out on the evening breeze.

Beyond the tents, the pastureland had been transformed into a Bedouin camp populated by an entire tribe of Bedoui, their wives, their children and their animals, flown in for the occasion from the

Sahara. Mounted on their camels and horses, a chorus of these tribesmen sang rousing drinking songs, accompanied by flutes, *tam tams* and drums; punctuated by sudden volleys shot from antique guns and the high spirited ululations of their women folk.

Radouan's grandmother had been distributing beautiful new *kaftans*, scarves and velvet shoes from Fez among the women and accompanied them to their dining tent. Toni and Delphine were seated at a table facing the dancing ground.

One of the mounted Bedoui galloped up to them with his group, fastened his eyes on Delphine, loosened his belt buckle, undid his trousers, patted his groin and burst into song.

Delphine stared at him in disbelief. 'What does he think he's doing?' she cried. 'Can you follow the words?'

Several Moroccan women paired off and began dancing with each other in front of the tribesmen.

'He's saying, now he's going to sing of the woman who lives inside him...'

'What?' Delphine was wide eyed.

'Of the woman inside him,' shouted Toni, trying to listen. 'It's very complicated, difficult to follow his dialect; he's going so fast... He's looking right at you... I think he would like to... really, it's too confusing for me to translate... amazing isn't he?'

'Who is this woman who lives inside him?' Delphine laughed as she stared back at him.

'I don't know... maybe some Goddess or a *Djinn*, I can't understand him...everything's so...'

From a raised platform at one end of the field came the strains of the *Haouz* band ASARI and it was rumored that the great Iraqi singer Kdim might join them after supper in serenading the bridal couple.

Between the house and the tents facing the dancing ground, a pavilion had been erected. Illuminated by golden lanterns and torches held by young boys and girls, its cupola and sides were canopied in scarlet and green silk, embroidered with gold thread fastened with fresh pink rose buds. Inside, a low heart shaped throne upholstered in dark imperial purple from Tunis awaited the arrival of Radouan and Hafida.

Attended by her mother, her grandmothers and many sisters and cousins, the bride was still closeted somewhere inside the house, an ancient fort-like structure with a tower where, if all went well, she

and Radouan would spend their wedding night. The moment of truth had arrived for Hafida, and she was paralyzed with fear. Afraid of not looking pretty enough to be marrying the handsome Radouan, now a rich man; afraid, too, of the assault on her body that was about to take place; fear of Radouan's prodigious strength and well-known short temper. Even her bath in the candle lit *Beit Laaraysat*, the anointing of her body with rare oils and perfumes, the dressing of her hair and the layers of expensive silks and satins that now covered her - all this was meant to calm her down and reassure her, but it was having the opposite effect of giving her a chill.

From another part of the house, la voix déchirante of the great Umm Kalthoum echoed eerily through the rooms and corridors.

"Why did I go? Why I went?

The sidelong glances from his eyes they burnt me.

When I complained he didn't even listen to me - to what was happening to me.

That's him, my Doctor and my Disease.

Oh, I called from far away and told him my problem and he said it was not his business.

Oh, see how many times I've bent down to him... asked him to claim my soul... Ah, ah, ah.....

And be sure that one day he must come back and ask for me."

Finally, as in a trance, her face a mask of makeup and sequined veils, Hafida was led out of the house and carried aloft on an open bronze dish, like a meal on a large platter, by a group of dancing women and young married couples. And there was Radouan waiting for her, Radouan in formal evening dress enthroned like a prince in a beautifully decorated pavilion. Rose petals fluttered down upon her, cameras followed her, flash bulbs popped. So many foreign guests staring unnerved her. The loud voices of the men getting drunk scared her. Was Radouan drunk too? She didn't think so, she hoped not. He stood up, smiled tenderly as though she were a child and helped her down from her perch on to the dais. Was his smile real or fake she wondered and hoped desperately it was real, but... They sat down. The tension was killing her. Her dress and underwear



were too tight. Although she longed to turn and gaze at him, him whom she hadn't seen since their first meeting, it was not allowed and so she stared dutifully straight ahead, frozen in space and time. So traumatized was she that a great battle could have been raging before her very eyes and she never would have seen it. Guests filed by nodding, murmuring salutations and depositing presents at their feet. The intoxicating music of ASARI, reverberating through the moonlit night made her wish she could get up and dance and whirl about like a dervish. But, of course, that too was out of the question. It was a very serious moment and she must conserve her energy for the long night ahead.

Signaling the feast would soon commence, the pace of the music quickened and ended in a crescendo of yells, whoops, joyous ululations and fusillades from the mounted tribesmen. The women poured into the tent where Toni and Delphine were already seated. And filing out of the tent for drinking, the men sat down on the carpeted earth of their own eating tent around tables set for eight.

Rupert looked around nervously for something to eat with. 'You must be prepared to eat quickly,' Prospero warned mischievously

Across the table Nick sighed, 'Difficult as it may be for you, old chap, I'm afraid you'll have to resign yourself to using your fingers, there's no other way.'

By now quite drunk, Rupert stared vacantly at his hands.

Soon Radouan joined his father and several other men as steaming bowls of soup were passed around.

'Just hold the bowl up to your lips and drink it,' Prospero whispered encouragingly, '*makayn mouchkil.*'

Rupert struggled.

Great platters of fruit de mer arrived in a bouillabaisse-like stew with loaves of hot bread, followed by pastillas of roast pheasant, quail and doves, filet of beef with Yorkshire pudding, whole lamb stuffed with couscous and sultanas and an Osso Buco of several young camels sacrificed for the occasion. Each course was devoured with such gusto that very quickly only a stack of broken bones remained.

Rupert fell behind and finally gave up. 'We are all one; I suppose that's the message, isn't it?'

'Community... yes,' Pero laughed.

'And if you don't have a strong immune system you die,' Nick observed.

‘You must have a strong one,’ Rupert stuttered, ‘I mean immune system... understand you’ve been living here for quite some time.’

‘I went mad here,’ Nick replied stoically ‘... kept prisoner by my students for seven years, alone in an old *Riad*. They were trying to protect me. I saw no one so I don’t think my immune system has really been tested...’ He laughed expansively. ‘Now all this sudden socializing may do me in... It was my fault... I wanted to end it all and took some poison. They brought a woman in who saved me but my brain has never been quite the same.’

Rupert scrutinized Nick. ‘And may I ask just what poison you took?’

‘*Ch’dak J’mel*... *Datura*...’

‘*Datura*! Ah yes, we grow it at home... salmon pink variety... fantastic scent... but is it really poisonous?’

‘Yes, very ... even the scent is poisonous... eight seeds will give you night vision; repeat it too often and you will go blind. Brewed in a tea, and given to the victim little by little over time it will... well you saw the result in the mad Youssef...’

Rupert thumped the table nervously with his big thumb. ‘And my gardener has it growing in pots all over the place! Could he be up to something I wonder... hmm... must remember to speak with him. Or perhaps I won’t... just watch him more closely and see what he’s up to.’

The feast ended with mountains of sweets, cakes and tarts accompanied by strong coffee and a tea of penny royal, wild geranium, and oregano to settle the stomach. Radouan and Hafida returned to their throne. Men and women now circulated and the dancing began again: married couples young and old, women with women in twos and threes, men with each other hand in hand, mothers with young daughters, uncles with nephews, brothers with sisters and anybody else who could dance. ‘*RAKAS TA YAKBIR, OU MA YANSA H’ZAT LAKTAF!*’ Radouan shouted from his throne and slapped his thighs in time with the music, ‘The dancer got older but can still raise his shoulder... *Whaha. Whaha. Ayeee...*’ As wine flowed and midnight approached, the dancing grew wilder and, overwhelmed by a passionate eagerness and the fervor of *al kamar*, inhibitions began to dissolve.

Hafida's attendants arrived, lifted her back on to the bronze platter and carried her away to the bridal chamber where she would be made ready for the night and kept amused while she waited for Radouan.

Shepherding infants and small children, grandmothers and widows were the first to slip away; then matrons and teenage daughters took their leave and young wives left their husbands. Finally, Radouan's mother along with Hafida's mother, Toni, Delphine and all the other invited women, vanished into the house.

Delphine was disappointed. 'So that's it?' she gestured. 'You mean we came all this way and don't even get to...'

'What did you think?' Toni laughed 'That you were going to watch them make love? Intermission, darling... we're having a little break... entr'acte... we'll be serenaded by young boys and hopefully there'll be something for us to smoke and perhaps we'll doze off for a few hours...'

'A few hours! Then what?' Delphine said wearily.

'The bloody sheet, my dear, the bloody sheet.'

'The what?'

'The bloody sheet, Hafida's maiden head...'

'Are we in Sicily or something?' Delphine muttered sarcastically.

'They say many Sicilian customs came from here, from Marrakech' Toni whispered, 'Sicily was ruled from here for several hundred years... Now we must rest... let our minds wander with the music and think of the happy couple upstairs in the tower... or try to forget them! At some point, the two mothers will come and herd us out into the courtyard where the sheet will be displayed from a balcony and everyone will cheer... bit of subtle irony there for us, don't you think? And then it's back to the *hamam* with Hafida, and the men will go to their *hamam* with Radouan and after that there will be more champagne, a big breakfast, more dancing and a day of entertainment. I think Radouan has engaged a famous magician from Herat in Afghanistan... maybe he'll saw someone in half... sometimes these things go on for days.'

Delphine raised her eyebrows and stared at Toni 'And what if she's not a virgin?'

'Who?' asked Toni.

'Hafida.'

'Well... I wouldn't worry,' Toni smiled gleefully, 'I'm sure they solved that problem long ago!'

Outside, as the Bedoui tribesmen joined the musicians from ASARI, many of the older men retired to the bar for some serious drinking while the younger men and teenage boys continued the dance.

In the shadow of one of the tents Francesco had taken Radouan aside and was propositioning him. They were both quite drunk. 'I know you miss my tongue, *mon ami*,' Francesco drawled, 'miss it caressing your lips, your body, your *zahp*... Now before you go to her... we have an agreement, you swore a solemn oath... you must...'

With a murderous look, Radouan pushed Francesco away and growled, 'You can't have me, you fuck, we're finished ... 'cause you broke the agreement, I know it... you fucked her, Delphine, and maybe you're still fuckin' her... You were countin' on me goin' down there in *Boulmaraz*, weren't you?'

'*Habibi*, don't... do not be so cruel... be tender...'

Radouan grinned and cracked his knuckles. 'I'm rich now; I don't have to be tender. Allah the Merciful has rained down His *mani* on me and you can't expect me to come runnin' anymore.' His eyes glittered in the moonlight as he swayed from side to side. 'I can buy and sell you now, *habibi*... Maybe you'll never work again...'

'You wouldn't do that, *amico*... what about Delphine?'

'What about her?'

'She must fulfill her destiny... the realization of her talent, her dreams, her expectations... you said that yourself many times.'

'You fuck, Delphine doesn't need you any more... she's gonna fulfil her destiny *avec moi*, not like some plastic movie queen... so screw you and your tongue and your slimy...'

Francesco sighed wearily. 'I disgust you, I know, but there was a time... together we've shared many memorable moments... Now juss because you have some MONEY... REALLY, don't be so boring... so arriviste... nothing more boring than a puritanical maquereau... Infidel! You have this guilt trip inside you, that goes against your pagan soul and fucks you up... you make me want to KILL MYSELF.'

'Let me help you,' Radouan purred. 'I'll do it for you... you swore you wouldn't touch her... get away from me. Away! I swear...'

‘Now you are lying again you compulsive liar. I never swore anything; it was you who swore...’

‘No. No. I am Radouan.’ His eyes blazed. ‘You don’t understand... *se faire compredore que...* that I’m divine... a divine creature who cannot be fucked aroun’ with. Now go! GO! I don’t wanna see your face again!’

Francesco grinned wickedly and slurred his words ‘With a God one is always laughing or crying.’

Radouan smiled maniacally, pushed him aside, strode away through the crowd and began dancing with Hafida’s brothers.

‘You scolders of the grape,’ he trumpeted, entering their circle, ‘I will never win your smiles... Jus’ because I went against thee, it’s ill mannered to revile...

‘Ah, breathe no more the name of wine, and please stop blamin’ me... for I fear your foul tongues will tarnish its fair name... So come and pour it out, my boys, a vintage ten years old, inside my crystal goblet like a lake of liquid gold... an’ when the water mingles there I see a yoke of pearls close strung... a yoke of shinin’ pearls on pearls.”\*

Pop up: ( from The Forbidden Verses of Abu Nuwas )

‘*Z’waj lila, tadbirou aam!*’ someone yelled, ‘Before you get married a night, think for a whole year.’

