
Opening Extract from...

A Most Wanted Man

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John le Carré

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The golden rule is, to help those
we love to escape from us.

Friedrich von Hügel

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A Turkish heavyweight boxing champion sauntering down a Hamburg street with his mother on his arm can scarcely be blamed for failing to notice that he is being shadowed by a skinny boy in a black coat.

Big Melik, as he was known to his admiring neighbourhood, was a giant of a fellow, shaggy, unkempt and genial, with a broad natural grin and black hair bound back in a ponytail and a rolling, free-and-easy gait that, even without his mother, took up half the pavement. At the age of twenty he was in his own small world a celebrity, and not only for his prowess in the boxing ring: elected youth representative of his Islamic sports club, three times runner-up in the North German Championship hundred-metre butterfly stroke and, as if all that weren't enough, star goalkeeper of his Saturday soccer team.

Like most very large people, he was also more accustomed to being looked at than looking, which is another reason why

the skinny boy got away with shadowing him for three successive days and nights.

The two men first made eye contact as Melik and his mother Leyla emerged from the al-Umma Travel Shop, fresh from buying air tickets for Melik's sister's wedding in their home village outside Ankara. Melik felt someone's gaze fixed on him, glanced round, and came face to face with a tall, desperately thin boy of his own height with a straggly beard, eyes reddened and deep-set, and a long black coat that could have held three magicians. He had a black-and-white *keffiyeh* round his neck and a tourist's camelskin saddlebag slung over his shoulder. He stared at Melik, then at Leyla. Then he came back to Melik, never blinking, but appealing to him with his fiery, sunken eyes.

Yet the boy's air of desperation need not have troubled Melik all that much since the travel shop was situated at the edge of the main railway station concourse, where every variety of lost soul – German vagrants, Asians, Arabs, Africans, or Turkish like himself but less fortunate – hung around all day long, not to mention legless men on electric carts, drug-sellers and their customers, beggars and their dogs, and a seventy-year-old cowboy in a Stetson and silver-studded leather riding breeches. Few had work, and a sprinkling had no business standing on German soil at all, but were at best tolerated under a deliberate policy of destitution, pending their summary deportation, usually at dawn. Only new arrivals or the wilfully foolhardy took the risk. Cannier illegals gave the station a wide berth.

A further good reason to ignore the boy was the classical music which the station authorities boom at full blast over this section of the concourse from a battery of well-aimed loudspeakers. Its purpose, far from spreading feelings of

peace and wellbeing among its listeners, is to send them packing.

Despite these impediments the skinny boy's face imprinted itself on Melik's consciousness and for a fleeting moment he felt embarrassed by his own happiness. Why on earth should he? Something splendid had just occurred, and he couldn't wait to phone his sister and tell her that their mother Leyla, after six months of tending her dying husband, and a year of mourning her heart out for him, was bubbling over with pleasure at the prospect of attending her daughter's wedding, and fussing about what to wear, and whether the dowry was big enough, and the groom as handsome as everybody, including Melik's sister, said he was.

So why shouldn't Melik chatter along with his own mother? – which he did, enthusiastically, all the way home. It was the skinny boy's stillness, he decided later. Those lines of age in a face as young as mine. His look of winter on a lovely spring day.

That was the Thursday.

And on the Friday evening, when Melik and Leyla came out of mosque together, there he was again, the same boy, the same *keffiyeh* and outsized overcoat, huddled in the shadow of a grimy doorway. This time Melik noticed that there was a sideways list to his skinny body, as if he'd been knocked off-true and had remained at that angle until somebody told him he could straighten up. And the fiery stare burning even more brightly than on the previous day. Melik met his gaze head-on, wished he hadn't, and looked away.

