

# Otared

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# A Beginning



THIS LINE OF BLOOD PUT me in mind of many things.

It was traced on the wall, not quite vertically but leaning at a slight angle and at its apex looping sharply back to the ground. Small droplets hung down, running from the edge of the bend. It reminded me of an ostrich's tail feather, a column of water rising from a fountain, the glowing tracks of fireworks launched across the sky.

The butcher was a true professional. With his massive cleaver, he struck the calf's forelegs a single blow to bring the beast down, then passed the same blade over its neck, opening the rosy throat and an artery, and sending the blood jetting out in a clean line—dragged down by gravity, held horizontal by the pumping heart—only to meet the wall a few centimeters away and describe itself: the classic profile of airborne liquid, a shape about to be lost forever and then preserved, a stroke upon the wall.

Many people ate from the flesh of the slaughtered calf. They say raw meat stimulates the sex drive, or so I've heard, and certainly the rites have something rousing about them: the slaughter, the mingled stench of blood and dung, the skinning, the carcass hung up and butchered, the sight of dozens standing waiting for a cut of meat, of kids off to one side eating lumps of raw liver, still hot and soft, of a man rushing off with his plastic bag full of meat and smiling as he goes . . . and then me, sat watching it all in my white robe, relaxing after the exertion of many months.

The Eid al-Adha holiday: a fine opportunity to derail your diet, kick back, and find out what's going on out in the countryside; to ponder, too, the relationship between flesh and sex.

In the evening, the poor gathered in numbers, come to eat from the vast spread laid out for them. They sat on the ground around a spotless white cloth with empty bowls of various shapes and sizes before them, and then a charity worker came around, dishing two pieces of meat for each person from a huge pot carried by his colleague, picking them out with his bare hand, and not bending to place them in the bowl but waiting until the dish was lifted, then letting them fall—at which the pauper would immediately start eating. Boiled meat swaddled in fat: gray flesh, white fat. To me, it all looked revolting, but those doing the eating were thoroughly enjoying themselves.

On the wall before me a line of blood was traced like that I'd seen five days earlier, during Eid at my family's place in the country. On this occasion, it had come from the artery of a sixteen-year-old boy. Between wall and bed, in the narrow gap no more than fifty centimeters wide, his body was crammed into a most outlandish pose: head to one side, mouth squashed but open, the two arms raised with palms half-folded into fists and, stranger still, his legs also raised—knees up by his face and one broken, the lower half dangling forlornly from the joint and resting along the side of the corpse. On the opposite wall, clearly visible to the naked eye, was the line of blood. It looked to me as though the owners of the apartment had recently repainted the walls. The pale cream was even and flawless, unmarked by fingerprints, unscuffed by furniture: a wall in one color, a canvas or a blank page, and the line of blood showing its color ever stronger.

I was on my own. I'd rushed impetuously to the address provided to find officers from the Emergency Force had beaten me to it. Some stood dazed in the living room. Others were on the stairs outside the apartment. None had been into the bedrooms,

just peeked past the open doors at what lay inside, and sure enough they'd been careful not to touch a thing—not out of any desire to keep the crime scene uncontaminated as the rules dictate, but because they were frightened. It was when I looked into the eyes of the first officer that I understood. I know what the eyes of a frightened police officer look like. It's impossible to put into words. We're the only ones who recognize it, who share it. Wordlessly, we confess our fear. We share the burden between all those who lie within the circle of trust. I'd been in the same position many times myself, prey to the same fear, had shared my burden with colleagues using that same look and, a few times, carried it alone, and I know the pressure it brings. I was informed that the father had killed his family and prepared myself for a lot of blood, but the officer's look told of something more. For an instant, some of his fear transmitted itself to me and I understood that fear would be with me for a long time.

The owner of the house was sitting in the living room in front of the television, his shoulders covered with a light blanket and staring at the screen. He seemed to be eating from a bowl held between his hands. In a well-stuffed armchair sat an elderly man, his hands in his lap and his head resting against the back of the chair, and I saw at a glance that he'd been dead for hours. The other man was watching an old film—Ismail Yassin cavorting in a shady dive and singing the praises of alcohol, the other patrons all warbling along—and wolfing from his plate with a spoon. The smell was deadly—rot, and excrement, and cooked meat, and vomit—and I noticed hardened lumps of shit beneath the dead man, on his chair and the floor at his feet, even as the other finished his meal, laid the dish down beside him, and went on watching the film. I realized then that my brother officer's fear had been an unvarnished response to the scene before him.