Sweating hard, Radouan stripped down to his shorts, called for more champagne and began to dance.

An old man outside the drinking tent shouted, ‘Hey there, accumulate as many sins as you can my lads, the Lord is ready to relax his wrath... And be sure that when the Day of Judgment comes, he will forgive you... *Waha*, before this Mighty King, FORGIVENESS! And brothers, then you will gnaw your fingers to the bone, regretting all the joys which you turned down through terror of Hell’s fires.’ Pop up: ( *ibid* Abu Nuwas)

The mounted Bedoui joined in repeating the verses, rhyming and punning on them; their drummers beating out the rhythm, their women ululating excitedly. *Tam tams* scintillated and flutes wailed as Radouan ripped off his shorts, stood naked in his pride, and took a long draught of champagne from a Jeroboam held to his lips by Prospero.

The older men streamed out of the drinking tent to watch; clapped their hands and cheered.

'*Ash briti a laaryan?*' What do you need, you poor naked man?' Radouan's father cried.

'*Khattem, a moulay, khattem!* A ring, my princely father, a ring!' Radouan roared.

The crowd exploded with laughter and catcalls. Two circles of young men formed around Radouan dancing in opposite directions. Then, suddenly he was lifted on their shoulders and carried through the house upstairs to the tower room where The Keeper, Hafida, awaited him.

Like Gilgamesh of old with his club, Radouan strode naked into the bridal chamber still clutching his Jeroboam of champagne and stood there swaying, bringing Hafida in and out of focus as her attendants scattered like rose petals before a storm.

Expecting to be rough with her, as was the custom, seeing this nervous child trembling there before him, the terror and desperation in her eyes; his heart melted and he recognized the presence of that inner one he had discovered in prison. In her diaphanous gown, Hafida stood there, a plump nymphet, with the same crooked smile that had first intrigued him.

He advanced toward her, his *zahp* rich with excitement.

She gazed at it fascinated, whimpered and retreated.

Finishing off the champagne in big gulps, he swaggered around the room after her, pretending he couldn't catch her, playing cat and mouse and finally cornering her. Slowly he peeled away her coverings until she was standing there naked, staring at him, not lowering her eyes modestly as she should have, but shamelessly staring at him.

His upper lip curled up over his teeth 'You've had someone before me,' he growled softly, 'one of your brothers or maybe an uncle, tell me how many men have you have had before me...'

She reached up and slapped his face.

He felt his cheek, looked at his hand and grinned at her. 'By rights I should beat you for that,' he said.

She whispered angrily that it was not true, that he would soon see it wasn't true. Just because she was not shy did not mean she'd done it before.

He drew close and explored her *tina* with his forefinger, found her hymen intact and noted her large clitoris. 'It's this,' he whispered, 'you have enjoyed too much with this... maybe I should have it removed.'

'No, no,' she replied fearlessly, '... I want my pleasure too. How can I give you pleasure if I don't know it myself?'

'Your pleasure is to give me sons, as many as possible. That is your pleasure and to worship me... Look, my *zahp*, I'm going to teach you the many ways to worship it. From now on I am your teacher in love... look here... take hold of it.'

She gazed into his eyes not wanting to look at it or touch it.

He laughed indulgently. 'Do not be so *motaraddid*, so prudish... take it... its hot... it will warm your hands... what comes from it, will soon make you a mother. Kneel down and pray to it, kiss it and thank God for it!'

Hafida obeyed awkwardly.

He was smitten by her childlike manner, her nervous surrender. 'I like your *zouk*,' he purred, 'look how hard my *zahp* gets when I stroke it... that fat *zouk*, of yours,' and slapped her ass gently. Then, holding out his arms he lifted her up and kissed her forehead.

'It is a good thing to unite with a woman in love,' he whispered as he carried her to the bed - 'A VERY GOOD THING.'

## 86

Paris, October 15, 2048

In the baroque ballroom of a large seventeenth century hotel particulier on the Isle-St-Louis, Hafida sat alone on the polished parquet floor, Radouan's head in her lap, pounding her forehead with her fists and sobbing. Unfinished plates of food and hastily crumpled napkins littered the empty gilt banquet tables where candles burned low.

Overwhelmed by grief Hafida gazed off into space and whispered to her husband:

*'Less than an hour ago you were dancing here, habibi... like a terrible dream from which I will never awaken here in the ballroom*

*where you fell down, here where we've enjoyed so many good times. What can I do my heart? Tell me... my breath is short my body is weak and refuses to obey the commands of my mind... here, waiting for our son Adam to return with his brother Othman... oh, why are they taking so long? Why?'*

Glancing down at Radouan, she stroked his forehead.

*'Yes, habibi, I promise you, now at last we will take you back to Maroc where you belong... Right now my stomach is feeling sick and my heart is beating too fast... most times when I have a shock like this I can calm myself... you know that... but now...'*

Looking up, she blotted her tears with a napkin, and continued speaking to him

*'My mind is saying calm down Hafida... God the All Knowing, the Compassionate, has taken you away so not to worry but I think my body is saying something else remembering all the times it has waited for you, habibi and doesn't yet know you won't come back... Yes you roamed far but always returned. Now you will never return and suddenly my world is lost forever but alive inside me... that's what I'm feeling right now, my achiki, our life together. What shall I say? It was a miracle. Really, I never dreamed it would be like that... from the first night you knew it, that I was madly in love with you. But I never thought we would become so close like two halves of one being hoping to become one again. Will we be together that way on the other side, my Khalili... my poor darling? Believe me my first instinct was to pick up a knife and stab myself, like those brave wives in India who jump on their husband's funeral pyres... that was my first thought. I should have done it, we'd be together now but I couldn't... I just couldn't. Not out of selfishness, believe me to stay alive without you, no because taking one's own life is wrong and because of our children and grandchildren... If I show my grief now our whole family will fall apart... Delphine is hysterical. Mokhtar is trying to calm her down... I must be strong.'*

Kissing his forehead, she massaged his shoulders.



*'My poor mahboubi, it was not where you wanted to leave this world from was it, this pile of stones, always said you wanted to go from the tower room at Dar Chems where your Baroness left her body may God keep her in the seventh sky... Had it all planned in your mind I know... Mach Allah, God had other plans for you... But how can I go on talking to you like this? Look how I am weeping, look! All our children with us here to celebrate our fiftieth wedding anniversary Delphine and dear Mokhtar too all still here in the house somewhere I'm sure you can hear them weeping... a house of laughter has become a house of tears. They say you're dead but how can that be...? Such a short time ago you were... now here I am waiting for a miracle. Oh where are you? So gay you were, so proud, dancing with Othman's daughter between courses the orchestra playing your favorite songs but when you sat down I could see you were out of breath and when you took a bite of whatever had been set before you and began choking... ayeee... choking! I couldn't believe it how could it be, my darling? You were a great singer, your throat was in perfect condition... in my whole life I swear I never heard you choke but there you were waving your arms and attacking your throat with your hands... see what you did... all the marks the scratches... poor habibi.'*

*'Adam jumped up and began slapping your back... Adam a world famous surgeon, he should have been able to save you but he was terrified... after all you were his father... Then Mokhtar panicked and began moaning like he was dying too... You looked up at us helplessly, then your face turned dark and suddenly you stopped breathing... STOPPED BREATHING! Delphine wanted to stay here with me but became hysterique. Mokhtar has gone to give her a shot. "Praise God, a fast death is a blessing," Aicha said and kept hugging me. Ah... but it's not habibi not a blessing for me at all or for you. My future is bleak... with your last breath, fifty years are gone forever... What times we have lived through habibi, peace be upon you... you were a fine man and very kind to me.'*

Like the flames of a dying fire, the great moments of her life flickered before Hafida's inner eye. When they were married she really could recite most of the holy *Qur'an* and was considered something of a prodigy, especially as she was a girl, but still she did not know the meaning of Gods word. When she was twelve and should have been studying with a *Fakih*, she had to stay at home and

help her family who were highly impractical people, especially her father a follower of the great Sufi Saint, Yacut, in the lineage of the Egyptian, al Murisi. Huddled together under blankets, half naked and shivering with cold they would often be, while with the money for their supper their father would have gone off to buy song birds at the market and release them.

Before she married Radouan she expected the worst and had been pleasantly surprised that her husband was not as difficult as she had thought he would be. In those days it was still the custom among men his age to keep their wives as ignorant as possible so they could not meddle in their husbands' affairs. But to her surprise and joy, Radouan sent her to a Shaykh who began teaching her the meaning of the Holy *Qur'an*. At the same time, because she was a quick learner, Radouan and his American friend Nicholas began teaching her to read and write Arabi as well as English and French.

*Ah, but years later I came to know it was Toni, may God reward her, who had insisted you do this.*

For the first few years of their marriage they had lived with Nicholas in Prospero's *Riad*, which Radouan had purchased and was fixing up. She was assisting his sister Fouzia who had been looking after Nicholas and would leave as soon as she married Prospero. It was Nicholas who had really taught her English while Radouan would give her lessons in French. She smiled as she recalled how Nicholas would make cards for her in all three languages with funny drawings and how quickly she had learned. But she soon realized this American was *majnoun* and Radouan had explained that Nicholas had poisoned himself out of love for someone in his homeland and the poison had affected his brain. But of course it had been Radouan whom he had loved and who had driven him crazy!

She gazed down at her husband and massaged his body, hoping for God's intervention.

*'Yes, achiki, finally you told me everything didn't you... had to get yourself drunk to do it... but it was a story I had heard before we were married, can you imagine? Can you still hear me, my darling? I KNEW BEFORE WE WERE MARRIED YOU'D BEEN HAVING AFFAIRS...ALL THESE STRANGE AFFAIRS WITH EUROPEANS... so I decided to play the traditional Muslim wife. It wasn't hard because for you I had a powerful physical attraction. I obeyed, I*

*served and acquiesced, surrendered and never opposed you in any way and you became bored and decided to educate me!*

*'I'm sure you thought I would be angry when you told me about Nicholas, but at that time in my eyes it made you very glamorous: that you could know foreigners, speak and make love to them. Then I understood why, after Khadija was born, you moved Nicholas out to Dar Chems with Youssef and Youssef's trainer, Karl... Wherever did you find him? Such a pretty young man he was and so kind. Did you know Nicholas had a passionate affair with him... you never mentioned it but you must have known or did you plan it that way? At least he died a happy man, Nicholas... may God cherish him.'*

When had Nicholas died she asked herself. Yes, it was in 2008, three years after Othman was born... some blood disease they said, but she had always thought he never completely recovered from the poison he had taken.

The night he died Radouan had been out drinking. Suddenly Nicholas had taken sick and she and Mokhtar rushed him to a clinique where they said he needed blood or he would die. Radouan was the only person anyone knew who had the same rare blood type so they called around and finally found him gambling at the Casino. He protested that he was very drunk and there would be too much alcohol in his blood, but the doctors insisted and so he came. She remembered when Radouan arrived Nicholas had been conscious. She was there holding his hand. Radouan had staggered through the door; she thought he was going to fall flat on his face, and then Nicholas said, 'Why have YOU come here?' and Radouan answered: 'To give you my blood so you won't die.' Then the strangest thing had happened: Nicholas gazed up at him for one long moment, smiled, blew him kisses with both hands, and died! It was a terrible shock. It was like Nicholas had died rather than take Radouan's blood and he was deeply wounded. They interred Nicholas in the mausoleum at Dar Chems and Radouan didn't speak to anyone for days.

Then the strangest thing had happened. A month later they received a call from a bank in Boston, a city in the state of Massachusetts in America, telling them that Nicholas K. Brady III had bequeathed ten million dollars to Radouan's foundation *As-Sabil* - the path, the method, the way. Radouan was pleased, but not surprised because he always believed Nick had money hidden away.

So, during those first years of their marriage Radouan had treated her like his daughter, or a toy, or a piece of clay he was modeling. Later on as she got to know him better, she came to the conclusion that, as it was forbidden to make love with one's daughter, it must have excited him to think of her that way because anything forbidden had always intrigued him! Then when she had discovered she too felt a certain secret pleasure in making love with someone who could have been her father, she became embarrassed and ashamed.

