



## CHAPTER 31

### AMENITY LOST

**D**amnit,” Gupta mumbled, “the mobile’s battery is out and the charger’s in Techo’s car.”

“Booted car.”

“No!”

“Yeah. Makes for a slow getaway. But why phone anyone? What’s there to talk about anyway?” I said as we pulled into the parking lot of the funeral home.

“Jeez, Is there anything we did right?”

“Yes, get second degree burns. Otherwise it’s all *gang aft agley*.”

“You have a point—you and Robert Burns.”

“It’s going to blow Fenster’s mind when he finds out we have the money,” I said. “Though he won’t be pleased we don’t have it—on us that is.”

“Well, we have to see Mindy first,” said Gupta. “No Mindy, no money.”

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Gupta was getting pretty conscious. And mobile. We exited the car and walked toward the entrance of the white wood building with its wide porch, columns, and portico, through which runs the circular driveway lined with—trees.

“Are these Eucalyptus, Mr. Biology?” I asked. Gupta nodded. Across the street were offices. On one side was a parking lot and on the other side the sun was setting, setting behind a church.

“Man,” Gupta said, “we’re just making it—look at that sun going down.”

“We’re five minutes early,” I said. “Got time to burn, time for the sunset to burn.”

It did make an impressive scene, the scarlet daylight's end behind the church, the church with a huge electronic sign that read GIVE THANKS UNTO GOD FOR HIS GIFT TO YOU OF JESUS, HIS ONLY BEGOTTEN SON. Gupta looked at it squinting and shook his head.

“Thank you,” I said.

“What are you saying ‘thank you’ about?” he asked.

“Thanks for Christ consciousness, ‘utterly divine mind’ as Pseudo Dionysius says, the only begotten son of god, god, which is the incomprehensible absolute, and thanks that we’ve gotten this far.”

“How the hell can you think about stuff like that at a time like this?” he said.

“We should always be grateful,” I said. “that we’re divine, to be alive, to be breathing this great air, under this beautiful blue sky, paying a jumbo ransom.”

“We’re close to death, might not be breathing in a while, the air has exhaust in it, the sky gives us skin cancer, my arm’s killing me, the morphine’s wearing off, we’re giving a fortune to a gangster who might cut our heads off for fun, we’re terrified. You’re crazy.”

“How about ‘thank you to Hanuman? It’s all just words that point to immediate reality.”

“Shut up.”

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The sign went blank and then changed to read, "MINDY IS FREE!" Unfortunately, we didn't learn that till later. Gupta and I were looking straight ahead at the front door of the funeral home as we walked and when he turned to look at me he was facing the wrong direction and when I turned to look at him a tree had come to obscure the new message on the sign.

A couple of men came out on the porch and watched us approach. One was tall and one was short.

"Recognize them?" I asked.

"It's the Goony Twins," said Gupta. "Are you grateful to see them?"

"It's not really gratitude for anything in particular, actually—ultimately it's gratitude that we are already Buddha or one with god, Brahma, something like that," I said.

"One with the Goony Twins."

"Good day, gentlemen," I said. "We have something for your boss." I looked at Gupta's watch. "We have arrived here three minutes before sunset. Please tell him that."

They just stared at us. And then Halffoot stared over our heads and then Shorts stared around our heads.

"Now pay attention," I said. "We have something for Bobby."

"Uh, come in," said Halffoot.

"Why are they staring over there?" said Gupta turning around. "Oh—reading the inspirational message from the church? Hmm. Ah, there's a new one, a shorter one. Can't quite make it out anymore. Need my glasses. But they're on the floor of the Mint. That's where I lost them getting, in a roundabout way, the treasure Bobby is waiting for." He smiled impishly at the Goony Twins who were not amused.

"A new inspirational message?" I turn around to look at the sign again. "Well, let me see," I said. "I can't see it. Sun's in my eyes. No matter. I can make up my own. How about, "From the first, not a thing exists." That's, uh. I forget. Some early Chinese teacher. Maybe Hui Neng. I can see it

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doesn't speak to you, to either of you. Hmm. So how should we proceed?"

They grabbed us.

"Ahhhh! My arm!" shouted Gupta as we're dragged inside.

"What a pleasure. We didn't know you'd be here," I said.

Fenster was sitting behind a polished wood desk. "I know you didn't get the gold. It's on the telly. Flubbed attempt—by punks. I gotta hand that part to you. But anyway, where's the money?"

"We've got it," I said.

"You've got the money?" said Fenster. "How much?"

