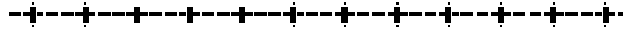


Bedtime Story



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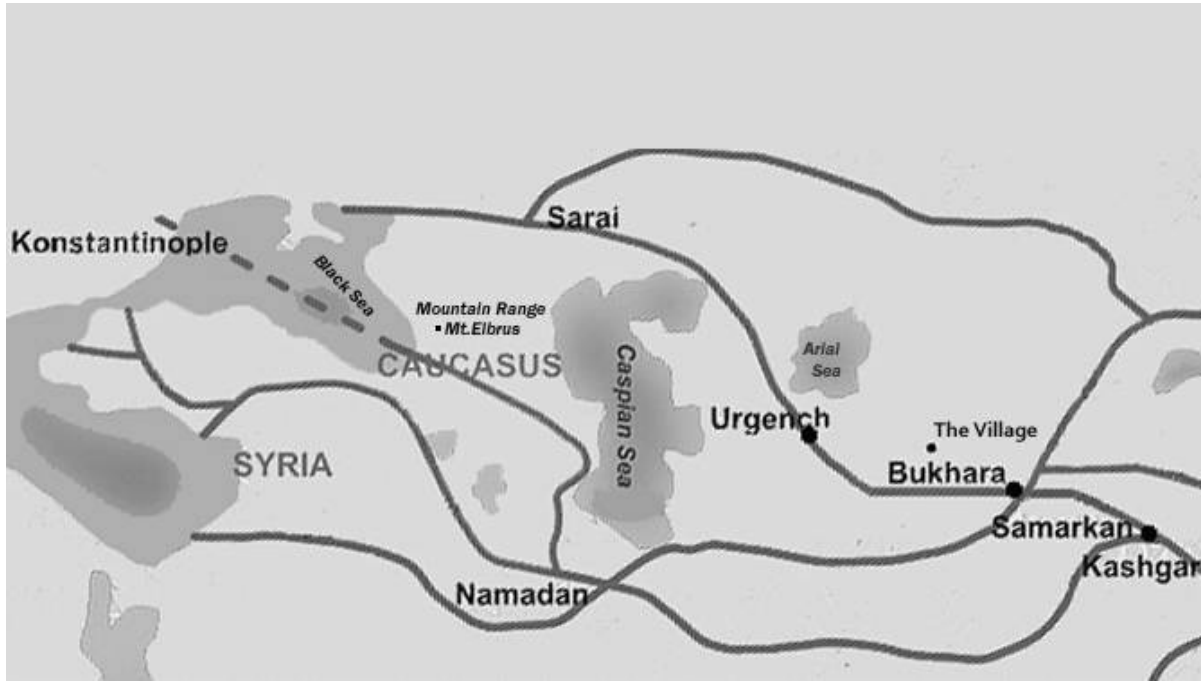
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Prologue

The stillness of the night was interrupted by the shape of a running man. Moving towards the forest, away from the main road that led to the lights of the city, the man was running in a way that could best be described as unnerving, although even that wouldn't be saying enough. The terrible state of panic, in which he appeared to be, was the most obvious part of the whole picture, but hardly the most disturbing. Much more unsettling was the fact that he never even glanced back, to make sure whether he was still being followed.

Usually there are two reasons for people to run like that. The first - one is eager to get to what it is there ahead of him and of course has no need to look back. The second - whoever makes such a run from someone or something, is seriously scared and on a subconscious level knows, that if he turns and sees what it is behind, that had scared him so much, he wouldn't be able to move.

It was for the second reason the running man never looked back. But not even that, made what was happening so terrifying, it was the way the man was running. It seemed that he had no proper sense of direction, or resemblance of a strategy. Once stumbled, he would start running to the right, then for no particular reason he would turn to run to the left. If he happened to bump into a tree, he would take a few steps back and run into it again. He would do so several times, before finally finding his way around the tree. He was like a fly stuck behind the glass, aimlessly moving around, striking the glass with its head trying to find the way out. It was clear that the man was insane.