But Radouan had never beaten her, nor had he circumcised as he threatened to do on their wedding night. Even when she had been difficult or talked back to him and made him angry, he would just grab her and threaten her but never do anything - though it was permitted under certain circumstances, she believed.

And it was during those same first years, and again because of Toni, God bless her, who had, after all, experienced great wealth and knew its problems, that Radouan and Prospero had set about organizing something they called, *Foundation As-Sabil*. Founded in 2000, it was an organization dedicated to improvement of the health, education and environment of the Moroccan people. Over the years it funded many projects and institutions people could identify with as the world around them, the culture they had always known, began to crumble. 'A path in the night so we don't lose our way', Radouan had called it and three quarters of his inheritance was set aside to fund it. As by then the value of the Baroness' assets which Radouan had inherited, was over twenty billion euros, about fifteen went to *As-Sabil*.

Thinking about it she smiled sadly to herself. How up till then in Morocco nobody but the poor had ever really thought much about the poor! But when Radouan inherited his fortune he had remembered the days of his youth; selling cigarettes one by one in the big square of Marrakech, and becoming a gigolo to support his family. Where were those charitable organizations then, those Islamic charities? Why hadn't they helped when his father became sick? Why had no one helped except other members of their family who were also destitute?

Really, from what she had heard about Radouan before their marriage, she'd never expected he would be so generous. Because of his early poverty she had expected he would hoard his money, but no. During those early years she had watched anxiously as he

struggled with his conscience between the pain he felt for the plight of the people, and all the advantages and opportunities his sudden wealth had brought him. She remembered the pressure was hard to bear. Strange organizations: financial and charitable trusts, NGO's no one had ever heard of, political parties, even governments, began soliciting his patronage and sought to control him. At one point he had even been approached to fund militant organizations engaged in *Jihad*, but Prospero had refused to condone it and threatened to leave Radouan if he did. So they had argued about it for weeks but finally Radouan agreed that his many Sufi ancestors would be pleased if he followed the path of non-violence, self-sufficiency and compassion.

Because of this decision, Hafida remembered, despite all their quarrels and the problems he'd caused her, Toni felt justified that her loyalty and devotion to Radouan had been right. His capacity to endure both good fortune and bad was remarkable. Remembering the desperate days and years of his youth, he had been determined to help lift his country to new levels of prosperity without money leaking into the foreign bank accounts of politicians, bureaucrats or middlemen. This of course did not endear him to his fellow country men.

It had been Mokhtar who encouraged Radouan to begin improving the chances for those young people who lacked the skills, education or connections to do so themselves; an experiment that was successful. God praise Mokhtar, she thought and keep him.

Nevertheless for her, personally, it had been a very difficult time. During her first pregnancy Radouan had been busy working with Pero and Toni and hadn't had much time for her; made his headquarters out there at Dar Chems where they had moved the Baroness' son Youssef and down the road Toni was building her own place. Although Toni had been very tender with her, what she remembered most was the loneliness of those days and that she became insanely jealous of Toni. Sometimes in the *hamam* near the *Riad* in Marrakech she would hear gossips saying that when Radouan wasn't with her he was with Toni and that they were married. Radouan always told her he was working with Prospero on organizing *As-Sabil*; that it was a very big problem for them and when he was away for weeks at a time, he was taking care of business. Sometimes he would be in Paris, others in Vienna or Riyadh, or

places like Dubai, Singapore, Hong Kong, Tokyo, New York, London or Milan.

She smiled as she remembered the day he bought her a book of maps called an Atlas, and taught her how to read it so she could learn Geography - said it was very important for people to know where they were located. Contemplating how simple minded she had been in those days she ran her fingers through his hair, stroked his forehead and sighed.

*'Ya, habibi, my jealousy of you then was terrible... because I had never experienced such pleasure, such delight, and satisfaction, I wanted you constantly.'*

Smiling sadly to herself she thought back on those years: what a saga they had lived through and what a change had come over him when she began to have his children.

After Adam, their third child, was born in January 2001, Radouan decided to organize a trip to celebrate the purchase of their own jet. They had taken the children along. Adam was only 4 months old, Aicha a year and a half and Khadija about nine months. Radouan had hired Mokhtar as his personal servant and she had Mokhtar's wife Fatima as her maid. Radouan's bodyguard friend Houcein, a doctor, a chef and three women to look after the children had accompanied them. She remembered how difficult it had been to control Houcein, even for Radouan, but Houcein was very tough and very useful at airports when officials tried to swindle them with outrageous landing fees. Houcein carried a Teflon dagger under his jalaba at all times. Radouan said Houcein was there to protect her and the children, but it seemed to her he spent more time watching young girls and boys and in the casinos gambling.

But she had always remembered that trip marked an important turning point in her life. Getting out of Marrakech flying about in the sky in their own plane was a life changing experience; to see how people in other parts of the world lived and behaved was a revelation. She and Mokhtar had never been out of Morocco. Raised up in large very poor families, at an early age they had learned to quarrel and make scenes but traveling seemed to calm them down. There were so many things to see and so much to learn that she had forgotten about herself and her personal problems. It was on this trip that Radouan taught Mokhtar how to use a lap top computer and a cell

phone and at the end of each day, had him write down where they had been, who they had met, and what they had done. Now, fifty years later, Mokhtar was still faithfully entering the details of their daily life with a server in Argentina.

On that first trip they had traveled to Cairo, Mecca, Medina, Istanbul and Greece. Although she had never veiled her face before, now Radouan insisted she be covered from head to toe. She smiled to herself when she thought of it, but at that time she was still very shy and felt safer and more secure inside her wrappings.

In Cairo, they visited all the great Mosques, the Malmuk Tombs, the Pyramids and taken a boat ride on the river Nile. In those days the air in Cairo had been so bad every time they stepped out of their limousine, they choked. But Radouan explained that ever since Cairo began people had been complaining about it, still everyone had to go there because the Egyptians were the most interesting people in the world - very deep and very intelligent.

In Mecca and Medina, they had given thanks to God for His Compassion and Generosity in bestowing upon them three beautiful children and Radouan had given generously for the feeding of Pilgrims and the maintenance of the libraries in those holy places. In Istanbul, they had stayed with a Turkish friend of his, one of his old loves, the widow of a very rich Lebanese gentleman who had a beautiful old house on the Bosphorous and spent winters in Marrakech. They visited Hagia Sophia, Topkapi and the Palace of Tears; and relaxed in a very elegant Turkish bath, quite different from their simple Moroccan Hamams. In Greece, she remembered, they had visited the island of Delos, sacred to Apollo, and spent a day at The Oracle of Delphi where fields of hyacinths and narcissus were in bloom and far away on the horizon, beyond miles of olive groves glittering in the afternoon sun, they could see the Gulf of Corinth.

Later, the same year in June, when summer had arrived in Marrakech, they took a second trip to Italy, stayed at the Hotel Splendido where she and Radouan had their first really romantic moments. In his fine cotton *jalabas* and *gandouras*, made by an Egyptian tailor, he shone like the sun and was the center of attention wherever they went. From Portofino, she recalled, they had traveled in a caravan of four cars to Monaco, where they had been joined by Prospero, met several officials and discussed buying an apartment there. But Monaco was too chaotic too crowded with summer visitors. The traffic was terrible and Radouan hated it. Becoming concerned

that their Italian drivers were not up to it, he hired four new French cars and drivers and they drove on to Nice where they spent several days with an old Corsican woman who had once been a famous chanteuse in Paris. She had finally married one of the godfathers of the Nice Mafia and on his death had inherited a great fortune and a beautiful villa overlooking the harbor.

After touring the Riviera they visited Toni at St Remy in Provence where Delphine and a man she thought was Delphine's husband called Francesco joined them. By that time, of course, she knew Radouan was married to Toni but had no idea this beautiful young woman was also his wife!

She stared down at Radouan's pale face.

*'Yes, habibi, you were very naughty sometimes... a real rascal'*

And smiled to herself recalling how, from their first meeting, she and Delphine had become great friends; Delphine, nearer her own age than any of the others and they had had fun together. Also, Delphine was very smart and often defended her with Radouan.

*'When you would criticize me for something, she would come to my rescue. Or if you would say I was too young to do this or to do that, Delphine would say nonsense and insist I be brought along. You don't remember, but I do, habibi.'*

She closed her eyes and asked herself how she could be talking to him like that when he was... And could still see the beautiful gardens at Toni's estate, the olive groves, the orchards and vineyards and how, after a few days' rest there, they had flown on to Paris where, even though she had lost twenty kilos, she still felt embarrassed by her appearance. All those beautiful French women, so sophisticated, so well turned out, how they had terrified her. But Toni had accompanied them, understood her shyness and went out shopping for her and brought back some beautiful new clothes. Even so, she had still been nervous around Toni, suspicious of her self-assurance, and her hold over Radouan. Although Toni had saved Radouan's life and his inheritance, she had to admit she had still been jealous.

Years later, of course, she discovered Toni and Prospero had been having a serious affair and she needn't have been jealous at all!



Poor Pero, constantly together with her working for *As-Sabil* and not being able to show any affection or any sign they were in love. It must have been very difficult, especially as Prospero was married to Radouan's sister Fouzia, a naturally suspicious woman, who would have reported anything she might have seen or heard. Perhaps all the difficulties they had encountered, all the secrecy and separations, kept their passion alive for it had lasted until Toni died. And she was certain Radouan must have known about it but didn't mind as long as Pero could cope with Toni's neediness. Ah...Toni, Hafida smiled to herself, basically she was a romantic: her vision of life was generous, even wild.

Her Mister Radouan, on the other hand with all his *Baraka* was not at all romantic or sentimental, but extremely practical, a practical mystic you might say. She recalled making love with him many times when he was called to the telephone and could immediately address the problem at hand and discuss it in detail with the caller. At first it seemed to her he was like a heartless prostitute, turning his love on and off. Later on she realized he had the gift of being able to live simultaneously in many worlds - a gift, and a big problem for him!

In those days, however, his biggest problem had been Delphine who, unknown to her, had occupied his mind totally and haunted his dreams. It was as if he wanted to punish her for her refusal to obey him - and to get even she was out to destroy his mind. Although he never appeared to be jealous of Toni, of Delphine he was wildly jealous; jealous of her body, her career, her success, and above all her many FANS!

Hafida, bent over, rested her head on Radouan's and whispered:

*'You wanted fans too, my poor darling...would have enjoyed them so much and you certainly deserved them. Instead, all you got were people kissing your hands and trying to talk you in to doing things you didn't think were right. They thought you were King Midas and you became bored and annoyed.'*

Ah, but they never counted on Pero being there, Pero behind the scenes, advising and supporting him. Even so, Radouan hadn't been able to hide behind *As-Sabil*. No... Day and night people came to him for help, sometimes threatened him. Finally, it became impossible for him to go out that he wasn't asked to do something for

some one, so he started travelling in disguise - became a master of disguises.

How well she remembered him at R'hamna in those days outside the village in rags like a beggar walking through a permanent camp of supplicants that had grown up there waiting for him to appear. Which was sad, because all his life he had enjoyed wandering about freely talking with people, going where he pleased when he pleased, and suddenly he was trapped – a victim of his own good fortune. His ideas and proposals were ridiculed and it became difficult for him to lead a normal life in Morocco. Which was why, she supposed, he had purchased this place, here on the Isle-St-Louis - this pile of stones. Because it was so big he'd never have to go out; because Pero had discovered it would be less expensive for them than keeping an apartment at the Ritz, and most of all because Delphine had demanded it.

Still, because of his early days in Paris and the indignities he had suffered there on the boulevards and in the Metro, he had avoided going out and strolling around, fearful he might get into trouble. It was then when he realized his money had only bought a larger prison that he withdrew into the warmth and routine of his family and rarely ventured out except in his armored utility vehicle, Houcein in front with the driver carrying a laser-guided Glock.

*'Really, you were not prepared for what happened to you, were you, habibi. As long as your friends and family had roofs over their heads, even tents and enough to eat, you had always been happy. A dreamer you, my achiki... so many years in the hard world of the streets that when you saw the joy in the faces of our children, you wanted the whole world to be like that... newly born and perfect... didn't you? Yet through it all you believed in your own people and continued to initiate projects that would help them that you were unable to live among them was your fate - God's Will. Even if you had given up everything and become a Marabout or a Hermit, I'm sure they still would have hounded you.'*

By then, she remembered, the first decade of their marriage had passed, she had given him eight children and suddenly the world had become a very dangerous place - which was why Radouan had opted for survival and decided to purchase a large property in Argentina, near Cordoba - one of the largest Fincas in the region and

the perfect place to vanish in. They called it The Vanishing Point and for the next thirty years spent most of their time there managing *As-Sabil*, becoming self sufficient, avoiding the mindless chaos and greed of the developed world raising their family and organizing large environmental projects in the foothills of the Andes. Until Toni died out there of a stroke while watching polo on a playing field Radouan had carved out of the bush.

