

The Egyptian Assassin

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The poem extract on page 44 is from *Ahmad al-Za'tar* by Mahmoud Darwish, translated by Jonathan Wright

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The Eagle

FAKHREDDIN WRAPPED THE TURBAN TIGHT across his face and nose, leaving a narrow slit for his eyes. He leaned over to the camel carrying Omar and pulled it toward him, and the camel complied. He took hold of the turban covering the boy's face. Omar didn't move, apparently indifferent to what his father was doing. Fakhreddin looked into Omar's eyes, and still he couldn't see any glimmer of life in them. They seemed to be frozen. He tightened the turban around the boy's passive face and let the camel resume its normal pace. The sandstorm had just started and they were on an open plain, with no hills to shade them and no caves to provide shelter, so it would not be wise to stop now. As long as their mounts could keep going, they should travel on. Only the sound of the wind and the hiss of the sand broke the silence. The storm would pick up in a while and then the sand would fill the air and cover the earth, like a sea swallowing everything. He had to find shelter before the storm peaked, or else they would perish.

At dawn the day before they had skirted the town of Kutum without going into it, then traveled for nine hours without stopping. Fakhreddin wanted to leave northern Darfur and reach the Egyptian border as soon as possible. He wasn't worried about the tribesmen or the villagers, or even about the foreigners all over the area, but about those he had left behind. He knew there was a place with small caves a ten-hour journey north of Kutum. The storm would be at peak

strength in less than an hour and he had to reach it before the sand came. Omar hadn't uttered a word since he had met him two days earlier. The boy didn't appear to see him. He would move in whatever direction his father pushed him, listlessly and without resisting. He hadn't eaten or drunk anything since they had set off. Whenever Fakhreddin passed him the water bag he ignored it, and when he offered him dates and pieces of bread he didn't reach out to take them. Fakhreddin took hold of Omar's hand, opened it, and put some bread into it, but the boy let it fall to the sand. Fakhreddin was angry: the desert was no place to be finicky. But his anger was a waste of energy because Omar took no notice.

General Samir's head was in the crosshairs of the rifle when Fakhreddin's phone began to vibrate. His hand shook and he lost the target in the scope. He hesitated. Only special people knew this phone number. He concentrated on the target again. He moved the sights right and left across the general's head. He held his breath. General Samir turned to his companion to hear something he was whispering and looked through the file he was holding. Fakhreddin could make out his features clearly. There could be no mistaking him. The sight was steady on his forehead. The phone kept vibrating stubbornly. Fakhreddin tensed. General Samir suddenly looked up and Fakhreddin imagined that their eyes met. He pulled the trigger. He fired a single shot that lodged between General Samir's eyes and downed him instantly. The file slipped out of the general's hand and flew through the air. General Samir fell to the asphalt on the path that led from the door of his house to the heavily guarded iron gate. Fakhreddin heard the sound of his head hitting the asphalt and saw the blood spilling from his nose and mouth. He looked through the rifle scope, and on the dead man's face he saw the smile of someone who at the last moment had understood what was happening. Fakhreddin took a deep breath and pulled back from the edge of his

hiding place, out of sight. From his pocket he took the small telephone, which was still ringing, and answered it.

At first he didn't believe his ears. The world spun and he imagined he was falling from the eighth-floor balcony where he had hidden and was hearing the words as he tumbled toward the ground.

"What? What did you say?"

"As I told you, he's just been sentenced. The council meeting has just broken up and the group is set on carrying out the sentence at once."

"Sentence? Council? What council? Have they gone mad?"

"Listen carefully because I can't talk long. I did what I could but a majority sentenced the boy to death and Sheikh Hamza took their side. They decided not to tell you but I couldn't hide something like that from you. If there's anything you can do, you should act now because they're determined to carry out the sentence the day after tomorrow at the latest. I have to go back in now. Goodbye."

Then he hung up. Fakhreddin was stunned for some moments. From his hiding place he watched the guards running in all directions and the security officials rushing toward the scene, glancing at the blood-soaked body, then looking away as they went into the building. Men came and started to cover the body. They picked it up and silence reigned. Still sitting on the floor in his hiding place, Fakhreddin tried to piece together the meaning of what he had just heard. He had to leave now, immediately. He dismantled his rifle and put it in his bag, gathered together his few scattered belongings, and left the hiding place, never to return.

He didn't take the car that Hind had left him. That was what they had agreed to do if something unexpected happened. He walked as far as Manshiet Bakri and took the metro to Ramses Square, where he sat to wait for Hind in the cafe they

had agreed on. His thoughts were racing. He could get in touch with Sheikh Hamza. Perhaps he could persuade him to postpone the execution for a few days until he reached the group's camp in eastern Sudan and dealt with it himself. But if he spoke to Sheikh Hamza, the group might bring forward the execution. They certainly wouldn't want him to hear the news before the execution because they knew he would try to stop them. Could he reach eastern Sudan by the evening of the next day? There was a plane to Khartoum in the evening but traveling by air wasn't safe; his identity might be detected at the airport, and even if he was only suspected he would be delayed. One night in detention would delay him enough for the boy to be executed. He could take the train to Aswan and then get to the border area. But the border area and Wadi Halfa port were full of security men on both sides and he could be detained there too. The safest way would be to cross the Gilf Kebir desert west of the Nile into northern Darfur and then head to the eastern region, but that would take at least ten days, without taking into account the sandstorms that might delay him further.

