

THOSE WHO STONED THE DEVIL

A NOVEL

Haji Gani Jamalzade

THOSE WHO STONED THE DEVIL (Novel)

Volume VI

Baku, Qanun Publishing, 2022, 268 pages

Proofreader: Ayyar Tahir

The novel "*Those Who Stoned the Devil*", included in the sixth volume of the writer's selected works, was published in 2022. The novel tells the story of a group of pilgrims on their journey to Mecca. The author describes the events that befall the believers traveling to the holy land. Unfortunately, among the pilgrims there are those who have no connection to Islam—criminals and fame-seekers. The tragic fate of such individuals is also portrayed in the novel, and their evil deeds are exposed.

ISBN 978-9952-38-

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Winner of the Istanbul Copyright Awards

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This is the author's thirteenth book.

The novel *"Those Who Stoned the Devil"* recounts the pilgrimage of a group of travelers to Mecca. The author portrays the experiences of the believers on their journey to the holy land. Unfortunately, among the pilgrims are individuals who have no true connection to Islam. Their tragic fate is reflected in the novel, as the author exposes their malicious deeds.

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FROM THE AUTHOR



A child's memory is strong — I still remember it clearly. My late mother, Khanimnaz khanum, whenever she prayed, spoke, or swore an oath, would lean her left shoulder toward the Sun and lift her head to the sky. I used to ask, "Dodo, are you sure Mecca is that way?" She would reply with confidence, "Inshallah, this path will lead you straight to the Kaaba!"

We called our mother "dodo"¹. She was a woman with little formal education — she performed her prayers, fasted, attended the mosque on Ashura, and made offerings at holy shrines. After retiring, every last Friday of the month, she would give three manats to our neighbor Aliyar, a retired teacher who had taken up religious duties, to recite *Yasin* for her deceased parents.

My late father, Oruj, also prayed and fasted, though he took a somewhat skeptical view of religious rituals. He had a doubtful nature and would occasionally pause his acts of worship. His time working for the police had left an impression on him.

There were six of us children. Our father insisted that we all receive an education, but it was difficult for him to provide for such a large family. He longed for the day we could earn our own bread.

¹ “Dodo” means “sister” in the Talysh language. Of course, I didn’t go around broadcasting my parents’ religious devotion at school — quite the opposite, I tried to hide it. I secretly joined the Pioneers, and later the Komsool. We had just moved from a remote mountain district to the city. We were living in an industrial settlement where there were Russians and Armenians among our neighbors. Islam wasn’t encouraged in the settlement; instead, godlessness and atheism were promoted everywhere. We lived a life full of contrasts — at home, the love of God reigned; at school, there was no place for Him. I felt a kind of incompleteness inside.

I had loved books since childhood. Reading helped me put everything in its place. I came to understand where the truth really was, and that sense of incompleteness disappeared.

One day, the path my mother had pointed out to me in childhood led me to Mecca. I fulfilled one of my deepest desires — I circumambulated the House of God.

That pilgrimage deeply moved me. I decided to write down what I saw and heard. This is how the novel *“Those Who Stoned the Devil”* came into being.

Hadiths:

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said in one hadith:

“Whoever visits me during my lifetime or after my death will be with me on the Day of Judgment and will always receive my intercession.”

In another hadith, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said:

“By touching the Black Stone (Hajar al-Aswad), people make a covenant with Allah the Almighty.”

An anonymous hadith states:

“Whoever circumambulates the sacred Kaaba, prays two rak'ahs at the Maqam of Prophet Ibrahim, and then drinks water from the Zamzam well, Allah the Almighty will forgive their sins.”

ŞEYTANA DAŞ ATANLAR

(a novel)

1

GROUP LEADER HAJI SARVAN



Haji Sarvan was never one to rush. Even the two-rak'ah morning prayer — which could be completed in five minutes including ablution, iqamah, salams, remembrances, and supplications — he would stretch to ten. Now too, ignoring the honking of the taxi waiting outside, he calmly fulfilled his duty before Allah.

After a quick breakfast on his feet, he turned off the gas and lights, slung his shoulder bag over his arm, and left the kitchen. He grabbed the handle of the suitcase he had packed the night before in the hallway and dragged it outside. He locked the apartment's metal door, walked through the small garden, and locked the gate as well. He hid both keys in one of the deep inner pockets of his bag.

In the early morning twilight, he rolled his suitcase toward

the taxi waiting by the roadside. Seeing the driver's head through the half-lowered window, he reproached him:

— What's got into you, neighbor? — he said. — With all that honking, you've stirred up the whole neighborhood!

The driver really was his neighbor. In the dim light of dawn, he grinned and said:— Haji, the world wouldn't end if you picked up the pace a little! — He mocked his regular client's sluggishness. — I've been waiting so long my eyes are turning yellow!

Haji Sarvan playfully warned him:— Careful what you say, or I won't take you with me on the pilgrimage next year!

The warning hit home — the neighbor fell silent and smoothed his drooping mustache. Haji Sarvan tossed his suitcase and bag into the back seat and got in beside the driver. In a conciliatory tone, he said:— Drive on, neighbor. But remember the saying: "He who rushes falls into the oven."

Still groggy from sleep, the driver didn't argue. Wanting to please his regular customer, he replied sweetly:— Don't mind my grumbling, Haji. I've got a lot of respect for you. Just give me a call when you're back — I'll come pick you up myself.

Then he started the car and headed toward the airport.

Though Haji was over seventy, he was still full of energy and walked with the upright posture of a young man. Since the passing of his wife, Hajikhanum, he had lived alone in a small, three-room apartment surrounded by greenery. He had no children, and he kept his distance from relatives. By now, he was used to solitude.

True, cooking and housework were a bit of a challenge, but he never complained. He saw life's hardships as blessings from God. A pleasant expression never left his face, and a faint smile always flickered in his small eyes.

Haji was a man of experience and liked things to be orderly. He arrived at the airport a bit early. In the waiting area, he chose a spot right in the center, across from the entrance, so no one would pass by unnoticed.

Just then, his assistant Gulu arrived, stacking the suitcases and setting up a makeshift "desk." Haji Sarvan took a list from his bag. Gulu tied a small Azerbaijani flag to the handle of one of the suitcases, giving the "desk" an official appearance.

Gulu was also one of Haji's neighbors and the one who had helped organize the trip. He was relatively young and didn't

Speak much unless spoken to. His laid-back demeanor could calm even the most irritable person — likely a trait of his profession.

— Looks like we got here a bit early, Haji, — he said.

Haji Sarvan disagreed:— I wouldn't say that, Mullah Gulu, — he replied, pointing to a few familiar faces wheeling in their suitcases. — Look, those folks over there — they're part of our group.

Gulu stood up to greet them. Though Haji respectfully called him “Mullah,” Gulu actually worked as a corpse washer at the Imam Rza Mosque, though he did occasionally serve as a cleric when needed. He knew the *Yasin* surah and various recitations. And, by the grace of God, he had a beautiful voice. It didn't take long before the group members, arriving in twos and threes, filled the waiting hall. Haji Sarvan marked them off on the master list one by one and handed each a guide booklet. Passports, flight tickets, and payment receipts were all in his bag. He instructed every pilgrim not to wander off from the waiting area.

Paper wristbands were distributed by his assistant. This was a precautionary measure — in case someone got lost, became

confused, or fainted during the pilgrimage, the wristband, which contained important personal information, would prove helpful. The text was written in three languages: Azerbaijani, English, and Arabic.

Gradually, the waiting hall filled with noise and chatter.

This was Haji Sarvan's twentieth pilgrimage to Mecca as a group leader. He had also led several smaller Umrah trips for high-ranking and wealthy individuals. You could say his hair and beard had turned gray on the roads to Mecca and Medina.

Of course, being a group leader was considered a routine position at the Committee. Every year, around three to four thousand pilgrims traveled to Hajj from Azerbaijan. This year was no different. Within two to three days, nineteen flights were scheduled to depart for Saudi Arabia.

From time to time, Haji cast his gaze across the waiting hall. Mashallah, his memory was excellent — he could recognize his group members from a distance. If anyone were to ask, he could list their names, surnames, even dates of birth.

Preparations for the pilgrimage had taken more than a month. Once or twice a week, he gathered group members at assigned mosques for briefings and training so that they

wouldn't face difficulties during the journey. That was the requirement of the Committee. Haji Sarvan would teach the pilgrims how to tie the *ihram* (the sacred state for pilgrimage), the rules of entering and exiting the *ihram*, and provide detailed information about the holy cities. He explained the regulations of the hotels where they would be staying, and dictated a list of necessary items and clothing for the trip. He made sure the group members memorized the *talbiyah* (the pilgrimage chant) and well-known religious elegies.

By now, the waiting hall had grown so noisy that it was hard to hear anything clearly. Only one or two people remained who hadn't yet been checked off the list. The more carefree members of the group, taking advantage of Haji's good-natured attitude, were in no rush to approach the "desk."

Haji Sarvan turned to his assistant:— Mullah Gulu, go call in the free-spirited ones from our group, — he said. — It's time.

Gulu, the corpse washer, hadn't paid for the trip himself — it was covered by donations that Haji Sarvan had arranged. Because of that, he was a bit reserved and obedient, feeling indebted and eager to follow his patron's instructions without hesitation.

There were many like Gulu among the pilgrims — people going thanks to charity. God had granted Haji Sarvan a special gift: he could easily convince wealthy men to contribute and encourage them to support the needs of the Imam Rza Mosque. Thanks to him, more and more believers were fulfilling their dreams each year.

Finally, he completed his work. Only three blank spots remained on the list — nameless and unsurnamed. These were backup places, which often remained unfilled.

He called out to his assistant:— Mullah Gulu, get ready. We're going.

2

NEW ARRIVALS



After sitting on his knees for over an hour, Haji Sarvan's legs had gone numb. Just as he was about to stand and shake the stiffness from them, he noticed a short man with glowing cheeks appear in front of the “desk,” and decided to stay put.

The newcomer greeted him and cheerfully said:— Haji, where are you going? Wait a second — there’s still one faithful Muslim left who hasn’t made it to Hajj... — He extended his documents with a grin.

Haji Sarvan looked at the new arrival with a hint of suspicion, returned the greeting, and took the passport, flight ticket, and the bank receipt confirming the payment made to the Committee’s account for the trip. Everything was in order. After glancing over the man’s identity once more, he said:— Little brother, may Allah accept your pilgrimage.

The pilgrim, clearly pleased with himself, slipped on the paper wristband that Gulu handed him and took his guide booklet.— See you around, — he said, stepping away from the “desk.”

Mullah Gulu leaned in and asked quietly:— Who was that?

Haji Sarvan, looking thoughtful, replied:— I don’t know. Probably someone with a government post.

— How can you tell he’s a government official? — Gulu pressed for clarification. — Don’t you see how confident he acts? — Haji Sarvan muttered. — As if he created the mountains himself...

— Even if he’s a government official, he seems like a bit of a hedonist, — Gulu speculated. — His nose is red like a rooster’s comb. Probably a fan of vodka and wine.

Haji Sarvan chuckled:— Nothing escapes your eyes, Mullah.

They had to cut their conversation short — two more men pushed through the crowd and approached the “desk.” In their hands, aside from passports, they held flight tickets and bank receipts.

One of them had a large, almost monstrous build — like a giant. The other was short, with a pale, grayish face, as though he had never seen sunlight. Despite the heat, both were wearing expensive suits with red ties around their necks.

Their appearance struck Haji Sarvan as odd. Though surprised, he masked his reaction and checked them in like the others, placing their documents into his bag.

Gulu, for some reason, felt the need to clarify things. He asked:

— Are you together?

The gray-faced man quickly and elaborately responded:— No, we're not together — we met at the airport. I'm a lawyer, by the way. I work as a legal advocate, — he added, formally introducing himself. — My name is Fakhraddin. If you ever need a lawyer, I'm at your service.

The giant-looking man snorted with laughter.

– I am also a gravedigger at the Wolf Gate cemetery. My name is Rahim, – he said, imitating the lawyer with a smile and added:– I am at your service too, and I'm someone who appreciates good people.

The man who had introduced himself as a lawyer glanced sideways at the gravedigger but said nothing.

The gravedigger, shrinking like a chick under the weight of that gaze, stirred something in Haji Sarvan, but he decided it was pointless to spend any more time on these newcomers. He gathered the papers on the “table,” slung his bag over his shoulder, grabbed his suitcase, and headed toward the escalator. As he did, his assistant whispered in his ear:

– I think I’ve seen these men before.

Haji Sarvan stopped:

– Where have you seen them?

– In the zone, – the assistant clarified. – They both look familiar, but I can’t remember exactly.

– I thought you had a good memory, mullah, – Haji Sarvan scolded him. – What’s wrong with you? Getting old?

Gulu replied apologetically:

– It’s been over thirty years, Haji, – he said. – What can memory do about that...

Haji Sarvan was well aware of Gulu’s biography. He knew

that in his youth, Gulu had made a mistake — a wall he had built collapsed and injured a neighbor's young child, and he had paid the price for that mistake, spending several years behind bars. Despite now working in the somewhat unpleasant business of corpse preparation, he was a family man with many children. Thanks to his upbringing, his children were always active in the Imam Rza mosque, and the cleric Amirkhan never tired of praising them.

Though Gulu's words piqued his curiosity, the group leader didn't stray from his path:

– All right, mullah, there's no time now. We'll talk about this later, – he said. – But don't take your eyes off those last arrivals.

The assistant lingered a bit behind but soon caught up with Haji. He raised a small Azerbaijani flag in his hand high above his head. Dr. Abuzar was just a step behind the group leader. At that moment, the boarding call for the flight to **Medina, Saudi Arabia** was announced. Haji Sarvan quickly stepped onto the escalator and, against the backdrop of the flag waving in his assistant's hand, commanded the others in a firm voice to follow him.

3

IN THE NEUTRAL ZONE



Turned out, the rush was unnecessary—the flight was delayed. To find out why they were stuck in the neutral zone, Haji Sarvan made several phone calls, but no one could clearly explain the reason for the delay. He was offended by the vague responses he received from the authorities. Still, he didn't argue—he knew that the officials were always right. Later, he made another call, this time directly to his superior, to inform him about the newly arrived pilgrims. The news was received calmly on the other end. The official paused, seemingly consulting with someone, and then instructed him not to interfere in the matters of the new arrivals.

This struck Haji Sarvan as strange. After giving a detailed report about the late arrivals, he had expected a different response. His superior's directive didn't sit well with him. He switched off his mobile phone.

The flight delay didn't worry the group leader much. He was used to making several trips to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia each year. Every time, there was some kind of issue. He knew that the citizens of the world's wealthiest country had gotten used to taking things slow.

Saudi Arabia, with its twenty thousand square kilometers of territory, would boil under the July heat. The Arabs, who had once dismounted camels and climbed into luxury cars, drove them like camels—slow and steady. When the country gained independence at the beginning of the last century, no one imagined that oil would be discovered in the Arabian desert, that everyone would become rich, the cities would flourish, and the people would live in abundance.

The country, whose leader was known as the **Protector of the Two Holy Sites**, had become the most powerful and wealthiest nation in the East. Ninety percent of its thirty million population lived in cities. No one was left roaming the desert holding on to a camel's tail.

Reflecting on this, Haji Sarvan looked around the spacious waiting hall. Most of the group members were young. They had scattered throughout the neutral zone. Without considering the challenges of the journey ahead, they were joking and

laughing. Jealous of their youthful carefreeness, Haji Sarvan called over Mullah Gulu, who was pacing through the hall.

— What are our early-arrival pilgrims up to?

— The “lawyer” is dozing behind the coffee stall, the “gravedigger” is spinning through the hall like a top, and Balaca is nowhere to be seen, — Mullah Gulu replied in detail.

— I’ve walked back and forth across the entire hall several times, but I haven’t run into that red-nosed man. No idea where he could’ve disappeared to.

Haji Sarvan praised his mortician-assistant for being so diligent in his duties:

— Good job! — he said, then gently reminded:

— No one can leave the neutral zone without permission, Mullah. I have their documents in my bag. Balaca must still be around here somewhere. There’s an inconsistency in his paperwork. Invite him to see me.

As Gulu turned to leave, Haji asked:

— Have you remembered who the lawyer and the gravedigger are?

— Not yet. It's like my mind's gone blank, — Gulu shook his head.

— But I'm certain they're both former convicts.

4

BALACA



There was turmoil in Balaca's mind. He still doubted whether the trip to Mecca would actually happen. Honestly—Balaca and the Holy Kaaba? The thought wouldn't even have crossed his mind in a dream. His whole life had passed in slow, hesitant actions, and even now, he couldn't believe he was flying to perform the Hajj.

The flight delay worked in his favor—he wandered a bit among the pilgrims, hoping to find a like-minded travel companion. A little further away from the younger crowd, two elderly men had set up a tea spot. Balaca approached them casually.

— Looks like you're the only ones around who match my age... I suppose we'll make good company. My name's Balaca.

The elders welcomed him warmly. One of them was holding a thermos. He gave the newcomer a careful once-over.

— What age are you talking about, brother? Mashallah, your hair is dark as night, — he said. — You're comparing yourself to us old folks for no reason.

Balaca tugged at his reddened nose and said:

— Don't be fooled by the black hair and beard—I'm over fifty, — then joked, — Maybe my dark hair isn't from youth... maybe just stubbornness.

The elder with the thermos nodded approvingly:

— In that case, let's get acquainted. My name is Mirzammad, — he said, then introduced his companion. — This brother is Maftun, a Haji. This is his second time performing Hajj. He's also been on Umrah once.

Balaca shook hands with Mirzammad first, then with Haji Maftun. Feigning admiration, he said:

— I'm honored to meet such devout believers like yourselves.

— I like your sweet tongue! — Mirzammad smiled. — Will you have tea with us?

Without waiting for an answer, he pulled a collapsible cup from his bag, poured tea, and offered it to the new

acquaintance.

But Balaca didn't get a chance to drink it—his mobile phone rang. Whatever he heard made him jump to his feet. As he stepped away from his new companions, he apologized:

— Important call, — he said.

5

BALACA AND EFLAN



Balaca, following the instructions he had received on the phone, opened the yellow door marked “No Entry!” in the depths of the neutral zone without knocking and entered. He greeted Eflan, who was sitting behind a small desk like he owned the place. Trying to hide his surprise, he made a crude joke, blowing over his shoulder first to the right, then to the left:

"Fu! Fu!" he said. "Astaghfirullah! What's your intention, Eflan? Are you planning to nullify our holy pilgrimage to Mecca?"

Eflan was the adviser to the director at the Agency where they both worked. He had significant authority. With his knowledge, skills, and cunning, he could outsmart anyone — if needed, he could even make shoes for the Devil. Just so you know, when the director was absent, it wasn't the deputies who

ran the Agency, but Eflan. He smiled crookedly at Balaca's words but stood up respectfully from his seat: "Welcome, Mr. Balaca, come in, have a seat," he said, but couldn't hold back a reproach. "You never stop acting, do you?"

Eflan wasn't alone. Behind him stood two young men with athletic builds. One had ears shriveled like dried meat, the other's nose was flattened against his face. In short, both were former boxing champions. Balaca didn't greet the "boys" with a handshake, just nodded in acknowledgment. He sat across from Eflan and said with envy:

"Maşallah, you're a lucky man, Eflan! Your big cousin must really value you if he's assigned you bodyguards."

When Balaca said "big cousin," he was referring to the head of the Agency, Büyük. Everyone knew about their cousin relationship. In town, he was known as Big Cousin, and people sometimes called Balaca either Little Cousin or Small Cousin.

Eflan held back from scolding Balaca for comparing him to the Devil — after all, he was the director's cousin. He replied indifferently:

"Don't worry, Mr. Balaca, when our director is in Mecca,

he'll assign a bodyguard for you too."

"What's going on? Why did you call me?" Balaca asked impatiently. "Couldn't this have been said over the phone?"

"It could've, but I wanted to see your blessed face," Eflan replied sarcastically. Then, with a touch of surprise, he added, "You fool, don't you know you can't trust mobile phones? Haven't our past troubles taught you anything?"

Without doubting his conclusion, Balaca said,

"So, the delay in the flight isn't because of the Agency?"

"Of course not. Don't let your thoughts drift to the old days. Our dagger used to cut both ways back then. Now, the Agency is powerless — it barely manages to swat its own flies," Eflan said with regret.

"Then how did you manage to get into the neutral zone?" Balaca asked.

"With help from old connections..." Eflan waved his hand. "There are still some organizations unaware that the Agency is now *persona non grata*."

"Maybe the delay is due to technical reasons?" Balaca tried to clarify. "Maybe it's on the orders of a more powerful

organization than the Agency?"

Eflan frowned:

"What difference does it make to you? Do you think I came here to discuss the flight delay?" he asked. "I was passing nearby, called the airport information desk, found out the flight was delayed, and came to deliver the director's message to you."

Balaca urged him on: "Then just say it," he snapped.

"Listen, Mr. Balaca," Eflan ignored his irritation. "We were reviewing the list of pilgrims traveling to Hajj. We came across something interesting. There's someone named Mirzəmməd on the same flight as you. He's seventy years old, but he was born in the same town, same street as you."

"So what?" Balaca wasn't moved in the slightest.

"I'll let you in on a little secret!" Eflan smiled faintly. "Isn't it strange that three men from the same small town are going on pilgrimage at the same time?"

Balaca agreed:

"Yes, it is odd," he said. "But I don't see what harm a seventy-year-old man could pose to me. Care to elaborate?"

"Mirzəmməd is the stepfather of the millionaire Sərhəd who died in the basement of the Agency," Eflan revealed the threat. "And you know Sərhəd had a brother named Sərham who's still in prison..."

"Now I understand..." Balaca calmly scratched his cheek.

Out of respect for Balaca's composure in the face of danger, Eflan relayed the director's instructions: "The director asked that you stay alert. These are not the old days," he said, then gestured toward the bodyguards. "See, things have gotten so serious that I no longer leave the office without bodyguards."

Knowing that big-bodied Eflan was a coward at heart, Balaca teased: "Seems like fear's crept into your bones!"

Eflan dodged a direct answer: "I'm not scared one bit!" he said and stood up. "Why should I be afraid when Big Cousin is around?"

Balaca stood up as well: "Alright. So tell me, when do the bosses depart?"

"We'll fly out in three days, on the last flight," Eflan said, then added, "Oh, and keep an eye on the old man — Mirzəmməd, I mean. I'm sure he holds a key to the mystery."

Protect yourself from him."

Balaca didn't hide that he had already met Mirzəmməd. Just in case, he added: "A little while ago, Mirzəmməd was saying goodbye to a beautiful lady. When you have time, find out who she is. Might be useful." Then, to smooth over his earlier rudeness, he apologized:

"I haven't had a drink in four or five hours, my nerves are frayed, and I sometimes blurt nonsense. I hope you'll understand."

Eflan's annoyance faded: "I feel for you, Mr. Balaca," he said with a smile. "But you've got to hold it together..."

"Easy for you to say!" Balaca replied as he got up and left the room, leaving his companion surrounded by bodyguards.

6

FƏXRƏDDIN AND RƏHIM



Trying to pick up the trail of his lost target, Rəhim wandered the neutral zone like a hunting dog. Eventually, tired, he returned and sat beside Fəxrəddin. In a guilty tone, he whispered:

“Qədəş, that bastard Balaca was heading toward the far end of the neutral zone. I followed him, but suddenly he vanished — like a piece of bread in the wind,” he said, his already round eyes bulging with frustration. “What can I do? What do you advise?”

Fəxrəddin, of course, knew the criminal code by heart — but he wasn’t a lawyer. He was known in the criminal world as **Lotu Faxı**, a “thief-in-law.” As part of preparations for the Hajj pilgrimage, his life sentence had been annulled and he was released. In truth, this wasn’t that remarkable. Lotu Faxı, who had spent thirty years in prison, could have walked out anytime

he wanted. But a vow he had made out of loyalty to the “thieves’ brotherhood” had kept him bound. He had no intention of breaking the code of the underworld. In fact, his release now was precisely to fulfill that vow.

He sat with one leg crossed over the other, leaning on a travel bag. His jacket and tie were off, and the sleeves of his shirt were rolled up. Without changing his position, he listened. His reply came slowly:

“Sit down and rest, Domba,” he said. “Wherever Balaca is, he’ll come back here. Where else would he go? We’re all flying on the same plane.”

Even the man who called himself a gravedigger — Domba Rəhim — wasn’t a minor figure. He too held the title of “thief-in-law.” He was one of Lotu Faxı’s closest henchmen, essentially his enforcer. His nickname wasn’t due to his round eyes, but because he was born in a small town called Damba, near Pirallahı. Still, everyone called him **Domba**, not Damba. Lotu had arranged for his early release from prison using the “safekeeping” fund.

Only recently had Rəhim understood the reason for his pardon six months earlier. Lotu’s multi-layered strategies

always took time to sink in. Now, reassured by his boss's words, he felt relieved. He had expected to be scolded for losing the man he was tailing. Gratefully, he vowed: "Qədəş, I swear, making Balaca's mother cry is now my duty!"

"We'll see, Domba," Lotu smiled and added warmly. "Just remember, if you don't make his mother cry, your own mother will be left crying."

Domba Rəhim shrank from Lotu's seemingly kind but threatening words. Trying to change the topic, he asked: "What about Böyük Xaloğlu? Who's going to handle him?"

"Another friend of ours — Mad Məhər — will play the funeral drum for him," Faxı replied.

"I know Mad Məhər. He's the late Sərhəd's brother," Domba said. "His real name is Sərham... A couple of months ago, we shared a cell. He was generous, never ate alone when he received food."

Lotu didn't like how informed his henchman was. He warned him:

"I told you, don't stick your nose into everything!"

Domba Rəhim raised a hand to his forehead:

“Got it,” he said, then added curiously, “Do you think that bastard Böyük knows about the plot?”

“He must know,” Lotu muttered, unwilling to talk more and closing his eyes.