At last he could run no further, as the number of trees increased and number of hits increased with it. With the last struck he sat heavily on the ground and couldn't get up anymore. All that was once human, had left his face. Every facial muscle was tightened, revealing bare teeth, like a mad dog. Eyes wide open and blood pouring down onto them, completed the mask of horror. He was sitting straight and staring ahead, when what seemed like involuntarily, by some force, he started to turn his head around. And then all what was left of this man was a scream, unending horrible scream, a scream that would give even the strongest of men nightmares.

Leaving this screaming thing sitting on the ground The Faceless Man turned to walk away.

Part One:

The beginning

1.

Tale of the captured

The First thing Omar Nubbiri felt when he woke up was the sense of rough material against the skin of his face. He couldn't tell straight away, whether his eyes were closed or opened. It took him a moment to remember, that he was not under the blanket in his hotel room, but kidnapped, or something of that sort. He remembered walking out of a business meeting, when he was hit hard on the head. After that - darkness. And now he woke up with a bag over his head, tied to a chair.

"Is someone there?" Omar tried "Please answer me".

Silence.

"Please talk to me. If you went through the trouble of taking me, there must be something you want". Maybe it was a horrible mistake. He has been in Saudi Arabia a number of times and always felt safe. Besides, he was not rich enough to draw attention and not important enough to draw interest. Omar Nubbiri was a successful businessman, one of the young executives for the big trading company in Emirates. He certainly had money, but not enough to be the target for kidnappers. As for the religious or political extremists, why would they be interested in him, he has never been much into politics and was never considered the fanatical type. A good salesman - that's all he was. Nothing more.

He tried again "That must be some kind of mistake. I'm sure we can work things out if you only talk to me".

'What if someone just robbed me' he thought 'robbed me and left'.

He tried to free himself but without any luck. Finally, when he was sure he was alone, a very unpleasant voice spoke to him: "Should I congratulate you or kill you? Are you a puppet or a warrior of God?"

Omar felt fear rush to his head making him dizzy. This was a mistake, a horrible mistake "I don't know what you are talking about. My name is...."

The voice cut him off "I know your name, Mr. Nubbiri. In fact, I know a lot about you. Where you live... and your family. Two daughters - Adiva and Ameera. And your beautiful wife Hessa. You have a good life Mr. Nubbiri, a lot to be thankful to Allah for"

Omar felt another wave of fear, much stronger this time, mixed with rage. "You have no business with them, if you are man enough, you'll talk only to me. Ask your questions and I'll answer truthfully".

The Voice chuckled in approval "You are a smart man Mr. Nubbiri. Do not worry, I have no intention of visiting your home, there are other methods of persuasion. I was just making a conversation."

"So what do you want of me?"

"To be sure"

"Sure of what?"

"Of who you are"

"You know who I am. You just told me"

"There is no way to tell before you looked into a man's eyes"

The bag was pulled off Omar's head and a sudden bright light blinded him. He heard footsteps closing in and then some figure sat in front of him. Omar squinted, trying to make out the face and could not bring his sight to focus. The man sitting in front of him kept quiet. It took some time before Omar could see him. He did not like what he saw. Not one bit.

The skin on the man's face was grey - the colour of the ashes, his eyes cold and emotionless. There was no remorse or anger in them, just cold curiosity of the scientist looking at the lab rat. 'It's the man you can't reason with or bargain for that matter' was the first thought that popped into Omar's mind. Still, he had to try; they might not want to kill him after all. He looked around and saw three men standing behind him motionless, statue-like.

"You are making a big mistake. I am just a businessman. That's all".

The man did not respond.

"What do I have to do to prove it to you?"

Silence.

"Are you a religious man?" Omar tried a different approach. "I am. And I swear by the name of Allah, I am telling the truth."

"You are not a warrior. You are obviously a puppet." It was the owner of the voice that had been speaking to him earlier "The question is: Are you aware your strings are being pulled? Do you know the puppeteer?"

He took a long look into Omar's eyes piercing him through. Finally he broke the stare. "I don't think so". The tone of his voice did not make Omar feel easier. 'It doesn't sound like he is going to let me go'.

"Do you know why you are here Mr. Nubbiri?"

"I told you I don't. Why is it so hard to believe?"

"It is not. In fact, I do believe you. But you are no fool, Mr. Nubbiri. You must have some idea."

"All I know is that you made a mistake and it seems that I am the one who is going to pay for it."