She remembered how all the families in the area and their guests would gather at the Polo ground to drink and feast and watch the matches. They had their own little grand stand that seated two hundred. Toni often took over the microphone and described the action like a sports announcer. Sometimes she wore a top hat and smoked a cigar, a different Toni then, playful and funny; making personal jokes about the players in various languages, which kept everyone laughing - very important during those dark days. And that's what she was doing when she had her attack and died.

Terrible it was for poor Pero, because he was there when it happened and had to suppress his grief. He and Radouan brought her body back to Dar Chems where it rests in the mausoleum, but neither of them ever returned to Argentina again.

She gazed up at the glass dome of the ballroom now tinted pink by the first rays of rising sun and spoke to him:

*'The shock of what has happened, habibi, I'm afraid I'm not handling it very well. My mind is wandering and frayed... I'm thinking now of all the things we should have spoken of... things left undone... the loose ends... perhaps it's just old age but I can't seem to get my thoughts together... My brain is frazzled!'*

*'Now I'm back at the Ritz again on that first trip to Paris. You know, I didn't feel as strange about being an Arab there as I did in Greece but I have to say, I still didn't want to leave the hotel. Riding around in our big limousine with its tinted windows was fine, but the thought of walking in those Paris streets and boulevards scared me to death. I remember thinking then that Paris was the most beautiful city in the world, and vowing that some day when I'd lost more weight I would return and sit in those cafes and stroll on those boulevards without all my coverings.'*

Returning from Paris that August, Radouan had managed to enroll her at the University of Marrakech for the fall term of 2001 and

promised if she did well there they would go back to Paris and she could attend classes at the Sorbonne. He was sure they were going to have many children and she had to be educated so the children wouldn't grow up stupid. Suggesting that she might study Biology and Medicine, he explained that it was very important to know what was going on inside her own body and the bodies of their children - enough to let the doctors know she knew something and couldn't be fooled! And if she ever expected to know any interesting people, he added, she would have to study History, Literature and the Fine Arts.'

Thinking of that time, her mind raced back to that horrible September afternoon, just after their return from Paris when the famous Twin Towers of New York had fallen down before their very eyes on television and they knew a strange new age was dawning. 'The Age of Rage,' Prospero had said immediately and predicted years of anger, violence, incrimination, perfidy and monumental hypocrisy; likened it to the bursting of the famous Marib Dam 500 BC, *Saylu' I 'Arim* and the ruin of the Kingdom of Saba, the kingdom of the Queen of Sheba who had visited Solomon. It was a sign, and omen. Had not the women of the Marrakech Medina, shortly after his election, said the new U.S. President had *F'TNA* written across his fore head?

'Never underestimate the importance of Maji, Voudon, Sorcery in the present encounter which is about to unfold.' Nick said, 'The British and the Americans have always under estimated this.'

That a few young zealots, hijacking domestic passenger planes of a foreign country and using them as missiles, could have successfully staged such a dramatic attack meant it was a complex and deeply hidden conspiracy, or it was God's Will. Too many things could have gone wrong. The odds against it happening were too great.

'God likes to be worshipped Mokhtar said thoughtfully as they watched the awful events on television, but since we Moslems worship him five times a day he will stand by us.'

But what was the real meaning?

The real meaning, Prospero thought, was that the new hi-tech warfare had been challenged by guerilla and suicide tactics, and that the embarrassment and rage of military planners and superpower disciplinarians would bring on horrific consequences. It had happened before with the Assassins, this inversion of fighting power, a scam that took a hundred and sixty-three years to eradicate.

She remembered all that afternoon and evening Radouan had remained silent, puffing on a hookah, watching the disaster unfold – watching the endlessly repeated images of the collapsing towers. Until finally he had yawned, muttered the word, castration, and had fallen asleep.

Delphine had called him from Rome and said she thought the importance of the event was being exaggerated. ‘These disasters happen, you know,’ she said pointedly. ‘We have to expect more of them, especially now with world’s population out of control. You must stay ahead of the curve, avoid contact with politicians and we must lead our lives as normally as possible. Above all, *Foundation As-Sabil* must not help these people who want to bring the world to an end.

The most confusing thing for them as they sat there watching the disaster unfold on their screen was the way it was presented; the slick sequencing and timing of images, having to constantly remind themselves they were not watching a Japanese horror film - that Godzilla would not suddenly rise up behind one of those buildings.

‘Godzilla is there,’ Nick observed quietly, ‘you just can’t see her.’

A few days later when it became clear who would be blamed for this event, she remembered how Radouan had received an overseas call from an acquaintance of his who had once lived in Marrakech. For as long as they had known each other, Radouan had suspected the caller had been some kind of agent. Now he was on the phone urging Radouan to send letters of condolence to the President of the United States and the Mayor of New York City.

Radouan went ballistic. Why should this guy be telling him what to do, like the President of the United States was some kind of Sultan one had to flatter and bow down to? He began to pace the floor and crack his knuckles, working himself into a fit.

Hafida remembered she had been so frightened that for the first time in her life she had acted on her own; called Toni in Provence and told her what was happening - how Radouan was about to lose it! God above only knew what the result would be.

Minutes later, Toni called back and spoke to him, told him he didn’t seem to understand this person was trying to protect them, reminded Radouan how rich he was, and that he had a very large foundation, *As-Sabil* which was giving away vast sums of money. ‘Do

we actually know the Foundation hasn't given money by mistake to charities that are funding these things?'

That was when the debate between Prospero and Radouan about funding *Jihad* organizations really began. Although they thought they had settled that issue before, of course, Radouan's first instinct was to fight. Many of their friends were impressed by Bin Laden's organizational skills, his grasp of economic realities and real politic - after all, five or six graduates of the London School of Economics were Al Qaida members. But finally Radouan came to the conclusion Al Qaida was just the same old scam with new clothes: raiding caravans under a banner of religion and a protection racket posing as a religious revival using masses of desperate young under educated men and women as human explosives. In Holy War nothing was forbidden - as the Jews and Arabs had learned dealing with Christian Crusaders in Jerusalem.

But Radouan hated Osama for his hypocrisy and cynicism, a fake *Marabout* he thought, and predicted his actions would bring on a new Crusade from the *Maishis*, which could turn half the world into Gaza.

Prospero was certain some of the Moroccan clans who had amassed great fortunes and felt endangered by *Foundation As-Sabil's* charitable activities would use an incident like this to finish them off... *Bizzaff...* *As-Sabil* would be finished! Radouan must write the letters of condolence.

Hafida smiled down at him as she remembered how, for the sake of his children and for *As-Sabil*, he had swallowed his pride, called the man back, and patched things up. Pero and Toni collaborated on writing the letters of condolence and Radouan had signed them. She remembered then Radouan became deeply depressed, said the whole affair made him feel like the cockroach in a story by the Russian author Kafka which Nicholas had once read to him, like a *boucheron* waiting for humans to come and stomp on him. Later, there had been a meeting with officials in Paris where the Foundation disclosed its financial dealings and tried to prove it had not funded any terrorist groups. But suspicion lingered in high places, especially as Radouan had once been characterized by the press during his trial as an 'Arab Terrorist', and because he and Prospero were demanding more transparency and concerned environmental behavior from the companies they now virtually controlled.

'Horrible times,' she remembered and shook her head sadly, but what to do? Finally Pero and Radouan had agreed Moslems should not assault the walls of Babylon by turning young men and women into guided missiles. Radouan had a fortune to invest and *As-Sabil* had even more they had all agreed there must be a third way, a path, and a method: to remain absolutely neutral and focus on improving conditions in their own country. Through their investments they could influence the behavior of government policy makers and transnational corporations. They would also invest heavily in building up infrastructure, encouraging self-sufficiency; updating the past without throwing it away, releasing brain power through first class health systems and education. It was a big gamble, *Inchallah*.

She remembered how it was just after this that Radouan had decided not to send her to school. Instead he hired tutors from England and France to come and teach her at home. Then he ordered everyone to stop watching television and employed a nice young American from MIT to watch, whom they came to call the Watcher because he watched television day and night, evaluated it, and gave out printed reports. Radouan believed all the TV stations were corrupting the truth and this soon became apparent. At the same time, 'The Watcher' trained Mokhtar to use the Internet, explained all its possibilities and three years later when *As-Sabil* launched its first satellite, they constructed an Intranet.

During that stressful period, Hafida had to admit, she'd been so busy having children and getting used to living with someone like Radouan that she had barely been aware of the world outside.

As the years passed, however and resources became scarce, the world became a playground and a battlefield for powerful elites within governments, business and finance, and the position of *Al-Sabil* became increasingly difficult. And because these mafia's seemed to have unlimited funds, superior communication systems and machines that could destroy anything they disapproved of, they got what they wanted. Slowly the Sufi values that were the basis of *Foundation As-Sabil*, became increasingly difficult to uphold. Pero had cautioned there would be a price to be paid for not backing either the Crusaders or the Jihadists; *As-Sabil* would have to pay more attention to its security. Both sides would be trying to trick them, set them up in some way - It was a time of betrayals and financial chaos, sinking slowly into a new Dark Age in which the few had to fight harder than ever to control the many.

She remembered how she thought it would never end, and how Radouan would put his arms around her and console her saying: 'Time rushes by, my darlin'...nothin' lasts forever.'

So lost in thought had she been that now, gazing around at the empty ballroom she was surprised to see it was still there. Where was Adam, she wondered. Before he left he had mentioned that she should start gathering her thoughts, as she would soon have to speak with the press. 'We don't want to anger them,' he'd cautioned her 'but we don't want to tell them too much either.'

Looking down, she patted Radouan's forehead and spoke to him softly.

*'Achiki, I have solved that problem. Instead of sitting here answering all their questions about your scandalous life, I will use up the time speaking about our children - and Delphine's. I know they will try to demonize me as an ignorant Moslem woman who refused to practice birth control... some kind of fertility witch... I know that, habibi, and I'm prepared. I shall tell them giving birth was a joy... and for you being a father was a life changing experience... so why not? We had no financial problems... why not enjoy giving life and multiplying? Of course, they will be hoping to trick me, thinking that like many rich mothers I won't know what's going on in my own family, but I have a surprise for them and I've memorized the whole of it'*

'My husband Radouan-Jannat al Uld Billah has gone on ahead, and is survived by his two wives, Hafida and Delphine and twenty five children all alive and well...'Hamdou' Allah... Praise God. May he grant them long lives and comfort them with joy.'

'I had twenty-two children and my co-wife Delphine had three. In order of their appearance they are:

Our first daughter, Aicha, born July 23, 1999, the day King Hassan II died. I remember it well... watching the funeral cortege with my first born child at my breast. Now she lives in Fez with her husband, a *Cherif*, and ten children.

Our second child Khadija, born in May 2000, is an art historian, living in London with her husband, a publisher, and five children.

Adam, our first son, was born in late February 2001, and was followed two years later by a second boy, Othman, born in 2003.



Both of them live on our place in Argentina with their Argentine wives and children. Adam is a surgeon, and runs a clinic out there. Othman is an Avocat with degrees from the University of Paris and Harvard Law.'

*'Khalili... I'm thinking as both you and Pero are now gone, Adam and Othman must come back here and run things... I will send Faysal and Taha down there. They're both single, handsome, and out of control... send them there to find good wives. What do you think?'*

'Our next child was Hamza, born in 2005. He is an Arabic Scholar, and a world authority on the civilization, languages and dialects of the Arabs of Yemen, currently teaching at Princeton University in America. Hamza was especially dear to his father's heart; a great story teller and could always pull Radouan out of his dark moods by reciting many of the legendary stories spawned in ancient Arabi.'

'Soufiane, our sixth child, was born in 2006. He and his second wife, a very beautiful Lebanese girl, have their own apartment here in the house and manage all our family affairs.'

