

# Blood Stains

A novel Afghan story

**By Arley Loewen**





## ***Bloodstains***

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This short novel is fiction. It is inspired by my reading of medieval and modern Persian texts, many which are cited in the endnotes, as well as by many different events during our years living among Afghan refugees in the 1980s and 1990s. The characters in the novel are fictional.

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### ***Other books and translations by Arley Loewen***

***Memoirs of an Afghan Village***, M. Zarin Anzor, Pashto short stories, translated by *Homayun Hotak* and Arley Loewen, Rahmat Publications, Op Mercy Afghanistan, 2012.

***Images of Afghanistan – Exploring Afghan Culture through Art and Literature*** with Josette McMichael, Oxford, 2010.

***New Horizons for Afghanistan – Principles of Leadership Development***, Rahmat Publications, Op Mercy Afghanistan, 2008-2013 – English, Dari – translated by *Homayun Hotak*, Pashto – translated by *Nabi Tadbir*.

***Real Men Keep their Word***, Akram Osman, Dari short stories, translated by Arley Loewen, Oxford, 2005.



*If you sin and succeed, it's really  
no sin, but if you sin and don't  
get away with it, then you have to  
make up for it somehow.*

Iranian author, Simin Daneshwar  
in *Savushun*, 1969

اگر آدم گناه کرد و موفق شد، آن  
گناه بر عقیده خودش و دیگران گناه  
نیست، ولی اگر موفق نشد، آن وقتی  
گناه، گناه است و باید جبران‌ش کرد

سمین دانشور، سوشون، ۱۹۶۹



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# Kites and Football

## Even if it takes a lifetime!

Akram's knees buckled as he yanked hard on the kite string. His bright golden kite, with a dazzling reddish vest design in the center, soared straight up, then hovered quietly for a few seconds. Feeling the tug of the string as the strong breeze played with his kite, Akram wondered how many kids in the area were watching him. He imagined them talking to each other ... "*Akram's winning today! He's never been ahead like this before.*"

He caught his breath. Another kite was veering dangerously close. Someone was challenging him. Akram yanked hard. Then, with a sudden swoop, his own kite took a suicidal nose-dive. Akram's hands bled from the bite of the razor-sharp kite string. He ignored the pain as he jerked the string and pulled it hard once more, dragging it across his rival's string. In a flash, Akram's kite-string sliced through his rival's as if it were cheese. The rival kite hung limp in the air. The younger neighborhood boys cheered as the kite fluttered in the wind then tumbled down listlessly. The boys dashed down the street and jumped across the open sewer ditch, ignoring the smells and garbage piles. Every boy was for himself, as each one vied for the newly available kite. Akram smiled quietly to himself as he heard the boys shout, "Akram's champion! Akram's the new winner! He beat Ghulam!"

## 2 Kites and Football

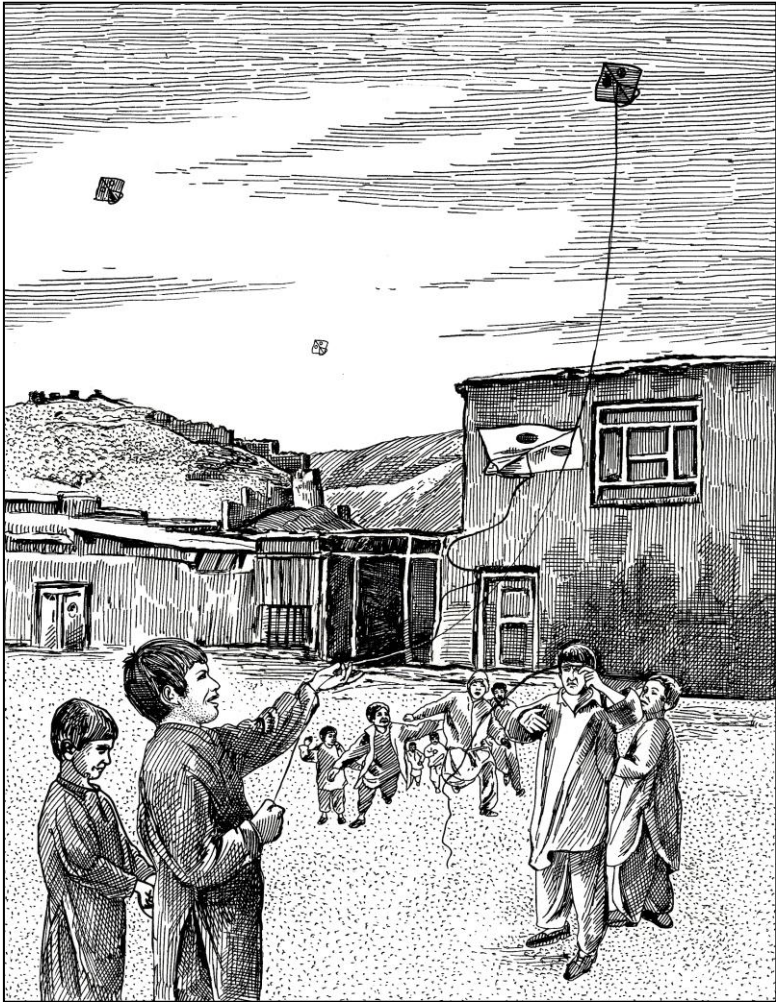
Ghulam was not pleased with the outcome. For several years he had been the unrivaled champion of the skies. Now a young, unknown novice had come from nowhere and thrown his kite into the fray, challenging him to a match. He was left with no choice but to fight the new upstart. He cursed quietly as he threw the loose string away. How long would the neighborhood boys wag their tongues about this new champion? Could he hold his head up high? Worst of all, he knew one lucky boy would boast, “I got Ghulam’s kite! I got it!”

Ghulam bit his lip as he muttered under his breath, “I’ll get him back, sooner or later.” He sneered to himself as he remembered the upcoming football game. This new upstart kite-flyer, Akram, was on the opposing team.

On Friday, the following week the two teams gathered for the football match on the grounds adjacent to Ghazi stadium. Ghulam’s team, with players from Shor Bazaar area, faced a group of young men coming from Chahar Dehi, a wide valley south-west of Kabul. Rivalry between these two teams was fierce and no recent phenomenon. People still talked how, years ago, their favorite *kaka* (vigilante)<sup>1</sup> from Shor Bazaar had challenged a young upstart *kaka* from Chahar Dehi just because he had dared to walk by Shor Bazaar’s favorite *chai*-place (where many *kakas* of the old city met frequently), without offering his respects to anyone. Such audacity had to be dealt with immediately and decisively. That fight between Kaka Awrang and Kaka Badrow remained a living memory for the people of Kabul, those from Chahar Dehi with their version and residents of Shor Bazaar with theirs.

Akram and his teammates—all from the Chahar Dehi area—had boasted among themselves for the past few days that they would throw the Shor Bazaar players back into the alleys and bi-ways of the Old City.





Akram's kite-string sliced through his rival's as if it were cheese. The rival kite hung limp in the air.

#### *4 Kites and Football*

Akram dashed down the center of the field. Very few players could match his speed. The cheers from the Chahar Dehi spectators spurred him on even faster. He was wide open.

“Pass! Pass, in front!” He shouted.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the ball coming. As he neared the net, he pulled his leg back to kick the ball straight into the goal, forgetting that the field was wet. He slipped and slid into the goal. As he was about to get back to his feet, he felt the sharp stab of a boot in his stomach. He looked up. Ghulam sneered sarcastically, “Can’t even stay on your feet, huh?”

A few minutes later Akram’s team rushed down the field again. From the far left, his cousin, Behzad, kicked the ball towards him. Akram’s eyes were fixed on the ball as it sailed towards him. A perfect pass! It was coming fast. No time to trap it before a kick. Taking a quick glance at the goal, Akram wound up to kick the ball as it hit the ground.

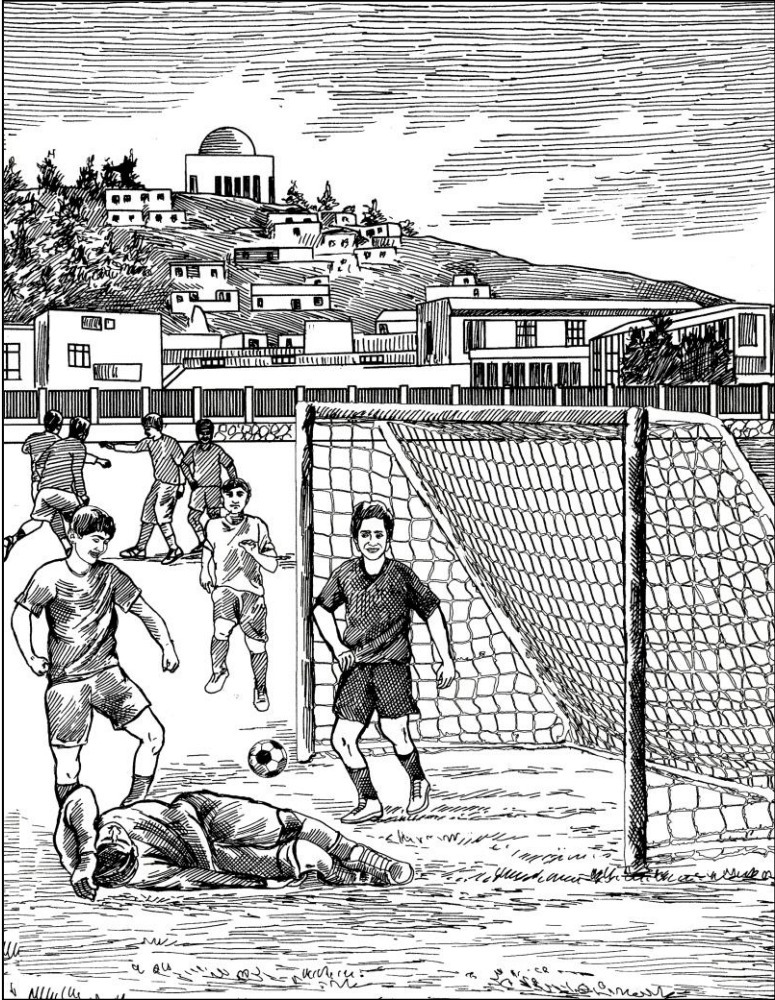
Suddenly, just as his foot connected with the ball, he felt himself flipping head over heels. He landed with a sudden thud, his head slamming hard into the dirt. Stars sparkled before his eyes. He lay on the ground for a few moments, his breath knocked out of him. He wanted to get up, but his head throbbed as he gasped for air.

Behzad yelled at Ghulam, “Hey, that was a foul!” He turned to the referee and glowered, “Ref, where are your eyes?” But the play continued without a whistle. Akram finally managed to get to his feet. His blood came to a boil. Ghulam was jogging away from the scene as if nothing had happened.

Akram joined Behzad as they both shouted at Ghulam, “Fool! Watch your legs! Don’t you know how to kick a ball? Blind or what?”

Ghulam only sneered back and sped after the ball.

The second half of the game was as fierce as the first—tripping, pushing, cursing, blood. The rivalry between the two



Akram landed with a sudden thud, his head slamming hard  
into the dirt.

players grew bitter. The referee finally blew the whistle to end the game. The score was tied, but Akram knew this was not the end. He would get back at Ghulam. As he walked by Ghulam and his brother, Ehsan, Akram spat and growled, “If it takes a lifetime, a real man gets even.”

Ghulam only laughed and spat back, “Any time ...”

## *Chapter One*

### **Helping Faqir**

(Twenty years later)

#### **Faqir's loss**

**A**kram counted the notes and shoved them roughly back into the creaky drawer. He sighed deeply as he wondered aloud to himself, "How will we make it this month?" He looked at the bags of flour he had yet to sell. The rainstorm last night had damaged the bottom bag. Yet another bag of flour spoiled. As always, he would have to bear the loss himself. The wholesaler was the stingiest and shrewdest businessman he had ever dealt with. But Akram shrugged it off. It would be all right, if only he could sell the rest of the flour.

He gazed down the street wistfully, wondering when another customer would come. Two boys, cricket bats in hand, ran passed his shop. Immediately he drew back into the shop. A wooden club was the last thing he wanted to think about.

"Salam, Uncle Akram!"

It was Basir, Faqir's young son. "Not again," Akram thought. That poor family just two alleys from his shop had moved in only a few months ago, but Akram already knew Faqir too well, gaunt, jutting cheek bones and a listless gaze in his eyes. Every two to three days Faqir sent one of his older children—he had six or seven altogether, a long line of them—for his regular packs of cigarettes, some groceries, or just a few matches. But they never seemed to have enough money to pay. Akram knew what Basir would say: "Write it in the book, father said." What could he do? He knew that Faqir was without a job and his wife was working hard as a cleaner for pitifully low wages. Recently, it seemed she often had to work quite late. But they had many mouths to feed. How could he refuse them?

"Kaka Akram, we need a dozen eggs, some flour and milk. But father says—I'm ever so sorry, but my pockets are empty and so are my children's stomachs. Please can you write it in the book?"

Akram sighed even more deeply as he scooped a kilo of flour. "There goes my profit for today," he said to himself, "and why should I care for them? Who are they to me anyway?" But he also knew what it was like to go without. He thought of his own three children, each of them sitting on the floor, around the *desterkhwan* (table cloth) with eager and hungry eyes. Often they quarreled for the few small morsels of boney meat that they were able to afford once or twice a week. Why couldn't they have meat more often, good-tasting lamb kebabs or chicken like other families? He bit his dry, chapped lips. Akram's heart ached for his two sons and daughter. He longed to be able to provide better meals. Were they supposed to grow up with just dry bread, day in and day out?

Akram looked at Basir's eager pleading eyes. He noticed a tinge of sadness in Basir's face. Maybe he should help the Faqir family. If only Faqir could find a job and have some daily





“Father says—‘I’m ever so sorry, but my pockets are empty and so are my children’s stomachs. Please can you write it in the book?’”

income. How much better that would be. As it was now, Akram felt obligated to dole out money to this poor family, money that he desperately needed for his own children. Faqir seemed to have so little respect for himself. Yesterday when Faqir had come to the shop, his eyes were even more languid, as if he couldn't focus properly. Akram wondered where and how Faqir got the money for all his cigarettes or whatever he was smoking.

Basir cleared his throat. "Uncle Akram, did you forget?"

Akram's thoughts returned to his shop. "Sorry Basir, my son. You wanted a dozen eggs and flour? Here, take this and ..." Akram swallowed bitterly. "Tell Faqir not to worry about it."

### **The day the rain never stopped**

What a strange rain! It rained all day. People in the city called it the rain of the century. Never in his life had Akram seen it pour like it did that day. Clouds—bizarre and fiery yellow with a dark blue, foreboding lining—billowed out from behind the hills, rolling over each other so fast as if they were trying to outrace each other. The rain started early. It rained and rained, for hours on end, all day. Not just a drizzle, nor even steady drops, but an endless downpour, with gusting winds, crashing thunder, and flashes of lightning. Trees snapped in two like matches. Then came the water. Tiny rivulets cutting through the city swelled into furious torrential floods. The waters gushed through the streets and kept on rising higher and higher.

The rains finally subsided by evening. Early next morning, Akram dropped by to see his elderly friend and neighbor, *Baba Sharif*. "Baba Sharif, how did you fare with the rain yesterday?"

Baba Sharif responded with a warm smile, "Akram *sahib*, I'm well, my house is dry. But I couldn't get your new neighbors out of my mind. You told me they live right next to the river."



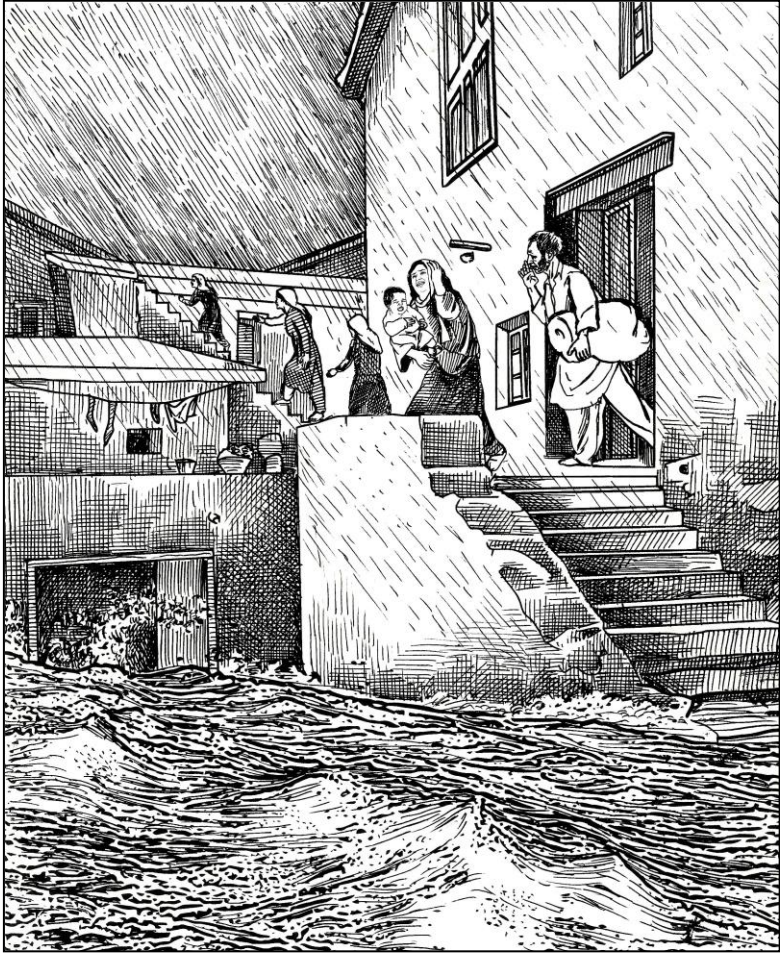
Akram, feeling embarrassed that he hadn't even given the Faqir family a thought, answered, "Yes, it's a decrepit place, barely enough space for a family to lie down and sleep."

A worried look came over Baba Sharif's face, "We should check up on them, Akram. I heard that the river rose high very fast. There were flash floods. Let's go now."

Akram agreed, but wondered why Baba Sharif was so quick to help others in need, even strangers. As soon as they arrived at the house, they noticed how the water had damaged much of the wall. They slowly climbed up the steep, narrow stairs to the second floor. Faqir was on the roof, trying to salvage the stinky, rotting cotton from a few long *toshak* mattresses.

Without offering any tea, Faqir told them the story, "We were sitting in our room. I had nothing to do. It started to drizzle early in the morning. I sent Basir to buy cigarettes. The rain came steady. It started to pour. Each hour it poured more and more. But Basir didn't come back. The water started to rise higher and higher in the street. Still Basir didn't come back. The water was flowing like a river on the street, and soon reached the door of the house. Basir couldn't come now, the water was too high. His mother was beside herself with worry. Soon the ground floor of the house flooded and the water started to rise up the stairs. I couldn't believe it. So much water! I told the children to stay upstairs. Suddenly, I heard this whooshing sound. Like a whirlwind, the water surged up, onto our floor. Right here, to the second floor! We quickly threw a few of our belongings up on the shelf. But how could we run? Where could we go? The staircase was flooded. The only way out was up, onto the roof. We ran from roof to roof in the pouring rain. We finally found Basir late that afternoon."

Faqir pointed out how the flood had carried away the little that they owned. A few plates and some kitchenware lay scattered on the floor.



“We quickly threw a few of our belongings up on the shelf. But how could we run? Where could we go?”

Baba Sharif listened intently. His eyes moistened. His full, white beard and glistening silver-like hair, along with his gentle, yet serious eyes bespoke of wisdom and dignity. He carried respect naturally. He was slow to speak. When he did offer words, everyone listened.

Much to Faqir and Akram's surprise, Baba Sharif bent down without comment and began to help Faqir. Ignoring Faqir's feigned courtesy asking him to stop, and thinking nothing of soiling his hands and knees, Baba Sharif sat on the cold hard floor and picked through the stinky cotton.

The next day Sharif collected a few of his own *toshaks* and gave them to Akram to take to Faqir's. Sharif instructed Akram, "And here's some money. Buy Faqir the groceries he needs. Don't tell him who it is from. Just get it to Faqir's family. They need it. And Akram, he lives close to your shop, you know him better than I do. You help him too, okay?"

After Akram had returned from Faqir's house, he stopped in at Sharif's place again. "You're going to get good *sawab* (religious credit) for this, Baba Sharif!"

Sharif frowned. He turned to Akram and spoke without a smile, "Akram, you know the words, 'Do good and throw it in the river, and the Lord God will bring it back in His time.' That's enough. If you focus on *sawab*, you'll lose it."

Akram thought to himself, "Sharif's ways are so different. What is it?"

He had known Baba Sharif as long as he could remember, but Baba often surprised him with such sayings. Baba Sharif's heavy white beard couldn't cover his genuine smile and deep peace that seemed permanently etched on his face.

Years ago, Baba Sharif's father and Akram's grandfather had owned shops next to each other in the main Mundayi market in Kabul's Old City. Ever since then, the two families had been bosom friends even though they weren't related to each other. In

the early 1990s, the families had to flee their shops due to the relentless fighting and shelling in their area. Akram had lost many of his immediate family members, including his father, and so for a few years Baba Sharif had taken the young Akram under his wing and had become like an adopted father to Akram.

Their paths had separated for nearly a decade. Now, once again, they were neighbors in next-door Pakistan. Many Kabuli Afghans had settled in Peshawar, but both the Akrams and Baba Sharif had found cheaper housing in Nawshera, a hot, crowded town an hour's drive from Peshawar along the Grand Trunk Road. Akram's small corner shop in the heart of the refugee community was just a few blocks away from Baba Sharif's house.

### **Another quarrel**

Akram collected a few groceries before closing his shop. It was early, but no new customers were on the street. The tiny bazaar here in Nawshera with only a few shops was really no place to run a business, but that was all he could afford for the time being.

As he walked home, he couldn't help noticing a group of teenagers engaged in a vicious football game. Even after twenty years, he still could not forget that game. He hurried his pace.

"You've come early again!" Fariba muttered quietly. "The food's not ready yet, so don't complain. You could have kept the shop open longer. We need the money. What's the problem?"

Akram grunted to himself. Fariba was nagging again! Better just to ignore her than to yell at her to be quiet. "What did women know about making money anyway," he thought. He playfully grabbed his younger son, Farid, by the arm and ruffled his hair. Both Farid and the older son, Kaihan, had started school with other Afghan refugees. They were learning to read and

write. His earnings were barely enough, but he wanted his boys in school rather than forcing them to earn a few coins banging on rusty old cars at the auto-body shop down the road. He hoped Farid and Kaihan's future would be better than his life had turned out—running a small corner shop where profits came in small coins – if any.

“I said you're home early!” Fariba raised her voice.

Akram acted as if he hadn't heard. He smiled at his daughter Manezha and gently stroked her hair. She would start school next year. “I'll get you a notebook tomorrow, okay? Kaihan can help you learn your letters.” Manezha giggled with delight.

“Akram!” Fariba continued, her voice trembling, “I am talking to you. Everyday I wash your clothes, cook your food, clean your house ... and all I see from you is nothing. Nothing! Don't you care about your wife and children? Are we nobodies?”

“*Zan* (woman), enough!” Akram snapped back. “What's the point of just sitting in the shop all night? No customers anyway! You know that! Now be patient, or I'll ...” he held his tongue. He didn't believe in raising his hands at his wife at a whim. He knew that was no way to treat her. On occasion, he and Fariba even enjoyed a few moments of friendship together. Yet she never seemed happy. She always wanted more clothes and better jewelry. But they just could not afford them. There never was enough money in that creaky drawer.

Akram's mind went to Baba Sharif. What would he say about their family? Fariba always complained, badgered, and nagged. He had to control her and make her respect him. If they were to have a healthy family, the arguing and yelling had to stop. But how was that possible?

The family gathered around the tablecloth. Akram was a bit subdued, irritated that Fariba had complained and nagged at him again. He reached for the *nan* (bread) and broke it, dipping it into the *korma* (stew). Under his breath, he was still fuming that he

had had to give away another kilo of flour—though he knew he could never talk to anybody about that.

“Oh, *zan*,” He suddenly raised his voice, “You’ve salted the *korma* too much again! Can’t you even cook a decent *korma*? My mother, when she ...”

“Your mother! You don’t know how to talk about anyone but your mother! You and your mother! If she’s so special, why did you let her go back to Kabul?” Fariba’s eyes flashed in anger as her jaw clenched. “You men, you think you are so grown-up, manly. You think you are the man of the house, but the first and only thing you can say is ‘mother, my mother did this, my mother did that.’ If you’re so attached to your mother ...”

They argued frequently these days. It was really nothing unusual, but Fariba’s sharp words were harsher than ever before. He lashed back at Fariba with stinging words. “How dare you insult my mother!” Akram was yelling now. His mother was the most honorable and precious person in his life. He respected and loved her deeply, and now Fariba was ridiculing it all.

