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With Delilah's recommendation and Sultan's connections, Safwat secured a position with one of the biggest law firms in Cairo. His lifestyle changed to suit his new-found status. A dozen new shirts and trousers, the most modern suits, and pure-silk neckties filled his wardrobe. He bid adieu to his old clothes and gave them to his younger brothers. No longer did he have to squeeze himself into overcrowded buses. Instead, he started taking clean taxis, sitting in the back and feeling important. He was so meticulous about his appearance, with his gelled hair and moustache, Italian suit and shiny shoes, people started likening him to Omar Sharif. He looked out of place in his neighbourhood. Safwat was more grateful than ever to Delilah and Sultan. His relationship with Delilah had become an open secret in the district.

'The whole street knows about our relationship, Safwat. It's not a secret any more,' she said to him.

'Does it bother you?'

'Of course it does. I don't want to be a whore in people's eyes.'

'What do you want us to do about it?'

'We have to marry!' It was the first time either of them had broached the subject of marriage. Although Safwat expected Delilah to bring it up eventually, it fell on him like a cold shower on a winter's night.

'You don't seem so happy about my proposal. Don't you love me any more?' She threw her arms around his shoulders and pushed her body against his, with a reproachful smile.

'Of course I love you, honey. You just surprised me.'

'A nasty surprise, isn't it?'

‘Not at all. Of course it’s a... it’s a... wonderful idea.’

‘So you agree?’

‘Yes, of course, I only wonder if now is the right time.’

‘Of course it’s the right time. What are we waiting for? Or are you hesitant because I’m older than you?’

‘Absolutely not. I don’t care about your age. I love you, Delilah.’

‘You’re only twenty-six. You may prefer someone your age,’ she said, as if to lament her age and at the same time test his response.

‘You know I don’t like girls my own age. A mature woman like you suits me better.’ He drew her closer to him. She spontaneously responded to his hands, and their lips met in a long kiss .

When Safwat left Delilah’s flat, he went back to his room and played some music. Omar was sitting on his prayer mat reading the Qur’an in his room. He frowned and grumbled indignantly. When he found it impossible to concentrate on his reading, he stood up and headed to Safwat’s room.

‘Would you please turn that off?’

‘What for?’

‘I can’t concentrate on reading the Qur’an,’ said Omar, frowning.

‘Haven’t you read enough? You’ve been reading for some time.’

‘Is listening to music better than reading the Qur’an? Wouldn’t it be better if you came and read with me?’ Omar reached over and turned the volume down.

‘Give me a break. Haven’t you heard the saying, *Give your heart an hour of rest, and your Lord an hour of worship?*’ Safwat smiled icily at his brother and turned the volume up again.

‘Why do you keep it loud? You can use headphones, but don’t force me to listen with you. I don’t want to listen to these satanic lyrics.’

‘And I *do* want to listen to these satanic lyrics.’

‘Isn’t it enough that you visit nightclubs and God knows what else? If you don’t fear Allah outside your home, then at least fear Him here in this house. Don’t force your bad influence on us here.’

‘How dare you talk to your elder brother this way?’ snapped Safwat. ‘I’m the man of the house. If you don’t like my ‘satanic’ music, block your ears with cotton.’

‘May Allah guide you back to His Straight Path.’ With that, Omar returned to his room with a long face.

‘And obey not him,’ recited Omar on his way to his room, *‘whose heart We have made heedless of Our remembrance, and who follows his own lusts, and whose affair has been lost.’*

Safwat turned the music up even higher and closed his door.

Omar picked up his copy of the Qur’an and left for the nearby mosque. On his way down the stairs, he met Mabruk, who noticed his irritation.

‘Where are you headed?’

‘To the mosque, to cleanse my heart of the sin that our brother is forcing on me.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘He’s listening to loud, infidel music,’ complained Omar, ‘and he wants the whole neighbourhood to share his sin.’