"Unfortunately, you are going to pay for it. But it was not me who made a mistake..... So you can't think of anything that might be the reason for your present misfortune?"

A sudden flash of memory hit Omar. He remembered that a few days ago one of his business associates introduced him to a factory owner, whose name he could not remember. This owner wanted to hire Omar for a short time, to make a business deal with an American company. Something about resin production. He didn't think much of it back then, because he hadn't consider it as a serious proposition. You don't just come up and propose a business deal to a complete stranger. On top of that, he offered Omar ridiculous amount of money, almost five times more than his annual salary. Thinking back he realized someone was playing him. In any case, telling it to these terrorists, or whoever they were, was hardly a smart thing to do.

"No. I can't think of anything."

"Now, see" the man shook his finger "your eyes tell me different. They tell me that you remembered something." This was a hard man to fool, even for someone like Omar, who was used to hiding the truth and manipulating people (it was one of his job's descriptions). You can not be a good business man

without mastering it. But this man saw right through him. 'I guess that comes with experience in interrogations' this was an unsettling thought.

"Ok. All I remember is that I was introduced to some factory owner. I do not remember his name. I've never seen him before."

"And how do you think it is relevant Mr. Nubbiri?"

"I don't know if it's relevant, but it seems strange to me, that someone I've never heard of came up to me with a very attractive proposition. I am not sure if you're aware of this, but it is not how things are done in the business world. It is almost rude. That is why I found it strange..."

He waited intensely for the man to respond. The man was silent, just looked at him with his cold, snake-like stare. "You asked me what I remembered. I told you. Now why don't you let me go? I am sure you are not the kind who worries about the police. Besides I don't know who you are. Your description can fit almost 90 percent of Saudi male population over 50. I am not even Saudi. I don't think anyone would listen to me".

The man was silent, just kept looking into Omar's eyes.

"You are not going to let me go, are you?" it was a rhetorical question "And you don't really care what I am going to say. You've already decided. Your only interest in me is of a sadistic nature. You've been doing it for far too long, my friend. You've defeated the whole purpose of interrogation. For you it is not about retrieving the necessary information any more, is it? You just like to see people's reaction to different methods of your 'persuasion' technique."

The man smiled and his smile reminded Omar a cartoon character he once saw- 'Grinch'. Almost comically evil. Only there was nothing comical about this man.

"You are way too smart for your own good Mr. Nubbiri". He walked to a table, removed a rug and revealed a lot of different instruments prepared for the torture "I am a conventionalist, Mr. Nubbiri, and always follow the routine, even when it seems unnecessary."

He picked up a tool, which happened to be a hammer. Omar was not a hero, or a soldier trained to bear pain and to face danger. The most dangerous thing he had ever seen was the robbery he witnessed just for a split second from the window of a taxi. The driver refused to stop when he wanted to help, but even if he did stop, Omar could hardly do anything. The fact was he had never experienced anything that tests a man's worth. But he was no coward and now facing the death he did not tremble. Instead, a sudden calmness swept over him as he realized that it was just his time. He only wished he could see his family one last time.

The man with a grey face sat in front of him again, with a hammer in his hands. "Do you wish to tell me more Mr. Nubbiri?"

Omar looked at him with pity "You know, when I was a child my father used to tell me this bedtime story about The Faceless Man. My mother always disapproved of this, as it's kind of a scary story. But I loved it. It was an adventure for me. I didn't see any scary stuff in it. Not back then.

My father told me, that no one knows when or how exactly it started. But he said it was a long time ago. When The Faceless Man was nothing but a boy something terrible happened to him, so terrible, my father used to say, that people chose to forget about it. But the boy to whom this had happened did not forget. When he got older, something just as horrible happened to him again and this time he chose a path that led him to become The Faceless Man.

My father told me that if someone is truly bad – rotten - The Faceless Man would know... and he would come... and then this someone would scream the endless scream of horror. I didn't understand the story. I was just a child, dreaming of righteous vengeance, of strength and justice. I was innocent, you see. But as I grew older and had my share of sins, it came to me - it is a scary story. After that, I tried to forget it and never spoke of it until today. It is until today I've never met a truly rotten man. One that is worthy of The Faceless Man's attention"

The man in front of him smiled "Are you trying to scare me with children's story Mr. Nubbiri?"