"Oh you mean like is it enough to cover the small gold ingot, which would save Mindy, or the one to save Frannie as well, or the sum of the two to save us all. Or, as you so poetically put it

*Kali takes while Shiva gives,  
With the smaller brick she lives.  
With the bigger she and Fran.  
With them both long live your clan."*

"Yes, yes, that's what I mean. How much means how much."

"The sum of the two. Three hundred K."

"Give it to me."

"We didn't bring it," said Gupta gently rubbing his arm. "We want to see Mindy first."

Fenster scowled at us. He looked at the Goony Twins and nodded toward the parking lot. They departed. Fenster served us some tea. Nice of him. Behind Fenster was a photo of Phar Lap with his keeper. I commented on it. Fenster said nothing. I complimented the artistry of the row of nice little capped pots behind him. "Crematory urns," he corrected, smiling unpleasantly. Gupta asked him what the hell was happening. Fenster just glared at Gupta. Finally Shorts came in and shook his head.

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“Okay—it’s not in the car either. Where is it?”

Gupta looked out the window, “Hey what the hell—you’ve destroyed Mindy’s car.” The doors, the hood, and the trunk were torn off with contents spread around—spare tire, seats, carpet, engine parts. “What the hell, man,” said Gupta.

“The loot,” said Fenster. “The bullion substitute.”

“Just give us Mindy and you get the money.” Gupta looked at me in a strange way and then fell over on the floor. I started to say something to Fenster but I got dizzy.

“My head hurts,” I said.

“Mine too,” moaned Gupta.

“This seems familiar.”

“Oh heck. Can’t move.”

“Me either.”

“Waking up tied together. Yes, I seem to remember that,” he said.

“Except we’re tied down on something this time.”

“I think he gave us that date rape drug in our tea,” he said.

“But that could get him that ugly guy as a roommate for five years,” I remembered.

“I think the date’s with Fenster.”

“Unfortunately.”

“Where are we?” Gupta asked.

“Let’s see. Tile walls over there and,” I crane my head up, “that looks like a furnace in front. I think this is a... a crematorium.”

We looked at each other and in unison let out an anguished cry of, “Ahhhhhh!”

“Don’t you think it’s about time Samo and the gang showed up?” Gupta asked as we twitched and turned. “They’re coming!” he yelled. “Our friends are coming!”

“Yeah, maybe so. I hope they hurry up. I can’t get anything untied.”

“We didn’t really make any appointment with them did we?”

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“No, we just ran off here. Make a mental note not to do that next time,” I said. “Need a an exit strategy.”

Suddenly there was the intensely amplified echoing sound of a woman’s voice with a full orchestra behind her. Joan Sutherland never sounded so frightening. The door opened and we heard jangling. Then in front of us appeared Fenster dressed in some ancient oriental combat gear. We stared at him in terror as Sutherland backed him up. He strutted around us for a while until her vocal level came down to the point where Fenster could be heard.

“Listen to her sing. She’s divinely inspired, the best there ever was and will ever be. If this is to be the last thing you hear, you’re fortunate. Why my Doberman, Mars, he comes running to hear Joan Sutherland....”

“Maybe cause you feed him then Mr. Pavlov?” groaned Gupta.

“Silence!”

“And who the hell are you this time?” moaned Gupta.

“I am Genghis Khan, slayer of multitudes.” He pulled a sword and swung it over his head, his eyes bulging. Then he let out a blood curdling shriek that was most effective in reducing Gupta and me to quivering marmalade.

“This is the sword that cuts both ways!” He looked at me with wild eyes that made me regret having corrected his understanding. “It cuts through delusion and it cuts through your neck!”

“You can stop with delusion,” I said.

“Where is my treasure!?” he yelled dramatically. “It’s the treasure or the furnace!”

“No Mindy, No money!” Gupta yelled back.

“All who yield to Khan’s law live. Those who deny it die!”

“No Mindy! No money!” Gupta repeated.

“Maybe we could modify that demand,” I suggested.

“No! Keep a unified front!”

“Maybe there’s a compromise in this,” I meekly offered.

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“No compromise!” grunted Gupta.

“No compromise!” howled Fenster Kahn.

“See, we’ve got some agreement there to build on,” I said.

“The money or the flame!” cried Fenster.

“Why resort to an oven?,” challenged Gupta. “What ever happened to cutting our heads off? And how convenient! There’s a sword right there!”

“Hey Gupta, Please!” I yelled.

“The sword is too quick, too merciful for you!”

He left the room and with a burst, high flames were spitting out in all directions in the furnace ahead. I yelled, “Okay! We’ll tell! We’ll tell!”