Domba Rəhim didn’t give up:

“You know, qədəş, maybe we made a mistake getting involved with this Hajj pilgrimage. It’s gotten too complicated. Maybe we should’ve taken care of Böyük in Baku instead.”

Lotu opened his eyes and gave him a cold stare:

“You think I’m not as smart as you?” he asked, glaring at Domba. “Listen and remember — in Baku, we wouldn’t have been able to touch him. The Xaloğlus are flying high. Their homes are like fortresses, their offices guarded, their cars armored, and they’re always surrounded by bodyguards. How could we carry out the ‘meeting’s verdict’ in such conditions? It wouldn’t have worked. We would’ve just sacrificed our brothers in vain...”

Domba Rəhim pulled out the pilgrimage guidebook Hacı Sarvan had given him:

“It says here that during Hajj, even killing a mosquito or fly

is a sin,” he said. “By killing the Xaloğlus, aren’t we violating one of Islam’s rules?”

Lotu Faxı agreed:

“Of course, it’s a sin to kill mosquitoes or flies,” he said, then clenched his teeth and added, “But someone like Böyük is worse than any insect. Even if we break Islamic laws, he must not be spared. That idiot caused us millions in losses from the safekeeping fund. Keeping someone like him alive is the real sin.”

“Yes, qədəş, he caused the death of our brother Sərhəd and looted his assets...” Domba Rəhim added. “We must avenge our friend.”

Rəhim had known Sərhəd since their days in a juvenile colony. That’s where their friendship began. Back then, when they joined forces in the camp, no one dared to mess with them. Even after Sərhəd was released, he would come back to visit Rəhim and bring him food.

Lotu Faxı gave his henchman a sharp look:

“Oh please! You think all this fuss is about Sərhəd?”

Domba stared blankly at him:

“I thought it was...” he muttered.

Lotu cut him off:

“Don’t think — know! I only care about the millions from the safekeeping fund that were invested in Sərhad’s company,” he said and grumbled. “Your friend Sərhad wasn’t a good man. Money made him wild and arrogant. He didn’t listen. I warned him many times — told him to keep his head down and stick to business — but he didn’t listen. He got involved in politics. Dreamed of becoming a member of parliament. He challenged the government’s candidates. Gathered company staff and townsfolk in the district culture center, announced his candidacy, and submitted a list of 50,000 supporters to the election commission. He humiliated government-backed candidates in the region. So they set the Agency on him — and that’s how all this happened. In short, I feel no pity for Sərhad. Because of him, the safekeeping fund’s millions went down the drain thanks to Böyük.”

“I didn’t know all that...” Rəhim admitted.

“Well, now you do,” Lotu said. Then, as he leaned his head back onto the bag and closed his eyes, he added, “Your job is Balaca. After a short rest, go find him...”

Domba Rəhim was too afraid to look directly at Lotu Faxı's corpse-colored, ashen face. He opened the guidebook again, holding it up as an excuse to hide behind it, but he couldn't read. His whole life flashed before his eyes.

7

DOMBA RƏHİM'S LIFE



The town of Damba, where Rəhim was born, was one of the small settlements along the seashore. Most of its residents were fishermen. A little farther away, there were two military units. Below a tall hill where a lighthouse stood, a cemetery stretched across the plain. On one side, Muslims buried their dead; on the other side, Christians laid theirs to rest.

Rəhim's family home stood across the highway from the cemetery. He didn't go to school because children laughed at his ogre-like appearance; he wandered around aimlessly. Though a teenager, he looked much older.

His father was the cemetery's caretaker. He was a wretched, sullen man who carried a bottle of vodka in his pocket. In his youth, he had served time in prison. After being released, he got married and fathered four or five children. This old man with

a threadbare turban, a prayer bead in hand, and a beard, spent his days in the cemetery. He barely managed to support his family. He fulfilled the wishes of visitors to the graves and earned a few manats. When no cleric was around, he would pull out a tattered book from his coat pocket and recite the Surah Yasin in a droning voice, written in Cyrillic script, not even realizing he was committing blasphemy. When tired, he didn't go home but rested in a small caretaker's booth at the cemetery entrance.

Rəhim was fifteen when his father passed away. The family's burdens fell on him. The cemetery job wasn't taken away — it was entrusted to his mother, but the meager salary wasn't enough to feed the family. His father's turban, prayer beads, and old notebook became useful to him.

He could recognize, even from afar, those who regularly visited their deceased. Some he would wait for eagerly. He especially looked forward to the visits of a young woman and an older woman. They would come to visit a grave with a man's portrait etched in marble. The girl, always dressed in white, looked to be in her early twenties. She was attractive, and her face glowed with contentment. The older woman's face, however, was corpse-colored. She moved slowly and silently —

it was obvious she was ill.

The girl would look at Rəhim's tall, rugged frame and laugh nervously, though she spoke harshly. Once, annoyed that he didn't understand something she said, she scolded him: "You don't even know something this simple? How old are you, man?"

When she learned his age, she felt sorry for him and didn't pressure him further. During their visits to the grave, she would sometimes call him over, give him tasks, and generously reward him.

Then, suddenly, their visits stopped. Rəhim was deeply saddened. One day, while wandering the cemetery aimlessly, he saw that a new marble grave had appeared beside the old one — it bore the image of the pale-faced woman.

Soon, the girl in white began visiting again. She was often accompanied by a skinny young man. From the rings on their fingers, it was clear they were engaged, but they behaved coldly toward each other. Sometimes the girl would arrive in a car driven by a thick-mustached man. Rəhim couldn't figure out who was who. The familiarity in the man's behavior with the girl was obvious — they would park by the roadside and sit

embracing for hours.

One time, the girl came in the rain. After sitting by the grave for a long time, she was soaked and unsteady. She called out to Rəhim for help as she reached the cemetery exit. He carried her to the warm caretaker's booth, helped her out of her wet clothes, laid her down on the wooden bench, and covered her with his old jacket. Then he lay down beside her. The girl didn't resist — on the contrary, she eagerly gave in to the teenage boy's wild desires.

That evening, two policemen came for Rəhim. He was handcuffed and taken away. The trial didn't last long, but the victim's claim of virginity at the time of the incident was not accepted. Medical examination showed that the 25-year-old woman had already been in the early stages of pregnancy when it happened. It turned out that the girl was not exactly a model of traditional morality. The accused boy, on the other hand, was a minor. His sentence wasn't severe. Rəhim was sent to a juvenile detention facility.

8

DOMBA RƏHİM IN THE JUVENILE COLONY



Since Rəhim brought his father's heirlooms with him, he was welcomed with respect in the colony. His peers nicknamed him *Mullah* for always wearing a turban, carrying prayer beads, and walking around with a copy of the Surah Yasin under his arm. Even being accused of rape didn't tarnish his reputation. Everyone feared his tall build, massive fists, and rugged face. Only the hot-headed Sərhəd wasn't intimidated — and the two quickly became friends.

Rəhim would sometimes gather influential boys in his room and host gatherings. But when a new warden arrived, the rules tightened. Guards started breaking up any assemblies immediately. Lunch now required military-style lineups. Sometimes, the warden made them stand for hours in the yard, inspecting their appearance and punishing the untidy ones.

During one of these inspections, the warden noticed Rəhim. He snatched the turban off his head, tore the prayer beads from his hand, and threw them into the waste ditch, shouting: "Hey freak, what do you think this place is?!"

Being publicly humiliated infuriated Rəhim. He vowed revenge, and Sərhəd promised to help. They debated for a long time. Rəhim said:

"If I had a sharpened metal rod, I'd teach him a lesson!"

"But you're getting out in six months!" Sərhəd reminded him. "If you kill the warden, you'll rot in prison for life."

"So what? If I forgive this insult, everyone here will laugh at me. You know I have no other choice," Rəhim protested. "What happens, happens!"

The next day, they were invited to a nearby barrack for mourning — one of the boys had received news of his father's death. Rəhim thought of reciting the Yasin, took out his book. As he read, Sərhəd pulled him aside: "I don't think that's the Yasin," he said. "If you read that in front of someone knowledgeable, you'll embarrass yourself. You might as well throw the book away."

“How do you know it’s not the Yasin?” Rəhim’s big eyes lit up. “Are you a mullah?”

“No, I’m not, but my stepfather Mirzəmməd knew the Surah Yasin by heart. He tried to teach it to me and my brother. I still remember the beginning: ‘Ya-Sin. Wal Qur’anil-Hakim. Innaka la-minal mursalin. Ala siratin mustaqim...’”

“Then what is it I’ve been reading? My father read it like that...” Rəhim said, confused.

Sərhəd shrugged and smiled faintly:

“Maybe your dad had a sense of humor.”

From that day, their friendship deepened. Rəhim had to throw away the book. Maybe they would have accomplished more together in the colony, but soon Sərhəd was released.

9

DAMBA RƏHİM IN PRISON



Pickpocket İmir, known in the "Turşulu" prison zone, always approached new inmates quickly but carefully — he never acted without Lotu Faxı's permission. For a few days, he observed Rəhim, looking for a way to get close to the young but notorious convict. It was said that this new guy had killed the juvenile colony warden.

After they finally spoke, İmir found they got along well. He told Rəhim about the rules in the "Turşulu" zone, did small favors, and soon earned his trust. One day, he brought up Lotu Faxı:

"You know Lotu runs the show here. If he wants, he can call a meeting and declare you a 'thief-in-law,'" İmir said, tempting Rəhim. "Everything depends on him."

Though he looked older, Rəhim was still a child — but a

determined one, ready to kill if necessary. İmir studied his rough face, handed him a stack of money: “This is from Lotu Faxı,” he said warmly. “Buy yourself food — or this prison soup will kill you.”

There was no need to explain who Lotu Faxı was — every prisoner knew his name. Rəhim grinned: “I’d die for Lotu Faxı! I want to meet him.”

“God willing! I’ll arrange it soon,” İmir promised. “He has a job for you...”

“What kind of job?” Rəhim asked without hesitation.

İmir, pleased with Rəhim’s readiness, said: “There’s a guy in here called ‘The Teacher.’ You need to get close to him, join his group, and gain his trust.”

“Why me?” Rəhim asked, surprised. “Don’t you already have people?”

“We do, but ‘The Teacher’ knows all our guys — he won’t let them near. We need an outsider,” İmir explained.

“And then?” Rəhim pressed.

İmir avoided the question:

“‘The Teacher’ has gone rogue. He’s trying to form a group against Lotu Faxı. He’s an ex-athlete, refuses to follow the rules.”

“And then?” Rəhim asked again.

“Then... he needs to follow the same fate as the warden in the colony,” İmir finally said. “Lotu won’t forget your service.”

And that was how Rəhim and Lotu Faxı first connected.

10

QIRĞI BRINGS BAD NEWS



After instructing Balaca, Əflan went straight from the airport to the Agency. As soon as he immersed himself in pre-trip preparations, he forgot about everything else. Many issues were still unresolved. But before he could get back to work, he was urgently summoned to the director's office.

He found Böyük looking troubled. There was a look of confusion on his delicate features. His carefully shaped eyebrows and now-gray mustache had lost their sharp appearance. Without waiting for an invitation, Əflan sat down in front of him and noticed two other people in the room. One of them was Qaflan, whose brother had been put in charge of security at the Agency. Qaflan now sat tall near the door. His right hand was hidden — likely resting on the trigger of a gun under a black cloth draped over his lap.

The other man stood sideways by the window, blowing cigarette smoke out the open vent. As soon as Əflan glanced at him, he recognized him — there was only one person allowed to smoke in the director's presence.

“Whoa! That's our Qırğı!” Əflan exclaimed jokingly. “My friend, you're still alive?”

He remembered the man by his nickname — *Qırğı* — but couldn't recall his real name. The man, with his hawk-like bent nose — likely the source of his nickname — wrinkled it indifferently.

“You see I'm not dead!” he replied and chuckled. “I'm a small fry — who would bother killing me? Let the big ones be afraid...”

The target of that comment wasn't clear, but the director joked in response:

“Are you teasing your old boss?”

Qaflan joined in:

“My brother Əflan, guys like Qırğı have thick skin. You could fire them from a cannon and they still wouldn't die!” His comment made everyone laugh.

Despite his gaunt, death-like appearance, Qırğı was one of the Agency's veteran agents. Though he officially held a small position in a penal zone, with Böyük's backing he sometimes even interfered with prison administration. He had good ties among criminals — even high-ranking thieves and underworld figures respected him. His reports were always detailed and reliable.

Qırğı squinted at the brothers — who most at the Agency feared — and said without hesitation:

“It's not clear yet who will be fired from the cannon...”

Since the Agency's powers had been reduced, its agent network had been handed over to other organizations. But loyal Qırğı hadn't abandoned his old boss — he still visited.

When he finished his cigarette, he sat across from Əflan. Böyük grew serious:

“Əflan, Qırğı has come with bad news,” he said, then turned to the agent. “Repeat what you told me.”

Əflan wasn't surprised at all. Strange things had been happening around the Agency lately. According to Qırğı, a thieves' meeting — a *sxodka* — had been held in the “Turşulu”

zone, and a death sentence had been declared for the head of the Agency.

Qırğı ended his statement apologetically:

“Of course, it’s bad news, but better that you know.”

The director couldn’t hide his anger:

“Can you believe this? The scum of society think they can challenge us!”

Though Əflan took Qırğı’s words seriously, he asked casually:

“Where did you get the information? You’re stationed in a different zone — how can you know what’s happening in Turşulu?”

“I heard it from a new inmate transferred to our zone,” Qırğı replied, not avoiding the intense gaze from Əflan. “He’s an old thief, doesn’t lie, and is well-known in the criminal world. The man has spent thirty-five of his fifty years in prison. He can’t live outside. As soon as he’s released, he gets himself locked up again.”

“And where did he hear this news?” Əflan asked.

“In the detention center — from his cellmate.”

“You must have visited the detention center then...”

“Of course. With the prison administration’s approval, I even brought the inmate to Turşulu. But we couldn’t find the person he mentioned. Turned out the guy had been transferred from the detention center to a psychiatric hospital by court order.”

“So your source is a certified lunatic?” Əflan tried not to laugh.

“If we trust the court, yes,” Qırğı agreed. “I went to the psychiatric hospital. Once I confirmed the man was there, I returned. No use taking a madman seriously.”

Əflan paced around thoughtfully before sitting again:

“You caused this whole commotion based on a madman’s story? Have you lost your mind?”

Qırğı smiled mysteriously:

“That’s the thing — what I’m telling you happened a month ago. At the time, I didn’t want to worry the director with unverified info. So I kept it to myself.”

“One month later, you found out that even madmen can tell the truth?” Əflan guessed.

“You’re not wrong,” Qırğı replied, smiling defiantly. “A new inmate arrived in our zone. He was transferred from Turşulu and brought a message. He confirmed that a meeting was held there, and that a death sentence was issued for Böyük Xaloğlu. This time, it wasn’t a joke.”

“There must be a reason for the sentence,” Əflan said. “Did you ask?”

“Yes. Apparently, the thieves’ common fund — the *obshak* — had invested heavily in businessman Sərhəd’s company. His death wiped out everything. This angered the criminal world. They blame our director for Sərhəd’s death and accuse him of seizing the fund’s millions.”

“That’s it?” Əflan asked.

“Well, there’s one more thing. If the stolen amount is returned to the *obshak*, the sentence will be lifted,” Qırğı added.

Böyük snorted:

“See, Əflan? Such delicate-hearted murderers we have!”

He stood up, shook Qırğı's hand, and saw him out. Then he turned to Qaflan, sitting quietly behind the door: "Go to the airport immediately. Change your ticket for tonight and fly to Medina. Tell Balaca everything you just heard. Don't delay."

"But we're scheduled to fly in three days anyway," Əflan reminded him. "We can deliver the message ourselves."

"You don't understand the seriousness," Böyük snapped. "The criminals have declared war. Every hour counts. Balaca is in danger. It's my fault for letting him travel alone."

Without waiting, Qaflan stood, strapped his gun to his belt, and left. He knew the director never repeated himself — and never changed his mind.

11

AFTER TEA



The elders cleared the tea table. Mirzəmməd tucked the empty thermos into his bag.

“Let’s go,” he said. “Let’s see what the group leader says about the flight delay...”

As they were about to get up, they noticed a group of younger men sitting not far away. Two of them were loudly debating while the others listened.

One of the debaters was Muxtar, a taxi driver — a stubborn, good-looking young man with a bit of knowledge about Sharia law. He was likely not even thirty. The other was Zakir, a businessman in his early forties whose short beard had turned entirely white. He had a deep understanding of Islam and knew many surahs from the Quran by heart.

Despite this, Muxtar wouldn’t back down:

“God’s word says: ‘I created man as a free agent.’ That means man has the freedom to choose his path. Doesn’t this verse contradict the idea of fate?”

Zakir smiled slightly:

“You understand one part, but not the rest. *Free agent* doesn’t mean what you think. Yes, man has the freedom to choose good or evil — he is free in that regard. But in all other actions, he operates within the framework of divine decree.”

He then quoted the relevant verses in Arabic from memory.

The elders exchanged glances and quietly walked away from the group. Hacı Məftun said with great satisfaction: “The religious knowledge of our youth amazes me!”

“Yes,” Mirzəmməd agreed. “The number of young believers is growing by the day — you’re absolutely right.”

Hacı Məftun laughed:

“If it were up to me, I’d limit older people’s participation in the Hajj and give preference to the young. I’m glad the banner of Islam is in strong hands.”

But this time Mirzəmməd disagreed:

“Don’t dismiss us so quickly, brother!” he said. “Back in the days of the pioneers, Komsomol, and the Party — didn’t we still protect our faith?”

Hacı Məftun nodded:

“You may be right... Maşallah, your thoughts are solid.”

12

DOMBA RƏHİM FINDS BALACA



After resting, Domba Rəhim got up and quietly walked away, careful not to wake Lotu. Just to be sure, he checked the neutral zone again, but couldn't find what he was looking for. He returned to the place where he had lost track of his "prey." He figured Balaca must be behind one of the identical doors. Leaning against a pillar, he waited.

His guess proved correct. He saw Balaca step out from a yellow door and head toward the part of the neutral zone where the pilgrims had gathered. No need to follow — he knew where he was going. Then three more people exited the same door. Domba didn't recognize any of them, but since they weren't heading toward the pilgrims, he decided to follow them.

Later, he returned to Lotu. Seeing the question in his boss's eyes, he said:

“I found Balaca — he’s chatting with two elders not far from us.”

Lotu Faxı didn’t react, just closed his eyes again. But he wasn’t asleep. His mind was turning over the events from the past year.

13

MEETING IN THE “TURŞULU” ZONE



As soon as Lotu Faxı heard of Sərhəd’s death, he took action and summoned Domba Rəhim. They met in the visitors’ room of Penal Colony No. N, known as “Turşulu.” Though the room was mostly empty, they whispered cautiously — they knew there were always eavesdroppers around.

Lotu repeated the same message several times, then demanded:

“Repeat it back to me.”

Domba did. Lotu was satisfied:

“Not bad. Now go do what I said. Try to explain it clearly — make them believe. Come back by the end of the week. I’ll be waiting.”

Domba returned at week's end — empty-handed. He wasn't a great speaker, and his dull, rough face made him seem slow. By the time he got to the point, he had already tested the listener's patience.

Lotu asked bluntly:

“Keep it short. Did you deliver my message to Böyük?”

“Yes. I passed it through the old woman Əlfiyyə who lives on the state farm. She's related to the Xaloğlus — the grandmother of Böyük's ex-wife. She visits their house.”

“What was their response?” Lotu asked, suppressing his irritation.

Domba replied:

“They said, ‘Lotu Faxı may be the boss behind bars, but outside — that's someone else's territory.’ As for Sərhəd's money, they said the government seized it, and they have no knowledge of it. If Lotu has a problem, take it up with the government.”

Lotu's face darkened:

“So, Böyük has no intention of returning our money willingly,” he said. “I wanted to resolve this peacefully, but that

didn't work.”

“What’s our next step, qədəş?” Domba asked.

“That’s up to the *sxodka* to decide, not me,” Lotu replied, ending the meeting. “But one thing’s certain — no one’s going to forgive Böyük for stealing Sərhəd’s millions.”

14

LOTU FAXI



Even though he was in prison, Lotu Faxi had a hand on the city's pulse. Every day, thousands of manats moved through the accounts of the thieves' communal fund — the *sax/anc*. Managing such a massive pool of money wasn't easy — memory alone wasn't enough. Lotu had to learn to use a computer. Now, he kept the millions in circulation, loaning money to trusted investors and sharing in their profits.

Those seeking protection were granted it — in exchange for regular payments to the *sax/anc*. Lotu was managing his criminal empire well, and the other “thieves-in-law” who profited from the fund were pleased with him.

He monitored the activities of businessmen and entrepreneurs under his protection. The emergence of the Agency changed everything. While the Agency had existed before, it had only functioned as a passive regulator. Inspectors

used to be satisfied with minor bribes.

But when Böyük Xaloğlu was appointed as its head, everything changed. The new director had a taste for luxury — five or ten manats wouldn't satisfy him. Soon, every entrepreneur in the capital was paying regular monthly dues.

At first, the Agency didn't touch businesses protected by the *saxlanc*. This reassured Lotu, but confused him. Meanwhile, the Agency treated other investors like gangsters — using the underworld's own rules. Böyük acted like a “thief-in-law” himself. He punished and extorted freely, with no one daring to stop him.

Even businessmen under Lotu's protection started complaining. The Agency's intrusions were growing reckless. A few weeks ago, plainclothes agents raided “Pəmbə” Hafiz's villa without a warrant and claimed they found rocket parts buried in the vineyard. They arrested Hafiz — the son of a protected criminal, Cinni Canı. His family was known for being cautious and peaceful. Hafiz, in particular, was so mild-mannered that people nicknamed him “Pəmbə” — “Pink.” He ran concrete factories and owned gravel quarries in the provinces.

Seeing the situation worsen, Cinni Canı rushed to Lotu's zone with his cane in hand.

Around the same time, another of Lotu's protected businessmen was arrested. Jewelry merchant Zülfü was stopped just outside the airport. Agents claimed to find 100 grams of heroin in his bag and seized all his gold and gems. They shut down his workshops and jewelry stores.

Zülfü didn't even smoke — he suffered from chronic asthma since childhood. His wife rushed to Lotu for help.

Lotu Faxı was a patient man who preferred resolving matters peacefully. But the Agency ignored his messages. And then, Büyük made the biggest mistake — he arrested Sərhəd, one of the most powerful businessmen under the *saxlanc's* protection.

Sərhəd wasn't an average entrepreneur — he was worth millions. After the fall of the Soviet Union, he had gotten rich fast. He had done time for embezzling state property but was later released. With no money, he turned to Lotu via Domba Rəhim and signed a partnership with the *saxlanc*. Then he brought in an old friend from Syria, Kadir, who had business experience. Together, they took over the cigarette distribution

business — importing from Aleppo and dominating the market.

They opened hundreds of shops, invested in factories, and employed countless workers. Their motorcades had more bodyguards than most presidents. Maybe that's what eventually doomed Sørhød.

Lotu had invested much of the *saxlanc*'s capital in Sørhød's ventures — and the returns had been massive. The partnership was risky, but very profitable.

15

MƏHƏR LEARNS OF SƏRHƏD'S DEATH



S ərhəd's political ambitions cost Məhər dearly. He ended up back in prison. But life inside wasn't bad — he was welcomed warmly, thanks to pickpocket İmir's influence. Packages from outside added to his status. His leftovers attracted envious eyes. And no one dared challenge someone of his size and strength.

Every time Mirzəmməd visited, he brought alarming news:

“There's an inspection at Sərhəd's company...”

“They're pressuring Sərhəd...”

His employees are suing him...”

Məhər's head, already unsteady, couldn't handle the stress. He once told İmir:

“I need to see Faxı.”

“What for?” İmir asked, then added, “Please, save the grunting for later.”

“I want to talk about Sərhad.”

“Faxı is already handling his case,” İmir said. “But I’ll pass on your request.”

Then the news of Sərhad’s death reached the prison. Məhər’s mind snapped. He started picking fights, beating inmates. One day, unhappy with something, he grabbed a mop handle in the cafeteria and attacked the guards, injuring several.

He was restrained with great difficulty, bound, and thrown into solitary confinement on the warden’s orders. After ten days, he was released. But he was no longer the same — dragging his feet like a broken man.

Two days later, he was back in solitary. The administration wasn’t about to forgive his assault on the guards.

16

THE DEATH DECREE



Lotu had given his cell to the crime world's generals for a meeting. Pickpocket Īmir was attending to their needs. Of course, the warden of the "Turshulu" zone had not allowed such a gathering without a price — he had received a generous reward from the thieves' fund.

Ten days after Sərħəd's death, the "sxodka" (thieves' council) convened. Lotu Faxı's claim about losing the investment caused mixed reactions. Some initially blamed him for negligence. But when it was clarified that the lost investment was much smaller than the total returns already made to the "thieves' fund," everyone calmed down.

The meeting proceeded coolly and didn't last long. The members unanimously voted on the death sentence for the head of the Agency who had embezzled their funds. The task of carrying out the fatwa was given to Lotu himself. As the saying goes, "The one who kills the dog should also drag it away."

17

LOTU FAXI AND THE COLONEL



The warden of the "Turshulu" zone entered Lotu's cell alone, violating protocol by not allowing the accompanying officers to enter. He did, however, leave the barred door ajar.

"Salam, Faxı qədəş!" he greeted. "They said you wanted to see me."

Lotu dangled his legs off the bunk and stood up. "Welcome, Colonel," he said. "I have an important matter to discuss."

The cell resembled a bank office. Lined folders were stacked on wall-mounted shelves. A "Toshiba" PC and a "Canon" printer sat on the desk. The floor was covered with an expensive rug. Only the clunky iron bunk beds and the metal table bolted to the center floor betrayed the cell's true nature.

The Colonel couldn't help himself:

“Quite the cell you've got here, qədəş,” he joked.
“Honestly, this place looks better than my office.”

Lotu replied without missing a beat:

“May whoever envies it be blessed with the same.”

