

CHGAPTER ONE

‘Ahalen, Ahalen! (Welcome) A stocky bearded man called out rising to his feet. A surprised and joyous broad smile spread all over his bearded face, and shaking the ash of the cigarette he was still holding between his right hand fingers – he extended his arms towards the approaching youth.

The oriental café at the east side of the old city was crowded – packed up with clients, as a matter of fact. No one of its many rounded tables was unoccupied or without a load of half full bottles, glasses, cans or those tiny so typical white coffee cups.

Groups of guests were huddled together round each table. Shadows covered most of the crowded and noisy square, but the last sunrays were still shining brightly on top of the low opposite buildings.

The youth made his way through the crowded tables in quick long strides, pale and anxious. Most of the guests were foreigners, light haired tourists who kept babbling enthusiastically in their strange language. As they sitting on the low and uncomfortable chairs, and kept bursting out from time to time in roaring laughter; the slight inconvenience did hardly wane their enthusiasm.

The youth compatriots on the other hand, were watching him with suspicious and hostile glances. He had never been in that neighborhood before, thus the insecurity that was marked clearly on his pale face, was quite comprehensible. He wasn't a known figure in that remote quarter and there were too many informers, turncoats and other black souls in those somber days. What's worse the Shabac's (the Israeli counter intelligence) blood thirsty hounds mingled in their communities, as if they were born and bred among them; and there were hardly any possible ways or means to point them out, so well they were dug in their midst...

A surging wave of uncertainty was flooding the youth, but bracing himself and grinding his teeth, he walked on towards the bearded man, seeing nothing but his host's smiling bearded face.

The golden head of a foreign girl that popped up behind his host's bulky figure didn't attract his attention,

he simply didn't notice her. With quite an effort he brought a forced smile on his pale and anxious face, and rushed to the open arms of his bearded host.

'Ma lac?' (What's the matter with you?) His bearded host whispered into his ear, in an extremely cautious manner; and without changing his warm and effusive expression he kept on smiling benignly, his white, even teeth glistening through full red lips and the black fringes of hair that circled his mouth.

'When did you arrive? How are you...? He asked loudly in a clear warm voice, feigning pleasant surprise. 'Tefadal!' (Please) Come, come sit down please.' He muttered on repeatedly. He was holding the youth's shoulders with both his hands, embracing him and then pushing him slightly away, to have a better look at him; scrutinizing the youth's pale face with loving eyes.

Releasing himself off his host's enthusiastic embrace, Samir thanked him warmly and sat down facing the square. His host still on his feet raised an arm above his head, catching the eye of some far off waiter; with quite acrobatic and peculiar movement of his palm once and once again, he hinted thus his message to the latter.

The waiter disappeared inside the café and returned almost immediately carrying a loaded platter and was hurrying towards their table.

Samir who was sitting with his back to the café's entrance, failed to notice that coded give and take conversation, and when the waiter seemed to appear from nowhere, unloading the platter upon their table with lowered eyes, Samir was caught with a sudden terror; his limbs stiffened and his blood seemed to have frozen in his veins, just for a fraction of a second. But he got hold of himself right in time, and managed to face his host before the latter sat down and noticed it.

They carried on their false small-talk, sipping their coffee, his host made some kind inquiries concerning Samir's kin, their doings, their health; while Samir answered according to the general line, with which he was briefed for that certain meeting. The various details of that conversation were vague of course and could be easily denied or confirmed as circumstances and needs might require. In his turn, Samir presented his host with a few questions of the same kind, to give their conversation the right sense of credibility.

A quarter of an hour passed. Their tiny coffee cups were empty and shaking his host's hand and thanking him again and again, as traditionally befits a senior, Samir took his leave and was on his way again.

Walking through the narrow and shadowed lanes, so familiar to him revived his spirits a bit. Time and again he had to force his way forward through dense human stream, listening to bits of conversation that kept inadvertently interrupting his thoughts. But there were also moments when all he was able to hear were his own footsteps, echoing back off the bare walls of a deserted tunnel like lane. Summing up his first impressions he had a feeling of disappointment, and the nearer he got to his destination his feelings of disappointment were increased. The main reason was his host's appearance, which reminded him those middle aged brokers or dealers, and other sorts of loafers who passed their days on street corners prying about for would be customers; or sitting all day long in cafés, smoking Narghillas (oriental smoking device) endlessly, gossiping aloud while playing Shes-Besh for hours long. That bearded man simply did not meet his expectations, and the roundabout course, which he was ordered to take; as if he was misleading his own shadow, seemed to him rather futile; and in spite by the short briefing and the bits of information, which he was allowed to know. The little he was told by his cell's leader, for that certain meeting. No, he did not like at all that bizarre affair, from its beginning to its nearing end.

Turning the next corner, the blood rushed in his veins again. He was almost there!

A door opened up slightly in the opposite wall and was immediately slammed shut, not entirely though but was left ajar; a long dark cleave in the pale wall, reflecting the sun's last rays of light.

‘Yallah, (come on), get inside!’ The bearded man muttered impatiently. ‘Hurry up!’ He added and hastened to shut the door behind the youth. With a swift gesture he pointed to Samir where he expected him to sit, while he himself went to the opposite side of the lone rectangular table. They were sitting in a small and poorly furnished living room, the small square table, the black phone on top of it, the two chairs, seemed to have been mustered particularly for that meeting. These were Samir’s conclusions as he sat watching the bearded man, in the few seconds before his host opened up their meeting.

His host had a marked stern look on his bearded face, his time was short it seemed to hint; much too short to spend it on Samir.

Undoing his tie, releasing his fat throat, he opened up with a question:

‘What brought you? What have you got?’