And this second encounter was all the less probable because Leyla and Melik scarcely ever went to mosque, not even a moderate Turkish-language one. Since 9/11, Hamburg's

mosques had become dangerous places. Go to the wrong one, or the right one and get the wrong imam, and you could find yourself and your family on a police watch list for the rest of your life. Nobody doubted that practically every prayer-row contained an informant who was earning his way with the authorities. Nobody was likely to forget, be he Muslim, police spy or both, that the city-state of Hamburg had been unwitting host to three of the 9/11 hijackers not to mention their fellow cell-members and plotters, or that Mohammed Atta, who steered the first plane into the Twin Towers, had worshipped his wrathful god in a humble Hamburg mosque.

It was also a fact that since her husband's death Leyla and her son had become less observant of their faith. Yes, of course the old man had been a Muslim, and a laic too. But he was a militant supporter of workers' rights, which was why he had been driven out of his homeland. The only reason they had gone to mosque at all was that Leyla in her impulsive way had felt a sudden need. She was happy. The weight of her grief was lifting. Yet the first anniversary of her husband's death was approaching. She needed to have a dialogue with him and share the good news. They had already missed the main Friday prayer, and could just as well have prayed at home. But Leyla's whim was law. Arguing correctly that personal invocations stand a better chance of being heard if they are offered in the evening, she had insisted on attending the last prayer hour of the day, which incidentally meant that the mosque was as good as empty.

So clearly Melik's second encounter with the skinny boy, like the first, was mere chance. For what else could it be? Or so, in his plain way, the good-hearted Melik reasoned.

* * *

The next day being a Saturday, Melik took a bus across town to visit his affluent paternal uncle at the family candle factory. Relationships between his uncle and his father had at times been strained, but since his father's death he had learned to respect his uncle's friendship. Jumping aboard the bus, whom should he see but the skinny boy sitting below him in the glass shelter, watching him depart? And six hours later, when he returned to the same bus stop, the boy was still there, wrapped in his *keffiyeh* and magician's overcoat, crouched in the same corner of the shelter, waiting.

At the sight of him Melik, who as a rule of life was pledged to love all mankind equally, was seized by an uncharitable aversion. He felt that the skinny boy was accusing him of something and he resented it. Worse, there was an air of superiority about him, despite his miserable condition. What did he think he was achieving with that ridiculous black coat, anyway? That it made him invisible or something? Or was he trying to imply that he was so unfamiliar with our Western ways that he had no idea of the image he created?

Either way, Melik determined to shake him off. So instead of going up to him and asking him whether he needed help, or was ill, which in other circumstances he might have done, he struck out for home at full stride, confident that the skinny boy stood no chance of keeping up with him.

The day was unseasonably hot for spring, and the sun was beating off the crowded pavement. Yet the skinny boy contrived by some kind of miracle to keep pace with Melik, limping and panting, wheezing and sweating, and now and then jumping in the air as if in pain, but still managing to draw up alongside him at pedestrian crossings.

And when Melik let himself into the tiny brick house that, after decades of family scrimping, his mother now owned almost free of debt, he had only to wait a few breaths before the front doorbell chimed its carillon. And when he returned downstairs, there stood the skinny boy on the doorstep with his saddlebag over his shoulder and his eyes blazing from the effort of the walk, and sweat pouring down his face like summer rain, and in his trembling hand he held a piece of brown cardboard on which was written in Turkish: *I am a Muslim medical student. I am tired and I wish to stay in your house. Issa*. And as if to ram the message home, round his wrist a bracelet of fine gold, and dangling from it, a tiny golden replica of the Koran.

But Melik by now had a full head of outrage. All right, he wasn't the greatest intellect his school had ever seen but he objected to feeling guilty and inferior, and being followed, and preyed upon by a beggar with attitude. When his father died Melik had proudly assumed the rôle of master of the house and his mother's protector and, as a further assertion of his authority, done what his father had not succeeded in doing before his death: as a second-generation Turkish resident, he had launched himself and his mother on the long, stony road to German citizenship, where every aspect of a family's lifestyle was taken under the microscope, and eight years of unblemished behaviour were the first prerequisite. The last thing he or his mother needed was some deranged vagrant claiming to be a medical student and begging on their doorstep.