The colonel laughed. “Better than my office indeed, minus a few details...”

“If you're that fond of it, let's switch places. I won't protest,” Lotu smiled.

“How did your ‘sxodka’ go yesterday?” the Colonel asked.
“No bloodshed, I hope?”

“It was fine,” Lotu answered shortly. “All quiet.”

“If it's not a secret, what was the occasion?”

Lotu gave a vague reply and didn't mention the death sentence for the Agency chief. With a smirk, he added: “You should attend one of our gatherings sometime, Colonel. You're a partner in every penny anyway. What's a ‘sxodka’ without you?”

The Colonel brushed off the sarcasm and moved to sit

behind the iron table.

“Let’s be quick. Time’s short,” he said. Then, turning to Ĭmir, who was listening in:

“What are you staring at? Step outside and wait.”

The pickpocket shrank back but hesitated. Lotu stepped in to resolve the tension:

“I trust Ĭmir,” he said calmly.

The Colonel justified himself: “This is just a precaution. You know in our line of work, the fewer witnesses the better.” But seeing no resistance from Lotu, he relented. “If you trust him, I have no objection.”

Lotu finalized it: “Make us some tea, dear pickpocket.”

Once alone, Lotu stated his request briefly. The Colonel replied without hesitation: “Impossible. I can’t let you out of the zone for two or three months. The most I can allow is twelve hours.”

“Why? Have I lost your trust?” Lotu asked.

“This has nothing to do with trust,” the Colonel said, trying to justify. “If something happens to you, I lose my rank. You’re

not just any inmate.”

Lotu leaned forward, voice dripping with sarcasm: “With all the money you get from us monthly, sometimes you need to take risks. Or are you planning to live off your base salary alone?”

The Colonel faltered, tried to smile: “Let’s not confuse issues, qədəş. I’m not entirely free in my decisions. I’ll need the leadership’s approval.”

“Then get it! What are you waiting for?” Lotu snapped, tapping his foot impatiently.

“I’ll try. The leadership is new, though. They’re not granting anyone access yet,” the Colonel explained.

Lotu’s expression darkened.

“This is about millions, not spare change! My brothers entrusted me with the decision of the 'sxodka.' I either get the stolen money back or punish the ones who took it. There’s no other way.”

The Colonel licked his dry lips.

“You’re saying it’s really that much money?”

“Of course! And you could have a share in it,” Lotu offered, watching the greed flicker in the Colonel’s eyes.

The Colonel considered it: “It’s easier for me to get you on the pardon list than to let you out temporarily,” he said. “I’ll go straight to the general.”

“How much will that cost?” Lotu asked directly.

“It won’t be cheap,” the Colonel smirked. “You’ll have to open the purse strings. Freedom is a sweet thing.”

Lotu shrugged:

“I’m not doing badly here either. I’ve been in this zone since I was 18 — I’m used to it,” he said. “But the decision of the ‘sxodka’ requires me to be free. So your price will be met, whenever you like.”

18

LOTU FAXI MEETS MƏHƏR



If Lotu hadn't intervened, mad Məhər would've rotted in solitary. At Lotu's request, he was moved into İmir's cell. With good food, a warm bed, and medication, Məhər quickly regained strength. He soon asked: "Help me avenge my brother, İmir," he said.

İmir took him to Lotu's cell. Solitary had subdued Məhər — he now listened quietly, even remaining silent for a while after Lotu finished speaking. Then he let out a long chuckle.

"What's so funny, Məhər?" Lotu asked.

"Faxı-Maxy qədər, they say you're smart, but turns out you're dumber than I am!" Məhər laughed again. "And I'm the crazy one!"

İmir scolded him:

“Don’t talk nonsense. Apologize!”

Lotu didn’t get angry — he smiled.

“Why do you say that, Məhər?”

“I meant no offense,” Məhər said, apologizing. “But your plan is foolish. The Agency is a government institution, not a thieves’ den! We don’t have cannons or armies. As long as Big Guy is in Baku, we can’t reach him. The ‘sxodka’ ruling will be meaningless...”

Lotu asked seriously: “What if the Agency behaves just like a thieves’ den?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Məhər said, repeating himself. “We can’t reach him in Baku.”

Lotu praised him: “Well said, Məhər,” he turned to İmir. “See, even our madman is clever. Whoever calls him crazy should lose their tongue!”

Unmoved by the praise, Məhər asked eagerly: “So what’s your decision, qədəş?”

“You’ll need to wait a bit,” Lotu replied. “I’ve received some info about the Khaloglu family. I need to verify it before deciding. But the sentence must be executed.”

“How? Are we going to use magic from inside prison?”
Məhər mocked.

“Hold on,” Lotu cut him off. “I’ve got good news. Lawyer Ənnağı is working on our case. In a few days, you’ll be transferred back to the asylum — and then released. But stay away from familiar faces; let everyone think you’re still in the zone.”

“What about you?” Məhər asked. “I can’t do this without you.”

“I won’t leave you alone. I’m due to be pardoned soon. My documents are ready.”

19

LOTU FAXI'S LIFE



Lotu Faxi had lived only eighteen years in freedom. The rest of his life had passed behind bars. His memories of free days were fragmented and incomplete.

His father, İgid, was a medium-height, broad-shouldered, muscular, blonde man. Though he was forty years old, he looked much younger. He had been working as the chief accountant at the state farm for twenty years and was considered one of the most trusted employees. The farm's director, Mr. Rəsul, had been in charge since its founding. Now seventy-five and barely able to walk, he was kept in his position even after reaching retirement age due to his skills as a manager. Frequent illness often confined him to bed, and in his absence, İgid essentially took over his duties.

İgid was also an amateur hunter. He was never home on

Sundays. With a double-barreled shotgun on his shoulder, a cartridge belt around his waist, and rubber boots on his feet, he would spend the day in the forests and mountains — never returning empty-handed. Sometimes he would take his tenth-grade son Fəxrəddin along. He taught him everything he knew: how to drive, how to aim, how to shoot, how to trap birds, hunt rabbits, shoot foxes — even accounting.

One day, while Fəxrəddin was holding the shotgun and jokingly aimed at a schoolmate who was herding sheep outside, his father scolded him:

“Never point a gun at a person,” he said sternly. “I forbid it.”

“Why?” Fəxrəddin asked in surprise.

İgid didn’t explain at first. “Just don’t. That’s final.” Then he added, “God forbid something goes wrong — you spill blood. You’ll suffer for the rest of your life.”

İgid loved his only son and treated him more like a friend than a child. He never raised his voice at him.

He drove the director’s Volga year-round. For some reason, Mr. Rəsul’s wife, Bağda Khanım, always found fault with

newly hired drivers and had them dismissed. The director spoiled his young wife and never said no to her.

Every morning, İgid would drop the director off at work, then take his fifteen-year-old daughter Nərmin to school. She didn't study in the village school but in the regional center. After returning, İgid would work at his official duties in the office for a few hours. The director didn't like to drive around and usually had people come to his office instead. After lunch, Bağda Khanım had full command over İgid. She would have him take her to the tailor, the beauty salon, shops, friends — wherever she pleased. She usually sat in the front seat beside the driver. This petite, beautiful woman was half her husband's age and very commanding. In public, she often spoke harshly to İgid. Fəxrəddin had witnessed this a few times but noticed that his father didn't seem offended — he might even have enjoyed it.

İgid was rarely home, yet those short visits were enough to expand the family — Fəxrəddin had six younger sisters, the eldest being sixteen. Her name was also Nərmin. Their thirty-five-year-old mother could barely keep up with the cooking, cleaning, and childcare. On top of that, she also worked at the farm. She was worn thin from all the stress and labor — so

skinny, a squeeze of her nose might have killed her.

Sometimes İgid was summoned to the director's mansion even at night. Usually, Bahar, the housemaid, would call. She had a rough, loud voice that made the phone speaker vibrate:

“İgid, don't act dead — the director wants you. Come immediately.”

İgid never allowed any of his family members in the director's Volga. Even if he saw his son or daughters walking down the road, he wouldn't offer them a ride.

One day, the Volga broke down. While İgid was fiddling under the car, he asked Fəxrəddin to deliver a package on the backseat to the mansion.

“To whom should I give it?” the boy asked.

“Whoever opens the gate,” İgid replied. “And ask when Bağda Khanım plans to go to the city.”

A Zhiguli car was parked outside the mansion. When Fəxrəddin rang the bell, the side gate opened, and Nərmin came out with a young man, probably in his twenties. Word had spread in the village that the director had engaged his daughter to his nephew who lived in the regional center — this was likely

him.

“Who are you? What do you want?” the young man barked. “Are you one of those loafers who play with doorbells?”

Nərmin interrupted him. “Əsəd, calm down. He’s the driver’s son.” She reached out and took the package from Fəxrəddin, explaining to her fiancé, “I forgot it in the car this morning on the way to school.”

Fəxrəddin had never seen Nərmin up close before. It was true — she looked just like his oldest sister, Nərmin. They were like two halves of the same apple. This surprised him, but he couldn’t make sense of it. He relayed his father's question:

“Nərmin Khanım, my father asked when Bağda Khanım is going to the city so he can come.”

At that moment, Bağda Khanım came out to see her daughter and future son-in-law off. She answered herself:

“We won’t need İgid to drive anymore,” she said with a sour look at Fəxrəddin. “If I need to go anywhere, my future son-in-law will take me.”

She hugged the young couple, watched them get into the

Zhiguli, and only then turned to Fəxrəddin, still waiting.

“Forget what I just said. Tell your father to come tonight — I have somewhere to go,” she said and disappeared into the mansion.

After that, Fəxrəddin often saw the Zhiguli around the village. Əsəd was clearly visiting his fiancée.

Around that time, İgid began to look troubled. Inspectors from Baku had come to audit the farm’s accounts. Since the director was bedridden, İgid was running documents to and from the mansion all day. He came home late, if at all.

One day he didn’t come home for lunch — instead, news of tragedy spread. The entire village rushed to the mansion, which was surrounded by police. Soon, İgid’s body was carried out on a stretcher. As they loaded it into the ambulance, the wind lifted the sheet — his bloodied, naked body was visible. The body was taken to the district center.

Later, the police brought the farm director back — handcuffed. The man looked like death itself, barely able to stand. His clothes were soaked in blood. They put him in a UAZ with barred windows.

A few days later, the police returned Īgid's body to the family. A tent of rugs and sheets was set up in the yard. Huge pots of water were heated. Fəxrəddin washed his father's body himself. The back of the skull had been smashed. The killer had likely attacked from behind to avoid a confrontation. As he bathed the body, Fəxrəddin made a decision — the murderer would not live another day.

20

HACI SARVAN'S GROUP IN THE CITY OF MEDINA



Even in the neutral zone, Hacı Sarvan found no peace. Suddenly, one of the pilgrims, Rəfiqə Khanım, began to feel unwell. The group's doctor, Abuzər the Healer, quickly laid out all the medicine he had on hand, but nothing seemed to help.

“Maybe she didn’t get her injection on time. Rəfiqə has diabetes,” Şərqiyyə Khanım recalled.

She searched the woman’s bag, found what was needed, and administered insulin. As the patient slowly began to recover, boarding for their flight was announced.

The flight attendants were repeatedly calling passengers, urging them to board. Hacı Sarvan sent Molla Gülü ahead with the rest of the group, and he himself boarded last — only after confirming every name on the passenger list.

No other extraordinary events occurred during the flight, but the first-time flyers among the pilgrims continued to struggle. Some needed help, then others — there was no rest for Hacı Sarvan either on the ground or in the sky. Yet the three-hour flight passed quickly.

By the time the plane landed in Medina, it was lunchtime. As soon as they stepped out of the airport, the scorching Arabian heat hit them, sapping the strength of those unaccustomed to it. It took a while for everyone to board the buses. Exhausted and worn out, they finally reached the hotel in the late afternoon.

But the refreshing air from the lobby's air conditioners revived the pilgrims instantly. Before assigning rooms, Hacı Sarvan first took them to the dining hall. After dinner and in the cool comfort of the hotel, the mood of the group improved considerably.

When he handed the guests over to the hotel receptionist, another side of Hacı Sarvan's personality emerged — it turned out he spoke Arabic fluently.

Balaca, Hacı Məftun, and Mirzəmməd were assigned to the same room — just as they had requested. The group leader

addressed the pilgrims as they were heading to their rooms:

“You’ve just arrived from a long journey. Get some rest. After breakfast tomorrow, everyone should gather in the lobby. We’ll visit the holy sites together,” he said. “It gets crowded at those places. Don’t ever remove your wristbands — they’ll help if you get lost.”

21

THE TRIO



While riding the elevator up to their rooms, Hacı Məftun said:

Let me tell you, I know the city of Medina quite well. During my Umrah, I wandered around neighborhood by neighborhood. To be honest, going on pilgrimage with a big group is tiring. It's better if the three of us go together..."

His suggestion appealed to Mirzəmməd. Balaca hesitated a little:

"What if we run into a language barrier?" he asked.

Hacı Məftun replied modestly:

"I know a bit of Arabic. I can manage," he said, then added with a laugh, "Not everyone can be a polyglot like Hacı Sarvan..."

22

BALACA'S FIRST PRAYER



It was time for evening prayer. While his companions were performing ablution in the bathroom, Balaca scratched behind his ear and hesitantly confessed:

“It’s no secret from Allah, so I won’t hide it from you either—I don’t know how to pray,” he admitted, adding before anyone could ask, “To be honest, I know nothing about the basic tenets of Islam.”

His admission left his companions speechless. After a few minutes, Hacı Məftun asked:

“Forgive me for asking, brother, but what business does someone so unfamiliar with religion have on a pilgrimage? Do you just like the Hacı title?”

Balaca scratched the back of his neck:

“If I said I suddenly found religion, you probably wouldn’t

believe me,” he said. “It just happened by chance...”

Hacı Məftun didn’t dig into the details:

“No worries. If you want to learn, stand behind us during prayer, repeat what we say, and you’ll memorize it soon.”

“How long will my training take?” Balaca joked.

Hacı Məftun replied enthusiastically:

“Allah’s word has such power that you’ll learn in no time.”

Mirzəmməd tried to clarify:

“Will our brother be praying the Shia way or the Sunni way?”

Balaca’s grasp of Islam was shaky—like a house without a foundation. At age six, he had experienced a brief moment of passion for Imam Hussein. On Ashura Day, an old woman named Fəridə, who worked at the local club, would serve syrup to all. Kids would gather around, chanting “Curse on Yazid!” and she’d reply, “Blessings of the Imamate!” while handing out drinks.

The taste of that syrup still lingered in Balaca’s memory:

“I’ll pray the Shia way,” he said. “I’m a supporter of Imam

Ali.”

His roommates were pleased. Hacı Məftun explained how to make an intention and perform ablution. He laid out a prayer rug and placed a spare turbah in front of Balaca:

“Just repeat after me,” he said.

Balaca began performing his first prayer—but the divine words didn’t flow from his lips with much enthusiasm. His roommates noticed.

23

THE CHIEF AND THE ADVISOR'S DISPUTE



After sending off Qırğı and Qaflan, neither the chief nor his advisor moved from their seats. Both were occupied with the same thought. Eventually, Əflan broke the silence:

“We still have two days left,” he said.

The Chief tried to understand:

“So what?”

“I mean we could postpone the pilgrimage,” Əflan said quietly. “We could go once the danger passes.”

The Chief, as if expecting this, replied:

“That’s not possible. We’re not going on this trip voluntarily! Ensuring the safety of Committee Chairman Mizi

Mətişoğlu is our duty. If it weren't for his support, the Agency would've been shut down long ago. After Sərhəd's death, he stood by us like a man, didn't let the jackals tear us apart."

Əflan couldn't hide his discontent:

"You shouldn't have signed off on Sərhəd's death, Chief."

The Chief stood up and looked down at him:

"Don't play dumb! Sure, we had a history with Sərhəd, but I never wished him dead. I was going to squeeze some money out of him and let him go."

"His death could've been avoided," Əflan insisted.

"How?! His own actions doomed him. It wasn't us—it was orders from above. Even the pills we used to interrogate people were swapped. You know all this." Then, cutting off Əflan's next comment: "Shut it! Didn't you get 10% of the money we squeezed out of Sərhəd? You didn't complain then, did you?"

Everything was still fresh in Əflan's memory. He had tried to change the course of events but failed.

24

MILLIONAIRE SƏRHƏD AT THE AGENCY



From the first minute, it was clear Sərhəd wouldn't be easy to handle. No one expected such stubbornness from a millionaire. Most investors who passed through the Agency acted like lambs to the slaughter. But Sərhəd wouldn't even negotiate the demanded amount. He even threatened:

“I'm not the type to run from either the Big Man or the Little Man,” he said. “I'll see this through to the end.”

The Chief tasked his advisor with “softening” Sərhəd. Əflan, a master of persuasion, spent several hours trying, but got nowhere. He returned to the Chief:

“He's not budging, Chief. I even left him in a dark cell for an hour. No effect.”

“We’re short on time!” the Chief snapped. “We need to wrap up before the auditors show up.”

“I was going to ask if...”

But the Chief already knew what he meant and pointed a finger at him:

“No! If you so much as lay a hand on him, I’ll destroy you. But the mission remains—his foreign account numbers must be on my desk. This is urgent.”

Əflan turned pale but held his tongue. Then, trying to lighten the mood:

“So what if his face gets bruised? It’s not like he’s a movie star.”

“He’s a trader, yes, but he’s well-connected. If there’s pressure, they’ll get him released and we’ll be left exposed.”

“What if we go after his family?” Əflan suggested.

“You idiot!” the Chief snapped. “His wife and kids are already abroad.”

“Then maybe his accountant or secretary?”

“Already questioned. They know nothing.”

Pacing the room, the Chief finally made a decision:

“You’re done with Sərhad. Focus on his company instead. Prepare a power of attorney, take a few men, and lock down the main office. I hear he’s got cash there. One week’s worth of daily takings should be enough. We’ll send the account numbers up the chain.”

Əflan smiled, relieved to still have the Chief’s trust:

“I thought I’d lost your confidence,” he said cautiously. “But what about Sərhad?”

“Let Qaflan handle him,” the Chief said. “Maybe your brother will find a better interrogation method.”

“He’s rough, Chief,” Əflan warned. “Could stir up chaos.”

“That’s what we need. We don’t have time. He’ll find a way.”

25

ƏFLAN AND QAFLAN'S SPORTS CLUB



1 987 exposed the Soviet system's flaws. Store shelves were empty, money was worthless, and chaos reigned. The criminal underworld started dictating the rules. The brothers Əflan and Qaflan had backgrounds in wrestling and both worked as schoolteachers after finishing the physical education institute. But by 1987, their salaries weren't enough.

"We'll starve at this rate," Qaflan often complained.

"Maybe we should open a private sports club?" Əflan suggested.

"With what money? Are we starting with 'In the name of God'?" Qaflan joked.

Still, they rented a basement and used school equipment to get started. Soon, they had plenty of students. But gradually,

Əflan drove away the regular kids and kept only those with criminal pasts or who could fight.

Qaflan didn't like this:

“Why are you bringing ex-cons in here? You think you'll raise world champions?”

Eventually, Əflan shared his real plan—using the name of famous criminal boss Lotu Faxı to collect protection money from local businesses.

“What if we get caught?” Qaflan asked.

“We won't. The country's in chaos.”

“But if Lotu Faxı finds out...”

“He won't. Everyone's using his name.”

Eventually, Qaflan agreed.

26

THE COUSINS' INDIRECT ENCOUNTER WITH THE BROTHERS



In the late 1980s, the Chief, then head of the Anti-Theft Department for Socialist Property, was in a bind. The kickbacks he funneled upward were no longer enough. He turned to his cousin Balaca:

“The local businesses are out of our control. They’re threatening us with Lotu Faxı or Sanı Abşeronki. What do we do?”

“Fear works best on traders,” Balaca said.

“What, we send cops to collect bribes? Brilliant advice...”

“No, we need muscle.”

“Where do we find reliable guys?”

“At sports clubs,” Balaca replied.

Coincidentally, a restaurant owner named Əhlimən came in with a black eye. He’d been threatened by two thugs claiming to work for Lotu Faxı. They took 50 manats from his till and warned him to pay monthly or face destruction.

The Chief and Balaca decided enough was enough and set a trap. The thugs were arrested easily. Tracing their contacts led them straight to Əflan and Qaflan.

27

THE COUSINS MEET THE BROTHERS



Summoned to the station, the brothers denied everything. The Chief realized Əflan was the brains, and Qaflan just the muscle. “You’ve got two witnesses,” Balaca warned. “What’s the point of denying?”

“We’ll see what the court says,” Əflan replied smugly.

“You won’t see a courtroom,” the Chief said coldly.

“Why not?”

“Lotu Faxı won’t let you live if he finds out you used his name.”

“He’s in jail. How would he find out?”

“We’ll make sure he does.”

Shaken, Əflan asked:

“What do you want from us?”

“Now we’re talking,” the Chief smiled.

And so began their cooperation.

28

LOTU FAXI AND GÜLÜ THE MORTICIAN



Lotu Faxı had a restless first night at the Medina hotel. Dombanın’s snoring kept him awake. Hearing a noise, he dressed and followed it to the rooftop, where he enjoyed the view of the Prophet’s Mosque.

Suddenly, a familiar figure—Gülü—stepped off the elevator. They recognized each other from prison.

Years ago, Lotu had protected the naive and good-looking Gülü from prison abuse. Gülü had promised to repay the favor one day.

“You would’ve been ruined without me,” Lotu reminded him.

“Let’s not get into details,” Gülü said. “But I haven’t forgotten.”

“Good. Then I need your help,” Lotu said. “But if you betray me, I’ll wipe your family off the face of the earth.”

“I know who I’m dealing with,” Gülü replied.

29

SƏRHƏD'S DEATH AND THE AGENCY'S COLLAPSE



Qaflan's interrogation failed—Sərhəd died. The Chief exploded in rage.

“We needed his foreign account numbers, not his corpse!”

“I only gave him half the pill,” Qaflan insisted.

“Did you check with the doctor first?”

“It was the pill our own Agency doctor recommended.”

The Chief paused. That doctor worked for the Deputy Minister. He realized Sərhəd's political activity had made him a target.

“Call the boys back from his company. Burn all signed documents. Move the cash to my garden—quick!”

He left immediately and was rushed to the hospital with

chest pains.

That afternoon, masked men stormed the Agency. They sealed offices, replaced guards, and posted an order declaring the Agency shut down.

30

REESTABLISHING THE AGENCY



Surprisingly, this made Əflan happy. He and Qaflan rushed to the hospital. Balaca was already at the Chief's side. "They just wanted our files. Now that they have them, we might be allowed to reopen tomorrow," the Chief said.

He was right. Within a week, they were unofficially allowed to resume operations—though with fewer powers and staff.

They were moved to a backup location, stripped of landlines, but given mobile phones with unlimited talk time. Salaries doubled, but bribes and bonuses disappeared. The mood was grim. Even the Chief was laying low. When asked, Balaca shrugged:

"I have no information," he said.

31

THE NEWS OF THE TRIP



One day, the Chief showed up at the Agency in a very cheerful mood. Toward the evening, he summoned Əflan, Qaflan, and Balaca to his office and said:

“Get ready—we're going to Mecca soon, on a pilgrimage.”

The news was so unexpected that silence fell over the room.

Once Balaca gathered himself, he said nervously:

“Don't joke about the Hajj, cousin! Even if you go, I won't. I'm a man who drinks—I have no business in Mecca!”

Qaflan supported Balaca:

“Balaca's right, Chief. We don't pray, we don't know religious rituals, we're unfamiliar with the Shahada, and we swim in sin—how can we become pilgrims?”

Əflan said nothing. He knew the Chief better than anyone

else in the room. He immediately sensed there was something more behind this pilgrimage.

Balaca and Qaflan's panic amused the Chief. He smiled faintly and said:

“We're going to Saudi Arabia on a business trip, not for pilgrimage. Stop panicking. It's our friend and benefactor, Committee Chairman Mizi Mətişoğlu, who's going for pilgrimage. Our job is to ensure his security.”

Əflan asked suspiciously:

“Chief, we can ensure anyone's safety in Azerbaijan—but how can we do that in Saudi Arabia? That's a foreign country...”

Just then a noise came from the reception room. Everyone in the office went silent. Qaflan stepped out and quickly returned.

“It's the cleaning lady—just sweeping up,” he said indifferently.

The Chief asked sharply, “Sweeping at this hour? Əflan, check the identity of that cleaner tomorrow—just in case.”

Əflan raised his hand to his brow: “Yes, Chief. I'll check.”

The Chief didn't like the new building of the Agency. It felt like the walls had ears. Secrets discussed inside seemed to leak out elsewhere. He frowned and clarified:

"Let me explain. In Saudi Arabia, we have two friends close to the royal family. They've promised to help us."

Balaca asked, "Do you mean Aisha and Muhammad?"

The Chief confirmed, "Yes. Our old classmates now work at an oil company. Aisha Memari is also a translator for a prince."

Balaca was surprised. "What's their connection to the royal family?"

The Chief grinned proudly, though the story seemed made-up: "Hah! You don't know? They just married off their eldest daughter to a prince—they've joined the royal family. I spoke with Aisha the other day. They're in good spirits. They both send their regards!"

"Incredible! So they agreed to help us?" Balaca asked skeptically. "I remember—Muhammad Khalaf wouldn't write a course paper for free. He's changed?"

"I trust Aisha Memari more than Muhammad," the Chief

laughed. “I told you—we kept in touch from time to time.”

Balaca, recalling the past, smiled too: “They say old love never dies...”

“Remember this, Balaca,” the Chief said with a laugh. “Love doesn’t have an expiration date. If it exists—it’s eternal...”

Əflan and Qaflan always envied the cousin’s connections. Wherever they turned, they had someone to lean on—as if they’d planted people there with their own hands.

32

PREPARING FOR THE TRIP



Preparation for the trip took more than two months. The challenges never seemed to end. Committee Chairman Mizi Mətişoğlu's endless desires didn't exactly align with the rituals of the Hajj—to put it mildly.

