The Vizier’s Story

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This is a true story—or so I was told. It happened in my grandfather’s time, and he had it from someone who knew those involved. He told it to me as a cautionary tale.

There once was an old caliph, a man of rare gifts and good fortune. He ruled a small country, but a wealthy one—a country upon which all the gifts of Allah had been showered in grand measure. He had the finest heir a man could have, dutiful and yet courageous, beloved by the people almost as extravagantly as the caliph himself. He had many other fine sons, and two hundred beautiful wives, and an army of fighting men the envy of his neighbors. His treasury was stacked roofbeam-high with gold and gemstones and blocks of fragrant sandalwood, crisscrossed with ivories and bolts of the finest cloth. His palace was built around a spring of fragrant, clear water; and everyone said that they must be the very Waters of Life, so fortunate and well-loved this caliph was. His only sadness was that age had robbed his sight from him, leaving him blind, but hard as this was, it was a small price to pay for Allah’s beneficence.

One day the caliph was walking in his garden, smelling the exquisite fragrance of the blossoming orange trees. His son the prince, unaware of his father’s presence, was also in the garden, speaking with his mother, the caliph’s first and chiefest wife.

“He is terribly old,” the wife said. “I cannot stand even to touch him anymore. It is a horror to me.”

“You are right, Mother,” the son replied, as the caliph hid behind the trees and listened, shocked. “I am sickened by watching him sitting all day, drooling into his bowl, or staggering sightless through the palace. But what are we to do?”

“I have thought on it long and hard,” the caliph’s wife replied. “We owe it to ourselves and those close to us to kill him.”

“Kill him?” the son replied. “Well, it is hard for me, but I suppose you are right. I still feel some love for him, though—may we at least do it quickly, so that he shall not feel pain at the end?”

“Very well. But do it soon—tonight, even. If I must feel his foul breath upon me one more night I will die myself.”

“Tonight, then,” the son agreed, and the two walked away, leaving the blind caliph shaking with rage and terror behind the orange trees. He could not see what sat on the garden path behind them, the object of their discussion: the wife’s old lap-dog, a scrofulous creature of extreme age.

Thus the caliph went to his vizier, the only one he was sure he could trust in a world of suddenly traitorous sons and wives, and bade him to have the pair arrested and quickly beheaded. The vizier was shocked, and asked the reason why, but the caliph only said he had unassailable proof that they intended to murder him and take his throne. He bade the vizier go and do the deed.

The vizier did as he was directed, seizing the son and his mother quickly and quietly, then giving them over to the headsman after tormenting them for confessions and the names of confederates, neither of which were forthcoming.

Sadly, the vizier went to the caliph and told him it was done, and the old man was satisfied. But soon, inevitably, word of what had happened spread, and the brothers of the heir began to murmur among themselves about their father’s deed. Many thought him mad, since the dead pair’s devotion to the caliph was common knowledge.

Word of this dissension reached the caliph himself, and he began to fear for his life, terrified that his other sons meant to emulate their treasonous brother. He called the vizier to him and demanded the arrest of these sons, and their beheading. The vizier argued in vain, risking his own life, but the caliph would not be swayed; at last the vizier went away, returning a week later a battered, shaken man.

“It is done, O Prince,” he said. “All your sons are dead.”

The caliph had only a short while in which to feel safe before the extreme wrath of the wives over the slaughter of their children reached his ears. “Destroy them, too!” the blind caliph insisted.

Again the vizier went away, soon to return.

“It is done, O Prince,” he reported. “Your wives have been beheaded.”

Soon the courtiers were crying murder, and the caliph sent his vizier to see them dealt with as well.

“It is done, O Prince,” he assured the caliph. But the ruler now feared the angry townspeople, so he commanded his vizier to take the army and slaughter them. The vizier argued feebly, then went away.

“It is done, O Prince,” the caliph was told a month later. But now the caliph realized that with his heirs and wives gone, and the important men of the court dead, it was the soldiers themselves who were a threat to his power. He commanded his vizier to sow lies amongst them, causing them to fall out and slay each other, then locked himself in his room to safely outlast the conflict. After a month and a half the vizier knocked upon his door.

“It is done, O Prince.”

For a moment the caliph was satisfied. All his enemies were dead, and he himself was locked in: no one could murder him, or steal his treasure, or usurp his throne. The only person yet alive who even knew where the caliph hid was...his vizier.

Blind, he groped about for the key with which he had locked himself in. Better first to remove the risk that someone might trick him into coming out. He pushed the key out beneath the door and told the vizier to throw it away somewhere it might never be found. When the vizier returned he called him close to the locked portal that bounded his small world of darkness and safety.

“Vizier,” the caliph said through the keyhole, “I command you to go and kill yourself; for you are the last one living who is a threat to me.”

“Kill myself, my prince?” the vizier asked, dumbfounded. “Kill myself?”

“Correct,” the caliph said. “Now go and do it. That is my command.”

There was a long silence. At last the vizier said: “Very well.” After that there was silence.

For a long time the caliph sat in his blindness and exulted, for everyone he distrusted was gone. His faithful vizier had carried out all his orders, and now had killed himself...

A sudden, horrible thought came to him then: What if the vizier had not done what he had told him to do? What if instead he had made compact with the caliph’s enemies, and was only reporting false details when he told of their deaths? How was the caliph to know? He almost swooned with fright and anxiousness at the realization.

At last he worked up the courage to feel his way across the locked room to the door. He put his ear to the keyhole and listened. He heard nothing but silence. He took a breath and then put his mouth to the hole.

“Vizier?” he called in a shaky voice. “Have you done what I commanded? Have you killed yourself ?”

“It is done, O Prince,” came the reply.

Finishing his story, which was fully as dreadful as it was sad, the under-vizier Walid lowered his head as if ashamed or exhausted. We waited tensely for our guest to speak; at the same time I am sure we all vainly hoped there would be no more speaking, that the creature would simply vanish, like a frightening dream that flees the sun.

“Rather than discuss the merits of your sad tales,” the black, tattered shadow said at last—confirming that there would be no waking from this dream, “rather than argue the game with only one set of moves completed, perhaps it is now time for me to speak. The night is still youthful, and my tale is not long, but I wish to give you a fair time to render judgement.”

As he spoke the creature’s eyes bloomed scarlet like unfolding roses. The mist curled up from the ground beyond the fire-circle, wrapping the vampire in a cloak of writhing fogs, a rotted black egg in a bag of silken mesh.

“...May I begin?” it asked...but no one could say a word. “Very well...”