'Then Hind and Ismail arrived 2008, the twins, a girl and boy. Hind is married and lives between Paris and Southampton, Long Island with her husband, a French banker, and seven children. Her twin brother Ismail, a bachelor, is a barrister in London and lectures at Oxford on the Malikite interpretation of Sharia Law in Islam. He has written several books comparing the legal systems which evolved from the Greeks and Romans, and those which developed in the Middle East from Hamabouri, Moses and Mohammed.'

'Fatima, our fourth girl, born in 2011, lives in a place called Hana on the Hawaiian Island of Maui, with her husband a descendant of the original Hawaiian Royal family. They spend their days surfing, raising their seven children, and managing a large organic pineapple plantation on the other side of the island. Hana is unforgettable; untouched by time, so tranquil you can forget the world and all its cynicism. It's a very long trip for me now, however, so I tune in on them with my communicator.'

'Then came Batoul, born in 2012 - Batoul the most beautiful of our girls. She is married to an Italian Prince. They live in Monaco;

have four children and a busy social life there on the Riviera. I believe he works for an American investment firm...'

*'Or is he Greek, habibi? You know I'm vague about him because I dislike him so much... so pompous about his family, his money etc. - and not a very good husband either. I wish she would divorce him and find someone more compatible, but the children... well there would be a big court case wouldn't there?'*

'Yazzine, our sixth son, was born in May 2014.'

*'My favorite son, I suppose, because he reminds me so much of you, habibi.'*

'Yazzine lives here in Paris where he divides his time between writing and music. He is an accomplished performer on the Lute and the Kanoun, writes and sings his own music and has a band which is a big success. Very handsome he is and seems to have a new girl every few months. We manage to see him two or three times a week and he has been a great comfort to us.'

'His younger brother Ibrahim, born in 2016, is a well-known Bio-Environmentalist and lives in London where he works full time for *Foundation As-Sabil*.

*'Did you know that along with his Japanese girl friend, he now has an English boy friend - and worries about his future all the time?'*

'Then came dear Laiya who was born in 2017. Laiya is a scholar in Buddhist Studies at Stanford University in California. She is working on a book about Neo-Platonism and Buddhist Influences among the early Sufi masters.'

*'Really, you know she's prolonging her stay out there because she's still having an affair with that Indian computer genius who lives in San Francisco and won't divorce his wife to marry her. It's difficult. Remember how angry you were with him for making her so unhappy... thinking up all sorts of schemes to bankrupt him...'*

'Next came a second pair of twins, Omar and Malika who were born in 2018, a very difficult birth I remember. Omar is a graduate of

The Wharton School of Economics and an investment adviser for a big bank in Malaysia.

*'And still married to that rich American girl whose family do not like the idea of an Arab son-in-law...ayee... how you hated them. No children there yet, thanks to God the All Knowing, so there's still hope they'll divorce.'*

'Omar's twin sister Malika owns and runs a wonderful Islamic book store in London and is married to a Jewish boy of Iraqi origin. They are very happy and have three divine children. The boy's father, heir to a large banking fortune, always gave Radouan good advice over the years and we often visited their place in Gloucestershire.'

'Then came Farouk, born 2019, who graduated from Brown University in America a few years ago and has started his own publishing company in New York. Farouk married Nazreen, a Pathan girl from a Pakistani family. They have two children and live on Prince Street in downtown Manhattan. She's very sweet, my favorite daughter-in-law. Her father is an American, and her mother a Pathan from the Hindu Khush.'

'After Farouk came Zineb, born 2020, and Zoubida in 2021. Both girls attended Cambridge and are married to Moroccan boys. Zineb lives in Rabat and Asilah where her husband manages our real estate holdings in Morocco and Zoubida lives in the big house at R'hamna with her husband, a Botanist, who works for *As-Sabil*. Both girls have two children.

In November 2023, Faysal arrived. Later in life he attended Harrow and Oxford and lives in London.'

*'Yes, I am definitely going to send this rascal to Argentina. Like you he is charismatic, dashing, plays polo like you, and like you he drinks too much... which is why I'm going to send him out there to find a nice girl and get married... what do you think?'*

'Meryam, our twentieth child, was born in 2025 and recently graduated from Sarah Lawrence College in America where she majored in Psychology. She is very intelligent but still not quite sure what she wants to do - thinks she might like to start a Public Relations firm.'

*'You had a husband picked out for her, Achiki... that rich boy from Mumbai, handsome but not too bright. Now that you're gone, habibi, I doubt she'll go through with it. You never knew it but at the moment she thinks she's a lesbian and refuses to leave New York; lives with a girl she calls her 'significant other', whatever that means, who is after her money I know, and sees me as a big obstacle... What do I do?'*

*'Soumaya came next in 2026, and is a senior at Vassar College in America where she has been majoring in Arabic studies and Foreign Relations and wants to come back to Morocco and contest a seat for Parliament.'*

*'Last night at the party I told her, 'Ehbel Terbah, my loved one, make your self look stupid and you will be the winner.' Good advice for anyone entering politics don't you think?'*

*'And last, but certainly not least, is Taha born 2028, the baby of the family. He attended Harrow a year behind Faysal and lives in London.'*

*'But hated it, my darling, because he was always in Faysal's shadow... You never understood this, that he should have gone to some other school and now he's my greatest worry. Perhaps it would be wrong to send him off to Argentina with Faysal. Really, he's been so spoiled and bossed around by this family he has no mind of his own... needs to get away from us all... but where? He's in that flat you bought him in Eaton Square, stays out all night, sleeps all day, and isn't interested in going on to college or doing anything constructive, or even traveling. What's wrong? Delphine says he just needs time to find himself - whatever that means - and I suppose she's right. Still it's very painful for me to stand by and watch him destroying himself... it's as if he's very unhappy about the direction his life is taking and wants to revenge himself against the whole world... the same self destructive impulses you once had, habibi. Last night when you had your attack I thought Taha was going to suicide. Maybe I have to find him a beautiful girl from R'hamna who will bring him down to earth... and now you have left us I'm sure the tabloids will focus on him.'*

'All these my children and forty-one grandchildren were here last night when my husband had a stroke and died, he was eighty five or six we can't be sure...'

*'Ya habibi, you were embarrassed that you were causing such a scene weren't you? And furious that you weren't dying as you had planned; saying good bye to your children and grandchildren one by one in the grand bedroom suite of the Baroness' where she herself had died... what a thing to happen. Mach Allah, Al-insan moussayer, wa laysa moukhayer: man proposes, God disposes!'*

*Ah- ya... my poor brain is unraveling. I can't imagine how I'm still able to function but I must!'*

She closed her eyes, and there were Delphine's three boys, she must not forget them: Yahya, born in April 2004; Jebbor, born in November 2006 and Bachir, in May 2008. Three boys, one after the other, it was quite a time. Now Yahya is a motion picture producer here, not surprising as his mother had been a great star. Jebbor is a very good painter who has had a number of exhibitions in New York and Tokyo as well as Paris where his abstract calligraphy is very much admired. And Bachir is an Investment Banker and handles his mother's Finances.

*'Thank God, habibi, or by this time she would have spent it all!'*

She remembered how fond Radouan was of all three boys, especially Jebbor who took him for long walks in the Bois de Boulogne, played backgammon with him and read to him in the evenings. All three of them had been there last night with their wives and children.

Determined to pull herself together, Hafida sighed and straightened her back. Now her inner one was telling her she should sell this big place and move back to Dar Chems or the great house in R'hamna, but what about Delphine? She loved her life in Paris where she was still an important personality, had many friends and family, invested heavily in the theatre and was a big art collector. Even now, years later, her films with Francesco were still being shown in theatres and on television.

As for dear Mokhtar... now that Radouan was gone she supposed he would want to go back to Marrakech where his wife and children were always waiting patiently to see him. Poor fellow, he was in such a state. A faithful shadow he had been these last few years always with Radouan. Now suddenly he was a ghost. As he grew older and death approached, Radouan couldn't sleep unless Mokhtar was near him, sleeping at the foot of his bed, or more often than not, holding Radouan in his arms until he drifted off.

From the beginning, by making him his valet, she reflected, her husband had kept his passion for Mokhtar a big secret - as he should have - never spoke of it to her or anyone else. It was a life long affair between the two of them which began before she came on the scene. Finally, after they were really too old to be anything but dear friends, one day Radouan had told her the whole story.

She gazed down at him and laughed indulgently.

*'At least it kept you at home, achiki... you didn't go out looking around like so many of your friends.'*

She remembered with amusement how startled Radouan had been by that remark and thought how in some ways he was very naïve. For example: he had never suspected her relationship with Delphine!

Delphine was his white pigeon on the roof; a love-hate relationship and he'd been terrified of losing her and insanely jealous. He was the big cat and she was the bird in a golden cage, not a pigeon either, but a bird of Paradise. And because Francesco had such a hold over her, all the time promising her fame and fortune, Radouan had grown to hate him, had agents following them day and night and wanted to know everything she did. It wasn't just that he hated Francesco for sleeping with her; he certainly knew Delphine

had slept around before he met her. No, the problem was Radouan felt Francesco had betrayed him, broken his solemn oath, the bonds of their old friendship, their camaraderie, and that was unforgivable!

When her second film won the Palm d'Or at Cannes, she remembered, Delphine became a really big star, and Radouan had gone quietly *hemq*, mad, and sometimes not so quietly either. Tried to conceal his feelings, but she would catch him grinding his teeth and knew he was fighting the desire to revenge himself on Delphine, have one of his tantrums and go over the top... *passer ses nerfs sur quelqu'un!* 'Her words of the night are coated with butter,' he had screamed one night referring to Delphine, 'but as soon as the day shines on them they melt.'\* Pop-up: (from the Thousand and One Nights).

He'd been certain she wanted to destroy his mind, so why, Hafida asked herself, why had he bought up all the original prints of her films, had digital copies made and watched them for hours on end, even traveled with them?

Because of her career, Delphine couldn't live with him and yet he couldn't live without her. She smiled to herself and stroked Radouan's forehead.

*'And I sat on the sidelines having your babies, Khalili, but I was secretly applauding her.'*

Thinking of those times now so remote, she shook her head and frowned. It was just after Delphine began her third film that Francesco had been murdered by three young toughs in a part of Rome famous for that sort of thing; they had strangled him with his own scarf and stolen his car. There had been a witness in another car, but he was too afraid to get out and stop them. One of the boys was caught, claimed he wasn't involved and didn't know who the others were. He was jailed for awhile but was soon let out. Francesco dead! He was so brilliant, so alive! Hafida remembered how shocked she had been and that no one else was - although they were surprised he would have been so stupid as to frequent such a notorious area.

Radouan had pretended to be furious, but underneath she was sure he felt Francesco got what was coming to him. 'He who eats honey must be prepared for the sting of bees,' he would say solemnly when anyone mentioned it.

She remembered they had been in Marrakech at the time, out at Dar Chems. One of those wonderful summer nights, with music, wine, and dancing, and they had gone to bed. Then just before dawn the phone rang and she remembered Radouan muttering in Arabic from the Holy *Qur'an*:

'I seek refuge in the Lord of Daybreak from the misbehavior of his creations; from the baleful night when she spreads her darkness; from the malevolence of witches; from the vindictiveness of the envier, when he envies... At this hour it's always bad news!'

Then he sighed and mumbled hallo and it was Delphine. Yes, Delphine, and she was hysterical; kept screaming that she knew he was behind it. Insisted he find the other two boys... that she knew he could.

Radouan had held out the phone to her so Hafida could hear and Delphine had screamed and screamed '...cochon fils de cochon fils de pute... salopard... salope... sable negre... LE DIEU TE MAUDIT!' Then silence and Radouan hung up. 'Sounding like one of her films', he mumbled and immediately fell asleep.

Minutes later the phone rang again and it was Toni demanding that he be in Rome the following afternoon. It was absolutely imperative for him to be there; for his reputation, 'to keep Delphine from spreading things against you, stupid; to support her and take care of the funeral arrangements!' Radouan objected that the funeral arrangements were a matter for Francesco's family, said he didn't even know how Christians did these things; but sure, he would be there and would arrange a memorial gathering to pay tribute to Francesco.

Hafida opened her eyes, bent over and kissed Radouan's forehead.

*'It was at that moment you chose to tell me you were married to Delphine, habibi... Why? I still can't believe it! I thought it very cruel of you... TERRIBLE! Or was it just thoughtlessness?'*

She remembered how upset she had been; and worried that she might have a miscarriage. She was eight months pregnant with Othman, who would be born on her twenty-first birthday. So she refused to accompany Radouan to Rome, went out to R'hamna where the new house had finally been finished and she could find



peace of mind and be well looked after by Radouan's mother and her women.