'Get the hell out of here,' he ordered the skinny boy roughly in Turkish, squaring to him in the doorway. 'Get out of here. Stop following us, and don't come back.'

Meeting no reaction from the haggard face except a wince

as if it had been struck, Melik repeated his instruction in German. But when he made to slam the door, he discovered Leyla standing on the stair behind him, looking over his shoulder at the boy and at the cardboard notice shaking uncontrollably in his hand.

And he saw that she already had tears of pity in her eyes.

Sunday passed and on the Monday morning Melik found excuses not to show up at his cousin's greengrocery business in Wellingsbüttel. He must stay home and train for the Amateur Open Boxing Championship, he told his mother. He must work out in the gym and in the Olympic pool. But in reality he had decided she was not safe to be left alone with an elongated psycho with delusions of grandeur who, when he wasn't praying or staring at the wall, prowled about the house, fondly touching everything as if he remembered it from long ago. Leyla was a peerless woman in her son's judgment, but since her husband's death volatile and guided solely by her feelings. Those whom she chose to love could do no wrong. Issa's softness of manner, his timidity and sudden rushes of dawning happiness, made him an instant member of that select company.

On the Monday and again on the Tuesday, Issa did little except sleep, pray and bathe himself. To communicate he spoke broken Turkish with a peculiar, guttural accent, furtively, in bursts, as though talking were forbidden, yet still in some unfathomable way, to Melik's ear, didactic. Otherwise he ate. Where on earth did he put all that food? At any hour of the day, Melik would walk into the kitchen and there he was, head bowed over a bowl of lamb and rice and vegetable, spoon never still, eyes slipping from side to side lest somebody snatch his food away. When he'd finished, he'd wipe

the bowl clean with a piece of bread, eat the bread and, with a muttered 'Thanks be to God', and a faint smirk on his face as if he had a secret that was too good for them to share, take the bowl to the sink and wash it under the tap, a thing Leyla would never in a month of Sundays have allowed her own son or husband to do. The kitchen was her domain. Men keep out.

'So when are you reckoning to start your medical studies, Issa?' Melik asked him casually, in his mother's hearing.

'God willing, it will be soon. I must be strong. I must not be beggar.'

'You'll need a residence permit, you know. *And* a student's ID. Not to mention like a hundred thousand euros for board and lodging. And a neat little two-seater to take your girlfriends out.'

'God is all-merciful. When I am not beggar, He will provide.'

Such self-assurance went beyond mere piety in Melik's view.

'He's costing us real money, Mother,' he declared, barging into the kitchen while Issa was safely in the attic. 'The way he eats. All those baths.'

'No more than you, Melik.'

'No, but he's not me, is he? We don't know who he is.'

'Issa is our guest. When he is restored to health, with Allah's help we shall consider his future,' his mother replied loftily.

Issa's implausible efforts at self-effacement only made him more conspicuous in Melik's eyes. Sidling his way down the cramped corridor, or preparing to climb the stepladder to the attic where Leyla had made up a bed for him, he employed what Melik regarded as exaggerated circumspection, seeking

permission with his doe-eyes, and flattening himself against the wall when Melik or Leyla needed to pass.

'Issa has been in prison,' Leyla announced complacently one morning.

Melik was appalled. 'Do you know that for a fact? We're harbouring a gaolbird? Do the police know that for a fact? Did he *tell* you?'

'He said that in prison in Istanbul they give only one piece of bread and a bowl of rice a day,' said Leyla, and before Melik could protest any more, added one of her late husband's favourite nostrums: 'We honour the guest and go to the assistance of those in distress. No work of charity will go unrewarded in Paradise,' she intoned. 'Wasn't your own father in prison in Turkey, Melik? Not everyone who goes to prison is a criminal. For people like Issa and your father, prison is a badge of honour.'