The Chief began to regret getting involved, but it was too late to back out now. The Agency's future depended on this trip. He was stuck in a dilemma. The Hajj pilgrimage needed to be completed in a week, or the trip would have to be canceled. Mizi Mətişoğlu constantly reminded him:

“Chief, keep in mind—I don't have much time. I can't be out of the country for long. Our trip, roundtrip, mustn't take more than a week.”

The Chief contacted Saudi Arabia and made his request. Aisha Memari was hesitant at first, but after seeing his persistence, she promised to consult with the authorities. A few

days later, she said it was possible—the pilgrimage could be completed in six days—but the trip needed to be carefully planned down to the tiniest detail. Every step had to be coordinated to avoid deviations.

Əflan, Balaca, and even Qaflan tried to help the Chief as much as they could. It had to be that way—the Agency’s fate was tied to all of theirs.

Finally, once both the visible and hidden aspects of the trip were discussed thoroughly, the Chief instructed Balaca, who handled financial matters for the Agency, to transfer funds to Muhammad Khalaf, Aisha Memari’s husband.

His cousin didn’t hide his sarcasm:

“So our dear friend won’t help for free?”

“Friendship may have its limits—but money has none!” the Chief explained. “Don’t forget to send the funds immediately. You know Muhammad Khalaf’s temperament—he might throw a tantrum.”

33

LOTU FAXO'S MECCA TRIP TAKES SHAPE



The old pickpocket İmir had found peace thanks to Lotu Faxy. He was assigned to clean and maintain the meeting rooms in the "Turşulu" prison zone. The gossip he overheard from guards, supervisors, and guests sometimes turned out to be useful.

One day, the wife of a prisoner visited and told him some important news. She had heard from someone working at the Agency that the Chief would be going on pilgrimage.

İmir dropped everything and rushed to his cell, stumbling over his own feet. At one point, Lotu Faxy had considered getting him released, but the old pickpocket had refused:

“Buddy, I have no family left. Distant relatives think I’m long dead. I’ve got nowhere to go. I’m better off here.”

Lotu Faxo was tidying his cell, packing up his belongings into cardboard boxes. Tomorrow was his last day in prison—he was being released. When Īmir told him what he'd heard, Lotu Faxo lit up with excitement.

“This is good news, Īmir! I've been racking my brain for days, trying to find a way. Our enemy's trip to Mecca is a gift to us. We'll get our revenge there.”

“Then you'll need to go on pilgrimage too!” Īmir said.

“Why not? Pilgrimage and business. The Hajj has been a long-time dream of mine,” Lotu grinned. Then he added seriously, “My sins are weighing me down, Īmir. I can't carry them anymore. I need to repent.”

Īmir knew the history of Lotu's sins well. He didn't argue.

“You'll take the Madman with you?” he asked.

“Of course. I can't do anything without Məhar,” Lotu nodded. “Maybe I'll bring Domba too...”

“I'd go with you...” Īmir said longingly. “Please take me, buddy.”

Lotu chuckled indifferently:

“No way. You’ll die on the road, and I’ll be responsible. That’d just add one more sin to my name.”

Then Lotu considered the conversation over and returned to packing.

34

THE “TRIO” IN MEDINA



Their first day in Medina was productive. Guided by Hacı Məftun, the trio visited many holy sites. They even visited the valley where the Prophet Muhammad’s favorite dates were grown and ate some fresh from the tree. They visited the Baqi cemetery and viewed from afar the unmarked graves of Imam Hasan, Imam Zayn al-Abidin, Imam Baqir, and Imam Sadiq.

The Saudi police didn’t allow anyone past the iron fence.

They performed prayers at the Prophet’s Mosque, just a short walk from their hotel, though the city’s furnace-like streets were searing hot. They had agreed in advance: if separated, they would regroup at the Baqi-facing exit.

Amid the mosque’s cool interior, among thousands of disciplined worshippers, their hearts swelled with awe. They quietly repeated blessings as they drew nearer to the golden

latticework behind which the Prophet's grave lay. They placed their hands on their chests to apologize to strangers they bumped into and began their prayers.

The Prophet's tomb was said to lie beneath what had once been Aisha's house. The mosque had been built over it later. To his right and left were buried the Caliphs Abu Bakr and Umar.

Hacı Məftun advised them to fix their gaze on the center of the lattice—toward the Prophet's grave:

“Let your blessings be directed at the righteous, not those who usurped Imam Ali's rightful place.”

Balaca mimicked everything his companions did but didn't appear to be moved. He behaved more like a tourist, wandering indifferently.

He couldn't sit still and often left alone, phone in hand. He never invited the others to join him.

One day, Hacı Məftun told Mirzəmməd:

“Let's follow him. We should know who we're sharing a room with. Or... let's say we go visit the Mosque of the Two Qiblas. It's one of a kind.”

35

THE YOUNG AND OLD BELIEVERS TOGETHER



Although the Mosque of the Two Qiblas was only five kilometers from the Prophet's Mosque, the heat made the journey exhausting. In the mosque courtyard, they saw a few of the young men from their group—Zakir and Muxtar among them. They prayed together.

In the early days of Islam, Muslims prayed facing Jerusalem. But eighteen months after the Hijrah, during a prayer, Prophet Muhammad received a revelation instructing him to turn toward the Kaaba in Mecca.

After the prayer, Hacı Məftun spoke passionately to the young men:

“We are standing where the foundation of Islam was laid! Not everyone is granted such good fortune!”

Mirzəmməd was wilting from the heat. He whispered to Hacı Məftun:

“I don’t feel well...”

“We’re leaving right now,” said Hacı Məftun, then turned to the youths. “We’re heading back to the hotel. What about you?”

Zakir looked around and said, “You go ahead. We want to explore the city.”

Muxtar added happily, “We’ve got our own route, elder.”

As they walked off, Zakir asked:

“Where’s your roommate, Balaca? Haven’t seen him...”

Hacı Məftun forced a smile:

“He’s got his own route too...”

36

HACI MƏFTUN'S LIFE



By nature, Məftun was a simple and naïve man. As a child, he was often the target of jokes at school and in the neighborhood. But his devotion to faith helped cover up this shortcoming. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the tin work he had learned at the factory became useful. He opened several small tin workshops around the city. Though not flashy, his business was profitable and steady.

As his wealth grew, so did his reputation. After going on Hajj, he became highly respected. But he never left the Kombinat neighborhood, which had turned from a growing village into a proper town. Of course, he no longer lived in a shack beside the club, but in a gated estate.

In his youth, Məftun loved books, which his mother figure Fəridə disapproved of:

“Idiot! What’s the point of reading? Learn a proper trade, make money, stand on your own! Do you enjoy living off my

meager pension?”

She would scold him often, but she always gave him her last piece of food. While she walked around in clothes made from old military coats dyed black, she made sure he was well-dressed.

Məftun loved her deeply, even though he didn't understand her. Years later, he found out she wasn't his biological mother, but a close friend of his real mother—who was still rotting away in prison, having never once asked about her son.

In his forties, Məftun finally decided to marry. At Fəridə's suggestion, he married Şərqiyyə, a widow from their village. Because she had once been married to a war hero colonel, one of Şərqiyyə's conditions for the marriage was getting the blessing of Hacı Sarvan, a respected figure and Məftun's childhood friend.

Sarvan, amused by the formality, joked around a bit but ultimately gave his approval.

Məftun got married—but his deepest wish remained unfulfilled. For years he had clung to God's mercy, praying endlessly for a child. Though simple-minded, he never shared this longing with anyone—it lived only inside him.

37

HACI SARVAN AND GÜLÜ THE MORTICIAN



The first day of the pilgrimage went well. After visiting all the holy sites in Medina, the group returned to their hotel exhausted. Even Hacı Sarvan felt worn out, but he had no time to rest. A new group of pilgrims had arrived from Azerbaijan, and some were placed in their hotel—under his care.

Though evening had already passed, Sarvan found the dining manager, charmed his way through, and got the kitchen reopened so the newcomers could eat. Then, with a night-duty assistant, he arranged sleeping arrangements and fetched extra folding beds from storage.

Once everything was settled, he went down to the wide hotel vestibule—the only place with a strong enough satellite signal for uninterrupted calls. He updated HQ about the day's

events and the new arrivals. Then he didn't hang up right away. With glasses hanging from a cord around his neck, he put them on and began browsing news online. But his mind was elsewhere—his thoughts wandering through the reel of his life.

His assistant Gülü appeared with a checklist. She had checked each room.

“Everyone's in place except Balaca, taxi driver Muxtar, and Hacı Məftun. From the new arrivals, Qaflan is missing.”

Sarvan thanked her:

“God bless you, Gülü. Without you, I'd be lost. You're good for everything!”

Then joking, “Sit down, rest. Let's see when our stragglers return. Midnight's still a way off.”

Gülü sighed unexpectedly:

“Honestly, Hacı, some of these pilgrims are such rogues—they don't serve God in Baku, but here they are visiting God's house.”

“Everyone has a trace of God-fearing in them,” Sarvan replied calmly.

“I still think...” Gülü started, but Sarvan cut her off:

“I thought you cared more about the dead than the living.”

Gülü didn’t miss a beat:

“I need to know my future customers, don’t I?”

Sarvan laughed heartily at her wit:

“You’ve got a sharp tongue!” He removed his glasses and looked away. “Stick to your job. I’ll rest a bit—I’m truly tired.”

38

HACI SARVAN'S LIFE



Sarvan was just one year younger than his brother Sørtib, but much smaller. God had created him frail, lacking strength, height, and charm—all the things his brother had in abundance.

But Sørtib had a kind heart and always protected Sarvan.

His four sisters disliked Sarvan. His wrinkled face and fragile frame were off-putting, and Sarvan didn't care much for them either.

Their home was near a small military town. Sarvan used to climb the fence to watch soldiers training and dreamed of becoming a soldier himself—but that dream never came true.

When their father sent Sørtib to a military school, Sarvan cried and begged not to be separated from him:

“Dad, don't send him away! I can't live without him!”

But their father, a strict man, didn't comfort him:

“Quiet, fool! You'll never make a soldier. You'll just get trampled.” Then he tried to explain more gently. “Son, you need a trade within your strength. Starting tomorrow, you'll go to Mullah Shəhriyar to learn the Quran. Being a cleric isn't a bad job—you get free food at ceremonies. Maybe you'll grow strong.”

Sarvan didn't dare disobey and accepted his fate.

39

SARVAN AT THE MULLAH'S



The mullah lived behind the village mosque and taught a handful of students in secret due to fear of the authorities. Sarvan befriended a boy named Məftun from the nearby Kombinat settlement. He was a bit eccentric—he had a habit of stopping to break any glass bottle he saw on the road. But he was friendly.

After finishing their studies, Məftun said:

“People consider clerics to be parasites. I don’t plan to become one—I’ll work at the factory. But you’ve got a good voice. You should stick with it.”

Indeed, Sarvan’s beautiful voice earned him fame. Soon he was invited everywhere, especially during the Ashura season.

His father had been right—he thrived. His face filled out,

wrinkles faded, and even his height seemed to improve. Over the years, he graduated from a religious studies faculty and even published a book on Islam.

He held a minor position in the clerical office, but his real income came from religious ceremonies.

After marriage, he moved out of the family home and built a small house near the city road. His wife was also religious. They were devoted to each other but had no children.

His relationship with his father remained cold. They never contacted each other. His sisters ignored him too.

His brother Sərtib, however, became a colonel in the Soviet army—a family hero. When he returned to Baku on leave, relatives lined up to host him.

Having lived in Russia, Sərtib had become russified and gone through many marriages. But when he was transferred to Baku, he returned single. At his father's insistence, he married an 18-year-old neighbor, Şərqiyyə—but the marriage didn't last.

When war broke out in the 1990s, Sərtib joined the fight as a volunteer. He was a strict commander and died from a sniper

bullet. His death devastated their father, who passed away shortly afterward from grief.

Sarvan blamed himself for his brother's death—for the jealousy he'd carried in his heart for years. Despite twenty years of repentance, the guilt never left him. Even praying for hours at the Kaaba hadn't eased his burden. Perhaps, he thought, God had chosen not to forgive him.

40

QAFLAN



Qaflan received his room key but didn't go upstairs. He had no luggage. Instead, he joined Balaca waiting nearby, and they headed to a nearby café.

Qaflan ordered coffee and cold water. Balaca, surprised at the once-dull man's fluent English, said:

"You've come a long way, Qaflan. When you joined the Agency, you were like a butcher's block."

In truth, Qaflan wasn't as dumb as he appeared—his bluntness was more of a disguise. He replied with a proverb:

"Tie a horse among other horses, and it may not change color, but it will change behavior. I just adapted."

Then, smiling, he lowered his voice:

"I've brought an important message. The criminal bosses in the 'Turşulu' prison zone have issued a fatwa for our Chief's

death. They've hired a hitman to do it."

Balaca forgot his coffee and reached for the list of drinks.

"Is your source reliable?" he asked.

"From Qırğın," Qaflan replied simply.

Balaca knew Qırğın, a former Agency employee—he wasn't one to spread rumors.

"So, the criminal world can't forgive our Chief for seizing Millionaire Sərhəd's fortune, huh?"

"You've guessed it." Qaflan downed his coffee. "The Chief said to tell you to be careful."

Balaca's drink arrived. Qaflan smiled:

"This doesn't look like your usual poison. It's only called beer." Balaca laughed too:

"Someone's watching me. I'll give them a lesson..." He downed one bottle and packed the rest into a plastic bag. "Better if they don't see us together."

He said goodbye to Qaflan and left.

41

THE LATECOMERS AND THE "HAJJI BEER"



The first of the missing to return was the driver, Muxtar. He greeted them and was about to walk past when he saw Hacı Sarvan's questioning look and stopped. He explained:

"I got lost, Hacı. Thought I'd take a walk and ended up losing my way. Showed my bracelet to a taxi driver—he brought me back."

Next came Hacı Məftun, entering through the hotel lobby. Hacı Sarvan, still on the phone, joked:

"Let's hope Şərqiyyə doesn't hear about this. Out at this hour—hope it wasn't an Arab girl keeping you busy, Hacı?"

But Məftun was in no mood for jokes. He sat beside the group leader and whispered:

"I was following Balaca... Can you believe it, Hacı? He's in

a café drinking beer. Not alone—one of our own was with him. I mean, seriously, what's a guy like that doing on pilgrimage?"

Hacı Sarvan, seasoned in handling unexpected issues during pilgrimages, didn't panic. He scolded his old friend:

"Come on, Hacı. You know there's no alcohol for sale anywhere in Saudi Arabia. I just can't believe your roommate was drinking beer in a café."

Just then, Balaca appeared in the vestibule. He approached the two men, smiling coldly, and shook the plastic bag he was holding:

"Gentlemen, I found some 'Hajji' beer. Want some? It's alcohol-free. Excellent refreshment."

Then, turning to Hacı Məftun with mock irritation:

"Hacı, spying isn't your strong suit. Don't follow me again—you give yourself away from a mile off."

Without waiting for a response, Balaca said goodbye to Sarvan and walked off toward the elevator, swinging his plastic bag.

Hacı Sarvan smiled at his embarrassed old friend and looked after Balaca with curiosity.

"Seems like a suspicious guy. I wonder what he really is."

42

GÜLÜ THE MORTICIAN AND BALACA



The laundry room was open to pilgrims from 6 PM to midnight. Everyone was busy washing sweaty clothes in rooftop machines and hanging them to dry. Under the blazing sun, clothes dried quickly.

That evening, the group was scheduled to leave Medina. Everyone was occupied with preparing their clothes. There was a line at the laundry.

Gülü had been nervously pacing the hallway for some time. Soon Mirzəmməd and Hacı Məftun passed by, each carrying a laundry bag. Behind them appeared Balaca, with a large bag in one hand and a phone in the other.

Gülü greeted him from a distance:

“Balaca müəllim, I’m heading to the laundry too. Let me

carry your bag so you can talk freely on the phone.”

“No need to trouble yourself, molla...” Balaca hesitated.

“It’s no trouble—it’s my duty.” Gülü took the bag from him and warned, “The queue’s long upstairs, and not all the machines are working.”

Balaca frowned:

“I have urgent business—can’t delay it. I’ll do the laundry later.”

“I’ll wash it for you and hang it to dry. You can pick it up when you’re done with your work,” Gülü offered.

“Thanks, brother Gülü,” Balaca smiled and walked off, phone pressed to his ear.

43

MIRZƏMMƏD'S PLEA



They were supposed to leave Medina today. Mirzəmməd told his companions he wanted some time alone to repent. “Let’s meet at the Baqi cemetery exit,” he said, then headed deep into the mosque.

He carried guilt in his heart over Sərhəd’s death. A voice inside kept saying, “You should’ve stopped him, begged him, changed his mind.” That voice tormented him—it couldn’t be silenced.

He stood in prayer facing the Prophet Muhammad’s (PBUH) tomb and said:

“Lord, for the sake of this sacred soul, forgive my sins!”

Then he went into prostration and stayed there for a long time. Memories of what had happened the previous year burned inside him.

44

SƏRHƏD'S AMBITION



From time to time, Mirzəmməd would manage to gather his fragmented family. He always seated Sərhəd at the head of the table. They had reconciled, and their closeness was so sincere that even a real father and son would be jealous.

Despite being a millionaire, Sərhəd always sought Mirzəmməd's advice before making big decisions. Now, he expressed a new ambition:

"I'm planning to run for parliament. I'll announce my candidacy this year."

Mirzəmməd tried to dissuade him:

"Why rush, son? If not this year, then five years from now. You're still young. What's the hurry?"

"Remember—you can't make a move without the

authorities' approval. Otherwise, you'll lose."

"I only need the people's approval," Sərħəd countered. "I'm not bowing to anyone."

Məħər, who was drunk at the time, laughed:

"Hrrr! My brother's millions have made him greedy for power."

"Shut up!" Sərħəd snapped.

"Why should I?" Məħər slurred. "We all live under your shadow. If something happens to you, we're all doomed."

"This is about public service, you idiot—not your comfort!" Sərħəd shouted.

"Aren't we part of the public?" Məħər objected.

Sərħəd didn't back down:

"I've given him a major post, and he just loafs around drunk all day."

Məħər was head of security at Sərħəd's company but didn't take his job seriously. He loved spending his brother's money and never missed a single village party.

Sərhad was right. Guilty, Məhər sniffled:

“Little brother wants to enjoy life—what’s the harm?”

He rose slowly.

“I’ll go lie down. If I stay, we’ll argue.”

“Yeah, go sleep it off. We’ve got somewhere to be later.”

When Məhər left the room, Sərhad turned to Mirzəmməd:

“I can’t wait five more years, father. The people expect me to act. Our village is falling apart!”

“Don’t forget you have a criminal record,” Mirzəmməd warned him, then turned to Kəmalə, who had been quietly listening.

“Daughter, bring us some tea.”

Kəmalə still looked youthful for her age, dressed well and glowing under the chandelier. She stood and said:

“Right away!”

Then, from the kitchen doorway, she added:

“Listen to Mirzəmməd—he’s speaking for your good.”

“Yes, auntie,” Sərħəd said with a mock salute, hand to his temple.

But neither of them was fooled. They knew it was nearly impossible to change his mind.

Mirzəmməd tried once more:

“Remember, son, the road to power is full of traps—tread carefully.”

“Don’t worry, father. Half the village earns their bread because of me. No one can stand against my factories, companies, or warehouses. A month before elections, my team will go door to door. Where words fail, money talks. I’ve opened the purse. Power is sweet—if you’d tasted it, you wouldn’t hold me back.”

Mirzəmməd grinned:

“Don’t let my tea-serving fool you—I’ve also been offered high posts.”

Sərħəd’s jaw dropped:

“Seriously? Tell me how that happened!”

Mirzəmməd was famous for his generous meals during

Azerbaijan's political unrest. Protest leaders would gather at his teahouse. When the opposition took power, they offered him a post—but he declined:

“I’m a cook, not a governor.”

“You shouldn’t have refused!” Sərhəd said sincerely, sipping the tea Kəmalə had brought.

“Everyone should do what they know best, son,” said Mirzəmməd.

“There are plenty in power who don’t know what they’re doing!” Sərhəd argued. “Money fixes everything.”

“Not everyone can be bought,” said Mirzəmməd.

“That’s where you’re wrong. I can buy votes from every household in the village.”

“I’m not talking about voters—I’m talking about the people at the top,” Mirzəmməd said. “You know who your opponents are and who backs them.”

“I can handle them too. Wave a few millions in front of them—they’ll dance like puppets.”

Despite Mirzəmməd’s pleas, he couldn’t convince his son.

Less than a month later, Sərhad officially registered as a candidate. His team was already canvassing. But then things went south—police planted drugs on Məhər and his men. They were arrested and sentenced swiftly. Even Clause 9B couldn't save Məhər.

The clouds began to gather over Sərhad's head.

45

THE STORM BREAKS



Less than a month after officially registering his candidacy, Særhød's problems began.

Mæhær and his associates were arrested by the police. The charges were serious: possession of narcotics with intent to distribute. It was a setup, but nobody could prove it. Within days, the court sentenced them harshly. The ruling left no room for appeal. Not even the much-whispered Clause 9B could save them this time.

The authorities moved quickly, cutting off the roots before the tree could grow. They struck just before Særhød's campaign was about to gain traction.

It became clear that the order came from high up. His opponents weren't just political—they were part of the elite establishment. The message was obvious: "Stay in your lane."

Særhød fought back. He hired lawyers, appealed the

verdicts, went public with accusations of a political conspiracy. But it was no use. The press wouldn't publish his statements. His interviews were edited or cut entirely. Television hosts refused to speak with him. Even social media pages started vanishing.

Mirzəmməd had warned him, but the young man hadn't listened.

Now, the factories started closing. Business contracts were canceled. Bank accounts were frozen. Customers disappeared. Friends turned away.

In just a few weeks, Sərhəd went from being the village's golden son to a pariah.

Mirzəmməd visited him one last time before he left the village. He found the young man sitting alone in a warehouse, smoking silently in the dark.

"Son..." Mirzəmməd began, but Sərhəd didn't look up.

"I was so close," he said bitterly. "I thought money could open every door. I thought I was untouchable."

Mirzəmməd put a hand on his shoulder.

"You're still young. Life doesn't end with defeat. Learn

from this. Power isn't about wealth. It's about knowing when to push—and when to step back.”

Sørhød stared into the darkness.

“They broke me, father. They broke everything.”

46

MIRZƏMMƏD AND MƏHƏR



With surprising agility for his age, Mirzəmməd tried to catch up to a tall, broad-shouldered man in a blue shirt ahead of him. When he couldn't, he shouted:

“Hey, Məhər! Wait!”

The man didn't stop but lingered at each storefront just long enough to delay, then quickly moved on before Mirzəmməd could reach him.

Just one corner away from the hotel, the man in the blue shirt disappeared into the crowd. Out of breath, Mirzəmməd slumped onto the sidewalk in the building's shade.

He had barely caught his breath when his companions arrived.

Putting on a proud expression, he said:

“So, who’s old now?”

Hacı Məftun sat beside him and jokingly wrapped an arm around his shoulder:

“Mashallah, you were like a racehorse out there! We couldn’t keep up!”

Balaca wasn’t convinced. It was obvious that Mirzəmməd had chased after someone and failed to catch them. But he chose to ask questions later, masking his impatience with a smile:

“Brothers, let’s go—our group leader is waiting.”

47

MIRZƏMMƏD'S PAST



Mirzəmməd had grown up in hardship. He didn't remember his mother—she had died when he was very young. His father, Sülü, returned from war mentally unstable. He had rented several hectares of land from the sovkhos and made a living from farming, giving a portion to the state and selling the rest at the market.

They lived in a shack on the edge of the collective farm's land.

When Sülü wanted to satisfy his lust, he turned to Moldovan women exiled to the Absheron region who worked at the factories. He also made advances on local widows—an act that eventually led to his demise. One day, they found his body in the irrigation canal.

At age ten, Mirzəmməd was taken in by his maternal grandmother. She lived alone in a semi-basement room in the

Çəmbərəkənd neighborhood of Baku. A spry, devout woman, she often recited the Quran, especially Surah Yasin, which she had memorized. She taught Mirzəmməd to read along.

Though poor, she made a living by crafting and selling soap made from clay called gilabı. Mirzəmməd wasn't fond of school but helped her mold the soap for local bathhouses. She loved him but disapproved of his interest in girls.

“May your father's disgraceful bloodline rot in hell! Looking at women already?”

Mirzəmməd wasn't a bad boy. He woke for morning prayers and fasted during Ramadan. One of his legs was slightly shorter than the other, so he wasn't drafted into the army.

Eventually, his grandmother persuaded a local shop to hire him as a night watchman. But one day, police arrested him—the store had been robbed. The real thieves weren't caught, but they easily pinned it on Mirzəmməd. He was sentenced to seven years.

In prison, things only got worse due to his physical weakness. By the time he was released, he was nearly forty, with white hair and beard. His beloved grandmother had died

and was buried in the Çəmbərəkənd cemetery. After some thought, he packed her Quran and returned to his ancestral village.

48

MIRZƏMMƏD BECOMES A TEAHOUSE OWNER



With help from village elders, he found work at the local “Raypo” teahouse. It had been closed for years and was in terrible shape. Everything was broken or missing—he had to start from scratch.

Within a few months, Mirzəmməd turned it around, even adding a dining area. Business picked up. He needed help, especially in the kitchen.

He hired a woman named Kəmalə, a widow from the city with two boys—Sərhad and Sərham (nicknamed Məhər). She claimed they were her late brother’s sons. They had no place to live, so Mirzəmməd let them stay in a storeroom behind the teahouse.

Kəmalə was worn down by life. Her face was darkened like burnt wood. She dressed simply and worked tirelessly. The

younger boy, Məhər, was a bit wild but quickly became attached to Mirzəmməd. His older brother, Sərhəd, was gloomy and disobedient.