The officer told me that there were four more bodies: the young man in the first bedroom, his older sister in the second, and the mother and a young boy in the third. They had

been killed by thrusts from a kitchen knife, dealt out by the father now sitting in front of the television. The rigidity of the corpses and the smell of decomposition suggested that he had killed them two or three days ago.

The kitchen was in a state of chaos: pots and bowls all over the floor and table, a putrid stench, patches of dried vomit on the floor, and shit everywhere.

In the first bedroom, I stood transfixed before the corpse of the boy wedged between the bed and the wall, and after a minute had passed I realized that I was slowly losing consciousness. Losing it and conscious of it. I pushed out of the room and out of the apartment. It was on the top floor, so I climbed the stairs to the roof and there, beneath stars that choked on the filthy air, I threw up.

The nausea was overwhelming. Unable to stand, I sat on the grimy rooftop, trying to bring my stomach under control. The boy's bizarre posture, his rigid body, face turned to the wall and hidden from sight, were images that would never leave me, as though etched into my memory for eternity. And most regrettably, they brought back every corpse I'd ever clapped eyes on since starting in this job: wretched faces, slack mouths, half-closed eyes surrendered to death. I made an effort to suck in fresh air, something other than the rancid fug inside the apartment. I filled my lungs as full as they would go. A gray haze lay between the stars and moon and me, and looking up I saw, among those stars, the faces of a family. I saw their names spelled out beneath their pictures in the paper: Wife—Abir Abdel Haqq, 37; Daughter—Farida, 11; Daughter—Sally, 4. And my picture with them: Captain Ahmed Otared. Husband. Father. The article bore no headline, contained no details, just black lines beneath the pictures where the writing would be, nothing I could make out or understand, and yet I knew that this was an item about how I'd murdered them, without the faintest idea who they were or why I was certain that I'd killed them and had changed

their fate for a better one, even if it had been death. Then I saw that I would kill many people, and that a great number of people would be killed in whose deaths I'd play no part. I saw that people would kill their children and eat their flesh, and I saw that the man sitting, eating, and watching television had broken the last of the seals and set loose everything that would later come to pass. All this I saw and I understood nothing.

This was before I had entered the remaining rooms. Before I had seen the other bodies. Before I had seen what the man had recorded on his phone.

The investigation and confessions established that the father had killed his family with the kitchen knife, then spent several hours preparing for the next stage. He had laid out a small knife and various cooking pots, and proceeded to chop onions, peel garlic, and deseed a large quantity of tomatoes. Next, taking his sharp little knife, he had chopped off their lips, noses, and ears, prized out their eyes, sliced away portions of their calves and thighs, and dug out his wife's breasts. He had put the eyes in a small bowl, the ears and lips in a larger one, and the chunks of flesh in a third, while the breasts he'd laid in an earthenware dish. He had added the chopped onion, garlic, and tomatoes to the bowls, and then cooked it all in the kitchen. The smell of food had suggested meat being cooked for Eid, and the neighbors hadn't suspected a thing. The father had taken calls from family members, accepting their good wishes—had even called some of them himself—and when they'd asked after the family, he'd said that his son was out with friends, the other children were asleep, and his wife was in the shower.

But the father had been careful to solicit the approval of the grandfather, the man I'd seen dead alongside him. He told us that he had recorded much of what had happened on his phone and with a camcorder. We had already extracted all the recordings and added them to the case file by the time he told

us this, and with the footage we had it looked like this was going to be easy: a clean case with no complications, death sentence for the father guaranteed. If it hadn't been for the cooking business, it would have been a textbook case. Run of the mill.

Most of what took place was caught on camera. We found a clip of the father cutting up a section of his wife's thigh, and another of him slicing her breasts, as if giving a demonstration of his technique. There was a clip of him unhurriedly and calmly chopping noses, ears, and eyes—except for the eldest son's. He was left untouched. The father said that the boy had resisted fiercely, had died suffering, and so hadn't deserved to be cut up and eaten. Then there was another clip of him placing all the flesh in a bowl, adding vegetables and seasoning, and stirring everything together. A long clip of a steel saucepan with its Perspex lid, and the meat gently stewing inside; the longest of the lot.