But Melik knew she had other thoughts up her sleeve that she was less inclined to reveal. Allah had answered her prayers. He had sent her a second son to make up for the husband she had lost. The fact that he was an illegal half-crazed gaolbird with delusions about himself was of no apparent interest to her.

He was from Chechnya.

That much they established on the third evening when Leyla astonished them both by trilling out a couple of sentences of Chechen, a thing Melik never in his life had heard her do. Issa's haggard face lit up with a sudden amazed smile which vanished equally quickly, and thereafter he seemed to be struck mute. Yet Leyla's explanation of her linguistic skills turned out to be simple. As a young girl in Turkey she had played with Chechen children in

her village and picked up snippets of their language. She guessed Issa was Chechen from the moment she set eyes on him but kept her counsel because with Chechens you never knew.

He was from Chechnya, and his mother was dead, and all he had to remember her by was the golden bracelet with the Koran attached to it that she had placed round his wrist before she died. But when and how she died, and how old he was when he inherited her bracelet were questions he either failed to understand or didn't wish to.

'Chechens are hated everywhere,' Leyla explained to Melik, while Issa kept his head down and went on eating. 'But not by us. Do you hear me, Melik?'

'Of course I hear you, Mother.'

'Everyone persecutes Chechens except us,' she continued. 'It is normal all over Russia and the world. Not only Chechens, but Russian Muslims everywhere. Putin persecutes them and Mr Bush encourages him. As long as Putin calls it his war on terror, he can do with the Chechens whatever he wishes, and nobody will stop him. Is that not so, Issa?'

But Issa's brief moment of pleasure had long passed. The shadows had returned to his wracked face, the spark of suffering to his doe-eyes, and a haggard hand closed protectively over the bracelet. *Speak*, damn you, Melik urged him indignantly but not aloud. If somebody surprises me by talking Turkish at me, I speak Turkish back, it's only polite! So why don't you answer my mother with a few obliging words of Chechen, or are you too busy knocking back her free food?

He had other worries. Carrying out a security inspection of the attic that Issa now treated as his sovereign territory

– stealthily, Issa was in the kitchen, talking as usual to his mother – he had made certain revealing discoveries: hoarded scraps of food as though Issa were planning his escape; a gilt-framed miniature head-and-shoulder photograph of Melik's betrothed sister at eighteen, purloined from his mother's treasured collection of family portraits in the living room; and his father's magnifying glass, lying across a copy of the Hamburg Yellow Pages, open at the section devoted to the city's many banks.

'God gave your sister a tender smile,' Leyla pronounced contentedly, in answer to Melik's outraged protests that they were harbouring a sexual deviant as well as an illegal. 'Her smile will lighten Issa's heart.'

Issa was from Chechnya then, whether or not he spoke the language. Both his parents were dead, but when asked about them he was as puzzled as his hosts were, gazing sweetly into a corner of the room with his eyebrows raised. He was stateless, homeless, an ex-prisoner and illegal, but Allah would provide the means for him to study medicine once he was no longer a beggar.

Well, Melik too had once dreamed of becoming a doctor and had even extracted from his father and uncles a shared undertaking to finance his training, a thing that would have entailed the family in real sacrifice. And if he'd been a bit better at exams and maybe played fewer games, that's where he'd be today: at medical school, a first-year student working his heart out for the honour of his family. It was therefore understandable that Issa's airy assumption that Allah would somehow enable him to do what Melik had conspicuously failed to do should have prompted him to throw aside Leyla's warnings and, as best his generous heart

allowed, launch himself on a searching examination of his unwanted guest.

The house was his. Leyla had gone shopping and would not be back until mid-afternoon.

'You've studied medicine then, have you?' he suggested, sitting himself down beside Issa for greater intimacy, and fancying himself the wiliest interrogator in the world. 'Nice.'