Mirzəmməd cared for them like his own children. He encouraged them to pray and learn the Quran. He especially tried to teach them Surah Yasin.

The boys constantly bickered, and sometimes Məhər would physically overpower Sərhəd. Still, they were united in one thing—they both jealously guarded their aunt from Mirzəmməd. One of them was always keeping watch over her.

Sərhəd, though smart, had no interest in school. He picked fights with kids, especially orphans. Once, he injured a student, blinding him in one eye. He was sent to a juvenile colony. Kəmalə wept every day until Mirzəmməd spent some money and managed to get him released a year later.

Meanwhile, 12-year-old Məhər showed no interest in school, had a big appetite, and acted far older than his age. He obeyed Mirzəmməd, calling him “Dad,” and never left the teahouse. Sərhəd, though smaller, was quick and agile. He deeply resented Mirzəmməd for being close to his aunt.

49

MIRZƏMMƏD'S LOVE



Thanks to Mirzəmməd's generosity, the family's situation improved. Məhər grew into a big, strong boy who fiercely protected his brother. Once, he cracked another child's head. This time, the case went to the police. The victim's family didn't withdraw the complaint.

To avoid jail, Mirzəmməd sent Məhər to a mental institution. After a while, he was released under Clause 9B. From then on, people feared him.

With better living conditions, Kəmalə's appearance transformed. Her body filled out, her shoulders rounded, her cheeks turned rosy. She no longer avoided Mirzəmməd's gaze.

Though over forty, Mirzəmməd still feared intimacy. Years of prison had scarred him. But eventually, desire overcame him, and he responded to Kəmalə's silent invitation.

Their love made them happy, but they kept it secret. The boys were now grown, and they feared how they might react.

After leaving the juvenile colony, Sərhad never returned to school. He worked the markets, often sleeping out. One afternoon, he returned home unexpectedly and caught them in bed.

He snapped, grabbed a knife, and lunged at Mirzəmməd:

“You dog—I’ll kill you!”

Mirzəmməd froze in his underwear. Kəmalə threw herself at the boy, crying:

“Stop, son! He’s my husband! We’ve had a religious marriage!”

Just then, the bulky Məhər burst in and wrestled the knife away.

“What’s wrong with you? We finally have a father and you want to kill him?” he growled. “Are you dumber than I am? Can’t you see the woman deserves some happiness?”

50

SƏRHƏD AT THE MARKET



After the incident, Sərhəd left home and disappeared for four or five months. Eventually, Kəmalə couldn't bear it and sent Məhər to find him.

"You'll find him at the market," she said. "They say he's renting and working. If he's short on money, give him some. And make peace with your brother. Don't mind us."

Məhər found Sərhəd behind a stall selling buttons, pins, and thread—what people called "Jewish goods." They made up, but when Məhər offered money, Sərhəd refused:

"I've got my own. Don't worry."

"Hrrr! Found a treasure, have you?" Məhər laughed.

Ignoring the sarcasm, Sərhəd asked, "Want to stay with me? I've rented a summer house outside the village. Lots of space."

"I'll think about it," Məhər replied.

“I’ve got the perfect job for you,” Sərħəd coaxed.

“What’s it called? Am I the boss?”

“Stop joking,” Sərħəd said. “You’ll be my bodyguard—just like when we were kids.”

“You’re that important now?” Məhər asked, surprised. “There’s that much money in button sales?”

Sərħəd glanced around, opened a drawer, and revealed a stash—foreign cigarettes, lighters, chewing gum, and branded T-shirts.

“Wow, it’s a whole department store! Where’s this from?”

“A friend of mine, an Arab student named Kadir. We split the profit. I’ve got an arrangement with the market boss—no problems.” He leaned in.

“Last month I had some trouble. Paid a fine and got a suspended sentence. I need to stay out of sight until it’s over. So I’m making you my partner. You’ll run the stall. I’ll handle deliveries.”

The offer was too tempting. Məhər agreed.

51

SƏRHƏD’S FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH THE XALOĞLU CLAN



After involving Məhər in trade, Sərhəd’s business flourished even more. When regular customers requested rare foreign goods, he would head straight to Kōmürçü Square in the city center. You could find anything there. By now, Sərhəd was known among traders—he was trusted, and they would procure whatever he needed.

With summer’s arrival, the village market became more vibrant. The sea was nearby, so people coming from the city to the beach did their shopping there.

Once, Sərhəd was returning to the village with a pair of “Levi’s” jeans that a customer had ordered. At Sabunçu station, as he boarded the electric train, a girl in a short dress carrying a suitcase approached him, saying she wanted to go to the

Sovkhoz. Sərhad explained the way. Upon hearing they shared the same route, the girl was delighted. She said she was visiting her grandmother from Moscow. Having spent much of her childhood in the Sovkhoz, Sərhad realized he knew her grandmother, Aunt Tosya. Both were pleased. The girl's name was Vera. Her slightly crossed eyes gave her a unique charm. Sərhad immediately fell for the Moscow girl. Taking her suitcase, he led the way. They sat across from each other in the train. After half an hour, they reached the Sovkhoz station. Sərhad had to deliver a customer's order, so he couldn't see Vera off. But before parting, he said he wanted to see her again. Vera agreed without hesitation, promising to wait at the station the next day. Sərhad looked at her doubtfully, but she kept her word and came.

After a few meetings, they became intimate. Sərhad showed her around the city, took her to notable spots, and even introduced her to his brother at the village market.

Due to the summer heat, they often went to the beach. One evening, while walking her home, Vera said she would go wherever he went. Sərhad understood the hint and took her to the summer house where he was staying.

Məhər noticed Sərhad's infatuation:

“Hmph! This Russian girl’s going to be your downfall,” he warned. “Be careful.”

“She won’t!” Sərħəd objected. “I’m going to marry her.”

“You’re an idiot,” Məħər mocked. “Can’t you see the fire in her eyes? She’s not wife material.”

Sərħəd got angry:

“Shut up, idiot! Like you know anything about girls!”

Məħər didn’t respond. He quietly endured the insult, seeing that his brother was completely consumed by love. “*He’ll come to his senses when reality hits him,*” he thought.

After getting intimate with Vera, Sərħəd and she had a joyful time. One day they sat arm in arm on the cliffs, watching the Caspian Sea waves. Sərħəd had taken off his shirt but didn’t feel like swimming—there was a breeze. As they chatted sweetly about their future, a group approached them.

Sərħəd wasn’t worried about the Xaloğlus themselves, but about the police officer with them. “*If they take me to the station, they’ll find a way to charge me with something,*” he thought. “*They’ll stack a new sentence on top of my suspended one.*” He decided to flee immediately. As he jumped from the

cliff into the water, he trusted Vera wouldn't betray him, wouldn't reveal where he was staying.

He returned to the rented summer house at night without a shirt, bruised and battered. He looked like he had been beaten with a stick. Məhər was alarmed, flagged down a car, and took his unconscious brother to the doctor. Sərhəd spent a month in the hospital being treated for pneumonia.

Once recovered, he looked for Vera and learned that she had moved to Moscow with her grandmother. Later, he found out she had married Böyük. This left him deeply heartbroken.

52

SƏRHƏD'S SECOND ENCOUNTER WITH THE XALOĞLUS



The Soviet regime was already collapsing. Though few believed it, it was undeniably falling apart. Azerbaijan was in turmoil. Restrictions were lifted, borders opened, and the number of people importing goods from abroad kept rising.

Sərhəd, who had started his business early, was earning more each day. He had nowhere to stash all his money. He was riding high, living with big dreams.

With the return of his beloved Vera, he was walking on air. This passionate love lifted his spirits. Sleeping with his enemy's wife gave him immense satisfaction. When Vera said, *“Böyük is dead weight. He doesn't come near me for months. But you—you're a real stallion!”* Sərhəd would melt with pleasure.

Though he tried to keep the affair secret, Məhər somehow found out and advised him:

“Brother, this woman is trouble. Let her go. If she cheats on her husband, she’ll cheat on you too.”

“Maybe,” Sərhəd agreed. “But nothing beats dishonoring Böyük’s pride.”

Məhər shook his head but stopped interfering. He had enough problems of his own.

Sərhəd wasn’t one to back down. In the market, disputes among traders sometimes turned into brawls. Whenever a conflict arose, he’d step back and let Məhər take the lead.

Məhər’s fists always secured victory. But once, a fight got bloody, and everyone was taken to the police. Some were sentenced, others paid bribes and were released. Because of the “9B” mark in his file, Məhər was sent to a mental hospital.

His absence was quickly felt. Caught up in rivalry, Sərhəd didn’t realize he was being watched. One day, the authorities raided his home. He immediately recognized one of them—Balaca. Surely, Böyük was nearby. Sərhəd’s confrontation with the Xaloğlus never seemed to end. Fate kept crossing their

paths.

Balaca came with an operation unit. They searched the house and found enough evidence. Sərhad didn't want to go to prison and pleaded with Balaca:

“Let me go. Don't send me to jail.”

Balaca laughed:

“Oh, come on! What did you think would happen when you seduced someone's wife? That you'd be patted on the back?”

Sərhad didn't flinch:

“What about when Böyük made someone else's lover his wife? Did he think Vera would stay loyal to him?”

Balaca was momentarily stunned by the logic, but still issued a warning:

“You can't go toe-to-toe with us. Stay out of our way—or next time, it'll be worse. Just a friendly warning.”

Thanks to the Xaloğlus' efforts, Sərhad wasn't just charged with smuggling. He was also accused of selling stolen goods and sentenced to a long term in the “Turşulu” zone.

53

SƏRHƏD IN PRISON



Prison didn't scare Sərhəd. His experience in the juvenile detention center had prepared him well. Among the inmates, he carried himself confidently. When he was arrested, he lost all the money and goods he had accumulated over the years—everything went to the Xaloğlus.

Məhər was still in the mental hospital. His aunt visited him occasionally, always bringing him gifts. Even though she hid it, Sərhəd knew that Mirzəmməd was covering her expenses. He had long since let go of his grudge against his stepfather, promising himself that once he got out, he would make peace with him.

Time crawled by, but Sərhəd remained patient. Mirzəmməd's lawyer proved to be very capable, and in 1992, Sərhəd received some good news. It was announced that his trial would soon conclude, and he would be released earlier

than expected.

Meanwhile, he received another piece of good news. Somewhere in another prison, a notorious “criminal boss,” Domba Rəhim, had been moved to the “Turşulu” zone. Their reunion was emotional. Domba Rəhim, now an influential figure in prison, decided to introduce Sərhəd to Lotu Faxı, a powerful man in the criminal world.

Sərhəd was skeptical:

“What could someone like him help me with?” he asked. “He’s been locked up for life. He needs help himself.”

Domba Rəhim laughed at his friend’s naivety:

“You’re so gullible! Lotu Faxı can leave prison anytime he wants. He’s just like me—he has connections that allow him to get out for a few hours or even days,” Domba Rəhim explained. “I’ll vouch for you, don’t worry. You’ll need money for business once you’re out, right?”

Sərhəd agreed:

“Of course.”

Domba smiled, knowing his old friend would come around: “That’s the point! Lotu Faxı has millions stashed away. He can

help you.”

A day before Sərhəd’s release, Domba Rəhim took him to meet Lotu Faxı. What he saw was astounding. The prison cell resembled a luxurious businessman’s office rather than a jail. Lotu Faxı, dressed in a suit and tie, spoke with Sərhəd for a long time. Afterward, Lotu Faxı agreed to invest in Sərhəd’s business ventures.

This marked the beginning of Sərhəd’s rise to financial power.

54

IN THE LAUNDROMAT



Domba Rəhim and Lotu Faxı were keeping watch in the laundromat like soldiers on guard. They were waiting for a delivery. When nothing arrived, they decided to leave.

After praying, Domba Rəhim laid back on the bed and stretched.

“Maybe it’s just a delay?” he asked. “Or did the deliveryman make a mistake?”

Lotu Faxı, without changing his expression, responded:

“We’ll know soon enough,” he replied, then added, “No time for relaxing now. Pack the bags, we’re leaving. The buses will be on their way soon.”

Domba, grumbling and taking his time, said: “You know, they say the thief’s home is the prison. But it’s a lie. Freedom is beautiful.”

Lotu Faxı didn't answer, but his mind was occupied with his own thoughts. As Domba finished packing, he looked at Lotu Faxı:

“I'm ready. Let's go.”

55

LOTU FAXI'S LIFE



It was the chaotic 1990s. Lotu Faxi's sister, Nørmin, arrived at the prison to visit him and mentioned: "I've just seen a good lawyer who says they'll be able to lift your life sentence soon."

Lotu Faxi, with his usual calm demeanor, replied: "I don't need any lawyer's help. When the time comes, they'll release me. I can leave prison whenever I want. Not permanently, of course, but for a few hours at a time."

He had earned the right to request such freedoms. Once, when he was just eighteen, he had been crowned a "criminal boss" in prison. His skills in finance and his cunning had turned him into one of the most influential figures in the prison system. The prison's earnings had risen dramatically under his leadership. Some of the money he secretly funneled to a group of trusted associates.

The first years of his imprisonment had been difficult. He had pushed away visitors who brought the outside world's air with them. Only his sister had been allowed to visit him regularly. She had vowed to lift his sentence, and now she had good news.

But things weren't as simple as they seemed. During a recent visit, she told him: "I've heard something disturbing. When your lover, Ɔsəd, was involved in the murder of an innocent man, his accomplice Rəsul confessed, and now it seems that he might have been wrongly accused."

Lotu Faxı was taken aback. His hands trembled as he absorbed the news: "Is that so?" he asked. "I've killed innocent people, haven't I?"

He thought about the events leading to the murder of his father and Rəsul, a man who had once been an ally but now seemed like a stranger. It all made sense now.

56

THE FRIENDSHIP BETWEEN LOTU FAXI AND DƏLI MƏHƏR



After Nərmin left, Lotu Faxı sat in his cell, reflecting on what had been said. His associate, Cibgir İmir, entered the room with a message.

“Do you know anything about Sərhəd?” Cibgir asked, handing Lotu Faxı a note.

Lotu Faxı read the note and then glanced up: “You mean Sərhəd, Domba Rəhim’s friend? Yeah, he’s the brother of that madman, Məhər. I’ve heard about him. He’s not really crazy; he just plays the part to avoid trouble.”

Cibgir explained that Sərhəd’s brother, Məhər, was known for being able to deal with difficult situations, especially when it came to handling prison politics. “You need to bring him here,” Lotu Faxı ordered.

57

THE GANG MEMBERS ENTER THE EHRAM



Hacı Sarvan's gang left their hotel complex in Madinah after the evening prayer. They climbed onto a bus heading toward Mecca. The ride was long, and as the bus sped down the highway, the passengers were lulled into sleep by the cool air inside the vehicle.

They stopped to perform the Fajr prayer at a rest stop in the middle of the desert. Although the location was far from civilization, the stop had everything they needed: water, a place to relieve themselves, and even a small store.

One of the members, Balaca, realized he had forgotten his clothes in Madinah, so Hacı Məftun offered him one of his towels. He didn't accept the gift, calling it an insignificant item.

After the rest stop, they continued their journey toward Mecca, where they would soon enter the holy city to complete their pilgrimage.

58

ON THE WAY TO THE SACRED CITY OF MECCA



As they got closer to Mecca, Hacı Sarvan led his group in prayer, congratulating them on entering the state of ihram. He explained that entering ihram meant putting on the white garment that symbolized purity and humility before God. It also meant they were now bound by certain rules and should refrain from sinful behavior.

He told them that they should not think of ihram as a symbol of death, but rather as a form of rebirth. It was a chance to start anew, free from the burdens of sin.

59

A NEW ENCOUNTER WITH QAFLAN



As Balaca mingled with the group, he was surprised to see a new face. It was Qaflan, a giant of a man with a dark, serious demeanor. Balaca couldn't help but ask if Qaflan had been assigned a bodyguard.

Qaflan grinned, wiping the sweat off his forehead: “Maybe I’ll get one soon, but we’re here for business, not protection.”

Balaca asked about the developments with Mirzəmməd and the Xaloğlus. Qaflan revealed that they had not heard from Sərhəd or his brother Məhər for a while, and it was unclear where they had been moved. The tension was building as they awaited further news.

60

THE PHILOSOPHY OF EHRAM



A debate broke out among the younger members of the group. Muxtar, filled with inner conviction, confronted Zakir: “Who are you fooling with this ihram? Do you think Allah doesn’t know your sins?”

Zakir, his short beard growing long, responded calmly: “Ehram’s wisdom lies in confessing your sins before Allah. Only He knows whether you will be forgiven.”

Hacı Sarvan, hearing the discussion, stepped in: “I am proud of you, my young brothers,” he said. “Indeed, the wisdom of the ihram is not about death, but about rebirth. It is a chance to become pure once again.”

61

VISIT TO THE HOLY KAABA



After the Dhuhr prayer, Haji Sarvan gathered his group and got them back on the bus. They immediately set off. The pilgrims, without having a chance to nap in the coolness of the constantly working air conditioners, reached the city of Mecca. They quickly spilled out of the bus. Mirzammad's illness had seriously worsened. His condition did not go unnoticed by Haji Sarvan. He came over, offered some comfort, and gave him strength:

"Hold on, elder, you'll get better once this heat passes!"

But the heat wasn't passing; in fact, the temperature kept rising. Haji Maftun took out his thermometer from his bag. Everyone gathered around him. When the mercury column approached fifty-five degrees Celsius, some of the pilgrims started to panic. Haji Sarvan was displeased with Haji Maftun's

actions and scolded him:

"Hide that thermometer, you're making the people anxious!" he said, then called the group to calm down. "Brothers, it's nothing, don't worry! How could it be any different? You say 'Arabia,' and of course, it should be hot here! You should know, Mecca is situated between mountains, and the Holy Kaaba is in a hollow, so it's hotter here than other parts of Arabia. But what's the problem? People live here, they work here! If they can endure it, so can we!"

Mecca, a city nestled between mountains, had an ancient history, but in the last fifty years, its appearance had completely changed. Buildings constructed by foreign construction companies gave the city a modern feel. Despite all the protests, high-rise hotels were being built within a hundred meters of the Kaaba. It was a sad sight. Haji Sarvan once stood on a balcony of one of these hotels and looked out at the Kaaba. His heart sank. The House of God looked very small. He couldn't understand the indifference to the Kaaba and the king of Saudi Arabia's decision to allow such construction.

Unlike the younger pilgrims, the older ones were suffering

more from the heat. Mirzammad, though he had been ill, didn't complain, so his companions did not question his silence, accepting it as normal. The significance of the upcoming ritual was pressing down on everyone like a heavy prison. It wasn't a joke. They were about to visit the House of God, and after this, they would be among the selected ones. According to tradition, all sins up to this moment would be forgiven, and if they continued to live righteously, they would stand on the Day of Judgment with their faces bright and clear.

Haji Sarvan stretched his hand towards the Kaaba and, in an emotional voice, said:

"Brothers, treat the ihram you are wearing as a shroud, consider yourselves dead. You are already in the presence of Allah. All your sins will be forgiven, and your faults erased. After the tawaf, you will be as pure as a newborn child, reborn into the world. This is the philosophy of the Hajj pilgrimage, a rebirth. If you protect yourselves from sin afterward, you will be among the people of paradise."

With that, he lowered his voice. "That's it. Let's go, it's no time to waste."

The area around the Kaaba was being cooled by mist-

spraying coolers. The pilgrims, encouraged by Haji Sarvan's speech, felt their anxiety ease, and they brightened up, except for Mirzammad, who was struggling with his pain. When he entered the House of God, he no longer believed he would emerge from the tawaf alive, but he gathered his strength and tried to forget the pain.

62

THE DISAGREEMENT BETWEEN MIRZƏMMƏD AND BALACA



Everyone was tired, and no one spoke. They lingered in the air-conditioned lobby until the room assignments were finalized. This didn't take long. They took their keys and went to their respective rooms. After considering the elderly people's request, Hacı Sarvan placed them all in one room, and Balaca was not separated from them.

After they took off their ihrams, Mirzəmməd's illness completely vanished. It was as if the person who had been struggling just a little while ago was someone else. Balaca smiled at Mirzəmməd's brightened face:

– Hacı Mirzəmməd, it seems you've been revived, huh? – he said as he sat on his bed and swung his legs.

– Yes, Hacı Balaca, I've torn the shroud! – Mirzəmməd

agreed. – Since I entered the ihram at the Şəcərə mosque, my condition has changed. Anyway, Allah had mercy on me, He didn't take my life, and He forgave my sins. It's true what they say, Allah-Təala would take the life of a servant who visits the Kaaba if He knew they would fall into sin again.

At this point, Hacı Məftun brought in a pot of hot tea. Mirzəmməd took out a packet of tea from his bag and handed it to him:

– If we use it sparingly, we can drink Lankaran tea until the end of the trip! – he said.

Balaca praised Mirzəmməd's generosity:

– Thank you, Hacı! – he said. – May your kindness be accepted.

Those who had performed part of the Hajj, the five main rituals of the Umrah-Tamattu, were already addressing each other as “Hacı” in full voice. Of course, ahead of them, there were still thirteen essential rituals to complete.

Hacı Məftun, who was making tea, suddenly smiled softly:

– The explanation of Sharia laws is the duty of the scholars. Sheikh Məhəmməd Fazili Lənkərani, concerning Allah's lost

and sinful servants, says this...

Balaca interrupted him:

– Møhəmməd Fazili Lənkərani is also a man, he can make mistakes! – he said, then repeated one of the famous aphorisms.
– A person walks from sin to virtue, from suffering to inheritance, from hardship to paradise. Humanity is a traveler on an eternal path. If that's the case, who can say that suffering is virtue, or inheritance is sin? No one!

Balaca explained the essence of life in just a few sentences. What he said was not disputed by anyone in the room, though no one agreed with it either. The stark truth confused them.

Balaca sighed. For several days, he couldn't get his mother Fidora's image out of his mind.

63

THE LIFE OF BALACA AND BÖYÜK



In fact, Balaca and Böyük were not cousins, but twin brothers. The identity of their father was unknown; their mother, Fidora, was not talkative, a closed woman, and she didn't like discussing her past. The information the brothers had gathered over the years was incomplete. Fidora was a Gagauz woman who had been exiled from Moldova to Absheron. During World War II, the Soviet government executed her father for collaborating with the Germans, and she was sent to the Absheron plains. She had worked in stone quarries for a time. Tired of this life, she joined thieves, but later decided to break away from her criminal partners for the sake of her children.

Her childhood memories were incomplete. However, the path to the sovkhos (collective farm) was firmly etched in Balaca's memory. The freshly plowed wet soil clung to his feet.

His mother, carrying a bundle, spoke relentlessly to the twins:

– Bad people want to kill us, we must mislead them. I am not your mother, I am your aunt. Your fathers worked in oil fields and fell to their deaths. The kid's name is Balaca, Kessam's name is Böyük. You are not twins, you are brothers, cousins. Böyük's mother's name is Fidora, Balaca's mother's name is Sidora. Böyük is one year older than Balaca. Fidora and Sidora are my sisters. Always call each other cousins. Forget that you were baptized at the church last year. You are Muslims now. My name is Fəridə, I am your aunt.

Böyük was smarter and stronger than Balaca. He always acted more grown-up, sometimes even speaking arrogantly. He interrupted his mother:

– So, from now on, you're Fəridə, the one who lives behind the club? – he asked.

Fəridə confirmed:

– Yes! – she said. – I'm Fəridə, your aunt.

When they arrived at the sovkhos, Tosya xala did not react well to Fəridə's announcement, but agreed to keep the family with her until they found shelter.

For some reason, Tosya xala had influence at the sovkhos. The director hired Fidora as a sweeper. A small, twelve-square-meter windowless wooden shed was given to the family far from the mansion. After leaving prison, Fəridə's certification proved useful to Fidora.

She cleaned the new place in one day. Although there was a faint smell of manure inside, it was livable. The children were overjoyed. They later learned that pigs had once been kept in the area. The sovkhos director also sent them three blankets, some aluminum dishes, and an electric stove.

64

THE TWINS IN UNIVERSITY



The day classes began at university, the twins ran into Məhəmməd in the hallway. Their old friend was studying in a neighboring class. This made them happy. From that day on, they didn't separate, always finding time to meet. A month later, a girl named Aişə Meməri joined their trio. They met at one of the many student gatherings at the university. Aişə was from the Democratic Republic of Yemen, and she was studying in the Russian department.

She received a standard student scholarship, but her family also sent her some money. According to her, her father was an engineer.

After classes, they would go out together. When they were together, they had a lot of fun. Usually, Aişə would pay for the outings, refusing any objections from the guys. She would say, "Even the poorest Yemeni is richer than you guys!"

Aişə's skin was a light brown, and she had full lips. From the very first day, she had a special interest in Böyük, and didn't hide her feelings. Though she spent nights in Aişə's single room in the student dorm, their relationship never went beyond that.

One day, he complained to Balaca:

– This black girl won't leave me alone, cousin!

Balaca had a different opinion:

– Better a foreign girl than a local one, – he said. – Cousin, hold on tight to Aişə.

They finished their first year. The twins didn't stay at home; they spent the entire summer by the beach. They had found a new "profession." They would keep an eye on couples who ventured far from the beach, and when things went too far, they would alert the local police. Half of the money collected from the extortion was theirs. Of course, it was just pocket change, but to the twins, it was a large sum.

When school started, they tried out their experience at the university. They chose the student dormitory as their target. They became the torment of students who spent their time at the gambling tables. Police raids were frequent, and students

were regularly stripped of their money and left alone. However, the twins soon gave up on this profitable venture.

One day, Məhəmməd passed a message to the cousins about the police raids:

– They are blaming you for the raids, – he said.

Böyük, with indifference:

– Who do they suspect because of the spot on the moon? – he asked. – Is that our fault?

– You just can't get the message! – Məhəmməd said with a smile. – It's an absurd suspicion.

They were now in their third year, and they still thought about returning to their old ways. They had to make a living somehow.

