

Chapter 14

How Frank and Mahmud were received by the Islamic State

Mahmud felt elated to steal a pick-up truck from the mercenaries and drive away with Frank while everyone else identified themselves to the police. He drove with great determination while Frank sat in the passenger seat, head hanging in dejection.

“My friend,” inquired Mahmud, “why do you look so miserable? You have just escaped persecution, and remain free to seek your fortune.”

“What good are freedom and fortune, if I cannot share them with Missile-Tits?”

“Your lovely wife will be well-protected by the governor, sir. Meanwhile, there are women even more beautiful where we are going. You will see!”

“Where are we going, anyway?”

“The one place we can both be sure of evading prosecution. The Islamic State!”

“ISIS!?” cried Frank in dismay.

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic. You Americans think we are all credulous fools, taken in by impossible promises and disingenuous media. Ha! If only you could hear what you sound like to those on the outside. It is a place much like any other, save that the police will never follow us there.”

“So you’ve been there before?”

“Indeed. It is a master-work of civic design. The caliphate have everything, and the people nothing. Wisely, they decry the Great Satan and chant ‘Death to America’ from their mouths while drawing oil and growing poppies with their hands, selling them on the open market where they end up in the US. This brings in enough money to supply them with American weapons and vehicles and cells, which look very impressive in videos and photographs, fueling recruiting efforts and securing their power. How glad they will be that someone who can fire an assault rifle from the passenger window of a bouncing truck has come to them!”

At the first border post, Mahmud told the guards that a mercenary captain wished to speak to the Caliph. They were immediately surrounded by shouting soldiers bearing AK-47’s, and invited to exit their vehicle and raise their arms. They did so, and the soldiers formed two straight rows defining a path before them. Their commander stood at its far end, wearing a keffiyeh and aviator sunglasses and fatigues, with an abundance of bandoliers and grenade belts and holsters covering him from shoulders to knees.

One of the soldiers explained to Mahmud that they would have to wait. The commander would not speak to them. The Caliph of this province would not speak to any Texan, or permit them to remain in the country more than three hours.

“Where is the Caliph now?” asked Mahmud.

“He’s gone to the parade ground, after saying his prayers, and you won’t be able to kiss the ground at his feet for another three hours.”

“But,” said Mahmud, “my Captain and I are starving, and he’s not a Texan. He’s a Hoosier! Couldn’t we have something to eat while we wait?” The soldier immediately went to his commander and reported the details of this conversation.

“Insh’Allah!” exclaimed the commander. “Since he’s a Hoosier, I can talk to him. Bring them to my arbor.”

Frank and Mahmud were shown to a beautifully manicured lawn, mown in a checkerboard pattern like a baseball field. It was shaded by fig trees, with peacocks foraging in their roots. They were served dates with fragrant honey and soft goat cheese, and roasted spiced lamb with cabbage and onion. There was fresh-baked bread so soft and chewy that Mahmud wept when he tasted it.

As Frank’s belly filled, he stretched back and looked around, and saw that outside the garden the Syrians squatted atop the rubble of their ruined homes, holding out empty bowls to passers-by. His mind had just formed a plan to bring them some of the largess that he and Mahmud could never finish when the Caliph, who looked very much like the commander relieved of all his bandoliers and grenade belts and holsters, entered the garden.

In the shade of the fig trees, he took off his sunglasses and removed his keffiyeh. His hair seemed rather thin and brown for a

caliph, inciting Frank's deeper scrutiny. Beneath the desert tan and thick beard, an old friend appeared. It was Missile-Tits' brother, Dick!