

The Longing of the Dervish

Hammour Ziada

Translated by
Jonathan Wright



To she who . . .

Any longing that diminishes through meeting is not to be relied on.

—Ibn Arabi

One

1

“I’M NOT FRIGHTENED OF DYING. I’m frightened I won’t see you again.”

2

Fire and smoke everywhere.

Fire and smoke in his heart.

The Mahdi’s city had fallen.

The holy city of Omdurman had been pounded by the shells of the infidels.

The Hour had come.

It was what Bakhit had spent seven years waiting for.

Now he would be free.

You brutes, I’m coming.

3

As soon as the shackles were off his legs, Bakhit Mandil jumped to his feet.

The prisoners who were still around him congratulated each other. One clapped his hand on Bakhit’s shoulder and shouted, “At last! Freedom, Bakhit!”

Freedom had come to them with the warships and cavalry of the invaders. It was September 1898 and the Egyptian army had entered the country. The Mahdist state was defeated.

But Bakhit didn't feel he was free. Bad blood and revenge stood between him and freedom.

He pushed his way through the crowd to get out of the prison. He felt weak. He hadn't eaten for eight days. He hadn't drunk anything for three. But he couldn't stay a moment longer.

The city had fallen two days earlier. In prison they had heard the news that the Khalifa and his commanders had fled. The Egyptians had entered Omdurman. A group of Christians and Egyptians had come to the prison and released some important people that they knew, but left the others.

Two days with no guards and with no one asking after them. It looked like those outside had forgotten them completely. They could hear the sporadic sound of shelling. They were in their shackles on the floor where the warders had left them before running away. Some were in the little cells, some in the prison courtyard in the sun. Bakhit was in one of the cells. There were about seventy people in a room that shouldn't have held five. The air was thick and heavy. They were breathing in the air that the others breathed out. Some of them wept for joy; others wept for fear of dying forgotten in the cell because the warders had run off and the new rulers were ignoring them. But Bakhit knew he wouldn't die there. He had put up with prison for seven years waiting for this moment. He wouldn't die till he had herded his enemies to their deaths like sacrificial lambs. He would go to Hawa with them in his power.

He stumbled out into the street.

Fire and smoke everywhere.

The city had been open to pillage and the black soldiers were still looting the houses.

He heard women screaming, and sergeants were walking around shouting that the time for pillage was over.

He slipped warily into the violence and the madness, looking for Merisila's house. Soldiers stopped him and searched him several times. Some soldiers attacked him to rob him but

then realized he was poorer than a mangy dog. They beat him up and let him go. He walked through the streets of a city he didn't recognize, asking the way from passersby. Omdurman was greatly changed. He had seen it two weeks earlier when he was last taken out on work duty. Now it seemed that years had passed between that time and the mad scene into which he had stumbled. There were dead bodies in the streets, swollen and surrounded by swarms of black flies. The putrid stench made the stunned city retch. The doors of the houses had been forced open. The roads were dirty and full of potholes. The smell of gunpowder was everywhere. To add insult, the dome of the Mahdi's tomb had been badly damaged.

He asked a passerby if he knew the house he was looking for. He received a surprised look and terse directions.

He walked past the arsenal, alongside the market, under the empty gallows. Then he turned west. He walked like a child who has just passed the crawling stage. He could feel where the iron shackles had cut into his legs. He was reeling but his determination held him upright. If he had succumbed to weakness he would have died years ago, but a man with a debt to love never dies.

He followed the directions of passersby.

When he stood at Merisila's door he wasn't sure he would find her. But he was certain that the safest place he could now seek shelter was under her roof. He pushed his way inside. Blinking, he noticed there were bodies piled up whose identities he couldn't make out. He heard his name. As he fell he saw Merisila rushing toward him. He collapsed on the ground, panting. He was sweating and bleeding, yet full of determination.

Merisila hugged his head and screamed. She thought he had come to die on her doorstep.

But he looked up at her and said in anguish: "It's time for revenge, Merisila. Death to those who killed her. Death, Merisila. I am death."

Merisila slapped her face. She sobbed and beat her chest with her hands like an angry mother.

