

School of Media, Culture and Creative Arts

**“A New Occupation”: A Novel & A New Occupation: An Exegesis
On Writing a Postcolonial Travel Narrative in the Picaresque Mode**

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Declaration

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made. This thesis contains no material that has been accepted for the award of another degree or diploma in any university.


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Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	4
ABSTRACT	5
A NEW OCCUPATION: AN EXEGESIS ON WRITING A POSTCOLONIAL TRAVEL NARRATIVE IN THE PICAESQUE MODE	6
INTRODUCTION	7
CHAPTER 1: THE POSTCOLONIAL RE-NARRATION OF A COLONIAL TRAVEL NARRATIVE.	11
The Other: Colonialist Discourse and the Manichean Allegory	12
<i>Hope and Despair</i> . The Myth of the Heroic Explorer	17
CHAPTER 2: CORRECTIVE SURGERY. UTILISING THE PICAESQUE MODE IN A POSTCOLONIAL CRITIQUE.	21
An outsider in a hostile world	24
CHAPTER 3: A NEW OCCUPATION. CREATING A PICAESQUE POSTCOLONIAL TRAVEL NARRATIVE.	28
CONCLUSION	34
WORKS CITED	36
A NEW OCCUPATION: A NOVEL	39

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Abstract

This thesis attempts to provide a twofold response to the key research question: How might the picaresque mode be used to utilise post-colonial knowledge in re-narrating a colonial travel narrative? One part of the answer takes on the form of a novel titled *A New Occupation*, while the second part is an exegesis titled *A New Occupation: An Exegesis on Writing a Postcolonial Travel Narrative in the Picaresque Mode*.

The creative piece, *A New Occupation*, is inspired by the Austrian Rudolf Slatin, who travelled to the Sudan in the nineteenth century, became the Governor of Darfur under the Egyptian Khedive, was taken captive by the Mahdi during the uprising, converted to Islam, took on a new name and served as Abdel Kader for over a decade under the Mahdi's successor, Khalifa Abdullahi. *A New Occupation* re-tells the last events leading up to his escape, taking into account post-colonial knowledge of travel narratives and picaresque narrative techniques. The novel depicts a man's struggle to adapt to the changing circumstances around him and to make sense of a life that he is unwilling to give up, yet unable to continue.

The exegetical part seeks to identify how Rudolf Slatin presented his captivity in his own narrative, *Fire and Sword in the Sudan*, by following colonial conventions, before taking a closer look at T.C. Boyle's *Water Music*, in which a colonial travel narrative is retold in the picaresque mode. Boyle's re-narration of Mungo Park's exploration of the river Niger is not only a very successful modern picaresque novel, it also reverses many of the colonial stereotypes about exploration and heroic explorers. By eschewing Manichean allegories of black/white, superior/inferior, etc. that were used so excessively in colonial travel narratives, and by avoiding the pitfalls of sensationalising the heroism of exploration, Boyle manages to create a deeply moving, deeply funny picaresque travel narrative. A close reading of *A New Occupation* seeks to point out the strategies that were applied to present the narrative from a postcolonial perspective in the picaresque mode.

A New Occupation: An Exegesis on Writing a Postcolonial Travel Narrative in the Picaresque Mode

Kerstin Kugler

Introduction

This thesis attempts to re-narrate a colonial travel narrative from a postcolonial perspective by employing techniques of the picaresque mode. It gives short examples of a colonial travel narrative and a picaresque postcolonial re-narration of a travel narrative. The colonial travel narrative is Rudolf Slatin's account of his decade-long captivity at the hand of the Mahdi and his successors, *Fire and Sword in the Sudan*, first published in 1896, and the picaresque postcolonial novel is T.C. Boyle's 1982 novel of the Niger explorer Mungo Park, *Water Music*.

Postcolonial studies have illustrated how difficult it is to underestimate the critical function that explorers and their travel writing played in 19th century imperialism or their hold over the public. Joseph Bristow, in his book *Empire Boys*, details the fascination of the public with adventure stories that glamorise the ideal 19th century explorer type. The heroic explorer figure is still very present in contemporary fiction, with books like Ilya Trojanow's *The Collector of Worlds* (2008) or Daniel Kehlmann's *Measuring the World* (2005), bestselling novels about Richard Burton and Alexander von Humboldt respectively, proving our fascination with heroes of exploration. There is much to be admired as these heroes of our imagination struggle through hostile territory for the advancement of knowledge and civilisation. As the above titles suggest, there is a belief that it is these explorers who open up unknown continents for our curious eyes. The world is for them to collect, to measure, to describe and to display to the public, and the most publicised 19th century explorations were frequently governed by two sentiments, hope and despair.

However, with the advent of postcolonial studies there has been a more critical examination of the role of the 19th century explorer and the glamorising and sensationalising of exploration in the media. Beau Riffenburgh's *The Myth of the Explorer* concentrates on the relationship between explorers and "their most important mediator – the press" (7) and exposes the role of the press in turning explorers into heroes and whipping up a public frenzy with the discovery of the North Pole and the advance into the interior of Africa.

Simon Ryan raises an important point in *The Cartographic Eye*, when he notes that in Australian exploration journals, "there is rarely mention of the other members of the party" (21), underpinned by policies such as the Royal Geographic Society (RGS) to recognise only individual explorers and not the

whole party by issuing only one medal per expedition (35). The “unified” explorer figure of explorer, author and narrator, created by the use of the first person singular pronoun (46-7), results from regulations of such institutions as the RGS, which controlled the exploration and the form of the resulting journals (31). Johannes Fabian makes similar observations in *Out of Our Minds* about the essential porters, soldiers and their wives, without whom an expedition would have been doomed to fail.

As the heroic image of the 19th century explorer is called into question, studies like Mary Louise Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes* and Frank McLynn’s *Hearts of Darkness* draw attention to the imperial agenda of exploration. Pratt in particular dismantles the myth of exploration as innocent knowledge gathering and remarks that “[o]nly through a guilty act of conquest (invasion) can the innocent act of the anti-conquest (seeing) be carried out” (56). Her study outlines how the explorers took part in the deculturation of the indigenous populations by denying them any cultural markers of significance, such as acknowledging that they possessed their own religious, political and moral beliefs. McLynn argues that the explorers’ outrage with the slave trade informed much of the civilising mission in 19th century Britain but draws attention to the fact that, while explorers and the public at home were determined to end the slave trade, in reality the success of explorations in Africa depended on it. Thus, explorers not only used the slave trade by following slave caravans but in some instances even aided it, such as when their expeditions opened up previously closed off areas to slaves traders, who would follow explorers on their expeditions.

Simon Ryan’s *The Cartographic Eye* analyses the very core of exploration when he takes a closer look at the function of the term *discovery* and observes that its use is problematic and offensive since it “carries the implication that the land was not previously known” (23). The offensive nature of the term arises from indicating that what is unknown to Europeans is unknown to everyone, which would mean by extension that what is known in Europe is the only knowledge that matters. The term is also problematic, since its connotations of catching sight of something for the first time are not necessarily what the explorers conveyed in their journals, where there was the habit of comparing (and sharing) “one’s own discovery to that of earlier great explorers, and thus set[ting] up a line of great discoveries” (25). This is not only self-serving (the explorer seeks inclusion in the “canon of great explorers”), but it is deceiving, as the explorers’ journals are filled with “pre-formed tropes” and “pre-existing perceptions of the place they were discovering” (18). In this way, it is not the explorer who gives himself up to the discovery of a new and surprising place, but, through his discourse, he appropriates and controls what

is new, often fabricating any additional features deemed necessary for the completion of a picture. His discovery becomes a scene the explorer actively constructs in his journals by “already existing cultural formations”. Thus, his discovery, his “personal vision” is “culturally mediated” (54).

JanMohamed pushes further into the subject of European stereotypes in his essay about the *Economy of Manichean Allegory*, a “transformation of racial difference into moral and even metaphysical difference” (61), which he sees present in colonial narratives, where there is a range of dualities based on good and evil and white and black. The frequency with which skin colour is mentioned and used to lead to observations about the moral character of the indigenous belies the assurance of the colonial writer that he only observes empirical evidence, as Ryan (137) points out. JanMohamed further contests that the use of Manichean allegories not only allows the colonial writer to turn the indigenous into a creature of inferior character, but by extension it elevates the European character at the same time as it defames the indigenous population.

As I delved further into postcolonial criticism of 19th century exploration, JanMohamed’s essay assumed a central position in my research and gave me the necessary framework to understand why Boyle’s *Water Music* resonated so deeply with me. Boyle’s picaresque re-narration of Mungo Park’s trials and tribulations in West Africa, coupled with a second plot of equal strength and wit about poor, orphaned Ned Rise, taking on the streets of London with his con acts and his instinct of survival, is not only laugh-out-loud funny but reverses so many of the prevailing stereotypes of exploration that it is instantly appealing from a postcolonial perspective. As Riffenburgh notes in his introduction,

Those involved in the business of exploration knew that it often bore little resemblance to the accounts that were presented to the public, but the depiction of exploration was rarely changed once formats were discovered that were not only mutually beneficial to the explorers and the newspapers, but popular with the hero-seeking public (3).

Water Music reverses this popular format and does not shy from portraying the more mundane aspects, often drawing a laugh from putting his hero in unhero-like situations. But, on a more serious note, it is a compelling narrative precisely because it refuses to follow the set of Manichean allegories that JanMohamed exposes in colonial writing. Skin colour is often left unmentioned, or when it is mentioned it is not overemphasised, resulting in a set of characters that are allowed to be good and bad, impulsive and considerate, weak and strong, regardless of their skin colour.

