

Chapter 28

What happened to Frank, Dick, Les, Mahmud, and Martin

"Forgive me once again," Frank said to his brother-in-law, "for stabbing you through the abdomen and leaving you for dead."

"Let's say no more about it," replied Dick. "I was a little too hasty, I admit it. But since you want to know how it happened that you saw me emptying the garbage, I'll tell you. The Islamic State boasts world-class battlefield medicine. My wound was cleaned and sutured and bandaged within the hour, and I recovered a week later. Then, everyone noticed that I was no longer Caliph, so I became an American prisoner. My own soldiers dragged me out into the dust and tore off my boots and beat me one hundred times on the soles of my feet. I crawled west for several days before I met a construction crew, harvesting raw materials for the rebuilding of Antakya. They took pity on me and gave me a ride. The foreman's uncle owns the company that operates this ferry, and he gave me a job. But what is my sister doing, here on the shores of the Sea of Marmara?"

"And, you, Les?" asked Frank. "How is it possible that I've found you again?"

"It's true," said Les, "that you saw me hanged. Naturally, that would have been my end; but you remember that a tornado arrived in the middle of the Act-of-Faith, and everyone fled for shelter. Our captors had little knowledge of the hangman's art, so I was still alive when a surgeon from Ben Taub teaching hospital came to cut us all down, and take us to be used as cadavers for dissection. As he inserted the IV's necessary to replace my blood with formalin, I awoke and sat up, drawing a deep breath. The surgeon fled, screaming about devils and demons, so I found some clean clothes and saw myself out.

"I took a job with an oil company, as personal assistant to an executive. He came to Istanbul on business, and brought me along. He never did pay me for my service, however, so I left in search of more gainful employment. Incensed, the executive sent the police to track me down. I was jailed, and beaten one hundred times on the soles of my feet. When I recovered, this was the only job I could find. Imagine my surprise when I found myself laboring shoulder-to-shoulder with Dick! We have been arguing now for several weeks about which of us has suffered the greater misfortune."

"Tell me, Les," said Frank. "When you were hanged, prepared for dissection, left unpaid, jailed and cruelly beaten, then made to haul garbage, did you still think that everything was for the best in this world?"

"I still hold my original opinions," replied Les, "because, after all, I'm a philosopher, and it wouldn't be proper for me to recant. And of every filthy, festering thing I've seen, or every vulgar lesson I've learned on this hateful, rotting, and abyssal globe, to me the idea of pre-established harmony is the most beautiful."