‘Don’t take it so hard, Omar. After all, he is our elder brother and we must show him respect,’ said Mabruk mildly.

‘I shouldn’t show him any respect if he commits a sin. On the contrary, I should show him my anger.’

‘Don’t be so harsh. He’s not the only one who listens to music. Millions of Muslims do. So don’t vent your anger on your own brother.’

‘If I can’t correct all the wrongdoers, I should at least do so within my own family.’

‘I think you’re overdoing it. Slow down, my brother. Our Prophet said, *He who tries to outdo himself in religion is certain to fail.*’

‘I’m not trying to outdo myself in religion, but in our time, whoever follows his religion is labelled a radical, fanatic, extremist, you name it,’ ranted Omar and continued to the mosque.

Mabruk shook his head in disapproval and ascended the stairs.

Omar stayed at the mosque reading the Qur'an until it was time for the noon prayer. After the prayer, he met with Durra, who seemed edgy.

'What's bothering you, Durra?'

'A bit of news I heard.'

'What?'

'Safwat is going to marry Delilah!'

The shock deprived Omar of the ability to speak for a few seconds. Although he had known about the relationship between Safwat and Delilah, he had hoped that his brother would come to his senses.

'It could just be a rumour,' said Omar hopefully.

'I wish it were, but it's true.'

A long silence ensued. Omar needed to be alone. He excused himself and headed to a park where he used to while away time with Durra in what felt like a different life.

He chose a dry, clean spot and sat down on the ground. Looking at the cloudy sky made him uneasy. Dark clouds lingered, looking down at him like human faces. Angry faces. Sad faces. Gloating faces. Feeling uncomfortable, he lowered his head and gazed at the ground. The grass was short and dry, and he could see the soil through it. A metre away, Omar noticed a beetle lying on its back, struggling to turn itself over. He looked around for a stick or a piece of paper to help it, but something stopped him. Somehow, he wanted to see how the beetle would solve its crisis.

'Hey, beetle,' whispered Omar, 'I'm not in a much better situation than you.'

He looked on as it continued its struggle. The beetle moved its legs in a continuous, frantic motion, hoping to turn itself over on either side. All it achieved was to move itself by a centimetre or so. It stopped moving for a moment, as though tired, before resuming its efforts. It certainly understood the danger it faced, that it was a matter of life or death. Omar looked around and saw nothing that might endanger its life. Its struggle went on.

Suddenly, the beetle's struggle became more violent. Omar looked at it closely; to his surprise, he saw a tiny ant climbing up the beetle's

leg. *Where had it come from?* he wondered. The ant appeared suddenly, as if it had been hiding under the beetle or in some secret crack in the ground. Soon, a line of ants appeared out of nowhere and marched forward like a formation of soldiers marching to battle. They marched between the blades of grass until they had reached the helpless beetle. Like professional fighters who knew how to wrestle their opponents to the ground, the ants knew their job well. Within seconds, an army of ants had tied down the helpless beetle. It continued to fight for its life but had no chance of surviving now. Omar wanted to interfere but he realized that, by saving the beetle, he would deprive the ants of a banquet that could feed their entire kingdom. He did not know what he wanted to do, but kept watching until the beetle slowed down and lay motionless. The ants dragged it away to hide it in the grass. *What an omen!* thought Omar. He stood up and finally made his way home.

The relationship between Omar and Safwat became increasingly tense over the affair with Delilah. Even Amina had heard a word or two about it, but to her, it was unthinkable that such a thing could happen. She resolved to pay no heed to baseless rumours. Safwat, meanwhile, was working slowly at preparing his family to accept his imminent marriage. He knew that Mabruk presented no problem to him. Amina and Omar were his main worry. It was almost a hopeless case with them, and Safwat had no other choice but to try and win them over.

‘Enough talk about revenge, *Ummi*,’ he told her at one of their late-night family gatherings. ‘Times have changed. We are not the same generation as yours. We have different dreams and ambitions. The last thing we need to do is waste our lives thinking about revenge.’