The second chapter, *Corrective Surgery* (which is also one of the chapter headings in *Water Music*) explores the picaresque mode in Ulrich Wicks’ *The Nature of the Picaresque Narrative: A Modal Approach* and lists some more modern picaresque narratives in order to gain an understanding of the

changing nature of the picaresque. This is followed by examples from *Water Music*, and the argument that the picaresque narrative strategies which Boyle employs function well in recreating a colonial travel narrative from a postcolonial perspective, and as such provides “corrective surgery” in a field that is frequently blinded by the myth of heroism.

The third chapter of the exegesis, *A New Occupation*, directs its focus on what makes Slatin a particular type of picaresque and presents both the strengths and constraints of the picaresque mode when recreating a postcolonial travel narrative. Slatin’s book focuses mainly on his long captivity at the hands of the Mahdists, and because most of his notes were lost during his escape it is largely told from memory, with the clear agenda of steering the British public towards a British-led reconquest of the Sudan. Clearly a colonial narrative, it makes frequent use of Manichean allegories as described by JanMohamed. Yet, regardless of the stereotypical presentation of the other in Slatin’s travel writing, there are moments when the imperial attitude breaks down and a tenderness shines through that admits the humanity of the indigenous. As well, Slatin is aware of the racist conventions of his time and readily acknowledges this in his book¹.

Slatin’s narrative is clearly different from Mungo Park’s, and the same should be true for my recreation of his writing. In Boyle’s *Water Music*, Mungo Park becomes a foolish antihero, guileless and clueless, even more comical for his refusal to abandon the heroic explorer image. My protagonist, however, was to be someone of a more gentle nature, embedded with the people around him, with whom he forms friendships and relationships. In *A New Occupation*, Abdel Kader (Rudolf Slatin’s name during captivity) is clearly a fictional character, and should be read as such. As Boyle writes in the “Apologia” to his novel, “the impetus behind *Water Music* is principally aesthetic rather than scholarly,” and he admits to having been “deliberately anachronistic”, having “strayed from and expanded upon my original sources. Where historical fact proved a barrier to the exigencies of invention, I have, with full knowledge and clear conscience, reshaped it to fit my purposes”.

Similarly, *A New Occupation* has been inspired by a real-life character but is a fictional account of Abdel Kader’s last days of captivity.

¹ Travelling to his new outpost in the company of General Gordon and other military, he asks one of the Arab officers for a drink of water, and is reprimanded by General Gordon. “Are you not aware that Yusef Pasha, in spite of his black face, is very much your senior in rank?” (Slatin 6).

Chapter 1: The postcolonial re-narration of a colonial travel narrative.

In its creative component this thesis attempts to recreate a 19th century travel narrative from a postcolonial perspective by employing picaresque narrative strategies. Partly, the creative component is inspired by Rudolf Slatin's account of his life and work in the Sudan and the events which led to his decade-long captivity by the Mahdi and his successor. Yet, the creative component is also inspired by T.C. Boyle's highly awarded *Water Music* (1980), which recounts the life of the Niger explorer Mungo Park. It seems a fitting example of a postcolonial recreation of a colonial travel narrative in the picaresque mode. Although *Water Music's* protagonist explores the Niger region in West Africa and *A New Occupation* is set in the Sudan, the similarities outweigh the differences. And even though Mungo Park was sent by the African Association to an area in Africa that was steeped in mythology and romance, Slatin testified to experiencing the same sense of adventure as he set out for the Sudan, an area under the Government of the Egyptian Khedive. Slatin's position in the Sudan was administrative and as Governor of Darfur he held a powerful position that was lacking in Mungo Park's Africa experience. Yet, the Mahdi's uprising soon reduced Slatin to captivity, the same fate that befell Boyle's protagonist upon his arrival in West Africa. In picaresque narratives, especially travel narratives, captivity is a recurrent motif, often giving rise to the crucial "re-birth" of the protagonist². Captivity narratives have been used in both picaresque and sentimental literature, however, two conventions of captivity narratives in particular made the model unsuitable for this project. Captivity narratives in sentimental or picaresque fiction³ see an individual held captive by a different, "savage" culture. Being held in captivity puts the cultural values and understanding of oneself as a cultural being under threat, however the individual manages to keep their identity not the least by keeping a diary and an "unwavering desire" (Armstrong 1998:373) to return home. It is this wish to remain the same even under extreme duress, as well as the wish to return to one's homeland, that makes captivity narratives unsuitable for the re-narration of a travel narrative based on Slatin's experience. Even in *Water Music*,

² See Chapter 2 for more detail on re-birth in picaresque literature.

³ Chapter 2, in giving an overview of literary modes as based on Ulrich Wicks's model, briefly touches on the common basis for picaresque and sentimental fiction as being two sides of one coin.

the protagonist's "unwavering desire" is not first and foremost to return home, but to find the river Niger, i.e. to complete the task he set out to do. Similarly, by succumbing to Princess Fatima's charms, he transgresses his own cultural boundaries and submits himself to the allures of the foreign culture. Traditional picaresque narratives, in particular in the Spanish tradition, were often combined with captivity narratives in which a youthful hero who seeks adventure becomes a captive of either pirates, as Carlos Sigüenza y Gongora narrates in his 17th century *Los Infortunios de Alonso Ramirez* (1690), or a "New World" tribe as narrated in Cabeza de Vaca's *Naufragios* or Bernal Diaz's *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*. Upon his captivity, the protagonist often assimilates with the natives, yet sooner or later there is an element that reminds him of his true identity, and which thereby leads to his return home. This, however, is not the case in *Water Music*, where the protagonist suffers from abject boredom upon his return and instigates his second exploration into Africa, which will see him perish and die. Neither was it my intention to produce the thesis' creative component from this perspective because my protagonist's *true identity* is not at odds with his captive identity. While it is true that Slatin, in his own travel journal, testifies to the cruel treatment he receives at the hands of his "barbaric" captors and his desire to return home, these protestations are very much conventions of 19th century travel writing. Slatin himself proved a reluctant fugitive, a fact that was often commented upon during his lifetime and noted by his biographer Gordon Brook-Shepherd in *Between Two Flags*. There were priests and nuns who managed an escape long before Slatin did, which led to speculations that his stay at Khalifa Abdullahi's court may have been voluntary. As well, Slatin's acculturation started long before his captivity, as for example his conversion to Islam, which was made by free will and not under duress during his time as Governor of Darfur. Yet, most problematic for the writing of the creative component would have been the convention of captivity narratives that they "always required an Other in the form of a source of pollution capable of eroding our cultural identity" (Armstrong 395). For the purpose of re-narrating a travel narrative from a postcolonial perspective, this question of the Other in opposition to oneself was of particular interest to me.

The Other: Colonialist Discourse and the Manichean Allegory

When the Prophet Mani began preaching his "religion of light" in 3rd century Persia, he told of an eternal struggle between the world of light and the world of darkness, or good and evil. Today, Manicheism describes in general a dualistic viewpoint, in particular of good and evil. Abdul JanMohamed, in an

attempt to understand colonialist discourse, finds that “any evident “ambivalence” is in fact a product of deliberate, if at times subconscious, imperialist duplicity, operating very efficiently through the economy of its central trope, the manichean allegory. This economy, in turn, is based on a transformation of racial difference into moral and even metaphysical difference” (JanMohamed 61). As he points out in *The Economy of Manichean Allegory* (1985), colonialist fiction found in this trope an economical way of attaching whole subtexts to apparently empirical binaries like black and white. JanMohamed studies how fiction and ideology interact in order to justify the brutal exploitation of the other (i.e. colonialism) by masking it as the progress of civilisation. In order to fully conceal the barbarity of colonialism, he argues, there is an obsessive use of dualities in the descriptions of the racial other. Thus, the colonial writer makes use of “the manichean allegory – a field of diverse yet interchangeable oppositions between white and black, good and evil, superiority and inferiority, civilization and savagery, intelligence and emotion, rationality and sensuality, self and Other, subject and object” (JanMohamed 63). By “permitting an obsessive, fetishistic representation of the native’s moral inferiority, the allegory also enables the European to increase, by contrast, the store of his own moral superiority; it allows him to accumulate “surplus morality,” which is further invested in the denigration of the native, in a self-sustaining cycle” (JanMohamed 84). As Simon Ryan points out in *The Cartographic Eye* (1996), even though the observation of white/black can “claim to be empirically sound, objective and neutral” (Ryan 137), the frequency with which it is repeated and emphasised extends the observation to include assumptions about the indigenous character. Thus, the “interaction between the explorer and the Aborigine, as represented in the text, is largely determined by the explorer’s view of the Aborigine’s intentions” (Ryan 146).

But Manichean allegories were not just used in colonialist fiction. Every form of colonialist discourse, and in particular colonialist travel writing worked with dualities such as civilised/savage, superior/inferior, adult/infantile⁴. These dualistic arguments in the explorer journals were the central trope in lobbying for further government intervention in Africa. When Harry Johnston, who explored the area around Mount Kilimanjaro, wrote that the “negro seems to require the intervention of a superior race before he can be roused to any definite advance from the low stage of human development in

⁴ When Livingstone thought that the Africans had stagnated while societies in other continents had continued to advance, and thus showed the world in its infancy, he was giving voice to a common sentiment among explorers, which was “the classic idea that travel to faraway places is time travel into the past. To travel in Africa is to go to where our present civilization came from, socially and culturally, if not geographically” (Fabian 2000:26).

which he has contentedly remained for many thousand years” (quoted in McLynn 310), he gave voice to the prevailing sentiment among explorers and the public at home that these “infants”, lacking history or culture,⁵ were in need of a parent, either in form of the British government or a chartered company.