“It’s my money and no money no Mindy! I mean no Mindy no money!” Gupta craned his neck up and looked at the furnace. “OK! Let’s talk!”

But Fenster was gone and Sutherland and her orchestra were getting louder again as the flames rose higher.

Another door opened and the Goony Twins threw someone else in. He was familiar. Oh—it’s the guy who was on the floor in the Brewery—Johnno. Now he’s on the floor of the crematorium.

“What are you doing here?” I asked him loudly through the music.

“Mindy’s waiting for me!” he yelled, looking at the fire in the furnace and swallowing hard. “She’s waiting for me and I’m not going to be there! She’ll think I’ve betrayed her!”

“What?” said Gupta. “What’s that about?”

“Come over and untie us!” I cried.

He’s obviously been beaten. He’s trying to get up.

The slab we are on starts to move slowly, very slowly toward the flame. “I guess we held our position a bit too firmly,” I yell at Gupta.

“Are you grateful now?” Gupta retorts.

“To the end,” I said, and then we both started yelling. As we’re yelling and proceeding toward the furnace we wriggled like crazy.

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Johnno was crawling across the floor toward us.

"I've got a hand free," Gupta said.

"How's that going to help us?" I asked. "I guess you can wave goodbye."

Johnno was up on his knees getting closer. We kept yelling and moving toward the flame that was getting hotter, especially on our feet, very especially on Gupta's feet because he's taller than me and we were tied onto the slab with our heads even.

"It's burning my feet! It's not funny! It's burning my feet!"

"I feel it! I feel it! Get over here quick and untie us!" I urge Johnno.

Gupta reaches down under the slab with his left hand and pushes in as far as he can. He's found a moving part, jabs a finger in. There's a hideous crunch followed in a nano-second by Gupta's yelling louder than ever. It stops.

Gupta's screaming about his finger and screaming about his feet. His shoes are smoking. Johnno pulls himself up to us. He loosens a belt that holds in our feet. We instantly pull our knees up.

"Thank god," said Gupta. "And thank you Johnno."

"My pleasure, mate."

He unties us all the way. I get off. Gupta's finger was stuck in a cog or something. With a muffled whimper he jerks it out. A splash of blood follows. He jumps down as the slab enters further into the flame.

"They forget I work here," said Johnno picking a key off the trim above the door.

With our newfound ally, we go as fast as we can out into a hall. Both Johnno and Gupta are limping with me in between them helping. Blood squirts from Gupta's index finger. There's a door to the outside at the end. We hobble frantically toward it, open it, exit into the outside world with a clear view of MINDY IS FREE! on the sign of the church. We look at it with amazement.

"Mindy is free?" I say with disbelief.



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“Mindy is free!” repeats Gupta and we start running toward the sign, him passing me up while emitting gasps of pain.

“I know,” said Johnno, who’s running with a limp alongside. “I set her free.”

“You did?” said Gupta. “That’s nice of you.”

“Wish we’d known that earlier,” I said.

“Now let’s get far from here,” said Gupta.

We’d gone a good ten meters when the Goony Twins jumped out from behind two trees with drawn guns that squashed our hopes. They lead us back to the building, within which Joan Sutherland was still singing grandly.

Just before we got to the door, Halffoot stopped. “Hey, do you notice that?”

“Joan Sutherland singing?” I guessed.

“Yeah,” said Shorts with what sounded like genuine concern. He picked up Gupta’s hand and inspected the bleeding finger.

“I didn’t know you cared,” Gupta said.

“I don’t,” said Shorts. He turned to Halffoot. “Wash it off in the faucet out here. I’ll be back in a minute.”

He came back just as he said and wiped off Gupta’s finger, put cotton over it, and wrapped it carefully and tightly with medical tape. Gupta groaned at this new pain and we looked at each other perplexed.

As Halffoot pushed us into the building we saw Shorts carefully wiping up the trails of drips Gupta left behind.

“Sorry about the mess,” Gupta said.

“You have a nice, domestic quality,” I said to Shorts as he wiped up the last drop and inspected the floor. “And you’re thorough.”

“Shut your trap,” he said.

“You think we weren’t watching?” Fenster said, still dressed as Genghis Khan. He glanced quickly at Gupta’s finger and looked away. He looked at Gupta’s arm, the scab on his lip, and his burned shoes. “You seem terribly accident prone.”

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"You missed the place where he stuck the piano wire up his finger," I said.

"You're stupid," Gupta said to me and then to Fenster, "And you're a bad man."

"Good and bad are relative," said Fenster. "To pick and choose between them is to fall into endless confusion."