But the most extraordinary set of recordings were those of the man's father—the dead grandpa swamped in his filth on the well-stuffed armchair.

The camera had been mounted on its tripod. The footage was of higher quality and clarity than the earlier recordings taken from the phone. Father and grandfather filled the screen, the former attempting to feed the latter from a dish in his hand. He was holding it in his left hand, bringing it up to the grandfather's face, and lifting out a spoon containing a small quantity of meat. The grandfather glared at him furiously, slapped at the dish, and shouted something in his face with such anger that we couldn't catch what he had said. By that stage in the investigation, everything was crystal clear, but we still needed an explanation or a clarification—a hint, at least—as to the motive, and the angry grandfather came as a surprise to us all. It was clear that the grandfather was immobile, that his old age confined him to the chair, and that he was aware of what his son was doing but had no way of stopping him. He knew that his son was chopping up his grandchildren

one after the other, and no doubt knew that he had cooked them. The most he could manage, it seemed, was to slap the dish and send it flying. It was all he could do.

In the next clips, the father was trying to persuade the grandfather to eat. Pressing him to eat. Whispering things we couldn't hear. We couldn't hear a thing he said, and couldn't imagine what a man might say to convince his father to eat the flesh of his own grandchildren. Initially the grandfather reacted angrily. "You're a liar," he was shouting. "Don't say that. . . ." The father spoke calmly, whispering, and the grandfather turned from anger to despondency, from shouting to weeping, and then to moans. The more the father spoke to him, the more he moaned, and the recording ended with the grandfather murmuring, "Enough . . . enough. . . ."

The next recording had been made a few hours later. By now a whole day had passed since the murders had been committed. Father and grandfather were seated as before, and the grandfather was trying to force himself to eat from the dish held by his son. He was gripping the spoon, bringing it to his mouth, and saying, "It's better for them. . . . Fine. . . . But I just can't. . . . It's not. . . . To eat them's not . . . to kill them. . . ." Then he began to whimper like a child, and ate the first spoonful.

Between each spoonful and the next, the grandfather wept. He was eating and murmuring, "It's best for them. A good father, a good grandfather. . . . They'll go to heaven for sure. . . . They won't come back here. . . ." Then he finished the first bowl, and after that he was silent, though he went on eating with a strangely mechanical air. In less than half an hour, he'd worked through five helpings, and the clip ended as he laid the empty dish in the father's hands.

From the autopsy, we learned that he had died from severe poisoning and had expelled a torrent of shit and vomit before he'd passed. The father must have watched him dying and not moved a muscle. The pair of them had been on a suicide mission to eat the victims: the grandfather had died almost

immediately, while the father had gone on eating even after we had entered the apartment. He had eaten and eaten, getting up to defecate anywhere and everywhere. Five whole days, and not a thought for keeping himself or the apartment clean. We later found out from the medical report that between them they'd consumed more than fifty kilos of flesh.

On the sixth day, a neighbor called the Emergency Force, bothered by a putrid stench issuing from the apartment next door. The father had calmly opened the door to the jumpy officers, then gone back to the television to finish the very last bowlful of a feast that had lasted all the days of Eid.

We all know the rules: not a finger must be laid on the killer. He is to be treated with great gentleness. Officers, recruits, and prisoners treat him as a dead man—particularly if he's confessed, particularly if he hasn't resisted or screamed at us. This is a man marching to the gallows of his own accord, so let him march.

During the trial, the judge didn't ask him much, other than the one repeated question: had he killed his family or not? The man confessed to what he'd done in the court's first session, and repeated his confession more than fifty times in the sessions that followed. Given the details of the case, the judge's boorishness and clumsy insistence on the point were completely out of place. The man had opened the door of his apartment himself and had surrendered to the police. He'd put up not the slightest resistance. He had confessed to the prosecutor and confessed to the judge. I could not understand why, every session, the judge repeated the same question: "Did you kill them?" When the judge asked him to put his confession in writing, the man produced one in his own hand, a large, clear hand with no mistakes or crossings out. Maybe he took pride in this document. There was one small detail that no one dwelled on for very long: his statement that the only reason he had murdered his family was that he'd lost a lot of money on the stock exchange.