Slatin, travelling through the Sudan on his way to assume the role of Governor at Dara, tells us in his journal how he stopped off at Om Shanga, which was not in his jurisdiction, and was deluged with petitions for (financial) assistance by locals who believed him to be General Gordon’s nephew. Slatin usually declined these petitions but made an exception in one case. Relatives of a young native of Khartoum, who had been engaged to his poor cousin on the condition that he travel and make some money before marrying her, came to seek Slatin’s help. Their young relative had married a rich and older woman in Om Shanga, or, as Slatin puts it, “a very rich old woman took a violent fancy to him ... would have her way, and had married him” (Slatin 12). Thus not inclined to keep his promise and marry his poor fiancé, the man’s relatives now asked Slatin to intervene, and he was more than happy to oblige. Speaking to the “unusually good-looking” (Slatin 13) young man, he secured his word that he would seek a divorce, whereupon Slatin informed the religious judge and government officials that upon divorcing the man from his wife, they should ban him from Om Shanga within two days. The following day, Slatin was called on by the man’s wife. This is his description of her:

Her long white muslin veil had got twisted round and round her dress, exposing her particoloured silk headdress, which had fallen on her shoulders; she had a yellowish complexion, and her face was covered with wrinkles, while her cheeks were marked by the three tribal slots, about half an inch apart; in her nose she wore a piece of red coral, massive gold earrings in her ears, and her greasy hair was twisted into innumerable little ringlets, which were growing gray with advancing age. I thought I had never seen a more appalling-looking old creature (Slatin 14).

The woman is distraught that her husband has been ordered to divorce her and leave the town. She is also furious with Slatin, accusing him of having interfered in her marriage and cursing him. Slatin’s reactions waver between ridicule and moral outrage. He “could not help being amused at the extraordinary figure before [him]”, at the same time, though, asks her “somewhat sharply” whether she did “not think it is outrageous that an old woman like you should have married a young lad who might have been your grandson?” (Slatin 14-5). The woman’s physical attributes, “appalling” in the eyes of the European, make her moral state equally appalling, a “creature” with base, sensual instincts and low morals. What is at stake here, though, is even more than exposing the moral inferiority of Africans. It is also the outrageous idea of a young man having fallen prey to an older woman and her sexual appetite.

⁵ Foreign culture was by no means a guarantee that Europeans would consider a non-European people to have civilisation. Among the British Empire were countries with a culture much older than that of the Europeans’ but as Edward Said has pointed out in *Orientalism* (1995), the racial inferiority of non-European civilisations was usually assumed among the Victorians (see for example Said 13-4).

The young man is in desperate need of assistance to get “him out of the clutches of the old woman” (Slatin 15). As Bristow points out in *Empire Boys*, “as Europe is to Africa, so is man to woman”, and Slatin Pasha calls on his readers to judge his action not from “the standpoint of purely Christian morality” but to hear out his story and “share his feelings” (Slatin 12), undoubtedly feelings of outrage and disgust. The lusty widow and the feckless young man in Slatin’s story are the opposite of what was acceptable, and by ordering their divorce, Slatin re-imposes European (male) control over African (female) chaos.

One of the main attractions of *Water Music* lies in Boyle’s refusal to use the trope of Manichean allegories, which is found so readily in colonialist discourse. When African villagers flee from the advance of an army, it’s described by Boyle as:

a scene from Milton or Dante: weeping and wailing, self-flagellation, misdirection, panic, loss of faith. Mothers run childless, children motherless ... One old man stands in the street whipping his ancient milch cow because it cannot heave up from the ground under the weight of the panniers slung over its shoulders. Another carries his wife, who carries her dog, who carries a scrap of cloth in its mouth” (Boyle 76).

The colonialist obsession with racial difference makes it difficult for readers to view the colonised in any way but the *other*, someone who is not only the opposite but also whose sum of attributes is somehow less than that of oneself, making it at times practically impossible to empathise or identify with the characters. The above quote shows how well a description of indigenous people fleeing from an enemy’s army can work when it is not loaded with an oversupply of racial difference.

In keeping with colonialist conventions of travel journals, Slatin seems unable to narrate an encounter with the locals without reminding the reader of their skin colour in sentences like “they were as black as ravens” or “licking their little black lips” (Slatin 28-9). In Boyle, on the other hand, Mungo Park is allowed to enjoy the female company of an Arab princess without ever mentioning the colour of her skin. In a neat twist, Boyle seemingly reverses the racism inherent in colonialist discourse by making only Mungo Park’s skin colour a topic. He becomes the object that is different, that needs to be studied and examined, and his physical attributes are translated into metaphysical (and inferior) ones. The colour of his eyes, for example, becomes a sign of evil. However, *Water Music* does not stop at reversing the trope of imperialist travel writing, it in fact dismantles it. By erasing the stereotypical opposition pairs of 19th century travel writing, or at least not overindulging in its redundancies, Boyle produces something universal to the human condition. We have in Mungo Park a Don Quixote-like character, whose desire is to find the legendary river Niger. In Boyle’s re-narration, the carefully constructed wall between explorer and explored or coloniser and colonised is deconstructed by ignoring

the powerful trope of the Manichean allegory that was employed in imperialist writing to justify the colonisation of the other.

In *A New Occupation*, I have attempted to achieve the same by avoiding redundancies like an over-emphasis on racial differences. My aim was to achieve the greatest empathy for my characters and their situations by employing a number of strategies. First, Abdel Kader, my European protagonist, has been a captive for nearly twelve years, and had worked before his captivity as the Governor of Darfur for nearly two years. Even if racial differences struck him as noteworthy at first, they would cease to do so near the end of his captivity, around which time my novel is set. From this consideration, it followed that the fact of his captivity and the cruelty of his captor had also lost their novelty. Boredom and routine had set in, and with routine came the possibility to entertain relationships and maintain friendships with those around him. Next, I attempted to eschew the binaries of civilised vs. savage by providing the main characters, regardless of their nationality, with something to care about. In *A New Occupation*, this something is pets because, as a narrative technique, the characters' attitudes towards their pets, their quarrels, worries and delight in them, show their personalities quite effectively. The introduction of pets into my list of characters, and the interaction with and about their pets, attempts to be an equalising force in the narrative. As Hassan worries whether his goat is in love and Abdel Kader seeks solace among his geese, their racial differences retreat while their interaction with the natural world around them is foregrounded.

Since the creative component shows Abdel Kader as someone whose identity is a fusion of his old and new worlds (his wife is Egyptian, his neighbour comes from Berber, his best friend is Greek and Omdurman is a melting pot), a traditional captivity narrative in which the captive is engaged in a mental and physical struggle to maintain their identity amongst a source of pollution would have proved impractical for my purposes, in particular because *A New Occupation* begins when Slatin's time in captivity is slowly coming to an end. Throughout his life, Slatin never offered an explanation why he was reluctant to leave. *A New Occupation* presents a protagonist who, like a youthful picaro, has given his life to adventure and accepted the varying roles that fortune has assigned to him. His endurance and stubbornness have seen him rise and fall at the court of the Khalifa. When he asks questions of identity, they have little to do with his cultural background but centre more around his ability to serve his master as he becomes old, and younger, more able men rise in influence and power. Thus, the

other that Abdel Kader fears the most is a part of himself, i.e. his young son who succeeds where Abdel Kader fails.

Hope and Despair. The Myth of the Heroic Explorer.

Water Music has proved not just in its treatment of the Other to be influential, but also in the depiction of its protagonist as congenial anti-hero, which is quite different to the depiction of a colonial explorer. The endurance and survival of captivity and other hardships related to exploration played a crucial role in 19th century travel narratives. Paul Genoni illustrates in *Subverting the Empire* (2004) how the risks and dangers associated with exploration were foregrounded in the journals which Australian explorers kept according to specific conventions and guidelines imposed by government agencies and institutions like the Royal Geographic Society. When Edward John Eyre, who embarked on an expedition to the centre of the Australian continent and realised early on that he would fail, decided to cross the Great Australian Bight to Albany instead, his journals marked a clear change from earlier travel writing in Australia. The explorers before Eyre built their reputation on their discoveries and wrote their journals accordingly, but Eyre, in the absence of any hope for discoveries of scientific or economic value, aimed in his journals to make the survival of the exploration his true goal (51-2).

The structure of the explorer's journey in peaks of despair and drama has a long history. Beau Riffenburgh, identifying the role of the press in creating the heroic explorer image, details how the American and English print media played a key role in sensationalising exploration. Analysing the achievements of Arctic explorers in the nineteenth century, Riffenburgh points out that while the Scandinavian explorers were by far the most successful in charting new land and scientific discovery and had a higher chance of survival, none achieved the same sort of public interest or hero worship as did their Anglo-Saxon counterparts⁶ because their accounts did not reflect what the reading public in America and England had come to expect of exploration⁷. "None learned that it was not achievements that were the key to journalistic hero-creation, but struggle and excitement" (Riffenburgh 164). One

⁶ A notable exception is the Norwegian polar explorer Fridtjof Nansen, who attracted the media's attention from the outset.

⁷ In the case of the Arctic explorer Otto Sverdrup, who achieved much in charting new land and improving polar travel equipment, Riffenburgh sees the reason why there was so little interest in him in that "he seemed to have had no adventures. His account made his four years seem too easy, and gave visions of men in comfortable settings, well-fed, and able to enjoy their leisure time reading, smoking, or conversing. That was neither what the public expected to hear nor what the press wanted to publish. So he was ignored by both" (Riffenburgh 161).

reason, perhaps, why the Anglo-Saxon reading public was accustomed to see exploration as a fight for survival may lie in the adventure stories for boys that were popular in the late 19th century. In *Empire Boys*, a study of 19th century colonialist fiction for boys, Joseph Bristow issues a post-colonial critique, arguing “how and why imperialism staked such a high claim on a specific kind of masculinity to perpetuate its aims” (Bristow 225). “British culture” glamorised “male heroes” by making the hero “an agent of moral restraint” and “the embodiment of intrepid exploration” (Bristow 226).

