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This novel is written exclusively for Right Truth Blog (www.righttruth.typepad.com) and its readers.

In loving memory of my precious
Sara (7/25/1951 to 12/13/2003) who always
encouraged me to write from the heart and was
at once both my greatest critic and my most
loyal fan.

In love with you always!

And...

To the greatest dad anyone like me could ever
have hoped for: Joseph Stanley Godlewski
(11/29/1918 to 04/14/2008).

You gave me life. Thank you!

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Chapter Fourteen

Haytham downshifted through the five gears of the truck as the guards motioned for the vehicle to park adjacent to one of the coral-colored rectangular buildings, exhaling as he finally switched off the diesel engine. He knew that his task was far from complete with the parking but any break from wrestling with the decrepit vehicle was to be considered a treasure.

Opening the driver's door, he climbed down from the cab and fumbled around within his shirt pocket for the last of his smokes; Mahmoud might've never liked his subordinate's smoking, but at the moment nervous tendencies outweighed those from command. Haytham was certain that the Ukrainians had seen many young Muslims light up every now and then, particularly those crossing over from Turkey, and so it shouldn't have been such a particular obstacle to their function.

He just couldn't seem to differentiate times when he was supposed to appear as a young United Nations servant or one belonging to the whims of Islam. In a way, he thought that his entire role was a sham towards either; that both functions were just as deceitful as could be. That is, both the United Nations and the cause of a Greater Islam were merely carrots intended to dupe those who had nothing better to do with their lives. At least that's the way that he saw it.

Deep down, Haytham suspected that religious practice was supposed to be a very personal thing. Perhaps one proudly acknowledged in public at times but a private commitment nonetheless. What his leaders tried to impose, however, was a variant where the disinterested were targeted for extermination. That's what sat uneasily upon his mind; that to conform by

violence seemed to approximate that which they themselves had scolded the West for. He puffed heavily upon his cigarette as his mind toiled with the contradictions and hypocrisies of his masters.

The Ukrainian guards seemed to have bought the young Arab's struggle for normalcy within an often chaotic world for they surrounded the vehicle in a haphazard manner that suggested relative boredom with the older white truck painted with the requisite **UN** upon the sides of the box. He couldn't understand a single word they were saying but imagined that they were behaving much as any youthful soldier would whenever confronted with foreign visitors. They waved and offered friendly gestures; shared cigarettes amongst themselves; and even laughed broadly over impromptu acts of levity.

Haytham tried to remain isolated from such envious feats of freedom for he knew that as soon as he left the premises his masters would impale him upon strict codes of conduct. It was hard, to fashion semblances of normalcy one moment and then adhere to knowingly perverted interpretations of Islam the next. A young man simply couldn't change directions so fast, particularly a medical student whose traditional discipline required compassion and devotion to the human cause.

Haytham's parents were doctors and good, caring ones. They were Muslims, yes, but did not press their views upon anyone. The new breed of Islamists that sank their fangs into his culture's jugular appeared viler; more contempt of anything opposed to their narrow-minded, nihilistic views of the world. In fact, for all of the destruction that the young Arab had seen of his superiors' actions, he could not believe that Allah could have endorsed such depravities. Only Satan could commission such activities and this reality sat heavily upon his mind until the arrival of the overbearing Mahmoud shattered his concentration.

"Our men shall arrive soon, in another vehicle." the older man spoke firmly but quietly. Every word seemed to follow the motions of his eyes as he gazed critically upon his surroundings. "You will feign trouble with the engine when we go inspect the prisoners. This they will believe..." He tapped the white truck as

if to instruct it to behave as ordered. "They must have heard of our troublesome journey. It will give us cause to remain here longer than would be expected."

"Yes." Haytham spit out the butt of his cigarette, burned nearly to the edge of his lips. He knew that there would be hell to pay for this simple act but felt that it shored his impersonation. "This they will certainly believe."

Mahmoud's stare seemed intent to pierce through the younger man's soul. "They *must* believe this." He briefly looked away while a pair of Ukrainians in combat fatigues passed close by. "Any failure on your part will be dealt with harshly." With that, he drifted away towards the rear of the truck.

Haytham longed for another cigarette; he knew that it was no idle threat. Whatever perception he had at he beginning was now erased by one of absolute loyalty to the Islamists. They were his masters, his overlords, and, should the need arise, his executioners as well. For the first time in his adult life, he found himself battling the existence of tears.

One of the nearby Ukrainians, a military officer of some modest rank seemed to notice the young Arab's inner conflicts and walked over towards him slowly retrieving a package of cigarettes from his breast pocket and offered one to Haytham. "*Bitriid sigaara?*" he spoke with fluent if somewhat generic Arabic.

Haytham smiled broadly and accepted the offering before his mind had time to reflect upon just how accurate the soldier's generosity had been. It made him feel quite uneasy, as if his mind was being scrutinized intently by the foreigners.

"*Shukran.*" Even in offering gratitude, Haytham had been conditioned to act just as generic; a safety mechanism intended to prevent discovery of his true heritage by way of dialect, a need made more pronounced by the vehicle's origination in Turkey.

"*Maa ismuk?*" pressed the Ukrainian.

"*Ismii* Haytham." answered the young Arab automatically."

"*Kayfa Haluk?*"

Haytham was about to lie that he was feeling pretty fine when the sight of Mahmoud returning rapidly and aggressively forced him to impolitely ignore the soldier.

“Do not talk to the infidels!” Mahmoud nearly lost his composure and elevated his voice beyond that which could easily have been detected by the guards. “You will only conduct yourself in a professional setting.”

“Yes.” replied Haytham, covertly trying to ascertain whether the young Ukrainian officer had understood the commotion. Fortunately, it appeared that he was distracted momentarily by subordinates of his own. “I merely tried to act as would any United Nations employee. That is our function, is it not?”

Mahmoud’s face contorted into one of extreme anger. “*Your* function is to obey, nothing else. Allah created you to serve his purpose; your destiny is already written through the pages of the Qur’ân.”

Bullshit. Haytham hoped that his expression did not betray his innermost thoughts. He had just about enough of this pretense regarding Allah’s Will and the Qur’ân. People were responsible for their own actions, that’s what gave humanity its unique characteristics amongst Creation.

“Do you understand me?” roared Mahmoud impatiently; the veins of his neck visibly taut.

“Yes, I now believe that I do.”