The sudden change in his host’s manners, the arrogant self-importance look on his host’s face sent an undeniable message to Samir: The bearded man in front of him was not eager at all to meet him, and what’s more he was looking forward to be done with him as fast as possible.

The phone rang suddenly loud and shrill, pounding in Samir’s brain over and over again. He could have jumped right out of his skin. He almost groaned aloud, and exhaled the caught air in his lungs with widening nostrils.

‘Hello, who is it?’ asked the bearded man, holding the receiver close to his hairy cheek. ‘Who...? Whom do you want in the name of Allah? No!’ He raised his voice almost to a shout. ‘It’s not the Anthawee residence and we didn’t send any laundry!’ Feigning bad temper he hung up decisively and turned back to Samir.

‘Well?’ He asked him in a calm and reassuring smile, pulling a packet of cigarettes out of his breast pocket; a foreign brand that Samir did not know of.

‘A cigarette,’ he offered his young guest with deliberate ease sending forth his hand with it to Samir, while opening the packet at the same time; a feat he managed to execute with the fingers of his extended hand.

‘So, what was it then?’ He asked again as if he were thinking aloud, or scanning his own memory.

Praised is Allah, the bearded man thought with much relief, watching Samir’s slim fingers as he pulled a cigarette out of the open packet.

The first phase passed successfully! The young man is clean, nobody followed him and nobody would suspect him. Thus there’s no need to cancel the operation, as it did happen already on several occasions before...

Taking a deep breath of air, he was swept with a sudden wave of elation. But there isn’t any reason to rejoice yet! He reminded himself cautiously. The young man’s ability is very doubtful. He isn’t an experienced member and he didn’t have any training of any sort... and how he would bear with the tasks we have in store for him, Allah and no one but Allah knows... His European appearance is his one asset, and that all there is to it for the time being. Yes, it’s a risky business. But enough with it! He scolded himself decisively, cutting off his own thoughts briskly.

‘All right, you have brought us some information I understand, go ahead talk, I’m listening.’

‘I was asked some time ago to collect any information I could get.’ Samir answered, exhaling cigarette smoke and feeling rather encouraged.

‘The truth I must say, I haven’t managed to collect anything of much importance, but Valid said...’

‘There’s no need to mention names,’ remarked the bearded man interrupting his young guest in mid-sentence, not too harshly though – taking care not to hurt the young man’s feelings at that early stage. ‘Try to talk in general terms, make it a habit of yours. Use phrases like I’ve heard, I’ve been informed, without mentioning the source. As long as you aren’t asked to get down to details, there’s no need to explain how a certain information reached your ears; and in this way we would all last longer, survive to serve our holy cause.’

‘Thank you, that’s exactly what I shall do from now on. With you permission I’ll continue.’

As his host just kept on watching him in silence, Samir went straight on: ‘I’ve been asked to collect information on movements and habits of personalities – I mean enemy personalities and I’ve brought with me such material.’

‘What personalities? What kind of personalities?’ His host asked in a rather flat and indifferent voice, as if he was uninterested in the whole matter.

‘It’s about my ex rector.’

‘You took your time didn’t you? Made sure to graduate first; passed the ceremonies and all, got a diploma hanging on the wall I bet!’ The bearded man retorted suddenly, with unhidden contempt.

‘What, beahiat Allah (in God’s life I swear)! I’d no such thoughts ever...’ Samir stammered, shocked by his host’s sudden change of attitude. ‘He’s an old man I couldn’t have ever imagined that he would be of interest to anyone!’ He went on vehemently. ‘I thought I would have made a laughing stock of myself, that’s what I thought; that’s what I was sure of, and if I wasn’t asked to bring the little I’ve got on him, I wouldn’t have come... Beahiat Allah (in God’s life) I wouldn’t have come!’

‘He must be the very kind type who wouldn’t harm a fly no doubt, that ex rector of yours.’ The bearded man echoed right after him adding fuel to the fire, with rough sarcasm that harbored quite an amount of reproach.

Bewildered Samir watched the hairy mocking face of his host. He didn’t agree to come to this meeting just to let that man humiliate him, mock him openly, laugh straight in his face; whatever that man’s rank and position might be. Samir thought bewildered, as he was getting very angry and frustrated.

‘Well yes, he didn’t hurt or harm me.’ He answered his host’s challenge, looking straight into his host’s eyes. ‘What’s more, I’ve found him very useful, and now having no more use for him, he doesn’t bother my thoughts anymore.’

Though he stood up to his host defiantly, he chose on purpose the last phrase to appease him, without causing his host to lose his face, and without offending him, and finding the right path back to obedience.

Fine, fine indeed! The bearded man thought quite pleased. That's exactly the type of man that we need. If he will be prepared carefully, he might be persuaded to carry out any task... Yes I'll better finish, the act of persuasion right away, thus delays, hesitations and doubts; which ends up usually in withdrawals, cancellations or worse in total failure shall be avoided at last. Yes, I must conclude it tonight, and thus prevent any possible leakage; and that's the right and only way to succeed!

'There's one thing I would like to understand first of all, why didn't you report that man when you were still his student? We were watching you all these years, you were aware of it, weren't you?' Scrutinizing Samir's face intently, he made a short pause and then went on:

'You do remember that everyone in your cell was ordered to collect whatever bits of information he could lay his hands on, while leaving us to decide its level of importance.'

An oppressive silence ensued. The reasoning Samir had brought forth at the beginning of the meeting, which dealt with the advanced age of that certain person became groundless all of a sudden, and again he fell into deep embarrassment.