'I was in hospitals, sir.'

'As a student?'

'I was sick, sir.'

Why all these sirs? Were they from prison too?

'Being a patient's not like being a doctor, though, is it? A doctor has to know what's wrong with people. A patient sits there and waits for the doctor to put it right.'

Issa considered this statement in the complicated way that he considered all statements of whatever size, now smirking into space, now scratching at his beard with his spidery fingers, and finally smiling brilliantly without answering.

'How old are you?' Melik demanded, becoming more blunt than he had planned. 'If you don't mind my asking' – sarcastically.

'Twenty-three, sir.' But again only after prolonged consideration.

'That's quite old then, isn't it? Even if you got your residence tomorrow, you wouldn't be a qualified doctor till you were thirty-five or something. Plus learning German. You'd have to pay for that too.'

'Also God willing I shall marry good wife and have many children, two boys, two girls.'

'Not my sister, though. She's getting married next month, I'm afraid.'

'God willing she will have many sons, sir.'

Melik considered his next line of attack and plunged: 'How did you get to Hamburg in the first place?' he asked.

'It is immaterial.'

Immaterial? Where did he get *that* word from? And in Turkish?

'Didn't you know that they treat refugees worse in this town than anywhere in Germany?'

'Hamburg will be my home, sir. It is where they bring me. It is Allah's divine command.'

'*Who* brought you? Who's *they*?'

'It was combination, sir.'

'Combination of what?'

'Maybe Turkish people. Maybe Chechen people. We pay them. They take us to boat. Put us in container. Container had little air.'

Issa was beginning to sweat, but Melik had gone too far to pull back now.

'*We?* Who's we?'

'Was group, sir. From Istanbul. Bad group. Bad men. I do not respect these men.' The superior tone again, even in faltering Turkish.

'How many of you?'

'Maybe twenty. Container was cold. After few hours, very cold. This ship would go to Denmark. I was happy.'

'You mean Copenhagen, right? Copenhagen in Denmark. The capital.'

'Yes' – brightening as if Copenhagen was a good idea – 'to *Copenhagen*. In Copenhagen, I would be arranged. I would be free from bad men. But this ship did not go immediately Copenhagen. This ship must go first Sweden. To *Gothenburg*. Yes?'

'There's a Swedish port called Gothenburg, I believe,' Melik conceded.

'In Gothenburg, ship will dock, ship will take cargo, then go Copenhagen. When ship arrive in Gothenburg we are very sick, very hungry. On ship they tell to us: "Make no noise. Swedes hard. Swedes kill you." We make no noise. But Swedes do not like our container. Swedes have dog.' He reflects a while. '"What is your name, please?"' he intones, loud enough to make Melik sit up. '"What papers, please? You are from prison? What crimes, please? You escape from prison? How, please?" Doctors are efficient. I admire these doctors. They let us sleep. I am grateful to these doctors. One day I will be such a doctor. But God willing I must escape. To escape to Sweden is no chance. There is NATO wire. Many guards. But there is also toilet. From toilet is window. After window is gate to harbour. My friend can open this gate. My friend is from boat. I go back to boat. Boat takes me to Copenhagen. At last, I say. In Copenhagen was lorry for Hamburg. Sir, I love God. But the West I also love. In West I shall be free to worship Him.'

'A *lorry* brought you to Hamburg?'

'Was arranged.'

'A *Chechen* lorry?'

'My friend must first take me to road.'

'Your friend from the crew? That friend? The same guy?'

'No, sir. Was different friend. To reach road was difficult. Before lorry, we must sleep one night in field.' He looked up, and an expression of pure joy momentarily suffused his haggard features. 'Was stars. God is merciful. Praise be to Him.'

Wrestling with the improbabilities of this story, humbled by its fervour yet infuriated as much by its omissions as his

own incapacity to overcome them, Melik felt his frustration spread to his arms and fists, and his fighter's nerves tighten in his stomach.