But he showed no distress in the way he conducted himself—no feelings at all, in fact. Throughout the course of the trial, he was like the living dead, heedless of what went on around him. The prosecutor’s sallies seemed ridiculous given the confession made in the presence of so many witnesses and repeated so many times, and the defense’s arguments even more so. Everything about that trial seemed absurd. Even the judge, who insisted on hearing the confession more than fifty times, who demanded a written statement, who brought the accused out of his cage during the final session, handed him his written statement, and asked if it was his (to which he replied, “Yes”), then asked if it was in his handwriting (to which he replied, “Yes”), then asked for the last time if he had killed his family (to which he replied, “Yes”)—even the judge was a joke.

Only the man himself didn’t seem ridiculous, and yet quite how to describe him I could never figure out.

People were confounded. They all felt for the killer. This was a man of the bourgeoisie: comfortably off, a respectable job, didn’t take drugs (just smoked), owned a large apartment in a classy neighborhood and two cars, his children at foreign schools and the eldest daughter graduated with honors from a private university. He was the beau ideal of the contented middle class, a man with a secure future, envied by many for his stable life and beautiful family. And yet not one of the stunned onlookers thought to ask why it had happened. Psychologists and sociologists offered no analysis. Of course, the pretext of losses on the stock exchange was very thin, too weak for the prosecutor to have advanced it as a motive in court, and were it not for the man appending it to his detailed account of what he’d done, it would definitely have been consigned to the trash. Television talking heads seized on his story, but no one asked what his real motive was, and discussions of the case were followed by pop songs, reports on fashion shows, and political debate. And though I might not have been that concerned by the true cause, even I knew “financial losses” was a fabrication.

I followed the case with great interest, attending every court session in anticipation of some surprise or dramatic turn in the course of events. I'd stare into the face of the man sitting in the defendant's cage, racking my brains for a complete memory of that face, but all that came to mind was the back of his neck and shoulders, and the blanket covering them. This was the only mental image I'd been able to retain. Even those images from the interrogations, with him sitting before me or beside me, seeing him plain with only the desk between us—they had gone for good, and nothing was left but the image of him sat before the television.

I was on my way to one of the trial's final sessions when my car broke down and I had to flag down a taxi to take me to the courtroom. I arrived late; the session had already begun. I can't remember if it was the turn of the prosecution or the defense. It was as good as over. All that remained were those formalities beloved of the Egyptian bench—and of judges everywhere—so that the matter could be elegantly concluded: a crisp life sentence; a duly solemn death sentence. Everyone knew that during one of the sessions the accused's case would be forwarded to the mufti, whose plea for clemency would fail to shake the certainty of the judge, who would then, in the next session, order the defendant's execution.

I delayed going in until I'd had a quick cigarette and a small cup of tea. I took a sip from the cup and it was bitter, no sugar, so I ordered some from the tea boy, who apologized with a smile and brought it to me with a little spoon. I stirred the tea and spent a few minutes looking at my phone. By now I was very late and estimated that the session must be halfway through. When I picked up the cup again, intending to finish it in a few quick gulps, I found a black beetle bobbing on the surface. A dead scarab.

My eyes fastened on the motionless insect. It hadn't been there before. Maybe it had fallen in while I'd been busy with the phone and had died, either drowned or from the heat of

the tea. I tipped the contents of the cup onto the floor, the finely chopped tea leaves swirling over the marble floor in the red liquid and the scarab rolling away. It started to move. So, not dead.

I asked the tea boy what he had ready to go—tea, coffee, anything. Someone had just ordered coffee and had walked off without taking it, he told me. As though it had been made for me.

He poured it calmly, picked up the little saucer that held the cup, and handed it over, volunteering the following: “That’s a cup of coffee with hope stirred in. Hope’s important. That guy who murdered his family lost hope, that’s why he killed them. . . .”

As the session ended, I watched the man walk out of the cage. Hair combed, in clean white overalls, he walked the way he’d done since I first saw him, but it was only today that I saw what made his walk so distinctive. He walked with all hope lost.