'The bare truth is...' He opened up hesitantly. 'I couldn't find any reason in collecting trivialities, and I didn't wish to bother anyone with it. Nevertheless, I've no intention to deny the pains I took to graduate... without needless risks. I couldn't jeopardize my future, which isn't my future, for it's dedicated to the organization. I might have been wrong, I know. After all any of my colleagues could have come forth with the same claims, or some similar reasons; but I knew very well that all those bits were collected by the other cell members... I mean my colleagues.'

Exposing his very thoughts, and his feelings at the same time was not easy at all! But it was his only choice, his only way to defend and justify his lack of activity in those years; and above all that bearded man in front of him was reading him like an open book, through the many personal details that the organization had amassed no doubt on each one of its members. Thus, it was much wiser to gain his host's trust, than make him pull new embarrassing facts out of his sleeve, which would very easily contradict Samir's standpoint right away.

'I see...' Said his host calmly, astonishing Samir once again.

'I do accept your argument with some misgiving, though I won't come forward with any claims or demands concerning your past deeds. Well then, let's get back to your report.' The bearded man concluded the matter with much ease. 'Go ahead talk.'

The file of the chosen victim was known to the bearded man up to its last detail, nevertheless, he sat listening to Samir's report attentively; comparing it with his own data and at the same time, weighing Samir's ability in professional terms; for even if that green horn would carry out successfully his planned mission, it might be his sole and last contribution to the organization in that certain area. He did know that the organization's priority concerning the youth was to exploit his gifts in the academic domain. As Samir was destined for political or rather diplomatic career, to represent the Palestinian cause in foreign countries, at the U.N., or other international institutions.

Who knows, he might develop into an influential figure or an international celebrity, in the long run. In that case, thought the bearded man, he had rather keep a close touch with the youth adventures and personal progress.

The heat in the narrow room was almost unbearable. Their cloths were soaked with perspiration, and both of them kept wiping their brows time and again.

A fine purifying furnace that meeting is going to be for him. Thought the bearded man contentedly, pulling another cigarette from the open packet.

The oral report reached its end and silence dominated again the narrow and smoky room. His host seemed to have fallen into deep thought, watching Samir like a huge black bird of prey, waiting with patience to its imminent turn to come.

‘So you must have known him rather well.’ The bearded man remarked at last. ‘How many times did you pay him a visit at his home?’

‘A dozen times more or less, but I was accepted as one of them, as part of the household I dare say. I hope I’m not expected to renew my contacts with him.’ Samir added with a hint of surprise.

‘There won’t be any need to and I don’t believe you or anyone else, would be able to do so in the very near future!’ The bearded man guffawed sarcastically rather pleased with himself. But he changed right away his expression, staring at Samir with a meaningful hard look, which left no doubts in his young guest’s heart.

‘You don’t mean to say that... It’s incredible!’ Samir muttered utterly shocked. ‘Just how can the death of such an old and useless man serve us?’

‘Living among them left marked traces of their influence upon you, it seems; that’s what one would gather from such talk! Have you really been contaminated with their squeamish mentality?’ The bearded man lashed at him venomously. ‘The mentality of wailing women fit for weaklings alone! If we were to lose such men, of such advanced age, of such position, it would have been hardly noticed. He isn’t an admired leader; he isn’t a political figure of any importance – one whose fall would cause alarm or unrest, not among us. But how does it appear in their eyes?’ He asked rhetorically to emphasize his point. ‘I’ll tell you how they look upon him, or upon his kind; in their eyes he’s the crowned intellectual, the famous pedagogue, the great man of science and research, whose achievements are revered with awe as the symbols of wisdom no less! That’s why such men are ideal targets to our cause, and their fate shall be concluded according to our needs alone!’ His host made a short pause to catch his breath, and went straight on.

'It's his turn now that ex-rector of yours, to serve our purpose. Yes, it would be a hard blow for them to bear; and that's our estimate. The elimination of their intellectuals or any of their spiritual elite, should crush their moral, should shake the earth under their feet, and should cause a nationwide outcry so typical to their distorted mentality. That's our aim, our exact aim. We're neither interested in his personality nor are we impressed by it; and by his merits, and his charitable character!' He added mockingly in a whining voice, as if he was whimpering himself. But straight away he changed his tone into a thunderous roar: 'The only thing that matters to us in his case, are the advantages that his death would add to our struggle!' Out of breath almost through his oral and mental efforts, he nevertheless marked his last sentence with a flourish; crushing what was left of his cigarette in the ashtray in front of Samir's eyes; with a swift resolute movement of his right hand.

'I hope I didn't hurt the budding flower of your soul.' He added suddenly ending the phrase in a mocking giggle, but resumed his monologue without giving his young guest the slightest chance to react.

'I used on purpose that notorious literary expression of theirs, as there's no other one in their loathsome language, which so properly describes their contemptible mentality of wailing women. THEY'RE NOT MEN AND THEY DON'T DESERVE TO BE HONORED LIKE MEN!!!' He ended his harangue shouting, but only for an instant. 'And what in the name of the prophet did he find in you, was he some kind of a pervert?' He hissed venomously at his young guest, before Samir could collect his wits.

'No behiat Allah no, he'd a family...' Samir stammered utterly shocked.

He had a family, Samir's answer resounded in the bearded man mind.

I've done it; the youth is ready to do it. The bearded man thought elated.

CHAPTER TWO

In the dark lane, beyond the door he had just closed behind his back, Samir stumbled and made his first uncertain steps as if he was drunk; bewildered and confused his blood still pounding in his veins he made his way slowly forward, by touching the nearest wall with one hand and getting used to the darkness.

The bad feeling, the uneasiness he suffered from, at that meeting's beginning was enormously enhanced as the meeting drew toward its end. Now on his own at last, he reached a serious mental crisis.

Just what could it be? He pondered desperately. What's the matter with me? What kept bothering me? What was pestering my thoughts on and on without a moment's rest?