Explorers rarely admitted that “the agents of exploration were groups, not individuals” argues Johannes Fabian in his study of exploration in Central Africa (Fabian 25)⁸. It is telling that the indigenous people who had the most direct impact on the success of an exploration, i.e. their African porters and helpers and camel or cattle drivers, appear in the explorers’ journals as a semi-invisible force. Although “travelogues abound with reports, complaints, and recommendations” (Fabian 29) on how to manage the indigenous workforce, the myth of the intrepid traveller, the “solitary explorer” (ibid.) who did it all by himself lives on. Fabian goes on to point out how it is an unacknowledged fact that the success of an expedition relied greatly on the wives or local partners of the African soldiers and porters that were part of every expedition.

They fed and cared for their husbands; usually they would walk ahead of the caravan and have dinner ready by the time the men reached their stopping place ... Often they would roam the countryside and gather vital intelligence regarding the availability of food, the mood and attitudes of the local population, and the current political situation. They helped the traveller maintain authority and discipline (Fabian 32).

In Slatin’s account of his captivity, *Fire and Sword in the Sudan*, his claim to heroism is his ability to endure and survive the hardships of Mahdist captivity. The longer and crueller the captivity, the greater is Slatin’s achievement in having survived. Enslaved to serve the Mahdi’s successor, Khalifa Abdullahi, Slatin is repeatedly accused of spying for his former employers, the Egyptian government. These moments serve as peaks of despair and danger, which culminate in his flight from captivity. Slatin is not the kind of hero who fights back or organises a daring escape. He remains calm and patient, giving in only to momentary despair. “How much was I still to suffer before it came to my turn to enter into everlasting rest?” Slatin asks at one point (151). Through his accounts of the Khalifa’s cruelty, he automatically increases the quality of his suffering. He becomes a hero not of action but by virtue of his endurance, which, because his captors are savages with few morals, by extension boosts his own morality, turning his long captivity into something similar to the passion of the Christ. Not incidentally,

⁸ Ryan points out that the Royal Geographic Society gave a medal to the expedition leader only, regardless of the achievements of other expedition members.

the same process was at work after General Charles Gordon's murder. The typical hero of Victorian exploration, who was "standing against beleaguering hordes – those masses of anonymous black, brown, and yellow humanity that peopled the Empire – personified the English task in the modern world. He stood for Enlightenment, Freedom, Justice, and Civilization" (Behrman 50-1). This typical hero is exemplified in General Gordon, who achieved the status of a Christian saint after his death at the hands of the Mahdists because he, the Christian, was killed by savages in his attempt to defend civilisation (Behrman 51).

"How long was I to continue in this wretched position?" Slatin asks near the end. "How long was I to keep up this constant strain of always standing on the defensive? How much longer could my present relations with the Khalifa last? I knew he was only waiting or [sic!] an opportunity to make me harmless, for he was perfectly well aware that I was at heart his enemy" (Slatin 294). Unlike Gordon, Slatin survives his captivity and lives to tell his tale after his escape.

Now again in the midst of civilized society, once more a man among men, my thoughts often turn back to the fanatical barbarians with whom I had to live so long, to my perils and sufferings amongst them, to my unfortunate companions still in captivity, and to the enslaved nations of those remote territories. My thanks are due to God, whose protecting hand has led me safely through all the dangers behind me (401).

Similarly, *Water Music's* Mungo Park is not a hero of action but one of endurance, although Boyle's use of slapstick prevents the cruelty inflicted on Park from elevating him to a Christ-like hero. In Boyle's portrait, the Niger explorer bumbles through Africa with little wit and grace. What brings him safely back home to England after he was long presumed dead is the ingenuity of his African guide, Johnson, and some good fortune. Asked at one point by his captors to dismount in order to present himself to the queen of the nomadic tribe that had captured him, he "steps down out of the saddle, catches his left foot in the stirrup and slaps to the ground in a storm of dust and goat hair. He lies there a moment, thinking Christ in Heaven what have I done now, while Dassoud and Ali exchange glances and Johnson rushes to his aid" (Boyle 45). Numerous other slapstick moments abound in the narrative, and are one of the narrative techniques that prevent Mungo Park from being turned into a hero, even though his captors equal Slatin's in cruelty and deceit. His is not the passion of the Christ but simply the consequence of an attempt to explore hostile regions. Presented in this light, Mungo Park remains the bumbling fool even after his return to England, where he becomes the celebrated discoverer of the Niger. That it is Mungo Park who is praised for the discovery instead of his wise guide Johnson makes the English society and reading public as naive and ignorant as the explorer. *Water Music* subverts the heroic myth of the explorer also in the character of Mungo Park's brother-in-law, Alexander, who

accompanies Park on his second, ill-fated exploration to the Niger. In him, Boyle exposes the sensationalising of exploration that helped create the heroic myth of the explorer.

There would be a second expedition, and Zander would be part of it. What more daring occupation was there? Not Nelson, not Napoleon himself could match it. The thrill of pitting oneself against the unknown, the delicious risk, the heady exhilaration of victory over nature itself; it was too good to be true. Of course, he thought to himself ... Alexander Anderson, explorer. This is what he'd been saving himself for (Boyle 366).

For the purpose of re-narrating a travel narrative from the postcolonial perspective, *A New Occupation* tries to avoid the creation of a morally superior captive, yet it also tries to avoid the creation of a bumbling fool whose foolhardiness is shown up through slapstick. The thesis' protagonist Abdel Kader is one amongst many, perhaps a little bit more foolish than the rest (his son certainly thinks so) but he does not stand in opposition to anyone. His captivity does not serve as a virtue but neither is he someone who needs constant rescue. Abdel Kader is a dreamy character, who has internalised much of his teenage desires that brought him to Africa. Thus, he is content with reflecting on the path that has led him to his present state in Omdurman rather than seeking to escape it. He accepts his captivity as a result of having followed his dreams of adventure, and has found in Omdurman a place for himself not as superior or inferior, but equal to his friends. The narrative lays much importance on Abdel Kader's interaction with his friends so that he cannot be seen as the solitary hero, neither in exploration nor in captivity. In the end, the one opposition pair that structures the narrative comes from within Abdel Kader himself – the son Abdel Kader created replaces him in the court of the Khalifa, thus nullifying the necessity of his captivity.

Chapter 2: *Corrective Surgery*⁹. Utilising the picaresque mode in a postcolonial critique.

Since in general tales of the picaresque hero have “been called romances of roguery” (Parker, 3), one would assume that either the background or the character of the picaresque hero is essentially mischievous, although Alexander Parker points out in *Literature and the Delinquent* (1967) that the word ‘picaresque’ has lost its original connotations and would better be replaced with “delinquent”: “By this I mean an offender against the moral and civil laws; not a vicious criminal such as a gangster or a murderer, but someone who is dishonourable and anti-social in a much less violent way” (4). Parker goes further to include even “an unattached outsider” or “an unscrupulous gate-crasher” (5) into this description. Nevertheless, the traditional Spanish picaresque has more specific characteristics than this. As Parker points out,

the Spanish *picaresque* ... begins in a setting of low life but generally ascends the social scale; the origins of the protagonist are usually disreputable; he is either born or plunged as a youth into an environment of cheating and thieving, and learns to make his way in the world by cheating and thieving in his turn (6).

Parker, who states in his preface that he uses the term ‘picaresque’ “in its Spanish sense” (v) as a continuation of a tradition that started with *Guzmán*, sees the end of picaresque tales in their true Spanish meaning with Tobias Smollett’s *The Adventures of Ferdinand Count Fathom* (1753), although he admits that “right down to our own day, elements in a multitude of novels, and even whole novels, ... can be called ‘picaresque’” (vi). Here, Ulrich Wicks offers a way of classifying modern picaresque novels that goes beyond the limits set up by Parker. By assuming a modal approach (and accepting the picaresque mode as one of the main modes of fiction alongside satire, comedy, history, sentiment, tragedy and romance), Wicks argues the modal approach,

allows us to see the *general* fictional makeup of the individual narrative work. Modes do not specifically impose a form and are thus prenovelistic: they are applicable to fiction anytime, anywhere. Since the picaresque is here posited as one of the modes, we would expect to find it in widely varying degrees in much fiction. I suspect that making the picaresque one of the basic modes begins to focus the problem that contemporary criticism has been struggling with in its ever-broadening use of the term (241, his emphasis).

⁹ *Corrective Surgery* is the title of a chapter in T.C. Boyle’s *Water Music*.

Taking the modal approach one step further, Wicks extends the discussion onto Wolfgang Kayser's narrative structural elements, distinguishing between figure/character, space/panorama, and event, and posits that the picaresque is "expressed best in the panoramic structure", whose "principle of composition [is] a knitting together of numerous single units – figures *and* events – which all have their place in the sequence" (243, his emphasis). Wicks balances his "modal-structural approach" with a "modal-generic awareness", which allows him to define a series of typical picaresque characteristics as found in actual works. Apart from the dominance of the picaresque mode and panoramic structure, Wicks states other important characteristics such as the relationship between the picaro and the landscape as a futile attempt to move from exclusion to inclusion (245), a vast number of "human types who appear as representatives of the landscape" (ibid.), implied parody of fictional types, and basic themes and motifs, e.g. unusual birth or childhood, the importance of tricks, role-playing, freedom and survival, often caused by the ejection of the picaro into a hostile environment. As Wicks points out "[e]jection is the picaro's second "birth" – it comes immediately before the world's first trick on him and is thus a kind of initiation shock" (247).

