



## Omar Alshogre: "Go to Hell"

**Talare**

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The transformation that we need to go through in order for us to become the people that we want to become depends mainly on the legacy that we want to leave behind. So let me tell you about the legacy that I want to leave behind and the transformation that I went through. As a teenager, I never thought that my life had any particular value. I wanted that to change, but I didn't know how or where to start. But sometimes, you don't have to start that transformation yourself. Now I want you to imagine every single thing I tell you. I was 15 years old when I had a gun pointed at my head for the first time. Very scary. I was 17 years old when I was so close to death that I thought I would never live to see another day. For no crime, I was taken to prison alongside my beloved ones, my cousins Bashir and Rashad. In prison, we were tortured on a daily basis. On top of that, we were starved. Starved to the level where I could see nothing but food, could imagine nothing but food, could dream of nothing but food. And tortured to the level where they threw us to the floor every day and beat us. And the day after, when you come to the same floor, you see your own blood. On top of that, they would give the torture equipment to my beloved ones and force them to use it on me. I was forced to torture my cousin. Day after day, I had to make him bleed; otherwise, we both would be killed. Everything was so extreme, and I never thought I would make it out. I never thought I would ever have a legacy. There was no point of transformation; I was just going to die. But I thought, you know, I have so many beloved ones, so many people outside who would care so much about me. They would actually get me out. My mom is so powerful; she will work and find a way to get me out. But one day passed, one week passed, one month passed, one year passed, and nobody got me out. And if you're stuck for over a year, there is no way out because the only thing I see is people dying. I've never seen anyone coming out. And you close one eye, then the second eye for a second to try to find peace somewhere, and as soon as you open your eyes, you turn to your right to realize that your younger cousin has died under torture. And the guards chose me to carry his dead body to a room we used to call the Death Room, where they collect all the dead bodies. The

smell of that room is the definition of death. The guards would never come inside because it's full of infectious diseases, so they would task the prisoners with all the jobs they had to do themselves. Suddenly, they gave me a book and a pen, and they said, "You have to register him in the files as dead. You know his name? Now he is registered." At that extremely dark moment, there was no way I could bring Rashad, my cousin, back to life. There was nothing good I could do. An idea came to my head. Now, let me take you back in time. When they brought us in, we had to go through interrogation for a month. During interrogation, they forced us to give false confessions. "How many officers have you killed?" I hadn't killed anyone. They beat you until you say you killed one. And just to give you some context of what "beat you" means, they can pull out your fingernails, and it hurts. On top of that, they force you to watch your fingernails being pulled out because they're trying to torture you mentally. During torture, I said that I had killed officers just to stop the torture. I had never done such a thing. The same thing happened with my older cousin Bashir; to avoid the torture and pain, he said that he killed many officers. However, the younger one, Rashad, kept saying, "No, I did not kill anyone." They tortured him. He knew he would die under torture because if he kept saying no, they couldn't have a false confession that would lead to execution. So, at that moment, when I was going to register Rashad, the younger one, as dead, I realized Rashad did not say anything wrong during the interrogation. In his file, there was nothing that said he killed anyone. So if he were alive and went to court, the judge would release him because he never said he killed anyone. But he's dead. The one who was alive is his brother, who said he killed someone. If he ever goes to the judge, he will be executed because he said he killed someone. At that moment, what did I do? I registered the one who was dead in that room with the name of his brother, who was still alive. We switched the names; we switched the files. Now, the one who was alive has a different name, his brother's name. If he ever goes to court, he will be freed. That little boy doing this? It gave me meaning, purpose, value in my life for the first time. I never had value, I just told you, and suddenly I could do something to save a life. There is nothing more meaningful than saving a life I loved that day, despite the fact that it was the day when my cousin died. So, I started to—sounds crazy—but I started to look for the dead people, trying to learn their stories. Who gave a false confession? Who didn't? Because by the death of some people, I could save others. Having the opportunity to save a life transformed me from being a prisoner to being something else, being a person with great opportunities to save lives I loved. That role that I got in prison, but I thought I would never

make it out, you know? Because the only thing I saw was people dying. I saved some lives. I saved the life of my cousin Bashir for a year. But then he died in my arms. He didn't make it because torture was daily, starvation was daily. And how could I get out? You know, there is no power in this world. Humans are torturing me, animals. They can't come and open the door. Trees wouldn't even move for me. So there was nothing, no power that could save me. One Tuesday, midday in the middle of the summer, they came to my room, took me to execution. I always wanted to die because things end when you die. However, things happened very quickly. I didn't realize what was happening. I woke up in the middle of nowhere. I didn't know what happened. I knew nothing. Suddenly, a car stopped there, picked me up, and a man met me somewhere and told me, "Hey, I'm taking you to meet your mom." I didn't know what was true, what was not, what was a nightmare, what was not. But I went with that man, and we came to a room. He opened the door, and I was imagining seeing my mother running to hug me. Already three years had passed. He opened the door, and no, nobody ran. Nobody was running toward me. There was no one; it was empty. And with that, your heart feels empty too. I took a step forward. I expected someone to come out of the bathroom, but no one came. And I sort of gave up at that moment. So I decided to take a seat; there was a bed in that room. I hadn't seen a bed in years. I was sitting in a small square on the ground with the dead bodies for years. Seeing a bed, clean—this was another room, so perfectly clean and made—I went there, and suddenly, in the middle of that weird feeling, something moved. And I wanted to see my mom; that was the only hope I could ever have. And then something moved. I turned around, and there was something strange, something weird. I moved closer, and there was a person moving the same way I was moving. It was so ugly, so disturbing, so bloody. There was blood coming from his eyes, from his nose, from his mouth. He had no hair, and he moved exactly the same way I moved. So I put my hand forward, trying to erase it. But the mirror doesn't work that way. And I couldn't imagine how terrible I looked. These three years, I hadn't even thought about it. Suddenly, I saw a monster standing in front of me in the mirror. No one could look at that monster and like him. No one would want to come close to that one. And I didn't want, after all this suffering that I went through, I didn't want to end up being a monster. Just to learn that I couldn't, because I had become that monster, skinny. It was much easier for my mother, who is, by the way, the most powerful, the smartest, most intelligent, most beautiful woman I have ever seen. If I hadn't been so skinny at that time, like all the other prisoners looked because of the starvation, we all looked the

same. If I hadn't been skinny, my mom would have never managed to fix a whole operation to smuggle me out of prison. So that monster was what saved me at that moment. So I'm going to say something. The legacy that I want to leave behind me is this story. A story that, despite everything that I went through—everything I went through, from physical to mental torture, from the beginning pain to the starvation to the loss of beloved ones, everything—despite everything, I made it through. And I will die today or tomorrow, I don't know. However, I will die trying to survive. I will die trying to do something good. I will die standing. Sometimes, we don't have the privilege to choose in which way we will be transformed and into what. We cannot choose the challenges and the changes that we're going to go through. And that's why today, I have no advice for you. Instead, I would say to you: go to hell. Metaphorically, of course. Because hell is unavoidable. You're going to go through challenges in your life, pain in your life, suffering in your life, that you're going to feel you can definitely not see any hope. And exactly at that moment of hopelessness and helplessness is the moment when you can transform into the person that you would be proud to present to the world. So in other words, go out into the world and enjoy hell. Thank you.

**Taggar**

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