“Listen, *zan*! Be quiet! Not another word, I won’t have it.”

Restrained, Fariba answered with exasperation, “I work like your slave every day, cook your food every day of the week.” Regaining courage, she raised her voice, “And then, if it’s not ready when you come, you yell at me. If you come late, it’s my fault the food is cold. Not enough salt, too much salt, what does it matter? You want me to be quiet, do you? And you can’t earn anything at the shop!” Fariba began to sob. Her voice trembled as she continued bitterly, “No one cares for me. I am just a slave and that’s all a woman is. Anything and everything I do is bad.”

Akram’s anger rose to a boil. He grabbed the bowl of *korma* and threw it across the floor. He looked at Farid and Kaihan, and then at Manezha. They were quietly huddling in a corner, fearing the worst. Not another yelling match.



Akram grabbed the bowl of *korma* and threw it across the floor.

Akram lowered his head. What if Baba Sharif would have heard it? At one point he had wanted to talk with him about his family and the frequent quarrels they had. He knew Baba Sharif would have listened, but how could he tell anyone about the constant wrangling in his home? A real man of the house had no problems at home, allowed no bickering. He controlled the house.

He clenched his teeth. Fariba had to respect him! She had to honor his mother! There was no other way about it. If the choice were between his mother and his wife, it would always be his mother. It had to be that way. But why did they always have to quarrel about things? Was this part of normal family life? He could hear the shrill voices from the houses next door. Women, always crying or nagging. This constant screaming in the neighborhood wearied him. It was everywhere—as common as the dust in the air. At the same time, Akram wondered to himself, why was his home not a happy home? For that matter, was any family happy anywhere? Maybe this was what family life was all about—two individuals coming together and then having to tolerate each other for the rest of their lives, their tolerance slowly turning to loathing and disgust. Why didn't people bother to think about these things? He remembered his teenage days, so carefree, until ...

Immediately he suppressed that painful barb.

Fariba broke the silence, “Why don't you answer me! I'm just your slave, that's all. That's all you expect from me. Stuck in this house the rest of my life! Is this a prison?” she mumbled.

The four walls around her yard were all she knew. When was the last time she had left her home? She couldn't even remember it. Day after day behind these walls, wondering why she had to be a woman. How often had she heard the saying “Woman was made from a rib, the left rib—that is why she is crooked.” That is why she is just the cook and keeper of the house. *A man can go*



*outside on his own but I cannot, she had thought so many times. He can yell at his wife but I cannot speak back. Is this supposed to be my lot in life?*

“Woman, house or grave!” Akram rarely quoted that terrible saying, but he had had enough. “One more word from you and I’m going to explode!”

He yelled at his boys, “Finish your homework! Now!” and stormed out of the room. Whenever he had an argument, which of late was all too often, he would leave the house, often to visit Baba Sharif. There, at least, he received the treatment he deserved as a man. This elderly man made up for Fariba’s constant nagging and screaming.

As he stepped out of the house, Faqir stood at the gate.

## **A carpet loom**

Faqir coughed and looked down sheepishly, “Akram, sorry to bother you, but I wanted to discuss something with you. Do you have a few minutes?” Faqir’s skeletal face and his much too lean, almost emaciated, body betrayed a sickly man. Even though not as tall as Faqir, Akram towered over Faqir with his broad, muscular shoulders, piercing eyes and a heavy jet-black mustache. Akram had the build of a young army general.

“Please come in! Why stand out here in the dark?”

To Fariba’s dismay, Akram appeared at the doorway again, this time with Faqir. Fariba disappeared into the kitchen as Faqir and Akram sat down on the floor around the *desterkhwan*.

“Please, don’t make any trouble, I’ve already eaten,” Faqir stuttered nervously.

Akram feigned a gentle smile, “Faqir *saheb*, I’m at your service. You know Faqir, you’re my neighbor. Whatever is in my hands, I’m at your service.” He stole a glance at the kitchen and saw Fariba quickly pull away. Akram continued his welcome,

hiding his annoyance. “Faqir sahib, this is your house, you know it.” Akram cursed quietly to himself for saying what he had just said. He knew he could not help Faqir, and even if he had extra funds, he would not have given them to Faqir. Faqir was badly in debt already; his charge account in the creaky drawer at the shop was far over his head. And why should Akram help this stranger anyway? Just because Baba Sharif would didn’t mean he had to.

Faqir coughed as he started again, “Akram, my life’s been nothing but a mess. I don’t even know where to start. You’ve been good to me. Your friend, Baba Sharif, is a noble man, for sure. You know I’m poor, Akram *sahib*. I’ve had nothing but misery and loss. I’ve lost everything. But it’s not my fault. Years ago, my brother was killed – back in Kabul. My other brother disappeared. I never saw him again. I was left all alone in the family. I spent everything trying to find those killers ...”

Without thinking, Akram blurted out, “Your brother? Who?” But in a flash he bit his tongue, cursing the killers.

Faqir continued, “I never found any trace of them. Then, with all the terrible fighting, bombing and rockets, everything got messed up. We lost our home. Finally, we had to come here. I’ve tried to find a job, but nothing has worked. My wife works hard, even late sometimes, you know, washing clothes and cleaning, but she earns so little. Akram, we can’t make it. I just can’t pay the rent. Today the landlord asked for next month’s rent and I just can’t pay it. What can I do? He’s threatening to kick us out of the room.”

Akram swallowed nervously. He thought to himself, “Why does Faqir come and dump his problems on me? No money for food, no money for rent, no money for the electric bills, no money.” His head hurt at this constant bellyaching.

“Akram, listen,” Faqir’s voice was desperate. “I know you’re a good man. I’ll do whatever you tell me to do. I can weave

carpets, I can tailor, fix bicycles, whatever. I need a job. You've got to help me, and I'll ..."

Akram thought of Baba Sharif, "Faqir, listen, I would love to help you, but I can't. My shop barely makes it. But I know somebody who maybe could do something for you. Come back in a few days and I'll see what he can do."

Faqir dismissed himself. Akram left the house without a word to Fariba, forgetting the harsh argument they had. He had no time or concern to help strangers, why should he? But he often wondered how he could make up for what had happened many years ago. No one else knew, but he did. Fariba had never suspected anything, nor had Baba Sharif. Here was a chance to build some credit against his old sin, credit with God, and maybe also with Baba Sharif.

Baba Sharif was reading quietly as Akram entered his room. They exchanged greetings and drank tea, discussing the events of the last few days. Finally, Akram broached the subject, telling Baba Sharif about Faqir's chronic poverty. "He's always asking for money, Baba Sharif. I don't know how to help him. Maybe here's a chance we can help someone, and isn't it good *sawab*?" He winced inwardly as he doubted it himself.

Baba Sharif smiled and stroked his long white beard, "Akram, you're always talking about *sawab*. Do you really think you can add it up? Well, *sawab* or not, it's true that Faqir is in need. You said he weaves carpets? Listen, what would you think if we set him up with a carpet loom? I know a place in Peshawar that makes solid steel looms. I'll advance the money for the loom as well as for the wool and necessary tools. When they've finished the first carpet, he can sell it on his own, start to pay back the debt, and buy some more materials. What do you think? Do you think Faqir could start a small business weaving carpets without the carpet monopolies, controlling and taking advantage of him?"

Perhaps he would get on his feet again. Akram, could you help me with this?"

During the next few days Akram was busier than ever between running his shop and setting up a carpet loom for Faqir. Akram felt good; maybe this could cover up his past. But Faqir's nervousness and stuttering put him on edge. He wondered if Faqir would make a success of weaving. As they worked late into the night setting up the carpet loom in the corner of Faqir's small room, Faqir's children huddled quietly without saying a word.

Akram gulped down a cup of tea and looked at Faqir, "The children's mother, not home yet?"

Faqir puffed on his cigarette, "I told you she often has to work very late. They make her wash and clean till late at night."

Akram kept quiet, but his heart went out to Faqir's children who had to go to bed without their mother. He wondered why their mother was out so much and so late. But just as quickly he pushed the disgusting thought out of his mind.

## Chapter Two

### Baba Sharif, a Wrestler?

#### The old wrestler

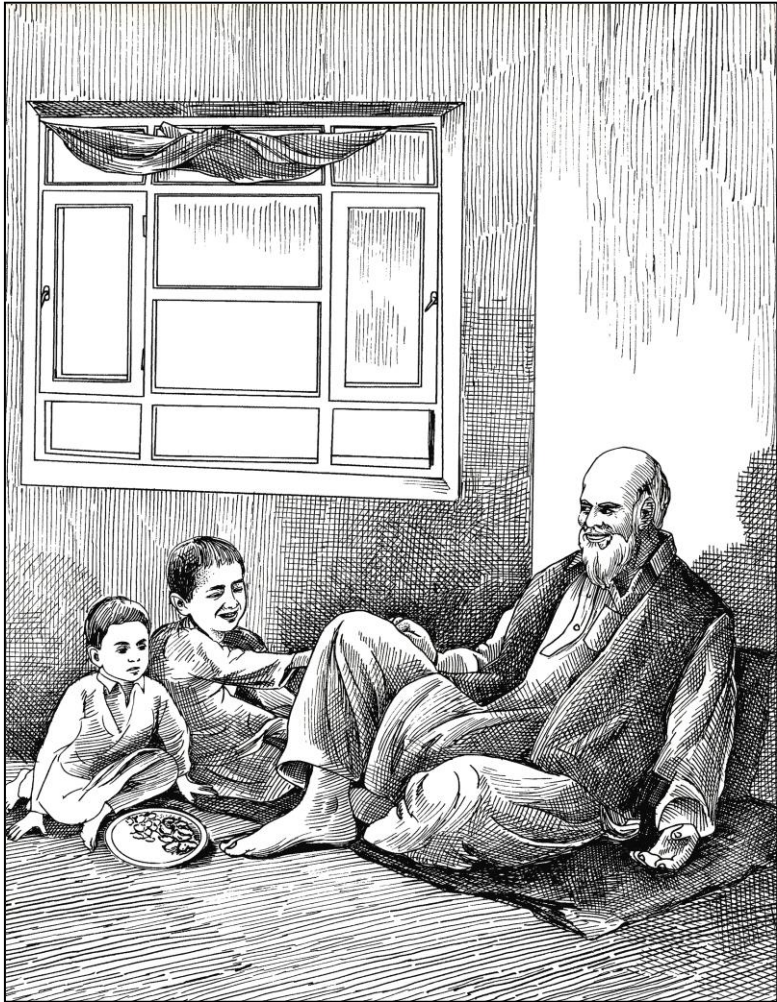
**A**kram's sons, Kaihan and Farid, loved Baba Sharif. The boys felt so special, sitting in Baba Sharif's pleasant *toshak* room, enjoying the elderly man's hospitality. When he laughed, his eyes twinkled with delight. His entire face lit up. His heavy white beard shook as if it were dancing on his face.

"Tell us a story, Baba Sharif, a story about wrestlers." Farid begged as he tugged on Baba Sharif's long tunic.

Baba Sharif chuckled quietly. He appeared slightly embarrassed. He had been showing the boys some of his old photographs—faded, black and white pictures from many, many years ago. One photo revealed a young, heavily built man, with bulging, muscular arms.

"Who's that wrestler?" Kaihan prodded.

"Oh, nobody, really," Baba Sharif responded quietly. Kaihan noticed Sharif's head fall. Kaihan thought to himself, "Is he hiding something?" He then blurted out again, "Come on, Baba Sharif, tell us who this is! What a *pahlawan* (champion,



The boys felt so special, sitting in Baba Sharif's pleasant *toshak* room, enjoying the elderly man's hospitality.

wrestler)! Look at his muscles! He couldn't have been just anybody! He's like Mr. Atlas! Like Arnold Schwarzenegger!"

Baba Sharif stroked his beard silently as Farid tugged at his tunic again and insisted, "Baba Sharif, you know who it is! You know!"

Suddenly Kaihan shrieked in delight, "Baba Sharif, it's you! It's you, isn't it? This is a picture from when you were young. You were a wrestler!"

Sharif tried to shake his head. If you could have seen the old man's face underneath his bushy beard, you would have seen him blush. But why would he blush at being a *pahlawan* in his day? Wasn't that the dream of every young boy?

Sharif cleared his throat. He laid his wrinkled, but strong hands on both boys. "Listen, sons, when I was young, like you, maybe a bit older, I wanted to be a champion wrestler. I wanted to be like the great *kakas* and *pahlawans* of Kabul, like Pahlawan Badrow."

"Who was he?" Kaihan asked.

"You've never heard of Pahlawan Badrow? I guess you're both too young. He was one of the greatest wrestlers of Kabul. His back never touched the ground. When he walked through the streets of the Old City, all the young boys ran after him. Every shopkeeper respected him and wished him well. They blessed him with their prayers. He looked like a towering mountain on the move. He wore those special wide-flowing trousers and heavy boots that *kakas* liked to wear. For me, Pahlawan Badrow was the greatest hero in the world. He had flattened his rivals, crushing them like wax in his hands. I dreamed that one day I would be like him, an undefeated champion of Kabul. Some day I'll have to tell you more about him."<sup>2</sup>

"You were strong like Pahlawan Badrow? Tell us about it, Baba Sharif," urged Farid.

Baba Sharif grinned shyly. He hesitated and then changed the subject. “Boys, how is your father’s shop these days?”

But Farid and Kaihan would not give in. “Baba Sharif, tell us, were you like Pahlawan Badrow? A wrestler that never lost?” They loved stories about champions and wrestlers, about heroes and warriors, and now they would not leave Baba Sharif alone.

Baba Sharif responded reluctantly, “Well, I wanted to be like him, boys. But let me start from the beginning. From the time I was a child, my only dream was to become a wrestler. So I wrestled other boys my age. I knocked heads with anyone weaker than I was. I thought I was actually getting tough. Then one day I lost a fight. A coppersmith boy threw me into the dirt so hard that I blacked out. Other boys laughed at me. I was so embarrassed. I cried and cried. I got up right away and ran to my mother, complaining about how the coppersmith boy had cheated me. I remember my dear mother telling me, ‘Don’t worry! You’ll be a hero someday. You will win, don’t worry. But you’re going to have to fall many times before that happens!’ I didn’t know what my mother was saying. But I knew she wanted to encourage me. She would often say, “A real man shows his colors in the arena.” When I was young, I had no idea what she really meant.”<sup>3</sup>

Farid was riveted to Baba Sharif’s story, “So when did you become a champion? A hero in a real wrestling pit!”

“Now boys, Kaihan and Farid, there is much to tell you about this. Eventually I entered a wrestling arena. But, Kaihan, Farid, I fell many times. I lost terribly.”

Kaihan looked disappointed. Why would Sharif fall? Baba Sharif was no coward, he knew that. A bit subdued, Kaihan queried, “What do you mean you lost terribly, Baba Sharif? How could anyone have beaten you? You couldn’t have fallen in a wrestling match!”

Sharif fell quiet. He knew the boys would not be able to understand everything he wanted to tell them. There was so much



to say. Every young boy dreamed of being a champion, of having bulging muscles, of hearing the crowds cheer him as their hero.

Kaihan continued, “Tell us, Baba Sharif. Tell us what happened! Did you really fall? I can’t believe it. Look at this picture, you were a champion. Look what it says under the picture,” Kaihan slowly stumbled through the words, “ ‘A champion whose back never hit the ground and whose knees never bent to the floor.’ ” He looked up at Baba Sharif. “You couldn’t have fallen, Baba Sharif! Tell us what you mean! You had to have been like that Pahlawan Badrow! I’m sure of it!”

Baba Sharif cleared his throat, shifted his legs slightly and reached for the *chai*-pot, “Boys, let’s drink some chai first. Here, Kaihan *Jan*, take a biscuit. Farid *Jan*, please, take one.”

The boys enjoyed this special attention. They felt very special as they sipped the tea and waited patiently.

## The raging bull

“Okay boys, I will tell you what happened. But it will take a long time,” Sharif finally said, in a rather reluctant and slightly embarrassed tone. “Today I’ll tell you about when I was a young guy, growing up.”

Farid and Kaihan nestled closer to Baba, whose age had hardly weakened or lessened the heavy, bulging arms and thighs, though Baba Sharif would be the first one to admit that his waistline was no longer like that of a young, well-built wrestler.

“I was in my teens, I can’t quite remember, maybe seventeen or eighteen years old. One day, a wild bull in Chahar Dehi where we lived broke loose from its chain. It was raging and crashing into one garden after another. The fiercest bull you ever saw. The boys threw rocks at the bull and teased it with sticks. That made the bull go even crazier. No one could stop it.”

Farid interrupted, “Why didn’t they just shoot it? Kill it!”

Baba Sharif smiled, “The bull belonged to a widow. She didn’t want to lose the bull. She wanted to sell it, so they had to catch it alive. There were two champion wrestlers in our area. They both tried to capture it. The bull gored the leg of one of the wrestlers so terribly that he limped for the rest of his life. The other *pahlawan* didn’t even try when he saw how the bull had smashed the first wrestler’s leg. So there was no one to take on the bull. It just kept on stampeding into one garden after another. It snorted at anyone who came close. Everybody was terrified.”

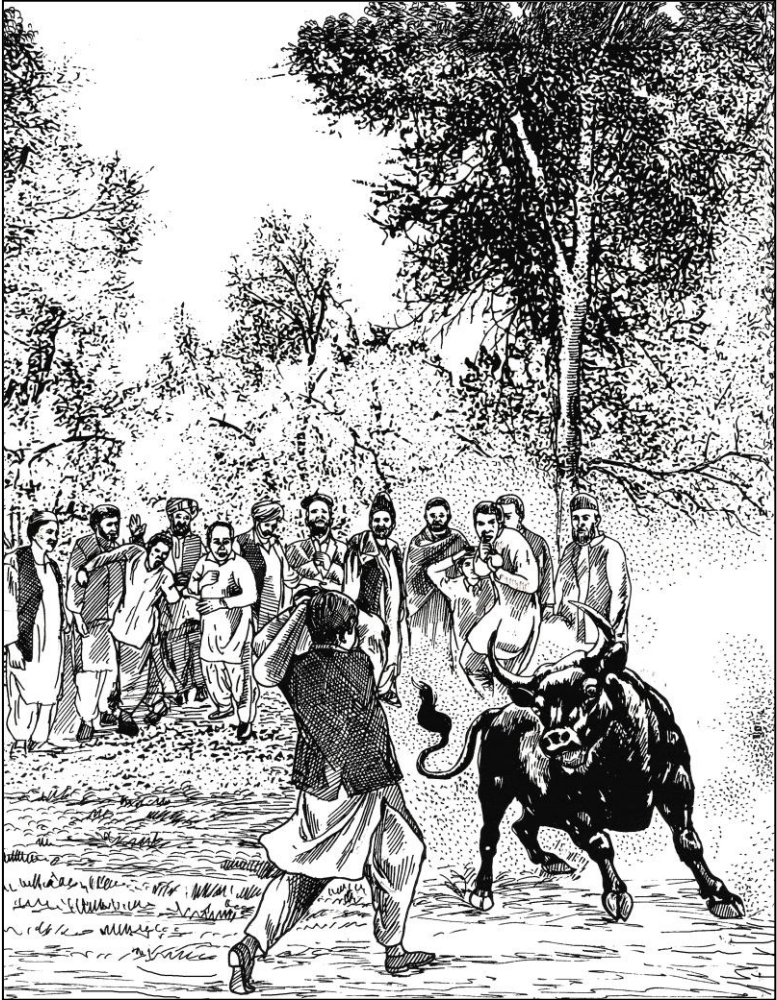
“So what did you do, Baba Sharif?” Kaihan asked inquisitively. His young eyes were bursting with excitement.

“Well, then the bull smashed into a garden that belonged to a very poor family in our neighborhood. It hurt me to see what the bull was doing, destroying their little garden. I saw that nobody was prepared to challenge it. So I slowly crept into the garden. Lots of neighbors came to watch. They yelled, ‘Sharif *Jan*, Sharif *Jan*, what are you doing?’ The bull was snorting and stomping up dust so high, at times you could hardly see him. It was a frightening sight. Suddenly it roared at the crowd. We all thought it was about to lunge towards somebody. Everybody screamed in panic. I had to stop the beast from hurting someone. I grabbed a club-like piece of wood and sneaked up close to the bull. With all my might, I smashed the club on the bull’s head. The club snapped in two, just stunning the bull a bit. Then it started coming at me!”

Farid and Kaihan’s eyes were glued to Baba Sharif. They held their breath

“Did it gore you?” Farid prodded impatiently.

“Just wait, Farid. Let me tell you. I could see the bull’s eyes—they were wild, red and bloodshot. The bull charged towards me. I quickly stepped aside and then, as fast as I could, I lunged at one of its back legs. My only chance was to throw the beast. I heaved and pulled at its leg as hard as I could. As it



With all my might, I smashed the club on the bull's head.

stumbled and turned its head to gore me, I jumped aside and then grabbed its horns. With all my strength, I twisted its head. Suddenly, there was a terrible thud as the bull hit the ground. It let out a horrible, ugly roar. I had never heard a bull roar like that. Some neighbors immediately ran to help me tie it up. We had caught the raging bull. All the people cheered and admired me. Again and again they said, ‘*Afarin* (well done)!’<sup>4</sup>

Farid and Kaihan both grinned from ear to ear. “Weren’t you afraid it could have gored you and even killed you? That’s when you became a real champion, right, Baba Sharif?” Kaihan asked, all the while admiring Baba Sharif.

“Well, Kaihan *Jan*, Farid *Jan*, I thought I was a champion then. The next day, and from then on, everyday, they called me *Pahlawan* Sharif. Other teenagers followed me. I often wrestled and people from other areas would come to Chahar Dehi to watch me. When I walked down the street in Shor Bazaar where we had our shop, many of the shopkeepers and customers would greet me. But I still had so much to learn. I hadn’t become a real champion yet.”

Kaihan’s face fell in disappointment. “Baba Sharif, I don’t understand. You threw that bull to the ground. All the boys in the neighborhood followed you. Everyone everywhere knew you were a hero. Of course you were a champion!” Kaihan insisted.

Baba Sharif was quiet for a moment, “It’s not the wrestling floor that matters. You think a person becomes a champion on the wrestling floor? Kaihan, Farid, you don’t prove who you really are just by beating others. If a person really wants to win in life, to become a champion, he will have to fall at some point. If you don’t fall, you can’t win.”

Kaihan was so curious he couldn’t hold himself back, “You mean you lost some matches? Your back touched the ground? Who threw you? I don’t believe it!”

Baba stretched out his hand to stroke Kaihan's hair. "Boys, I fell many times, many times. We don't like to fall. When we fall, it hurts, but we have to fall. That is the only way anyone can become a real champion."

Farid pulled on the elderly man's sleeve, "Baba Sharif, please, you have to tell us this story. How did you fall? Who was strong and tough enough to throw you? Please tell us."

Baba smiled to himself. He knew the boys did not understand what he meant. He chuckled and said, "Boys it's late, I'll tell you some other time. I have many stories, some about other wrestlers, some about myself. They're mostly wrestling stories. Have you heard of Purya Wali? What about the famous Mufrid? There's the story of Malani and the elephant from hundreds of years ago. Some are really strange, you've never heard of them before."

"Malani? Purya Wali? Who were they?" Farid asked, curious as ever. The names sounded strange to them.

"Listen," said Baba Sharif slowly, "I have an idea. Why don't you come over once or twice a week after you have finished your homework? Ask your father, I'm sure he'll let you. Maybe your sister can come as well. I'll tell you a different story each time. They're stories about winning and falling, about how to fall in order to win. Go home now. I'll see you next week."

The boys stood up, grinning at the prospect of hearing more of Baba Sharif's collection of fantastic wrestling stories.

"And make sure you do your homework first! Tell your sister to come, too." And with that the boys dashed home, excited to tell their father.

## **Training to be a champion**

"Please let us go to Baba Sharif's house tonight, please," Farid and Kaihan begged. They had waited a full week now to visit Baba Sharif again. Every night they faithfully finished their

homework as their father ordered them to. They knew if they did not do their schoolwork, their father would never let them visit again.

“I want to come too,” cried Manezha. “Father, please, just this once, can’t I come just this once?”

The boys looked at their sister disdainfully. “You have to help Mother clean up. Baba Sharif’s place is not for girls. You wouldn’t like his stories, anyway.”

Manezha’s eyes fell. She knew she had little chance to join her brothers.

Akram ignored Manezha’s pleas and looked at his sons. “Give Baba Sharif my *salams*, and tell him our neighbor Faqir is moving ahead with the carpet-weaving,” he said. Forgetting their sister, the two boys hardly heard their father’s words as they sped out the door and dashed down the street toward Baba Sharif’s house.