Omar smiled back "You did not listen. This story is not for children, but for grownups. It is a scary story for grownups. You see, I believe it was men like you that created The Faceless Man. And he knows where you are and he comes for you. I don't know whether this story is true or not, but I am almost relieved that you're going to kill me. Because it means that whether he is real or not isn't for me to find out. As for you, my friend.....well, you will most certainly be the one to know." Omar smiled again and with great satisfaction he saw the man's face grow paler and his cold emotionless eyes fill with concern. Omar looked deeper and saw unmistakable fear.

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To his dismay the man with a grey face realized that Omar read him like an open book. He quickly got up. Omar caught a glimpse of movement behind his back. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

The Man with a grey face made a sign to his man.

2

Fate of the lost soul

Al Hassani woke up screaming, covered in cold sweat. For the last free days he has been dreaming of the dark shape approaching, closer and closer, and he always woke up with a scream, sweating and shivering. This night was no different than any other. He became so afraid, that he slept only when he couldn't stay awake any longer.

The first incident occurred on that cursed day when this businessman from Emirates told him a bedtime story about some Faceless Man. He couldn't think of anything else that day. He cursed this Omar again and again. He should've tortured him like he intended to, to see how he would squeal, how he would squirm like a worm on a hook.

How much he hated those smug bastards: neatly dressed, with good manners and smiles, so civilized. All masks. They are not so different from him. At least he didn't lie to himself. These fools were so sure they're safe inside their bubble of security, when all you need is a little touch to destroy it. To show that, was one of the many reasons why he became who he was. There was no greater feeling of satisfaction than to see how an animal fear takes over those two-faced liars when they sense the danger and their masks of civilized men are thrown away. To see, how they would do anything to get back to their quiet little lives, to know that it was in his hands to give it to them and of course, not to.

But this Omar to his surprise appeared to be of a different breed. And as much as he hated to admit it, he has always been afraid of men like him. Men, who could suddenly reveal a surprising strength. It wouldn't be fun to torture him. In fact he probably wouldn't be able to, because he couldn't understand him. And what were the odds, that he would hear such an unpleasant story not from anyone, but Omar Nubbiri: "it was a bad day" he told himself. Now he had this superstitious fears "this is ridiculous" he said for a thousandth time.

On the day Omar was killed, Al Hassani lost his nerve for the first time in his life. He has always witnessed the execution. With Omar, he ran out of the room the second he gave the order, but not before he saw a peaceful look on Omar's face and that scared him even more. The first night he had the dream, he was able to shut his fears out and convince himself, that it was his subconscious playing tricks on him. After the second night, he was still able to stay positive; after all, he had to face the fact, that the time he spent with Omar Nubbiri was a traumatic experience for him. There was no other way to look at it. And it was only normal, that his mind still had emotional outbursts in the form of this dream. That wasn't such a convincing argument after free nights of the same dream. He couldn't see a psychiatrist. That was out of the question. So he had to find some other way to deal with it. The problem was that he could not rationalize his fear. None of the logical explanations gave him any relief.

Despite his occupation, Al Hassani was not a religious man. He never believed in God. All the stories about good and evil, about heaven and hell, about angels, ghosts or a boogey man, hardly ever impressed him. Even as a child he was too practical to be superstitious. In fact the word 'superstitious' was not in Al Hassani's vocabulary. Some might think that it was strange, since he was a son of the Imam¹, whereas his father was the main reason for his disbelief. Very early in his childhood, he realized that religion was more of the tool to keep people at bay, than sending God's word. Watching his father, he learned to use that tool before he finished school. He was always the leader in any play. Whatever he said, his mates were listening and obeying.

He became an Imam at the age of 21. Taking over his father's place, he soon gained more respect than his father ever could wish for. But after a while, he started to notice that there was not enough room for him to grow in this small town. His ambitions were much higher than having a power over a small community. He wanted bigger things. He wanted for people all over the world to say his name with respect or even better, with fear. He had a clear plan of how to achieve it.