The beach season had just begun. It wasn't very hot yet, but some people were already swimming. One day, as they were leaving the house, Fidora said: "Tosya's granddaughter has come from Moscow. If you have time, you should go and greet her."

In the afternoon, when they returned from the beach, Fidora asked, "How did it go, did you like Tosya's granddaughter?"

Balaca didn't hide his thoughts: "Aunt, Vera looks like a girl in a short skirt!" B y k added, "You should see her squinted eyes, Aunt!"

Then the matter ended.

65

BÖYÜK'S MARRIAGE



Böyük returned to Baku when classes began. He wasn't alone; Vera was with him. Balaca, who had received a telegram from his brother in advance, took Fidora with him to the airport. Aside from them, two police officers were also there to meet the young couple.

When the groom and bride appeared, Fidora couldn't hold herself back and rushed forward. She hugged them, crying from happiness. Balaca met Böyük with composure. It was then revealed that the happy couple had no intention of living at the sovkhos anymore.

Böyük whispered in Balaca's ear: "I won't set foot in that pigsty again!"

Fidora and Balaca took a taxi, while the newlyweds took a QAZ-31, with the police officers in a UAZ-69. The cars stopped in front of an apartment building in a microdistrict.

Böyük and Vera went up to a two-room, two-balcony apartment. The general father-in-law had taken care of everything. The rooms were furnished, and the kitchen and bathroom were spotless. To Fidora, her son's apartment looked like a palace, and she teared up again.

After getting married, Böyük's character changed completely. He became a commanding, demanding man. He could no longer tolerate his classmates' jokes. He would widen his big eyes and wag his chubby finger at them. Soon, he got a job as a night policeman. Now, vast horizons opened before him.

No one dared to joke with him anymore, not even the professors. He never set foot in the sovkhos again. Instead, whenever he got money, he would take his mother and brother to the city, rent them an apartment near his building, and say: "It's time to get out of that pigsty!" He was so busy that he didn't even have time to talk to Balaca; when he saw him, he would just ask about his mother.

Within a year, he received a junior officer rank. By the time he graduated from the university, he was already a lieutenant. When he got his brother a job in the police, he said: "Have fun on my account!" Balaca couldn't resist teasing him: "Maybe

you could find me a general's daughter!" Böyük replied, "You don't need to marry that squinty-eyed girl!" He then asked: "I'm busy; don't leave your aunt alone."

The rise of the "cousins" began.

66

THE “KIND” FAMILY



Böyük and Vera were living happily, deeply in love with each other. Vera flew to Moscow twice a month, each time returning successfully. The results of her travels were evident: Böyük was steadily climbing the career ladder. Vera was also planning to put an end to her squinted eyes. She had an expensive surgery planned soon, after which she would become a beauty goddess.

The baby born the previous year was making their small apartment lively. The boy, born six months early, was named Timur by Vera at the hospital so that anyone could also call him Teymur. The family doctor, a woman, had informed Böyük, Balaca, and Fidora that the baby had been born prematurely and needed special care.

As she raised her hand to stroke her hair, Fidora noticed the sparkling diamond-ringed finger of the doctor. The ring looked

familiar to her, but she couldn't recall where she had seen it before. After a couple of months, she realized it was Vera's ring. It was known that valuable gifts were given in exchange for big favors. Fidora, having been through similar things, was not deceived.

She realized that her daughter-in-law had come into the marriage pregnant. However, she didn't address it directly. Gradually, she distanced herself from her son's house. Even Balaca, who was shorter and weaker, had become suspicious. He looked down at his tall, handsome brother with disdain. Böyük treated both his mother and brother the same way. Occasionally, he would advise his brother: "Remember, sometimes, to stay on the right path, you have to go through the mud!"

Balaca agreed with him, but the disdain remained.

After her recovery, Vera began flying to Moscow again. In fact, she wasn't at home even when she was in Baku. Timur would run around the house while his mother came and went as she pleased. Böyük was so busy with his new responsibilities that he didn't intervene in his wife's travels. What could he say about Vera visiting her grandmother, who lived at the sovkhos?

67

IN SACRED MECCA



The Azerbaijani pilgrims were staying at a hotel complex located about seven kilometers from the Sacred Kaaba, in a hollow. Around them, green patches of grass could be seen here and there, in the streets, corners, and courtyards. In a country where the mountains and hills were made of granite and marble, fertile soil could only be found in the hollows.

The landscape of the area was beautiful. The constant presence of lush greenery in a place where the earth and stones were so harsh left people in awe. The hotel complex was situated in one of the quieter neighborhoods of Mecca. The local people were rarely seen, and the streets, alleys, and corners were under the control of the newcomers. During the day, it was impossible to stand outside because of the intense heat. Everyone either sought shelter in the shadows or looked for the coolness of the air conditioning.

The hotel complex was made up of several independent buildings, each resembling a large dormitory. The buildings were far apart, so walking from one to another in the heat made you sweat through your shirt. The facilities in each building were similar, with laundromats on the top floors, and washing machines available 24 hours for the guests.

After the Zuhr prayer, Balaca suggested:

– Let’s go to the “Osmanlı” café. I’m tired of the tasteless food at our canteen. Let’s go and eat properly.

Hacı Məftun immediately put on his slippers and got ready. Balaca had already scoped out the "Osmanlı" café on the first day they arrived in Mecca, after wandering between the buildings.

– A Muslim preparing for the Day of Judgment must forget about the world’s luxuries, Hacı, – Mirzəmməd commented. – But you seem more concerned about your stomach.

– Hurry up, Hacı! I’m not one of those madmen! – Balaca said, impatiently. – I can’t think with an empty stomach.

Mirzəmməd slowly wiped his big nose with a towel, got out of bed, and joined the others waiting by the door.

They were all fed up with the bland, half-cooked meals from the communal dining hall, so they regularly went to the “Osmanlı” café, located quite far from the hotel. Unlike other local cafés, it offered hearty dishes and stews. The abundance of Turkish cafés was a reminder of Saudi Arabia’s long period under Ottoman rule. The owners and servers at the café were all Turkish, so there was no need for a translator. Although the meals were expensive, they were filling and delicious. They would wait patiently for the dishes to be served, sitting comfortably in the cool air-conditioned room.

68

AT THE SACRED KAABA



The friends had already agreed the evening before that they would visit the Sacred Kaaba. They knew this was an opportunity that wouldn't come again. Balaca arrived on time, and Mirzəmməd was already ready.

– When Hacı Məftun arrives, we'll move out, – he said. – Şərqiyyə and Rəfiqə will join us as well.

Şərqiyyə was a tall, plump, cheerful woman. Though she spoke sternly with everyone, she seemed like a guilty person when beside her husband. Balaca noticed this, and it made him think, “Infertile women often blame themselves for not bearing children.”

When Zakir and Muxtar from the opposite room also decided to join, Balaca didn't object. He responded indifferently:

– Of course, no problem.

Soon, Hacı Məftun's round face appeared at the door:

– Hacı, the ladies are waiting for us downstairs! – he said.

They left the air-conditioned comfort of the hotel and got into a taxi to head towards the Haram. As they joined the huge stream of people, they reached the Sacred Kaaba. Pilgrims, each trying to touch the walls of the Holy Place, were slowly circling it. Hacı Məftun shared his previous experiences with them:

– If you follow my advice, you will easily reach the Həcərül-Əsvəd stone. Remember, don't resist the crowd; everyone is here with the same intention, and the flow of people will carry you to the stone. But, remember, don't try to kiss the Black Stone, just touch it. If you try to kiss it, either you'll be trampled, or you'll break your neck, – he cautioned. – In any case, don't resist, and you'll reach your goal.

The Kaaba, built of bricks, stands at a height of 15 meters, with a width of 10 meters and a length of 12 meters. Its corners point toward Sham, Iraq, and Yemen. Only the corner where the Black Stone rests is known as the Rükənəl-Əsvəd. Every year, on the 9th of Dhul-Hijjah, the Kaaba's golden doors were opened, washed with rosewater, and the fragrant musk was burned to purify it. Then, the old silk covering, embroidered

with gold threads, was replaced with a new one. This process was once done by hand, but now it had been mechanized, with the 670-kilogram cover being lowered onto the Kaaba with the help of cranes.

69

MIRZƏMMƏD MEETS MƏHƏR



As the small group of pilgrims was pushed through the dense crowd, Mirzəmməd's eyes once again caught sight of a tall man wearing a blue shirt. This person was coming out from the direction of Həzrəti-İsmayıl. As the man moved through the crowd, Mirzəmməd immediately recognized his face. His heart skipped a beat. There was no doubt about it — it was Məhər.

Not wasting a moment, Mirzəmməd pushed through the people, leaving the ritual behind. He followed the man until they reached a less crowded area near the Həzrəti-İbrahim station. He grabbed Məhər by the arm and, with urgency in his voice, said:

– Don't think you can escape this time! You slipped away from me in Medina, and I couldn't catch you at the Şəcərə

Mosque behind the columns, but you can't get away now. Stop, I'm telling you!

Məhər didn't seem to care. He let Mirzəmməd pull him along, only stopping once they reached a sparse area of the crowd. He looked at him with an indifferent smile, his expression full of mockery:

– Hırr! – Məhər grunted.

Mirzəmməd raised his hand, warning:

– This isn't a madhouse, it's a sacred place! Stop with your idiotic grunts, or I'll crush your throat!

Məhər wiped the stupid look from his face and looked at Mirzəmməd:

– Fine! – he said with a playful tone. – Hello, father! Let go of my arm, I'm not running away anymore.

Mirzəmməd, in disbelief, exclaimed:

– What are you up to now, son? What are you doing here?

Məhər answered nonchalantly:

– I came to perform Hajj, father! – he said, as if it were the most normal thing in the world. – What else are people doing

here?

– But why didn't I know about this? – Mirzəmməd replied, still in shock.

Məhər laughed:

– Well, I kept it a secret, – he said.

Mirzəmməd still couldn't understand:

– But you were in prison, my son, – he said.

– Yes, but they released me just before the Hajj. – Məhər looked down at his father, amused.

– Who released you? How did they let you go? This doesn't make any sense! – Mirzəmməd asked in confusion. – Doesn't the prison have any authorities?

– The boss of the prison is Lotu Faxı. He got me released, – Məhər replied with a sly grin. – You know, when he says something, it's like a command.

– You? Lotu Faxı? – Mirzəmməd was still astonished.

– This is not the place for this conversation, – Məhər waved his hand. – I'll meet you at the "Osmanlı" café around noon. Finish your ritual, or it'll remain incomplete.

Mirzəmməd couldn't believe his ears. He had been searching for Məhər in Medina, Zul-Huleyfa, and other places. He couldn't understand how the man had vanished so easily. But now, it seemed Məhər was playing a game of hide and seek that he had mastered in prison.

Mirzəmməd watched as Məhər disappeared into the crowd. "What a tricky one he is!" he thought.

70

RETURNING TO THE HOTEL



The small group passed by the Həzrəti-İbrahim station and stood in an open area, waiting for Mirzəmməd, but he did not arrive. They decided to move toward the exit. They walked around the Yemeni gates and lingered in the square for a while. The women, who were ahead, had already turned back to face them.

Hacı Məftun looked at them and said:

– I'll go back the same way we came, maybe we'll meet up with our friend, – he suggested, before pausing and asking, – Where's Muxtar?

Zakir smiled slyly.

– Muxtar said he's going to buy some small items from the stands here. He plans to give them to those who come to meet

him when he returns to Baku, – he explained.

Hacı Məftun was surprised:

– But he was just complaining to me about being out of money, – he said. – How did he find money to buy stuff?

Zakir hesitated and then admitted:

– I lent him some, – he said. – He’s been asking me for days.

Balaca couldn’t understand the secret behind Zakir and Muxtar’s companionship. Looking at them, they seemed like two completely different personalities.

– Well, it seems your friendship is working out! – Balaca remarked.

Zakir disagreed:

– No way, teacher, we argue non-stop for twenty-four hours, – he said with a chuckle.

Balaca asked:

– What’s the argument about?

Zakir licked his lips:

– It’s about the importance of Hajj, – he explained.

– Maybe you should elaborate, Zakir! – Balaca paused.

– Well, I’m not an expert on religious law, but... – Zakir stroked his short beard. – What bothers me is that this man is in need, yet he still went for the Hajj.

– How do you know he’s in need? – Balaca asked.

– He’s my neighbor, – Zakir replied shortly. – He has five children, and elderly parents to take care of. He lives in a small house built from scrap. He works as a driver all day to provide for his family. But he still came to perform Hajj, borrowing money to do it. What can you say about such a person?

– I admire his faith, I guess... – Hacı Məftun added, appreciating the man’s devotion.

Zakir let out a small sigh:

– Yes, he has strong faith, – he agreed.

Balaca couldn’t help but ask:

– So what about you, Zakir? How did you come to Hajj?

Zakir thought for a moment:

– I spent a small part of the money that God gave me on the Hajj journey. I made sure my family had enough for five years,

leaving behind rental properties that would provide monthly income. I've arranged everything so that if something happens to me, my wife and children won't suffer. God says that those with the means should visit His house, not the poor and needy. That's the philosophy of Hajj.

Hacı Məftun and Balaca were both speechless at Zakir's logic. The women approached them, and Şərqiyyə spoke up:

– Why are we standing here in the middle of the street? – she said. – Mirzəmməd isn't a child, he won't get lost. Let's go, we're tired.

No one protested. They all got into a taxi and made their way back to the hotel.

71

MIRZAMMAD AND MAHER IN THE CAFÉ



After completing the final circuit of the tawaf, Mirzammad looked around. When he saw his companions heading toward the Yemen Gate, he turned toward the Iraq Gate to avoid running into them. Realizing he might get lost if he took the bus, he set off on foot. By the time he entered the "Osmanlı" café, his legs were so tired they barely obeyed him. Maher was sitting alone at one of the tables near the door. He stood up as his stepfather approached and complained:— Son of the departed, hurry up! I'm starving here! — then called out to the server. — Hey Turkish brother, bring my order!

He had ordered food in proportion to his size and attacked the meal like someone who had just emerged from a famine. Mirzammad ate a bit to please his stepson, but quickly withdrew from the table and waited for him to finish. After a

while, Maher tightened his belt, leaned back, and let out a small burp. Then he sat very close to his stepfather and launched straight into his story, offering a brief summary of what he knew.

– In short, father, I must avenge Sarhad. – he said. – That scoundrel known as Big Khaloglu must die. You see, father, there was a woman involved. Big snatched Sarhad's lover Vera from him and made her his wife. That's where the enmity started.

And then what happened? – Mirzammad, always a fan of love stories, leaned in.

– Then it turned out well. – Maher smiled. – Years later, heartbroken Vera sought out Sarhad and they got back together.

– So you're saying the late Sarhad seduced the wife of that official you call "Big"? – Mirzammad wanted to clarify.

– You could put it that way. Back then, we were selling odds and ends in the market. I don't remember why, but they locked me up in the asylum. As for the poor guy, they framed him and sent him to prison. – Maher agreed. – All of it was that Big bastard's doing.

Hearing all this, Mirzammad was taken aback.

– The man you want revenge on is here? – he asked.

– Yes, Sarhad’s killer is also on pilgrimage. He’s staying in the three-story building reserved for VIP pilgrims. They arrived in Mecca this evening. – Maher laughed. – Now it's my move.

Trying to talk his stepson out of it, Mirzammad said:

– Son, killing a man is not a simple thing. Think it over.

– Father, Big is not a man. He’s a butcher. I must take him out. Besides, the decision has already been made by the *sxodka*. Mirzammad knew about the late Sarhad’s connection with the mobster Lotu Fakhi.

– You can’t even kill a fly in the Haram! It’s a sin! A crime!

– Mirzammad protested anxiously.

– Father, we can’t let Big leave here alive. We won’t have the strength to take him down in Baku. He has powerful backing – like the Agency. – Maher chuckled darkly. – Besides, father, a madman doesn’t know what’s a sin and what’s a crime. Mirzammad froze at his stepson’s blasphemy, unsure how to respond.

72

LITTLE ONE IN OFFICE



Now firmly established in the Department for Combating the Theft of Socialist Property, Big held sway over all trade and service establishments in the district. He had brought his younger brother, Little One, into the fold as well. One of the institutes in the district fell under Little One's jurisdiction. But it wasn't the local students who interested him — it was the small number of foreign students.

One day, while flipping through some old documents left by his predecessor, he noticed something odd: a student named Kadir had no recorded infractions. This struck Little One as suspicious. Kadir, a Syrian Arab in his fourth year, didn't live in the dorms — he rented a private apartment.

Little One kept an eye on him for a while, but questions remained unanswered. He went to Big for advice and shared his

findings:

– The Arab’s never short on cash, Xaloglu – he said. – Sure, he doesn’t flaunt it, but he also never denies himself pleasure. He’s always with different girls. Where’s he getting that kind of money?

Though Big was busy, he listened carefully to his brother:

– How often does the Arab fly to Damascus? What does he bring back to sell? – he asked.

– Twice a month. But he always returns empty-handed. Just walks out of the airport with a shoulder bag.

– Maybe he’s into black-market currency trading? That’s light to carry and heavy in value – Big speculated.

– No one’s seen him around Malakan Garden, though. That’s where the currency dealers gather – said Little One, then shifted topics. – By the way, remember those famous sisters, Ballı and Xallı?

Big perked up:

– The ones who lived in that basement on Chapayev Street? Yeah, they’ve been off the radar for two or three years.

Little One smiled proudly:

– Good news! I found them.

– No way! – Big grinned. – Couldn't you get them into a car and bring them over? We could reminisce...

– Easy now, you'd choke – Little One chuckled. – Balli and Xalli aren't the same anymore. They've opened a big odds-and-ends market near the airport. They're loaded.

Big remembered:

– Right, at one point you wanted to marry Xalli... If you had...

Little One retorted with equal sarcasm:

– You're teasing me? Weren't you the one who pined for Balli?

Big didn't share the joke. He soured, but Little One kept pushing:

– After they sold that house and disappeared, you were beside yourself... ha-ha-ha!

Big raised his hand sternly:

– Enough, Xaloglu! We don't have time to waste reminiscing over old flings. Let's get back to work – he said and returned to the earlier topic. – Dirty money always comes from bribes, theft, or trade. I doubt the Arab discovered a fourth source. Follow Kadir. See which locals he's in contact with.

73

BIG'S SUSPICIONS



By the time Big had reached the rank of colonel, Azerbaijan's ruler Vezirov's dreams of planting walnut trees had already collapsed. He was desperately looking for a way out. Had he been a bit more patient, with Vera's help he could've become a general. But he couldn't take the disgrace any longer. His wife's constant nagging, her shameless infidelity — he had reached his limit.

One day, he asked Little One for a favor:

– See where that wandering slut spends her time – he said.
– But be careful. Your sister-in-law is cunning. She'll lead you in circles. Don't screw it up or you'll come up empty-handed.

– Got it. – Little One's resentment toward Big melted away. Turns out, his brother had been spying on him for years. To lighten the crude request, he added jokingly: – I promise I'll catch her in the act. What you do afterward is up to you...

But tailing “sister-in-law” yielded nothing. Vera was alert and acted like she knew she was being watched.

74

LITTLE ONE UNCOVERS VERA'S SECRET



Little One didn't let the Arab out of his sight. He tailed Kadir for several days. Though the student had a car, he parked it a block away and always walked to class. Twice a week he visited the airport, where he retrieved a parcel from the storage lockers, then drove to a big village near the "Sovkhoz" where they had grown up.

He'd hand the parcel to a man selling trinkets in the market, take money from him, and return to the city. Impressed by the slick operation, Little One whistled in admiration. It ran like clockwork.

It wasn't hard to identify the seller. It was their old acquaintance Sarhad, who specialized in illegally imported goods — gum, lighters, keychains, cigarettes, plastic bags, colorful shirts, Levi's jeans, etc. His brother Sarham worked

with him.

Little One made a few more visits to gather intel. Since he wore civilian clothes, no one recognized him. One day, by chance, he saw Vera at the market — standing quite close to Sarhad.

It became clear that Big's suspicions weren't baseless. Vera had rekindled things with her old lover.

75

BIG PUNISHES SARHAD



Little One rushed to tell Big. His brother took the news about his wife calmly. Then, after listening to the details of Sarhad's smuggling operation, he made a suggestion:

- The airport's not our jurisdiction, so stay out of it – he said.
- Let our Arab brother sell his chewing gum in peace.
- What about Sarhad? – Little One asked.

Big thought for a moment:

– We can stitch him up. I'll call the regional department — they'll help you out. Plant some stolen goods at Sarhad's place so the charges stick. Let him rot in jail for five or six years. Maybe next time he'll think twice before chasing someone else's wife. Little One, ever eager to state facts, added:

– Honestly, it seems like it's your wife chasing Sarhad, not the other way around. She's no innocent herself.

– Maybe. – Big agreed. – But that doesn’t change a thing. Little One rubbed his hands together:

– Excellent! – he said with a grin. – Should we give the Arab a little warning, too? He’s about to graduate and go back to Syria. We might lose him.

Big interrupted him:

– Don’t touch him! What do you want — a diplomatic scandal?

– Don’t you care about my effort? – Little One complained. – I’ve been tailing him for months, night and day.

Big got up and opened the window. From Azadlıq Square, the chant “Topxana! Topxana!” echoed through the city, shaking Baku.

– Look at what’s happening — the city is in chaos. And you’re wasting your time on an Arab selling chewing gum? – he said.
– The whole country’s on the verge of change.

– What about Vera? – Little One asked. – What do we do with her?

Big promised:

– I’ll tell you when it’s time. You’ll know when I’ve handled it. Don’t rush.

76

THE ANSWER



A few days later, Little One got his answer. After hearing of Sarhad's arrest, Vera gathered her belongings and flew to Moscow, taking ten-year-old Timur with her.

Those who saw her at the airport said her face was bruised and swollen. She looked like a boxer fresh from the ring.

Vera never returned to Baku. The brothers breathed a sigh of relief. Fidora, their aunt, finally forgave them and moved into Big's four-room apartment.

77

FIDORA'S DEATH



In January 1990, the Russian army invaded Azerbaijan. Though the city was under occupation, people buried the January 20th martyrs fearlessly. During these days, their long-sick mother passed away. Grief-stricken, Little One wanted to bring a priest for the funeral, but Big mocked him:

- How smart of you! – he said. – Call a mullah.
- But aunt never converted to Islam! – Little One protested. – She was a Christian!
- So what? You want us to invite a priest? What will our colleagues think? Our neighbors? Everyone thought she was Muslim — she prayed and fasted.
- To hell with your neighbors and colleagues! – snapped Little One. – Since when do we live by other people's rules?!

– Think about it. People will call us hypocrites! Is that what you want? – Big said calmly.

– What about the afterlife? If a Christian is buried as a Muslim, how will her soul rest in peace? – For the first time, Little One openly insulted Big.

Big ignored the insult and gave advice:

– Don't act like a fool, Little One! You're not a scholar or a cleric. Don't start this heaven-and-hell talk. There's only one world — the one we live in. The rest is fantasy.

Little One calmed down slightly:

– So we'll bury her as a Muslim?

Big nodded.

They buried the Christian Fidora with a Muslim funeral.

78

THE FINAL FLIGHT



It wasn't hard to identify the pilgrims arriving on the final flight from Azerbaijan to Medina. Men and women alike stood out for their plumpness — they practically glowed. Not a single one seemed to have denied themselves a good meal. Their movements were confident, their posture self-assured, and their conversations leisurely. Their luggage barely fit on the carts, and they shuffled lazily toward the buses. Settling them in would take a while. Mizi Mətişoğlu, whose pilgrimage had been kept secret, arrived with his entourage on that final flight. They disembarked. The Committee Chairman emerged from the airport under heavy escort from Agency officers. Despite the heat outside, security procedures remained strict and orderly.

Big was on Mizi's right, Əflan on his left, two bodyguards behind, two in front, and the minister in the center as they reached the transport.

The last of the Azerbaijani pilgrims' buses had just pulled away. From a minibus parked nearby, a man dressed in Arab clothing stepped forward and approached the group. In fluent Russian, he said:

– *Dear sirs, a representative of the royal family of Saudi Arabia welcomes you to the holy land!*

Then in English:

– *Dear sirs, representative of the royal family of Saudi Arabia welcomes you to the holy land.*

Finally, in perfect Azerbaijani, he repeated:

– Gentlemen, the representative of the Saudi royal family welcomes you to the holy land. Welcome.

Big stepped forward, embraced the representative, and introduced him to Mizi Mətişoğlu:

– Mr. Minister, this is my friend Muhammad Khalaf. He's originally from Baku — we were classmates. He's now a Yemeni citizen. During the pilgrimage, he'll be our guide, interpreter, and protector.

Then he introduced the rest:

– This big-bellied gentleman here is our minister, Mizi Mətişoğlu. He loves food, but he's not greedy. The rest are my staff — each responsible for the minister's safety.

After a quick exchange of pleasantries, the group boarded the minibus. Mizi claimed the back seat — a spacious bench — and sprawled out comfortably against the soft, foam-filled cushions.

Muhammad, now dark-skinned from years in Arabia, was almost unrecognizable except for his light eyes. He took the front seat beside the driver.

Big, sitting behind him, asked:

– How's Aisha? Years ago, after giving up hope on Big, Aisha Memari had turned to Muhammad. They married after university, and he took Yemeni citizenship to be with her.

Muhammad turned and smiled:– She's great! She sends her regards! – he said, then glanced around the van. – Where's Little One?

Big smiled:

– Xaloglu's already in Mecca. He'll join us there. Do you ever miss the homeland?

- We’re planning to visit Baku this year, bring the girls too.
- Muhammad promised.

He hadn’t returned to Azerbaijan since burying his parents ten years ago.

- How many girls do you have now? – Big asked.
- Five. The eldest is married, the rest are still at home. – Muhammad beamed.

Big, impressed:

- Mashallah! That’s productive.