“Slowly now, boys, there’s no rush. Hurrying will always get you into trouble,” Baba Sharif spoke gently as he welcomed the young boys to sit down next to him. The boys bowed respectfully and kissed one of his large muscular hands as he placed his other hand over their heads.

“Your sister didn’t come?” asked Baba Sharif.

“She didn’t want to come,” lied Farid.

Baba Sharif pondered for a moment, then started, “Farid and Kaihan, listen! You think being a great wrestler means having huge muscles and being able to throw any rival to the ground? That’s easy. After I defeated that bull, everybody in the village looked up to me as a champion wrestler. It felt good. I could hear neighbors and kids in the street whispering about me. I would hear them say, ‘Well done.’ Oh, that felt good. So I decided I should become a serious wrestler. One day I bought a bag of *nukul* (almond sweets) and headed to a famous wrestling club where Ustad Ashraf was the master wrestler.”

“Why did you do that, Baba Sharif? Why did you bring those *nukul*?” interrupted Kaihan.

“You see, Kaihan, I wanted to show my respect to this master. I want to tell you one thing, boys. In wrestling, you have to learn respect, to really care for others and treat them well. In fact, that’s the first thing you learn.” He gave each of the boys a few *nukul* from the wooden bowl. “Take some, boys.”

He continued, “You should have seen some of those other wrestlers there. I had never seen such bodies in my life before! Sturdy but gentle, these men hovered around the wrestling pit with chests tough like shields, stomachs hard as rocks, muscles bulging everywhere. They were real athletes. I was so thrilled at the sight. That is what I wanted to become!”<sup>5</sup>

“But weren’t you strong like those wrestlers already?” asked Farid.

Baba Sharif looked quietly at Farid and said, “I had muscles, you’re right. But I had no idea about wrestling tricks. I had to learn them. Remember how I got beaten so badly as a child? That was because I didn’t know any techniques. So I trained with Ustad Ashraf. I trained and worked hard, very hard. I wanted nothing more than to be a champion. I think Ustad Ashraf noticed this because he paid close attention to me, taking special care to make sure I made progress. I practiced lifting heavy weights. I had to throw huge bags of wet sand that weighed up to a hundred pounds. Sometimes Ustad would hoist up a few heavy bags of sand, hang them from a window and then let them fall, and I would have to catch them.”<sup>6</sup>

“You would catch those bags of sand? Weren’t they too heavy?” Kaihan wondered.

“At first, they felt so heavy that I’d fall down trying to catch them. But I wouldn’t give up. I wanted to become the best. Learning to catch those bags forced me to move fast, be quick. I watched my biceps and chest swell and grow tough as steel.



Sometimes Ustad would hoist up a few heavy bags of sand, hang them from a window and then let them fall, and I would have to catch them



After about a year of training, when we wrestlers tussled with each other in warm-ups, I'm telling you, no one could bring my shoulders to the ground except the coach, Ashraf, and even he had to use all kinds of techniques and tricks to do so. I became a great *pahlawan*."

"You must have become famous in the wrestling arenas!" Farid said. The boys looked at each other and then back at Baba Sharif's muscles that stilled bulged even though he did not care to show them off anymore.

"I never lost in those days, boys. Every time I entered the wrestling pit, I bowed down low and kissed the dirt floor. I was ready to challenge any rival. And it's true, my back never touched the floor. But, there was still something missing. I still needed to fall. I had totally forgotten what my mother had told me."

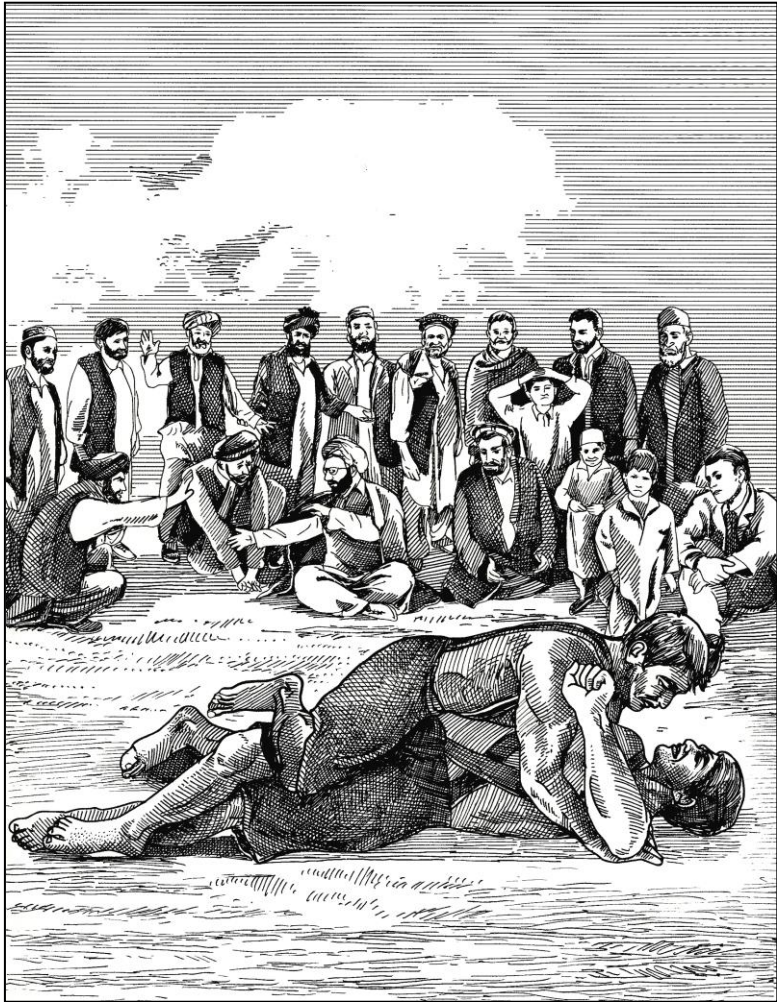
Both Kaihan and Farid looked at each other inquisitively. Why would a champion need to fall, to lose?

Baba Sharif continued, "I thought I had learned all the techniques from my master. One day I wanted to challenge him, so I dared him to a serious match. I was heavier and bigger than my master but it was still a foolish thing to do. My master told me later that it was not proper what I did. I was getting too proud." Baba Sharif stopped momentarily, his head hung low.

"So you challenged your master?"

Baba Sharif shook his head. "The *wakil* (area chief, head) in Chahar Dehi didn't like what I had done, but he arranged for the match. My master had told him, 'Go ahead, set it up.' Lots of wrestlers and trainees came for the match and even masters from other areas. In those days, wrestling was more popular than now. It was our national sport, you could say."

"Go on, Baba Sharif, what happened? Did you throw your master?"



My master threw me really hard, right there in front of all of the special guests.

“It was one of the shortest wrestling matches I’ve ever had. In a few seconds, my master threw me really hard, right there in front of all of the special guests. My head slammed to the ground so hard, I saw stars. I could not admit I had lost. I’m telling you, boys, I hated to lose. I made up an excuse about my master keeping one last point of wrestling from me which he then used to defeat me.”<sup>7</sup>

“Did he really?” asked Farid.

“I don’t know,” admitted Baba Sharif, “I think he probably did, because he wanted to stay on top. I had to say something. I didn’t want anyone to think he was actually stronger. I had to give a reason for losing. I wasn’t weaker than the master. I knew I wasn’t. I had thrown that bull and I knew that no one else could do that. No, I had not lost. At least that is what I thought to myself.”

Sharif gulped some tea and gave each of the boys a few *nukul* as he continued. “Boys, I was becoming a champion. But like everyone else, I thought I was the best. I became prouder and prouder. I would never lose. But when I lost this match with Ustad Ashraf, I made an excuse. It didn’t matter if it was true or not. When I lost I had to cover it up somehow.”

“But that doesn’t matter, Baba Sharif. You really were a champion,” Kaihan tried to console him.

“Kaihan,” Baba Sharif answered sharply. “It does matter. It matters terribly. Remember what my mother told me? I needed to fall over and over again if I wanted to win. But I still didn’t really know how to fall. When I lost, I covered it up.”

“So what happened then?” asked Farid. “What do you mean learning how to fall? Tell us!”

“Some other time, Farid *Jan*. Come back next week and I’ll tell you another story,” Baba Sharif spoke quietly.

## *Chapter Three*

### **Marriage-a Death?**

**Get the money!!!**

**F**aqir's eyes were bloodshot, his throat and lips dry. His hands shook as he nervously groped in his pockets, but the cigarettes were gone.

“Basir, I told you to get cigarettes. You know where to get them. From Akram's shop. Now go!”

Basir had no choice. He jumped up and was about to run out the door when he turned back and stuttered, “But I have no money.”

“What!” Faqir yelled. “Didn't I give you money yesterday?” Faqir cursed under his breath. He lifted his hand to slap Basir, but the boy cowered in the doorway, refusing to come closer.

“I ... I had to buy milk and bread. And Kaka Akram said he couldn't write it in the book anymore. I had to pay him.” Basir stammered pleadingly.

“Well, I need the cigarettes. Go, right now!” Faqir began to shake with fury. He turned to Nahid, his wife, who was huddled in the corner. Her black, gentle eyes and narrow eyebrows betrayed a long-lost beauty. Her soft cheekbones and long,

flowing braid down to her petite waist spoke of a once-sparkling youth. But now her eyes were sunken and her face had grown pale. Already a wrinkle or two were sneaking up just above her eyebrows.

“You, Nahid!” He shouted, “Where’s your money? I need it. You were working all day today. You have money, I know you do. Give it now!” His lips trembled with rage as he glared at her, coming closer and closer.

“Faqir *Jan*, Faqir *Jan*, don’t. Don’t! You know I had to spend the money for our baby today. You know she is sick. I took her to the doctor. You know that. I spent the money. It is gone, I don’t have any more. I would give it, all of it, but I don’t have any,” Nahid whimpered. She crept further back into the corner. Faqir, desperate for his cigarettes, grabbed the empty rice pot on the floor. Without thinking, he heaved it at Nahid. She expected it and dodged. The pot slammed into the wall and almost fell on the baby, but Basir, quick to the rescue, caught the pot just in time. Faqir cornered Nahid. With shaking hands, he clenched them around her throat and squeezed hard. Nahid hated this, but there was nothing she could do. She would have to face another beating, but why in front of the children? All so degrading.

Faqir pushed her to the floor.

The children, huddled in the far corner, were crying. They had seen this before, but they never got used to it. Homa, their beautiful fifteen-year-old, was responsible for the carpet-weaving project and had grown to be quite an expert at it. Sheila, only a year younger, was just as beautiful and nimble-footed. She was the little mother of the house, cleaning, cooking and serving tea so that Homa, the younger sister, Shirin, and their brother, Basir, could remain busy at the loom. All four knew what was about to happen. It was horrible. They cowered in shame.

“Jackass!” yelled Faqir. He pummeled her body with fists, flailing at her blindly. She was used to that. Faqir smacked her



Faqir grabbed the empty rice pot on the floor and heaved it at Nahid.

across the face, and then hit her viciously on the cheek. He had always been careful not to draw blood or make any visible wounds on her face. But not tonight. Tonight he was beside himself. He sent a horrible streak of curses her way and then, gnashing his teeth, yelled, “*Zan*, you’re hiding the money. Find it or ...” The children shuddered as he pelted her face again.

Nahid screamed. Her nose flushed with blood. She had long gotten used to his fists, but this time it seemed more vile and vicious than ever before. One blow after another landed on her forehead, her nose, cheeks, anywhere. Pain shot up through her head. He began to kick her. She buckled as a vicious kick hit her kidney. Her body throbbed in pain. Beside himself, blind with fury, he hit and cursed and hit again. Would it never end? Would he beat her till she fell unconscious?

The kids screamed in fear, “Stop! Father! Stop! Don’t!”

Homa couldn’t endure it anymore. She threw herself over her mother’s body, hoping to deflect her father’s terrible blows.

Faqir’s eyes were glazed with a poisonous and killing fury. He lowered his voice slightly, “*Zan*, if you don’t get me the money, I’ll ...” He grabbed the rice pot from Basir. Basir wouldn’t let go. He held on with all his might. He was no match for his father, but he didn’t care. His mother had suffered enough, and now his sister. He would not let go. Faqir kicked Basir furiously in the shins, “Give it here!” And then he struck him in the face. Basir yanked, jerking the pot out of his father’s hands. He dashed to the door and threw the pot as far as possible.

Faqir cursed at Basir, “I’ll get you for this, you ...!”

Faqir turned to Homa. Nahid screamed in horror. Still lying on the ground, she looked at Homa and almost fainted. She spat in hate as she glared at Faqir. *An animal! He was no father! He was vile and repulsive.* With utter hatred in her heart she spat at his face. *He was no man, no husband, not even worthy to be called a human—worse than an animal.* Come what may, she

would not let him touch her girls. He could treat her as he wished, but Homa and Shirin were her precious ones. The only sparks of joy in her home.

Everything went quiet.

Faqir finally drew a deep breath and pulled himself away. He sat up nervously and cursed the children, “Get to bed, you cry babies! Shame on you. Stop it now, all this crying, or I’ll make you cry even more.”

As the children hurried to get ready for bed, they suddenly heard a knock at the door. Nahid quickly pulled a blanket over herself and feigned sleeping.

Akram and his two sons, Farid and Kaihan, were at the door.

“Come in!” Faqir smiled as he welcomed them in.

“Sorry to come so late,” Akram apologized. “We just came to see how you’re doing. Baba Sharif is interested to know about the progress on the carpet.”

Faqir proudly showed them the carpet, “The children are working hard. Look, we’re about a quarter done now. It’s going to be a full six-meter carpet. Their mother tries to help when she can, but they make her work so hard where she works. They often have dinner guests, so she has to work until late at night, so much cleaning and washing. She’s just come back and is completely exhausted.” He lied.

### **You have to leave!**

“Make sure you bring home some rupees tonight,” shouted Fariba. “Manezha needs new shoes and ...”

Akram didn’t even listen. His head was bowed low as he slowly made his way back to the shop from the noon meal. Dark clouds hung low in the sky and the wind threw dust in the air. He was glad to get out of the house. Under his breath he cursed Fariba. “Will her nagging ever stop? And still no respect.”



As he opened the shop door and cleared the counter, he noticed a letter thrown on the floor. *How did this get here?* It was addressed to Faqir and came from Kabul. He remembered that Faqir had asked him if he could use the shop as a mailing address.

“Farid *Jan*,” he called his son loudly. “Quick, deliver this letter to the Faqir family, okay? It’s a letter for Uncle Faqir. It must be from his family in Kabul.”

Farid grabbed the letter and ran off. In a few minutes he was back. “Only Kaka Faqir and the children were home,” Farid said breathlessly.

“*Khanum* (woman) *sahib* is working again, isn’t she?” Akram mused to himself. “The mother is never home when I visit them. Always working and often late at night, but what about Faqir? Why doesn’t he work?” Akram wondered about the Faqir family, but then pushed it out of his mind. He really didn’t care to get more involved.

His thoughts quickly turned to his own family, Fariba and their three children, to the *desterkhwan* in his house and another argument they had just had. *That was not how it was supposed to be, was it?* Akram remembered Fariba ... twelve years ago ... back in Kabul.



*He looked at her. She was approaching the wedding couch in a perfect white wedding dress. He held his breath as she sat beside him. Everybody always said that here on the wedding couch a person was saved from loneliness. He smiled at her, their eyes met in the mirror – for the first time, at least that was always the official version. His heart pounded with excitement as she blushed. Her lips broke into a slight smile.*



Their eyes met in the mirror – for the first time, at least that was always the official version.

*She wasn't supposed to have smiled, but she had. He noticed her radiant teeth, whiter than pearls, whiter than the snow on the mountain peaks. His heart melted. What a wonderful day! He stared at her eyes with joy. He could hear the music in the background, the laughing and dancing, the partying, the musician continuing to sing one line after another: "Oh my sweet little love, your body glows like a flower." His own body throbbed excitedly. He had reached his heart's desire.*<sup>8</sup>

But there was no excitement here at his decrepit shop in the heart of Nawshera. Why, he thought, why did he feel so empty now? What would Baba Sharif say about this? At a wedding feast everyone always smiled and laughed. After each dance there was always vibrant applause. Lots of gaiety, but were they really happy? Just a few years later, even less than that, and the thrill was gone. Here behind the walls there were no smiles, only frowns and growls. Yes, out in public, or when guests came, they were all smiles. No one knew what was happening inside the home. But, really, everybody knew. Why didn't he and Fariba smile at each other anymore? Instead, they shouted and argued. Was marriage really such a miserable experience – both for men and women? Well, this was his private matter – something he could never share with anyone. He thought to himself, what would Baba Sharif say about marriage, about family, about husbands and wives arguing and yelling at each other? Somehow he couldn't imagine Baba Sharif's ways being the same as everyone else's ways.

He started rearranging the dusty cartons of cream to make room for fresh yoghurt. Just then Manezha and her mother, Fariba appeared at the shop, "What are you doing here?"

Fariba spoke quickly, "We need some more flour and sugar. I'm going to make some sweets."

“What for?” Akram shouted back, loud enough for anyone in the street to hear. “Who says you can go out? What about the kids? You ...”

Fariba retorted, “I always go on Wednesdays. You know that. With the neighbor lady. Manezha’s coming with me.”

Without saying another word, he dumped some flour and sugar into the small plastic bags and thrust it at her. “Get back soon, you!” Akram did not hold back his anger. “Lazy woman!”

Fariba hesitated, “And I need some money for the taxi fare.”

Akram bit his teeth in frustration, “There’s no money. You can’t go!”

“So you want us to walk?”

Akram threw a 50 rupee note at her, as he shouted, “That’s all I have; all you do is spend money, money and more money. Now go!”

He added a few curses and was about to sit down on his creaky stool, when he suddenly heard his name, “Akram Agha, *salam!* You look upset.”

“Baba Sharif, I’m glad to see you. I guess my heart has a way to yours. I was just thinking.”

“Everything’s all right, I hope?”

“From where did the sun come up that brings you here?” Akram’s face lit up in a smile, “Thank God, everything’s wonderful.”

Sharif nodded quietly. Immediately Akram realized that Baba Sharif had heard their short but angry argument. He lived down the other side of the street. Akram hadn’t noticed him coming.

During the past months, Akram had spent many hours with the elderly man. He trusted this dear old man; his words rang true. Nothing pretentious about Baba Sharif. Akram knew that most people who greeted him did so with an agenda or plan up their sleeve, but this aged man was different. He walked a different path. The more Akram talked with him, the more he

longed for his ways. But he had never talked to him about his family.

“Nothing new, Baba Sharif, just health problems again.” he hesitated. “The little money we have goes just for more medicine. She’s always sick.”

Baba Sharif listened, knowing it wasn’t his place to ask questions.

Akram felt restless with Baba Sharif, but if he ever dared to bare his soul, with whom else could he do it? No one cared for the welfare of others like this man. Everyone he knew just cared for themselves.

Baba Shari spoke quietly, “Yes, people have so many pressures, their minds, bodies, spirit ... they all relate together.”

“And will another prescription fix it? Of course not!” Akram chuckled bitterly.

Baba Sharif added, “Yes, our sickness is deeper. We need another medicine, but the problem is, if a person doesn’t understand his real pain, what can a doctor do? Hafiz Shirazi says, ‘Jesus’ breath is the doctor of love and grace, but if he sees no pain in you, who can he heal?’”<sup>1</sup>

Akram asked in a subdued voice, “What do you think is the real pain, Baba Sharif?”

Baba Sharif slowly stroke his white beard, “Akram, I think one of the real pains is the *desterkhwan* at home. The *desterkhwan* is more than food. It should be like ointment, a place of *peace*, but it becomes the opposite, a place of bitterness. It’s like we feed poison to our souls.

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<sup>1</sup> Dewan of Hafiz,

طبيب عشق مسیحادم است و مشفق لیک چون درد در تو نبیند کرا دوا بکند

Akram knew Baba Sharif was alluding to his family, to the argument they just had. Now was the time to open up if there ever was a chance. No customer was around, so Akram poured two cups of tea before he poured out his story, “Why does she always argue? I know it’s nothing unusual. What couple doesn’t argue? But she’s nagging more than ever. Is that what marriage is? Two people are supposed to live together, whether or not they actually like each other? Everybody begins their marriage with an expensive, colorful celebration.”

Baba Sharif chuckled, “Yes, we show off how much money we can spend—the more food, the louder the music, the better the dancing, the more the better. The rich throw money at the dancers and everyone talks about it for a long time.”

Akram grinned sarcastically, “And what’s it for? Just an expensive ceremony that allows us to have children? Because afterward we start to fight. That’s all it is, it’s like we’ve entered a battlefield, a secret one, behind walls. No one sees it, but everybody knows it. Do we really have to despise each other so much?” Akram asked. Seldom did he open up like this, but he knew Baba Sharif would take him seriously. He would not spread this to anyone.

Akram poured another cup of tea from his thermos. Baba Sharif quietly sipped the tea, careful not to rush in with simple answers.

He finally broke the silence, “Akram, I think you’ve answered your own question.”

“What do you mean?”

“Akram, you don’t care about your *desterkhwan*. You haven’t actually entered the *maidan* (arena, field, place of battle). Simple as that,” Baba said very bluntly.

“What do you mean?”

“Akram, you’re married, you say?”

Akram stiffened, “What are you saying? Of course I’m married. I have a wife and three kids.”

“Akram, don’t be angry. You say marriage is like a battlefield, a *maidan* where you fight. Can you be in two *maidans* at the same time? Can you sit at two tables at one time?”

“I’m not following what you’re trying to say.”

“Well, Akram, no wrestler can have one foot in one *maidan* and one foot in the other. When you get married, you start a new *maidan*. Before, you were with your family, your father and mother. That was your former world. It was wonderful, but which one is more important? The former one or the new one?”

“I don’t know, maybe both. My parents are the most important ... ”

“Listen, Akram. You told me what’s happening in your home. Fariba argues with you worse than ever. And you yell at her and even curse her. Then you go and talk about how wonderful your mother is. Look, two women—one you curse, the other you bless.”

“God keep my mother. Heaven is built under the feet of mothers.”

Baba Sharif smiled, “Mothers, you say? Which ones? Your mother, or the mother of your children? They’re both mothers. They’re both wonderful. You respect and honor your mother, of course, but what about your children’s mother?”

“No one can take the place of one’s mother, Baba Sharif. You know that. I’m from her blood.”

Baba Sharif nodded and then added, “But what about your children’s mother? They share her blood. Listen Akram, I remember when I first married. I thought the same. But one day my mother told me something I will never forget. She was an angel from God. Most mothers abuse their sons’ wives, but you know what my mother told me? She looked at my wife and our young son, her grandson. I can still see the sweet smile on my

mother's face as she said, 'Look how she loves your baby son!' And from then on my mother didn't interfere with our small family.

He sighed deeply, "How I wish my mother were still alive today! But that day was a new day for me. It dawned on me like it never had before. The three of us were a family! My wife, our son and I, we were together, separate from everyone else. We belonged to each other in a special way. We were our own new unit. Akram *Jan*, a new *maidan*, a new world. I promised myself that I would make my new world, a healthy and happy one. More than anything else, I would pay attention to this arena. I saw that I couldn't live in two worlds at once, in both my parents' *maidan* and that of my own family." Baba Sharif explained.

Akram looked shocked. Baba Sharif rarely spoke so sharply and directly. Akram retorted angrily, "What do you mean? My mother raised me, she carried me into the world. It's the most sacred duty in the world – to care for my mother. And now, what do you want me to do – not to live in my parent's world?" Akram was noticeably upset. He respected Baba Sharif, but this was too much.

"Akram, you asked, let me finish. We all love our families, our parents, mother and father, of course. They gave us life and supported us while we were young. And when we grow up, we have to support them. That is our duty, a great honor. We should never forget that. But, Akram, when you get married, you start another family—you, your wife and your children. It's an arena, just like you said. Before, you belonged to your father and mother's arena, but now you have started your own. Which one is more important?"

Akram was silent momentarily and fidgeted nervously.

Baba Sharif continued, "Look at these streets around us. There are hundreds of homes here in all of these buildings. You know many of them. Each home has its own *maidan*, its own



family unit. Sure, there are grandfathers and grandmothers, uncles, aunts, cousins and all those extended relatives. They may even live in the same place. But every person belongs to a simple *maidan* —father, mother and children. This street here is made up of hundreds of *maidan*. Some are happy, others are not.”

“What makes them happy?” Akram sighed quietly. He knew that his *maidan* was not a happy one, but he desperately wanted it to be happy.

Baba Sharif did not hesitate. “There is one thing that can make a *maidan* like paradise. It is simple. If the knot between a husband and wife is tied well and is strong and healthy, then the whole *maidan* will be strong and healthy. But that knot has to be a knot of real care. If you love someone, you will care for that person. Akram, I have never asked you this question before. You don’t even have to answer me, but think about it: If you care for your children, wouldn’t you also care for their mother? Do you ever think how you can make her happy? Listen to her? Do you let her talk to you without always answering back?”