The only way was by sea. Fakhreddin looked around, anxiously anticipating the arrival of Hind. The answer was to go to Marsa Alam by land, then take a boat and sail south to somewhere just short of Port Sudan. There was a small harbor there that Fakhreddin had used in the past and that he could easily reach. Sailing was dangerous in that region but the sea was less dangerous than airport security. He saw Hind coming toward the café in her long gray dress, carrying a shoulder bag like a student going home on the train. Just to be safe she settled into a seat behind Fakhreddin's, signs of anxiety on her face. She ordered a mint tea and listened, looking in the other direction. He didn't have time to explain everything. In brief he asked her to take the first plane to Marsa Alam, stay in the best hotel, rent a small cabin cruiser with an engine, and a sail for three days, supposedly for a cruise with a friend of hers,

and then to be waiting in the boat one kilometer out of Marsa Alam harbor toward the south at exactly one o'clock the next afternoon. Hind memorized the details quickly while thinking about the measures and preparations she would have to make to do all this without making a mistake or leaving any trail.

She stood up, left the check on the tray, and hurried off. Fakhreddin stayed another five minutes, then stood up and paid the check. He left a standard tip that the waiter wouldn't remember and went to the car that Hind had brought. He got in, turned the key, and within minutes he was on the October bridge heading for the Ain Sukhna road.

Fakhreddin hadn't gotten over the shock yet. He treated the news as a disaster that had to be averted immediately, without thinking much about what it meant or how it had happened. He was good at making plans for assignments and did it as matter of course. Concentrating on averting the disaster helped him neutralize his emotions, because however terrible it might be he could handle it if he broke it down into a series of specific tasks. He focused his mind on defining those tasks, setting out how they were sequenced and how they fitted together in a way that wouldn't go wrong. This spared him thinking about the disaster itself. But he couldn't keep his thoughts at bay as he drove alone at night along the road to Marsa Alam. He tried to push them aside by concentrating on the bends in the road, the unexpected dips and rises, and the oncoming vehicles that blinded him with their headlights, but the thoughts returned and took his mind far away. Could Omar have done that? He couldn't have committed such crimes! That wasn't Omar. There must have been a mix-up. Could Omar have been a traitor? And in such a despicable manner? And when did all this happen? Fakhreddin couldn't understand why no one had told him, so that he could have stepped in and dealt with it. Especially his old bodyguard Abdullah, the man who had contacted him: why hadn't he

gotten in touch earlier? Why had no one said anything until things had gone this far? How could they hold a sharia council to try his son? How could Sheikh Hamza take their side? How dare they sentence Fakhreddin's son to death? Half of them owed their lives to him, especially Sheikh Hamza. He thought about it as he drove, but he found no answers. "All this must be a nightmare," he said to himself.

Only the car headlights and the pale blue lights on the dashboard cut through the pitch dark. As he drove Fakhreddin tried to force these thoughts out of his head for a while. It was close to one o'clock in the morning and he still had a long way to go. He gripped the steering wheel with both hands and concentrated on keeping the car right on course as it took the bends. There was no room for error or for risks. He mustn't have an accident or a breakdown; there was no time. He mustn't stop or talk to anyone, except to get through the checkpoints along the road. He concentrated on the sound of the engine and the sound of the wheels as they hummed slightly on the bends. There was no point in thinking about anything else right now. There would be time when he reached eastern Sudan and met them. Then he wouldn't need to guess. He would get his answers straight from the source. He would see Omar and he would know the truth when he looked into his eyes. He would see Sheikh Hamza and the other leaders, and all would become clear. He couldn't believe that things stood as his friend had portrayed them. They must be something else behind it.

At one o'clock the next afternoon a small black dot started to move closer to the boat floating outside the harbor. A black head glinted in the rays of the sun, disappearing under the water, then reappearing and moving toward the boat on a zig-zag course. Fakhreddin never took risks; even alone at sea, one kilometer from the harbor, he was taking evasive action. He was swimming underwater more than he swam on the

surface, and changing course so that his head shining in the sun wouldn't attract anyone's attention. A few minutes later he appeared alongside the boat and nimbly climbed aboard. Hind was sitting at the helm and looking at him. He glanced at her and, without saying a word, lay on the deck, gasping for breath and recovering his strength. He stayed like that for some minutes, aware that she was watching him as she sat in silence at the back of the boat, almost enjoying the scene.

He stood up and looked at her inquisitively. She nodded to say that all was well. He went down into the cabin for ten minutes, took off his diving suit, had a quick cold shower, put on a pair of jeans and a white shirt, and then came back up. He went to the maps and looked at them as he started the engine and set off. In silence he gradually accelerated until the boat was going at top speed and Hind could no longer hear her voice when she spoke.

"Have you had anything to eat?" she shouted.

He shook his head.