“Damn that Christian woman! Damn that Christian woman! You poor wretch, Bakhit,” she said.

“If I adopted your religion and abandoned the religion of the Mahdiya, would that make you happy?” asked Bakhit.

Theodora laughed. “You’re joking!”

“I wanted to see you laugh. I’ll change my religion to please you when you next get angry with me.”

Merisila had never liked Theodora. She thought she was wholly evil. A white devil that took possession of Bakhit at sunset.

With help from other women, Merisila dragged Bakhit to the matting enclosure in the courtyard. She laid him on the ground and examined his legs. The iron shackles had worn the flesh to the bone. His flesh was septic and oozing pus. His body was hot with fever.

He would have been dead if it wasn’t for the vow he had made.

The shackles with their two iron rings had left marks in his flesh. He had been going out on work assignments in Omdurman with the shackles on his feet. With every step the shackles sank into his flesh. Bakhit had walked for months, and the shackles were years deep.

For days Merisila poured ghee into his wounds. She stripped him down every morning and rubbed his body with oil. She gave him a mixture of ghee, garlic, honey, and dates to drink.

He didn’t moan or try to escape the pain by fainting. The pain inside protected him from any other pain.

He lay on his back looking at the matting roof under which he had taken shelter. His body was naked and visible to the women Merisila had hidden in her house. He could hear them whispering and then suddenly laughing. His body

glistened like an olive when Merisila washed it with oil. She turned him over and he writhed. She ran her oiled hands over his naked body, back and front. She wrapped the wounds on his legs in cloth after cleaning away the pus and packing the wounds with ghee and salt.

Merisila's house was just a mud wall with one room and two enclosures in the courtyard.

When the women found out that their menfolk, after going out with their spears to meet the enemy, would not be coming back, they had rushed in panic to Merisila to seek refuge. They knew what the soldiers would do if they won. Many women had come to Omdurman from towns that had been defeated. They begged in the street or were forced to go to the public treasury for alms. Their bodies were at the mercy of the victors.

Even women who hated Merisila knew that safety lay with her.

If anyone was now so busy helping others that she wouldn't save herself, it was Merisila, who was twenty years old and from a family of slaves. She sold home-brewed beer secretly, told fortunes with seashells, arranged love trysts and marriages, helped fugitives, and traded in necklaces, chains, and secret potions to make people fall in love, to bring people together or separate them, to help men get hard erections and tighten up women's vaginas. The whole city knew she had saved seven women from the gallows in the marketplace and had humiliated the standard-bearer of one of the commanders in front of the mosque and within sight of the Khalifa. Love was her trade, magic ran in her family, and she had the valor of a mounted tribal warrior.

Merisila had taken in women seeking shelter. She had helped women escape when they wanted to escape. She had tended to women who were overcome with sadness. Mysteriously, she provided food for dozens of women, some of whom she knew and others whom she was seeing for the first time.

When Bakhit Mandil came to her she immediately cleared out one of the shelters and put him in it alone. She nursed him tenaciously, fighting off the death and the weakness that was in him. He heard her crushing garlic to make the potion for him, muttering anxiously, “You’re not going to die on me, you dirty slave, you mindless bastard. I won’t let you die.”

She was sniffing noisily and the women wondered whether she was about to cry.

“You’re weak, lying there like dead on the ground. You can’t stand up. Your wounds are infected with maggots. What for? You really are a sorry slave! I’ll nurse you back to health, to kill you later, you mule.”

She rushed the mixture over to Bakhit. She lifted his head for him to drink it, and insulted him as she did so. “Drink, you idiot, drink. Merisila won’t let you die.”

Bakhit’s eyes lit up, but his mouth was full of the sticky liquid and he couldn’t answer.

He wasn’t angry or frightened. He was in the right place. He had to put himself in Merisila’s hands, and she would look after him.

After that he started to strive for the goal for which he had survived the years that had passed.

Out of sight of the other women, when he felt Merisila’s tears falling on his face and running down his beardless cheek and into his mouth, mixing with the potion he was drinking, he felt he had been saved from all his old problems.

When he tasted her tears, as bitter as desert rain, he felt at peace with the world.

Leave yourself in Merisila’s hands; you’re safe now.