"You're forgetting *śīla*," I said.

"Mushy morality," said Fenster.

"That's a start," I said. "Now go deeper."

"It's useless without the treasure," he said. "Give me my treasure and then I'll be a good man."

"We don't have to give you anything now," said Gupta. "Mindy's free. "

"What makes you think so?" said Fenster.

"Everybody knows. It's even on the church's sign over there," I said.

Fenster looked over toward the church. "Bugger me dead!" he exclaimed. "How the hell?" He turned to me. "Give me the money or I'll have you both and all your friends beheaded. How's that?"

"We'll give you the money!" I said. "If you're going to let us go."

"No David! He can't kill us or our friends or any of us. If Mindy's free then the cops must be looking for Fenster for kidnapping!"

"Oh, yeah!" I said turning to Fenster. "Let us go and we won't make things worse on you."

"Nice try," he said. "But Mindy's not going to go to the cops. What would she say? What proof does she have of anything? Rudy wouldn't approve. And I know for a fact you two would be far better off without him knowing."

"Not any more," I said. "She will tell Rudy. Rudy's gonna get you. Let us go now and we'll tell him to go easy on you."

"Your friend's right," Fenster said. "You're an imbecile. Look. Give me the money or I'll kill you. End of discussion."

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"Gee, he seems convincing to me," I said to Gupta nervously. "I know it's your money but how about reconsidering?"

"Let's talk to Mindy first," said Gupta. "That sign and this guy saying he let her free could all be staged by Fenster."

"I believe it," I said. "I mean I believe she's free."

"Yes," said Fenster snarling at Johnno, "That weak doomed traitor let her wrap him around her little prick-probing finger to escape. He let her go earlier today."

"Prick?" said Gupta. He turned to Johnno. "She didn't..."

"We fell in love."

"I can't believe it!" Gupta stared at the sky.

"It was love at first sight—when I snatched her off the street that night, she just looked at me and smiled. And then... she kissed me."

"No!" exclaimed Gupta, "She *did* come on to her kid-nappers and from the very first!"

"Just to me. Queenly was driving. She never cared for him or Terrible Terry."

"Silence!" said Fenster.

"Bobby, I believe you," I said. "Mindy's free."

"Yes, I'm convinced too." said Gupta shaking his head in—belief. "But don't give him the money."

"*I'm* telling the truth, but *you're* lying. You're bluffing! You have nothing!" said Fenster.

"No, we do have the money—nearby. We just wanted to make sure Mindy was safe before we gave it to you," I said. "Now she's safe and so you can have it. Naturally, we'd rather not give it to you—I can think of other uses for it—but, that aside, your actual conditions were that if we provide you with both gold ingots or \$300,000, that we would *all* be off your hit list."

"It might be worth \$300,000 to me to watch you burn!"

"No, no, no—we had a deal," I said. "That's not fair! No incineration! No decapitation! That's not right! That's not

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honorable! Genghis Khan wouldn't go back on his word! We went through that exhausting, and highly inventive, treasure hunt and we brought you the treasure before sunset even after you changed the deadline this morning. We have brought you the treasure, not the attractive and heavy gold ingots that you would have preferred I grant you, but the agreed equivalent in cash—actually, it's a little less than the cash value of the gold but it will save you the trouble of fencing it—even though you *are* Fenster the Fence.”

“Stay on subject you idiot,” said Gupta.

“Nah—you don't have it so you burn,” said Fenster.

“We brought you the key,” I said, pulling the key out of my pocket and holding it up to him. “And the money's nearby. Since we didn't know Mindy was free, it was only right that we just brought the key. You would have done the same thing. Genghis Khan would have approved. He was fair. He lived by law. He was a man of his word.”

“Yeah,” said Johnno.

“Silence!” said Fenster. “*You* are definitely going into the inferno.”

“No—he's one of us now so the 300,000 should cover him too,” I added feebly trying to save the poor schmuck.

“Forget it—he's mine.” Fenster looked at me. “Okay, Boys, lock 'em up. I know this key,” he said. “It's to a locker at the airport—over by Virgin Blue. Right?”

“Right,” I nod. “The number's on it.”

“It's not yours to give,” said Gupta. “Give me the key. It's mine.”

“Shutup. If my treasure is there you two go free,” he said snatching the key, “and if it's not, you all three end up compactly settled in your own little cozy urns that will sit on a shelf in my special mausoleum of revenge.” He walked off and left us with the Goony Twins.

“Where's the cavalry?” whined Gupta.

“I don't know,” I bemoaned sympathetically. “I do wish they'd drop by.”