

Chapter Two

Our cell was on the fourth floor. This was No: 58. We were told to remember the number, and every time one of us came back from the Muhaqqiq, the Haras would ask him the Raqam of his Ghurfa. If he failed to speak out the number, or was unable to convey because he was a foreigner, just as I was, then he must suffer the slaps and blows falling upon his jaws, cheeks, head and everywhere. The Haras enjoyed this tremendously, and invariably performed his duties to please his masters. And when his hands tired, there were the kicks. "Cursed are your father and your mother, you rogue, why can't you remember your cell number?" He would shout.

The newcomer today was a young, handsome boy. He was pushed in, his blindfold removed, his handcuffs undone. For a few seconds he surveyed the room, looked at the strange, depressed faces and broke down. Sitting near the door he bitterly wept.

In spite of all the clashes, fights and quarrels that were commonplace within our cell, a strange bond of sympathy had grown among us. We heard each other's plight patiently and attentively, consoled and tended wounds. And when a newcomer appeared, we played host. So when this boy, Hasan, wept, the senior members rushed towards him, held him by the hand, and bade him to act honourably like a man. "*Ayb-Ayb La Tabchi-Anta Rajul*" - shame, shame, do not cry, you are a man, they said.

A glass of lukewarm water was given to him to drink, for there was no cold water available. And a cluster of men sat around him to hear his story. But Hasan was primarily interested to know how long he would be here. "They told me to accompany them for ten minutes. Ten minutes, yes, ten minutes only. I have an old mother, and I am her only son. My father is dead. She had just gone out to buy some food for the house, and they came in. My mother does not know that I have been picked. O Allah, she would die ... die ... die ... not knowing where I have gone." And he cried again.

This time they let him cry. As he lifted his head from his knees, tears rolling by his fair cheeks, for he was half Iraqi half Turkoman, he asked one of us. "How long have you been here?" "Two hundred and

eight days", the answer; he glanced at another questioningly and the reply was – "*Arb'ata Ash-Hur*" – four months. He now wept with a loud wail and said: "But they told me ten minutes. I am asthmatic, and my widowed mother is old."

I was there to witness the pathetic scene. A young friend of mine resting his palm against his cheeks was lying next to me. With a nervous twitch he looked at me and then at the newcomer and said "Allah Karim", and then with a sarcasm that seemed so out of place in the gory environment he added "*Inna Anzalnahu Fi Thamani Khamseen*" – Verily we have sent him down to No: 58.....

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