AD 2025



# 1

WE TOOK TURNS SMOKING THE joint. The five of us finished it in under a minute: just two puffs each. We lit another. As usual, the hash was completely pure. Unadulterated. When cut and crumbled, the block left no marks on the paper; it broke easily between my fingers and had a pungent reek, exactly as my colleague in Narcotics had described the pure product from the eighties. He'd told me what used to happen during raids on hash storehouses.

The pair of us had been lounging by a roadblock on Qasr al-Aini Street. There were very few cars about, and a man walked past us smoking a joint. We could tell from the smell. My colleague laughed. "We'd know there was hash in a building just by standing outside. We'd walk down the street and the stink would leak out of the doors and windows and hit us, and when we got to the apartment we'd know it was the one immediately. The dealers could do what they liked, none of them could cover up the smell. When we caught a whiff, we'd smile and relax. From then on, it was up to the rank and file: they'd search the rooms for hidden compartments. They'd search cellars. Might even have to dig a bit to get the hash out. Sure—even the dirt piled over it couldn't stop the stink getting out. Later, the dealers were forced to mix it with a lot of cheaper substances, firstly to boost their profits, and secondly to hide the smell."

I didn't know them, these four. I was put in with them and now there was nothing for it but to share the hash. We were

stationed in one of the rooms on the penultimate floor of the Cairo Tower. In a few hours' time, this long posting would be over; two whole years it had been. We were an advanced observation post, the eye of the resistance looking out over East Cairo, an instrument of execution and assassination, snipers, the long arm of the partisans, and I, Colonel Ahmed Otared, was commander of the unit that had held fast for all that time. Even when, one after another, the officers had begun breaking down beneath the intense psychological pressure, even when three of them had committed suicide in a single day, not a hair on my head had been disturbed. I'd just sent a message to the leadership to send more snipers and a detachment to pick up the bodies. And as that detachment had made its way to the tower from West Cairo, I had been writing my report: attributing the suicides to the pressures of the job, to our dazzling success in taking out targets, to the absence of any psychological training for the officers, to the loneliness and isolation, and to many other things besides.

After that, I would send officers on leave once they had stayed three or four months, thereby maintaining a reasonably high standard within the unit, and most certainly preserving the lives of the officers. I had realized that everyone who stayed up in the tower underwent a gradual nervous breakdown, and everything I mentioned in the report really did contribute to this: in the end, no matter how much an officer believes in his work, killing a human being he doesn't know is a major undertaking. I was a sniper. I know. I know that images of the victims linger in the mind for a long time. That one's memory selects certain images to hold on to forever. Even mine—and I'm a professional—retains images of people I shot and whose identities I can't recall. I can't recall where I was or where they were. I can't recall when it happened or how I received the orders to kill them. And of course, there's that tableau of the three bodies heaped up on top of one another, framed by the circle of my scope. That one will stay fixed in my mind; it will

never be erased until the day I die. So what of amateurs like them? Had it not been for the enthusiasm that sprang from their patriotic spirit, the Tower Group would not have had the slightest success.

The Tower Group was our official designation, and one that no one will ever find recorded in any official document. But it was the term ‘hornets’ which caught the imagination of the general public and became our *nom de guerre*. Truth be told, no one had the slightest knowledge of our presence, but they were aware that there were many snipers stationed throughout the city, on rooftops and up tall buildings. We left a clear trail—an officer walking down the street, then dropping without warning; a soldier sitting calmly at a café, his brains sprayed over the tables of those sitting beside him—and so it was that people came to conflate the Tower Group with the snipers scattered through the streets of East Cairo. We were all hornets to them, and certainly it never occurred to a soul that we were based in the Cairo Tower, the furthest point from everything, at the maximum range of our rifles and scopes. No one saw us and no one heard us, and with our suppressors we were veritable angels of death.

Initially, I’d assumed that the tower actually housed sixteen floors, but with time and much traveling up and down in the elevator, I realized that its capacity was very limited indeed. The massive structure housed just two floors (referred to as the fifteenth and sixteenth regardless), and atop the last of these an extremely narrow walkway ran around a vast central column, visible from many places throughout the city.