"Would you like something?"

He nodded. She looked at him grumpily, headed for the small galley to prepare something light as she grumbled to herself.

"Here you are," she said as she reappeared on deck. "Some cereal for your highness. Will this do?"

Fakhreddin smiled and shook his head in resignation at her constant sarcasm. He took the bowl from her hand and thanked her with a nod, without speaking. As he ate, he glanced back and forth between the maps and the horizon.

"So what are these maps then?" she asked.

"They're maps of the area."

"Really? I thought they were maps of somewhere else!" she said.

"Nice cereal. Where did you get it?"

"From the supermarket. Where do you think? From the herbalist?"

“Same difference.”

“What was that?”

He pointed at the maps and didn't answer. She sighed in exasperation.

“Listen,” she said. “We've got three days and nights ahead of us on a small boat. That's not much space and I'm claustrophobic, so you have to be nice to me.”

“Okay. Instead of ranting, tell me what you did in Marsa Alam.”

Fakhreddin stood up, holding the rudder as he listened to her recount in detail what happened in Marsa Alam. She sat in front of him and told him how she had rented the boat in her name and the name of a friend, claiming they had learned to sail together in Italy while they were students. She showed the man in charge the competence certificate he wanted and regaled him with details of the Italian coast and the wind patterns there. Hind loaded the boat with everything she would need to live on it for three days, adding things that sailors might take, such as simple fishing gear and sunscreen. She put her clothes in one of the cabins and put some more women's clothes in the other cabin. She threw a plane ticket in her codename in the cabin and scattered some other things around the boat. After that she changed her clothes and dressed up as her friend, Darqa al-Awsagi. Then she called the man in charge to tell him he should come to the boat immediately because her friend had arrived and they were about to sail. When he arrived the boat really was ready to sail. It had moved forward a little in the water and the engine was running. The man found Darqa al-Awsagi standing on the gunwale in a black bikini with a slightly wet sarong around her waist, her blond hair falling loose over her shoulders and with sunglasses covering half her face. She leaned down low from the edge of the boat toward the rubber dinghy carrying the man. Flustered by the proximity, he passed her the papers. He stole a glimpse at her breasts while pretending to be looking at

the papers. She took the papers, signed them, and waved her passport at him. He gestured that he didn't need to see it. To distract him yet more, she gave him a big smile, a long stare, and a friendly wave. Then she turned and swaggered back into the cockpit, while he stood in his rubber dinghy making incoherent gestures.

"And then I miraculously sailed the boat to here."

"It hardly took a miracle! You just go in a straight line from the harbor to here!"

"Well I've never sailed a boat all that distance," she said.

"What? You're joking?"

"No, I'm serious. I hardly know the basics. I turn on the engine, take hold of the rudder and have my picture taken and so on. You'll have to teach me."

"Why didn't you tell me that yesterday?"

"I didn't tell you anything yesterday. I never claimed I could sail a boat."

"So when you suggested coming with me and taking the boat back alone, what did that mean?"

"It meant you would teach me how."

"You're really crazy. My God, you're crazy."

She insisted on going to Sudan with him and then coming back alone on the boat. He said the idea was crazy but she assured him she could learn during the trip. She would memorize the route, then bring the boat back. She reminded him that leaving the boat on the Sudanese coast would raise questions and would provide a lead for anyone who wanted to follow him and find them. And then, in the end, there was the adventure—Hind sailing a boat across the border alone, without any prior knowledge of sailing. She didn't want to miss the excitement.

The storm had abated and the desert was calm again. The air had cleared, as though the violent storm had sucked up all the coarse grains of sand. The air was still and fresh, and

everything had recovered its usual color. To check the weather Fakhreddin came out of the small cave where they had taken shelter. He found the familiar desert in all its colors, stretched out under the sun in the calm after the storm: yellow and red sand, and shiny brown rocks that looked like they had just been washed. Visibility had been zero, the sheets of sand had scoured everything they touched, and the wind had been strong enough to blow away tents and loose rocks, but now there was complete calm. Usually the sight of the desert after a storm made Fakhreddin feel at ease, but that's not the way it was that morning. He brought the animals out, hobbled their legs, put out some food and water for them, then went back to the cave. He called Omar but there was no response. He felt his forehead, and his fever was unchanged. He shook him but he didn't react. He picked him up in his bedding and took him out in the sun. He laid him on the sand and dabbed some water on his forehead. His lips were parched. He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and dipped it in the bowl of water, then squeezed it drop by drop on his lips while parting them a little. He did this again until the bowl ran out of water, then he put the handkerchief on the boy's head and stayed sitting beside him. The sun was gradually rising in the dome of the sky, and soon he would have to decide whether they should resume their journey or spend another night in the cave. Prudence required that they leave Sudan as soon as possible. Fakhreddin didn't know what those he had left behind would do. The farther away he took Omar the safer it would be.