“Well, she always yells at me, nags me.”

“Okay, but before she does that, do you ever ask her how her day has been?”

Akram was quiet.

Baba Sharif continued, “As I said, you’ve started a new *maidan*. You must cling to it. It’s a new unit, one man and one woman coming together. They become one—in body and in spirit’. Akram *Jan*, that is the only way your family can be happy. That goes for everyone else out here on these streets as well. If you don’t care for the mother of your children, you will never have a happy *maidan*.”

Akram was glad a customer had arrived so he could avoid responding to Baba Sharif. His words seemed too strange to really work.

## Why a coffin?

The next evening, Fariba was busy preparing another meal, hoping that this time Akram would not yell at her for having too much salt, or too little salt, or having burned the rice or having made it too soft. Oh God, why was marriage so hard? It seemed so long ago that she had entered into her new life with Akram. She had been so young, only fifteen years old. Her mind drifted away to those innocent Kabul days, years ago.



*She heard the knock on the door and peaked out from behind the curtains. It was that old lady again. She tried to hear her parents' hushed voices. Why didn't they ask her? They didn't even bother to think of how she might feel. She knew what the old lady wanted, her words were sweet and courteous: 'Please accept our son as a humble servant for your daughter.' (English meaning: Please give your daughter to my son.) Her heart skipped a beat as her mother had glanced towards the curtains behind where she was hiding. What could she say? She had never met this man before. She didn't know who he was. But, of course, as the old lady said, he would be a humble servant. It would be folly to refuse. She kept quiet. Silence. That was her yes. Her father nodded in agreement. She was going to be married.*

*She started getting excited about the wedding. She enjoyed having her hands beautifully decorated with henna. She had never felt so royal before! She trembled as her sisters helped her with the new, dazzling wedding dress. Everyone clapped and cheered when she slowly walked to the fancy wedding couch and the musician's voice rose liltingly above the sound of the harmonium:*

*Oh my sweet little love, your body glows like a flower.*

*Walk slowly, my lovely one, walk slowly.  
As life reaches its end, whether sweet, whether bitter  
Walk slowly, my lovely one, walk slowly  
If the cup is full, whether in Baghdad, whether in Balkh  
Walk slowly my beloved one, walk slowly  
Remember me, oh my brothers and sisters.  
Make my coffin from laurel wood.  
Slowly, slowly carry my coffin,  
Place it in the black earth and cry.  
Oh my sweet little love, your body glows like a flower.  
Walk slowly, my lovely one, walk slowly.<sup>9</sup>*

آهسته برو سرو روان آهسته برو  
آهسته برو ماه تابان آهسته برو  
چون عمر بسر رسد چی شیرین و چی تلخ  
آهسته برو ماه من آهسته برو  
پیمانہ چو پُر شود چی بغداد و چی بلخ  
آهسته برو ماه من آهسته برو  
خواهران و برادران مرا یاد کنین  
تابوت مرا ز چوب شمشاد کنین  
تابوت مرا قدم قدم ور دارین  
برخاک سپاہ بانین و فریاد کنین!  
آهسته برو سرو روان آهسته برو  
آهسته برو ماه تابان آهسته برو

Fariba suddenly froze in her thoughts. What had they been singing at her wedding? About a coffin? She had never thought about that before. What did a coffin have to do with a wedding? Was one's wedding the beginning of one's death? She drifted back into her dream.



*Everyone in the family got ready for the wedding procession. The trumpets and the clash of cymbals echoed in*

*her ears. It was all so new! The musicians led the groom's family and his new bride through the city. How royal she felt, the center of attention. A large crowd escorted her to her new home, the home of her dreams. They all waited at the doorstep. Someone from Akram's family had killed a chicken and sprinkled some blood on the doorstep. Why did they do this? What did it mean? As she stepped over the blood, she stepped across the doorway into Akram's house for the first time. She was afraid and trembled. Slowly he led her through the hallway. Then they entered the enclosed wedding chamber. Such colorful silky covers on the bed! Her dreams had come true. She had reached her house of fortune.<sup>10</sup>*

Fariba wiped a tear with the tip of her shawl. A house of fortune? What fortune? Here in the stifling heat of Nawshera. She smiled bitterly at herself. Nothing but a prison of walls! A life behind walls and windows barred shut, whether Kabul, Peshawar or Nawshera. Marriage, the beginning of sorrow! She spoke quietly to herself, "What a strange world! That's our lot. 'Fate has covered us in black, destined for misfortune.' Why do marriages have such happy beginnings, only to be filled with sorrow so soon?"<sup>11</sup>

Just then she heard a knock at the door. She lost her train of thought. Quickly she wiped her face and opened the door. *It was Nahid, that poor man's wife! What did she want?*

"Excuse me, *Khanum* Fariba, for bothering you at this time of day. You are busy preparing a meal," Nahid stuttered nervously.

Fariba groaned to herself. If she came inside, the meal would be late, and Akram would curse and yell at her again. But she had no choice. "Come in, please do," she said, trying to put on a cheerful face.

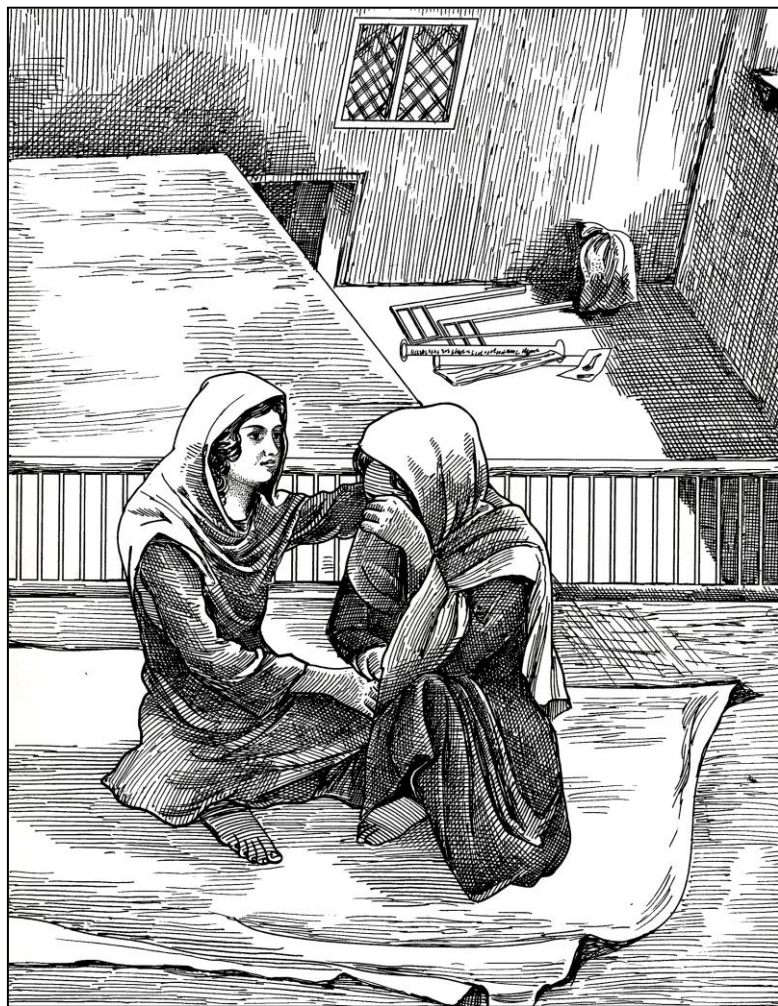
Fariba noticed how disheveled Nahid looked, her hair unkempt, her clothes dirty and torn.

“*Khanum* Fariba, I have to talk with someone. I have to. I have no one here from my family. I don’t know what to do. My life is finished. I have nothing but trouble and misery. God has cursed me—I know God hates me. My life is hell, one dark hell.” She began to sob uncontrollably.

Fariba managed to control herself in spite of her rising panic. Somehow she had to help this lady, whatever her problem was. “It’s going to be all right. Relax, be calm. God is kind.” Fariba cringed at these words, but what else could she say?

Nahid bitterly spat out the words. “Kindness? What kindness? There’s no kindness anywhere! It never will be all right. It is over, finished. You don’t know how hellish my life is. God has forgotten me. I am all alone, all alone ...”

She could hardly keep from sobbing as she continued. “*Khanum* Fariba, I know this Baba Sharif and your husband have been very kind to us. The carpet loom, the loans at the shop, we can never repay you. But you don’t know about my life, Fariba. It’s dark, darker than hell. Do you know why I work so hard? Do you know why I don’t come home until late every night? Fariba, I hate it, but what can I do? That spineless coward forces me to do this because he has to have money for his heroin. He never works himself. He says he’s too sick to work. He says his nerves are all messed up. The other day I spent some money for medicine. He constantly beats me, but this time he beat me so hard, I thought I was going to die. Then he threatened to hurt Homa. I hate it, *Khanum* Fariba, I can’t stand it. He has no shame. I will never let him touch our girls! Never! For the sake of my children, to protect them, God forgive me for what I’ve decided to do. I sent him to Kabul. I wrote a letter saying his mother was sick. He left this afternoon. He might be gone for a week. And I am leaving the house, Fariba, and taking my children. I cannot stay with him anymore. One day he will hurt one of the girls and that will kill me.”



Nahid began to sob uncontrollably.

Fariba held her breath momentarily. Then, without a thought she said, “No, God forbid!” There was not much more she could say. She had heard of this kind of life, but never had she seen it so close. Helplessly she asked, “So what will you do?”

“I don’t know. We will find a place somewhere and stay by ourselves. God will provide. We’ve packed up the carpet loom. Basir and the girls are bringing it over for Akram. Tell him thanks for all his help, but we can’t stay here anymore. When that coward comes back, don’t tell him anything, please. I ...” Unable to speak any further, Nahid left the house.

Fariba turned to the kitchen and sighed deeply. She thought to herself, “Thank God for Akram. Thank God our marriage is not ghastly like that poor woman’s!”

## **Help them?**

Akram cleared his throat and yelled with irritation, “What is this doing here!” He had just come home from another fruitless evening at his shop. Only a few customers had patronized the shop all evening, mostly to buy some candy or cigarettes. At times he wondered if it really was worth it, standing in that tiny, makeshift corner-store, hoping to earn enough so that his children would have enough to eat.

He had just opened the large gate. As he stepped inside, he noticed Faqir’s carpet loom and the unfinished carpet rolled up hurriedly and tossed into the corner. Rather agitated, he raised his voice, “Hey, woman!”

Fariba heard the sharp yell. She trembled nervously. Would there be an argument again? And before Akram had even come inside? She threw on her shawl and dashed outside. Breathlessly, she told Akram about Nahid’s visit. Akram sighed in disgust and blurted out, “What a gutless, shameless man! I knew something was wrong. I knew it! But this? What are we going to do with

this? I can't believe you let them leave this carpet loom here! Whatever for?"

Akram was livid. Tears welled up in Fariba's eyes as she asked, "What would you expect me to do?"

Akram was in no mood to comfort anyone, especially his wife. He glanced at the carpet loom in disgust. Was this the reward for trying to help a poor, helpless family? He retorted, "What do you expect me to do? When Faqir comes back from Kabul—and you know he will come back—he will go to his house and find no one there. Then he will come here and see this carpet loom. And then what do you think he will do?" Akram sneered. "You think he will just come here with a friendly smile to enjoy a cup of tea together? And talk about the weather, or ask for another loan? No! He won't do that! He will hold me responsible for this. Look at the mess you've created. Listen, *zan*, can't you see? We have nothing to do with that family's problems." He spat on the ground.

Fariba argued, "So, we'll just let that woman get used and beaten up till she's dead, and then her daughters? Is that what you would do, Akram *Agha* ...?" Fariba held her tongue. She dared not speak more.

Akram's eyes blazed in fury as he stood motionless by the gate. But deep in his heart he knew Fariba was right. He despised Faqir and kicked a loose stone at the gate. He was disgusted with himself to have gotten involved with that family.

Akram stormed out of the gate, forgetting about the meal at home. In a few minutes he was at Baba Sharif's house. Akram spoke quietly, "Sorry to bother you tonight."

Baba Sharif did not wait for an explanation, but invited Akram for a cup of tea. He listened quietly as Akram told him the pathetic story.

"I know you're angry," said Baba Sharif after a moment of silence. "But we must help them. There is no choice. If what



Faqir's wife told your wife is true, then when he comes back, he will find her—and you know, Akram, he might kill her. Then what will happen to those girls? Are we just going to stand by and watch him destroy his family?"

Akram was frustrated. He had only wanted to do a good deed and now he had gotten himself in more trouble than ever. He had wanted to cover up his own past, to make up for it, but nothing was working out. Finally he spoke, "So Baba Sharif, what are you going to do?"

Baba Sharif did not hesitate. "What are *you* going to do? Aren't you part of the support for that family? Look, Akram, we're in this problem together, you and I both."

"I can't get involved, Baba Sharif. His family's problem is not my problem. My wife got us into this mess. She let that woman leave the loom at my house. How stupid! It makes me look like I'm the culprit. When Faqir comes back he's going to hold me responsible. Then what will happen to my family? I've got nothing to do with it anymore."

Baba Sharif looked sharply at Akram, "So you're just going to walk away from it? I'm afraid you don't understand what duty really means. Listen, Akram, you and I will do this together, even if it's risky for us. This is God's way—that we help this woman and those children as best as we can. Believe me, this is a dangerous time for them. You have to find them, Akram. And when you do find them, we'll take her and her children away from here. I have some old friends who live in a village far off in the tribal areas beyond Peshawer. My nephew's son is here in Nawshera this week. He's going back tomorrow. He can take them there. They'll keep them safe. I know they will. I'm going to call and talk to them. I have never done anything like this before, but this is important. We have to save their lives."

Reluctantly Akram left Baba Sharif's house. He knew the elderly man was right.

## Chapter Four

### Who's the Real Champion?

**“I am number one!”**

**K**aihan and Farid rushed into Baba Sharif's house, and without waiting to be seated, blurted out, “Baba Sharif! Baba Sharif! Tell us another story!” “Boys, let me tell you something else first,” his voice echoing slight irritation. “You say you want to become wrestlers? It won't happen this way! No master trainer would ever accept you.”

The boys stopped in their tracks. “What do you mean?” they both asked. Seldom did Baba Sharif speak so sternly to them.

“Calm down and listen. Didn't I tell you about the door for an old-fashioned wrestling club? You've never stepped inside one, have you? It's like this, Farid and Kaihan. Both of you sit down so I can tell you.”

Farid and Kaihan sheepishly took their seats on the *toshaks*. They knew they had entered Baba Sharif's house too abruptly.

Baba Sharif stood up and held his hand just under his chest. “The door is very low,” he explained. “Not even as high as my

chest. Every time a wrestler enters the arena, he has to bow down low, very low. Do you know what for?"

Both Farid and Kaihan looked with bewilderment and shook their heads.

"Boys, a wrestler's first aim must not be to become a champion. You've got to learn something much more important. You want to be a winner? First you must bow. I told you that I had to learn to fall, remember? The low door is a picture of that, boys. It tells me that I need to bow down, to lower my head. It's a way of showing that I've bowed inside me."

"That's easy!" shouted Farid. He got up, went to the door and feigned a low bow as he returned.

Baba Sharif chuckled, but then shook his head. "Easy? Maybe on the outside," he said. "You can bow low and act humble on the outside, but I'm telling you, this old heart is too proud sometimes. The heart doesn't want to bow on the inside. In fact, inside you're still standing as proud as a peacock. I know lots of wrestlers who were like this—graceful and humble on the outside. Their outward charm covers up all sorts of conceit and arrogance and stuff on the inside. Anybody can cover it up. I sure learned that well, but I will tell you about that some other time. So—after you pass through the door, you enter the wrestling room. You always have to ask permission to enter. Always. If you don't, it's very rude. Then you step onto the wrestling floor.

"The dirt is soft on the wrestling floor. You stoop down and kiss it. I remember when we were training, we would always argue about who should take second position. Outwardly, no one wanted to take first position—because it makes you look proud. Everyone tried to act humble. But it was all show, Farid. Pretending. Really, on the inside, everyone hungered to be first. It's just like what you said about the door. It's easy on the outside. We did all that bowing and asking for permission, acting

so sincere and genuine. We tried to outdo each other with endless courtesies and apologies.”

The elderly man laughed at himself as he continued. “It was funny. We would pull back from others, swear to this and that, make huge pledges of devotion, say wonderful words like, ‘My life for your sake,’ ‘I’ll die for you,’ and so on. We bowed low before those with more experience, who were champion wrestlers.<sup>12</sup>

“But I don’t believe in that anymore. It’s not real, anyway. It’s just on the outside, an empty show.” Baba Sharif’s voice became firm as he gently laid his hands on both of the boys. “But listen, Farid and Kaihan, one thing is real. Respect. Respect from the heart. When you come in, this is your house. You’re always welcome, but remember, we must respect each other. And even from your young age, keep in mind that we need to bow from our hearts, not just our heads. And that is something you cannot show off. It is something you must learn in your hearts. After you fall a few times, you’ll know what I mean.”

Farid and Kaihan’s eyes fell. They dared not look at Baba Sharif now. They had disregarded rules of respect. Both boys blushed with shame. They had grown to admire this old man. Ignoring the boys’ embarrassment, Baba Sharif got up again and went to the little kitchen to prepare tea. Kaihan pulled on Baba Sharif’s arm, trying in vain to jostle himself into a servant’s role. But the elderly man, as if it was the most natural thing in the world, served tea, *nukul* and biscuits for the young boys.

“Now don’t worry about it boys, let’s go on. I want to tell you a story we used to tell in the wrestling arenas. It will make you laugh, but it shows how arrogant and proud a wrestler can become. Not just wrestlers, but anyone. There was this great champion called Pahlawan Muhammad Abu Saeed. He lived in Herat, hundreds of years ago. The king at that time was Sultan Husain Bayqara. He was a very famous king and loved to watch

wrestling and liked to gather lots of wrestlers in his royal court. They say he had a hundred of them, but that sounds exaggerated to me.

“Anyway, the best wrestler at the time was Muhammad Abu Saeed. They called him world champion. It was the greatest honor to have that title. Everyone wanted that title. Wrestlers did everything possible to get it. They would fight for it, cheat for it, and even kill for it. This Abu Saeed became the center of conversations all over Herat. Everyone talked about Abu Saeed, the world champion, in his presence, anytime, anywhere. And of course, Abu Saeed loved hearing people praise him with ‘*Afarin.*’

“But there was one person who still bothered him. Another great wrestler in Herat, called Malani, was also a champion. Abu Saeed loathed the very idea. How could you have two world champions? He wanted to be the champion by himself. He craved an official wrestling match with Malani to prove to everyone that he, Abu Saeed, alone, was the world champion. But Malani was a fierce wrestler, too. Some said he was a demon with a human face. King Bayqara discouraged Abu Saeed from challenging Malani. But Abu Saeed was stubborn. So they called in Malani and asked him about it. Malani hesitated because Abu Saeed’s father had trained him. He didn’t want to show disrespect to his trainer’s son. But Abu Saeed reminded him of one of the conditions in wrestling. Do you know what that is, boys?”

Both Farid and Kaihan had been listening carefully, but they couldn’t answer.

Baba continued, “Abu Saeed knew it well. If someone challenges you to a match, you can’t refuse. So Malani was forced to wrestle with Abu Saeed. A few days later, they donned their special leather breeches for wrestling and faced each other on the floor. The match began. Malani wrestled hard in such a way that neither one would lose. He wanted to make it a draw.”



Malani wrestled hard in such a way that neither one would lose. He wanted to make it a draw.

Kaihan interrupted, “Why wouldn’t Malani just try to beat Saeed?”

Baba Sharif hesitated and then said slowly, “I don’t know, Kaihan. I think he knew he could beat Saeed, but if he did it would shame Saeed too much. Saeed’s father had been Malani’s coach and he respected him. To shame Saeed would have been to shame his father.”

“I think he should have just beaten Saeed, because Saeed was so proud,” Kaihan blurted.

“Just wait and hear what happened. After they tussled and tangled together, the great world champion suddenly caught his opponent off guard and pinned Malani’s legs to the ground. Malani fell flat onto the floor, on his side. Abu Saeed immediately bowed before the king. He thought he was the real champion. He alone. But the king knew better and rebuked him. ‘Abu Saeed!’ he said. ‘You know better than this! It doesn’t count till you’ve pinned your rival’s back to the ground!’ But do you know what Abu Saeed said? He just laughed it off. ‘Minarets have no back or front!’ he shouted. Do you know what that meant?”

“He was insulting Malani, wasn’t he? Like saying, ‘A potato has no front or back!’ ” Kaihan laughed.

“Exactly, and guess what happened. Malani heard what Abu Saeed said. In a flash he jumped up. He was furious. He looked wild, like a mad elephant. Abu Saeed noticed that Malani was coming at him, and suddenly he realized he didn’t have a chance. He glanced around and noticed the framed window in the wall behind the king. He lunged for the casing and grabbed it with all his strength. But Malani wrapped one of his arms around Abu Saeed’s waist and with the other he grabbed Abu Saeed’s neck and pulled. He yanked so hard that the whole window ripped off and the wall started to collapse. Can you believe it! Right there in the king’s court! Malani was about to heave Abu Saeed to the

floor as if he were a little sparrow. The helpless champion was still clinging to the window frame. The king was afraid what might happen and shouted at Malani not to do it. And so Malani just quietly laid Abu Saeed on the ground, pulled back his hands, and walked out. So who, do you think, was the real champion?"

"Malani was!" Kaihan blurted, but then he asked, "So did Malani get the title?"

Baba Sharif was quiet for awhile, and then spoke up, "Boys, I told you that being a champion does not just mean throwing someone to the floor. I don't know if Abu Saeed continued to have his title or not. I don't even know if Malani took on the title."

"Why not Malani? Didn't he throw Abu Saeed?" objected Farid.

"But what did I just tell you, Farid *Jan*? What is a champion?"

Farid was quiet. He couldn't understand it all. Farid dreamed that one day he would be a champion wrestler. But Baba Sharif kept on talking about something else, not just muscles, not just outward show, but about falling and falling again, about bowing from the heart?

"There's another story about Malani I'll have to tell you some time, boys," he answered, "But not today. It's getting late and I know your father will want you home soon. You'd better run off now."

## **The elephant wrestler**

"Boys, Farid *Jan*, Kaihan *Jan*, welcome! Let's go to the park today; it's a long walk but it's such a lovely summer evening. We'll take this light carpet and have tea and dried fruit as we talk," Baba Sharif enjoyed these late afternoons with Farid and Kaihan, who had almost become like his own grandsons.



After a scorching summer day, the sweet smelling night blossoms spread a fresh fragrance into the twilight air. Baba Sharif picked a few of the blossoms and played with them in his fingers, holding them close to his nose. The fragrance was rich, as if one could taste it.

“You said you would tell us another story about Malani,” Farid started, impatiently waiting for the story to begin.

“Boys,” Baba Sharif addressed Kaihan and Farid cheerfully, “Which animal do you think is the strongest animal?”

“A lion,” Kaihan responded immediately. “They say a lion is the king of the forest.”

“What do you think?” Baba Sharif turned to Farid.

“A tiger! Nothing can run or jump as fast as a tiger,” Farid answered.

“Well, Farid and Kaihan, I wouldn’t want to face a lion or a tiger in the jungles, but in the old days there was another animal that everyone thought was the fiercest of all animals. It was like a monster. When it stampeded, nothing could stop it. Kings wanted herds of these animals to use in battle. You still can’t guess, Farid and Kaihan?”

Both boys were silent, wondering what Baba Sharif was talking about.

“Well, let me tell you what happened to Malani and you will soon find out. I read it in an old history book on Herat. I told you last time that Malani was a fierce wrestler. Like a demon. Everyone was scared of him. After Malani beat the supposed world champion, Abu Saeed, he became extremely arrogant. He always carried a heavy club with him, showing it off as a sign of how great he was. In those days, the king of Delhi was a close friend of King Husain Bayqara in Herat. One time, the Delhi king sent King Bayqara a special royal gift. Guess what it was! An elephant—but no ordinary elephant. It was a *mangalus* elephant.”

“What’s that?” asked Farid.

“A *mangalus* elephant is totally white—albino. The *mangalus* elephants are famous because they are the most ferocious of all elephants. And this one was one of the largest. It towered like a mountain. People boasted that it could fling dragons with one flick of its trunk as if they were tiny gnats. When King Husain Bayqara saw the *mangalus*, he was shocked and said, ‘I wouldn’t want anybody to mess with this creature. God forbid it! Nobody could save that person’s life!’ Apparently, the great wrestler Malani heard the king’s words and laughed to himself. For him, the elephant was nothing. He boasted to the king, ‘Anybody afraid to fight the elephant is not much of a man!’ ”

Farid laughed, “He sure was a brave wrestler, wasn’t he?”