So at age of 26 he joined a terrorist group known as BROTHERHOOD OF JIHAD. With his exceptional leadership skills he quickly moved up in the hierarchy. Those in charge realized that he was too big for them to handle and that he would soon eat them up, but it was too late. Before they had any chance to react, Al Hassani attacked wiping out the entire chain of command. He knew that his name would not be recognized on its own if he continued to operate within the same organization, so he gathered those loyal to him and created his own organization called THE WARRIORS OF ALLAH. With brilliant setups, his terror acts shook the whole world and by the age of 45 he has become known as one of the most dangerous terrorists of the century.

During all these years he never had any doubts about nonexistence of the God who could punish him for his sins. He never felt guilty, and any sign of remorse he considered as a sign of stupidity. Being a true atheist he lived by the law of the jungle: 'strong takes what he needs and the strongest takes all'. This philosophy served him well throughout his life. And since he never saw or heard of anyone being struck by lightning for doing bad things, he assumed that God was just a fabrication, maybe the greatest one, but fabrication nonetheless, by those exceptional few who ruled this earth.

Omar's bedtime story was about retribution, something that he has always laughed at, only now it was not so funny. Somehow it was all real. He could feel it in his bones. His last hope to get rid of this dream lied in one explanation, that his instincts (something that despite his atheism he believed in) were warning him of the danger coming. Hence, to get rid of the dream he needed to get rid of the danger. Someone out there was getting closer to him and that he could comprehend very well. He was not perfect after all, he made a mistake and left a trail somewhere, that was inevitable, but the good news was, he could fix it: 'and I will' the second he thought that he heard a knock. His heart dropped. A sudden fear hit him. He almost screamed, but forced himself to hold it in, knowing that if he did he wouldn't be able to stop.

¹ Muslim priest

He heard his nephew called his name.

'Idiot' he cursed himself 'you almost had a heart attack. Stop this childishness and pull yourself together'.

He called to his nephew "Come in Sayeed".

Sayeed came in. "I have good news Uncle"

"Finally, I could use some good news. Sit, and tell me everything"

Sayeed knew better than to argue with his uncle and although time was of an essence, he said nothing. He was his uncle's shadow, his second in command, hardly ever leaving his side and in ten years he spent close to Al Hassani he learned one unchanging truth about him: He never liked to rash into things. No matter how urgent matters were, his uncle always took a second to analyze the situation. He used to tell him all the time: "Before you do anything Sayeed, take a breath and think what you're going to do and what effect your action will have. Do that, even when you think that your delay can cost you dearly, because if you don't, a mistake that could've been easily avoided, can be fatal". That is why urging his uncle to hurry never crossed Sayeed's mind.

"Tell me what you've brought me" Al Hassani leaned forward eagerly, like a kid waiting for a present.

That made Sayeed nervous; he was not used to seeing his uncle like that. Al Hassani was the last person he could call emotional or edgy, but since the day he interrogated Omar Nubbiri he's changed somehow. Became unsure of things.

His uncle never let him be present during his interrogations. It was one of those 'hardly ever' times when Sayeed was not at his uncle's side. And since Al Hassani didn't share with him the results of the interrogation, Sayeed remained in the dark, which made him more confused and nervous. The strangest thing was that his uncle, before he went into the room where Omar Nubbiri was held, told him that it was an easy case and it wouldn't be a problem to retrieve the information. In fact he already knew the answer and was just going in to confirm it. When he came out, he had a look of the man who has just found out the day he would die.

But Sayeed kept his worries to himself for now, taking his uncle's advice not to rush. So, calmly he reported

"I think we've got our man"

"Are you sure of this? How did you find him and what makes you think it is him?"

"He was sold to us by a freelancer"

Al Hassani frowned in disappointment "Sayeed, Sayeed, am I such a bad teacher or is it you who is such a bad student? How could you let yourself to be caught in such an easy trap? The man we are looking for is too big for any freelancer to handle. So you're either got coned or worse, caught. If this is a trap then they are probably on their way here". While saying this he felt strange calmness 'worse comes to worst, this dream would stop'. Thinking that made him realize that he was afraid of this dream more than any jail.

"Neither, uncle, you are a good teacher and I'd like to think that I am a good student. We took precautions. We found a freelancer and interrogated him. There is nothing suspicious. I believe he just got lucky. He certainly did not strike me as someone the Agency would hire. I think CIA got sloppy. In

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