But Omar refused to speak or eat and drink, and was so weak that he had fallen unconscious in the middle of the storm. How could a sixteen-year-old boy be so stubborn? What had happened to him? How had he become so difficult? Fakhreddin had tried talking to him in every possible way—gentle, tough, with inducements and intimidation, favors and threats, everything, but he hadn't gotten a word or any reaction out of Omar. The boy didn't even look into his father's eyes, and

when he took hold of his head and forced him to face him, the boy didn't resist, but he didn't look at him either. He didn't close his eyes, and didn't avert his gaze, but he didn't look. Fakhreddin didn't understand. Where had his son learned to do that? How had his eyes become so glazed? There was no life in them, no expression, nothing at all.

He tried to control his anger but he couldn't maintain it for long. In the end he snapped.

"It's completely irresponsible. Instead of facing up to the inexcusable mistake you've made, you act stubborn. And instead of looking me in the face and admitting your mistake so that we can work out what to do about it, you refuse to speak! And now you're putting both our lives in danger with this childish behavior of yours. Speak. Or don't speak if you don't want. But eat and drink a little water before you faint and I have to carry you as well."

No response, not a twitch. Fakhreddin stared at him, seething with anger. His face was flushed, his stomach muscles tightened, and he wanted to grab Omar by the collar and cast him loose in the desert, but he suppressed his anger. It would be pointless to shout or get angry. That would only make matters worse.

"So be it. Say as little as you like. Go on hunger strike as you wish. I hope you starve to death. But I'll take you to Cairo anyway, dead or alive."

Then Fakhreddin also stopped talking, and about an hour later Omar collapsed from exhaustion. That was about twelve hours ago and Fakhreddin had been dripping water into his mouth about every hour. "He won't come around now, nor any time today, and we can't wait here long," Fakhreddin said to himself. He prepared a herbal infusion for him and dripped it into his mouth again. He patted the animals one by one and prepared them for the journey. He removed all signs that they had stayed the night there, picked his son up in his arms, and mounted the camel. He sat up straight and settled

Omar's body between his arms, and the little caravan set off again toward the north.

Fakhreddin knew the area well. He had traveled the length and breadth of it with colleagues from the group, and sometimes with the sheikh himself. Sometimes he had traveled with young Arab tribesmen who were grazing their livestock and who knew when the storms and rains would come and where the pasture and the wells would be, and sometimes with young Africans from the Fur, Masalit, and Zaghawa tribes who farmed and kept cattle and knew all the tracks and caves. He had climbed Jebel Marra with them many times, and only the local people knew the ins and outs of that mountain. With them he had crossed the deserts of north and west Darfur to Chad, or slipped south into Kordofan and the savannas of the south, moving weapons, money, equipment, and people. Now he took the same route to escape them, changing course every day so that none of them could follow him. It would take longer that way but he could be sure to arrive unharmed by those tracking him. "The real problem is this idiot who refuses to speak, eat, or drink. I wasn't prepared for that. I hadn't taken it into account," he said to himself.

The caravan moved slowly, slower than necessary. Omar was still unconscious. Fakhreddin couldn't hold him between his arms throughout the journey. He tied the boy behind him with a strip of cloth but he had to stop every now and then to deal with the animals, and every time he stopped it was a tricky procedure making sure Omar didn't fall off the camel. Two days passed like this after they left the cave and Omar was the same. Fakhreddin continued to drip the herbal infusion into his mouth. After a while he added some mountain honey and olive oil. He could see from the color of his face that Omar's condition was stable, but the boy would have to regain consciousness if they were to arrive. They couldn't go into the Gilf Kebir with Omar in this state, and the desert track was just a day away.

He was spending the whole day looking after his son, and at night they would resume their journey. Fakhreddin didn't like this state of affairs. Omar's behavior struck him as foolish obstinacy. He asked himself why all this was happening. He watched the camel walk silently through the soft sand under a canopy of stars in the night sky. A silvery light stretched across the land and the cosmic silence was total. It was at moments such as this that his spirit broke free from its bonds and soared. He could be himself and nothing else—not the warrior or the cautious intriguer, not the planner or the adventurer, just Fakhreddin the orphan, the idealist dreamer, and the father who was carrying a disobedient child, sick in spirit and in body, and who did not know what to do.

His plans were always flawless and he carried them out with precision. He was famous for that and no one ever disputed the details of how he made and carried out a plan, because he had an extraordinary ability to put it all together in such a complex and coordinated way that the sheikh called him the group's planning minister. But now his plan was falling apart because of this stubborn boy who might get them both killed. He had been angry with Omar, but now he knew there was no point in getting angry, no point to this resentment. If they went into the Gifl Kebir with Omar in this state they would have to move so slowly they would run the risk of running out of water and food. If they stopped to wait for him to recover, the people on their trail might do them harm. He couldn't go back to Darfur or head toward Chad because the risks would be too great along the way. He couldn't head northeast toward the town of Halfa, where there were troops and a border post. What should he do?

He couldn't force Omar to recover and he couldn't abandon him. He thought what he might do and gradually he realized there was no solution. Little by little he began to understand that his plans were collapsing and all the options available were fraught with danger. If he wanted to keep

traveling with his obstinate son, he might have to make do with an imperfect plan. Either that or take him across the desert now in the hope that Omar would recover along the way. But he knew that Omar couldn't make the journey in his present state, and if he went into the Gilf Kebir now his son would die in his arms within a few days. So his only option was to wait till Omar recovered, come what may.