In the *Picaro's Journey to the Confessional*, David Miles gives us a dualistic typology of two directly opposed literary heroes, the picaro of the picaresque novel and the confessor of the Bildungsroman. As the title of his article suggests, he chronicles a gradual move of the picaro towards the confessor in twentieth century literature to add more depth and a sense of personal development to the protagonist. The educational hero or confessor of the Bildungsroman is introspective, a "hero of personality-growth", and therefore the direct opposite of the picaro as the "non-developing hero", the "unselfconscious adventurer" or "man of action" (Miles 980). While the picaro's tale begins with an abrupt ejection of the hero into a brutal world, the confessor, in his youth, experiences a more gentle initiation into society, leaving his comfortable home to travel the world, and returns to his comfortable life as mature hero upon the completion of his travels. This "transformation" of the picaro into the confessor is achieved by a shift in the hero's viewpoint "from the world without to the world within" (Miles 989). Miles sees the twentieth century form of the "anti-Bildungsroman" as "parodying both picaresque and confessional branches of the genre". There is the "shamelessly happy (*felix*) confessor and genially *self-conscious* picaro" (990, his italics) in Thomas Mann's *Felix Krull*, or the "most radical extreme in the development of the anti-Bildungsroman" (990) in the figure of Oskar Matzerath in Günther Grass' *The Tin Drum*. Oskar Matzerath is a picaro/confessor whose story is not so much his ascent or descent

in society but whose main narrative function consists of providing the reader with a pair of satirical and sardonic spectacles through which the reader watches a corrupt, and at times apocalyptic society.

In *The Tin Drum*, picaresque elements are employed to unmask the cruelty of power structures in human society in an unsentimental way that is all the more effective for not victimising certain types or classes. Everyone is guilty of something, and in its affirmation of human weakness, the picaresque rewards the hero who possesses enough wit and insight to manipulate this knowledge. As such, the picaresque has always been an efficient tool for sociocultural criticism. *Lázarillo de Tormes*, published anonymously in Spain in the early 16th century and considered to be the first picaresque novel, illustrates why the picaresque is an effective tool in a social and postcolonial critique. Its low-born protagonist Lázaro recounts his life adventures that see him serving a number of masters before ending up in relatively comfortable employment and marriage. In that, it mirrors the popular opinion of its time that “a man born into humble circumstances could properly rise to eminence in the world by the exercise of virtue and ability, and deserved general acclaim when he had done so” (Truman 63). After his father was sent off and killed in a war, Lázaro’s mother enters a relationship with a black slave, which produces a half-brother. His happy family life ends abruptly when his stepfather is found guilty of theft, whipped and tortured, and his mother is ordered to stay away from him. Destitute, she cannot afford to care for the young Lázarillo and puts him into service for a blind man. In the coming episodes, Lázaro serves different masters whose cruel treatment teaches the naïve young boy how to survive by his wits. However, the very nature of Lázaro’s employment (he becomes a lowly town crier) and marriage (he marries the Archbishop’s mistress upon the Archbishop’s insistence) is seen as comic inversion and parody of the sentiment that “nobility is within reach even of those born in the most abject poverty” (Truman 64). Thus, *Lázarillo de Tormes* turns the idea of “rise in society by the exercise of virtue” into “its being a virtue simply to rise” (Truman 66). As we will see below, one of *Water Music*’s two protagonists, Ned Rise, will have a very similar experience to Lázaro’s. Yet, Ned Rise’s end could not be further from Lázaro’s, showing the possibilities of combining the picaresque mode with a postcolonial critique.

An outsider in a hostile world

[T]he *essential picaresque situation* ... is that of an unheroic protagonist, worse than we, caught up in a chaotic world, worse than ours, in which he is on an eternal journey of encounters that allow him to be alternately both victim of that world and its exploiter (Wicks 242, his emphasis).

The picaresque has often been heralded as the direct opposite of romance, which “presents superhuman types in an ideal world” (Wicks 241), and as we have seen in Chapter 1, colonial travel writing and the sensationalising of exploration combined romantic tendencies with imperial aims. In 19th century exploration, white civilisation assumed the role of an ideal world that the superhuman efforts of its people were trying to extend to the dark continent. The world in the picaresque, by contrast, is “chaotic beyond human tolerance, but it is a world closer to our own” (241). Boyle’s simple substitution in *Water Music* of a chaotic world for an ideal one becomes a powerful critique of imperialism because the Manichean struggle of good versus evil is replaced with a struggle for survival in both worlds, Europe and Africa.

In one of its plots, *Water Music*, T. C. Boyle’s episodic 1981 novel about the explorer Mungo Park, presents us with a classical picaro. The novel comprises two main plots, one about Mungo Park’s exploits in West Africa, and the other about Ned Rise, a “delinquent” (see Parker above), orphan, thief, beggar, and con artist.

Not Twist, not Copperfield, not Fagin himself had a childhood to compare with Ned Rise’s. He was unwashed, untutored, unloved, battered, abused, harassed, deprived, starved, mutilated and orphaned, a victim of poverty, ignorance, ill-luck, class prejudice, lack of opportunity, malicious fate and gin. His was a childhood so totally depraved even a Zola would shudder to think of it (Boyle 34).

As Ned’s origins are those of a typical picaro, and his whole life is an attempt to ascend the social ladder by turning tricks. According to Boyle’s description, Ned is part rogue, part smart aleck.

No matter how you look at it, from whatever angle, in light or shade, extremity or repose, it [Ned Rise’s face] is at bottom the face of a wiseguy. The face of the young lout who lolls in the classroom with his boots on the desk, sets fire to old ladies and drinks ink. The face of the teenager who saunters and slouches and terrorizes the fruit seller, smoking opium, bathing in gin, making a chamberpot of the world. The face of the young panderer arranging something improper, scurrilous even (17).

Thus, we have two protagonists with very different backgrounds, since Mungo Park comes from the Scottish rural middle class, the son of a doctor and a trained doctor himself, jumping at the chance of leading an exploration into the interior of Africa to escape the boredom and predictability of a country practice. Ned Rise on the other hand belongs to the traditional picaros who “sustain themselves by means of their cleverness and adaptability during an extended journey through space, time, and various predominantly corrupt social milieux” (Bjornson 4). As is often the case in picaresque narratives, the

picaro's cleverness and adaptability are frequently tested by fate, which thwarts the hopeful's attempts at climbing the social ladder as soon as he begins to experience his first successes. "Whenever things start to look up, whenever fantasy begins to jell into possibility, the Hand of Fate intercedes to slap you back to your senses," (50) thinks Ned Rise early on in the novel, and resigns into a continuous battle with fate by doing what he does best, ie survive. Fate serves up increasingly harder sentences, and Ned proves his ingenuity time and again by cheating death.

However, in *Water Music* Ned Rise is not only a classical picaro, his fight for survival in England under George III, juxtaposed with Mungo Park's Quixotic exploits to find and map the Niger, works as a postcolonial critique that undermines the notion of Africa as Heart of Darkness. As Gruesser notes in his 1992 study of contemporary non-African fiction about Africa, with the introduction of Ned Rise into the retelling of an explorer narrative, "Boyle incorporates a lower-class perspective into *Water Music* and depicts Europe as ridden with disease, filth, poverty, perversion, and drug abuse ... Boyle portrays Rise's existence as an unbroken chain of misery, cruelty, fraud, and drunkenness, more corrupt than anything to be found in Africa" (Gruesser 145). As briefly mentioned in Chapter 1, in Bristow's analysis of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* there are two dark places, one the metaphorical one, which is London or Brussels, and the other the actual one in Africa. But in *Water Music*, the actual darkness of Africa becomes the saving light for Ned Rise, whereas his dark London is bright with lights for the returned hero, Mungo Park, who is "basking in the adulation of his social superiors" (Boyle 208). In a nice twist, Boyle parodies another crucial element of colonial exploration when the African Association orders Mungo Park to edit and publish his travel writing instead of enjoying the fruits of his new-found celebrity – a celebrity which, by the way, hinges on the two accomplishments of his expedition. Mungo Park not only found the Niger, he also survived to tell England about it. He, too, is a survivor, like Ned Rise. But after his return, he "has become a prisoner to pen and ink" (234), a "slave to the desk, the page, the word" (235), a "man of action reduced to the man of recollection" (234), and he bridles at the less exciting demands of exploration when the Secretary of the African Association reminds him that "great discoveries are as much a product of good warm study as they are of deserts and jungles" (233). Mungo Park complies grudgingly.

Words. They haunt him at night and day, through his rewrite sessions with Edwards, through breakfast, tea and dinner ... He never imagined the book would be such drudgery. After the stark physical challenge of Africa and the heady swirl of celebrity, the last thing he wants is to sit at a desk and push words around like a professional scrabble player (233).

Africa is turned into a place of salvation and light for Ned Rise as it becomes the downfall of the explorer. The two protagonists meet on Park's second expedition into the interior. Ned, who has been sent to Africa as a convict, is recruited by Park, quickly realises that he can manipulate the explorer, and comes to understand that his whole life up to this moment has prepared him for survival in Africa as Mungo Park's life could never have. As Gruesser puts it, "[a]s Park grows increasingly passive, Ned acts to save the lives of the small party, becoming de facto second in command and the explorer's confidant" (Gruesser 146). Africa, though cruel and life-threatening, turns Ned into a hero, just as it bestows some very un-heroic qualities on the explorer. But it is more than his ability to survive that puts Ned in the foreground of the novel – it is his realisation that Africa presents him with the possibility to begin a new life: "Ned has escaped from the European "civilization" that produced and then hounded him, having found in Africa his kingdom on earth" (Gruesser 147).