I climbed up to the sixteenth floor, whose own circular balcony commanded a view of the entire metropolis. I was looking out over East Cairo from an elevation of approximately one hundred and eighty meters. Its celebrated landmarks seemed stronger than people, stronger than time, stronger than anything. Even an architect sympathetic to modern styles would perceive their ugliness, accommodated

through long familiarity, and maybe this ugliness was the reason why they had survived despite the deaths of so many. The Maspero building, for instance, had no business surviving as it had. It was a gigantic-buttocked man squatting on the ground, his impossibly slender head and chest thrust up into the air. A Buddha erect. A Buddha deformed. To the north was the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a tall European gent in an oriental turban, looming over the city, and at his back those numberless interlocked blocks of smaller buildings with no architectural style, or layout, or even specification in common, cut up by crooked streets whose widths would alter every hundred yards: the chaotic neighborhood of Bulaq Abul-Ela, its disorder a fitting backdrop for the infantile troublemaking that had broken out there years before. Then the Egyptian Museum, a clutch of decrepit idlers sitting on the ground, chatting in low tones. Inert for eons, shifting only to sip their tea, they lurked out of sight, loathing their own fraudulent history. The ruins of the deserted Nile Hilton, destroyed at the start of the occupation, was a drunken American tourist, fallen down and dead to the world, who had come to Cairo to find beauty in the shit around him, had searched long and hard, and found nothing, and even so couldn't admit that the place was a crapheap that harbored no beauty whatsoever—but blamed himself for failing to find the jewel buried in the dung. The Ramses Hilton, a vast whore hanging out over the Nile and hailing one and all . . . but no one went near her. And just as whores can be spotted by their filthy, frayed old shoes—as though they'd agreed among themselves that all their shoes would be like this—so the disorder of the street and the vendors outside the Ramses Hilton were its old heels. The intersection of the Qasr al-Nil Bridge and the Corniche was an unintelligible maze, a more byzantine version of its sister junction, where the Corniche met the October 6th Bridge. Then the Semiramis: a man, his wife, and their child. The man, having pissed at his feet, was just standing

there, neither moving away from the patch of urine, nor letting his family move. To his left was the Mogamma of Tahrir Square, bearing within itself the causes of all the sicknesses that plague Egyptians. It only showed me its flank because it knew I feared its chest, and head, and broad-notched belly. In front of it was the derelict Arab League: glorious rubble, stately ruins, whose demolition had finally laid Tahrir bare—it had been the only thing that lay between us and the square. It had come down the day after the Nile Hilton, but unlike the hotel, which had tilted over and fallen on its side without breaking apart, the Arab League building had collapsed completely, leaving a great mound of debris.

Nothing but chaos. I searched for some order amid it all, but whoever built Cairo seemed never to have contemplated it from a distance, never looked at the whole picture, but instead had taken each building as a discrete entity, standing alone; each one designed in isolation without regard for the structures that surrounded it. They had seen it from the perspective of someone at ground level—aiming to dazzle in an age before airborne cameras—not as a bird soaring through the sky. The architects who followed these founding fathers had continued to build in just the same way, and then those who came after had done likewise. Would I live to see it all destroyed?

For two years, this scene had kept me company. Today I would leave it.

The first thing we'd done was to divide the floor space of the old restaurant on the fifteenth floor into cubicles using plywood sheets as dividers, leaving the staircase up to the top floor accessible to all so that any one of the officers could get up there in an emergency. Each cubicle was occupied by a sniper. There he lived and slept and, when he was on duty, would climb to the top floor to watch over East Cairo. Over time, the number of officers rose and fell, corresponding to West Cairo's need for the Tower Group. Our mission: "To safeguard our surroundings." This elastic prescription had

always pleased me. Such flexible orders gave us the freedom to act in critical situations, although our job description went beyond conventional parameters, to include murder. I was left completely to my own devices; there was no rigid plan that I had to implement. I just had to adapt to developments and await orders, all of them most specific: assassinate so-and-so who'd be passing down the Corniche; shoot any five officers of the occupation over the coming month. There were even instructions to kill Egyptian police officers and civilians collaborating with the occupation. Plus our standing orders: to peer through our scopes at East Cairo and note any suspicious movements. As I mentioned, we were a post for advanced observation and assassinations.