The sea voyage went smoothly for several hours, until he reached the Sudanese border. Fakhreddin took the boat deep into international waters to stay clear of the coastguards. The calm sea helped him sail far and fast, and then he turned south and traveled as fast as possible. The boat's engine groaned from the strain but Fakhreddin seemed confident about what he was doing. He heard Hind muttering something about their speed and the engine but he didn't reply. At the helm now, Hind watched every move he made. He moved around as quick and agile as a panther, doing several things at the same time and not answering any of her questions because he was so focused on his numerous tasks. He knew that Hind didn't need answers. She was watching him as if she were taking pictures of his actions, analyzing them and storing them away in her memory.

He explained the elements of the operation to her in a few minutes: the maps, the gauges, and the things she had to focus on in this area and the later stages of the voyage, the weather conditions, communications between the boat and the authorities, the distress call and how to handle the fuel. He forbade her from using the sails on the way back. At night, on drawing close to the Sudanese coast, they would use the sails so that the sound of the engine didn't draw attention to them. This region had plenty of wind so they could make do with the sails, and there would be more fuel left for her to go back using the engine all the way. If anyone challenged her she could pretend she was a tourist who had lost her way.

It wasn't long before Hind felt that the wind was picking up. Minutes later Fakhreddin turned the engine off and asked her to help him hoist the sails. He pulled out the mainsail and started asking her to do specific tasks: tie this, push the foot of the sail to the other side, push, pull. And all the time he was busy opening, closing, and moving things, untying some ropes and making others fast. The sails were hoisted and secured and the boat set off faster than it had been traveling earlier, with Fakhreddin holding the tiller. The boat was heeling sharply to one side as they raced across the surface of the water. He looked at Hind and could see that she was gradually losing her fear and was starting to move along the sloping deck by holding onto the ropes on the guardrail until she reached the helm. He smiled at her encouragingly.

"I'll hand over the helm to you," he said. "Be careful. Don't let go of it. I'm going to the mast. Stay here until I tell you."

She nodded and he gave her the rudder. He looked at her quizzically and she gestured that everything was under control. He left her and edged his way along the deck toward the mast. Suddenly the boom swung around and pushed him toward the other side of the boat. The side closest to the water rose in the air and the other side fell. The wind forced the sail toward the water until it seemed that the boat was bound to capsize. But it didn't capsize. It kept moving forward at an angle. Fakhreddin fixed the boom in its new position and went back the same way he had come. He slid along the deck, rather than walked. He took the rudder from Hind's tight grip. She sat aside, trying to steady her nerves.

"Don't worry. Everything's going fine," he said.

"Are we going all the way like this?"

Fakhreddin mumbled something affirmative while Hind leaned over the side of the boat and emptied the contents of her stomach into the water. Fakhreddin smiled. She came back in a while.

“Welcome back. You’ll feel better soon. Drink something fizzy from down below, but quickly because we’re going to do that maneuver again.”

Omar woke up for the second time since the morning. He reached out for the plate next to his bed and took a piece of bread. He chewed it slowly, then had a drink. His frail body was curled up on the bed. The air was damp in the rocky cave where he and Fakhreddin had been staying for some days. The light was dazzling outside. Fakhreddin spent an hour looking after the animals, then came back and sat in the cave looking at his son. The boy put him on edge and he wondered what exactly was wrong with him. Omar had been staring into space without moving since waking up. His father looked at him and tried to accept the idea that his son was disobedient. But at least he had eaten something and drunk some water. He went up to him and sat by his side. The boy didn’t stir. Fakhreddin asked him how he felt but he didn’t respond. He tried to make conversation anyway, describing the journey that awaited them, how long it would be and some of the difficulties they might face. Omar didn’t respond. Fakhreddin ventured to say that they could move in two days if he continued to recover his strength at this rate, and he still didn’t respond. But he reached out for the plate, took another piece of bread, and started to chew it slowly. Fakhreddin stood up to do some more chores.

Complete silence.

Omar finished chewing the piece of bread and stretched out on his bed again, covering his body and his head. Fakhreddin sat at the mouth of the cave watching the desert outside, impatient to move on. He didn’t like this waiting. He didn’t like any waiting. He toyed with a stick in the ground and from time to time looked over at his son lying hidden under the covers. What had reduced him to this state? How had all this happened within sight and earshot of the men in the group

without anyone noticing anything? He didn't understand. He had found an answer in his stormy conversation with Sheikh Hamza, and that answer was a betrayal of trust. He had left his son in their care, to grow up among them, with them as guardians, and this is what had happened: they had betrayed the trust. But what was worse, what he couldn't understand was Omar's betrayal of himself. When Fakhreddin was his age he used to read about comparative religion and the history of philosophy. He developed a sense of right and wrong and it was beneath him to do wrong or compromise with it. Why had his son stooped so low? And what should he do with him now? He had saved him from the clutches of the group, which had been blinded by anger and the smell of blood, but what should he do now with a silent, thin boy who was stubborn and disloyal, and why had his son become such a person?

