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The Struggle

By Nelson Lowhim

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Walid sat at a table across from Mahmud. All Mahmud did was look at him, shaking his head. None of Walid's apologies worked. He woke up with sweat gluing his shirt to his skin.

Walid's sleeping wife stirred, but soon returned to her steady breathing. He swung out of bed, and walked out to the lawn, listening to helicopters in the distance. He was tired of the sound. The steady beat of an American machine gun started up, hitting a note inside his chest. Either someone was standing up to them, or they were shooting at shadows. Walid lit a cigarette and shivered as cold Baghdadi air leaked into his blood. The Samarra Mosque had been bombed earlier that morning, and though he still felt anger, he wasn't certain what to do about it.

"Walid, they're coming!" Haji Salaam yelled

Walid turned. His mind lingered on last night's dream. Smoke from late morning fires thickened the air and blurred the street. They had just set up a checkpoint, and he wasn't certain if Haji was joking.

"Minoo?"

"The Americans," Haji yelled, as he climbed into his car.

"Wayeen?"

"The bridge to Azamiya." Haji started his car.

No way, thought Walid, he had promised last night to get at least one.

"Get back out, they are at least five daqa'iq away," Walid said. He tried to stop his voice from quivering. Normally, he would've done exactly what Haji was doing.

They were parked on the side of a small road that was regularly used by people who tried to avoid the main street's traffic. Taking a deep breath, Walid pulled out his handgun, and pointed it at the first car that came down the potholed street. He hoped it would stop; he knew he wasn't going to shoot.

"Identification. Where are you from?" Walid asked the driver.

“What is this police checkpoint?” the man asked, scrutinizing Walid with a look of disdain as he handed over his ID.

Walid looked at the man, surprised that he had obeyed him so easily. “Us?” he looked back at his group and felt more powerful. “We ask the questions here, where are you from?” Walid asked; the ID checked out.

“Hurriya, azizi, you?”

Walid smiled. One of their own. “We are only looking for Sunnis, drive on.”

The driver hesitated, looking at Walid, Haji and their entourage, before swallowing his words, and driving on.

Walid pointed his gun at the next car driving by.

“Walid, they’re getting close,” Haji said.

Walid tried to slow his breathing down.

The car squeaked to a halt.

“Identification please. Where are you coming from; where are you going?” asked Walid.

“Where are your uniforms?” the driver asked back.

Walid pointed the gun at the driver’s asymmetrical, beady eyes, and large nose. “No questions, just answer.”

“Azamiya. I’m going to the market.”

Walid’s heart jumped. This was his moment to act, to prove Mahmud wrong. Walid felt queasy. He was not certain if this was right. He turned to Haji and the rest of his group and they came at the car.

“You are Sunni, n’am?”

The man’s eyes darted to the other men, and he nodded uncertainly. “But I am a good man, I work with Shiites, azizi you must not...”

Walid opened the car door, and pulled the man by his shirt.

“No please, I have a family, what are you doing?”

Haji opened his trunk, and they stuffed the man in. When the man gave Walid another look, Walid felt like crying.

They all jumped in their vehicle, and drove away. Walid looked behind to see an American Humvee slow down near the man's car. Two soldiers nervously approached it, guns out, like it was a car bomb.

“They think it’s a seeyara mufakhakha!” Walid forced out a laugh. The rest of them laughed with him.

They drove a little ways until they got to Salaam’s place. They pulled the man out of the trunk, and dragged him into the house. On the living room floor, the man got on his feet, and started to beg. Walid tried to stand as tall and steady as he could. He could feel the eyes of his group on him. He fought the urge to shit. He hated the man for not making this easy.

“Please, why are you doing this?”

Walid stepped forward, his hands shaking, sweating. "You think you can destroy our mosques, and murder our women, and not expect us to fight back?"

"No, no, I have never done anything; I don't know anyone who does that. These are Arabs from other..."

Walid stepped forward, steadied his hands and shot the man through his face. The sound jolted everyone, including Walid. The man crumpled to the ground. Walid realized he had been hoping the gun would jam. A pool of blood spread. He told the group to clean up and dump the body near a Sunni neighborhood. They stared at him in silence. He decided it was a awe.

A good night's rest was all he wanted, but his wife was giving him that look again.

"What is it?" Walid asked.

He'd been scared of killing again, so he found other things to do. Many Sunnis lived in Hurriya. He took his group and forced the Sunnis to leave. Walid and his men managed to collect taxes from some of the people or take some of their possessions.

His wife pulled out a poster that had his picture on it. Wanted, for 500,000 dinar. He was shocked; first that he would be on a wanted poster, then, that he would be worth so little.

"Where did you find this?"

"At the market. I tore some down, but then there were police everywhere."

He smiled; he loved that his wife would do that when she saw his poster. Other women would have just run away. He kissed her and caressed her smooth skin. She turned her head away.

Walid followed her eyes to the door. There was no one there. His stomach churned. Would the police knock his door down at any moment?

"Is dinner ready?" he asked.

She didn't reply and walked into the kitchen.

That night, after they had made love, she stared at the ceiling in a way that let him know that he needed to say something.

"It will be zian honey, don't worry about it." Walid, of course, hadn't stopped thinking about being caught for what he'd done. He felt small, foolish.

"You have one son and another on the way, in sha allah, what will we do without you? Think about it, Walid, please?"

He wanted to slap her, but she was right, he had to think about his family. He could not get arrested. He knew what happened in those prisons; sometimes people never returned. His family would most certainly starve. In the end, she was concerned with him turning out like Mahmud.

"I will," he said to calm his wife down.

"But what will you do now? Your face is everywhere, and people need money."

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