Was it the commitment I've just agreed to take on? What a fine mess I got myself into! One's own fate ups and downs could be quite puzzling. Wasn't I supposed to pass on the few bits of information I've haphazardly gathered, and be done with it?

'Behiath Allah!' (In God's life), he kept muttering under his breath. He could not have imagined to have reached such an outcome, such a nightmare...

How could I have dodged it? I could not! Who could have guessed that this meeting was going to end the way it ended? I was quite certain it was my first and last time to deal with these people, with such types who are engaged with the organization's dirty work; and I'm supposed all of a sudden to be their one and only savior, me of all men! Does the blow the organization suffered just recently, the sequence of arrests, which almost paralyzed it temporarily had anything to do with that bad feeling; that strange feeling of oppression that clutches my heart...? No, it has nothing to do with it. But that reason made them choose me for that certain task; although I'm an inexperienced novice. Could it be the question of the rescue plan, which is unknown to me yet? Why did he refuse to elaborate my rescue plan that bearded devil? Is it still unsolved? If that's true it's much worse. I simply can't get the hang of it... It could have been the veil of mystery, which the bearded man had stubbornly cast over the last stage of the operation, that smoke screen...

Was there any rescue plan at all? Or did my doubts arise at that very moment, after I've committed myself without the slightest objection?

Would I face the challenge? Would I accomplish my task without fail?

No, these couldn't be the reasons for the bad feeling that keeps troubling me. I'm not frightened or scared. He concluded thoughtfully.

While he was still tormented with his doubts, all of a sudden in a flash, the scattered clues fitted into a clear comprehensive conclusion. As if he had come out of an obscure labyrinth straight into bright daylight.

'In the name of the prophet, he muttered aloud adopting his host's favorite exclamation, without being aware to it. How they framed me with their honey dripping tongues! Valid my cell leader who started it all, and then that bearded man; who contradicted himself several times, I can realize it now! But out of sheer awe and obvious respect, I didn't put his words to a test of truth or logic; on the contrary, every word that came out from that bearded devil's mouth, I took for granted; and he was leading me along all through the meeting, just as one leads a lamb to the abattoir! Samir thought embittered. I've committed myself blindly without a second thought, foolishly, jeopardizing my future career, my own life...! There is no way out of it now but to have it done!

He stopped abruptly and leaning back on the wall, he took a deep breath of air, shutting his eyes for a moment; as despair and fatigue almost crushed him while he kept pondering on.

As for the potential victim, the ties I'd with him just recently... Again he was assailed with doubts and a feeling of remorse.

'What's another dog dead or alive on the face of the earth?' He fumed aloud with rage, spitting on the ground, and moving on; getting rid of his last doubts with much resolution. He was carried away by his own emotions, swept by a growing wave of fury.

What now, what's my next move? He thought confused and swept in feeling of in despair. And again the blood rushed to his head, bringing forth frustration and rage.

What am I supposed to do right now? Should I return home, to my mother's house without delay? I'd better do so. I must prepare myself, and get ready for the morrow, learn my instructions by heart; and as for the rest, well it's up to them to do their share. Let them, those who are behind it, take care of me, when it's all over and done with!

An urgent feeling of hunger troubled him suddenly, cutting off his thoughts. No wonder, he reminded himself, I'd hardly anything to eat all day long, and the cigarettes the bearded man offered me made things worse.

He was plunged still deep in his thoughts, as he reached a well-lit road. Shops were open and a lively stream of pedestrians blocked his way. Anxious to keep farther on he hastened to join the living stream, getting away as far as he could from the meeting place and the bearded man. Though he didn't dare to think of it directly, he was running away in fact from his host the bearded man.

At the first food counter he stopped, bought the food offered there: a flat round baked loaf stuffed with Houmous (mashed beans) and a bottle of some soft drink. He paid the owner with the few coins he had in his pocket, and devoured his food on the spot; quenching his thirst with quick short gulps, while watching nervously the passers-by.

How much money have I got? The puzzling thought crossed his mind, causing him to panic for a fraction of a second.

Just what brought that thought up? He kept wondering. He fished his wallet out of his pocket with a start, and checked its contents.

More than enough, he thought calming down a bit. He did put aside the sum of money needed for that wench, the one he planned to visit this same night; to pay her a visit was the main reason that made him come to that cursed meeting, and he had almost forgotten it. He reminded himself in wonder, tucking the wallet back in his slacks' pocket. After he made up his mind a second time that night, on that crucial matter... He turned towards that woman's address right away, without any doubts or hesitations.

The shutters at the “newcomer’s” house were closed; there was no sign of life beyond them. As he slowed down his pace Samir kept walking on. Passing the somber two-story house once, he turned on his heels with disbelief to pass in front of it a second time.

What’s wrong, what could have happened? Isn’t she home tonight, working? Once again he was assailed with restlessness and doubts, associated with subconscious fears; the fear of the “malevolent eye”, which kept haunting him; particularly while he was encountering difficulties.

A dark and broad figure appeared at the entrance of the next small house, as he was approaching it slowly. A buxom middle-aged woman was standing at the doorway, her shawl covered her head and accentuated the shadow of a mocking smile on her face.

I’d better ignore her and simply walk on. He thought at first, but as he was about to pass her he stopped, and looked straight into her mocking eyes; ready to ask her without shame, the whereabouts of the hostess her neighbor, or whatever could have happened to her; as it seemed that this woman must have known something.

As their eyes met a sudden change crossed the woman’s features. His troubled air, his handsome pale face aroused her compassion; and as she had teased already several other clients of the newcomer, who sauntered by much earlier she had enough of it. In a sudden and brisk change of mind she offered him her help. ‘She left,’ she whispered to him, ‘She ran for her life to Amman this very morning, before sunrise.’

