

## Chapter One

It was past midnight. The inmates in the cell were all half asleep, after a day, which had ended with a lot of anxiety and fear. Fear reigned everywhere; the fear of being summoned by the "Muhaqqiq" for an investigation that never seemed to end, of being beaten till you bled profusely<sup>1</sup> of being tortured till your nerves were wrecked. And then the massive metal door creaked, with a squeak harsh enough to send your blood tingling.

Every time the guard, the Haras, turned the keys in the hole, the door unlocked in stages, with a sharp metal voice. The leaning, reclining and sleeping inmates sat erect, with all alertness, like a flock of frightened sheep, expecting the slaughterer to enter the pen and make his pick.

But this time it seemed odd. Odd because the activities normally ended before midnight. So everyone looked questioningly at each other, shuffling his blanket full of lice, ready to meet the fate. A Haras entered. "*Inhadh*", he shouted, and commanded us to vacate the front part of the cell and push ourselves to the rear. In a cell which could hardly occupy three scores, we were three hundred.

Behind him entered a young man, stark naked except for a brief loincloth. He seemed to be in his early twenties. His head was shaved except for the two gleaming black locks, which gave an impression of two eyes grown on the head. His eyebrows totally shaved, his moustache half-shaven. Blood streamed from his chest, back, arms, thighs and legs. He had been chastised with the lashes, which turned his skin violet, and showed the marks clearly. His ghost-like appearance scared everybody, most of us unable to meet his glance, which showed utter helplessness and distress. And then we saw Abu Mahmood, dressed as usual in his black double-breasted suit, with a wry smile hanging on his thick lips.

"Tell them!" he shouted at the tortured young man. "Tell them of your sins, and why have we treated you thus". And the young ghost muttered in Arabic. "I had been here few months ago, and then I was released. As I went home, I informed some of my relatives and family friends about the whereabouts of their missing members. They had disappeared, and the families were worried. I told them, they were all

detained by the Mukhaberat, and that I had met them. I am now arrested again and convicted of having disclosed the secret".

"Did you hear him"? Abu Mahmood blurted. And every one of us answered in a chorus: *"Na'am Sayyidi"*. The message was conveyed. The young man, hardly able to walk was then pushed out of the door, taken away to where nobody knew.

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