Muhammad laughed and changed the subject. He laid out the itinerary:

- Dear compatriots, soon we’ll begin the Umrah-Tamattu rituals. First, we’ll visit the Prophet’s grave, pray at the Prophet’s Mosque, and visit the Baqi Cemetery. On the way, we’ll enter the state of ihram at the Mosque of the Tree. Then we’ll head to Mecca to perform the tawaf of Allah’s house. – Then, cautiously, he asked: – Who among you performs daily prayers?

No one in the van raised a hand.

Muhammad, sarcastically:

– Then what are you doing here? What’s a pilgrimage to you? What business does a non-believer have here?

Big, just as sarcastically:

– Don’t poke fun at old communists. We’ve got our own beliefs.

Muhammad joked:

– With that kind of belief, you’ll burn in hell.

Big fired back:

– Don’t get between God and his servant. He knows best who to burn and where.

Muhammad surrendered with a smile:

– As always, you’re right, Big. – Then, quietly: – What’s the minister’s purpose for coming on pilgrimage?

Big said nothing. He had been wondering the same thing for a while but still hadn’t found an answer. Changing the subject, he joked:

– Old friend, you still smell like fish — just like when we

were kids.

Muhammad chuckled:

– I can't sit at the table without fish. It's a habit now.

79

MUHAMMAD KHALAF



The 550-kilometer journey from Medina to Mecca took them seven hours, with a brief stop at the *miqat* in Zul-Hulayfa, where they entered the state of *ihram*. Now they were near the sacred Kaaba. Muhammad Khalaf didn't pay much attention to his guests' groans and complaints. He joked:

– Gentlemen, you've got too many sins. Sweat it out — perhaps the Merciful Lord will forgive you.

Mizi Mətişoğlu wouldn't let go of his gear bag. Big offered several times:

– Mr. Minister, let the boys carry it for you, it must be heavy.

But Mizi responded with a phrase that nearly became a proverb:

– In sacred places, we are all equal, Big. Everyone should carry their own burden.

The entourage looked at him with admiration. No one had expected such humility from him.

But Big, who knew Mizi well, suppressed a laugh. He thought to himself, *“I wonder what’s in that bag that he won’t hand over? Very curious.”*

Muhammad chose the least crowded path for the *tawaf* around the Kaaba. He thought to himself, *“There’s no point pushing into that chaos for a bunch of godless guys.”*

They completed seven circuits of the Kaaba and exited. As they boarded the minibus, Muhammad made a suggestion:

We’ve got a day and a half of free time. If you want, we could visit Arafat.

Big declined:

– Better to rest in Mecca. We have to pick up Little One, and the road minister is exhausted. He needs to recover. – Then, jokingly: – You can’t deny even sinful men their right to rest.

uhammad settled them into the guest wing of a grand old hotel. The three-story building was draped in luxury — every corner was decorated like a bridal suite. It had lush gardens and was guarded inside and out by Saudi police. Unauthorized access was impossible.

The guests changed out of their travel clothes and headed to the dining hall, which was open 24/7. They were dazzled by the variety of food — everything imaginable except bird's milk. Mizi Mətişoğlu was in high spirits, beaming with satisfaction.

Big whispered to Muhammad:

– Thank you, my friend. You've made me look good in front of the minister.

80

MIZI MƏTIŞOĞLU'S PILGRIMAGE PREPARATIONS



On the day they were to fly to Medina, Mizi was at work early. They were departing for Saudi Arabia in a few hours. Preparations were complete. The day before, his secretary had packed all his belongings into suitcases and a large trunk. Not even his family knew the real purpose of his trip. He always kept his wife and sons out of state affairs. To deflect questions, he had spread the rumor that he was going away for medical treatment.

Outside his office, he took a small package from his driver:

– I'll be away from Baku. You've got a week off.

Then, entering his office, he told his secretary:

– Call the head of the Agency to my office.

– Yes, Mr. Minister. – The young secretary called out sweetly, then, not caring that the driver was nearby, added

softly: – I'll miss you, Mr. Minister.

Mizi smiled but said nothing.

Though they called him “minister,” he was officially a committee chairman. Appointed during the Popular Front government at age 27, he had risen quickly and never fallen from grace. Ballı and Xallı had poured money into his career back then and still supported him — even in death.

They had transferred ownership of several container markets, shopping centers, properties, and restaurants to him before passing. Mizi was clever — he didn't chase new money but focused on protecting what he had. And he relied on his position to do so.

Despite his wealth, he was known as a modest official because he didn't steal public funds.

In his office, he opened the package and carefully placed its contents on the table — two white sacks. He weighed them with his hands. The one labeled “Ballı” was heavier than “Xallı.” He smiled sadly: *“Ballı always carried more weight in life. Xallı was lighter, more impulsive.”*

For years, Mizi had been unable to fulfill his sisters' dying

wish. They had wanted to go on pilgrimage, but illness had taken them quickly.

Balli, still barely able to speak on her deathbed, had whispered:

– Brother, please, take our remains to Mecca. Spend whatever you need. Our millions are yours. Maybe Allah will forgive our sins. We don't want to burn in hell.

Mizi had promised. But when he tried to arrange it, he ran into religious and bureaucratic hurdles.

Finally, an old childhood friend — now a village mullah — offered a solution:

– Take soil from their graves to Mecca, circle the Kaaba with it, then bring it back. I'll scatter it over their graves. It's equivalent to performing the Hajj.

he mullah even offered to dig up the graves.

Now, Mizi packed the sacks of soil into his large suitcase among his clothes. Then he sat at his desk and pressed the intercom:– Send in Big.

81

BIG AND MIZI'S FRIENDSHIP



Mizi Mətişoğlu had known Big since 1993, back when he had just received a high-level appointment. At the time, Big was working in the still-unnamed department tasked with preventing the destruction of socialist property. He had gone to Mizi's office and offered his "services." The two hit it off quickly. From that point on, Mizi happily made use of Big's abilities, but deep down, he always harbored doubts.

One day, he asked him directly:

– Why are you so loyal? We're not relatives, not friends, we didn't even go to school together...

Big didn't hide anything:

– I know your sisters, Ballı and Xallı. I helped them out a

long time ago.

The mention of his sisters' past hit a sore spot for Mizi. Yes, they were now respected businesswomen, but their early lives had been questionable. He glared at Big:

– You're saying you were my sisters' lover?

Big didn't flinch:

– I wouldn't put it that way. My cousin, Little One, wanted to marry your sister Xallı — it didn't work out. I also had serious intentions toward Ballı.

He then explained in detail how he had met the sisters.

Though it was hard to believe, Ballı and Xallı confirmed the story from their hospital beds. That was enough for Mizi to turn the acquaintance into a true friendship. They met often.

Big had fulfilled many requests for Mizi over the years, including helping eliminate Sarhad from the running when Mizi was trying to become a deputy. True, it hadn't worked out — the party backed someone else, and as people said, "Mizi hadn't yet emerged from the ballot box."

But Mizi didn't lose hope. He never demanded his money back or broke the rules of the political game. He believed his day would come.

In short, Big's loyalty had passed the test of time — he could be trusted.

– Hey Big, we forgot something – Mizi greeted him as he entered the room. – Sit down.

Big did, but looked puzzled:

– What did we forget, Mr. Minister?

Mizi's chubby face lit up with mischief:

– For variety's sake, we should've taken some ladies along on this trip too. One beauty for each of us — imagine that in Mecca!

Big, taking the joke seriously, replied regretfully:

– If only you'd mentioned it a few days earlier, I could've arranged something. But now it's too late. Even if I killed myself, I couldn't pull it off in time. – He grinned and rubbed his hands. – But it would've been something.

Mizi burst out laughing, his big belly bouncing:

– Come on, I was joking! Who takes mistresses to the Hajj?! You're hopeless — ready to go at a moment's notice! – Wiping tears of laughter from his eyes, he finally got to the real point: – How much cash should we bring, do you think?

Big was ready with an answer:

– No need for cash. I've already transferred a large sum to our friend Muhammad Khalaf's account. That should cover all our expenses.

Mizi looked at him with admiration:

– Bravo, Big. Your brain runs like a Swiss watch! – he praised. – My late sisters Ballı and Xallı were geniuses just like you.

Big smiled proudly. The compliment warmed his soul:

– No, my dear, I don't compare to Ballı and Xallı. May Allah have mercy on them — they were brilliant.

But the truth about the sisters was a little more complicated...

82

THE SISTERS' LIVES



Ballı and Xallı considered themselves musicians. True, no one was ever truly enchanted by their singing, playing, or dancing, and most of the events they were invited to were male-only gatherings with limited audiences. When they couldn't attract admirers for their performances, they used other "skills." The sisters weren't shy. If the money was right, they gladly fulfilled the men's desires. They split the earnings into three parts: one for daily expenses, one for savings in case of illness or slow business, and one for investment. They had no family support — their relatives had turned their backs on them.

They had grown up in a far-off village outside Baku. After finishing secondary school, their father wanted to marry them off — a suitor from the neighborhood had already received approval.

But during a visit to the city for a music competition, they never returned. They realized later how foolish that decision had been, but it was too late.

In their youth, the sisters partied anywhere — in cars, cheap cafés, or beachfront tea houses with bamboo walls. Only high-paying clients were brought to their semi-basement hideout on Chapayev Street.

One time, they got careless. Music and laughter from their apartment attracted the wrath of a nosy neighbor, who filed a complaint.

That day, Big was the officer on duty. He summoned the sisters to the station and took their statements. After a long talk, he promised to hush the incident — not for free, of course.

He began visiting their home regularly, always bringing along his cousin Little One. The relationships got more serious.

Little One wanted to marry Xalli, and Big was also developing a deeper relationship with Balli. He claimed he planned to divorce Vera. But the sisters weren't thrilled. They didn't want to give up their independence, and the cousins weren't really their type.

In private, the sisters would joke, “These guys need real men in bed!”

Eventually, they got tired of their suitors. In 1986, they quietly sold the apartment and vanished. They were both ambitious women, each with high-level connections — ministers, even. During the late Soviet years, Azerbaijan was in turmoil, and new economic opportunities had emerged.

Planes were constantly arriving with colorful foreign goods, and traders camped at the airport. Ballı and Xallı, though older, blended in among them. They had some savings and decided to take a risk. Xallı hesitated:

– This is all we’ve got, Ballı. What if we lose it?

Ballı laughed:

– We know the game. We’ll earn it back — we’re not old yet!

Xallı laughed too, then sighed:

– We’re not exactly spring chickens either. Men want young girls these days.

Ballı got serious:

– That’s why we have to act now. Money loses value every day.

Eventually, Xallı agreed.

Their old fling, now head of the airport cargo team, helped them get four used containers from the Baku Seaport, and the airport authorities gave them temporary permission to set up near the road. They cleaned and painted the containers, laid linoleum on the floor, and began renting them out as storage. Soon, sellers were laying out sheets next to the containers and turning the area into a market. The sisters charged small fees.

Business boomed. They added ten more containers, then built food stalls, tents, and toilets.

In a short time, they were wealthy. To deter old flames from bothering them, they started wearing hijabs. Rumors spread that they had married and even performed religious ceremonies.

Their father had died, and only their mother remained. Hearing of their success, she forgave them. She sent Mizi to visit his sisters. They refused to reconnect with the family but welcomed Mizi into their business circle. He had just returned from the army, and they offered to help him get into

government work.

– Don't tie your future to the market. One shift in policy and it's gone. But a government post is forever, – Ballı had said.

They paid off someone in a ministry and got him a job.

– Who knows, maybe one day you'll be a minister, – she joked.

Mizi pouted:

– You just want to get rid of me...

– Don't be silly. One day you'll thank us.

– The market comes and goes. A job is permanent, – Xallı said, hugging him.

83

THE VIP WING



The seventh wing of the hotel in Mecca was more refined than the others, reserved for wealthy pilgrims. Thick carpets covered every floor. Luxury was on display at every turn. The food selection in the dining hall was especially diverse. Security personnel in the lobby watched everything closely. No one entered uninvited — those who did were questioned thoroughly. The latest technology was used in their checks.

A guard pointed his phone at Balaca's bracelet, scanned it, and silently let him through.

Qaflan was staying in a two-bed room on the third floor. As soon as Balaca entered, he pulled two bottles of juice from the fridge and placed them on the low table.

– Drink up, Master Balaca. This stuff's excellent. The Black Arabs know how to take care of themselves! – Then he got to

the point. – I’ve run into a little problem. I called Əflan, and he told me to consult you.

Balaca looked around the room enviously, then sat down, sipping juice as he listened. It turned out that Qaflan’s roommate was a man named Məhər.

– He’s about fifty, tall, muscular, built like a wrestler. He never sleeps in the room at night. He disappears somewhere else and only comes back around dawn. He rummages in his bag a bit, then vanishes again for the whole day. Balaca got up and grabbed another juice from the fridge.

– It really is good. – he said, then asked: – Have the bosses arrived in Mecca yet?

– Yeah, they got here a little while ago – Qaflan confirmed.
– They’re in the main building, resting. They’re tired from the road.

Balaca sounded a little hurt:

– Xaloğlu has completely forgotten about me.

Qaflan didn’t know how to respond, so he stayed quiet. Balaca sighed, like a disappointed child, then asked:

– Have you tried finding out where Məhər sleeps at night?

– Of course! But he never stays in one place. Sometimes he’s in this building, sometimes in that one. Sometimes he just stays in the lobby watching TV till morning.

– What does he say when you ask him about it?

– Nothing. He just laughs that weird, stupid laugh of his.

– Wait, is your roommate actually mentally challenged? – Balaca was surprised.

– That’s the issue! It’s impossible to tell if he’s genuinely mad or just pretending.

– Then how did a crazy man end up in the VIP section of a hotel for rich pilgrims? – Balaca muttered.

– Probably a rich lunatic! What’s the big deal? – Qaflan shrugged. – Not all pilgrims are spiritual geniuses, you know.

Balaca replied cautiously:

– If a lunatic made it all the way to Mecca, then he must have *some* wits. Or someone clever is backing him.

Qaflan blinked:

– Funny, Əflan said the same thing — that he probably has someone guiding him.

Balaca stood and paced the room, then sat back down.

– Did the group leader say anything about Məhər? Have you asked?

Qaflan replied instantly:– Of course. The group leader knows nothing about him. Says he only saw his face during boarding.

– And how can we get a look at your roommate ourselves? – Balaca interrupted.

Qaflan threw his arms out:

– No idea. Who knows when he comes or goes? I even sent his name and photo to Baku via WhatsApp. The reply came yesterday — Məhər's never been in any mental hospital.

Balaca thought a moment:– Can you get a copy of his documents from the group leader? I have a friend in Baku who can find out who he really is.

– I don't know... would the leader give that info to a stranger?

– Qaflan hesitated.

84

CRAZY MƏHƏR



Just then, a tall man burst into the room giggling to himself. Without acknowledging either of them, he grabbed a towel from the head of his bed and walked right back out, still giggling. Qaflan, with mock ceremony, said:

– That was our Məhər.

Then, shaking his head:

– You think someone like *that* will have their pilgrimage accepted?

Balaca replied half-heartedly:

– I don't know, Qaflan. I'm no cleric.

Qaflan pressed:

– You mean they'll really call *him* a Haji?

– Most likely! I should go now — it's getting late. Come by in

the morning. We'll talk about this again. – Balaca stood up, and with a thoughtful look, added: – I feel like I've seen this guy somewhere before... but I just can't remember where.

85

AN ATTACK ON BALACA



They had been waiting for several hours in a dimly lit basement. At night, only one elevator functioned. The service lift always made a stop in the basement before heading to the upper floors.

Tired of waiting, Domba Rəhim said:

- Maybe I should check if Balaca's in his room?
- How would you even get up there? – Lotu Faxı scolded him.
- There's only one elevator...

Just then, the elevator started moving. It stopped at the lobby, then descended to the basement and stopped again.

Someone stepped out, holding onto the wall as he walked. Once they were sure it was Balaca, Domba Rəhim smacked him across the back of the neck. Balaca collapsed to the ground, motionless. Lotu Faxı looked at the body with concern:

– You idiot! You killed him! I said to hit him lightly!

– He won't die – Domba sniffed. – But if you'd let me, I'd have finished the job!

– Don't even think about it! – Lotu snapped. – The one who's supposed to die is his cousin.

– Then why are we chasing after Balaca? – Domba was confused.

– To keep Big nervous. That's the point.

– Understood, boss – Domba obeyed, but not before giving Balaca's limp body one last kick.

86

AT THE MEDICAL UNIT



When the group leader reached the medical unit, Balaca was already asleep after receiving a painkiller. Haji Sarvan gathered from the hotel security chief that, for some reason, a pilgrim who had descended into the basement had been attacked. Elevator technicians had found him unconscious and brought him to the medical unit. After regaining consciousness, the victim claimed he had been attacked. The security chief informed that the police had been notified.

The assistant who followed Haji Sarvan to the medical unit said,

– That talk about an attack is nonsense. – He added, – Probably the elevator broke down, and he fell and got injured while coming out of the dark basement. No need to make a fuss.

– The police will sort it out, – replied Haji Sarvan, dismissing Mullah Gulu's theory.

Haji Sarvan was an experienced man. As soon as he left the medical unit, he contacted Azerbaijan. Since it was nighttime, he didn't wake his superior directly but instead informed the duty officer about the incident.

87

QAFLAN AND BALACA



It was seven in the morning. Except for the duty officer, no one was in the foyer. Qaflan called Balaca:– I’m here, Mr. Balaca, – he said. – Should I come up? Balaca’s voice was weak:– Wait, I’m coming out.

It wasn’t long before Qaflan was pacing near the hardware kiosk. Someone limped out of the foyer’s medical unit and approached him. At first, he didn’t recognize Balaca, whose face was swollen.

– What happened, Mr. Balaca? – he asked anxiously.

– I was attacked last night. I was in bad shape but started feeling better just recently, – said Balaca, his cheeks pale.

– How did it happen?

Balaca satisfied his curiosity:

– It was already past midnight when I returned to our building.

I called the elevator in the vestibule and got in. For some reason, it took me down to the basement...

As the elevator descended, Balaca thought he had probably pressed the wrong button. The elevator stopped in the basement, the doors opened. He pressed the button again to go up, but the elevator didn't move. He stepped out. The basement was dimly lit. As he tried to make his way toward the stairs, a strong blow landed on the back of his neck. He fell and briefly lost consciousness. When someone began dragging him by the arm, he came to. Then he heard footsteps and voices speaking Azerbaijani. His arm was released, and at that moment, he received a kick that shook him to the core and lost consciousness again. When he came to, the elevator technicians were taking him to the medical unit. The doctor applied ice to his bruises and gave him a sedative. His pain eased, and he fell asleep.

What he said was hard to believe. An attack on a pilgrim in a holy place? Qaflan asked quickly:

– Did you spend the night in your room?

– No, in the medical unit, – Balaca replied. – To be honest, I was afraid, thought someone might be watching me.

– You did the right thing! – Aflan praised him and asked: – Did your group leader check in on you?

Balaca shrugged:

– I was asleep, didn't notice.

– What about Aflan? Have you called him? – Qaflan continued questioning.

– Not yet. – Balaca moved his cracked lips with difficulty. – What's there to say?

Qaflan insisted:

– It must be said. – He took his phone, briefly explained the incident, listened a little, and then said:

– Got it, brother. – He hung up and relayed the message. – Mr. Balaca, you can't stay here any longer. You must come with me to the main building immediately. The boss wants to see you urgently. We'll send someone later to collect your things.

88

THE SACRED MEETING OF BIG AND SMALL IN MECCA



When Balaca and Qaflan entered the room, Big, who was sitting sideways on the couch, jumped up and hurried to his brother, embraced him, and immediately scolded:

– Didn't I tell you to wait for me? I sent you so many messages... – he said. – I have so much to tell you! I've missed you so much, cousin.

Aflan and Qaflan didn't move. Big teased them:

– Oh, stay if you want, we have no secrets from you... – he said. – You already know all our little details, don't you...

The sarcasm worked, and the brothers left the room. As they walked out, Big instructed:

– Be in the minister's office, I'll come too – he said, then

looked over his brother again with concern. – They really messed you up! May the hand that raised itself against you wither away...

Balaca stepped back:

– It's nothing! – he said, patting his chest. – You know, cousin, it's been eight whole days since even a drop of alcohol touched my lips. I'm still holding out. What do you think?

Big smirked sarcastically, lowered his voice:

– If you want, I can arrange some alcohol.

Balaca responded indifferently:

– Whether I want or not, alcohol isn't sold in Mecca. Where would you get it from?

Big laughed heartily:

– You're nearing sixty and still don't believe in your big brother's resourcefulness. You know I come prepared, right?

– No way! – Balaca was astonished. – You smuggled alcohol through the border?

Big laughed again:

– You’re behind the times, brother! – he said, pulling a pill from the fridge. – Here, dissolve this in water and drink it. It’s equivalent to exactly one hundred grams of vodka.

– Is this new? – Balaca’s eyes widened.

– You’re falling behind scientific progress! This is old tech.
– Big shook his head. – You can take a handful of pills if you want. I have plenty.

Balaca hesitated:

– No thanks! – he said. – Spare me, cousin. I’m not about to sin on sacred soil! I’ve circumambulated the House of God and repented. I don’t want to fall back into sin.

– Those with complete faith aren’t afraid of sinning, – Big said indifferently.

– That’s the point — I don’t have complete faith! – Balaca shot back quickly, then tried to convince him. – A repentant man drinking again is considered a grave sin.

Big chuckled, his round belly bouncing as he laughed:

– Ha-ha-ha! So what if you sin? You’ll go on another pilgrimage, get forgiven again. Isn’t the door of repentance always open? – he said with a sly smile. – Besides, all that you

said applies to Muslims. We're Christians, remember? We were baptized in church. Islamic laws don't apply to us.

Balaca flared up:

– I'm no Christian! I'm a Muslim. You can be whatever you like!

Big, with a philosophy of simple living, replied from the heart:

– You're my faith, Balaca. If you're a Muslim, then I'm a Muslim too. – he said. – May I never live a day without you, Balaca.

– Then why have you been keeping me away from you all these days? – Balaca voiced his grievance.

– It was necessary! – Big explained. – I was distracting Lotu Fakhi, who's been challenging us.

– So I was your bait? – Balaca asked for clarification.

– Don't talk nonsense! I wanted to keep you away from the trouble that follows me. I didn't want my brother harmed. – Big finished his thought. – But from now on, you'll always be by my side.

Balaca smiled:

– I'd be grateful. You know I feel safe when I'm with you – he said, sitting next to Big and putting his arm around him. – I have no one but you!

The twins embraced like they had been separated for a hundred years.

89

LOTU FAKHI LOOKS FOR MAHER



Lotu Fakhi didn't return to his room after dinner, instead staying in the cool foyer, deciding to wait for Domba Rahim there. The weather wasn't suitable for going outside — people said the hot wind was stirring up dust, making it hard to open your eyes. Lotu was clearly troubled. Not by the weather, but by other worries.

He had just received a message from Baku. His trusted lawyer, Annaghi, wrote: "Reliable sources say the package is in Mecca, in the main building of the hotel where you're staying." This meant Big was already in the holy city.

Despite several attempts, Lotu Fakhi had been unable to contact Maher — his phone remained silent.

The next day at noon, the pilgrims were to re-enter the state of ihram, leave Mecca, and ascend to the Arafat plain to

continue the remaining rituals of Hajj Tamattu.

Lotu Fakhi had to send Domba to the seventh building during the night. The foyer was empty; everyone had retreated to their rooms. Finally, Domba returned. Lotu asked eagerly:

– Well? Did you see Maher? Is he okay?

– No, brother, I didn't see him, but he's fine. One of the guards there is from our region, he recognized Serham immediately. He looked at the key box and said the room key was still there, meaning your chuckling friend wasn't in the room. He also said that earlier, Serham was loitering near the main building — apparently trying to mingle with the big shots.

– You should have spoken with the group leader too... – Lotu said with annoyance.

– I did, brother. I had him called. When I asked about our friend, he frowned upon hearing Serham's name and said, "He sits where I don't even know." He added that the last time he saw him was at breakfast when he said, "I lost my phone, I'm going to get a new one." He hasn't seen him since.

Lotu Fakhi was somewhat relieved after hearing this:

– Good, at least he's safe and minding his business. – he

said. – He'll probably call once he gets a new phone.

– Of course, brother, besides, we'll see him tomorrow at Arafat anyway, – said Domba.

90

ON THE ROADS TO ARAFAT



Mizi Mətishoğlu couldn't fully enjoy the comfort of the main building. On the ninth day of Dhu al-Hijjah, early in the morning, under Muhammad's insistence, they had to leave the hotel:

– It's better if we arrive at Arafat five or six hours early, – he explained, as if trying to persuade people losing their comfort.
– If you want to complete the Hajj within the time you wished, you'll have to follow my advice. There's no other option.

By the time the small group came down, the smiling minibus driver was already in the vehicle, smoking a cigarette with his window propped against the door.

All the group's logistics fell on Muhammad. Ensuring the guests' comfort took most of his time. His phone was glued to his ear. He called here and there, not giving up until he got what

he wanted. Once the vehicle left the hotel, he finally closed his phone. Feeling proud, he said that two small tents with separate toilets, showers, air conditioning, and refrigerators were being set up in Arafat for the distinguished guests.

– One tent will be for the honorable minister and our Big Brother, and the other for us, – he said.

Balaca complained:

– Why don't I have a spot in my cousin's tent?

Muhammad shrugged:

– If you'd told me in advance, I would have ordered a three-person tent, – he said. – Now it's too late, Balaca.

Nothing escaped Muhammad's attention — he didn't forget even the smallest detail. They reached the crescent-shaped plain of Arafat, surrounded by mountains, without incident. The morning's coolness was refreshing. The vast field of tents was still empty. They parked the minibus on the road to Muzdalifah. A short walk away, among some green bushes, two small tents awaited them.

91

HAJI SARVAN'S GROUP



On the ninth day of Dhu al-Hijjah, just before the noon prayer, the hotel complexes emptied. Buses were to take the Azerbaijani pilgrims—now once again in a state of ihram—21 kilometers away to the plain of Arafat, where the remaining obligatory rites of Hajj Tamattu awaited them.