But it was worse for Delphine who had been inconsolable, *mohbata*, mentally demolished and frustrated by Francesco's death. Demolished, because he was very eccentric, aux goutts speciaux, you might say and because she was mad for him and terribly frustrated because she wanted to finish the picture they'd been working on. But no one knew what the ending was supposed to be and no other director would touch it because how could they finish the work of a great genius like Francesco Monte? Impossible! And even though Radouan had offered to finance the completion and distribution of the film, the project had finally been dropped. Nowadays, Hafida reflected, the film was considered so important the unfinished version was being shown and there had been proposals for various endings.

After the funeral and the tribute to Francesco which had been broadcast live on Italian TV, somehow Radouan had persuaded Delphine to return with him to R'hamna! 'Only God knows what he's up to now,' Hafida remembered saying to herself at the time. Maybe he thought quiet village life and a family atmosphere would calm Delphine down. Even so, she recalled, at the time she had thought it a very strange thing for him to have done, especially as he knew very well how upset she was - not because he was married to Delphine, but that they had deceived her for so many years.

*Mach Allah.* His actions were to have consequences beyond anything he could have imagined. Though of course she and Delphine had been friends for several years, now their relationship would change. Delphine arrived with him in October of 2003 and the days passed. Hafida remembered how Delphine used to come into her sitting room and she would teach her Moroccan card games like *Ronda* and *Tijari*. Sometimes Mokhtar and Radouan would join them. Delphine had just celebrated her twenty-ninth birthday and said she felt like an old woman. Often she would stand naked in Hafida's mirrored dressing room examining her body for blemishes or wrinkles... staring at her self and weeping. Slowly, however, the quiet life at R'hamna seemed to have a good effect on her and she began to forget her film star image - or outgrow it. Something of an accomplishment Hafida thought, for although it was obvious Delphine had been captivated by her own media image, she had managed to exorcise this malefic *Djinn*.

So Delphine had been there at her bedside when Othman was born - their second boy! Radouan had been very pleased and for Delphine it had been like a sudden clap of thunder, a raad, une coup de tonnerre, which grounded her and brought her back into the real world. Three months later Delphine confessed she was pregnant with Radouan's child, and that they had been married for years.

Then something very unusual occurred. Several months after Delphine's first son was born, having been casual friends for years, they had decided to spend the day in a luxurious new health spa near Asni and were alone in their own private *hamam*. By then, Hafida had lost over thirty kilos. Delphine told her she looked voluptuous and kissed her breasts and she had replied that she was fit because of all the hard work she had been doing taking care of her ever growing family. Without another word Delphine began exploring her secret parts and they had made love.

Even after so many years had passed, Hafida reflected, shyness still prevented her from thinking too much about their passions; what they had done and had continued to do over the years whenever they could. It had always been a separate compartment in her life, a ritual space, which she would enter and lose her self completely with Delphine. When they made love it was like they were two *houris* flying through space in each other's arms at a terrific speed.

Hafida was sure Radouan had never known. At first, she remembered, she thought Delphine had seduced her to get even with Radouan over Francesco's death. But later when Delphine had sworn to keep their relationship secret, she began to trust her and their passion had grown and mellowed.

She gazed down at Radouan.

*'You were right, khalili, on our wedding night, when you said I'd had sex before we were married... yes, I had, but not with men - and so had Delphine so it was nothing new for either of us.'*

She and Delphine, how hard they had tried to include Toni in everything, but their efforts had proven useless. What an amazing woman their co-wife had been, so generous, self-confident and with an optimism that was contagious. However the way she distanced herself from you with certain gestures and her brittle laughter made you realize she was a like a castle surrounded by a moat of despair;

the drawbridge had always been up and only Radouan and Pero had managed to get across and break through the gate. She stared down at him affectionately, he was like that, her darling husband, like an errant knight, a chevalier and that's what life had been between Toni and him: a constant battle!

But despite his rebelliousness from the beginning he had been willing to learn from Toni. Yes, because she had come from another world, made his world larger, given up her country and her way of life and finally married him. And it was she who had saved him, taught him to think ahead and plan.'

*'In many ways, habibi, you were a person who could see far into the future... a crazy seer, that's what Toni knew, and it was also your biggest problem. Many times you were so far into the future, you were unable to deal with the present... Making plans for the day or by the week, the month or year bored you... you hated it and were impulsive because you knew you had the Baraka and were protected. For years you floated on the moments as they passed, Carpe Diem as they say in Latin, Seize the Day, yes... by acting on instinct like those gallant wind surfers at Sidi Kouki, always optimistic that the next wave...'*

*'Well, that's why last night was so terrible, wasn't it, my husband -because it was so strange... as though your Baraka had suddenly deserted you. Or perhaps it was the angel Jibril, seeing that in your old age you were having problems dancing with your granddaughter, decided he would take you straight away to Paradise where you could dance forever...'*

*'Right now my Khalili, I pray that's where you are... dancing in the gardens of Paradise. In my life I have seen many dancers, habibi, but none like you. How can I forget the first time I saw you dance, there in the courtyard of your grandmother's house the night of our wedding before you came up to me... I couldn't believe you were human.'*

Hafida dabbed at her eyes that were filled with tears again.

*'Now please habibi, just look at us survivors... Delphine, Mokhtar, and me... like pieces of old wrecked furniture washed up here on the banks of the Seine. Look how I'm holding back my tears, my darling... I'm not sure I like surviving... it's too painful, too triste...'*

*poor Mokhtar, I'm worried now he's going to go hemq... What does he have of you khalili, nothing? At least Delphine and I, we have your children, your flesh and blood... but Mokhtar?'*

She stroked Radouan's forehead and whispered,

*'Achiki, just now I swear I saw you standing over there in the doorway smiling at me and talking with Toni and Prospero smiling as if all my concerns and grief were ridiculous... If your ghost is here in Paris won't it be lonely without us...? How will it get to Dar Chems? The mausoleum the Baroness built is there, it has a place waiting for you already inscribed with your name. Youssef is there and Nicholas, Toni and Prospero... There is room in the mausoleum for Delphine and Fouzia and me too...also Mokhtar if he wants to be there... about twenty five places I believe.'*

*'But you told us many times, you were supposed to be buried at R'hamna, that you had promised your father, and made Adam swear he would be buried there beside you... all your ancestors there. So what do we do? It's a problem... I want to be with you in death as I was in life, my husband, and I'm sure Delphine does too... and Fouzia, what about her? Certainly she will want to be with Prospero - so many problems...And what about Chaiir el Hamra's house where you first kept our dear orphan when you rescued him? You wanted to make it a library for your poetry collection, a place of reading and meditation but never got round to it. I will give it to Mokhtar... I'm sure he will see that your wishes are carried out.'*

Hafida sighed. In a few hours they would have to take Radouan away to wherever he was going to be buried. Something had to be decided very soon. Adam would not want him interred in the Mausoleum at Dar Chems because he found the origin of his father's fortune an embarrassment and would insist that Radouan be buried at R'hamna. But what of Radouan's promise to be beside the Baroness in death?

To outlast time, to be remembered in the future, to join the ranks of the immortals, The Baroness would certainly need Radouan's help. There were many who considered him a Sufi Saint; *Sidi Radouan-Jannat* they called him and thought he was a great *Maji* who could rain down money on them. For sure, they would come and start worshipping him wherever he was buried; make a

shrine and start a *Zouwia*. Beside him the Baroness would also achieve immortality.

As the first rays of the rising sun glanced off the glass domed ceiling of the ballroom she raised her eyes.

*'Ah see, habibi, the dawn is here... God protect us from the mischief of this day...from the photographers and journalists! What will I say to them about your accomplishments, my darling... the ones you would like to be remembered for rather than your misdeeds?'*

*'Foundation As-Sabil* of course... how to summarize everything it did?

In Marrakech and other Moroccan cities it assisted with funds for sewage, waste disposal, and pollution control; then Radouan began thinking of village life and that R'hamna could be a model for improving villages throughout the country. Small was beautiful had become his philosophy. 'Footpaths were better than super highways,' she remembered him saying, 'the more you used a footpath the easier it was to travel on. The more you used a super highway the more expensive it became to maintain.' The first experiment, to improve his ancestral village without changing it that much, had been a qualified success. They had learned a lot but more had yet to be done. So many Moroccan towns and villages were older than those of France. Why not pay more attention to them?

So, *As-Sabil* had given R'hamna and a few other villages the money to increase their power supplies and improve their water and sewage systems. It had also paved the village lanes with real paving stones, improved communication systems and made sure there were schools with computers, first class teachers, and well stocked libraries; as well as up to date clinics and hospitals with qualified staffs.

She recalled how difficult all this had been, how fierce the opposition from Moroccan notables, landlords and politicians who thought of the local countrymen and women as slaves. Somehow Radouan had managed to charm, cajole and bribe these powerful people to do the right thing. And slowly, as villagers received the tools to reach out and become well informed, they felt less isolated, more creative, stopped being fatalistic, and were able take control of their lives. *As-Sabil* made low interest loans for various projects and small businesses. Cottage industries grew up and became profitable.

Information Technology Outsourcing became a gold mine. Because of improved water and power systems people planted more orchards and raised more food.

Outside the villages, however, the land was still barren, exhausted by centuries of grazing, mono cropping and the cutting of trees and shrubs for fuel. *As-Sabil* imported thousands of meters of fencing and subsidized the slow, often painful, process of returning the land to fertility. As productivity increased, and since organic farming was labor intensive, many poor from the large cities returned to their native places drawn by the improved quality of life and its possibilities.

All these projects, originated by *As-Sabil*, were now facts of life. Strange, Hafida thought to herself, although the Baroness' father had thwarted her marriage to her Fassi lover because he did not want his fortune to pass into the hands of a Moor, yet it was God's will and was fated to happen through the attraction between the Baroness and Radouan. 'Morocco sheltered the Baron from the Nazis during the Second World War,' Prospero always said, 'now God was repaying the country for this act of kindness through *As-Sabil*.

'Praise belongs to Allah the Lord of All Being,' Hafida whispered, 'the All Merciful, All Compassionate, the Master of the Day of Doom.

Back in R'hamna at last, surrounded by old mementoes, treasured photographs and familiar objects of her life, Hafida sighed uncertainly and gazed around the room; the tower room where she and Radouan had first made love. Outside the open windows the olive groves were an ocean of silver in the warm breeze. Yet now that she had finally returned, suddenly she felt an unaccustomed strangeness, yes, as if she were seeing it all for the first time, a certain meaninglessness too, and she knew it was Radouan - the absence of him.

Really the past week had seemed endless to her. That awful morning, when Adam and Othman returned with the people who took him away, her *habibi* Radouan - one of the worst moments of her life - the memory of it receding now but still painful. She hadn't wanted to let go of him and it occurred to her that she must have made quite a fuss; remembered Delphine holding her tenderly while her world seemed to dissolve around her and everything she had been keeping back came rushing out. She remembered shrieking and sobbing – and cursing! Then Adam had given her a shot of something. Which must have been quite powerful because the next thing she knew she was giving her press conference, and then she was on the plane and Delphine and Mokhtar were standing over her trying to get her to drink some chicken broth that Mokhtar had prepared. And finally when she came to her senses the first thing she thought of, of course, was Radouan. Where was he?

Delphine looked terrible, her hair tangled like Medusa. Pointing to the back of the plane, she had taken her hand and guided her to a large silver box resting on silver lion's paws and said he was inside it. Adam and Othman were standing there and explained that long ago Toni had ordered it for Radouan; a beautiful work of art made in Italy by a gifted young Syrian. Only Radouan, Adam, and Othman had known of its existence. Radouan had disapproved of it on religious grounds but Toni had insisted so he had placed it in storage and forgotten about it. Othman said it was the best way of transporting Radouan back to Marrakech and explained that there were several coffins one inside the other. The outermost silver one was carved with the design of an ancient Arab ship under full sail and inscribed with a quotation in Arabic from a famous Maghrebi poet, Sidi al Shadhili, who had lived in Alexandria:

'Subject to us, every sea here on earth and in heaven above, in the world of our senses and the invisible world, the sea of this life and the sea of the life to come. Subject to us everything, O Thou in who rules over all - *Kaf Ha Ya Ayn Sad.*'

Inside, a second box was of pure gold, inscribed with more of the same poem. The third was electrum, the fourth teakwood from Malabar, the fifth cedar from Lebanon, the sixth wood of the neem tree, and the seventh, in which Radouan's body rested was of sandalwood from Mysore, in India.