Baba Sharif responded, “After he had beaten Abu Saeed, Malani thought he was undefeatable. Well, the king did not like his boasting. He got upset at Malani for showing off like that in public, and even called him a tiny, chirping swallow. The king and his advisors decided to teach Malani a lesson. They ordered him to fight the elephant. Maybe the elephant could pound the conceit out of Malani’s heart. Malani laughed at the challenge, jutting his chest out proudly. Without a thought he was ready to enter the battle-ring. But the elephant-keeper objected. He knew that Malani had a heavy club. In those days wrestlers would never let their huge clubs out of their sight. It was part of their armor. The heavier your club, the stronger and fiercer you were. The elephant-keeper knew that if Malani struck the elephant’s head with his club, he could smash the big animal’s brains with one blow. So you know what they did? They made a plan to hide Malani’s club.”

“How did they do that?” Kaihan asked.

“Well, in Herat during that time, they often had club-throwing contests, to see who could throw the heaviest club the furthest, or they would throw it as high as possible, twirling it around and still catching it. They knew that Malani’s club was one of the

heaviest, so they asked him if they could borrow it for a contest. Malani lent it to them, even though normally he never let anyone use his club. That afternoon, when Malani was taking his nap, one of the king's messengers came to Malani's quarters with the order that he had to come and challenge the elephant right away. Malani looked for his club, but it was gone. He knew he had been tricked, but he had no choice. He had to wrestle the elephant with his bare hands. If he didn't show up now, it would mean defeat for him."

"What happened? The elephant must have pounded him with its huge feet. Or did it use its trunk?" Kaihan asked eagerly.

"At first, the elephant laid its heavy trunk on Malani's shoulders and flipped him around so that Malani's hands landed flat on the ground. Malani knew that if the elephant would use his trunk once more, it could actually throw him into the air and heave him to the ground. It was strong enough to pulverize his bones with its massive legs. So Malani immediately leaped up and planted his own feet firmly on the ground. Then he used one of his wrestling tricks, grabbed one of the elephant's legs and heaved as hard as he could. He actually lifted up one side of that huge animal, and the elephant—even though it's almost immovable when it stands on its four legs—suddenly lost its balance and hit the dust with such force that the ground shook. The elephant's four legs were floundering in the air."

"So Malani beat the elephant? I can't believe it!" Farid laughed.

"He did beat the elephant, but that wasn't the end of it. The elephant-keeper led the mighty *mangalus* back to its pen, but now the elephant was furious and roared for revenge. They say that elephants hold grudges just like humans! That night it broke loose from its pen and, in a terrible rage, found Malani's tent and attacked it, ripping the tent to shreds. Malani and his wrestling friends jumped to their feet in a flash and pounded the elephant

with their clubs. It roared so loudly the king woke up in the middle of the night and went to find out what the commotion was all about. Malani was furious because the elephant had almost killed him. He was ready to smash the elephant's skull. The elephant-keeper pleaded with Malani to calm down. The king did the same and then compelled him to make peace with this *mangalus* elephant."

"How did he do that? If the elephant was so furious at Malani, and Malani at the elephant. It's impossible!" Kaihan interrupted. "They'll attack each other again!"

Baba Sharif paused for a moment, "You're right, you can't make an animal reconcile with its enemy, at least not in the normal way of saying sorry or forgiving each other. It's not even common among us humans, is it? No one says sorry easily. But what's the best way to show you're united with someone after you've had a terrible quarrel or fight?"

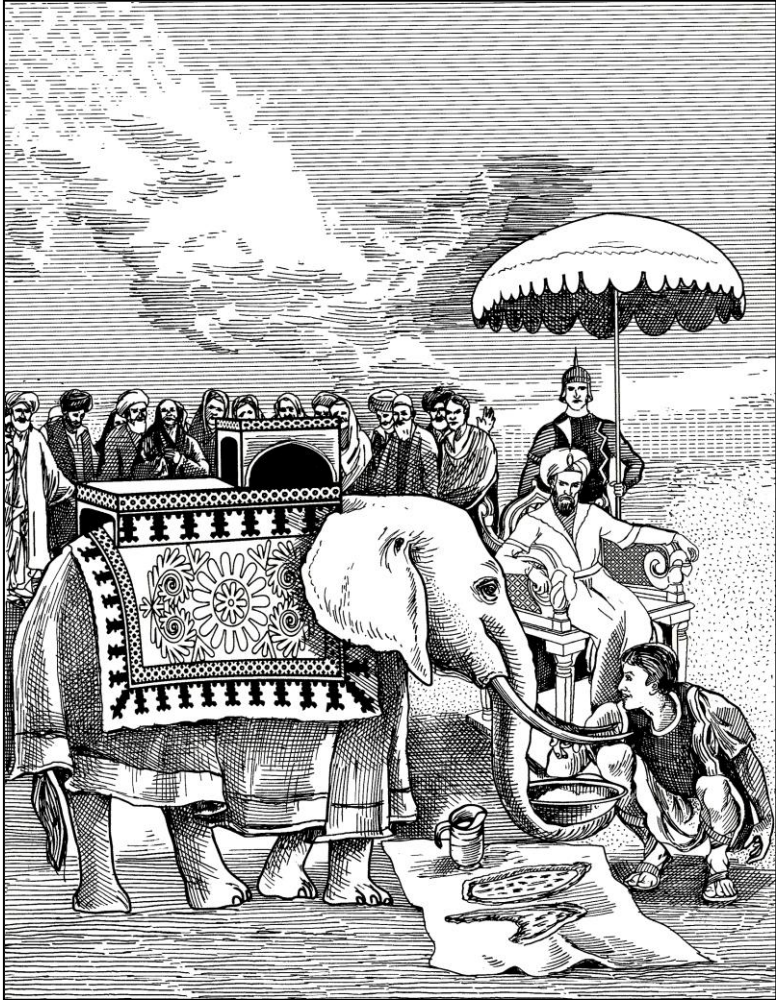
Kaihan and Farid remained quiet, not knowing what to say.

Baba Sharif continued, "Food. Eating together. It's hard to eat with someone you despise. When you eat bread together, you share life together. But this was much more than bread. In the book that I read, it says that they slaughtered sheep and horses to make a huge feast. Then they dressed up the elephant with fancy clothes ..."

Farid burst out laughing, "An elephant with clothes on!"

Baba Sharif continued, "Strange, isn't it? Malani sat on one side of the elephant and the elephant-keeper on the other side. You know what they did? Malani fed the elephant and the elephant fed Malani with its trunk. Think of the handful of food Malani would have had to eat! Not handfuls, but 'trunkfuls'!"

Kaihan gazed at Baba Sharif, trying to imagine how someone would eat a "trunkful" of food. He chuckled, "The elephant would just swing over a *khora*k of *tikka* kabab with his trunk.



Think of the handful of food Malani would have had to eat! Not handfuls, but ‘trunkfuls’

Easy. But what would poor Malani do? Take a whole sheep and ...?

“The whole sheep!” Farid laughed.

Baba Sharif chuckled, “I’m glad I wasn’t Malani! But they say that’s how the two calmed down and accepted each other. They ate together.”<sup>13</sup>

### **“I’ve done my duty”<sup>14</sup>**

Two days later, Farid and Kaihan knocked at Baba Sharif’s house again. No more did they only go once a week. As the elderly man welcomed them, the boys wasted no time in snuggling down beside him. The old man longed to explain in the clearest way everything that was in his heart, but he knew he had to take his time.

“Farid and Kaihan, last time I told you an old story, remember?”

“Yes. Malani and the elephant. He beat the elephant!” Farid blurted.

“Then they ate together,” Kaihan added.

Baba Sharif continued, “You remember it well. Good for you! Today I want to tell you a story that an old man called Faqir Ahmad Khan used to tell. Faqir Ahmad Khan was a famous story-teller in the king’s quarters in the city of Kabul, the Bala Hisar. That was a famous fort in the Old City area of Kabul. There’s a lot of history in that fort. The Moghul rulers used to live there, and later the British occupied it. One Afghan king after another ruled from there, like Sher Ali Khan, Abdul Rahman and others. Nowadays, it’s mostly in ruins.”

“Our dad told us about the Old City. He said their family used to have a shop there when he was young, before it got destroyed,” Kaihan said.

“Yes, we had shops next to each other. I knew your father’s father and grandfather well. Back in the old days, many wrestlers lived in Old Kabul. Elderly men loved to tell stories and feats of the great warriors and *kakas* from Old Kabul. I don’t think I’ve told you about those *kakas* before have I?”

“It’s another word for champion isn’t it?” Kaihan responded.

“Sort of. *Kakas* were tough guys, vigilantes. Each *kaka* had his own area they ruled, as if they were little kings. People say *kakas* took care of widows and orphans, beat up cruel shopkeepers, landlords and ...”

“You said something about Kaka Badrow,” Farid answered proudly.

“That’s right, Farid *Jan*. And that’s the story I want to tell you today – about Kaka Badrow and Kaka Awrang. I was telling you about Old Kabul. One of the famous places in Old Kabul was Shor Bazaar and the streets around it. The whole area was a maze of tiny streets and narrow alleys in the old days. There was the noisy Ahangari Street where blacksmiths banged on their anvils all day, making knives, swords and all sorts of tools. Close by was a place called *kharabat* (the ruins). Musicians and poets lived there. Some say they slept all day and stayed awake all night, telling stories of old-time heroes. Here, the sun rose in the middle of the night and the stars shone all day.<sup>15</sup> Lots of *kakas* spent their days here, too. In those days, there were two well-known *kakas*, Kaka Awrang and Kaka Badrow.

“They were good men weren’t they, Baba Sharif?” asked Farid.

“Well, Farid, many people thought they were good men, and maybe they were,” Baba Sharif said slowly and very thoughtfully, “but lots of them also smoked *chars* or *hashish* (dope) and they often got into fights.”

“Did you get into fights too? You were a tough *kaka*, right?” asked Kaihan with admiration.

Baba Sharif chuckled. "I can tell you one thing, boys. I thought I was. I thought I was a real champion, tougher than anyone else. My back still had never touched the ground. But anyway, let me tell you about Kaka Awrang and Kaka Badrow. They were *kakas* before my time. Kaka Awrang was a young *kaka* from the Deh Afghanan area. In those days, Deh Afghanan wasn't part of Kabul. Kaka Badrow was older and ruled the neighborhood in Payin Chawk in Old Kabul. Like everywhere else, the area was a maze of tiny alleys and narrow pathways. Each *kaka* was supposed to be a guardian of his own neighborhood. Each *kaka* had his own followers, boys who wanted to be wrestlers just like their *kaka*."

"Baba Sharif, what do you mean that they were guardians of their neighborhoods?" asked Farid, "They were like policemen?"

Baba Sharif laughed, "Well, not officially, but they often acted like they were. They were supposed to be responsible for peace and security. They made sure that there was order in their area. So, for example, if there was an outbreak of robberies, violence or even a murder, the *kaka* was expected to catch the criminals as soon as possible and hand them over to the authorities. They made sure that no one bothered the girls, and that the older women and widows were safe. We always say they were kind to those in their own neighborhoods, but I don't know how true that was. Of course, once they left their own neighborhood, well, that was a different story. Each *kaka* thought he was the best fighter. Like I said, they were proud men.

"But, back to Awrang and Badrow. Both of them had become famous in their own areas, young Awrang in the Deh-Afghanan area and Badrow in the Old City. They were tough fighters. But they also despised each other. Kaka Awrang was quite young, but thought he was tougher than the more experienced *kaka*, Badrow. And, of course, Badrow thought he himself was the champion. The rivalry between the two became worse and worse.



One day, when Kaka Badrow was drinking tea at a teashop in Shor Bazaar, the young rival, Awrang lumbered past with several of his followers. The two *kakas* glared at each other in disgust. Awrang wore glistening armor with a sharp sword hanging at his side. Badrow sneered at the young rival and called him a weak cock-bird. Then he cleared his throat, and spat on the ground.”

“Why did he do that?” asked Kaihan.

“That was how you greeted an enemy. These *kakas* were proud men. They hated rivals. Deep down in their hearts they had a terrible antagonistic spirit. They hated it when anyone else got a little better or stronger. They had to be number one. Remember Muhammad Abu Saeed from Herat? Well, Badrow and Awrang were no different. It’s something deep inside us—all of us, not just *kakas*. Think about it. Even in our families we can’t tolerate when one of our brothers does something better than we do. As if we can’t watch someone win. We can’t stomach it when others are happy. It’s not just that I want what others have, no it’s more than that, I don’t want others to have what I have. And even worse, if I don’t have something good, I don’t want others to have the good either. It gets even worse, if I’m going down, losing, I want others to go down with me. Probably the worst kind of jealousy is just wishing bad fortune upon others – it’s all envy, jealousy.”

Farid and Kaihan remained quiet for a few moments, deep in thought.

“This kind of rivalry is like poisonous venom inside a person. It eats away at them, slowly killing them and others. It’s deadly. Farid *Jan*, Kaihan *Jan*, I was like that too. Jealousy drove me to do terrible things.”

Kaihan shifted awkwardly. Farid’s head fell as he tried to understand Baba Sharif’s strange words. How could this man have been like that?

Then Farid piped up, "So, what happened to Awrang and Badrow?"

"Well, when someone cleared his throat and spit like that, it was terribly insulting. Awrang was outraged. He whirled around and shouted so loud that everyone in the bazaar could hear him, 'Really? You think so? Next week after Friday noon prayers you will deal with me next to the Bala Hisar cemetery.' Awrang had thrown a challenge to Badrow. And as I said, you couldn't turn down a challenge like that. Soon everyone in Shor Bazaar heard it. This was going to be a huge fight. People talked about it and even made bets on the two *kakas*."

"Who won?" Kaihan asked impatiently.

"Patience, my boy. Let me tell you what happened. They say thousands of people came out to see the match because both *kakas* were famous in their neighborhoods. The whole mountainside from the old Kabul Wall down towards the Bala Hissar was covered with people. Families made a great picnic out of the event. There were kebabs, special roasted lamb, different kinds of *palaw* (rice), all sorts of sweets, and lots of tea everywhere. Singers and musicians came out. It was a huge celebration. Everyone talked about Kaka Awrang. He was the young *kaka* who had thrown out the challenge. When he entered the open area, you couldn't help but admire him. He was graceful, handsome and youthful, just over twenty years old. He hadn't experienced the ups and downs of life like Badrow, nor did he have many scars on his face yet. Both men had their armor - shields, swords, spears, daggers, and heavy iron mail to defend themselves. This young Awrang had fixed some fancy feathers to the top of his helmet to draw more attention to himself. When the two *kakas* entered the arena, they bowed with such a deep show of respect that you would have thought they were the most gentle and gracious men alive. But in their hearts they were ready to kill each other."

“So what happened?” Kaihan burst out.

“At first they fought with spears. The spears clashed and clanged against their helmets and shields, but no one gained the upper hand. An old man with long white hair was the referee. He must have been a wrestler in his day. When he saw that no one was winning, he ordered the spear battle to end.”

“So they stopped fighting?” asked Farid, rather disappointed.

“No, no, just the spear fight was over. They threw their spears away and grabbed their razor-sharp swords. Like butterflies, each one danced around the other looking for an opportunity to strike his opponent. Each fighter tried to smash his sword on his opponent’s head or shoulders, but the opponent would deflect the blow expertly with his own sword. The crowd loved the fight, the clanging and clashing of swords. “*Afarin!*” came ringing out again and again from the excited crowd of spectators. But again, the old referee ordered them to stop using their swords.

“Now the two fighters had nothing but their daggers and leather breeches. This was the real wrestling match, when they fought hand-to-hand. No helmets, no shields and no swords. Except for their breeches, they stripped down to bare skin. They faced each other like two mad elephants. Everyone could see their bulging muscles glistening in the sun. They tangled with each other like two savage lions and used every wrestling trick they knew. Suddenly, Badrow let out an immense roar. He lifted the young Awrang and heaved him onto the ground. The crowd roared and then everything was deathly quiet. Not a sound could be heard.”

“Why, what happened?” asked Kaihan. “You said they had even bet on these wrestlers.”

“They knew Badrow would kill Awrang. Everyone was waiting to see it.”

“Right there in front of the crowd?” objected Farid.

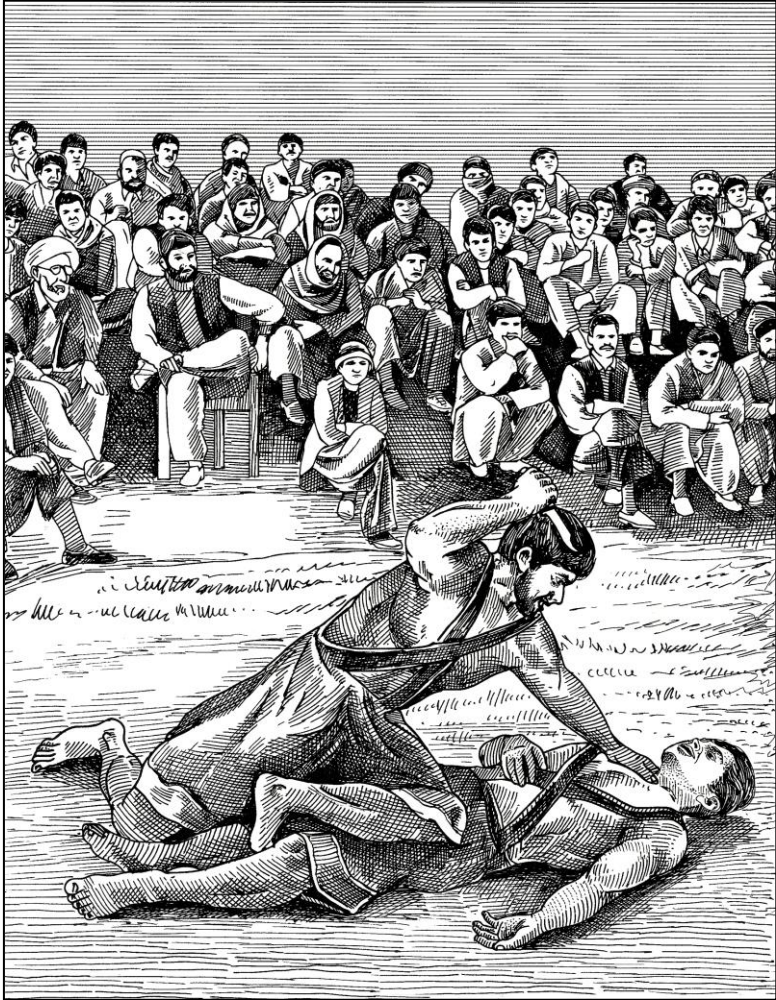
Baba Sharif quietly cleared his throat and explained, “I told you, boys. Those *kakas* were tough. Proud. Sure, they defended their own neighborhoods, but they hated rivals. They carried such deep antagonism in their hearts that they weren’t afraid to kill, especially someone who had overstepped himself, like Awrang had. Awrang lay on the ground. He knew Badrow would kill him. This young Awrang pulled his neck back, ready for Badrow, and said, ‘The dagger is yours, here’s my neck. You have a right to kill me.’ But guess what happened! People still talk about it. Kaka Badrow grabbed Awrang’s jaw with his left hand and pulled out his dagger from the sheath and raised it high in the air. It glistened in the sunlight. Everyone held their breath. But then Badrow slowly lowered his hand. He laid the flat side of the dagger on Awrang’s neck.”

“He didn’t kill him?” interrupted Farid.

“Exactly, Farid *Jan*. In a quiet, low voice, Badrow said, ‘Okay, kid, I’ve done what I had to do.’ Everyone cheered for Badrow. He had let his enemy go. And you know what happened? The two rivals became friends. Awrang became a lifelong follower of his former rival.”

Both Farid and Kaihan were amazed. The two men had hated each other for so long, and suddenly they were friends. Although neither of them had much experience in life, Farid and Kaihan had heard enough about fighting and hatred—even in their own home.

“Interesting, isn’t it?” said Baba Sharif. The boys nodded, amazed. Baba Sharif hesitated for a while and then continued, “So, everyone admired Badrow for what he did. He could have killed Awrang, but he didn’t. I have always liked this story. I wish there were more people like this. Badrow knew he could kill Awrang and be a champion. It would have been easy. But what would Badrow have gained for killing Awrang? Would he have really won?”



Badrow grabbed Awrang's jaw with his left hand and pulled out his dagger from the sheath and raised it high in the air.

Baba Sharif continued, “There’s only one thing that has always bothered me, boys. Remember in the story, when the two *kakas* went into the battle-ring, they bowed down with such an air of lowliness—that was just show-off, to impress everyone who was watching. You really think they respected each other? Not at all. Their hearts were full of envy and antagonism. Both were desperate to become champion and shame the other. After they had fought and wrestled for a time, Badrow had the upper-hand. He knew if he killed Awrang, he would be a champion. He also knew if he didn’t kill Awrang, he would be a champion. Actually, he would be an even bigger one if he didn’t kill him. Because then Awrang would *have* to follow him for the rest of his life. Awrang would have no choice. What Badrow did was a very manly and wonderful act. He didn’t kill Awrang. But from another sense, he shamed Awrang and forced his rival to submit to him. From then on, Badrow had living proof that he was indeed the champion, while Awrang had to walk around defeated for the rest of his life—a punishment more shameful than even death for some. That’s why many times, in such duels, rivals will fight till the death. Death is sweeter than defeat, because defeat is like a living death, constantly. Boys, I think Badrow was still proud. He didn’t kill Awrang—thank God! But in his heart, Badrow still wasn’t bowing to anyone.”

Kaihan and Farid remained quiet. How humble did a person have to become? What else could Badrow have done?

## Chapter Five

### They Can't Find Out!

#### Blood in the teashop

“**P**adar Jan, Padar Jan,” Kaihan called ahead excitedly as he ran towards the shop, “Do you know Kaka Awrang and Kaka Badrow?”

“Who are they?” Akram acted as if he did not know anything about them, busying himself with dusting the dirty jars stacked high up the shelves. Dust, the perpetual foe of every shopkeeper.

“They were *kakas*. They had this huge fight, spears, swords ...” Farid added excitedly, as he caught up with Kaihan.

“Badrow could have killed Awrang but he didn't. He held Awrang flat on the ground with a dagger in his hand,” Kaihan interrupted. Both boys vied with each other to relate the story.

“He even laid his dagger on Kaka Awrang's neck. Everyone thought Badrow would kill him. But he didn't,” Farid repeated.

Akram held his breath, as he sensed tension come over him. Lowering his voice, he asked Kaihan nervously, “Who ... who told you about them?”

“Baba Sharif did,” Kaihan answered, wondering why his father was suddenly so edgy.

Akram’s lips trembled, but he controlled himself so Kaihan would not see. His mind flew back to that horrifically bloody afternoon. For years he had tried to bury that event, to erase it completely from his life. Sometimes it seemed he could forget it. After all, if no one knew about it, it really wasn’t that bad, was it? But invariably it came back, again and again. And now it was staring him in the face. Kaihan and Farid mustn’t find out, and more importantly, Baba Sharif must never hear of it. Never! He forgot about the shop as his mind drifted off back to his youth in Kabul ...



*As a teenager, Akram loved his wooden flute. He threw his head back, the wind playing with his long, flowing hair as he blew into his flute and let out another deep, plaintive tune. This was the love of his heart, to sit out in an open meadow and enjoy his flute. Some young boys who were kicking a football in the playground stopped to listen to the heart-rending music.*

*Suddenly, glancing to the side, he noticed Behzad dashing across the field, shouting nervously, “Akram! Akram! Come, quickly! We’ve got to do something right away! Look, look, what they did to my hand!” It was Akram’s cousin and closest friend, Behzad. He was only sixteen years old, but his wide shoulders and muscular build made him look closer to twenty years of age. His mustache was heavy for his age.*

*Behzad’s eyes were bloodshot and full of fury as he breathlessly told the story to Akram, “I went into the teashop for a cup of tea. I knew Ghulam and Ehsan would be there, but*



*I didn't care. Remember them? They were on that football team from Chahar Dehi we played against last week."*

*Akram shot up angrily, "Ghulam and Ehsan? Sure I remember them. Dirty cheats they are! But why did you go there, Behzad? That was stupid. Without me? You could have gotten into a fight!"*

*Behzad continued. "Why should I be afraid of them? I just went in and sat down for tea. From the corner of my eye I could see them snickering at me. I knew they were laughing at me. I couldn't stand it. When I was ready to leave, I stood up and glared at them like this. Then I spat—"*

*"You, what?" Akram looked straight at Behzad, "That was just asking for trouble!"*

*Behzad continued, "What could I do? Just ignore them like some weak cow and walk out as if I were afraid? So I spat and was about to walk out of the teashop when both guys came up from behind and cursed at me. I whirled around. I had my fists clenched. I was ready to fight, but before I could swing at them, Ehsan pulled out his knife and slashed my hand. Look at it." Behzad untied the dirty, bloody towel he had wrapped around his hand. Blood oozed from the open gash. Behzad continued, "He's a coward, pulling out a knife without warning!"*

*Akram was upset. He despised Ghulam and Ehsan. He remembered the football game. Ghulam had deliberately kicked him in the stomach. And when Behzad had passed the ball to him and he was about to take a good shot at the goal, Ghulam had tripped him. The referee had looked the other way, but Akram knew Ghulam was a dirty player. He had harbored his anger and had promised to get even.*

*But he didn't like fights. Not like this. He knew how easily fights got out of hand. He hesitated. "So what are you going to do, Behzad?"*



I was ready to fight, but before I could swing at them, Ehsan pulled out his knife and slashed my hand.