'Where did it drop you off then, this magic lorry that showed up out of nowhere? Where did it drop you?'

But Issa was no longer listening, if he had been listening at all. Suddenly – or suddenly to the honest if uncomprehending eyes of Melik – whatever had been building up in him erupted. He rose drunkenly to his feet and with a hand cupped to his mouth hobbled stooping to the door, wrestled it open although it wasn't locked, and lurched down the corridor to the bathroom. Moments later, the house was filled with a howling and retching, the like of which Melik hadn't heard since his father's death. Gradually it ceased, to be followed by a slopping of water, an opening and closing of the bathroom door, and a creaking of the attic steps as Issa scaled the ladder. After which a deep, troubling silence descended, broken each quarter-hour by the chirping of Leyla's electronic bird-clock.

At four the same afternoon, Leyla returned laden with shopping and, interpreting the atmosphere for what it was, berated Melik for transgressing his duties as host and dishonouring his father's name. She too then withdrew to her room, where she remained in rampant isolation until it was time for her to prepare the evening meal. Soon smells of cooking pervaded the house, but Melik remained on his bed. At eight-thirty she banged the brass dinner-gong, a precious wedding gift that to Melik always sounded like a reproach. Knowing she brooked no delay at such moments, he slunk to the kitchen, avoiding her eye.

'Issa, dear, come down, please!' Leyla shouted and, receiving

no response, grabbed hold of her late husband's walking stick and thumped the ceiling with its rubber ferrule, her eyes accusingly on Melik who, under her frosty gaze, braved the climb to the attic.

Issa was lying on his mattress in his underpants, drenched in sweat and hunched on his side. He had taken his mother's bracelet from his wrist and was clutching it in his sweated hand. Round his neck he wore a grimy leather purse tied with a thong. His eyes were wide open, yet he seemed unaware of Melik's presence. Reaching out to touch his shoulder, Melik drew back in dismay. Issa's upper body was a slough of crisscross blue-and-orange bruises. Some appeared to be whiplashes, others bludgeon-marks. On the soles of his feet – the same feet that had pounded the Hamburg pavements – Melik made out suppurating holes the size of cigarette burns. Locking his arms round Issa, and binding a blanket round his waist for propriety, Melik lifted him tenderly and lowered the passive Issa through the attic trap and into Leyla's waiting arms.

'Put him in my bed,' Melik whispered through his tears. 'I'll sleep on the floor. I don't care. I'll even give him my sister to smile at him,' he added, remembering the purloined miniature in the attic, and went back up the ladder to fetch it.

Issa's beaten body lay wrapped in Melik's bathrobe, his bruised legs jutting out of the end of Melik's bed, the gold chain still clutched in his hand, his unflinching gaze fixed resolutely on Melik's wall of fame: press photographs of the champ triumphant, his boxing belts and winning gloves. On the floor beside him squatted Melik himself. He had wanted to call a doctor at his own expense, but Leyla had forbidden

him to summon anyone. Too dangerous. For Issa, but for us too. What about our citizenship application? By morning, his temperature will come down and he'll start to recover.

But his temperature didn't come down.

Muffled in a full scarf and travelling partway by cab to discourage her imagined pursuers, Leyla paid an unannounced visit to a mosque on the other side of town where a new Turkish doctor was said to worship. Three hours later she returned home in a rage. The new young doctor was a fool and a fraud. He knew nothing. He lacked the most elementary qualifications. He had no sense of his religious responsibilities. Very likely, he was not a doctor at all.

Meanwhile, in her absence, Issa's temperature had after all come down a little, and she was able to draw upon the rudimentary nursing skills she had acquired in the days before the family could afford a doctor or dared to visit one. If Issa had suffered internal injuries, she pronounced, he would never have been able to gulp down all that food, so she was not afraid to give him aspirin for his subsiding fever, or run up one of her broths made from rice water laced with Turkish herbal potions.