The disc of the sun rose gradually from the surface of the sea as Fakhreddin stood at the helm. He was fully dressed and had prepared a small bag containing things that Hind had brought. He looked at the bed and could see that she was still asleep. He leaned over the side of the stationary boat and felt the small rubber dinghy that was tied up alongside it. He called Hind; she got up and walked to the side of the boat. She stepped up to the edge and then slowly climbed down into the dinghy. Fakhreddin followed her and started to row the dinghy gently toward the shore. They arrived within minutes. There was no one on the shore at that time. Fakhreddin jumped ashore and waved to her to go back. He watched her row back to the big boat in silence, except for the sound of the small oars in the water. He had to leave the area as quickly as possible and she would set off in exactly one hour. She would turn on the engine and sail back in a straight line until she reached Marsa Alam, then hand in the boat and go back to Cairo, according to the agreement, and she wouldn't call him until he called her, whatever happened.

He left the coast at speed. He knew the area well and had some Beja friends in a nearby village, but he wasn't going to stop there. He didn't want anyone to recognize him until he reached the village where the group leaders lived and he didn't want to take the risk that word of his arrival might leak out to the group, even with good intentions. Otherwise they would hurry to carry out the sentence. It would also be difficult for Fakhreddin to explain the whole story to anyone he met now. If he told someone there was a disagreement between him and Sheikh Hamza, who could guarantee that they wouldn't be suspicious and take the safest option, which would be to inform Hamza? No, he had best remain under cover until he reached al-Areen. Fakhreddin skirted the village that stretched along the shoreline and walked toward the hills that ran inland. After a while he came across a horse-drawn cart driven by a southern boy. He greeted him and sat on the edge of the cart. He looked like a Zaghawa in his Darfuri gown and the dark sunglasses he was wearing. The cart drove on without them speaking for about half an hour and then Fakhreddin jumped down, thanking the boy for the ride. He walked on foot to a little settlement where he bought a motor-bike, filled the tank with fuel, and set off toward al-Areen, the village where the group was based. Along the way he thought about how he would handle his encounter with Hamza and the other leaders.

It was a stormy meeting. Everyone was surprised to see Fakhreddin walking down the narrow lanes of al-Areen. The guards on the security perimeter of the village hadn't noticed him arriving. Fakhreddin had slipped in between them, which wasn't hard as it was he who had trained them and helped prepare the defenses. He reached the door of Sheikh Hamza's house, shook hands with the guards, and asked them to tell the sheikh he was there. Two minutes later the guards came back and took him in.

“Where’s Omar?” he asked.

“And greetings to you too, and the mercy and blessings of God.”

“Where’s Omar, Sheikh Hamza?”

“Still alive.”

“Bring him for me to see.”

“Sit down, Abu Omar.”

Sheikh Hamza came up to him and embraced him. Fakhreddin stiffened. “What happened?” he asked the sheikh directly.

“What brought you so suddenly? When we invited you, you didn’t come.”

“What happened, Hamza?”

“What have the rats told you?”

“The rats? Is it true that Omar’s in detention?”

“Yes.”

“And why didn’t you tell me?”

“Sit down, Abu Omar, and listen carefully. You know what we mean to each other. You know how much we respect you. But what happened was very serious so, first, sit down and bless the Prophet of God. Open your heart and listen before you rush to judgment. You’ll see that I did the right thing and followed God’s law.”

“Send someone to fetch Omar first. I want to see him.”

“Before you’ve listened?”

“Before I’ve listened.”

“I don’t think that would be wise. Let me tell you what happened and then you can have what you want.”

“Bring him first.”

Sheikh Hamza looked at him and realized that Fakhreddin wasn’t sure that no one would harm Omar while they were talking. He gestured to the guard at the door, who disappeared for some minutes and then came back holding up Omar, who was walking slowly and staring into space.

“Omar!” Fakhreddin cried.

He rushed toward him and took him in his arms. He hugged him tight and pushed the guard aside. The guard looked to Sheikh Hamza, who signaled that he shouldn't intervene. Fakhreddin kept Omar in his arms, but Omar was stiff and unresponsive. He turned the boy's face toward him and looked into his eyes anxiously.

"Are you okay? Has anyone done anything to you?" he asked.

He hugged him again but the boy didn't respond. Fakhreddin held the boy's head back a little and looked into his eyes again, but he couldn't see any life in them. Nothing at all. Fakhreddin mumbled some reassuring and encouraging words but Omar was as silent and stiff as ever. Fakhreddin relaxed his grip a little and made an effort to smile, but Omar was far away.

"Has anyone done anything to you? Is there anything you want to tell me?"

When Fakhreddin received no answer, he set Omar on the floor at the end of the room and went back to Sheikh Hamza.

"Omar will stay here," he said. "Now tell me the story."