4

Bakhit didn’t know how many days had passed, and he didn’t care.

What did counting time mean when he had told himself that time had come to an end when Hawa was gone?

He stayed with Merisila till he could feel his body once again. He gained strength as if reborn. The marks of the shackles on his legs hadn't disappeared but the wounds had healed, thanks to the black woman's magic.

He willingly put up with her insults and abuse. He wasn't embarrassed that the other women were looking at his nakedness. He wasn't curious about the shouts from the city and the sound of bullets in the distance or nearby.

He had a dream. His dream stretched out endlessly. It recurred persistently when he was awake and in his sleep. There were six people he knew by name and he had a score to settle with them.

On the day he recovered and stood up naked under the matting roof, Sudanese soldiers broke into the house.

Merisila brought him a jelaba and he put it on. He sat up on the mattress for the first time and ate his meal. He told Merisila in a whisper what he wanted from her. She was the only person who could accomplish what he wanted in a city that was trembling like an old woman's hand. He gave her two assignments that were equally difficult, but Merisila didn't complain that they were too much trouble. She complained that he was mad and obsessed with a delusion. Ever since he had met Merisila, he had never cared about her opinion. But he valued her efficiency.

When the soldiers came into the house, he was eating gruel that she had made specially for him without allowing the other women to see it. The soldiers were black like him, wearing military uniforms and fezzes, with rifles and powder belts across their chests. The women screamed and the house was in an uproar. The soldier in charge announced their purpose.

"We're looking for men," he said. "The government has imposed a corvée on all able-bodied men."

Merisila wasn't impressed. She was antagonistic and stood in his way. Her head hardly reached his chest but he looked insignificant compared with her.

“If you were a man you’d get past me and search the house!” she shouted.

The sergeant was taken aback. He looked at his soldiers, then back at Merisila, who was seething like a cauldron. “I know you,” she continued before he had a chance to speak. “You’re Farajallah, the fugitive slave of the chief butcher. You’re him, you wretch. And now you come charging into people’s houses, proudly wearing the Christians’ stripes?”

“We only want to take the men,” the humiliated sergeant replied. “If you tell me this is the only man here,” he continued, pointing at Bakhit Mandil, “then we won’t need to search the house. We’ll just take him off to work. We’re taking everyone.”

Bakhit stepped toward him, upset that Merisila was protecting him like a hen guarding her chick.

“Apart from me, there aren’t any men here. I’ll come with you,” he said.

Merisila spat on the ground, just missing the sergeant’s boot. She rushed into her room, and came back with nine amulets that she wrapped around Bakhit’s arm. Nine large amulets that would protect him from ghouls, magic, envy, and prying eyes. In a whisper that she made sure the sergeant could hear, she said, “Don’t be frightened of his fancy uniform. It’s just Farajallah, the slave of the chief butcher in the market. He was the worst slave that ever lived there. Then he ran away a year ago. They thought he’d drowned in the Nile. If only he had! If he takes it into his head to order you around, remind him who he is. His back is covered with scars from his masters’ whippings.”

When Bakhit went out into the road with the soldiers, he found they had rounded up dozens of other men: Arabs, blacks, mulattos, slaves, and freemen. Sergeant Farajallah pushed him gently into line. “What a woman!” the sergeant said, trying to reassert his authority. “If it wasn’t for my orders, I’d teach her a lesson.”

Bakhit smiled guilelessly as the sergeant moved away. "If it wasn't for orders, she would've eaten you up on the spot, Farajallah," he said.

5

The years in prison had taken a heavy toll on him.

Those who had the misfortune to be in the Sayir prison in Omdurman had to buy their own food and drink. The prison didn't provide food for the inmates. All it provided was torture. For reasons unknown to anyone else, the warders would pick a few prisoners and flog them, or assign them futile tasks, or put them in sacks with scorpions and make bets on who would die and who would survive. Whenever the warders came through to check them, the prisoners felt that fate was walking among them looking for prey. Some of them couldn't take the torture and died. The warders might hand the bodies over to their families, or dump them behind the prison to swell up and rot there. Nothing was certain. The only truth was that the torture might start at any moment.