*"I told them they would get my answer sooner or later. Akram, look, tomorrow afternoon, when it's hot, they'll be asleep in their flat. I know it. They are just three brothers living there. Their older brother works in that nan-wayi (bread bakery) near the intersection. Their flat is right next to it. In the hot afternoon the nan-wayi is closed. No one will be there. Let's just knock on their door and visit them with a few clubs."*

*Akram shook his head. He did not like it. "Behzad, not me, I'm not going. You know it will get bloody, and then what will you do?"*

*"You're scared?" Behzad sneered. "So we're going to let them ridicule us every time we go and have tea or play football? What kind of life is that? You can't even hold your head up high with them around. Come on, Akram, are you a man, or what?"*

*Akram's blood came to a boil. Of course he was a man! He was not afraid, but he did not want to draw blood. He knew what could happen, but now there was no choice ...*

"Padar Jan, what's wrong? Where are you? This customer wants some bread and biscuits," Kaihan interrupted his father's reflective mood.

Akram's head shot up, sweat pouring from his face. How he loathed the heat in Nawshera. He smiled at the customer. "Excuse me, I was just thinking about my mother. She's very sick," he lied.

Kaihan stared at his father in bewilderment.

## **"Find them!"**

Akram hated his shop. Customers were few, and everyone complained about the prices. He thought again of his home, his wife, her constant nagging and their arguing. Then there was

Faqir. He cursed the coward. He knew he could come back anytime, and then what would he do? He had wanted to help him, to gain some *sawab*. In that way hopefully he could bury the past. But instead, he was in deeper trouble than ever before. He had gained nothing. The Kaka Badrow story bothered him terribly. Badrow could have killed his enemy, but he didn't. Tears welled up in Akram's eyes as he cried out, "Oh God, I can't forget it. How can I ever make up for it?"

"Ag....*agha* Akram! *Salam!*"

Akram looked away. He recognized the nervous, stammering voice. It was Faqir. He had come back rather soon, too soon for his liking.

Akram feigned a smile and reached out his hand, "*Salam*, Faqir! Where have you been? I haven't seen you around for a few days. Is everything all right?"

Faqir puffed on a cigarette, nervous and unsmiling. "I just came back from Kabul."

"Kabul?" Akram asked innocently, "You went all the way to Kabul and came back? I hope you're not too tired. How are things in the city? Your family is all right?"

"Akram *Saheb*, this is no time for formalities. Kabul is fine and so is the family, but where is my wife? Where are my children?"

"What do you mean? Aren't they at home?"

"They're not at home. You know they're not at home. They're gone. The house is empty. There's no carpet, no carpet loom. Nothing. Everything's gone." Faqir looked Akram dead in the eyes. "Akram, where have they gone?"

Akram knew he couldn't avoid the issue. He knew, sooner or later, Faqir would find out that the carpet and loom were at his house. And if he found out from someone else, it would only make matters worse. Akram spoke quietly. "Faqir, all I know is this. The other day your wife talked to my wife. She said she

would leave the carpet and loom at our house. Then she left. She told me she was taking the children somewhere. I was responsible for the loom, she handed it back to us. Then she left.”

Akram was thankful for the fact that during his youth he had always enjoyed body-building, athletics and exercise. Even now his muscles still bulged beneath his clothes, his chest still strong and firm. Faqir, a nervous, skinny chain-smoker, would not dare attack him, certainly not here on the street with shopkeepers and customers watching. But Akram also knew that Faqir might have evil intentions and that he would not be easily scared away. He was not to be trusted.

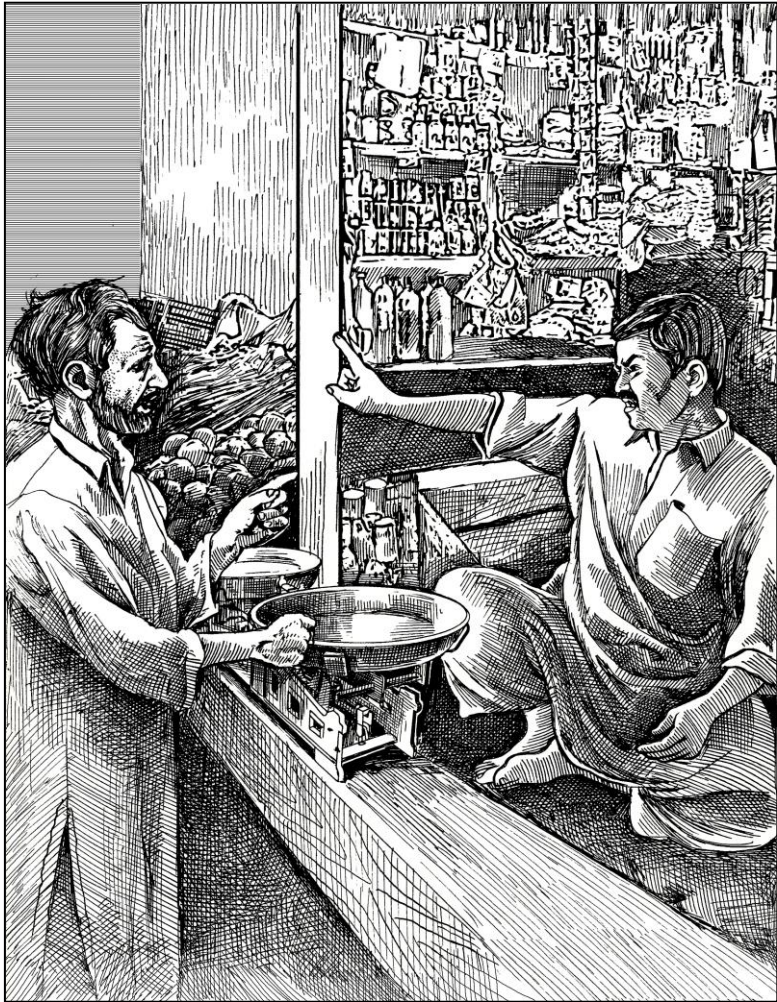
Faqir fidgeted in front of the shop and then cursed under his breath. “She sent me to Kabul on a lie,” Faqir spat out. “My mother is in perfect health. There’s nothing wrong with anyone.” He raised his voice angrily. “She shamed me, sending me away like this.” Then, looking nervously at Akram, he shook his finger and said, “And now you’ve hidden them!”

Akram shot back, “Faqir, I don’t know where they are! They aren’t my family. They just brought the carpet here—and then they left. They didn’t say where they were going. I’ve done nothing else and I know nothing more.”

Faqir cursed his wife. “That shameless woman!” he hissed. “If I could just get my hands on her!” Faqir knew Akram was lying, but he wasn’t ready for a fight. He was no match for Akram.

Akram felt his own nerves getting frazzled. “No shame, you say? Who has no shame? When I came to your house late that one evening I saw what had been going on. The house was a mess, clothes strewn all over the place. You can’t hide it anymore. You have a beautiful family, but you treat them like animals.”

Faqir swallowed nervously and calmed down. He had enough wits not to tangle with Akram on the street. He continued, more



Akram shot back, “Faqir, I don’t know where they are! They aren’t my family.”



subdued, almost helpless, “Akram, you know my life. I have nothing. I have six children and no work. We can’t pay our rent. So when all of our money’s gone, and we’re going deeper and deeper in debt, sometimes I lose control, my nerves are a mess. It’s okay, but .... but now the family is gone. Now I have nothing.”

Akram boiled with anger. How dare Faqir justify his deeds! He was in no mood to sympathize with Faqir any further. He spoke rudely, “Don’t you have any dignity, Faqir? You brought this on yourself. It’s your problem. I tried to help you with the carpet and loom, and now look what you’ve done. You could have made a life for yourself. But you ruined it! Now, listen, I’ll get you some food for dinner. You’re obviously hungry.”

Akram sent Kaihan to the house to quickly get a plate of rice and beans.

“Here, eat and then go. And leave me alone. You need to go and look for them yourself. You won’t find them here.” Akram knew Baba Sharif would think differently about not helping them, but he despised Faqir. He felt like teaching him a lesson or two, but knew that could only make matters worse. He had to think of his own children’s safety now. He had no idea what Faqir might do.

Faqir turned to go, then whipped around. He raised his voice, not hiding his resentment. “Akram *Agha*, when I went into our flat just now and saw it empty, everything gone, I thought of just one thing. I’ve told you before. Years ago they killed my brother, Ehsan. Twenty years ago. Out of nowhere two young men entered our flat with clubs. When they left he was a bloody mess.”

Akram’s eyes froze. He couldn’t breathe. Faqir’s brother? How could it be? God forbid!

Faqir continued bitterly, “For years and years I’ve looked for the killers. I swore I would cross the seven seas and seven

mountains to find them. I never found them. I spent all my savings trying but I never could. Finally I gave up. Left it to God. They killed Ehsan and my other brother, Ghulam, disappeared. I've never seen him since. Don't know if he's dead or alive. And now my own family is also gone. Everything I have has been taken from me. I swear to God, I won't leave one rock uncovered till I find them," Faqir's voice trembled with bitterness and fury.

He looked Akram in the eye. Immediately Akram diverted his eyes, busying himself rearranging rusty jars of canned goods on the shelf. "Akram, you've hidden my family. Bring them back!" Faqir said. And with that he left.

Relieved that Faqir was gone, he closed his shop and went home. He spoke little at the dinner table that evening. He didn't care that Kaihan and Farid would soon want to see Baba Sharif. He didn't want to talk to anybody. His wife knew well enough when to ignore Akram and simply busied herself with cleaning. But tonight Akram's surliness terrified her.

That night as he tossed and turned on his *toshak*, he repeated it a hundred times: Faqir was Ghulam and Ehsan's older brother! The past haunted him as never before. He tried to shut it out of his mind, but as soon as he closed his eyes, it all flashed before him ... that horrible day in Kabul.



*Behzad slapped him on the back, "Akram, ready?"*

*Akram rubbed his eyes from his afternoon nap. It was too early to get back to work. What was Behzad doing at his house?*

*"Akram, ready?" Behzad's eyes were bloodshot. "Here, Akram, you will need a few of these for your nerves." He handed Akram several homemade cigarettes and then kicked*



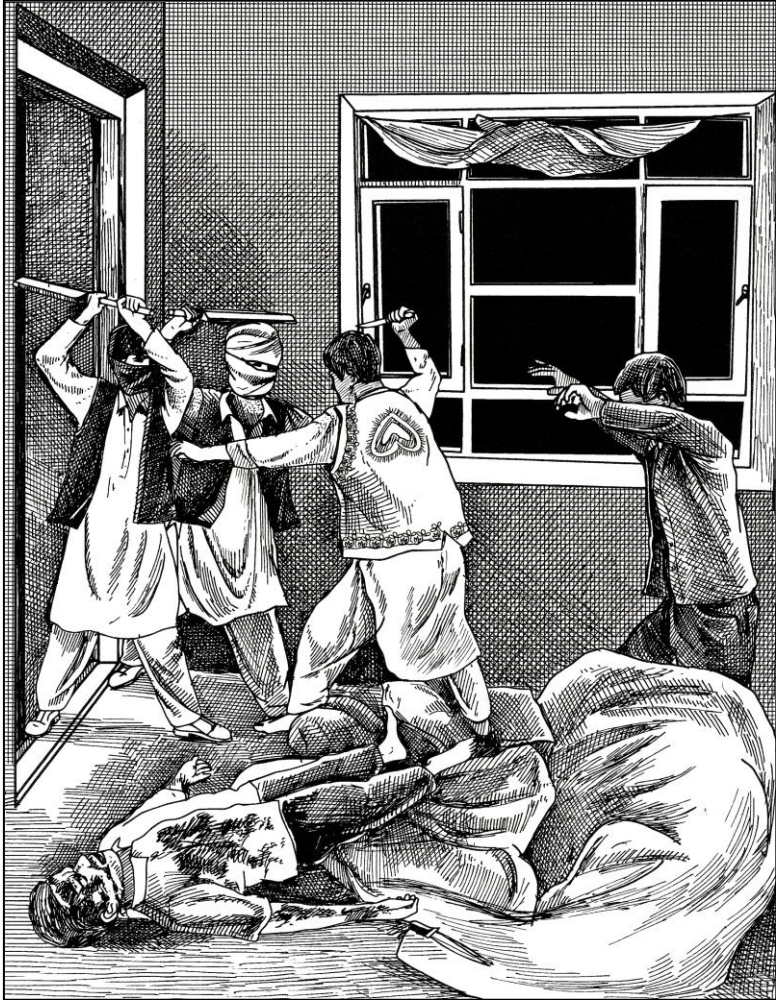
*Akram's toshak. "We've got work to do, Akram." His voice was gruff.*

*Akram shot up from his bed as he remembered yesterday's conversation with Behzad. He hated it, but he could not get out of it now. He despised Ghulam and Ehsan just as much as Behzad did. And he would not run from a fight. Only cowards run from fights. The two cousins calmly made their way down the street, clubs in their hands. It was stiflingly hot. Most shops were closed and the few that were open might as well have been closed. They approached the bakery. No one was there, and no one would be for another hour or two. Slowly they tiptoed up the stairs and made their way down the hall to the door. The room was on the second floor behind the bakery. Behzad and Akram swiftly masked their faces.*

*With a powerful karate kick, Behzad jolted the door open. Bursting in they found three young men sleeping away the hot afternoon. Akram wondered who the third man was. Behzad cursed at them. He screamed, "It's payback, boys!"*

*Without waiting, he slammed his club onto the first body. Someone let out a cry. The two other brothers were alert. They jumped to their feet and immediately realized what was happening. Both Ghulam and Ehsan were ready for the fight. Their older brother, groaning from the blow, did all he could to shelter himself from another blow.*

*It was bedlam. Clubs and knives everywhere. Akram saw Ehsan lunge at him with a knife. He had to defend himself. With all his might, he swung his club at his assailant. He landed a blow on Ehsan's head. His opponent crumbled to the floor without a word. His eyes went white. For a second, Akram stared at the sickening sight. Blood oozed from Ehsan's mouth and nose. Akram shuddered. He heard Ghulam scream viciously. Akram shouted, "We've got to go! Come on, let's get out of here!"*



It was bedlam. Clubs and knives everywhere.

*He flung his club at Ghulam to knock him off balance. Akram and Behzad dashed down the stairs. The older brother swore at the murderous intruders, "I'll get you, whoever you are, if ... if ...if it takes me a lifetime!"*

*Akram and Behzad were soon out on the street. Throwing their masks and bloody clubs into a nearby dumpster, they disappeared in a taxi.*

Akram's memories tortured him as the night wore on. No one had ever found out who the attackers had been. Akram had kept it hidden all these years. Even his cousin Behzad had vanished from his life. Lost in Moscow during the refugee years. And at times, Akram had almost been able to remove it from his memory. As he had heard someone say long ago, *If you sin and succeed, it's really no sin, but if you sin and don't get away with it, then ...*<sup>16</sup> He pushed the rest of the saying out of his mind. He had killed someone and had gotten away with it—success, indeed. No one knew he had done it. But after twenty years, he still couldn't get it out of his head. This was success? What type of victory was this? The more he tried to run from the memory of that bloody afternoon, the more he felt it seared to the core of his soul. He hated his conscience. Why couldn't he bury that day and be done with it forever? How he wished he could reverse that terrible day! If only ... ! But now it had come back to haunt him more often than ever before.

One thing was clear: Faqir must not find out anything from his past. Gradually, as the night wore on, a plan birthed in his mind. Even though he despised Faqir, he would do whatever he had to in order to cover up that bloody day. Faqir's family really didn't mean much to him. He had to protect himself foremost.

Akram was back in his shop the next morning, tired from a sleepless night. He kicked at the bag of flour lying on the ground and counted the hours. The day passed slowly. As usual few

customers showed up and so far no Faqir. But Akram knew he would come. He bit his fingernails. He tried to calm himself but his heart continued to pound.

“*Salam*, Akram!” It was Faqir. He was back.

Akram sighed quietly, trying to suppress the guilt and shame rising within him. He smiled calmly as he greeted him, “*Salam* to you, Faqir.”

“I’ve asked everywhere, all day,” Faqir said bitterly. He eyed Akram with contempt. “You know where they are, don’t you, Akram. Now where are they?”

Akram tried to remain as calm as possible. “Faqir, I’ll help you, just relax.” He spoke kindly. As always, the sweeter the talk, the better one could hide things. Funny how words covered things up!

“Listen, Faqir. The other day when your *zan* came by, she said Faqir had gone to Kabul because his mother was sick. She told my wife some story that they couldn’t stay in their home anymore; problems with the landlord or something. So they brought the loom to my gate. What could I do? I went to talk with Baba Sharif. You know he’s a kind man. He’s the one who helped you with the loom. Listen, Faqir, your family ...”

Just then a customer came by, asking for a kilo of sugar. Akram’s heart pounded, shame and disgrace piercing his conscience. What should he do? How could he think of helping Faqir? Giving this woman to her demented husband was shameful. She needed shelter. But so did he—from his sins, from his past. Giving her up would make things right with Faqir. And then he would be out of his life. But, then again, does one shameful deed cover up another?

It disgusted him to be bothered by such thoughts. He tried to push these disturbing questions out of his mind. “It’s none of my business,” he mused silently. “Why should I care about Faqir or his wife? I’ve helped them enough. What’s it done for me? Faqir

messed up his own life. I can't fix that. I've got to take care of mine!"

Akram had never really cared for others. Baba Sharif had been showing him another way of living, but he saw now it was demanding too much.

The customer left all too soon. Akram turned to Faqir, put his arm around him and led him into the dingy shop. "Listen, Faqir. When your *zan* came, we thought you were going to be in Kabul for a long time. Your landlord came by and apparently the family had to leave ... Baba Sharif knew he had to help them find a place to stay."

Faqir cursed Akram, "Bullshit! Somebody's hiding them, I'm sure. You're just making all this up! All this stuff about the landlord and Baba Sharif helping my family. You think the landlord would have forced them out when I was away?"

Akram stayed calm, "Do you want me to help you find your family, Faqir? I'm telling you the truth, Baba Sharif contacted his relatives who are living in a village somewhere in tribal territory, in the mountains. He is as *sharif* (noble) as anyone could be. He really cares for people."

Faqir coughed bitterly, "Cares? Nobody cares for anyone. Everyone's in it for themselves!"

Akram winced inwardly, as if a knife had stabbed his back. He continued, "One of Baba Sharif's relatives took them to that village. They're staying there. I don't even know where it is. Look, Faqir, it's late now. Come back tomorrow. I'll talk with Baba Sharif, okay?"

Faqir laughed bitterly as he snarled at Akram. "You think I believe you? I never found those killers, but this is different. My wife and children are gone. Someone has taken them. Someone is hiding them. This time, I'll cross the seven seas to find them. Akram!" Faqir's eyes burned with fury. He lowered his voice, "I

warn you, Akram, keep an eye on your sons!” And with that he stormed down the street.

Akram’s heart pounded. His throat was dry. Nothing was working! He had started to help this family. Baba Sharif had gotten him into it. He had hoped to gather some deeds to cover his shameful past. But now everything was falling apart—his life, his family and, worst of all, his past was unraveling. His knees buckled under him.

## *Chapter Six*

### **A Different Fall**

#### **He fell willingly**

**K**aihan and Farid ignored their father's change of temper, though it seemed odd he was so nervous. They were glad to leave the shop. They raced to Baba Sharif's house, each one trying to be the first to knock on the door. Baba Sharif greeted them with his usual smile and welcomed them in.

"So you liked the story about Kaka Awrang and Kaka Badrow?" Baba Sharif asked Kaihan and Farid as soon as the boys sat down. "Tell me, what did you like about it?"

Farid did not hesitate to answer, "Badrow was the winner. He could have killed Awrang, but he didn't. He showed everyone how tough and how good he was."

Baba Sharif was quiet. They still wanted to be tough champions like everyone else. "Boys, the story I will tell you today is different from all the others. It is another very old story. Maybe it's just a legend, I don't know. Some say it happened hundreds of years ago, even before Sultan Husain Bayqara was king of Herat."

“Another Herati story?” Kaihan interrupted, eager to hear another wrestling legend.

“No, it wasn’t in Herat. It happened in India, though this famous wrestler came from Khiva, a city in ancient Khwarazm. Do you know where that is?”

Both Farid and Kaihan shook their heads.

“It’s not in Afghanistan. Khiva used to be part of a huge Persian empire. It’s a city close to the Caspian Sea, somewhere in present-day Uzbekistan. The story is very old. Nowadays you can hear many different legends about this wrestler.”

“Who was he?” Farid asked.

“His name was Mahmud Purya Wali.<sup>17</sup> I mentioned his name a few weeks ago,” Baba Sharif continued. “Nowadays in Khiva they hardly think of him as a wrestler. They remember him as a great poet and a musician. Maybe he was. But, most wrestlers today remember that he was a superb champion. They say Purya was the greatest wrestler throughout the Persian empire during his day. He knew hundreds of wrestling techniques and even wrote a book about it. Too bad it’s lost. I’ve often wished I could have seen that book, because he knew amazing wrestling techniques.”

“What do you mean?” both boys asked eagerly.

Baba Sharif continued slowly, “Wrestling was the public sport of all the great Persian cities—Herat, Nishapur, Khiva, Bukhara— and so on. They say Purya Wali had about forty student wrestlers. He trained them well and they traveled together from city to city for competitions. In each city, Purya won. He always won. A real champion, his back never touched the ground. Purya was a true hero for the entire Persian world. His fame spread all the way to India as well. The story goes that a young wrestler from India heard about this undefeated champion. Many called this young upstart crazy because he



wanted to fight with Purya. But he was determined to wrestle with the great Persian champion.”

“Why would he want to do that? Purya would easily defeat him, wouldn’t he?” asked Farid.

“Maybe he was like Kaka Awrang, or that other wrestler in Herat, what was his name?” Kaihan mused.

“You mean Abu Saeed?” Baba Sharif answered.

“Yes,” Kaihan spoke up. “They all wanted to be the best, like you said, Baba. They were so proud they couldn’t accept any other rivals. They could never lose.”

Baba Sharif nodded quietly and thought to himself. Maybe the boys were actually beginning to learn. He continued, “I think this young upstart had won a few competitions in his city, Multan. Multan used to be part of India. Maybe someone dared him to challenge Purya, I don’t know. Anyway, Purya was proud too. When he heard about the challenge from this young weakling, he was insulted. He sent a message back in the form of a two-line poem, the last line says,

*I and my elders, we’re strong and supreme,  
I wouldn’t buy the whole of India for one grain of barley!*<sup>2</sup>

“Purya was too arrogant to take up the challenge from an unknown upstart. That was stooping low for nothing. But the legend says that a few days later he had a dream that he should accept the challenge. So Purya and his student wrestlers traveled all the way to Multan. This is where the challenge had come from. They were given a royal welcome, feast and music. Even the king of Multan attended the feast. On the evening before the competition, Purya was relaxing up on the roof of the guesthouse when he heard an old woman weeping and praying. He listened

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<sup>2</sup> آن جا که من و همت پیران من است یک جو نخرم جو نه و هندوستان را



Purya Wali walked over to where she was and spoke quietly,  
'Woman, be at peace'

closely. He heard her cry out, ‘Oh God, tomorrow do not let my son be shamed by this champion, Purya.’”

“It was this young wrestler’s mother?” Kaihan blurted out. “What did Purya say?”

Baba Sharif hesitated a moment, then continued, “He walked over to where she was and spoke quietly, ‘Woman, be at peace, God will hear your prayers.’”

“What did he mean by that? How could Purya say that?” Farid objected.

“Just wait, Farid *Jan*, wait. The next morning, a large crowd came out to watch the match. It was almost like an international tournament—Indian wrestlers against the Persians. First, Purya’s students wrestled with each other and with other trainees from India. Then Purya wrestled with some of his students. He easily threw each one to the ground. Everyone saw how strong and powerful he was. They all cheered for this great fighter. Then this young upstart entered the wrestling ring. He looked so small. As the two faced each other, Purya grabbed the young wrestler’s arms. He was surprised how soft and weak they felt, like butter!”