Much of the humour that abounds in the Mungo Park sections comes from the gap between the protagonist's expectations of exploration and the reality he finds in Africa. Mungo Park's expectations are of course a product of colonial travel writing and the media, which have, like a sentimental romance, turned the explorer into a hero. In a picaresque narrative, however, the hero is unmasked, or as Wicks calls it, he is "ejected" into a "hostile world" turning "tricks" on him.

"Instead of confirming the images of saintliness and superiority typically found in explorers' accounts of their experiences in Africa," Gruesser argues, "Boyle's Park is a klutz" (143). In Africa, Park is "powerless, incompetent, comical" (ibid.), and the difference between his ideals and the reality turns him into a Don Quixote, dependent for his survival on his African guide¹⁰. Park's "re-birth" as picaro takes place by his entrance into an alien and hostile environment, where his European credentials are of no assistance. Musing on how different his actual exploration has turned out from his vision, Park notes that "here he is, not at the head, but somewhere toward the rear of the serpentine queue wending its way through all this parch, a prisoner for all intents and purposes" (Boyle 64). Ned's experience of Africa is a very different one. A victim of civilisation, he "rises" above his lowly background, as his last name promises, while Mungo Park is humbled and humiliated, futilely trying to gain access to African society. His plight serves as postcolonial critique of the image of the heroic explorer, so as in the opening paragraphs, where the explorer can be found with exposed bottom, a captive at Benowm, his eyes

¹⁰ Boyle has strewn his novel with allusions to *Don Quixote*, such as calling the explorer's horse Rocinante (Boyle 14).

about to be gorged out. He is a “delinquent” like Ned Rise, a delinquent to common sense. The dark and barbaric Africa of colonial travel writing is presented as a place with its own set of rules, offended by Mungo Park’s naive dream of adventure.

For the reader to be able to see it in this light, the point of view in the narrative is crucial. *Water Music* abandons a typical first-person picaresque narrative in favour of a third-person point of view, an important strategy to align the readership with the place that Mungo Park stumbles upon, so keen to explore.

Wicks sees the first-person point of view as vital for picaresque storytelling because the presence of a narrating “I” in addition to an experiencing “I” (and “the ironic gap between the social nonstatus of the protagonist and the presumptuous act of writing his autobiography”), makes the “narrating process ... a crucial part of the fiction” (244). But the fact that *Water Music* discards the traditional autobiographical point of view, and replaces it with multiple third-person points of view allows Boyle to introduce a second protagonist as well as a number of subplots, creating a “panoramic narrative” with a multitude of events and figures, all striving, without success, from “exclusion to inclusion,” all “representatives” of a particular landscape (see Wicks above). Through this, Gruesser posits, Ned Rise “serves as an ironic double for Park and a parody of Christ, to whom many “saintly” explorers implicitly compare themselves” (Gruesser 145). The “double-identity” of Ned Rise/Mungo Park is essential for the novel because the hero of the beginning is replaced in the end by the anti-hero. As Gruesser argues, because “of his ability to survive, Rise eventually becomes the hero of the book, regarding Africa as a place to begin a new life instead of a place of death”. Thus, the introduction of multiple points of view prevents the novel from turning into a classical picaresque autobiography or *Bildungsroman* and allows it to enact a more comprehensive postcolonial critique. As Gruesser argues, “Boyle depicts the civilization of Europe as a thin veneer masking its corruption” (Gruesser 143), and Mungo Park, as portrayed in *Water Music*, would not have come to the same conclusion.

Chapter 3: *A New Occupation*¹¹. Creating a picaresque postcolonial travel narrative.

Coming across Rudolf Slatin's book on his life and captivity in Africa, *Fire and Sword in the Sudan*, I quickly realised its potential as a picaresque captivity narrative. The protagonist, a young man trained in the Austrian military, seeks his fortune in Africa and finds service in the Sudan under the rule of the Egyptian Khedive. Here, he quickly climbs the ladder in the military and becomes Governor of Darfur at the age of twenty two. In his hometown, a similar position would be quite out of the question for the second son of a middle-class Jewish family, recently converted to Catholicism and impoverished after the death of the father.

At the height of his career Slatin is thrown into captivity when the Mahdi revolts against the Egyptian government and quickly overthrows all opposition. In Omdurman he serves as guard and military advisor for the Mahdi's successor, Khalifa Abdullahi, for nearly a decade before the combined efforts of his family, the Austrian Consul-General in Egypt, and Sir Reginald Wingate, the future Governor-General of Sudan, can secure his escape. This is not to say that there haven't been attempts to escape. Most of Slatin's – or Abdel Kader's, as he was called by the Mahdists – plans are thwarted by unfortunate events or the fickleness of his flight companions, turning his years in captivity into a carousel of hope and despair. Not only do his many failed escape plans see him become more despondent, but the Khalifa has grown increasingly suspicious of Abdel Kader's loyalty and gradually diminishes his freedoms. When Abdel Kader finally emerges from his captivity, he quickly becomes a celebrity among the courts in Europe. His book, published in English with the help of Wingate, is dedicated to Queen Victoria, who receives him cordially and invites him repeatedly to her court in Balmoral.

Like many picaros, Abdel Kader quickly adapts to new situations. So it happens that as Governor of Darfur he converts to Islam after it becomes known that his soldiers attribute recent losses in their fight against the Mahdists to their leader being an unbeliever. This conversion, by the way, proved a disappointment for General Charles Gordon, who never forgave Slatin for it. Slatin sees it more pragmatically. "In this life one has often to do things which are contrary to one's persuasion, either by compulsion or from some other cause," Slatin says when discussing his conversion with one of his

¹¹ *A New Occupation* is the title of a chapter in Charles Neufeld's *A Prisoner of the Khaleefa: Twelve Years' Captivity at Omdurman*.

men. "I shall be quite content if the soldiers believe me and abandon their silly superstitions. Whether others believe me or not is a matter of indifference to me" (114). Of course, Slatin's own father converted from Judaism to the Roman Catholic faith upon moving to Vienna. If he did it from religious conviction or like his son later on for pragmatic reasons is not important. The fact that he was a Roman Catholic opened many doors to him that would otherwise be locked in nineteenth century Vienna. So too his son, who knows that "in taking this step I should be placing myself in a curious position, which could not fail to be condemned by some" (114), but, he remarks, "[t]he effect on the men of the step I had now taken was much greater than I expected; there was no longer any reluctance to be sent on expeditions, although our enemies were increasing daily in number and strength" (115).

In the cruel world of the picaresque, freedom is the greatest asset of the picaro, who loses his other fortunes as quickly as he makes them. Thus, capture, which arrives after a series of ill-fated events as the ultimate misfortune, intensifies the picaro's growing despondency. Captivity is, however, also an experience that makes the picaro accept the "burdensome responsibilities of manhood", as Julie Greer Johnson observes of the popular seventeenth century picaresque narrative *Los Infortunios de Alonso Ramirez*, based on a true story about a Spanish youth who seeks his fortune in the Spanish Indies and ends up as captive of English pirates (61). In Slatin's own narrative the longing to regain his freedom and be "once more a man among men" (401) outshines all other aspects of his captivity. In my own narrative, however, I have coupled the protagonist's longing for freedom with a feeling of angst. As Wicks describes it, freedom as a theme in picaresque literature "is partly an exploration of the paradox of entrapment in freedom" (246). "The freedom of the picaro is imposed on him, though he learns to relish it, and he is actually trapped in freedom, or, to put it another way, the chaos the picaro discovers in freedom paradoxically traps him in his own freedom" (ibid.).

When the opportunity for escape finally arrives and Abdel Kader, after numerous deliberations and procrastinations, seizes it, he does not act from a desire to reclaim his former life, i.e. his freedom, but from a sense that his life at present must come to an end. This is also characterised by him accepting his son's commencement in the palace guards (something he was opposed to earlier). Abdel Kader senses what is required of him and the old picaro moves over to make room for the young one, the one who will replace him in his struggles for fame and fortune. He finally grows up, and flees.

Since my own narrative is limited in its scope to approximately fifty thousand words, I made the deliberate choice of spanning the last few weeks of Abdel Kader's captivity. It was, however, not my

intention to present a “bumbling fool” like Boyle had in *Water Music*, nor did I want to portray someone whose suffering elevates him or makes him in any way more than he is. I took my inspiration from Rudolf Slatin’s narrative but decided that I did not simply want to re-write his life. Rather, I wanted to create a picaresque whose years in captivity are not only characterised by suffering, servitude and tricks, but also by the pleasures he derives from friendship and companionship, and from being an accomplice to other people’s tricks. As such, I had in mind a gentler picaresque than either Ned Rise or Mungo Park in *Water Music*. I deliberated to create in Abdel Kader a protagonist with Candide’s naivety and honesty. Voltaire, as James Lynch argues in an essay about the (ab)use of romance conventions in his novel, “is less concerned with making light of the literary excesses of romance than with using the romance conventions to shock the reader, as he has shocked Candide, into reality” (44). Underneath the surface structure of parody lies a stern warning, Voltaire’s response to Leibniz’s tenet that we live in the best of all possible worlds.