‘Is that so?’ He exclaimed nodding his head with wonder, grateful though to that woman, whom he did not know and have never seen before.

‘Her kinsfolk are looking for her, that’s what I’ve heard and true it must be, for the poor soul is on the run.’ She added expressing her regret.

‘I see, thank you so much.’ He muttered with difficulty and turning away, he left her and walked on in the empty lane.

So she ran away, fleeing for her life... She must have crossed the river on one of the bridges; and she could be way deep in the Kingdom of Jordan by now. He thought disappointed. What a lousy luck, a real fine start to begin with! He sulked with much bitterness and frustration. But it could be a good sign after all, a good sign indeed! Isn't he himself supposed to get there very soon, tomorrow "inshallah" (if Allah wishes so), if he will accomplish his task without a hitch.

Oh come on! He urged himself. There're others, she isn't the only one I know, is she? There are two more places where he could go and pay a visit to. But he liked better that certain wench, he took fancy to her heavy bosom; her darkish purple nipples, which made such a contrast with her ivory pale skin. What's more she didn't charge him excessively as did most of the others. These after all are not his only open options; he kept encouraging himself while keeping a steady stride forward. He could tour the nightclubs and the few hotels in that eastern part of the city; and hunt down one of those blue-eyed foreigners. Sure, no doubt at all! Yeah, the big butterfly hunter! He scolded himself getting back to reality in a surprising sudden switch. I could have made love to a bunch of them till dawn.... If I'd the time to spare, but I haven't! No, not the shortest spell of time should I waste. Yeah, sheer waste it should be...! He decided in a heated frenzy, pulling his wallet a second time, ready to count its contents.

But why count my money? What for? He wondered in dismay, shocked by his own unexplained conduct. Isn't it a deadly trap, a one-way trail to my own doom? He panicked suddenly as the features of the bearded man were taking shape in his mind's eye. Hasn't that treacherous hyena double-crossed me? Why didn't he brief me on my escape plan? Is there an escape plan at all...?

Terrified for the second time over these haunting suspicions, assailed by growing fears and anxiety he stopped all alone in the dark lane; peering straight forward absentmindedly, holding his wallet in his right hand.

They're going to forsake me right after it! What am I waiting for then? Shouldn't I save my own hide and clear off, while there's still time to do so? Run for my life...! Vanish into thin air without leaving any traces behind me... 'No never!' He muttered aloud listening frightfully to the echoes of his own voice, coming fast back from the bare dark alley walls, which are surrendering him.

They won't desert me! They won't leave me behind and I shouldn't have given such an idea the slightest thought I must do it; I must accomplish my task, whatever the risks might be... even if the price would be my own death!

Tears stood in his eyes. He was already mourning his lost youth, and was swept in a wave of self-pity.

But having reached such a high peak of emotions, made him drop back into reality; to the empty dark alley where he was standing alone undecided.

What am I wasting my energy for? Yielding like a young jackass to false suspicions and bad feelings? What in the prophet's name am I still doing with that wallet?

With a resolute movement he pushed his wallet back into his slacks' pocket, and resumed his lonely walk in a rather decisive stride.

And what need do I have for money? He scolded himself again angrily.

If I should fail or if I should fall into the Shabac's hands after having done it... He thought in cold defiance and spat three successive times on the ground before him, as he walked on. No, I won't be in need of money in such a case, Allah alone knows for how long... But if I'll succeed "inshallah", I would have all the money I've ever dreamed off and wished for. So, why should I worry about money like a fool, I'd better return home, and get ready for the morrow. Yeah, better rest, have some hours of sleep; and give up all those small diversions, which bothered me so much just now. I'll have to give it up for a while. I must rid my thoughts of it right now, there's no other choice...

As he came out to a small open square he noticed a lone-parked cab, at the far curb. He went straight over, tapped slightly the drowsing driver on his shoulder.

'To Sylowan,' he said opening the cab's door.

CHAPTER THREE

Having slept a bad and grim night, strewn with nightmares, Samir woke up falling straight into a rather bad mood. The few things he had prepared last night did not escape his mother's suspicious eyes. It must have worried her no doubt more than ever, and though she had had her fill of sorrow up to the brim, and knew very well to hide her feelings; at this particular time the traces of worry and strain, were visible on her old and wrinkled face. She did not bother him with questions, but the questions were right there, hanging in midair; without being asked whirling in his brain, and troubling his conscious.

What to become of her, what's her lot? My own mother! Didn't she suffer enough already? Would she too be among those who have to wait at the gates of detentions camps, to have a short glimpse of me behind bars...? After some frightful days, awaiting some news of her missing son...? That one aspect would not be utterly bad from her point of view. But if on the other hand I will succeed, if everything shall come off well; would she ever see my face again, at her age?

What a hateful course of life! What a misfortune! How in the devil's name did they get to me? Why did they have to pick me, out of all the others? Why me, curse them! They aren't better than the Jews, than the Shabac's leprous dogs?

Time is flying by rapidly and I've hardly done anything yet. It's getting late! He thought with much self-reproach, and driving away his bad feelings he forced himself to get up spent and ill-humored as he was; but there were still a few more things he had to do before leaving.

'Sit down and eat.' His mother said, as he came back from the rear court having washed his face with fresh cold water.

'Don't worry.' She added gravely, doing her best to encourage him. 'You'll get along, you'll find some work.'

'Sure I'll find some work!' He repeated her last sentence in heated fury. 'What work, what for did I've to study all those years? What did you've to toil for, wreck your health, feed me, and look after me! What jobs are there for a poor devil like me? To clear their garbage, to scrub their sewers...! Is that what they call work? Are these jobs fit for an educated man?'