"In the name of God the Merciful, the Compassionate. You know your status in the jihad and how much we all respect you. We've never come across anything that discredits you in any way whatsoever. You left your son in our care and we looked after him and brought him up well. I took him under my wing and treated him as my son. And believe me, there's nothing harder for me to say than what I'm going to tell you. I was stunned when I heard about it and I didn't take a position until I had seen and heard it myself and the boy had himself confessed. What you are going to hear will be hard for you too, and a test of your faith. Don't let anger and pride blind you, and remember what God says clearly in His book: *'In the name of God the Merciful, the Compassionate. You cannot guide anyone you like, but God guides whomsoever he wishes.'* God Almighty has spoken the truth."

“Tell me the story, Hamza, and enough beating around the bush. What happened? Why do you want to kill my son?”

“Your son betrayed us. Your son was responsible for the killing of several members of the group and conspired to have us all killed. If God Almighty hadn’t protected us he would have succeeded.”

“My son? Omar?”

“What happened was that Egyptian intelligence recruited the son of one of the people working with Sheikh Azzam. They lured the boy, drugged him, abused him, and took pictures of him. Then they asked him to provide them with basic information about Sheikh Azzam and his group. It wasn’t important information at first and they threatened to tell the boy’s family if he didn’t cooperate, so he did. But Sheikh Azzam’s group isn’t active, as you know, and it turned out later that their real target was not Sheikh Azzam, but us. This is what someone said later. He said they were targeting us in retaliation for operations we had carried out against them. We don’t know what operations they were talking about. We haven’t carried out any against them since we blew up the consulate in 1995. What reminded them of that fourteen years later? God alone knows.”

Fakhreddin’s heart sank. What operations were they talking about? Could it be that it was to take revenge on him? For his operations?

“Tell me, have you carried out any jobs and pinned them on us, Abu Omar?”

“No, of course not.”

“Maybe one of our members carried out some lone operations and they thought we were behind them. Anyway, they put pressure on the boy to introduce them to one of our children and he did. This boy took your son Omar and went to meet these people in a place they chose, and they did to Omar what they had done to the first boy.”

Fakhreddin felt dizzy. Out of the corner of his eye he looked at Omar and saw that he was far away, as if asleep or

unconscious and unable to hear what was happening. Fakhred-din watched the sheikh as he spoke, his face as rigid as stone.

“Omar cooperated with them. Sudanese intelligence monitored the meetings, arrested the boys, and told us what had happened. It turned out he had given the Egyptian security agents a list of the names of our members who had fled Afghanistan and the countries where they had taken shelter, the names of those who were in the Damazin farm and in Kutum and in Kordofan. We tipped off as many of them as we could but some of them were arrested, and some were killed. We took Omar from the Sudanese and asked him, and he confessed. We have tapes of his confessions. I sent you an invitation to come but you refused.”

“I thought that . . .”

“It doesn’t matter now. Some of the members sat down with him and tried to persuade him to repent, out of deference to you, despite the blood that had been shed. He did repent and they sent him to the sharia units to complete his repentance, strengthen his faith, and atone for the offense he had committed. But he ran away and disappeared. After that we found out he had gone back to Khartoum and resumed contact with the agents of his own free will. Then he contacted us and asked to come back and showed remorse and penitence. We weren’t convinced that his repentance was sincere but we thought we’d see what it was all about. We brought him back here and two weeks later he made some excuse and went off to Khartoum. We had put him under surveillance and we filmed him in Khartoum with an agent who gave him a bag of explosives. The Sudanese, who were also tracking these agents, arrested him with the bag and interrogated him. He confessed that the agents had asked him to put the bag in my office and detonate it on the day of the weekly leadership meeting. They had trained him to use the explosives. There wasn’t any doubt about it. We eventually got the boy back from them, brought him here, and

questioned him ourselves. He confessed to me and to the sharia council that was convened.

“The council had a long discussion on the religious law aspect. The boy clearly knew what he was doing. At the trial some members asked him if he knew the penalty for treachery and he said he did. Some of them asked him why he had betrayed us and he said he didn’t like us and we weren’t his family and that we had no obligations to each other. Just like that! The members had a long discussion with him and it was clear that he hadn’t acted under duress, so he was sentenced to death on the basis that what he did was equivalent to conspiracy to murder, and the council endorsed the verdict by a majority vote.”

“And why didn’t anyone call me? Why didn’t you send for me and explain that my son’s life was at stake?”

“You chose to go. You decided to leave our group and work alone. And you persuaded the sheikh to let you go despite my opposition at the time, so don’t come now and ask us to treat you like a member who lives with us.”

“Is that how it is then, Sheikh Hamza?”

“You know that many members opposed your departure and thought it implied arrogance and insubordination. Malicious tongues wagged, wondering how you happened to leave Afghanistan just two months before the Americans started bombing, but I shut them up and, although I wasn’t convinced about you leaving, I stood with you out of respect for our history together. You left your son with Umm Yasser while you were on jihad and we looked after him for you. When you came back here you told Umm Yasser you’d leave him with her some time longer because you’d be worried about him in Cairo and you couldn’t look after him. So we took him under our wing. We treated him as a son and this is our reward. He was responsible for our members being arrested, tortured, and killed. He cost the group large amounts in expenses, damaged our relationship with the

Sudanese, helped the security people against us, and almost cost us our lives. What do you want me to do? Give him a medal?"