Farid and Kaihan laughed, “Purya must have just thrown him with a flick of the finger!”

Baba Sharif shook his head, “No, Farid and Kaihan. It didn’t happen that way. They started to tangle. Then suddenly Purya slipped and then his knees buckled.”

“He slipped! How could he? Didn’t he get up right away?” asked Farid.

The old man continued slowly, “First his knees touched the ground. Then, when he tried to get up, he slipped and fell flat on his back. His shoulders hit the ground. The young wrestler saw his chance. Immediately he sat down on Purya’s chest, Purya’s shoulders flat on the ground. The crowd was shocked. Purya’s students were horrified. Their master, the greatest champion of all, had lost. Purya quietly stepped out of the arena. But first, he

raised the young wrestler's hands up, giving the championship to his opponent."

Farid and Kaihan stared at Baba Sharif in silence. What a strange story!

"After that, Purya's wrestling students disappeared. Their master lost and that was a shame. They couldn't handle it. Something had gone terribly wrong."

"They couldn't lose, like you said the other day. Everyone wants to be a champion." Farid commented.

"So that's it – just a story about how this champion fell?" asked Kaihan, wondering why Purya had lost.

"No, no, the story does not end here," Baba Sharif continued. "The Multan king wanted to entertain Purya with royal Multan hospitality. The next morning, the king invited him to join him on a hunting trip. Kings loved to hunt animals, especially deer. The two men rode their horses and soon came to a wide stream. The king's horse got spooked and in a panic was about to leap over the stream. Purya saw that the king was going to fall off the horse and get hurt. Purya jumped off his own horse and grabbed the king's horse's back legs with his arms. He held the horse back. It was no small horse. The king was astonished and noticed Purya's extraordinary strength. He wondered why Purya had lost to the young upstart the day before, and so he asked him about it. At first Purya was quiet, but then related this poem to the king:

*If you can rule your own spirit (nafs), you're a man  
And if you don't seek fault in another, you're a man  
A real man does not kick someone who has fallen  
If you take the hand of the fallen, you're a man<sup>18</sup>*

گر بر سر نفس خود امیری، مردی

ور بر دگری نکته نگیری، مردی

مردی نبود فتاده را پای زدن

گر دست فتاده ای بگیری، مردی



Purya jumped off his own horse and grabbed the king's horse's back legs with his arms.

“But why did he do that? Did he really let the young wrestler win? That’s crazy!” Kaihan responded, frustrated with such a strange ending.

Baba Sharif stretched out his arms and hugged both boys. “Kaihan and Farid, I have been telling you about falling. When I first heard this story I didn’t like it either. Purya lost. I think he actually allowed himself to lose, to fall to the ground. He seemed like a coward.”

“But he wasn’t, was he?” Farid wondered.

“Boys, it’s late. But just let me say one thing. I’ve told you before that winning is more than muscle power. There’s another way to become a hero, a greater way. I heard someone say this about heroes and sacrifice, ‘A champion may be worth thousands, but when someone willingly puts his life in danger for someone else’s sake, that’s a real champion.’ When Purya willingly lost the wrestling match, he did it so the young wrestler could win. Wrestling was Purya’s life. He was a champion, always a champion. To lose was like losing his life. But that’s what Purya did.

“But he didn’t just lose. He actually gave it away. Willingly. He who sacrifices himself for someone else, even if they are his enemy, is the ultimate champion. He has performed the greatest heroic deed possible in the world.”<sup>19</sup>

The boys looked confused. Baba Sharif sat up and continued, “That’s what Purya did, isn’t it? He sacrificed himself. Well boys, it’s late tonight. You need to go home. When you come back next time, I’ll tell you another story. It’s not like the Purya story, it’s much sadder.”

## They smashed my feet!

The next day, Farhid and Kaihan finished their homework as fast as they could. Farid threw his books into the corner and jumped up, “Kaihan, let’s go!”

Deep in thought, Akram glanced up as he heard Farid’s commotion and yelled, “Oh son, calm down! Watch your books. Where are you going?”

“To Baba Sharif’s house, for another story. He said we could come today.”

Akram was tired, but a worried look crossed his face. “Let me go with you today, okay?” Maybe that would help him get his mind off Faqir and his own past.

Farid and Kaihan didn’t understand why their father seemed so worried, but were glad that he would come along. The three made their way to the elderly man’s home.

“Akram *Saheb!* Great that you joined your sons today! Your sons have kept me busy with all these wrestling stories!” Baba Sharif’s warm voice greeted them.

“Hope you’ll make them real champions some day!” Akram answered, letting out a hollow laugh. He was in no mood for talking today.

Baba Sharif welcomed the threesome into his house. But his voice was quieter than usual as he began the story, “Today I’ll tell you about a great champion who came back to Kabul from Arabia. They called him Mufrid.<sup>20</sup> You know what that means?”

“No,” both boys shook their heads.

“It’s the same as your name, Farid!” Baba Sharif elbowed the young lad gently. “Do you know what ‘Farid’ means?”

Farid again shook his head and mumbled, “It’s just a name, isn’t it?”

Baba Sharif chuckled. “It’s a great name. I don’t know if your father knows what it means, do you, Akram?”

“Never really thought about it,” Akram answered. “It has something to do with being a good person, like being a single or the only champion, right?”

“Farid means unique, single, one. Mufrid also means that – a person who is the one and only one in something. That’s what this *pahlawan* was. He really was unique, especially in club fights. He could swing his mace so hard that it smashed anything in its way. They said his club weighed over thirty kilos. When he came back from Arabia, we wrestlers in Kabul heard about him, how strong and how well-built his body was.”

“So did you fight with him?” Farid asked curiously.

“Just wait, I’ll tell you what happened,” Baba Sharif spoke softly, but with a slight embarrassment in his voice. This made the boys more curious than ever. “When Mufrid returned to Kabul, I had become quite a champion in our area – Chahar Dehi. We wouldn’t just have wrestling matches, but club fights too. Some of these fights were actually quite terrible, bloody matches.”

“Did you ever get hurt?” Farid asked.

Baba Sharif was quiet and then said softly, “Boys, let me tell you the story. It was terrible.”

“You never lost a match, did you? You were the champion of champions, right?” Kaihan asked proudly.

“Well, I thought I was,” Baba Sharif answered quietly. “Anyway, when Mufrid arrived, he showed off his skills and techniques on the streets. Sometimes he would shout out loud on the street, challenging others to fight him. Everybody thought he was a champion like Rustam – you boys know about Rustam, don’t you?”

“Of course,” shouted Farid immediately, “He was the greatest hero of Iran, wasn’t he?”



“He actually came from Zabul, they say, and his mother was from Kabul, maybe that’s not so important,” Baba Sharif added. “But as for his ...”

Kaihan interrupted, “He never, ever lost a battle, did he?”

“Well, that depends on what you mean by losing,” Baba Sharif said. “Some evening, ask me about Rustam and I will tell you some of the greatest and maybe saddest stories of our culture. Rustam was a superb hero, and when I was young, I thought he was the greatest, the most undefeatable hero in the world. I wanted to be like him, to shout and challenge anybody who came my way.”

“So what happened when this Mufrid came to your area?” asked Farid, anxious to hear the story.

“The news spread to our *wakil* (area chief, head) that a champion from Arabia had come to our area. The *wakil* invited him to his large courtyard and offered him real hospitality. The *wakil* loved wrestling. We often wrestled in front of him. But when the chief welcomed Mufrid, I got quite upset. He had always given me favors when I wrestled in his presence. But now he was paying attention to a new wrestler. I didn’t like that. Kaihan *Jan*, Farid *Jan*, in my heart there was a bitter spirit. I was full of envy. I told you before about envy and jealous, remember?”

“You said it’s like poison!” Farid stated proudly.

Baba Sharif nodded, “You’re right. It will kill you if you don’t get rid of it. It was killing me. I couldn’t stand it when I saw someone else becoming successful. This new wrestler, Mufrid, started receiving special rewards from the *wakil*, the kind of rewards I used to get from winning my wrestling matches. One day I approached the *wakil* and told him that I wanted to fight Mufrid. But Mufrid didn’t want to fight me.”

“Why not?” asked Kaihan. “He must have been afraid!”

“You know, boys, I come from a religious family. My father and grandfather were spiritual men who would pray for others. They said that our ancestors were special saints and holy men. People even paid them for their prayers. I never understood that. But Mufrid had heard that I came from such a religious family. That’s why he didn’t want to fight me. But I wouldn’t give up. I was determined to fight with Mufrid. I thought he was just looking for excuses. I wanted to be number one, the champion of all champions. I wanted to show everyone that I could beat Mufrid. But Mufrid refused. I’m ashamed to tell you boys, but one time I gathered my friends together and we made an ambush attack on Mufrid with our knives.”

“Did you kill him?” Kaihan sounded shocked at the story. Why would Baba Sharif have attacked Mufrid like that? In his mind he wondered if that was not cowardly, to ambush someone with knives.

“Kaihan, thank God, I didn’t kill him.”

Akram shifted nervously as he thought to himself, *Why does everything have to remind me of my past?*

Baba Sharif continued, “When I think of it now, I am really ashamed. I wounded him badly; one of my stabs pierced his kidney. It was awful. The *wakil* was really very upset at what had happened. He sent Mufrid to the best doctor in Kabul for treatment. He soon got better. But Mufrid still wouldn’t fight with me. When I think of it now, he was a real *kaka*, a hero through and through. He actually went to the *wakil* and told him to ignore what I had done, to let it be.

“He was like Kaka Badrow, wasn’t he? He could have fought but he didn’t.” Kaihan suggested.

“He was better than Kaka Badrow,” Baba Sharif said quietly.

“So did you become friends with him?” asked Farid.

“I wish, Farid *Jan*, but I was too stubborn, too bent on being a champion, or at least, what I thought was a champion.”

“So you challenged him again?” Farid continued.

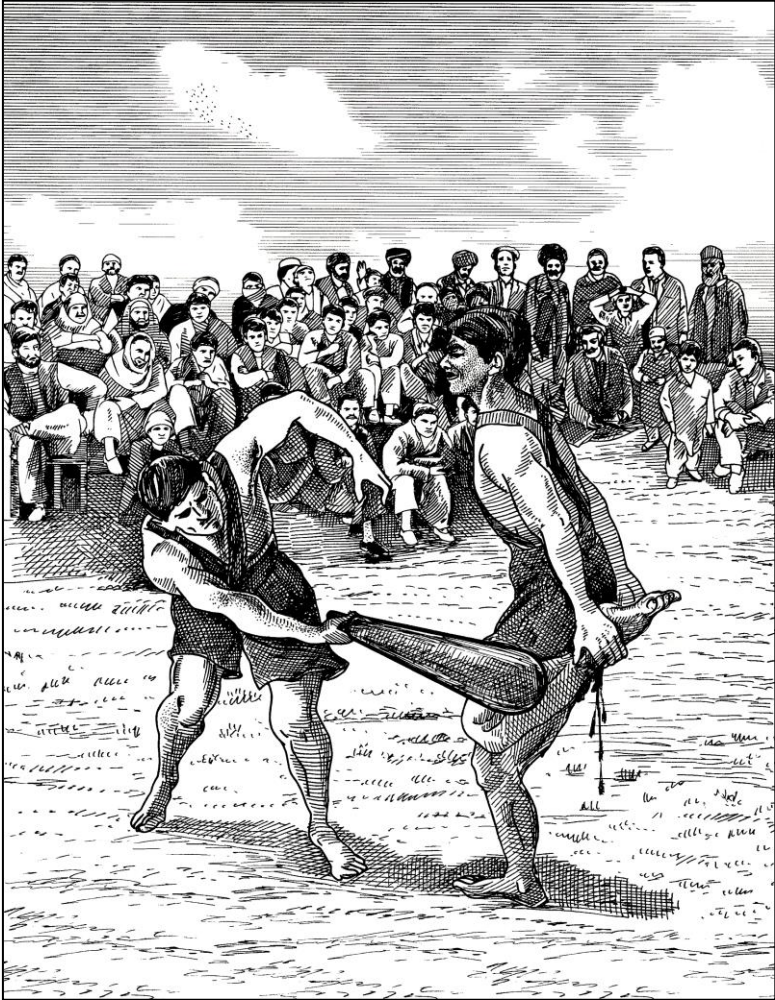
Baba Sharif lowered his voice even more, “Boys, I’ve told you about falling, and falling again. I was blind, foolishly blind. I told the *wakil* that as long as I couldn’t battle with Mufrid, there’s no way that I could be a friend with him. Finally, he convinced Mufrid to take up the challenge and so we agreed to fight. It was in a big public square so lots of people came to see. When the duel began, I was excited. Here was my chance to prove to everyone that I was the best, a true champion. But that Mufrid really was a champion. He knew how to fight. I delivered one blow after another. I went straight for his head. But this Mufrid deflected each one. He was swift and jumped away from my blows like a light-footed deer. I could see that he did not want to attack me, but I didn’t give up. I then took my club and threw it at him as if it were a spear. He deflected my club, caught it and raised it high up. He had enough of my arrogance and wanted to end the fight. He smashed that club on my right ankle with all his might. That was the hardest blow I had ever felt in my life. I could hear the bones in my foot crush like pulp. I crumbled to my knees.

I had never fallen before. I tried to stand up, but I couldn’t. I fell to my knees again. Once more, I stood up on my right foot, but my broken foot just swung loosely. Hung from my leg like a limp rag. You could actually hear the crowd sigh in horror. The fight was over. I hobbled off the arena and noticed the *wakil*. I knew what he was thinking. I lowered my head. I had lost.”

Kaihan and Farid were quiet. What could they say? They felt so bad that their hero, Baba Sharif had lost a match.

Baba Sharif slowly bent over and pulled up his pant legs. “Look boys,” as he pointed to a few ugly gashes that crisscrossed his leg, still easily visible many decades later. “My foot never was the same again.”

“Did you never fight after that, Baba Sharif?” asked Farid.



Mufrid smashed that club on my right ankle with all his might.

Baba Sharif's lips broke into a sad smile, "I wish I could have, but that was my last match."

Farid's face fell, "You don't have anymore wrestling stories, then?"

Baba Sharif chuckled, "Don't worry, Farid, I have many other stories, not just wrestling ones. You must be tired of these, aren't you? Come back in a few days and we'll see what story comes to mind."

## Chapter Seven

### The Confrontation

#### The strange nightmare

**A**kram tossed and turned on his *toshak*. Sleep refused to come. He lay quietly and listened to his children breathing peacefully. He thought of his sons' many visits to Baba Sharif. He clenched his fists again. Some of these stories jabbed him deeply. Kaihan had told him so innocently, "Kaka Badrow could have killed Awrang, but he didn't. He could have, but didn't!" And now there was this Mufrid. He didn't kill his opponent, even though he could have. *But I killed Ehsan! I did! Oh God, Faqir must not find out. Baba Sharif must not know. No one must know about it.*"

Akram had to keep it covered. He pulled his blanket tightly over him, fearful that someone could see or hear his thoughts. As he drifted into a restless and fitful sleep, he dreamed.



*Akram heard the crowds cheer as he wrapped his arms around the rival's legs. With a powerful lunge, he heaved the*

*opposing wrestler so hard to the ground the crowd fell silent. Akram stood up, straight and tall. Champion again. He was tough and strong, he had learned well the tricks and trade of wrestling. The town and the surrounding area often gossiped about Akram's cunning skill as a champion wrestler. He loved the cheers in the wrestling arenas when he threw his rivals to the dust.*

*Akram caught his breath. Where was he? He saw himself in a very different arena, a place where he had never been before. Millions of stars in the sky twinkled as if the entire world were watching him. Akram looked around him. He was not alone. A new rival stood before him. He had never seen this rival in his life. Piercing eyes, unusually muscular and intimidating, yet curiously handsome. Who was he? Where had he come from? How had he arrived here? Akram saw his own children on the sidelines, and everyone else's children too.*

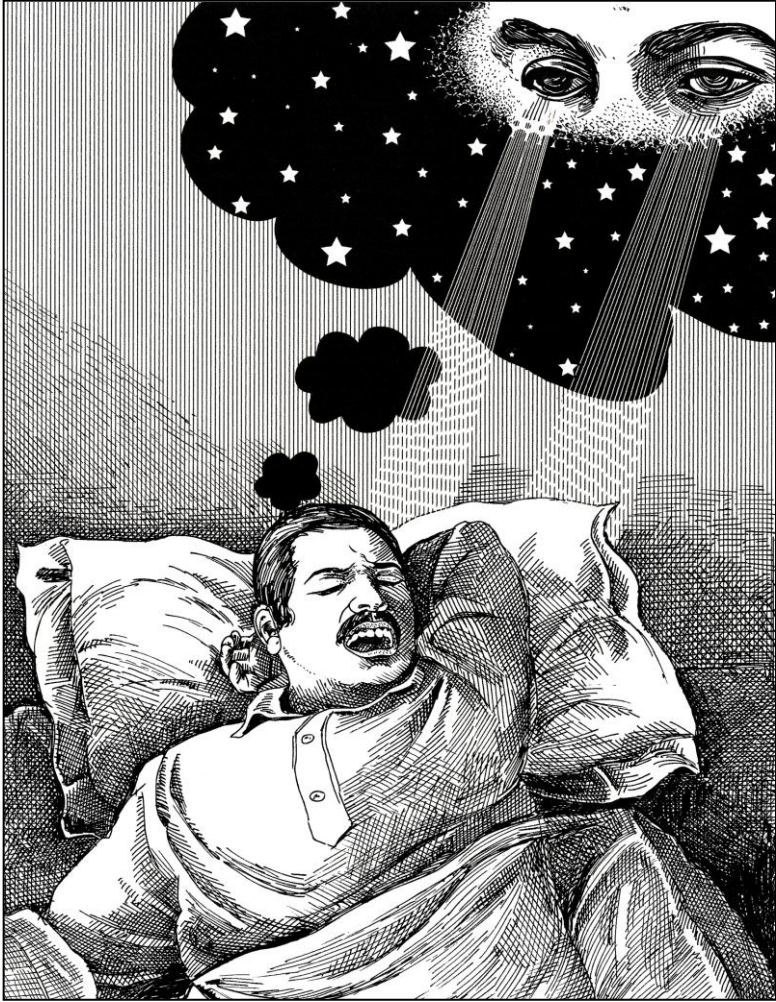
*He froze! He saw Baba Sharif. Why was he here? Akram knew he had to face this wrestler he had never met before in his life. In front of Baba Sharif and everyone else.*

*Akram had never lost. All his life he had schemed. He had never been caught. But now, there was no escape. Nowhere else to turn. He could not hide. He could not run. He trembled. How could he confront this strange but daunting opponent? Akram yelled out, hiding his fear, "What is your name? Who are you?"*

*He heard the stranger shout his name, "I am Heaven!"*

*Heaven? Who was that? Was this stranger real, or was Akram merely imagining him? Had this stranger come to wrestle him? Why? Which trick or ruse would he have up his sleeve?*

*But Akram had to confront him. Heaven approached him slowly, a powerful wrestler unlike anyone Akram had ever seen. Somehow Heaven could peer right through him. So much*



In his dream, millions of stars in the sky twinkled as if the entire world were watching him.



*of his life, Akram had lived two lives—an outer life, the one that people could see, and a hidden life that no one knew. Most people liked him. His speech was smooth and courteous, his behavior worthy of praise. This was the natural way, simply making good impressions on others. But then there was that other world, his hidden life, his bloody hands and his plotting and scheming to cover it all up. He had masked it well. No one knew what was inside him. No one had ever seen his bloody hands, the hands that he had killed with. Not only had he killed, but he had tried to kill the very thought of what he had done. He had tried to murder the conscience of his heart. But Heaven saw it all, straight through his outer life to the hidden mess inside. Heaven knew Akram. With one penetrating glare and a stroke of his powerful hand, Heaven stripped off Akram's masks of pretension.*

*First, Heaven grabbed Akram's mask of kindness. People knew that Akram's hands were open, that he helped the poor—at least they appeared that way. What an image of kindness he had created! But did he really care for others? Whenever he didn't want to help someone, he simply said that he had no money to give or that he was busy. Whatever was in his hands, he would gladly have given it. He, with his open, willing hands and sweet words – all shows of sacrifice, when in fact he always calculated what he gave and expected praise in return. Whatever he did, he cared for one thing, to hear the word afarin!*

*Then, Heaven went for his tongue, and with it his mask of truthfulness. Akram's sweet words were memorized clichés to stay in harmony with the crowds and not to rock the boat or have people bother him. His outward piety looked good but had little bearing on his life. Akram saw his own tongue, a slippery, oily little vessel. It moved anyway that he wanted it to. The point was that today, this very moment, he would say*

*whatever he had to say in order to get what he needed. The tongue knew nothing of the heart and the heart knew nothing of the tongue. Now this vile, little devilish mask lay squirming on the ground.*

*Akram felt the knife-like eyes of Heaven pierce through him. How putrid and ugly he felt, exposed and naked. In despair he tried to wrap himself with his arms, to cover his nakedness, but alas, it was in vain. That penetrating gaze!*

*How dared Heaven invade his world? Akram cowered before Heaven. In utter shame, he threw up his hands to cover his face, his body. But as Akram held his hands close to his face, his heart sank in anguish. His hands – he had never seen them so hideous—dirtied, stained, from twenty years back. Nothing had been able to wash them clean. They were stained forever.*

*Akram flayed his hands wildly, wringing them in vain. Heaven's eyes drew close as Akram tried desperately to cover his body one more time. Akram turned away; he closed his eyes. With one blow the mysterious wrestler felled him. Akram felt himself falling, exposed and naked. He groped at everything near him, anything to cover himself. With his hands, his arms, his face, he tried to hide himself. Oh the shame, the whole world was watching. But there was no escape. He had never fallen like this before, like falling into a bottomless pit.*

*Suddenly his back slammed into the dirt. He dared not look up, but Heaven's penetrating eyes would not let him hide. What eyes! Fierce, but true! Terrible but gentle at the same time. Eyes that knew it all, yet, somehow, were filled with love. In desperation, longing to hide, Akram screamed ...*

Akram screamed and pulled the sheets to cover him. He had been exposed. He lay in a sweat of fear and horror. Had they seen it? Did everyone know now?

His wife grumbled, "What's all the noise? Let me sleep."

It was still another hour before the morning roosters would welcome the dawn. But sleep had left him. He crawled out of bed and stepped outside into the darkness. Who was that mysterious wrestler? Where had all those masks come from? Never before had he seen the ugliness behind the masks. Never before had he even seen any masks at all. The hidden ugliness was putrid, toxic like poison, and it had destroyed his soul. How could he clean himself? He wrung his hands. This nightmare had been the most appalling experience in his life. Never before had he seen such dirty, bloody stains. He had to wash himself. But how often he had washed his hands! All his life he had washed them religiously and ceremoniously. But his hands were still stained! What could he do? It was almost as if he could feel blood drip from his hands. Oh, for pure water to wash this filthy witness from his hands? He cried in silent despair, "Oh God, look at these hands! They tear out my heart. If only the water from some mighty river could wash my hands clean! But, no! Impossible! Instead, my hands stain every river on earth."

In the morning he had to talk with Baba Sharif again. He could not handle this torture. He would tell Baba everything.

### **Where's Farid?**

Akram wrapped his shawl tightly around his shoulders. He shivered as a brisk wind howled around the street corner and tugged at his baggy pants. He felt tired. He had slept restlessly last night and the dreadful nightmare bothered him all day. The questions were relentless. Who was Heaven? How did he know everything? How had this stranger ripped off all those masks? He

was ready to close down the shop earlier and visit Baba Sharif, but every tiny sale—even if it profited only a few coins—was necessary to pay his rent. It was late afternoon. He had wanted Kaihan and Farid to come watch the shop for him, but they hadn't come home from school yet. Listlessly he locked up the shop anyway. He couldn't fight his conscience any longer.

Akram knocked on Baba Sharif's door and waited. He knew Baba Sharif would listen.

"Come in, come in," Baba Sharif welcomed him warmly and quickly offered him a cup of tea. "What's on your mind, Akram? You look very worried."

Akram wasn't going to beat around the bush this time. "Baba Sharif, I couldn't sleep last night. In fact, I haven't slept much the last few nights. I've told you lots about my life, my family, my wife and the problems we have. You've listened, you've cared ... I've learned so much from you. But Baba Sharif, there's stuff you don't know. I've kept it hidden for years. It's terrible, the stuff I've hidden." Akram wrung his hands nervously, as he struggled to push back the tears. He continued, "My conscience, I tried to ignore it, push it aside, ... but I can't. It's there, always there, every day, every night, and it's shouting louder and louder. It's ... Baba Sharif, you don't know it, but ... but ...twenty years ago ... I ... I killed ..."

Baba Sharif waited quietly, not wanting to push his friend.