In the prison there were Europeans, Egyptians, military commanders who had fallen out of favor with the Khalifa, political rivals, and poor wretches who never stopped crying and who were there for reasons that no one knew.

The prison was a big compound near the river, with a wall of unbaked brick. Inside there were small cells, mostly without windows. During the day the prisoners were allowed to sit in the courtyard, but they spent the night crammed together in the cells, piled on top of each other.

The wealthy prisoners, and there were many, had people to bring them food and drink through a long chain of bribes. But lowly creatures such as Bakhit Mandil had to fend for themselves. They were taken out to the city to look for work that would earn them some money. They went out in shackles, guarded by warders who took a cut of what they earned. The warders made sure they were present when the prisoners

struck agreements with their employers, so they would know how much the prisoners were going to be paid and could calculate their share.

Bakhit Mandil had worked in these streets often in the previous seven years.

He went out in a chain gang, walking slowly because of the shackles on his legs. He took care not to fall over. The warders took them along the city streets. The prison and a number of important government buildings lay behind a large stone wall. Years earlier, Bakhit had helped build this wall, which surrounded the Dome district in the city center. The warders took them out through the northern gate in the wall. They went past the Bayt al-Mal, the treasury, and the houses where the clerks, the Egyptians, and people from old Khartoum lived. The procession veered east and walked parallel to the river. Sometimes they turned south to go back into the dome district and sometimes they went west into the market. The procession didn't have a fixed itinerary. The idea was that people should see them and come and ask for workers they could hire.

There was a difference between the work he had done then and this *corvée* work.

The streets had lost their color. The sparkle had faded. A sullen mood had settled over the workers. One injustice begets another. Maybe they were used to the old injustice. But today they were on the threshold of a new injustice and didn't know what it would mean for them.

The soldiers ordered them to fill in the holes in the streets and clean up all the rubbish.

They picked up the dead bodies and the guts spilled out. Bakhit and some others lifted one body and a leg came off in his hand.

Bakhit and five others were assigned to some streets close to the arsenal. As they worked, the Sudanese soldiers came and went. Once or twice they saw a European officer on a

horse. "Is that red man Egyptian?" one of the workers asked in amazement.

Bakhit looked at the officer, listened carefully, and replied, "He's English. They're everywhere these days."

His colleagues looked at him in puzzlement.

"Like Gordon," he explained.

They knew what he meant. Everyone remembered the English pasha who had been sent by Cairo some years earlier to fight the Mahdi. The Mahdi's soldiers killed him in his uniform on the steps of the palace in Khartoum.

A pasha with red skin. Full of delusions. He had come to the city at the darkest of times. He had allowed the slave trade, after previously banning it. He had tried to win over the Mahdi, then threatened him. He had tried to tempt him with a governorship. He had written letters to him. He had tried to improve morale in a city that was consumed by despair. He had stood on the palace balcony scanning the horizon with a telescope in the expectation of relief. Two warships had arrived to help but he was already dead and the artillery fire forced them back.

"Would you like to make some money with me?" one of the workers whispered to Bakhit.

Bakhit took a good look at him. He was of medium height, about the same age as him, with a noticeably large head and cloudy eyes.

"Tell me more," he said.

"At the end of this street is the arsenal. There must be weapons and gunpowder there worth stealing," the man replied.

Bakhit looked toward the end of the street. He could see soldiers around the arsenal, holding weapons and watching them.

"Haven't you seen all those guards?" Bakhit asked.

The worker looked around to make sure their colleagues couldn't hear. "I know one of the clerks who work inside," he said. "He'll help us get past them. With his help we can take some of the gunpowder and the weapons and smuggle them over the wall to the river."

The idea stirred Bakhit's spirit of adventure, but he kept his enthusiasm firmly under control. "That's rather too risky for me," he said. "I've just come out of prison. I don't want to go back to prison when the Egyptians are in charge."

The workman shook his head in surprise and slipped off to find another partner. Bakhit was familiar with this relentless enthusiasm for taking advantage of opportunities, but he wasn't interested in all that. He intended to make do with whatever he was paid for his work at the end of the day. He was staying with Merisila so he didn't need more money. If he took any ill-considered or unnecessary step he could end up further from his objective.

