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Mr Khan walked into the Private Gambling Room on the third floor of the casino. Time stood still in this room where natural light never entered. It was neither night nor day in this place where the walls were clad in Thai silk and the lounges in supple, thick cow hide from The Philippines. A poisonous cloud of cigar smoke hung in the air. Mr Khan had exchanged \$500,000 US dollars for high denomination chips which had been neatly stacked at the blackjack table by his assistant, Ms Lam, an impeccably dressed woman of Chinese descent who dutifully pulled out Mr Khan's chair and stood behind him as the dealer began to play.

The object of the game of blackjack is to draw cards with a total closer to 21 than the dealer's total—without going over 21. Cards are dealt clockwise from a dealing service called a shoe. You are dealt two cards, while the dealer takes one card. The cards are dealt face up so you can see your point value. A digital security camera trained on Khan as he took his cards. Both he and Ms Lam were fully conversant with the security systems deployed by casinos around the world and were entirely unfazed by them because they had no intention of attempting to cheat the House. They were genuine players, professional to a tee, vastly experienced and seamlessly attuned to the rarified world of high rolling. The dealer won the first hand and raked in the chips before resetting the shoe to commence a new game. Khan bet in increments of \$10,000 with the intention of playing two hands, win or lose.

Just as Khan took up his second hand a casino attendant approached Ms Lam from behind and spoke to her in hushed tones. There was a telephone call for Mr Khan. Would she like to take it? Of course. Without speaking to Khan she turned on her heels and followed the attendant, tracked across the floor by several cameras. She took the call at a low table on the periphery of the gaming arena and within a matter of thirty seconds it was completed and she returned to the blackjack table where Khan had won the hand and recouped his losses. Ms Lam leant forward and whispered into Khan's ear, who then excused himself from the table with a brief apology and explanation that a matter of some urgency called him away.

As Khan left the room Ms Lam explained the situation to the attendant and requested that Mr Khan's chips be redeemed in British pounds. A case would be provided within a few minutes and it would be appreciated if the attendant could see to it that the process was expedited as Mr Khan was a very busy man and in much demand. Ms Lam added that she would leave an envelope for the attendant at the front desk for his trouble. The attendant bowed curtly and Ms Lam left the room.

Khan was in reception with his carry-on bag by the time

Ms Lam emerged with the case. The valet ushered them to a waiting car and they were whisked off into the dusky summer evening. There was no conversation or exchange of looks between the two as the airconditioned car sped through the city towards the highway that would lead them to the border area where Iraq, Syria and Jordan intersect. It was essential that they travel south to avoid the hotspot areas where the US had recently launched renewed raids against so called Al Qaeda operatives in the area. Like everyone else in Syria, Khan, although Pakistani in origin, was of the opinion that history, the people and the land itself were against the US occupation of Iraq and that these border raids were no more than shadow boxing exercises designed to provide fodder for the public relations personnel in the US administration and their cronies in Baghdad. The presence of Ahmed Chalabi as the Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister reminded Khan of Groucho Marx's quip that he would never join a club that would have him as a member. So much for Iraq's new democracy if Chalabi was at the top, he thought.

Not that Khan cared for democracy. He had, of course, studied the history of western philosophy and political science and knew very well the doctrine of humanism and the structure and function of democracy as it could be traced from Periclean Athens to the American and French Revolutions and the intervening centuries. But, at heart, Khan avidly believed, it was a flawed system that had become corrupted by political factionalism and the cosy relationship between the dominant political classes and global business. It was the way of the infidel and would be defeated by God's will and through the shedding of the blood of martyrs.

As the sun set over the gentle hills surrounding Damascus the adhan called the faithful to the prayer of Maghrib and the driver pulled the car over to the side of the road, got out and removed three prayer mats and some bottled water from the boot of the car. Ms Lam pulled her hijab around her face and removed her shoes.

Back at the Palace Hotel and Casino, two security officers were reviewing the footage of Ms Lam and Mr Khan's episode in the Private Gambling Room. They quietly discussed the composite video recorded by several cameras. One of the men systematically removed the footage from the archive and reset the date clock.

The car carrying Khan, Ms Lam and several hundred thousand British pounds cruised into the desert night. In Washington, the Secretary for Defence was receiving a briefing from his communications staff on the contents of a communique addressing the incursions across the Syrian border.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Boris Kelly.