Submissively out of sheer humbleness so typical to her women-folk, his mother kept quiet bowing her head down; she was used to his outbursts.

'I've got some business in town, some documents to arrange.' He said lowering his voice to normal tones again.

'What documents?' She asked alarmed.

'Travel documents, I want to get the hell out of this cursed country! Do you understand? He answered her in a wild shout, 'to get the hell out of here, forever!'

It was the right thing to do, putting it down straight, he thought in complete composure. It would be much easier for her to learn it from his own lips, thus his sudden disappearance won't surprise her; neither would it surprise his relatives or his friends; and if friends or foes would venture to ask or question her on his whereabouts, she'll have a ready answer.

'Where do you intend to go?' She mumbled after having recovered from the shock his last words caused her.

'I'm going to Kuwait via Jordan.' He answered without having racked his brain much about it.

Well, I did find the right solution to my problem. He summed up his problem in his heart, with much relief.

'But it must take some time... a few weeks... what time will you be back? Today I mean, you're not leaving yet, do you? I'll see you this evening, won't I?'

'Yes, of course!' He calmed her down and the easiness, with which he uttered out that lie, surprised him. He never managed to lie to her before and whenever he tried, she had caught him red handed.

'I won't be long.' He assured her. 'I'll be back at sunset or even earlier.' He promised her with feigned indifference, and thanking her briskly he got up and left.

Doubts and misgivings did not trouble him anymore; he was out early, as he was told. The time was a quarter past six, and he was on his way with no need for haste.

In a small plastic bag he had packed some food wrapped in a piece of cloth, along with the dagger the bearded man furnished him with.

- 'More than these simple means, you won't need.' The bearded man told him before they parted.

- 'As for the rest, the real sophisticated means just leave it to us.'

Was he given any other choice, but to leave it to them, his own fate?!?

Inshallah... (With Allah's will) he prayed hopefully. They won't forsake me, no! He summed the matter up encouraging himself once more.

Isn't he a university graduate, and he didn't take his studies in Bir-zeith - or some other doubtful college, but at the famous Hebrew university. He's an asset to the organization, to his people; they know it just like everyone else who is part of the organization surely knows it.

Though he disliked him, distrusted and hated the bearded man; for his refusal to brief him on the last phase of the operation and left that crucial phase undisclosed. But he could not deny his knowledge, experience and wisdom.

So as far as he is concerned the bearded man is a villain and an unbearable person, but he's as wile as the devil himself; Samir summed the matter up encouraged.

- 'Be there one hour earlier.' The bearded man advised him last night.

- 'Wait for him from seven am on.' It was not a bit of advice as the bearded man termed it; these were in fact minutely detailed orders.

-*'Got a reliable watch on you, I hope?'* The bearded man asked getting hold of Samir's left wrist.

'Adjust it to their radio station, there's no harm in listening to their radio station. I'm not testing you don't you worry; I mean it, so adjust your watch first thing in the morning to the time announced at their radio station.'

This piece of advice he failed to accomplish, Samir recalled angry with himself, while riding the bus from his village to the western part of the city.

There was no harm in listening to their broadcasts as the bearded man has remarked, but he could not do it in his mother's presence' and that is why he has forgotten it completely no doubt. In any case it didn't bother him, if he would reach that certain spot one hour earlier, or fifty nine minutes earlier; it did not make any difference at all.

Getting off the bus at the almost empty terminal, he bought a Hebrew morning newspaper he folded it neatly, and shoved it into his plastic bag. Its upper part with its large printed header he left popping out exposed, as he was told to do.

- 'The few passers-by who might cross your way, would certainly take you for one of them; that simple precaution should be your first step to keep them off your track.'

A bright idea that might enhance his chances to get away undetected, though nothing would stop the grave consequences that would arise out of his sudden disappearance; and how it might influence his old mother only Allah knows. But having enough worries more than one could normally cope with, in just a short while to come, he chased these thoughts away.

- 'Await him at mid-field; find some mound or a group of bushes, to shelter you, till he comes. The traffic on the roads around, is quite heavy; the passers-by on the other hand, are very few. So the sooner you'll get there in that case, the better would be your chances to keep them off your trail.'

He's dead right! Samir thought mounting the second bus he had to travel with, at the main bus terminal. He handed the driver the fare without uttering a single word, two silvery coins; he collected his ticket and the change, and went over to the seats next to the rear exit door. One elderly fellow passenger sat next to the driver, a couple more were at the rear end of the bus.

Without giving any heed to them or to the driver, he settled in one of the single seats, pulled out the morning paper, and pretended to read it with growing impatience; though he could read their language fluently as if he was taught it from his early childhood, he gazed at the spread newspaper in front of his eyes, with an empty look, waiting anxiously for the journey to commence.

When the bus's engine roared at last and they were moving slowly out, he folded his newspaper and shoved it back into his plastic bag with a sigh of relief. He was near a state of exhaustion already.

Two bus stops beyond the small valley, Samir got off and went on foot backwards; doing his way through the back silent streets; away from the bus's course and south to the towering museum hill.

-‘Trample the grass at the spot you've chosen, and spread the paper over it, thus the morning dew won't wet your pants, as you sit in wait for him. That should be the hardest hour to pass, the time you'll have to spend expecting him. Nobody but him is using that path at those hours of day, so don't let worries of that sort trouble your mind; if by sheer coincidence someone else would come across, let him be! Just lower your face and keep on waiting, it's him we're after. Don't you forget it!’ The bearded man told him last night raising a threatening finger. *-‘If on the other hand you happen to be the impatient type, the one who fidgets nervously whenever he has to sit still – well then...’* He added laughing. *‘Take a string of praying beads with you...’*

‘Arse ibn el arse!’ (Pimp son of a pimp) Samir hissed furiously aloud, remembering the note of sarcasm, which accompanied that remark. Whatever he did or said, that bearded devil, had a certain purpose – and that teasing remark was intended to strengthen him mentally. He had no doubts about it. Its purpose was to prevent any second thoughts, which might weaken him; or make him change his mind at the last moment.