As he worked he thought about his next steps. He had asked Merisila for the information he wanted. But he also needed a weapon and some money. He wasn't going to steal them. That could endanger his whole mission. He had to save his earnings little by little like a busy ant.

He wasn't in a hurry. There was no time frame for his mission; it could take an eternity.

6

The city of Omdurman had begun as a small village for fishermen on the west bank of the Nile opposite Khartoum, the capital the Turks had built. When the Mahdi took Khartoum in 1885, he came to Omdurman and made it his base for a while.

The Mahdi wandered around on his camel until it knelt at the spot where God wanted the Mahdi to build himself a house. That was where he was buried when he died, and a dome was built over his tomb.

Little houses sprang up everywhere, built of mud, straw, and animal skins, and with time they were dressed with red brick and stone.

The city expanded along the river. In the heart of it stood the Mahdi's dome and to the west of the dome the great

mosque. To the south stood the houses of the Khalifa and his relatives, their guards, and people from the west of the country. To the north stood the houses of people from the Nile valley in the north of Sudan.

In the middle there was the Bayt al-Mal, or treasury, the Bayt al-Amana, where ammunition was stored, and the Sayir prison where Bakhit had been held.

On the night years ago when Bakhit was thrown into the prison, it had been summertime.

They threw him down in front of the warders. He was bleeding profusely and shaking in trepidation, unsure whether to believe what was happening to him. He could still remember the taste of the beer he had been drinking that night.

The warders wanted to whip him but they couldn't find anywhere on his body to do it. His body was swollen and bleeding. You could hardly make out his features. They put him in a small, windowless stone cell and locked the door. It stank of putrid, festering wounds and was as hot as a furnace.

They threw him on top of other people who were lying on the ground. The people were startled and they shouted out, insulting Bakhit and the warders. The cell was as dark as the world of the blind. Bakhit was wearing only a pair of torn trousers that hardly covered his legs. He could feel the bodies beneath him moving aside to make space for him on the ground. He was drunk with fear and the remains of the beer. His urine came out hot beneath him. He heard someone cursing in the distance but he didn't care. He kept forcing his urine out in a stream that mixed with his blood. Someone kicked him in his side and cursed him when he noticed that his foot was covered in blood.

Toward dawn he started to cry.

He sobbed out loud. After that he never cried again throughout his imprisonment. He seemed to have vented all his grief in that one cry. He crawled in what he thought was the direction of the wall and tried to vomit up the beer in

his stomach. The other inmates moved away, but they came closer again when they saw that he couldn't bring anything up. The only alcohol left inside him was the alcohol in his veins but the grief would burn inside him for the rest of his life. He spat, then leaned back against the wall. The cell was hellishly hot. He heard the dawn call to prayer from the mosque nearby and the sound of metal gates moving aside to let people through to pray.

He didn't move. The other prisoners asked him what crime he had committed. He didn't answer. All of the others volunteered the charges against them:

"I killed three people."

"They picked me up because I was late in paying a debt."

"I've been sentenced to five years for smuggling grain from the east."

"I'm innocent."

"I ran away from my master and the Mahdi's army caught me and locked me up here. I don't know till when."

"I'm serving three months because I smoked tobacco."

"I stole a donkey from the butchers' market."

So many of them were competing to say what crimes they had committed that Bakhit's brain was overwhelmed. The whole world existed in this little room.

They were interrupted when daylight appeared, along with the warders. They took hold of him, put six heavy shackles on his feet, and tied his hands with a heavy chain that they pulled tight around his neck. He resisted and they flogged him. Some of the people around him also got whipped by mistake. They shouted and moved away. When they had finished with him, they inspected the other prisoners. They found that one of them was dead, so they dragged him outside and shut the door. The other prisoners, sweaty and frightened, moved closer again. Again they asked him what his crime was.

"My crime was love," he said. His voice betrayed the loneliness he felt.

There was a moment of stunned silence, and then they started to laugh cautiously. “They accused a man of love? You poor wretch,” one of them said.

Bakhit Mandil wasn’t interested in explaining.

In his sadness he kept apart from the other prisoners, who had been taken out to the courtyard. Humbled, he cowered at the base of the wall and wallowed in his sorrows.