Safwat’s words hammered into Amina’s head. She fell silent and a look of paralysing shock took hold of her face. Omar was indignant and readily snapped at his elder brother.

‘Have you forgotten our father and how he died? Does his blood hold no value for you?’

‘No, I haven’t forgotten him, but I don’t want more people to die. I

want to live a happy and peaceful life, to marry and have children, and I don't want to die and leave my children obsessed with the ghosts of revenge.'

'So now you're blaming our father for disturbing your mind with his ghosts of revenge!' said Omar sarcastically. 'Have you forgotten that he died defending us and our home?'

Safwat shouted, 'I don't need a teenager to lecture me! Do not forget that I'm your elder. Show some respect when you talk to me!'

'If you have no respect for our father, I have no respect for you. Or maybe what I heard is true – that you are going to marry Delilah.'

'I will not consider the opinion of a boy when I want to marry.' Safwat tapped his index finger on his brother's chest to show his contempt.

'Don't consider my opinion if you want to marry any other woman,' shouted Omar. 'But if you marry Delilah, you had better consider my opinion and consider it seriously. Don't forget that I'm not a little boy any more. I'm eighteen now. I'm a man, not a boy. I can stop wrongdoers by force, if necessary.'

Omar glared at his brother and made a fist to confirm his words of warning.

'Are you threatening me?' Safwat's face reddened. He trembled with fury and was almost at the point of explosion.

'Understand my words any way you like, but you had better take them seriously.'

'Shut up!' Safwat slapped Omar's face.

'Traitor! Traitor!' Omar clutched at Safwat's collar and kept shouting out, 'Traitor!' Before the scene got any worse, Mabruk and Amina stood between the two brothers, who had suddenly turned into bitter enemies. Amina and Mabruk separated them.

'I would like to talk to you in private, Safwat.' Amina, by then, had recovered her composure. She sensed how dangerous the situation had become. She entered her bedroom and Safwat followed her.

'Close the door please.' He did as she ordered.

'I wanted to talk to you in private because I didn't want your brothers

to hear. I've been hearing rumours about a relationship between you and Delilah.'

She did not blink her eyes as she spoke, but riveted them on her son's. He, in turn, could not stand his mother's questioning stare and had to lower his gaze. He looked vacantly at the floor.

'Now I have only one question and I want you to give me a straight answer,' she said firmly. 'Is what I hear true?'

Her voice echoed in the ensuing silence and the word *true* resonated in Safwat's ears, as though answering back that what she had heard was indeed true. Amina saw the answer in her son's defeated eyes.

'Are you really going to marry her?' she asked incredulously.

'I'm tired of thinking about revenge. I need to live in peace,' implored Safwat.

'And you don't want your father's soul to rest in peace?' Her eyes widened and glittered with tears.

'Enough hatred, *Ummi*. I'm sick of living with nothing in my mind but revenge, and nothing in my heart but hatred.'

'So you are indeed going to marry Delilah? The woman who stole my land, the woman who was behind your father's death. What spell has she cast on you to turn you into such a traitor?'

'I'm not a traitor, *Ummi*. I'm only different from all of you. I'm a futurist who can see what is the best decision to take today in order to cope with what will come tomorrow. You all curse me now, but tomorrow you will all praise my intelligence.'

'And what kind of intelligence will we praise, Safwat?'

'When you discover that, by marrying Delilah, I will have warded off even greater danger.'

'What greater danger can she present to us than taking a shop and a flat from our hands?'

'The danger of taking the whole house, *Ummi!*'

'Now you're talking just like them. You are repeating Sultan's words. You've betrayed us, Safwat – betrayed your father; betrayed me; betrayed your brothers; betrayed Nagy; and betrayed everything that was once beautiful in our life. I don't want you to stay in this house any more.'