Such an ostentatious object had disturbed Hafida and she remembered Radouan's oft-repeated desire that he should be wrapped in a simple *kafin* and buried in the *Zouiya* cemetery in Marrakech to become part of the earth. 'That's where we will all come together again,' he would laugh, 'the rich, the poor, the brilliant and the stupid.' But it was an idea that was hard for their children to accept and Taha had burst into tears. 'Dump him in the ground somewhere just like that... you must be crazy!'

Seeing the beautifully carved silver ship riding the great ocean waves, she had been deeply moved that Toni would have thought of such a thing, so she kept quiet. But when Mokhtar had opened all the boxes one after another and finally got to Radouan, he looked so changed, so pale; suddenly he wasn't the man she had known at all, not even a person, really, just an object, a masque, an empty shell. It was a horrifying moment and she had screamed. A moment she wanted to erase from memory but could not. The moment when she suddenly realized the man to whom she had devoted her whole life had left her forever... gone traveling for the last time and would never return.

She had fainted in Taha's arms and the next thing she remembered the plane had landed at Marrakech and Mokhtar was trying to get her to sit up. And there was Adam trying to give her another injection to get her through the next few hours, and Delphine trying to get her into a *Haik*. Sometimes they were very useful, those *haiks*. She certainly hadn't wanted anyone to see how she looked.

Outside the plane, the scene was incredible: a huge crowd had gathered, every R'hamna who could get there had come and on the tarmac below, their immediate family had gathered while a glass enclosed lift was maneuvered into place. Then eight of their boys carried the coffin into it and when they reached the ground carried it on their shoulders to an open van. After that she and Delphine were helped into the lead car of a cavalcade which followed the van to the Baroness old *ksar*, *Dar Chems*, where Radouan's body would rest in the mausoleum until his Testament was read out. Along the way, people stood in small groups waving and throwing flowers.

Unless he left instructions in his Testament to the contrary, Adam had finally conceded, the easiest thing would be to inter Radouan at *Dar Chems*. But that afternoon as she sat having tea with Mokhtar and they observed how the neighborhood was fast becoming a Mahgrebi version of Los Angeles, they decided it might be better to



bury Radouan in R'hamna where they would have more control over development around them. 'Why can't we take the Baroness there too?' Mokhtar asked, 'move the whole mausoleum and every one in it to R'hamna. It came here in pieces. Why can't it be taken apart and moved.' Hopefully Radouan's Testament would clarify things and give them guidance.

By eight that evening she and Delphine along with Fouzia, Mokhtar and all the children and grandchildren, had gathered in the grand salon of Dar Chems to hear Mr. Somers read the Testament. Somers was a senior partner of the firm that handled Radouan's affairs after Prospero died. She remembered thinking how very strange it was after so many years, to be back in that beautiful room with its crimson silk walls hung with paintings framed in gold; everything exactly as it always had been. And remembered how impressed she had been when Radouan first brought her there some weeks after their marriage, showed her photos of the Baroness and her friends and told her many stories about them.

Even though she had never known her, Hafida began to feel the Baroness' presence: intelligent, intuitive, wildly carefree but never out of control. Was she there now watching and judging them?

A large screen stood beside Mr. Somers' desk. He welcomed them all and said he had a surprise for them; then nervously shuffled some papers and pressed a button.

*'I, Radouan-Jannat ibn Ibrahim ibn Abbas ibn Hassan al Uld Billah, do declare the following to be my last Will and Testament.'*

Suddenly Radouan's voice filled the room, and there he was before them on the screen speaking in English. She felt faint again. Delphine covered her face with her scarf and burst into tears. Mokhtar slowly drew in his breath and stared wide-eyed. But there he was among us, Radouan, full of life, looking very smart in a pair of cream colored silk pajamas, sitting in the Baroness' suite reading from a sheaf of papers.

He grinned shyly and spoke carefully. She judged the recording must have been made recently.

*'This was my idea... Somers here did not approve... I hope it doesn't upset you... and that it will be a document for those who come after me.'*

*'First, I want to thank you all for a life that has been happier than I ever could have expected. I would also like to thank the members of our extended family who were directly responsible for our successes and who left this world before me. I'm thinking about Toni, Pero, Nicholas, and Rupert... I hope they can hear me now and that I'll see them all soon... Inch Allah.'*

*'We've had some tender moments in this room and must always remember and thank God for the one who made it possible, our Baroness Minna... may The Lord of the Spirit World protect her. As time goes by you may find that she is still here. Believe me, since she died I have spoken with her many times in this very room...yes, and for that reason, if for no other, we must keep this place exactly as it is... also Toni's place down the road... preserve them for future generations... the houses, the gardens, the orchards and olive groves, so that they will know how we lived... once upon a time..'*

*'As the owner of these properties it is my wish that they be given to As- Sabil for its international headquarters... never to be sold or divided.'*

*'In the name of God the Compassionate, the Merciful, I ask that you work hard to sustain As-Sabil... bring it the means from whence we know not so that it may continue helping the people...'*

*'Praise be to God, there is no power, no strength, save in the Almighty. On whomever he wishes without reckoning, he bestows riches. Oh Lord, I ask your forgiveness of my sins and repent to you all my faults...'*

Then Radouan had shuffled the papers before him, put on his reading glasses and smiled out at them. Hafida found herself struggling to hold back tears.

*'Which brings me to the subject of where my bones will rest... a difficult decision for me... My father, Peace be upon him, made me promise to be buried beside him in R'hamna in an ordinary grave and I have asked Adam to be buried there beside me... On the other hand, the Baroness, may God cherish her, made me promise I would be interred near her; and built the Mausoleum you have all seen here*

*in the garden for that purpose, in which her true son Youssef as well as Pero, Toni, and Nicholas, already lie.'*

He looked up over his glasses and nodded.

*'I'm sure Hafida and Delphine have been puzzling over just what to do about this... Hafida, my keeper, my love... and Delphine my all consuming passion... Alors, this is my solution. Because the region here is being destroyed by greed and unsustainable development, and the tranquillity which we have enjoyed here for so many years is surely going to an end... Mach Allah... It is my wish that the entire mausoleum from its foundation stones to its cupola be moved to R'hamna along with its occupants so that we can all be together there, and that a mosque dedicated to Sidi Bou Othman be constructed beside it. However, it's important for me that I be buried in the earth, wrapped in a simple cotton cloth and not interred in a niche in the wall of a mausoleum. So you will have to bury my body in the customary way near my father and then rebuild the mausoleum around us. Very generous it was for Toni to have that silver coffin made but she never understood that it is not our custom... we do not want to be mummies... we want our bodies to dissolve in the earth and bring forth more life.'*

*'I worry also that the Baroness' ghost may feel lonely here in this house without us... but as I do not believe ghosts respect space or time, if we remove her body to R'hamna, her ghost will surely follow. As this place will become the headquarters of As-Sabil... God willing, her ghost would also be happy here where there would always be sympathetic people for her to speak with - Maybe my ghost will be wandering' around here too.'*

A sly smile crossed his lips and he adjusted his glasses.

*'As most of you know, my personal assets, land, shares, cash, etc., make up the capital of one large privately held Compagnie ELAL, in which you will all receive voting shares. It is my wish that all decisions and settlements of disputes, which may arise between you, will be settled by a three-quarters majority vote. So many fortunes have been destroyed by fighting among heirs; I hope you will be able to abide by this.'*

*'The number of votes each of you will have is equal to the percentage you will inherit. I hope you and your heirs will keep ELAL privately held for as long as you are able.'*

*'Bequests are as follows: 8% each to Hafida and Delphine... 4% each to Fouzia and Mokhtar... and 3% each to Aicha, Khadija, Adam and Othman, whom I appoint as our representatives on the board of ELAL, without salaries, for as long as they are able to handle the job... after which their positions should be given to other members of the family chosen by the surviving heirs, with appropriate remuneration. Adam, I appoint as Chairman of ELAL, and Othman its CEO.'*

*'To each of my remaining twenty-one children I leave 2.5% each, the remaining 11.5% to be divided equally between my living brothers and sisters, (except Fouzia who has already been noted here) or their descendants. There are also various bequests in cash and three trusts for Toni's grandchildren which can be taken out before anything else is done.'*

*'The shares of my female children will be held in separate irrevocable trusts so they cannot be looted by husbands or gigolos...'*

He had pointed at the camera and laughed.

*'Monies from these trusts can be given monthly to my female children for their comfort and support. Upon their deaths these trusts are to be passed on to their children who, when they reach the age of thirty, will be given full control of the assets.'*

*'The shares for my male children will be given to them directly, except for those under thirty whose shares will be held in trusts like their sisters', until they reach that age.'*

*'Really, I'm just giving you a short summary... the details are more complicated... but be sure they are all in your favor... to protect and provide for you all... and for future generations. During the last forty-eight years my private assets have doubled every five or six years, so you will be well provided for.'*

Putting down his glasses, he sipped some wine and cleared his throat.

*'Now listen to me... I want to give you advice from the grave and hope you will remember it.*

*'This world you are living in is a mischievous lover. What we think will happen usually does not... and what we don't expect usually does... Yes, my beloveds as you've heard me say many times, Life is God's Joke so watch out! He favors whom he chooses and we cannot understand his choices because we are part of them... part of the Joke. Time seems to rush by, but it's our own invention and really nothing ever changes... jus' takes different forms. That's part of the Joke too. We invent instruments to explain and explore this puzzle, but it is hopeless because all our mathematics and technologies reflect the structure of our brain which belongs to God alone. We appear to be caught in a process which has a beginning and end... birth and death... yet we must always remember that no living thing ever asked to be born... or to die.*

*'As we are all trapped inside this conundrum, what is left to guide our behavior? Compassion. Yes, Compassion. When all our systems have failed, when everything has been taken from us, what is left is something we call Compassion, which is more than just attraction and repulsion... nor is it possessive or practical. We call The All Mighty Compassionate because He has gifted us humans the emotion of Compassion.*

*Imagine us as passengers adrift in a rudderless ship blown about on a sea where even the stars cannot guide us. Islam means surrendering to this universal truth while still going about the business of living one's life. By practicing Compassion we can soften the cruel blows of this struggle. Let compassion be your rudder, be kind and forgiving and you will be happy.'*

*As the Merciful One is Compassionate he will also forgive you for straying from the straight path. He knows that ignoring the djinns of desire cannot conquer Shaitan, and he will forgive you. Believe me, I am an expert in what some people call Sin... but I know if you are Compassionate you cannot Sin no matter what you do or what religions say. Maybe you will make mistakes but you won't sin...*

*Compassion is the instrument of choice. Compassion is Mansour, my darlings, the winner.'*

Then he leaned forward intently.

*'But going about the business of living one's life means taking action and as a guide to that there is an old Sufi saying which goes, 'All our so-called plans are fantasies and adventures. Observe the accidental, the coincidental for they are Gods real plan.*

*Man's plans... sometimes they work, sometimes they don't. More often they are mistakes that cause more problems. The All Mighty's plan makes itself known in the accidental encounter, the unforeseen disaster.'*

*'So you must be watchful, my children and learn to read the omens because for every action there is always a reaction. Never take action in haste... Act in haste repent for ever, so the saying goes... because finally the reaction will catch you up... may be years coming... may be pleasant or may come suddenly like a thief in the night. The fruits of your actions will always overtake and haunt you. So learn agility and the courage to change... to walk the tight rope of life but not linger upon it...'*

Then he sighed, nodded his head and looked out at them.

*'I have lingered too long.*

*'I have written each one of you a personal letter that Mr. Somers will be giving you. I want you to be happy now that old Radouan has been released from life's burdens... really, I have always believed that death should be celebrated so don't mourn me... Though I've gone on ahead, I am also with you. Get on with your lives and perhaps, as some say, we'll meet and speak again in the World behind the World.'*

*'Tomorrow or the day after, at Toni's place, I want you to make a big feast, call all your friends and any old friends of mine who are still around... call musicians, wine bearers and dancers... Sing and let the wine flow and I'll be dancing with you...'*

Smiling shyly, shuffling the papers in front of him, he began to chuckle then laugh and the recording ended with him blowing kisses at them with both hands.