One of the most important picaresque aspects in *A New Occupation* is a variant of what Wicks calls the “Ejection Motif”, in which the picaresque finds himself suddenly in a completely new situation, “looming danger, a chaotic world to which he will have to adapt” (247). “Ejection is the picaresque’s second “birth” – it comes immediately before the world’s first trick on him and is thus a kind of initiation shock” (ibid.). In *A New Occupation*, this ejection into chaos is Abdel Kader’s capture by the Mahdi and his subsequent captivity. His new master, Khalifa Abdullahi, treats him like a father at first (he feeds him and, like a real father, names him), but during the siege on Omdurman suddenly changes tack and has Abdel Kader shackled and thrown into jail, where he is left to beg for food for over a month. From this early low point, Abdel Kader has to learn to regain his master’s trust and prove indispensable to him, which he achieves when he not only becomes a member of the Khalifa’s palace guards but also his chief advisor on the military training of new recruits. Yet, amid palace intrigues and the Khalifa’s increasing suspicions, it takes all of Abdel Kader’s energy to avoid prison for a second time, or a fate worse than that. This leads us to another crucial picaresque element, which is Abdel Kader’s utter lack of control over the kind of world he inhabits. His life is subject to people and events out of his control, and is thus reduced to his will to survive and his attempt to regain control. This is achieved painstakingly over the course of many manoeuvres – tricks, as it were, or Abdel Kader’s ability to fill many different roles for the multifaceted whims of his master, yet it is lost suddenly and in a flash. Like many picaresques, Abdel Kader’s core strength is his ability to serve his new master in any role his master wishes, which

sees him succeed among the palace guards. However, like the typical picaro, he is also his own worst enemy, bringing about his demise when the notes he has kept about his captivity are discovered and he is accused of espionage for the Egyptian Khedive. It is a principle of the picaresque world that the higher the picaro strives, the harder he falls, yet Abdel Kader's core belief as picaro is that he can, and *should*, eventually rise above his lowly position.

Since I had an honest nature like Candide in mind, my picaro, as is the case in many modern picaresque narratives, lacks what the picaros of earlier tales had so readily at their disposal. He does not live by his wits or deceive in order to gain something. In fact, Abdel Kader's friends despair of what they call his dreaminess and slim grip on reality. However, Abdel Kader is not completely guileless since he manages to befriend people in high positions, like Gamal, the Khalifa's private secretary, who is not only loyal to his friend but also in possession of a sharper mind. Thus, Abdel Kader survives by his servility *and* his friend's wits.

However, it is this honesty and naivety which, one could argue, places Abdel Kader also in conflict with the usual picaro. Augie March comes to mind, created by Saul Bellow in his 1953 novel *The Adventures of Augie March*. Keith Opdahl notes that "Augie is really the opposite of the picaro. It is not Augie who lives by his wits but the Machiavellians. Good-hearted, spontaneous, and vulnerable, Augie is in fact more of a traveling victim than rogue" (82). Bellow and other modern writers such as Thornton Wilder in *Theophilus North* have inverted a key element of the picaro by making kindness, compassion and a weakness for love important character traits of their protagonists. Sometimes, the picaro's good self is exploited by the world surrounding him, turning him into a victim of rogues. At other times, the picaro's goodness is not coupled with vulnerability and prevents the protagonist from becoming victimised. But always, it is the picaro who lives by a moral code, by some noble notion which he refuses to violate. It seems as if this is the modern picaro's freedom, the choice not to compromise even under duress.

In my narrative I wanted to couple my picaro with someone who was his opposite, and I decided to use a father-son pair for that purpose. In order to fully develop the two plots I have like Boyle decided to forego a classical first-person narrative in favour of using both Abdel Kader and Zeki as focalisers.

As Abdel Kader personifies the aging picaro, who is late in departing the world's stage, missing numerous cues fate has given him that his turn is over, I had in Zeki a young hero keen on leaving his mark on the world and finally starting "real life". Zeki, over-flowing with an abundance of nature's gifts

such as talent, good looks and confidence, is everything his father isn't. His father's naivety and gentle nature are for Zeki symptoms of weakness and cowardice. Zeki is determined to be different.

[I]f there was one thing Zeki had learnt from his father's example, it was that he was not going to be a servant himself. "If you fly high, you fall deep", his father cautioned him often but as far as Zeki was concerned he'd rather fall deep. "If you fly, people think you're an eagle", he'd respond to his father. "If you crawl, people step on you because you're a worm. (44)

Zeki's ascent shadows his father's descent as if they were engaged in a tug-of-war about luck. While Zeki gets a number of lucky breaks, misfortunes accumulate for Abdel Kader. His mistress has left him, his diaries have been discovered and burnt, the Khalifa is convinced that he is spying for the Egyptian Khedive and has punished him by removing almost all his privileges. He continues to work as palace guard for the Khalifa but lives under constant threat of being sent to prison. The money he expected from his wife in Egypt fails to arrive and his best friend has a serious accident whereupon he is dismissed from the palace guards. On the other side of the spectrum is Zeki, whose star is rising. A wealthy elderly widow has taken an interest in him and wants to get married – this, by the way, serves as comic reversal of Slatin's outrage in his own narrative about the old widow's fancy for a young and handsome man (see Chapter 1.3). The Khalifa has taken an interest in the young cadet and offers him a leading position in the palace guards where Abdel Kader is losing his influence. Zeki is about to become very rich and well connected, just as his father is about to be left with nothing.

As my scope was limited and my focus was on Abdel Kader's last few days in captivity, my narrative has a somewhat less episodic structure than traditional picaresque tales do, which are mostly *big* books. However, I propose that my own narrative is easily expandable. Given the word limit imposed on my creative component, I had to write several episodes *off-stage*, as it were, so as to keep within the scope of my work. The discovery of Abdel Kader's diaries, for example, though it is referred to in my narrative on numerous occasions, has happened before the start of *A New Occupation*, as has the subsequent burning of his books. Outside the scope of this thesis, therefore, I would be able to present a more episodic structure by beginning with Abdel Kader's departure from Austria. The separation from home and family is frequently the starting point in a picaresque narrative, presenting a young picaro either violently isolated from his home or leaving freely on his own accord to seek fortune and adventure in some far-away places (see for example Wicks and Johnson). Following his departure, there would be his quick ascent in the Egyptian military and his marriage to the sister of a wealthy Egyptian merchant, before he becomes a captive of the Mahdi and is thrown into chains upon the murder of General Gordon. From there, we would see our protagonist slowly gaining the trust of his new master,

Khalifa Abdullahi, weathering numerous palace intrigues until his luck runs out and we find him in dire straits once again, which is where my narrative commences.

Somewhat forced to compromise on the episodic structure, I was however determined to stay close to my aim of creating a postcolonial travel narrative. JanMohamed's critique of the use of Manichean allegories in colonial travel writing proved most helpful in this regard and I decided, in order to create a *postcolonial* travel narrative, there had to be no distinction between the protagonist and the other characters that allowed for an inference of moral differences based on racial difference. I tried to achieve this by creating a network of genuine relationships for Abdel Kader with friends, colleagues and family, frequently not revealing the origin of the individual characters, thus blending Abdel Kader into a multi-ethnic society.

Conclusion

My early interest in exploration was sparked by books by the German author Karl May and other adventure stories. The heroism of the explorer, who struggles on despite sheer insurmountable obstacles, has informed many afternoons spent in re-enacting certain key scenes: altercations with a group of mean-looking villains; the epic fight against the evil archenemy, who seems to have more lives than a cat; the company of a cheerful, good-natured and slow-witted friend; the noble damsel in distress. With his sorrowful countenance, Don Quixote was the exception who proved the rule. There was something about Don Quixote's fight against windmills, his obstinacy in his attempts to make reality fit his imagination, that seemed to me somehow more *real*, more representative of the human condition, and far more interesting than the schematic good vs evil fights along the lines of H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*. The possibility that the hero could be heroic only in his imagination, and was in reality everything he wanted to leave behind, like an inverted Superman-Clark Kent, intrigued me. Don Quixote was one of the rare narratives that recounted the life of adventurous knights in a way that seemed to leave the worn formula behind. It was not much later that I came across *Water Music* by T.C. Boyle. Everything about Boyle's narrative was different from other adventure stories. His hero stumbles through Africa, falls off the horse, loses every fight, is congenial but a fool, and depends for his survival on his Sancho Panza. Clearly, Boyle's protagonist had more in common with Don Quixote than Quatermain, the protagonist of *King Solomon's Mines*.

In creating my own picaresque, postcolonial travel narrative, I hoped to find a new way of telling the old adventure story. In particular, it was clear to me right from the start that if I should succeed in this attempt, I would have to take into consideration the imperial attitudes of the real-life explorers, if not of the genre of adventure stories. As Edward Said points out in *Orientalism*,

if it is true that no production of knowledge in the human sciences can ever ignore or disclaim its author's involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances, then it must also be true that for a European or American studying the Orient there can be no disclaiming the main circumstances of *his* actuality: that he comes up against the Orient as a European or American first, as an individual second (11).

Thus, I imposed two restrictions on the creative process. I wanted to avoid the use of Manichean allegories that are so typical for colonial narratives, and I wanted my protagonist to be a modern picaro. I realised that picaresque narratives are usually quite expansive and attempted to condense what I regarded as essential for my narrative within the boundaries of a master's thesis. The result is a fusion

of different influences, inspired by Rudolf Slatin's real-life account of his captivity, on which my narrative is loosely based.

It was my aim that *A New Occupation* should fill the gap between narratives that glorify the explorer and others that merely send him up, notwithstanding his achievements and his endurance. Humorous in its tone, the novel is written from a perspective that was inspired by the picaresque, while also reaching beyond some of the norms associated with that genre. I did not aim to write a comic adventure story that simply makes fun of its protagonists. I wanted to take the subject of my novel seriously because it is an intrinsically serious subject matter and exploration in Africa had far-reaching consequences both for the explorer and for Africa. However, to take the subject matter seriously does not mean it has to be written in a serious tone. Exploration in Africa was marked by a considerable amount of difficulties, and explorers had to endure starvation, disease, tribal warfare, and were often 'missing' for months and years. It is the case that explorers had to be willing to undertake enormous efforts, but all these efforts had relatively little of the desired impact. In that, the explorers' epic quest for knowledge and civilisation was not unlike Don Quixote's fight against windmills.