How hard it was, that hour of waiting, he realized soon after the very first moments. Whether his prey shows up or whether he doesn't show up, he must wait for him up to fifteen minutes to nine am. If by any chance he won't show up, that poor old devil; he isn't that eager to hunt him down. If the old man won't show up I won't regret it!

-‘When he comes towards you, get up and step forward with ease; he may guess you were expecting him, there's nothing unusual in that fact and you're not hiding it from him. He'll be surprised of course, but remember there's no possible chance that he might suspect what really awaits him.’ At that point his host paused abruptly, and raising both his arms, just a bit over the table's level; he nodded his head moving it slightly forward with pursed lips, as if to force the idea into Samir's head.

-‘Getting closer to him while he extends his hand to shake yours, hit him with your fist under his chin, as hard as you can; aim your knuckles to his Adam's apple. A good aimed blow with all the shoulder's might behind it should kill a man on the spot, a man in his prime not an old timer whose days are numbered. But above all, that first blow's purpose is to silence him right away, thus he won't be able to trouble you with calls for help or by uttering any other sorts of noise.’ Here again the bearded man cut himself short, with a loud chuckle, testing how much impressed Samir must have been with that show of toughness and expertise.

Well he didn't impress me at all with his show of vulgar cynicism, Samir recalled disappointed with his host's conduct.

-‘If he won't tumble and hit the ground right away, see that he gets there as fast as possible without hesitation! Again I repeat one good blow should suffice to crush him down. Don't stoop over him, but crouch down on your heels beside his body; and finish him off with the dagger. Stab him between his ribs, with a good hard one under his left armpit. One thrust of the dagger four fingers below his arm-pit, will do. Draw it out carefully, if it gets stuck in his ribs, don't waste your time over it! Just leave it there! But rub your fingerprints off the hilt, with the tails of his cloths, shirt or jacket whatever would cover his corpse. Cover his mouth and nostrils with the tails of his cloths. See that his face is well covered, and then kick his ribs in with your heel over the spot you stabbed him. Crush his ribs! Break his bones in cold blood, don't get heated up, don't lose your head; just make sure his mouth and nostrils are well covered, otherwise you might be sprayed all over with his blood. Don't drag his corpse and don't you dare to fall into any act of futile foolishness – under no circumstances, be it a symbolic nonsense or whatever...! If some traces of his blood or filth smears one of your hands or your heel, clear it off with his cloths.’

Throwing an anxious glance to the far end of the path, Samir cleared his throat nervously. Would the professor arrive earlier than usual? Disgustedly he spat the few drops of saliva; he managed to accumulate in his dry mouth. Last night he was assailed with a strong feeling of nausea, and rose to his feet but was still bent over the table, supporting himself with his hands. He was about to leave, before the briefing was over, ready for the worst. To his astonishment, his host asked him back to his seat in the most polite terms; without harsh comments or any signs of anger.

-‘You haven’t ever butchered a sheep, or kicked a stray dog? Well then, that’s the way to treat him. Treat him as if he’s a dog, a leprous dog.’

The dagger! He didn't take it out of the bag yet! Samir recalled terrified suddenly with that unexpected sign of neglect. But it's just seven eighteen he told himself, having checked his wrist watch in his haste. He had still plenty of time left, he concluded relieved.

Yeah, there's plenty of time yet. he thought yawning, pushing away troubling thoughts of obligations, commitments out of his mind, falling into day dreaming, lingering over reminiscences; the professor features, his doctrines; his two daughters who disapproved of their father's relationship with an Arab; just as their mother thought, but had hidden it with much tact. But the professor wife had such haughty airs, and did treat him with such arrogant scorn; that small and skinny female with the iron hold over her husband. She made the professor's life so miserable...

There was that rented apartment, which he shared with Ghill his Israeli roommate. This apartment was not far from the very spot he was sitting right now; (Just to think of it, how strange!). Shaoul Ghill called him a name fit for a female, when he introduced him to the landlady; the leftist fool (she didn't have to know of course, that he was an Arab).

“I'll do the talking” Ghill said then, which was one of the very few things he ever did right. For as long as Samir kept his mouth shut, one couldn't tell him from any other Israeli student. It took him some time, to get rid of his guttural pronunciation, and speak their language as they did. But there were always embarrassing circumstances, which he couldn't escape due to sheer coincidence in some of the cases; and due to those who did their best to expose his real origin, his real identity and thus humiliate him, drive him away from their circle.

It did happen quite frequently, even with Ghill his good friend. The small favors he had to repay him, for his kindness. They shared an apartment between them, a fact which was a miracle in itself. The long hours he had to keep away off their common abode in the late afternoon and evenings, when Ghill's girlfriend was bound to come.

One such episode he remembered rather vividly, when these two stayed for some reason longer than was agreed upon between him and Ghill; thus on coming back he found them sitting next to the table, for an "aftermath" cup of coffee. He wasn't introduced a fact which enhanced their mutual uneasiness.