"No. You should have sent for me to come as soon as the problem started and before things reached this stage! And besides, why did he hate you so much? What happened to him? Someone must have done him harm. Do children hate their families like that for no reason?"

"You'll have to put that question to him or to yourself. As far as we're concerned, we did everything by the book to the best of our ability."

"And haven't you ever asked yourself, Sheikh Hamza, how the security people were able to recruit two boys from the group so easily? Doesn't that mean that you're at fault too?"

"The fault is obvious. It lies with the boys, who succumbed to the devil."

"He's a child! He's sixteen years old! How did he come to meet the devil, so that he *could* succumb to him? He's a child in your care. If the devil overpowered him, that's your responsibility."

"No, Abu Omar. He's not a minor. We've examined him and he's not a minor."

"If you're an adult physically it doesn't necessarily mean you're an adult psychologically! Be reasonable, Sheikh Hamza!"

"You be reasonable and don't try to hold me responsible for the boy's deeds."

"So the boy's responsible? How can it be his responsibility? Was it Omar who antagonized the security people and set them against you? He's a young boy you should be looking after and bringing up, rather than throwing him to the lions and then wanting to go and kill him!"

"Omar's not young. The council met and confirmed he's an adult and he himself admitted he was responsible and knew what he was doing, and that was the end of the matter."

“The end of the matter? Something must have happened to your reason. Are you forgetting yourself or what, Hamza?”

“It’s not me who’s forgetting himself. In fact the situation seems to be worse than I thought and the lack of resolve seems to be congenital.”

“Lack of resolve? Congenital? God damn you! You’ve forgotten the Panjshir, you ingrate. My God, if it wasn’t for me, the mountain hyenas would have eaten your corpse years ago.”

“Our lives are in the hands of God, so you can’t take credit for something that God has decreed for me and for which He has used you as His instrument. Didn’t I say arrogance and insubordination?”

“You really haven’t changed, Hamza. You’re like the pot calling the kettle black. You’ve always projected your own faults onto others.”

“Watch your tongue. Don’t go too far.”

“You watch your tongue, you thug. If I was a less generous man, I’d have finished you off.”

Hamza looked to the guard, who was on the alert and who rushed toward Fakhreddin. Fakhreddin spun around and before the guard could reach him he punched him right in the throat and knocked him unconscious. He went for Hamza, grabbed him by the neck, and lifted him in the air. Trembling with rage, he looked at him and shouted, “You listen to me. If you think those guards will protect you from me, you’re mistaken. If I want to punish you, no one’s going to stop me having your head cut off.”

Hamza made a gurgling noise and his eyes bulged. Fakhreddin maintained his grip. “Abu Omar, I’m choking,” the sheikh gasped. “Let me down for God’s sake, don’t be crazy.”

Fakhreddin took a deep breath and put him down, still holding him firm. Hamza slowly got his breath back. He looked at Fakhreddin and continued: “Have you gone mad, Abu

Omar? Do you want to kill me? Listen, I can recommend that the council postpone the execution, as long as you stay here. We'll give you the boy and he'll be in your custody. You can go back to your old position and play your part. We're reuniting the mujahideen who were dispersed by the war in Afghanistan. Some of the ones who went to Iraq and Chechnya have come back, as well as some of those who were in Somalia and Darfur. Hopefully we'll start to operate systematically, and we would reserve an important role for you. You can stay, and together we'll take revenge on those who tempted your son and led him into iniquity. By God, I'll bring you that agent and you can do what you like to him. This is the only way to save Omar. No one will dare demand that the death sentence be carried out against Omar as long as you are among us and the boy repents and you vouch for him, and that would be the end of the matter."

"Why didn't you do that from the start? Why were you going to kill Omar?"

"Enough of that. Now we're here and you have this chance."

"No, enough of *your* nonsense and you listen to me. I've known what you're like for a long time, since the days of the war in the north, when you groveled to the sheikh so he would put you in command, and I didn't care then and I don't care now. But I never imagined you would sink this low. My son? My son, you bastard. If I were to follow your logic I would have to punish you, and now. But your punishment is to be yourself, as you are, and to spend the rest of your life living the same way you've always lived. Listen to me and don't interrupt. This is the end of the line for me and you, for me and all of you. I'm out of here and I'm taking my son with me. No one will stand in my way and no one will come after me. That's the end of the matter. From now on, I don't know you and you don't know me."

Fakhreddin didn't wait for an answer. He just picked Omar up off the floor, threw him over his shoulder, and left.

He walked down the narrow village lanes. Men stopped to look and the guards stood aside in confusion and hesitation. No one stood in his way, but angry eyes were watching him and the son he was carrying in his arms. He went through gateway after gateway and security cordon after security cordon until he reached his motorbike. He sat on the saddle, set Omar in front of him, and put his arms tight around him so that he couldn't fall or run away. Then he set off for the road that led to the Gilf Kebir desert.

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Embrace on Brooklyn Bridge

by Ezzedine C. Fishere, translated by John Peate

In the Spider's Room

by Muhammad Abdelnabi, translated by Jonathan Wright

Guard of the Dead

by George Yarak, translated by Raphael Cohen



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