Hafida remembered how Delphine had trembled, how many sobs there had been in that room and how finally Aicha had rescued

them all by having tea and sweets served, while from the garden the consoling sounds of a flute had calmed their nerves.

Before she went to bed that night she had knelt down and spoken to him:

*'I go to bed happy, my husband, for the first time since you left me... because now I have this souvenir of you.. It makes me feel Okay... and I know now you will always be with me. Chokrun, my habibi! Yah, may peace be upon you. Chokrun!'*

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The next few days they had remained at Dar Chems negotiating with contractors and architects about designs for a Mosque for Sidi Bou Othman and how to move the mausoleum and reconstruct it at R'hamna. Fortunately, Radouan had saved the plans for the mausoleum so it could be easily taken apart and moved without much damage. Finally, when everything had been settled according to Radouan's wishes, they had organized a big party down the road at Toni's old place, and invited all their old friends and all the children's friends as well. There, they had feasted and toasted Radouan, resting temporarily in his silver coffin on a platform near a fountain at one end of the courtyard. Champagne flowed. There was dervish dancing, and by the end of the evening half the guests were in the pool. Later, when everyone had gone home or to bed and Delphine had driven back to Marrakech, Hafida and Mokhtar walked back from Toni's place to Dar Chems along the allee of cypresses Mokhtar had helped plant fifty years before. The moon cast bars of bright light across the way as they marveled at how tall the trees had grown.

How tipsy they had both been, she smiled to herself, supporting each other to keep on the path. She had been staying in the Baroness' suite and Mokhtar in a bedroom downstairs. When it came time to say goodnight, however, and he had suggested some bed tea to soothe their nerves, she had become suspicious and was about to decline when he revealed he had something important to tell her.

Something Radouan had made him promise to tell her privately after he'd read his testament.

And so a short time later, Mokhtar appeared with a tray, sat down on the floor and poured out the tea. Then he lit a pipe of kif, passed it to her and she asked what was bothering him. Was it seeing Radouan and having him speak to them like that?

'Yes, it was like that, like a resurrection, but not...' He shook his head. 'Since he left us I have awakened each day to the sadness of being alone without him. At sundown when the muezzins call, I hear his voice, and in the silence of the night he comes to me in dreams... There is something he wants me to tell you, something he told me only last month and made me swear I would never tell any one but you.'

Hafida smiled inwardly. 'Now I'm going to get the Scorpion!' she thought.

'You never knew her,' Mokhtar said and looked about the room... 'The Baroness... myself, after Radouan got me a job here, I saw her only once or twice before she died but she had something about her that was impressive. Just after he found me this job, Radouan, for some reason he had to go to Paris to see Delphine. This was at the beginning of her film career. I was getting bored shut up in that small house in the Medina and had been asking him to find some outside work for me to do... He said as he was going away that he needed someone out here to watch over the Baroness because not only was she dying of an incurable disease but she was in danger of being murdered by somebody.'

'Murdered by somebody! You mean he knew someone wanted to kill her?'

'Yes, and make it look like it was him... you know he always knew everything... Listen and I will tell you.'

'I'd been out here for about two weeks when he came to see her that evening before he left for Paris. Earlier the same day, I had overheard someone in a suit and tie speaking with a Fassi accent to the new server Zouheir and giving him money. He was counting it out, two bricks it was, and he was telling Zouheir the next time Radouan came out he was to kill the Baroness as soon as Radouan left!

'I reasoned the Fassi knew Radouan was leaving for Paris the next day and would be coming out to say good bye to her. So I intercepted Radouan on the drive and told him what I'd heard, and



that he was facing a dangerous situation. He listened thoughtfully for a few moments, and then asked me to keep the Baroness' maid Fatima occupied until he left because he didn't want to be interrupted and to watch the door of the Baroness' suite. As it happened that wasn't very hard, because that maid, who later became my wife, had been having an affair with the new server Zouheir, and wanted to revenge herself on him for fooling around with other girls. So I occupied her for a few hours, in the big linen closet just outside this suite.' Mokhtar grinned shyly. 'That was the beginning of our romance. Then, shortly before midnight, when Radouan left the Baroness he found us in the linen closet and told us to stay there and watch to see if Zouheir came and entered the Baroness' suite... this very room where we are now sitting.'

'So we watched and Zouheir did come. Just after we heard Radouan's car drive away, he came with a tray of tea the Baroness always took to make her sleep. He was inside for a very long time. Finally he came out with the same tray and went downstairs. This is what Fatima and I told the police when they were here questioning Zouheir. This is all I knew until a month ago.

Hafida found it all very confusing. 'But you never told the police you overheard Zouheir and the young man in the suit speaking about killing the Baroness, did you?'

Mokhtar replied that he had been so frightened he only answered the questions they asked him and they never asked him that.

'Is there more?' she asked and wondered if it was because he knew so much that Radouan had kept Mokhtar close all those years

'You know I am not a bearer of tales or a gossip,' Mokhtar replied, 'and I am telling you this because he ordered me to do so, not because I want to. You must swear you will never repeat it. Swear!'

'I swear on the earth that covers my father's head.'

'You were so young at the time, not even married yet, so you could not have known that the Baroness was suffering greatly. She had asked Radouan to help her end her life, yes... wanted to die in his arms; sleeping pills, injections, whatever it took she didn't care... as long as she was in his arms when she died. After all, they had been lovers for over twenty years! Radouan, he told me many times he'd tried to talk her out of it, but she kept insisting... pleading with

him. He told her it was suicide and was forbidden, but she said it wasn't suicide, it was compassion.

'So, even though he was against it, Radouan went ahead and found out the easiest way to do it with sleeping pills and whisky. But he told her he would be accused of murdering her and put in jail if anyone found out. She said nonsense. He said not nonsense and then explained to her what he had learned: that the young man who claimed to be her lost son, had seen her Testament in Mlle Saadi's office. That the two of them, Saadi and the young man, had conspired with Ahmed to hire one Zouheir the new server, to kill her and make it look like he, Radouan, had done it.'

'What was Radouan to do?' Mokhtar asked. 'Either the Baroness would die in his arms that very night... he didn't have the sleeping pills with him... or be murdered by that slippery psychopath Zouheir. So he took a chance, and it was a big chance, because what if Zouheir had not come into this room after Radouan left, and what if he had discovered the maid and me watching from the hall closet?'

'So my husband helped her end her life in this very room... how did he do it?'

'Smothered her with kisses,' Mokhtar said slowly, '... that's what he told me. She just sighed and stopped breathing...'

For some moments Hafida was speechless. 'Smothered her with kisses! That's what he told you?'

'Yes...' Mokhtar exhaled and nodded his head thoughtfully 'So now you know and I've followed his instructions.... He also told me he knew he was going to die soon. He didn't seem to know how or why because he was in good health, but he knew and wanted you to know and promise that you would swear over his body just before they buried him that you would never tell anyone - especially not Delphine, who gossips too much. If this story got out, he thought it could destroy your entire family and *As-Sabil* as well. He was sure no one would understand why he had done it, he barely understood himself, but he knew he had done the right thing... Whether he had died for doing it, he cared not at the time, but thanks to God the All Knowing and to Toni and Prospero things had turned out right.'

'Thanks to God and to you, dear Mokhtar,' she replied. 'It was you who warned him, you who stood by him all these years. That was very important for us... so many times he went *hemq* and only you

could handle him. Without you he would have landed up in an institution...'

'He found me on the way, starving and cold. I owed him my life,' Mokhtar replied, his mouth trembling.

'Don't cry,' she pleaded, 'you'll have us both crying again.'

'I think I'm going to die soon too.'

'How do you know?'

'I feel it inside...'

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By early the next morning, most of their large family had departed except Aicha, Khadija, Adam and Othman and their children who had stayed on and had accompanied her, along with Delphine and Mokhtar to R'hamna, a closed army truck with Radouan in his sandalwood box preceding them.

Arriving here she was still asking her self why Radouan had never told her the real story of the Baroness' death when she entered this room, the room where Radouan had first made love to her and felt drained and empty and really wished she didn't know Radouan's secret, wished Mokhtar had kept it to himself. Could it really be true or was he playing some kind of trick on her. She would never know. What she did know was that she would have to live with it for the rest of her life!

After a short nap, she joined Delphine and Mohktar and they went down and stood by his coffin and shook hands with the town's people who had come to say good bye to him and as the afternoon slowly eroded, they carried him to the burial site, where she kissed his forehead for the last time, and swore solemnly that she would faithfully keep his secret.

Then Adam and his sons carried Radouan's body to the gravesite, lowered it into the earth and Othman prayed:

'In the name of God the merciful who forgiveth aye,  
Praise is to Him, the Lord of all that be, the King of  
Judgment Day.

Thee we worship and for Thine aid we pray.  
 Lead us in the right way.  
 The way of those, to whom Thou hast been gracious,  
     against whom thou hast not waxed wrath, and who go  
     not astray!  
 Amen.  
 From God we come and to him we return.'

And Hafida whispered to herself:  
 'Love wins all. Those who can truly see know.  
 Prosperous is he who purifies himself, or gives alms, and  
 repeats the name of the Lord and prays.'

Despite her efforts to sidetrack the Press by mentioning all their children, the following Obituary had appeared a few days earlier on the sites of the major world news services.

*Paris Reuters – October 16, 2048 Today in Paris, the great house on the Isle-St-Louis was draped in red and green, its lights dimmed in mourning for its mysterious occupant, Radouan ibn Ibrahim Al Uld Billah, who died there last night at the age of eighty-seven. A renowned philanthropist, collector and one of the world's richest men; he is probably best remembered for his oft quoted remark, 'Life is God's Joke.'*

*Although he had properties around the world and traveled between them, aside from his immediate family and employees the eccentric recluse, who favored disguises when he ventured out, had not been seen publicly for over thirty years. Billah's foundation, As-abil, until recently presided over by the late Prospero Manolo Serfati, was established at the turn of the century and has since become one of the largest charitable organizations in the world. A pioneer in strategies to empower the rural poor, it incurred the wrath of the Moroccan Establishment, was dismissed by international development agencies and bitterly opposed by business interests and government bureaucracies of the time.*

*Born in Marrakech, Morocco in 1962, into an ancient tribe of mounted Arab fighters, the R'hamna, one of the tribes of the Banu Hilal who invaded Morocco in the Eleventh Century, by eighteen, Billah had become a man about town in Marrakech, well known as a rising star on the International polo scene, and over the next decade notorious for a series of scandalous affairs with members of the*

*international set including the Baroness Minna Von Schleebruck, doyenne of Marrakech society for forty years, and the late British socialite Antonia Howard. It was during this same period, under circumstances shrouded in mystery, that he acquired a very large fortune and gave three quarters of it to As-abil.*

*Billah, a Sunni, was an outspoken critic of Christian, Moslem and Jewish Fundamentalism. His famous quip, Life is God's Joke, incurred the wrath of various Ayatollahs, Imams, Muftis, Cardinals and Rabbis across the spectrum of the Religions of the Book, enraged the Vatican, and was the subject of a Fatwa issued in Qom which denounced him as a Heretic and called for his death. During the same period, roughly the first two decades of this century, he was hounded by the international press which demonized him variously as a Neo-Marxist, Socialist, Luddite, Regresso, Terrorist, Anti-Globalizationist, Radical Environmentalist, Social Terrorist, Womanizer, Gigolo, Libertine, Playboy, Toy Boy, male chauvinist pig, Dervish, and Sufi. In his native country, Morocco, however, he was worshipped by many and still is as a Holy man with extraordinary powers.*

*Disillusioned by the life his wealth had brought, and stunned by the ridicule with which his foundation As-Sabil was originally received, by 2010 Billah had left Morocco and taken up residence in France where he purchased the hotel particulier on the Isle-St-Louis where he died last night.*

*In 2012 he migrated to Argentina and was living on a large property in the Eastern foothills of the Andes Mountains where he remained for two decades. On the death there of his first wife in 2038, he returned to Paris and took up residence again on the Isle-St-Louis.*

*Although he became increasingly reclusive and had not been seen in public for over thirty-five years, he was an astute investor, and amassed a personal fortune estimated at two hundred billion pounds. As Chairman of the Board of As-Sabil, he oversaw its emergence as one of the largest philanthropic organizations in the world with assets of over a trillion pounds.*

*He is survived by his second and third wives, their children and grandchildren. Memorial services will be held in Marrakech on October the Seventeenth. Burial will take place the following afternoon at the village of R'hamna, a few kilometers west of Marrakech.*