Although the embarrassed atmosphere that wench, to his amazement showed much interest in him, scrutinizing his features with a pair of impudent eyes. Those shameless searching looks disturbed him that much that he had to seek refuge in their small kitchen, busying himself with the gas stove. Having poured himself a cup of black coffee, he returned to the one room they shared together, to face that Jew bitch once more. It didn't take long to figure out the cause of her curious looks that daring gaze, which he took it to be at first. How foolish of him, his liberal and tolerant friend who advocates with such fervor peaceful coexistence, international fraternity and what else, equality and likewise bullshit; betrayed him to his current bitch by telling her his secret. The furtive glances they started to exchange, the way she lowered her eyes at last, over her empty cup gave them both away.

His broad minded friend Ghill, the vigilant human rights champion suddenly kept avoiding his eyes; while his current bed partner that Jew bitch did overcome her short lapse of weakness, and assailed him again with those daring looks of her; though making it clear somehow that she knows, while her looks seemed to come behind an invisible wall. The 'fair opportunity' which he cherished, the very slight chance he had hoped for just a few seconds; as a direct reaction to those daring looks (she was pretty curse her), knowing that she did get it, just a while ago, wasn't an easy trial either. And thus his hopes faded away, vanished on the spot. Nevertheless she must have fancied the same thoughts he did, the profligate bitch!

Remembering the frenzied fury, which took hold of him at that time, rekindled in him these same wild dissolute emotions again. A terrible urge assailed him, swept all over him, to rush his roommate and clutch his throat, wriggle it, twist it, crush it into a lifeless pulp! Slap that Jew bitch with all his might on her slightly parted lips, once and again; throw her back onto his bed, tear her clothes off, and rape her there and then! Didn't she desire it herself the reckless bitch?

The fear that all of a sudden masked her face, her frightened looks, enraged him even more. With a quick dart he rose to his feet and pushed his way to the door, bumping his thigh against the table's edge and his shoulder against the door post. While he was slamming the door behind him, he could hear Ghill calling out: "Sha-ouulll wait, don't go...!" Shaoul he called him the hyena, the filthy hypocrite! Samir recalled in a hazy stupor.

The morning dew has dried up already, and the rising sun was scorching his face; thirst bothered him. Out of foolish fretfulness he didn't bring along any drink with him. He was briefed, instructed, had adequate time to do whatever he needed to do, and still something was amiss!

A vague and far form of a man was moving on the path, moving straight towards him; an undefined silhouette, widening and narrowing rhythmically against the blinding brightness of the rising sun. Deeply moved still by his infuriating reminiscences Samir watched the approaching vague silhouette through narrow blinking eye slits, perceiving hardly its details.

'Samir what a pleasant surprise!' He heard and recognized immediately the professor's warm voice, and saw at once the happy smile, stretched all over his old and wrinkled face; while his broad and slightly stooped figure was moving slowly on.

Samir rose heavily to his feet astounded by the professor's appearance and moved forward to meet him, in an awkward but slow cautious step. As if it wasn't he who was in motion, but some alien body within him; a body in which each of its muscle's movements is being reported to a foreign mechanism's center, which is in control of each one of his movements and dictates all his reactions. A frenzied feeling of great urgency assailed him. His blood surged in his veins pounding against his temples, storming his brain; speeding up his reactions in an ever-growing crescendo.

The hearty warm smile left the professor's face

'Is anything wrong Samir, are you all right?' The professor asked sending forth his right hand, toward his former student. 'You are rather pale, what's the...?'

A torrent of somber fury mixed with anxiety and fear, swept Samir's brain, distorting his features. But with a swift and decisive movement, he raised his right fist, and hit the professor's pink and well-shaved Adam's apple with all its limp skin folds as hard as he could.

Pushed hard backwards his eyes bulging almost out of their sockets, the professor's cry of agony was strangled in his crushed throat. The terror of death turned his face into a grotesque mask. He stumbled on unsteady shaky legs for a fraction of a second, his hands reaching up desperately to his swelling throat, and uttering strange short snorts, in an utmost effort to breathe one of his legs had risen abruptly, hanging in midair; and swinging round in a sudden fall, he came crushing down in a thud, hitting the ground with his face.

Shocked with the outcome of his deed Samir stood petrified watching with disgust the fierce fit of twitches, which ran down the professor's back. His shoulders kept pushing inward, his hands under the heavy load of his dying body were scrapping the ground, striving in vain toward his blocked throat, his choked lungs craving for a breath of air.

The process of death was reaching its climax, the inevitable end. Intense convulsions rocked the professor's back and legs. Suddenly his torso hardened in a futile effort to rise off the dust. As his legs kept kicking the ground in a wild uneven beat, one of his shoes came off and rolled a few inches away. While Samir was watching it roll utterly flabbergasted. The last effort of the dying body to retain its spark of life, brought up a wave of accentuated twitches which engulfed the whole body again; and ended up as the stretched out limbs stopped still abruptly; and the professor's lifeless corpse flattened down listlessly on the ground.

The dagger...! Samir rushed back to the crumpled newspaper and his plastic bag. With the drawn dagger in his right hand, its sheath in his left; thus he charged the dead body with a head long dive as if he was a hawk sinking its beak in its prey's flesh. He stabbed the corpse's back incessantly, in a feverish frenzy, up to a state of complete self-exhaustion almost.

Out of breath with aching limbs, he stopped at last realizing how tired he is. He was covered all over with his perspiration, which kept pouring on and on out of every inch of his skin, he stooped down again and wiped clean the dagger's blade with the professor's light summer jacket.

Quite composed and calm by now, but slow with fatigue, while returning the dagger back into its sheath; Samir kicked the corpse's ribs in contempt, and ended it up by trampling heavily his victim's white wrinkled neck. Leaning heavily down on it, with all his weight, he uttered aloud in his mother's tongue: 'Eat dirt you leprous dog.'

- 'As soon as you'll accomplish your holy mission hit the path, and head westward with ease at your own time. Don't rush things and don't you worry, we'll be keeping an eye on you...

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