He didn’t have the strength to talk. He wanted to think over every moment of the previous day so that he wouldn’t forget. He wanted to etch those moments onto his body like tattoos.

In silence he set about burning the memories and delusions into his skin. They would stay with him as long as he lived.

7

It was a day that seemed like a thousand years.

A day when he reassessed all of his previous life.

He relived past happiness. He suffered sorrows he hadn’t thought existed.

Then he arrived at a truth by which and for which he had lived.

He would take revenge.

He would take revenge and he would die for her sake.

He would give her a sparrow once again.

Nothing would stop him seeking revenge. He wouldn’t succumb to sadness. He wouldn’t torment himself with guilt. Instead he would keep the anger alive in his heart. He didn’t know how long he would stay in prison but the day he came out there would be enough anger in his heart for him to exact revenge like an expert.

He defined his fantastical objective.

He decided to eat and drink only hatred. Until the day he came out.

He didn’t know at the time that he would have to wait seven years for that day.

The next day he realized he would have to work to eat. But he was withdrawn and wasn't interested in going out. He pottered around the courtyard in his shackles.

Whenever he moved, the chains made an unpleasant metallic sound. The rhythm of his steps could be tracked by the clanking of the chains.

Some of the prisoners were kind to him and offered him some of the little food they had.

One of them gave him a piece of cloth, which he used as a fan on hot nights.

"You need it more than me because you're new," he said. "My body's gotten used to this inferno. You'll need it to fan yourself. The air here is trapped, like us in our chains. It's stifling and it can't move. You have to move it with this piece of cloth to get a breeze," he explained.

He walked around the courtyard looking at the other prisoners with his generous new friend, who was called Jawhar and was also a slave who no longer had a master.

Jawhar was thinner than Bakhit, but taller—taller than anyone Bakhit had ever known. On his cheeks he had thin scar lines. He had a few small hairs under his chin, but not what one would call a beard. He was talkative and friendly. They took shelter in what little shade there was. Jawhar pointed to a secluded room and said, "That's the chamber of wonders. There are three Egyptians there. Two of them are civil servants and the third is a soldier they caught spying in Berber. There's a man with them who claims to be Jesus the son of Mary, and the fifth man is a Christian sheikh. All of them except Jesus pay the warders a riyal a day to keep that room for themselves."

He showed him the warders' rooms and told him about Touma, the wife of one of the warders. She provided services to the prisoners in exchange for small gifts.

"Services?"

“She’ll smuggle a letter in from a woman or pass on requests. She’ll bring you a mug of beer. Maybe for a riyal she’ll let you touch her bottom,” Jawhar said. “Her bottom’s worth a riyal, or more,” he continued. “It’s amazing, like the dome.”

Bakhit had no interest in women right now. The woman who had stolen his heart wasn’t here. She was gone, and with her everything he desired in women.

“I hear your crime was love,” Jawhar said with interest. “What’s that about?”

Bakhit didn’t answer.

“Did you kill the husband of the woman you loved?”

He didn’t answer.

“They caught you in the house of a married woman?”

He didn’t answer.

Jawhar didn’t insist. He moved on to other subjects.

Within a few days Bakhit was familiar with all the details of the prison: its history, stories about it, the balance of power between the prison governor and the warders, the customs and sorrows of the prisoners. Jawhar told him everything, however insignificant. He became his constant companion. Sometimes fortune smiled on them and the warders put them in the same cell for the night. But mainly they put them apart. The prisoners were put into the cells at random. They were herded like sheep and locked up till morning. The warders put handcuffs back on some of them, counted the living, and dragged off the dead. They collected their bribes and then locked the doors.

Bakhit spent the night with handcuffs on, but they were taken off in the morning and then he shuffled around with just the shackles on his legs.

On the day he completed his first month he went out with a chain gang for the first time.

The warder dragged him by the neck and pushed him into a long line of prisoners that was shambling out. He

was amazed by how quiet the streets were. Although he was inured to suffering he had thought the city would be weeping and the streets dressed in mourning clothes. How come the Nile was still in its place? The dome hadn't collapsed and the mosque hadn't flown away. He couldn't imagine Omdurman without the dome. He hadn't known Omdurman without it. But he knew that the sadness was his sadness. He realized how alone he was in this world. Perhaps others were crying, but he was the sad one. Perhaps there were people around him, but he was alone.