Thick dust covered Cairo, a blend of car exhaust, a fog that seemed to come from nowhere, and maybe, too, smoke from burning agricultural waste that drifted in from surrounding villages and towns. Every few weeks, all these would gather together into a curtain that hid Cairo's distant buildings from our eyes in the sky—a curtain like the one I'd made myself to deflect prying eyes, like the mask I wore when aiming at targets.

Every morning, each man would take his rifle, adjust his scope, and take up his favored position—sitting on the floor with the rifle propped on his knee, or resting it on a slender bipod—while I went upstairs, up where the balcony curved around the tower's outer face and all Cairo lay revealed. I'd make a couple of circuits to take in the buildings and streets unimpeded by stone or glass: East Cairo and its celebrated architecture under occupation, and West Cairo's anonymous blocks—a few of which had been razed during the bombardment—free and under the complete control of Egyptians. Each time I went up to the balcony, the blockages and blockades would dwindle and Cairo become more accessible.

I was highest in rank, the unit's leader, who carried a rifle just like them. I didn't receive orders from another

commander, but had complete freedom to act as the situation dictated, with the exception of a few cases each month. For this reason, I didn't look through my scope that much, but whenever I tired of gazing down on the bigger picture I would raise my rifle to see the city's component parts through the sight. Not one of us had fired a bullet for nearly a month now. Things had settled down and life had returned to normal, as though nothing had happened, and then a week ago I received a message instructing me to vacate the position today. All week we had been getting ourselves together. We didn't even take up our observation positions with our customary commitment. These were our last days in the tower. Where to next? What would the next mission be? I didn't know.

I approached the edge of the balcony and leaned against the railings that rose over my head, facing East Cairo. Through my scope, I could see the five battleships lined up directly below me. I could see the sailors moving over the deck, lazily, as though they'd got nothing to worry about, as though they were not, like us, stuck. The flotilla in mid-river wasn't there for protection; it was a brazen display of force. Pedestrians on the Corniche saw it and no one crossed the October 6th Bridge without staring at the ships. They didn't do any real damage, as they had in the early days, and nor did they prevent it, and not a single Egyptian had ever contemplated attacking them. They were the occupation's immovable idols.

They didn't know where we were, but they knew we could see them, that we were watching them, tracking them through our scopes. They knew we'd dealt painful blows to their colleagues. We might have been in the tower, or one of Zamalek's many other buildings, or even on the Nile's west bank. Perhaps we were on a rooftop in the East Cairo that they occupied. To them, we were ghosts.

This was the first time I'd stood upright, facing East Cairo, in the light of day. We were out of range of the naked eye, but not of an eye that sought us through a scope. We wouldn't

stand staring scopeless at the city except by night. Though the sights' lenses reflected light, assassinations were carried out in minutes, too short a time to reveal our position. The observation mission took place on the fifteenth floor, where the revolving restaurant had been located before the occupation. The thick glass ringing the space broke up the sun's rays and kept our lenses from being seen. I remember how complicated it got in the final weeks: I'd update our routine every day in order to keep our position an undiscoverable secret, and I succeeded.

I remember my first day there. It was night when I reached the tower, and I wandered about for a while outside the grand entrance, looking up at the huge eagle that surmounted it, then got into the lift. Seconds later I was on the fifteenth floor. I climbed up to the top floor and looked out longingly at the five ships on the Nile. Full of eagerness, I took out my scope and inspected each one. I was breaking a number of rules by doing this, placing the position, if not the whole mission, in jeopardy. The next day, when the courier came with food and the first message, I gave him a letter requesting permission to destroy the five ships. What I'd written must have come across as overly excitable, for the day after that an officer from the resistance, a general, came to me and said a lot of things about the importance of the position and the importance of maintaining it unseen. He told me that the island of Zamalek was completely empty: no residents, no civilians. The residents had cleared out a while ago, during the violent bombardment that set the streets and spacious parks aflame. Only a few operatives from the resistance remained, and giving away their position in the tower was easily done: a bullet fired at the wrong moment, a glint of light on a scope's lens. One of us emerging onto the balcony in plain sight would be enough. No one, he told me, would ever dream that the resistance controlled the Cairo Tower and had retained it as a forward observation and sniping platform. He told me to

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