Haji Sarvan's group was the first to arrive in Arafat. They were assigned one of the most comfortable tents. They settled in a spot surrounded by green bushes and flowing water. Their location was elevated, offering views of concrete paths and canals stretching to the mountains.

Though once barren, the roughly 75 square kilometers of Arafat had been developed. Roads and canals had been built, and deep concrete drains had been constructed to handle the frequent rains. Green bushes planted along the roadsides added

to the scenery.

The enormous tent city stretched along the canals, disappearing into the mountain base. Pilgrims would spend the ninth day of Dhu al-Hijjah in prayer here, and after the sunset prayer, they would head to Muzdalifah, and then to Mina.

As the blazing sun dipped behind the mountains, a gentle breeze stirred. The Arafat plain, sheltering hundreds of thousands of pilgrims, came alive. People spilled out from their tents, strolled the concrete paths and canal sides, and wandered among the greenery, enjoying the coolness.

Upon arrival in Arafat, Mirzəmməd and Haji Məftun's first question to the group leader was:

– Where did Balaca disappear to? Are we going to carry all his stuff now?

The leader gave a brief explanation about Balaca and clarified everything. Then, he shared some good news with the elderly men who had taken responsibility for carrying his bags:

– Leadership has moved Balaca to the main building's group. Someone will come shortly to collect his suitcases, – he said, not forgetting to thank the elders. – I'm grateful to both

of you... May your friendship be everlasting. You didn't ignore my request. We'll talk more when there's time.

Then the group leader hurried off. After learning the true identity of their former roommate, the two elders felt awkward.

92

MIZI MƏTISHOĞLU'S DESIRE TO WALK



The midday heat had passed. Balaca sat in the shade, dozing. The swelling on his face had subsided. His body no longer hurt like before, but the throbbing in his leg persisted—he was limping. They had settled in a quieter area, away from the flow of pilgrims. The mountains around Arafat appeared shrouded in mist, with only their silhouettes visible.

Mizi Mətishoğlu emerged from the tent, wanting to stretch his legs. Big followed him out and suggested:

– Minister, maybe we should just walk around nearby, not go too far?

Mizi rubbed his large belly:

– If I don't walk, I'll never get rid of this, Big – he said. –

I've gained ten kilos in just a couple of days.

– Time to go on a diet, Minister, – Big laughed. – This belly doesn't look like it'll shrink just from walking.

As Mizi grunted and moved forward, Big had no choice but to follow. Bodyguards patrolling the tent area noticed Aflan's signal from behind a bush and followed the leadership. Qaflan didn't like Aflan's excessive caution:

– Who would dare harm our boss here, brother? We're among thousands of people...

Aflan gave him a sharp look and stood up:

– You stick to what you understand, don't interfere with my job! – he said, hurrying after the leaders.

Still drowsy, Balaca didn't find Aflan's safety measures unnecessary. Having learned from his recent experience, he said:

– Aflan's right! – and stretched. – Big shouldn't have separated you from your group! We'd know more about that lunatic you shared a room with by now.

– Don't worry, Mr. Balaca, I've got news on Mad Maher, – said Qaflan. – I went for a walk this morning. I saw your

roommate Mirzəmməd talking with Maher by a canal. I blended into the crowd just in time. Maher was calling Mirzəmməd “Father.” Unfortunately, I couldn’t hear their conversation. I tried to follow Maher afterward, but he disappeared. I had to follow Mirzəmməd instead and traced the tent he entered. I believe Maher and Mirzəmməd will meet again. I’ll go back there soon.

Balaca immediately inferred:

– Could Mad Maher actually be Serham, the adopted son of Mirzəmməd, the brother of Sərhəd?

Qaflan agreed:

– I’m sure of it! – he said. – We must be cautious. I suspect they’re the killers.

Balaca perked up:

– Maher might be one of the murderers, no doubt. But I seriously doubt the old, frail man is a killer. I’ve spent several nights sharing a room with Mirzəmməd—I know him well.

93

AN ACCIDENT DURING THE WALK



Evening twilight had just fallen over the plain. Pilgrims enjoying the coolness walked along the concrete paths. Suddenly, a crowd built up. Those coming from behind pushed forward, causing some ahead to tumble into the open concrete drainage channel. Among those who fell were the two bodyguards walking in front of the Minister and Big.

Aflan rushed forward, grabbed Big's arm, and pulled him back. The hefty minister hadn't even been jostled by the crowd, but the incident frightened them all. They quickly returned to the tent.

The disoriented Mizi Mətishoğlu was taken to his tent. Big gave him a sedative from his bag and helped him lie down on the mattress, covered him, and stepped outside. He called Qaflan:

– Go and see how our guys are doing, – he ordered, referring to the two bodyguards who had fallen. – Also find out what they say caused the accident.

Then he gathered everyone into the large tent for a briefing. Aflan, who didn't think it was a coincidence, proposed:

– Let's move the tents to another spot, somewhere more secluded.

Big dismissed the idea:

– No point in trying to hide in Arafat.

Balaca asked:

– But what exactly happened?

Feeling responsible, Aflan described the scene:

– We were moving by the usual protocol. Two guards in front, two in the back, with our leaders in the middle. I moved between the front and rear. The path was crowded—we moved slowly. Then Big called me and said, “Go ahead with the minister, I want some water.” As we distanced ourselves step by step, the commotion started. I rushed back and grabbed Big from the canal's edge and pulled him away. Just then, we heard screaming from those who had fallen into the canal.

Qaflan soon returned to the tent. Big asked sharply:

– Well, speak! How are the boys?

– Not good, – said Qaflan. – One had a split head, the other had a metal rod pierce his side. They were taken to a hospital in Mecca by emergency services.

Everyone fell silent. Aflan then said:

– We’ve no business staying in Arafat. We must go to Mina immediately.

– But it’s not yet time for the Maghrib prayer! – Balaca objected.

– So what! – Aflan scoffed. – We’ve skipped prayers before; the world didn’t end. Missing one or two more won’t make a difference.

Big shook his head and said:

– Call Muhammad. – He added, – He was resting in the minibus when we went out.

94

MUHAMMAD KHALAF'S ADVICE



There was no need to call Muhammad. He had already heard about the incident and rushed over. His first words were:

– Don't hide anything from me, Big, or I won't be able to protect you properly. Speak openly.

Big decided there was no point in hiding anything and told him everything from beginning to end. Muhammad was stunned and could hardly believe his ears:

– The criminal world has declared war on you? The thieves' council sentenced you to death? Sounds like a movie!

Big nodded:

– Yes, just like in the movies!

Muhammad thought for a moment, then slowly said:

– It’s serious, I see that now. – He pulled a folded paper from his pocket and opened it. It was a hand-drawn map. – I think we shouldn’t go to our tents in Mina. It’s better to take the upper road to Jamarat and try to throw off the killer. He’ll assume we’re moving with the rest of the Azerbaijani pilgrims.

Big liked the idea:

– Smart thinking, – he said, though he added, – What if they follow us?

Muhammad explained:

– That’s not possible! No vehicles are allowed into Arafat without special permission. Your guy can only come by bus. But we’ve got a private vehicle. We’ll always be one step ahead. We shouldn’t wait. We must leave Arafat immediately.

95

MAHER LOOKS FOR BIG



Despite the medics' efforts, only two of the injured at the accident site regained consciousness. The others were lifted unconscious and taken to helicopters and ambulances.

Seeing no point in lingering, Maher decided to leave. The opportunity had slipped away. Chance had come between him and Big. As he left the scene, he chuckled to himself: – Hrr! Got away this time, – he muttered.

He returned to his group's tent, which was empty—everyone must've gone to the accident site. He lay down on the carpet, used his bag as a pillow, and tried to nap but couldn't. A thought struck him, and he bolted upright. Without paying attention to a few remaining group members, he stepped outside.

He walked toward the small tents. His confident strides,

though unsuitable for someone in ihram, drew smiles from others. He didn't change his pace. From afar, he saw there was no movement around the small tents, but he stayed cautious. Slowly approaching, he saw the tents were empty. Maher didn't panic.

“They must be in the vehicle!” he thought. He remembered the minibus parked on the highway but saw it was now gone. Maher stood confused. Then he let out another signature chuckle:

– Hrr! I'll get you eventually!

But this time, his laugh lacked confidence. Unsure of what to do, he wandered aimlessly by the roadside.

96

LOTU FAKHI MEETS MAHER



– Brother, you lost your prey this time.

Maher, hearing the familiar voice right behind his ear, spun around sharply. It was his boss, Lotu Fakhi. The thief-lord's gray, dull face bore a faint smile. They embraced like long-lost friends. Domba Rahim, standing a bit farther off, also approached with a grin and greeted him. Maher let out his trademark chuckle and confidently said:

– Hrr! He can't escape me! I'll check every tent and find Big.

– I'll help you, – Domba offered. – I have my own score to settle with that bastard Balaca.

Lotu Fakhi laughed at his men's naïveté:

– What scores you're talking about! – he said. – They've

probably already left Arafat.

– Fine, I'll catch up with them at Muzdalifah, – Maher insisted.

– Think, brother! They're not traveling by bus. They have a private vehicle, – Lotu Fakhi had to explain. – You won't reach them even at Muzdalifah.

Maher asked uncertainly:

– What about Mina? Can we catch them there?

Lotu Fakhi pulled a map from his back pocket:

– I got this from reliable sources in Baku. It shows there are two roads from Muzdalifah to Jamarat. One goes through Mina, the other goes directly, called the upper road, – he said, putting the map back without opening it. – We don't know which one they took.

– So what's your suggestion? – asked Domba Rahim.

Lotu Fakhi thought a bit, then said:

– Here's what we'll do. Maher, go back to your tent and move with your group toward Mina. Domba and I will take a highway car to Muzdalifah, then go by the upper road to

Jamarat. That way, Big won't escape. Whichever of us encounters him first will finish the job.

– Where do we meet? – Maher asked.

– If we survive, we'll meet at the sacrifice grounds. – Lotu Fakhi replied nonchalantly, then hugged Maher. – Take care of yourself, friend.

97

BETWEEN TWO DESERTS



Once the minibus left Arafat, everyone breathed easier. Big, now feeling safe, cheered up and joked with Muhammad along the road, even teasing his staff.

Muhammad, however, was worried. He didn't respond to the jokes and only offered weak smiles. The vehicle drove through the desert highway under the clear night sky.

After the tension of earlier events wore off, the Minister dozed off in his seat. They'd been driving for a while when Muhammad instructed the driver to pull over. The slope ahead marked the end of the Arafat desert.

– This is where Arafat ends, and Muzdalifah begins, – he explained.

– So what, my friend? – Big asked, trying to understand.

– It's Maghrib prayer time, – Muhammad said. – This prayer must be performed in Arafat.

– Oh come on, just keep driving! – Big waved his hand. – We'll reach a nice place and you can pray there, we'll watch.

– No, this prayer can't be delayed. The penalty is heavy, – Muhammad insisted.

Balaca was surprised at his persistence:

– Hey, since when are you so devout? Weren't you the one who cried when you weren't accepted into the Pioneers?

Muhammad hesitated, embarrassed:

– That was the past, brother. We were kids and didn't understand, – he said, then added sternly, – Trying to lead a believer astray is a sin.

– Fine, but where will you find water for ablution here? We're in the middle of nowhere! – Big objected again.

Muhammad stamped his foot:

– Oh ignorant friend, when there's no water, you perform tayammum with earth. It's allowed by Islamic law!

Balaca laughed:

– Brother, we’re old communists. Don’t drag us into the wilderness with this. Let’s just keep going.

Muhammad wouldn't give in. He declared:

– If you don’t complete all the rituals of Hajj, your stone won’t hit Satan. Even if it does, it won’t harm him.

The whole vehicle burst out laughing. Aflan choked with laughter:

– Local guy, we don’t even want our stone to hit Satan!

Qaflan roared:

– We’re not throwing rocks at ourselves, are we?! Ha-ha-ha!

Big joined in:

– Right, Muhammad! We’re ready to stone anyone who stones Satan! – He stood up. – Mizi Mətishoğlu is calling me, I’ll consult with him and return.

He went to the minister. They whispered for a while, and finally, the minister said aloud:

– Brother Muhammad Khalaf, I’ll pay the penalty. Just drive.

Hearing this, Muhammad calmed down. He suggested:

– Since we’ve stopped, we should collect stones here on the slope. The right side of the road is considered Muzdalifah valley. Stones for stoning Satan must be collected here.

Big handed him a plastic bag from his backpack:

– Muhammad, have the driver do it. Let him collect for all of us!

Muhammad gave the order. The Arab nodded and climbed the slope. He soon returned with a bag full of stones and resumed driving.

A few kilometers later, the minibus stopped again.

– What now, Muhammad? – Big asked, annoyed.

– From here on, we must go on foot. Cars aren’t allowed in Jamarat.

The passengers got out and witnessed an incredible sight. Two endless streams of people were moving through the twilight. A high metal fence separated the road to Jamarat from the road to Mina. Following Muhammad’s advice, they took the upper road.

– Our car will be waiting for us in Mina, in front of the sacrifice grounds. After stoning the Big Satan, we'll return via the lower path, perform the sacrifice, and spend a day in Mina. The next day, we'll stone the Small Satan and head back to Mecca, circle the Kaaba again, and then fly from Jeddah to either Turkey or Dubai, and from there, home to Azerbaijan.

98

MAHER IN THE MUZDALIFAH DESERT



After parting ways with Lotu Fakhi and Domba, Maher returned to his tent, performed the evening prayer, packed his belongings into a large bag, and when the group leaders began calling the pilgrims to board the buses, Maher sneaked into one of the buses assigned to Hacı Sarvan's group. He entered from the rear and found a seat at the back. In the dusk, no one noticed him.

Hacı Sarvan's group reached the Muzdalifah plain in about half an hour. Pilgrims disembarked and began to spread out, gathering pebbles for the ritual stoning of the devils.

Under the headlights of passing cars, they searched for the right stones—"larger than a chickpea, smaller than a hazelnut." Mirzəmməd and Hacı Məftun collected 49 such stones, with a few extras for backup. They put them into a half-

liter plastic bottle and tucked it into their bags.

Hacı Sarvan had taught them well:

– On the first day at Jamarat, you only stone the Big Devil. On the next two days, you must stone all three—Big, Medium, and Small—seven stones each. In the crowd, your stone might miss. That’s why spare stones are necessary.

Meanwhile, Maher sat on a rock by the roadside, smoking and watching the pilgrims. As Mirzəmməd passed by, he recognized his adopted son in the half-light and cried out:

– Maher, my boy, what are you doing here? Why aren’t you with your own group?

– I boarded your bus by mistake, Father, – Maher lied.

Hacı Məftun looked him over carefully:

– Mirzəmməd, who is this brother?

– He’s my son, – Mirzəmməd muttered.

– And why did you hide his presence from me? – Hacı Məftun asked in surprise.

– I only found out recently myself. He came in secret. – Mirzəmməd smiled nervously and whispered, – My son’s a little

off in the head.

Maher overheard and chuckled, addressing his father:

– Call me crazy all you want, Father, just not “off.” – Then he added, – I joined your group so you wouldn’t be lonely.

– Does Hacı Sarvan know? – Mirzəmməd asked.

– If God knows, that’s enough. Group leader doesn’t need to, – Maher chuckled. – Don’t worry, Father, I’ll handle Sarvan myself.

– Then why aren’t you gathering stones? – Mirzəmməd asked.

– Hrr! I don’t need them.

– What will you throw at Satan then?

Maher grinned in the darkness:

– I brought my stones from Baku.

– You brought them from Azerbaijan?! Why? There are plenty here! – Mirzəmməd was baffled.

– Hrr! People say the devils here are used to Arab stones. They dodge them easily. But our stones will catch them off

guard. One hit, and both legs break.

The elders stood speechless. If a sane person had said it, they'd applaud. But since it came from a "madman," they couldn't bring themselves to believe it.

99

HACI SARVAN'S GROUP IN MINA



After collecting stones, Hacı Sarvan's group joined the crowd heading to Mina. Everyone was burdened, so they moved slowly. Occasionally the crowd stopped altogether. Some pilgrims halted to shop at kiosks, further slowing things down. Hacı Sarvan allowed the delay to buy time deliberately.

As planned, they reached the Mina tents past midnight. After settling in and washing up, they briefly rested, then headed back toward the edge of Muzdalifah near the Mina bridge. Shia pilgrims were required to pray the morning prayer here in Muzdalifah.

Everyone gathered around water taps to perform ablution. After prayer, Hacı Sarvan said:

– Today is said to be extremely hot. While the morning

coolness lasts, we must go. Mad Maher, who had mingled among the women, chuckled:

– Hacı, the ladies want to rest!

Out of respect for Mirzəmməd, Hacı Sarvan hadn't objected to Maher joining their group. He had already called Maher's original group leader and smoothed things over.

Maher brought with him a light-hearted atmosphere. Everyone enjoyed joking with him. The female pilgrims had grown fond of him too.

Hacı Sarvan, determined and strategic, said:– There's no time to rest. We stop even for a minute, we'll get caught in the heat. – He pointed at the thinning crowd. – Soon, this place will be packed.

No one objected after that. Hacı Sarvan took the lead.– Before throwing the stones, recite “La ilaha illallah!” And when the stone hits the wall with a sound, say “Allahu Akbar.” If your stone doesn't hit, throw another. After completing the ritual, turn right, walk a little, and gather near our flag. Don't wander off.

Muxtar asked anxiously:

– Hacı, hundreds of people are throwing stones at the same time. How will I know if mine hits?– You'll know, – Hacı Sarvan said firmly. – When a believer raises their hand with a stone, all surrounding noise fades. You hear the sound of your stone hitting clearly. That's called divine connection.– And if the noise doesn't fade? If there's no connection? – Muxtar asked skeptically.

– I wouldn't know about that... – said Sarvan. – You'll have to ask a religious scholar.

100

ON THE ROAD TO JAMARAT



After leaving the vehicle in Muzdalifah, Aflan's responsibilities increased fivefold. The minister had no endurance—he whined and complained constantly. Aflan, worn out, might have snapped at him had he not feared Big's reaction.

They found themselves in the middle of a large group of Iranian pilgrims, many of whom were ethnically Azerbaijani. Communication was easy; people started asking one another questions. Big walked in silence, with Balaca leaning on his arm, still limping from the basement incident.

With two bodyguards lost in Arafat, one now walked ahead and one behind. Qaflan kept a watchful eye as well.

They walked a long way in the night's cool air. Near dawn, Jamarat came into view, and everyone grew cheerful—everyone

except the minister, who continued to suffer. His big toe was bruised and painful.

Muhammad Khalaf tended to him, applied iodine to the toe, bandaged it, and then examined his rubber slippers, finding and removing a tiny sharp piece of stone. Relieved, the minister's complaints decreased, though his expression remained sour. From time to time, he would stop and put down the bag he carried over his shoulder.

To ease the burden, Aflan told Qaflan:

– Carry the minister's bag.

But Mizi Mətishoğlu refused angrily:

– It's light. I'll carry it myself, – he said. Though he didn't say it outright, he clearly regretted coming on pilgrimage.

As they neared Jamarat, the movement slowed. The pilgrims were now walking step by step. They had no idea what was causing the blockage ahead. Meanwhile, another crowd was heading in the opposite direction toward a tunnel.

A five-hundred-meter-long, high metal fence separated the two flows.

An Azerbaijani from Ardabil, walking next to Balaca, said:

– Mr. Balaca, this is my second pilgrimage. Last time, the same thing happened. They blocked the road and said a prince was at Jamarat.

– So you think the prince has come again to throw stones?
– Balaca asked.

– Surely, sir. They enter Jamarat by car, throw their stones, and return to Mecca by car.– How can that even be allowed? – someone from Tabriz said in disbelief. – That’s not a pilgrimage! Coming and going by car?!

– Who can forbid them, brother? – the Ardabil man answered. – Isn’t the whole country theirs?Balaca smiled:

– We are the subjects, not the scholars—sharia is not for us.

– Mr. Balaca speaks the truth. They’ll hold us here until the prince leaves. They did this last time too... Let’s move toward the fence. There’s more air there. Soon, we won’t be able to breathe.

Balaca pointed at the ten- or twelve-year-old boy walking with the Ardabil pilgrim:– Your son?

– Yes, sir, my youngest. – He then turned to his boy: – Qasim, go bring juice for the gentlemen.

Along the road, large plastic barrels filled with chilled juice were available to pilgrims. Anyone could take as much as they wanted. The barrels were constantly refilled by staff.

The boy returned quickly and handed out the drinks, then whispered something to his father. The Ardabil pilgrim turned to Balaca:

– Mr. Balaca, my son says two men were asking near the barrels about pilgrims from the Soviet Union. They might be your companions.

Balaca looked in the direction the boy indicated. He immediately recognized two men about five or six meters away—the one with the bile-colored face and the giant brute. Though he didn't know their names, he remembered them from his group.

He was surprised to see them here. Something crossed his mind—but before he could think further, the crowd swelled, and they were swept forward. The open-air crowd was now packed so tightly they could barely breathe.

Those near the metal fence were the first to come under

pressure. The fence stretched and bent under the weight. Suddenly, it snapped. Screams rang out, then cries, wails, and moans. The two crowds collided. A disaster unfolded...

101

HACI SARVAN'S GROUP AT JAMARAT



After stoning the Big Satan, Hacı Sarvan's group descended the escalators and emerged into the open air. Their faces glowed with joy. The great tempter—Satan—had been punished. Having been pelted by the stones of hundreds of thousands, he had likely fled, too injured to deceive again.

As they moved away from Jamarat, the sun broke through the clouds like molten fire. The heat was unbearable. The cool tunnel was still a kilometer away.

The old and frail began to shrivel, the young turned pale. The temperature exceeded fifty degrees Celsius.

Mirzəmməd stumbled like a drunk, and as he reached for his bald head, Hacı Məftun stopped him:

– Friend, shading your head is not allowed...

– My skull feels like it's on fire... like it's going to burst...

– Mirzəmməd groaned.

Seeing his father's struggle from a distance, Maher forced his way through the crowd and grabbed his arm.

– Don't worry, Father, I'm with you...

The heat overwhelmed everyone in a matter of minutes. No one spoke. They moved like soulless corpses. Maher, as strong as an ox, was unfazed—his dumb grin never left his face.

The road back from Jamarat was separated from the road toward it by a thick wire mesh. Maher noticed the returning crowd was in trouble. Movement had stopped, tension was visible on their faces.

Getting closer to the fence, Maher suddenly whispered to Mirzəmməd:

– Hrr! Father, our friend Big is right there! Hey, look! There's my roommate Qaflan with him. And that rolling ball must be the minister! – He laughed.

Mirzəmməd didn't even have the strength to turn his head.

Then Maher saw Lotu Fakhi's darkened, stone-cold face and Domba's bloodshot bulging eyes.

– Whoa! You guys are here too?! – he cried in horror, but the rising noise drowned his voice.

The crowd's pressure increased, and the fence was being stretched to its limit. Then the screaming began, followed by wails. People were being trampled—many had their robes torn, their bare bodies exposed.

Qaflan was on his knees, head on the ground. Balaca and Big were struggling. A bloodied Aflan was lying across the minister, trying to shield him.

The horror made Maher's hair stand on end. He wanted to stay and look, but the moving crowd dragged him forward.

Hacı Sarvan was walking ahead and didn't see what was happening behind. He turned back and shouted in panic:

– Hurry! Hurry! Don't stop. I think disaster is about to strike...

They entered the tunnel just in time. They didn't see the fence collapse, the two streams crashing into each other, people being trampled. Though they tried to slow down, the crowd

didn't allow it. The screams followed them into the middle of the tunnel.

102

HACI SARVAN'S GROUP AT THE SACRIFICIAL SITE



The catastrophe at Jamarat terrified the group. Even long after they had distanced themselves from the site, they remained shaken. Only when the blazing sun hit their backs did they start to come to their senses.

They still had the sacrifice ritual ahead. It gave them something else to think about. The group leader took them to the slaughterhouse.

Once out of the tunnel, Hacı Sarvan kept trying to use his phone, but the mobile network seemed to be down.

Mirzəmməd was preoccupied with Maher, who was now completely lost to reality. His murky eyes stared skyward. He seemed to have lost the last bit of sanity he had.

They didn't stay long at the sacrificial site. They paid the cashier the required amount, handed the receipt to the gatekeeper, and skipped the actual slaughter. They returned to their tents in Mina, performed the "taqsir" (hair-cutting), exited ihram, washed up.

The sun, the trauma, and exhaustion had taken their toll. No one touched the food brought in sealed plastic containers. As soon as their heads hit their pillows, they passed out. Not even Maher's constant chuckling beside Mirzəmməd disturbed their sleep.

103

NEWS OF THE DISASTER



Uncertainty lasted until noon. The pilgrimage office's representative in Mecca arrived in Mina. Group leaders gathered in his tent. He clarified what had happened, sharing both official statements and media reports.

Official Chronicle (Saudi Arabia, Riyadh):

“On the 10th of Dhu al-Hijjah at around 9:00 AM, a disturbance occurred at the entrance to Jamarat. 150 pilgrims were injured. No deaths or serious injuries were reported.”

Media Report (24 Sept, 1:20 PM):

“During the Hajj rituals on Mina Mountain, a stampede occurred. 753 pilgrims died. 863 were injured. The disaster occurred after the stoning ritual, as pilgrims were returning from Jamarat.”

Another Report (24 Sept, 3:30 PM):

“New estimates suggest the number of dead is at least 2,530. More than 1,200 are injured. One of the access roads to Mina was closed for unknown reasons.”

Follow-up Report (26 Sept, 12:00 PM):

“Since the majority of the dead were Iranians, the tragedy sparked a diplomatic crisis between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iran accused Saudi Arabia of mismanagement and negligence, threatening legal action and urging the UN to investigate.”

Oddly, there was no serious reporting on casualties among Azerbaijani pilgrims. Any such talk was dismissed as mere rumor.