Someone picked out Bakhit, Jawhar, and a third prisoner when they were close to the neighborhood inhabited by the Kinana tribe. The man took them to his house to finish off a well he was digging. Bakhit wanted to chat because his heart was burdened with old wounds. He insisted on going down the well with Jawhar while the third prisoner stayed at the top to carry away the soil. As he filled the bucket time and time again he told his friend his story. Jawhar cried as Bakhit spoke, and tried to keep himself distracted by digging. But the streaks of tears, mixed with mud, were visible on his cheeks. Bakhit told him about Hawa. His love. How she had shunned him at first and had then become favorably disposed toward him. The birds he had given her. The desire that he found hard to bear. Her notebook and the way she poured her innermost thoughts into it in ink. He told him stories that were confused and fragmentary, in which the only common thread was his love for her. But they touched Jawhar and made him cry. Bakhit made Jawhar feel his pain. He said nothing critical of Hawa and took full responsibility himself. Among his fantasies he included some facts. But what are facts other than what we remember? Our memories are our reality and fantasies what really happened. That day ended but the stories didn't end. Jawhar tried to arrange to be locked up in the same cell as Bakhit but the warder had other ideas and it was the warder's will that prevailed. Even a

bribe didn't work. Jawhar went off sadly and full of curiosity to another cell, leaving Bakhit and the rest of his stories in another cell.

They didn't put shackles on his hands that night because he gave some of his earnings to the warders. He squeezed in among the other prisoners. He heard someone complaining that he was near the shit hole. Some of the people moved around in the darkness. Someone shouted out, asking the people near the wooden door to move aside to let the moonlight in through a large crack in the wood. A moment later the light came in, pale and faint. Some of it fell on Bakhit's face and some lit the way for the grumblers to change places. Before the light was blocked once again, Bakhit Mandil heard someone saying, "Is that you? What a coincidence!"

He didn't know who the man was talking to, but he could feel him creeping closer.

"You're Bakhit. You worked at the soap factory. Have you forgotten me in just a few days?" the man eventually said.

Bakhit squirmed in his place. That filthy voice.

"I haven't forgotten you. But I can't see you," he said.

The voice laughed. Bakhit was thinking how disgusting the man was.

"In this tomb I wouldn't have seen you either if it wasn't for the light that came in just now," the man said.

The man was close by now, right next to him.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Younis Wad Jaber."

"Younis."

"Yes, Younis."

"Younis the soldier in the Mahdi's army?"

"Now you remember."

Bakhit felt Theodora's presence as a halo of light.

There was an uproar among the prisoners and they started shouting. Some of them tried to push Bakhit. Some were hitting him. But he didn't back off.

“For God’s sake! You’re going to kill him.”

Yes, Bakhit wanted to kill Younis.

The shouting got so loud that the door opened and the warders attacked. They hit Bakhit hard but he wouldn’t let go of Younis’s neck. When the light streamed in through the open door and filled the room, Bakhit could see Younis’s flushed face. His eye sockets were inflamed and his tongue was hanging out of his mouth. He was gasping loudly and Bakhit’s hands were tightening around his neck. Someone hit Bakhit on the side of the neck and he loosened his grip. Another blow, and everything went murky. But he hung on. He dug his fingernails in to hurt his enemy more. But the violent blows to his neck didn’t give him time to kill him.

As he collapsed, hardly conscious, he saw Hawa looking at him through the open door. She was white, framed by silver light.

Her face was sad.

9

When the doors of the cells were opened in the morning, Jawhar ran out looking for his friend.

Overnight the news had spread like magic through the whole prison. All the cells knew that Bakhit Mandil had tried to kill a new prisoner. Jawhar paid a bribe to see Bakhit at the pillar he was tied to. The guard took him to within a few feet of Bakhit and made him stop there. Jawhar wanted to rush to his friend’s side but the guard held him back.

“I agreed you could look at him. If you want a closer look, you have to pay more,” the guard said.