Knowing that Issa in health or death would never permit her to touch his bare body, she provided Melik with towels, a poultice for his brow, and a bowl of cool water to sponge him every hour. To achieve this, the remorse-stricken Melik felt obliged to unfasten the leather purse at Issa's neck.

Only after long hesitation, and strictly in the interests of his sick guest – or so he assured himself – and not until Issa had turned his face to the other wall and fallen into a half-sleep broken by mutterings in Russian, did he untie the thong, and loosen the throat of the purse.

His first find was a bunch of faded Russian newspaper

clippings, rolled up and held together with an elastic band. Removing the band, he spread them out on the floor. Common to each was a photograph of a Red Army officer in uniform. He was brutish, broad-browed, thick-jowled and looked to be in his mid-sixties. Two cuttings were memorial announcements, decked with Orthodox crosses and regimental insignia.

Melik's second find was a wad of US fifty-dollar bills, brand new, ten of them, held together by a money clip. At the sight of them, all his old suspicions came flooding back. A starving, homeless, penniless, beaten fugitive has *five hundred untouched dollars* in his purse? Did he steal them? Forge them? Was this why he had been in prison? Was this what was left over after he had paid off the people-smugglers of Istanbul, the obliging crew member who had hidden him, and the lorry driver who had spirited him from Copenhagen to Hamburg? If he's got five hundred left now, how ever much did he set out with? Maybe his medical fantasies aren't so ill-placed after all.

His third find was a grimy white envelope squeezed into a ball as if somebody had meant to throw it away, then changed his mind: no stamp, no address, and the flap ripped open. Flattening the envelope, he fished out a crumpled one-page typed letter in Cyrillic script. It had a printed address, a date, and the name of the sender – or so he assumed – in large black print along the top. Below the unreadable text was an unreadable signature in blue ink, followed by a hand-written six-figure number, but written very carefully, each figure inked over several times, as if to say *remember this*.

His last find was a key, a small pipestem key, no larger than one knuckle joint of his boxer's hand. It was machine-turned and had complex teeth on three sides: too small for

a prison door, he reckoned, too small for the gate in Gothenburg leading back to the ship. But just right for handcuffs.

Replacing Issa's belongings in the purse, Melik slipped it under the sweat-soaked pillow for him to discover when he woke. But by next morning, the guilty feelings that had taken hold of him wouldn't let him go. All through his night's vigil, stretched on the floor with Issa one step above him on the bed, he had been tormented by images of his guest's martyred limbs, and the realisation of his own inadequacy.

As a fighter he knew pain, or thought he did. As a Turkish street kid he had taken beatings as well as handing them out. In a recent championship bout, a hail of punches had sent him reeling into the red dark from which boxers fear not to return. Swimming against native Germans, he had tested the extreme limits of his endurance, or thought he had.

Yet compared with Issa he was untried.

Issa is a man and I am still a boy. I always wanted a brother and here he is delivered to my doorstep, and I rejected him. He suffered like a true defender of his beliefs while I courted cheap glory in the boxing ring.

By the early hours of dawn, the erratic breathing that had kept Melik on tenterhooks all night settled to a steady rasp. Replacing the poultice, he was relieved to establish that Issa's fever had subsided. By mid-morning, he was propped semi-upright like a pasha amid a golden pile of Leyla's tasselled velvet cushions from the drawing room, and she was feeding him a life-giving mash of her own concoction and his mother's gold chain was back on his wrist.

Sick with shame, Melik waited for Leyla to close the door behind her. Kneeling at Issa's side, he hung his head.

'I looked in your purse,' he said. 'I am deeply ashamed of what I have done. May merciful Allah forgive me.'

Issa entered one of his eternal silences, then laid an emaciated hand on Melik's shoulder.

'Never confess, my friend,' he advised drowsily, clasping Melik's hand. 'If you confess, they will keep you there for ever.'