Akram wept as he spilled the story to Baba Sharif. He told him everything. About the kite-flying, the football game, that bloody afternoon with the wooden clubs, the horrific revelation that Faqir was Ehsan's older brother and now the horrendous nightmare.

"Baba Sharif, I don't know what to do. My life is ruined. My family doesn't know, my boys don't, and Faqir must never, never find out. But ..."

Baba Sharif took a deep breath and poured another cup of tea for Akram. “Akram, you know the old saying. I don’t really accept it, but I remember my uncle used to say, *‘If you sin and succeed, it’s really no sin, but if you sin and don’t get away with it, then you have to make up for it, atone for it somehow.’*”

Akram rubbed his face roughly, “Yes, I’ve heard it too. It’s gone through my mind a hundred times, again and again. I thought I had gotten away with it. No one knows, but ....”

Baba Sharif smiled sadly, “Yes, you’re right, you never succeed. Even if no one else knows.”

Akram sighed painfully, “I got away with it, but my conscience never did. Never.”

Baba Sharif spoke very gently, “There’s only one way to make up for it, Akram. It’s the hardest thing you’ll ever do, but also the gutsiest. We talk highly about real guts, Akram. Everybody says they’re so brave, gutsy and tough. But as we say, “Just get off your high horse and calm down.” Akram, real guts means to be true, true to your conscience, true to what happened. You have to ...”

“Akram! Akram! Quick, come!” Both Akram and Baba Sharif shuddered in fright. The sudden scream outside shattered their intimate and intense words. It was Fariba. Her shrieks betrayed a horror Akram had never before heard from her. Akram jumped to his feet. As soon as he opened the door, he saw Fariba stumbling passed the gate, frantically trying to keep her shawl on.

“Akram! Akram! Kaihan just came home, ... but ...Farid ...” Fariba’s body convulsed and shook. She slumped into Akram’s arms.

“What’s wrong, Fariba? Where’s Farid? He didn’t come home? Where is he?” Akram yelled. He grabbed Fariba, almost ferociously, his eyes piercing with rage.

Baba Sharif tried to hold him back, “Akram, calm down! Your anger won’t get you anywhere.”

Ignoring Baba Sharif, he left Fariba to limp back home on her own as he dashed down the street. He had to find Kaihan. He yanked the gate open and yelled, “Kaihan, Kaihan! Come here, right now! Come! Tell me, what happened? Where’s Farid?” Akram’s voice shook with anger. He was about to grab Kaihan and beat him hard for not watching Farid carefully, but he stopped in his tracks. Kaihan was huddling in the corner, his shoulders shaking as he wept uncontrollably.

Akram quieted his voice though his whole body was shaking with horror. He whispered harshly, “Tell me Kaihan, where is your brother?”

Kaihan could hardly talk as tears rolled down his stained face. “Farid and I ... were walking ... walking home from school with our friend. Then ... then ... suddenly, two men stood in front of us ... and ...,” Kaihan swallowed.

“Who were they, Kaihan? Where did they go?” Akram roared impatiently.

Kaihan wiped his eyes and stared up at his father, his face an ashen white. Hardly able to speak, he stammered, “Th ... th-they tried to ... to ... to grab me ... me too, b-b ... but I got away and ran ... so did my friend, but ...” He shook his head and broke out in sobs.

Akram cursed himself. He knew he should have watched his sons and picked them up from school. Now it was his turn to search. An uncontrollable fury welled up within him. It must have been that wretched Faqir. He would not leave any stone untouched until he found Farid. Without a further thought, he slammed the door and headed outside. Fariba had just reached the gate. He grit his teeth and then spat bitterly, “You, *zan*, you! You let that woman leave her carpet loom here. You made us

look bad. Why didn't you get the boys? You let them come home alone! You should have known ...." He had to blame someone.

He rudely grabbed her arm and in a rage, twisted it so hard that she crumbled under the pain. He lost control and beat her mercilessly. "Akram! Stop it! Stop! We must find Farid!" Fariba screamed.

But Akram was not listening. He ignored his confession with Baba Sharif, though deep down Baba's words nagged him. He forced them aside. He had to absolve himself of the terrible nightmare he had lived through the night before. And now he was facing another, even worse nightmare. With everything crashing down on him, Akram lost his senses. With a terrifying roar, he leaped at Fariba like a tiger and kicked her viciously. Grabbing her hands, he threw her into the hallway and stormed outside.

He didn't know where he was going. Cursing Faqir under his breath, he said to himself maliciously, "Faqir, if I catch you, you'll forget about the brother I killed. I will slice you from head to toe and let you suffer, you gutless, godless creep! How dare you lay hands on my son!" Akram shook with blind rage. He only saw blood before him. He would bloody the whole world to find his son and take revenge on Faqir.

He rounded the corner where Baba Sharif lived, where he had shared so intimately just several minutes earlier. But the time to talk was over. Baba Sharif's talk was too gentle, too soft. No, he would not let anyone convince him otherwise. Now was the time for revenge, the time to prove who the champion, the hero on the street really is. He had held back from pounding Faqir's face. He even had tried to support and help the wretch, but no more. Akram turned back and hurried to his shop. Baba Sharif would have told him to leave it there, to leave it alone. But, no, now was the time to take it up again. He opened the creaky door and reached behind the drawer. The dagger glistened, even in the late

afternoon sunlight. As he wiped it carefully across his hands, he sneered bitterly. He quickly tucked it behind his pants and stormed down the street again.

Hour after hour, Akram stormed up one alley after another. He did all he could do to contain himself as he asked shopkeepers in the market for any sign of Faqir. Everyone shrugged their shoulders. Some even chuckled, as they had already heard the story of Faqir's family disappearing. No one was going to involve himself in this new feud.

The wind had stopped and the moon was slowly climbing over the sky, casting eerie shadows on the narrow alleyways. He could hear the slam of overhead doors, as one shopkeeper after another closed up shop. It was late. Time to return home. But Akram wandered on.

Suddenly, he noticed a shadowy figure slither his way into a narrow footpath. Akram stopped in his tracks. He held his breath. Reaching to his side, he felt his dagger securely in its sheath. With nimble steps he tried to slip past the footpath and sneak behind a bend, but before he rounded the corner, the man leaped out on to the street.

Faqir stood before him and shouted, "I told you to find them!" To Akram's horror, Faqir was sporting a cricket bat. He raised it high and sneered, "Smells like stew, hot *korma*. It's time to get somebody's head ready for the broth!"

Akram wasted no time. He drew his dagger and lunged at Faqir. But Faqir was ready. He quickly stepped back but stuck out his foot. Akram tripped over him and stumbled onto the street. Even before he hit the dirt, he spun around and leapt back on to his feet. Faqir swung his cricket bat with utmost force, but he had miscalculated Akram's agile reaction. The bat whistled as it whirled through the air and smashed on to the street, cracking in two. Akram snarled bitterly, "You're a loser, just like that bat. Now tell me where my son is, or I'll slice you like an onion."



Faqir dared to step closer and then, in a flash, he pulled out a dagger from his side. He whipped it so fast, it nicked Akram's shirt before he could draw back. Akram fingered the ripped shirt and felt the blood ooze from a small cut. It wasn't deep, but it enraged him more than ever. Nothing mattered anymore. He would get rid of this miserable scoundrel who didn't deserve to be called a human. Kill him and forever remove the last reminder that was torturing his heart and mind. Recklessly Akram flayed his dagger at Faqir. Alas, too reckless. The dagger slipped from his hands and flew into the dark gutter.

Faqir lunged at him. Akram had to get away. He knew Faqir had lost all sanity—and his son was in Faqir's control. Akram turned and dashed down the street. There was nothing he could do but run for cover. He sped down one alley and across another, slipping away from Faqir's sight. As he reached Baba Sharif's house, he pounded on the door and waited, holding his breath. It seemed an hour before the door opened. Baba Sharif had no time to welcome him as Akram slipped inside. Baba Sharif was about to close the door when Faqir suddenly appeared. His eyes bloodshot and face contorted, he tried to force his way in, cursing Akram.

### **Blood or tears?**

Baba Sharif stood his ground. He would not let Faqir pass him. Faqir was breathing furiously, the dagger shaking in his hand. He raised it high as he pushed his way passed the old man to attack Akram.

Baba Sharif looked straight at the intruder, "Faqir, put that dagger down!"

Faqir ignored him and cursed again, "Out of my way old man, before you get hurt. If I let Akram out of here alive, I'm not Faqir! He's a thief! A kidnapper!"

Akram retorted immediately, “Who’s the thief? Who’s the gutless cow, Faqir? Who’s the kidnapper? Speak for yourself. You don’t even know your wife.” For a moment Akram recalled how he had beaten his own wife. It shamed him more than he could bear.

“Get lost!” snarled Faqir. “You know where my family is! You’re the dirty one!”

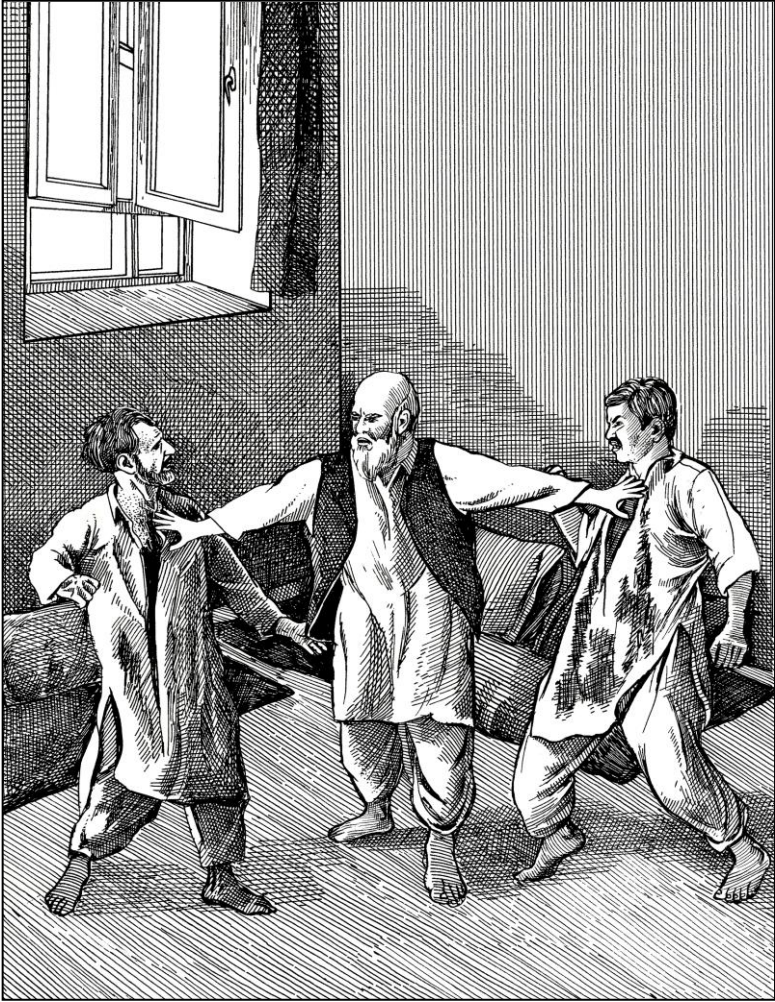
Akram had not wanted to fight in front of Baba Sharif, but no backing down now. He bristled at Faqir, “I say it again, tell me where my son is. If not, right here, here’s the line and here’s the *maidan*. Let’s fight it out and see who’s the dirty one.”

Faqir grabbed his dagger tightly. The two circled each other, like wolves baring their teeth, ready to attack.

Baba Sharif forced himself between the two men, pushed them apart and held out both hands as if he was the referee, “You will do no such thing. Do you hear? Again, put that dagger down, or ...”

Faqir tried to brush off the elderly man, but before he knew it, Baba Sharif resorted to one of his best wrestling tricks and Faqir lay flat on the ground. His dagger fell away. Akram laughed and was about to lunge at his enemy, but Baba Sharif was not going to allow his house to become a bloody *maidan*. With another nimble move, he grabbed Akram’s hip and yanked as hard as he could. In an instant, both men, Faqir and Akram lay flat on the ground, with Baba Sharif standing over them, his hands at his side. “Okay, men. Stop acting like cowards. Both of you, get up. Akram you sit there, and Faqir you sit on the other side. You want a *maidan*? This will be no bloody *maidan*. That is finished. Far too much blood has been shed. Fighting is over. In my *maidan* we talk, we listen, we pray ... we’re men! But we do not fight. Is that clear?”

Deep down Akram respected Baba Sharif and brushing off his clothes, he meekly sat cross-legged on one of the *toshaks*. Faqir



Baba Sharif was not going to allow his house to become a bloody  
*maidan.*

had little choice but to oblige. Both men sat there glaring at each other, neither saying a word. Both hating and being hated.

Baba Sharif knew the hostility between the two was beyond his power to handle, but he couldn't leave them alone now. They would kill each other. Baba Sharif spoke slowly, but forcefully. "Akram, you're a shopkeeper. You've been helping Faqir and his family. What's happened that he's so furious at you? And Faqir, your face is raging hot. Why are you ready to kill each other? Calm down, both of you. What's going on? It's time you talk! It's time you listen!"

Akram stared in front of him, his eyes glued to the flower design on the carpet. Just an hour earlier he had told Baba Sharif about that strange nightmare he had, that ghastly unmasking. But instead, the nightmare had become a worse reality, an even worse unmasking. Before he could say a word, Faqir spoke up, "Baba Sharif, you know what's happened. My wife and family are gone. I must find them. They are all I have left of my miserable life. And I know Akram knows where they are. He's hiding them from ..."

Akram flared up, "That's a lie! You good for nothing, I have told you a hundred times and I tell you again, I have not hidden your family. I was going to help you find them."

Faqir kept his eyes on the ground as he continued, "I've turned over every stone under heaven, trying to find the devil who smashed my brother's head in. And now, someone's taken my family. This time I know who did it. This time, if he does not tell me where they are, I will not let him get away alive. And I've got Farid!"

Faqir laughed bitterly at Akram.

Akram flew to his feet. He was blind and crazed with hate now. He would kill Faqir! Once and for all, he would do away with this wretched animal and bury the past forever. Ignoring Baba Sharif who was standing in front of him, he lunged at Faqir.

He clenched his fist, then grabbed the wooden tray on the *toshak* and swung wildly. It hit hard with a sickening thud. Blind with fury, he struck again. Blood oozed from the victim's forehead as he slowly sank to the ground. He offered no resistance, as Akram dealt another blow on to his back. Akram heard groans of pain. He ignored them and struck yet another swift blow at the wounded person now lying on the ground before him.

Suddenly Faqir screamed, "Akram! Akram! Stop it! Stop it!" Faqir cried at the top of his voice, "What are you doing? It's Baba Sharif!" Although hate overwhelmed Faqir too, he could not bear the scene. He grabbed Akram's arm, but Akram easily deflected the grasp as he was about to land another ghastly blow.

Faqir threw himself upon Baba Sharif. He had to shelter the elderly man from the terrible blows. He could feel the elderly man sobbing. Faqir waited, expecting a blow on his own back. But, nothing came. All was quiet. Only Baba Sharif's groans could be heard. Faqir buried his face in Baba Sharif's torn clothes. They were sticky with blood.

"You're killing him, Akram!" Faqir moaned, his face buried in Baba Sharif's wounded body.

Akram's face fell. He could hardly breathe as he opened his eyes. Exhausted from rage, he looked at the scene before him. Baba Sharif? He had beat and bloodied the dear old man?

"No! No!" He shook with horror. His stomach grew nauseated. His knees buckled as the wooden weapon slipped from his hands. In utter dismay, it reminded him of that horrible club twenty years ago. *Oh God, not again!* He had wanted to kill the past, bury it forever, but instead, he was repeating it. *I wanted to cover it, bury it, but ...*

Almost inaudibly, he groaned in despair, "I didn't do it! I didn't kill ... my hands are ..." Akram wrung his hands as if trying to clean the last drop of blood that still clung to him.



Faqir screamed, “Akram! Akram! Stop it! What are you doing?  
It’s Baba Sharif!”

Faqir couldn't make it out. "You didn't what?" He glared at Akram. Akram ignored Faqir and turned to the wounded old man. *Was he still alive?*

Baba Sharif stirred and groaned in pain. Blood oozed from his face and dripped onto Faqir's hands. Faqir, who never had had an ounce of mercy in his bones, wiped the blood from Baba Sharif's face.

Akram fell down beside Baba Sharif. He too stroked the elderly man's face and felt the blood. "Oh Baba Sharif," Akram sobbed, "I didn't know what was happening. I didn't mean to. Never! Twenty years ago ... "

Then he looked at Faqir, kneeling beside him. No one spoke. Shame, an unutterable shame, coursed through Akram's veins. He began to sob. He couldn't talk. A few minutes ago, Akram had been so outraged he had been ready to attack Faqir and even kill him. But now he was sobbing as a child beside him. When had anyone ever seen Akram shed tears like this?

Baba Sharif managed to sit up, his face in pain. He turned to Akram, "Akram, I know you're heart is breaking. Your son is lost. Don't worry, we'll find him. But there's more to this than Farid getting lost."

Akram moaned quietly. How he wanted to shed this heavy burden he had carried for years. He had kept it covered all his life. But now, ever since Faqir and his family had moved into the street, this terrible, bloody memory had come back to haunt him. Stained, branded. It wouldn't leave him alone. It was like a horrendous, appalling rat that kept gnawing at him day and night, threatening to chew his jugular vein and eat away at the very foundation of his soul. He felt that, sooner or later, he would be hurled into a deep, murky and bottomless sea, never to see the light of day again.

Baba Sharif knew it was best not to disturb Akram as he struggled with himself. He looked at Faqir whose face was wet



with sweat, his hands trembling nervously. Both men, hands stained with Baba Sharif's blood and heads fallen, were quiet.

Akram sat off to one side, his head buried in his arms. "Faqir, remember that football game many years ago—between Chahar Dehi and Shor Bazaar teams?" His words stumbled, "Ghu ... Ghulam ... Ghulam, your brother was the captain of Shor Bazaar team. Ehsan also played. It was a terribly wet ... He ... uh ... I fell ..."

Faqir interrupted, "You knew my brothers?"

Akram trembled as he looked at his stained hands. His voice quivered, "Faqir, you see these hands? If only I could cut them off. I hate them. They give me terrible nightmares."

Faqir remained quiet as Akram spilled out his story. As he talked, Akram could see Faqir's veins on his forehead bulging, about to explode. Akram could hardly say it; he hesitated, then finally spilled it out, "My cousin and I, we were fools ... we should never have gone to the *nan-wayi* that hot afternoon. I told Behzad not to, but he pulled me in."

Their eyes met. Faqir looked down and let out a deep breath. After what seemed like forever, Faqir muttered, "It's over. Come with me."

Akram sighed deeply. He knew that his son Farid would be alright.



## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> The word “*kaka*” is unique to the Afghan Dari language, meaning a vigilante or toughie. Traditionally, a *kaka* ruled a neighborhood and ideally cared for the poor, orphans and widows. There was usually tremendous rivalry between neighboring *kakas*, each considering himself as superior to the other. Note it is *kAka* (کاکا) not *kAKA* (ککاکا) which means uncle.

<sup>2</sup> Some characteristics of wrestlers in Baba Sharif’s stories are adapted from the Afghan writer, Akram Osman’s collection of short stories, *Real Men Keep their Word*, translated by Arley Loewen (2005) and from the Iranian story-teller Mohammad Jamalzada’s “The World of Chivalry and Manliness” in *Isfahan is Half the World* (1983), translated by W.L. Heston. The original Persian text, “Alam-e Futuwwat wa Mardanagi” in *Sarutah yak Karbas* (n.d.).

<sup>3</sup> Baba Sharif’s experience as a child wanting to be a wrestler is adapted from Akram Osman’s story, “Barat, the Wrestler, and I” in the collection, *Real Men Keep their Word*.

<sup>4</sup> The story of the raging bull is adapted from the first chapter of Sadiq Chubak’s novel, *Tangsir* (1936).

<sup>5</sup> The description of the wrestlers is adapted from Jamalzada's chapter of wrestlers and manliness, "The World of Chivalry and Manliness".

<sup>6</sup> The training example is taken from a 16<sup>th</sup> century text on cultural and political life of Herat during the rule of the Timurids, *Badayi al-Waqayi* (completed 1538/9). The author, poet and man of letters, Zayn al-Din Wasifi, who first spent time at the Herat court and later entered the service of the Uzbek rulers of Transoxiana, presents a graphic account of the social and cultural life of wrestlers.

<sup>7</sup> This story is adapted from the famous wrestling tale from Shaikh Saadi's *Gulistan*, *Kulliyat-i Sa'di* (Complete Works of Saadi) 101 (14<sup>th</sup> century). Saadi offers a different lesson in his account, i.e. never let friends get the better of you.

<sup>8</sup> The wedding scene is adapted from Akram Osman's story, "The Deceptive Object" in the collection, *Real Men Keep their Word*.

<sup>9</sup> The traditional wedding song in Afghanistan, "*Ahesta Buro*" (Go slowly), has a verse in it alluding to the death of the bride. The traditional interpretation says "death" refers to the bride's leaving her family. The musician, Abdul Rahim Sarban (d. 1989) admired for his deep voice, has given living memory to this song. It remains the standard wedding song for Dari speakers to this day.

<sup>10</sup> This wedding scene is adapted from Akram Osman's story, "A Crack in the Wall" in the collection, *Real Men Keep their Word*.

<sup>11</sup> Taken from Akram Osman's story, "A Crack in the Wall," in the collection, *Real Men Keep their Word*.

<sup>12</sup> These phrases are taken from Jamalzada's description of wrestlers.

<sup>13</sup> The two wrestling stories, 1) Abu Saeed and Malani before the royal court and 2) Malani and the elephant, are adapted from the 16<sup>th</sup> century Wasifi text on wrestlers. See note above.

<sup>14</sup> Baba Sharif's story about *Kaka Awrang* and *Kaka Badrow* is adapted from the story recorded by Abdul Ghafur Brizhna (d. 1977). This account portrays the traditional culture of local vigilantes (*kakas*) of Kabul, Afghanistan in the early modern period.

<sup>15</sup> The description of *kaharabat* (ruins) is taken from Akram Osman's story, "Nazi Jan." in the collection, *Real Men Keep their Word*.

<sup>16</sup> This sentence is from the novel, *Suvushun (The Requiem)* by the well-known Iranian short story and novelist, Simin Daneshwar. *Suvushun*, first published in 1969, with at least 16 print-runs, boasts over 500,000 copies in print. It was translated into English by M.R. Ghanoonparvar (1990).

<sup>17</sup> The earliest source of Purya-ye Wali's wrestling legends comes from Kamal al-din Husain's 15<sup>th</sup> century history of Sufi saints, called *Majalis al-ushshaq* (The Gathering of Lovers), which the author dedicated to Sultan Husayn Bayqara of Herat. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a shrine was built in honor of Pahlawan Purya Mahmud on his burial site in Khiva, which is located in the Khorazm province of Uzbekistan. In 1810, a mausoleum was constructed on the site and to this day, it stands as a prominent religious edifice in honor of the "guardian of Khiva." Today he is remembered more as a poet, philosopher and saint than as a wrestler. This text contains several versions of the Multan story.

<sup>18</sup> This poem is taken from *Majalis al-ushshaq*.

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<sup>19</sup> The texts on sacrificing oneself for the good of another are adapted from a treatise on manliness, *Futuwwat Nama-ye Sultani* (Sultan's Book on Manliness) written in the 15<sup>th</sup> century in Herat by the polymath, Husain Waiz Kashifi (d. 1504), a prolific writer in the Timurid court of Sultan Husain Bayqara. See *Futuwwat Nama-ye Sultani*, 22.

<sup>20</sup> The Mufrid story is adapted from Wasifi's 16<sup>th</sup> century text on cultural life in Herat.

## Vocabulary List

*afarin* – well-done

*agha* – sir, Mr.

*Baba* – grandfather, term of endearment for an elderly man

*chars* or *hashish* – dope, marijuana

*desterkhwan* – table cloth on the floor, refers to the dinner table

*jan* – dear, term of endearment

*kaka* - vigilante or toughie

*khanum* – woman, lady

*kharabat* – the ruins, also means being intoxicated with divine love, hence 'ruined'.

*korma* – different kinds of stew

*maidan* – arena, field, place of battle

*mangalus* – white elephant

*nan* – flat bread

*nan-wayi* – bread bakery

*nukul* – sugar coated almonds

*padar* – father

*pahlawan* – champion, wrestler

*palaw* – special Afghan rice

*saheb* – term of respect, sir

*salam* – peace, term for greeting

*sawab* – religious credit

*sharif* – person of dignity, noble

*toshak* – mattress for sitting on and for sleeping

*ustad* – master, teacher

*wakil* – area chief, head

*zan* – woman