Jawhar didn’t have anything to pay him with, so he had to make do with looking at him from a distance.

Bakhit was tied to a large wooden post on the eastern side of the prison courtyard. His back was streaming with blood. His trousers, already torn, were now in shreds. His feet were not touching the ground. Two heavy, rust-colored

chains were wrapped around his wrists and his neck. Jawhar could see the blood dripping from Bakhit's toes and seeping into the ground.

Saddened, Jawhar turned back.

He rushed around the cells collecting leftover food and then started looking for Younis. He asked the prisoners where he was and they pointed to where he was hiding in the shade in a remote cell. He was sitting alone, recovering from the shock. Jawhar offered him some food. For those who were new to prison, the novelty distracted them from making arrangements to eat in the first few days. He tried to be friendly by making conversation and he allayed Younis's apprehensions. Jawhar was a smooth talker. Bakhit Mandil would learn from him how to wrap his listeners around his little finger.

"Welcome to Sayir Prison," he said. "It's not common for a new prisoner to go through what you had to go through, but what happened has its advantages. It's made you famous. Fame in prison has its benefits if you use it well."

Younis stuffed his mouth with food and nodded. Jawhar steered the conversation warily toward what had happened. He told Younis details he had invented about Bakhit Mandil's unexpected attack on him. He deliberately hurt him by saying Younis had screamed and begged for mercy.

Younis shook. "Lies! That's all lies! If I'd wanted to, I could have killed him."

"That's not what they're saying."

"That filthy criminal took me by surprise, but I'll kill him," said Younis.

"Kill him for what he did yesterday or because of some old grievance?"

"I've known that bastard a long time."

Jawhar had picked up a scent. "How come?" he asked.

Younis asked for a drink and Jawhar hurried off to fetch him some water. On his way back he went past Touma. He told her to visit Bakhit and secretly give him a drink. He

promised to give her his wages for the coming week. When he had second thoughts about this generosity, he consoled himself. "He who loves is at the mercy of the wise," he said to himself.

He went back to Younis and found him surrounded by other prisoners from the Mahdi's army. He slipped in among them grumpily. It was no longer the right time for stories.

He found out that the prisoners were old acquaintances of Younis's who had served with him in the army. They were urging him to take revenge. In the commotion they didn't recognize him, but he knew that one of them would remember he was friends with Bakhit, because he and Bakhit hadn't been apart for two weeks. If that happened, he wouldn't be able to escape. He slipped away, having heard enough.

He spent the day watching his friend from a distance in case the Jihadiya, the Mahdi's old soldiers, tried to do him harm. He saw Touma sneak up to him to give him a little something to drink. The day passed peacefully until Jawhar was stuffed into a cell. The next day he tried all kinds of ruses to avoid going out with a chain gang. He kept watching his friend, guarding him. When it was too hot in the sun, he moved to a piece of shade where he could still see Bakhit. A guard passed by and Jawhar asked him how long they would be keeping Bakhit there. The guard shrugged his shoulders and said he didn't know.

Probably no one knew. He would stay tied up there till someone in authority noticed him and ordered them to take him down. Until then no guard would dare to go anywhere near him. And if the Jihadiya soldiers got their hands on him, he was so insignificant that he wouldn't count if he was killed. They would throw his body into the wasteland between the prison wall and the river, where it would swell and rot.

Younis Wad Jaber came across Jawhar on the fourth day of Jawhar's vigil over Bakhit. He was swaggering around with

SELECTED HOOPOE TITLES

No Knives in the Kitchens of this City

by Khaled Khalifa, translated by Leri Price

Otared

by Mohammad Rabie, translated by Robin Moger

Time of White Horses

by Ibrahim Nasrallah, translated by Nancy Roberts



hoopoe is an imprint for engaged, open-minded readers hungry for outstanding fiction that challenges headlines, re-imagines histories, and celebrates original storytelling.

Through elegant paperback and digital editions, **hoopoe** champions bold, contemporary writers from across the Middle East alongside some of the finest, groundbreaking authors of earlier generations.

At hoopoefiction.com, curious and adventurous readers from around the world will find new writing, interviews, and criticism from our authors, translators, and editors.