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A New Occupation: A Novel

Kerstin Kugler

Preface

Standing on the banks of the Nile and looking across the water to the gardens of Khartoum, a feeling of deep satisfaction runs through Abdel Kader, a.k.a. Rudolf Slatin, the former Governor of Darfur, now a captive of the Mahdi's successor, Khalifa Abdullahi. He converted to Islam, surrendered to the Mahdi, took on a new name and swore allegiance to a cause he doesn't care about. His fate, tied to Fortuna's wheel and the Khalifa's mood swings, has had its ups and downs, though lately he has fallen into disgrace. Still, gazing out at the convergence of the two Niles, he is filled with the belief that his life has a purpose, his present a future. But when his estranged wife makes him an offer that is equally hard to accept or decline, he must make a decision.

Part 1: The Dervish

Sunrise

Abdel Kader was riding home on Hassan's donkey, eastward away from the Khalifa's palace. His head was full with the approaching festivities of the Feast of Bairam, yet his mind kept veering off to memories of Ranya. One of these memories was something she used to say about Omdurman, which was that they should call it Corpse Colony. Ranya was always thinking of funny things to say, she'd made their captivity bearable. That's something Zeki had from her, this light spirit and cheerfulness, even though Zeki was at a difficult age and didn't tend to show it. Then one day Ranya had thought up something else without telling anyone. He and Zeki accompanied her to Elias, her merchant brother. Elias was going to see into some sandal-wood oil business in Cairo, where they had scores of relatives. Ranya loved scent of every variety and she loved her relatives. She was excited when Elias finally held the Khalifa's permit to leave Omdurman. She just never came back.

Their marriage had been fine and life, even in captivity, had a kind of predictability. Zeki was six at the time and already known in Omdurman as one of the finest cadets in the Khalifa's elite warrior school. And Abdel Kader? European, captive, slave – he was at the height of his career. He remembered the time with a pang, when he had heads turn his way. There'd been the rumour going around that General Gordon was his uncle, a rumour he did little to squash, and one could still hear it being whispered in quiet corners to this day. The other rumour, the one that the Khalifa loved him like a son and trusted him with his life, unfortunately didn't persist as long, which proved again his old Aunt Yolanda's saying that a whole lie is more believable than half a truth.

Ranya had always claimed their marriage to be more than just a marriage of convenience, and they did spend long hours in bed – not the kind of hours Gamal always hinted at when talking about the passion between him and his late wife but pleasant hours. Ranya's dowry had allowed them to be independent of the Khalifa's irregular payments, and back then, things hadn't been as dire in Omdurman as they were now. They nearly had enough to purchase one of her brother's Abyssinian ponies. And then Ranya went to Cairo and Abdel Kader had to keep borrowing Hassan's donkey.

But to be honest, Abdel Kader had always known that an agreeable husband and a talented son didn't mean the world to Ranya, not if it meant living in captivity. She had told him right off that she

couldn't stand life without a number of necessities, such as a good scent, and no one ever seemed to be able to find these things in Corpse Colony.

He had reconciled himself to her leaving. Ranya shouldn't go without the things she loved, and quite often, when one of Elias' caravans made its way to Omdurman, she managed to send him some money. It was sad though because Zeki kept on shining, people stopped him to touch his clothes for good luck or to get a better look, his beauty made Abdel Kader proud and wasn't something a mother should have to miss. By the time he was ten, Zeki was such a skilful rider that he could have performed at a review of troops alongside the Khalifa's son if Abdel Kader had ever had the nerve to bother. But then the Khalifa's troops were defeated at Metema by the Abyssinians and the Khalifa's fury was meted out to everyone around him. Looking back, it was probably then that Abdel Kader's relationship with the Khalifa began to sour, and what a long, drawn-out process that falling out had been!

The Feast of Bairam. Displays of horsemanship, swells of courage, when the parade grounds outside Omdurman were filled with the Khalifa's army from all parts of the Sudan. His annual chance to meet and mingle with the sheikhs, the emirs, with great men, once influential or newly important, old Government men, sworn Mahdists, clerks that once worked under Gordon in Khartoum, everyone he'd ever crossed paths with in freedom, in captivity and in prison. Most of them had been in prison too at least once. It wouldn't be the Khalifa if he didn't believe in the power of fetters, either as a punitive or preventive measure. It was his conviction that a prison term was never unjust because if someone hadn't already done something to deserve it, it served as a reminder to keep him on the straight and narrow. Add this to the Feast of Bairam and it's easily understood why there was such an atmosphere of exaltation and nervousness. Called to the Khalifa, there was not one emir who did not fear to find himself in chains at the end of the day – and did it matter what for? Sheikh Nejoumi, of Berber, paid of his own accord ten times the official bride price for his third wife, who was said to be a great beauty. The Khalifa, who heard of this, summoned both Nejoumi and his new wife to Omdurman. What Nejoumi had done irked him on account of several things. Firstly, who but the Khalifa had the right to give such a showy display of wealth? Secondly, and apropos wealth – how but by failing to pay his due tributes to the Khalifa had Nejoumi amassed such wealth in the first place? And thirdly, who wouldn't want to see the face that made a man pay a fortune for its possession? So the Khalifa had Nejoumi thrown into jail, had his house searched in Berber, relieved him of his silver treasure, his camels and his slaves, and sent him back a month later a pauper ... and sans wife. On the other hand, last month, when

Saadalla discovered Abdel Kader's diaries and the whole scandal broke, the ombeyas were sounded that summoned Abdel Kader to the Khalifa, and Abdel Kader was convinced – *convinced!* – that he would be hanged this morning. It didn't start well. As expected, the Khalifa accused him of spying for the Egyptian Government, he accused him of betraying his faith, he had his house searched for more incriminating evidence and his diaries were burnt, without ceremony but with plenty of zeal. Yet, at the end of it, the Khalifa ordered Abdel Kader's chains off and sent him home, with only minor repercussions. He confiscated Abdel Kader's horse to restrict his movements and he took some of Abdel Kader's land outside Omdurman and gave it to Saadalla. But that was it. Abdel Kader could hardly believe it when, at night time, he still had a head on his shoulders to rest on his pillows.

Abdel Kader smiled. Ranya would have laughed, had she heard Nejoumi's story.

Zeki never seemed to forgive his father for not having introduced him to the Khalifa's son but Abdel Kader's secret dream was that Zeki would one day save a caravan from slave hunters and the caravan was one of Elias', taking Ranya back to Omdurman. Wouldn't it make her feel proud as well as glad to have escaped slave hunters through the hands of her grown son?

Of course, this particular dream was not very likely to happen, Ranya wouldn't come back in a thousand years. Like so many merchants, her brother had sided with the Mahdi to keep the slave trade alive, and Abdel Kader had sometimes felt he ought to point out that her brother was part of the reason they had been forced to surrender. Rather than confront Elias or live within the limitations of Corpse Colony, Ranya had opted for Cairo's luxuries. She kept reminding Abdel Kader in her letters that she could easily secure his escape, his and Zeki's. But just as Ranya wouldn't come back, Zeki would never flee – that was something Abdel Kader and Hassan agreed on. Since Zeki was a little kid, it had been his dream to become a famous warrior, and with Madibbo as teacher and the Khalifa's emirs beginning to take notice of him, this dream was just about to come true.

Abdel Kader had always wanted to be exceptional, either as an explorer or as a general like Gordon, and he admitted to feeling a little jealousy in that regard. Truth was he was more a strategist than an actual warrior. The one time he had actually engaged in shows of horsemanship he had landed his jagged spear in a freshly planted pomegranate tree and people couldn't keep a straight face. After all he was the ex-governor of Darfur and belonged now to the Khalifa's guards. "God grant Abdel Kader the wisdom to accept his fate," the Khalifa said – that was in Rahad, at a time when the Mahdi was still alive.

His lack of aim didn't mean he wasn't a good soldier. He was a stickler for detail, great with routine, loved the words 'in theory.' It didn't matter that his aim was bad, all that mattered was that he could show the Khalifa how to conduct a review of troops in an orderly fashion when the plain outside the city walls, where the Khalifa decided to set up his parade grounds, was filled with untrained soldiers as far as the eye could see.

Hassan's donkey, Umm es Shole, limped through puddles left by the night's heavy rains and past the palace of the Khalifa's oldest son. The night was coming to its end, and Umm es Shole was done bucking and protesting. No doubt she had her own opinion about being loaned to her master's friends and wasn't shy of showing it. Abdel Kader rubbed her behind the ear, something that he knew annoyed her when it came from anyone but Hassan, but how else could he show her that he didn't bear any grudges for her misbehaviour? He also called her 'old girl,' and told her he understood she was tired. Umm es Shole didn't so much as twitch her ear.

Would Ranya still have called Omdurman Corpse Colony had she ever ridden home at daybreak? Already he could make out a group of mimosa trees inside the palace garden. Usually, when the Khalifa retired to bed, he and Joseppi and Gamal would sit under the trees inside the garden and drink tea for an hour or two before they had to go back to the mosque for morning prayer. Drinking tea meant mostly listening to Gamal. He had been the Khalifa's principal secretary for ten years and Abdel Kader had not met another man who could talk more than Gamal. Gamal considered him a friend, and he had his own opinion of things, which meant his tea would always get cold.

Even Joseppi trusted Gamal and had told Abdel Kader repeatedly in the past few days that Gamal was the one who had saved him from the gallows. It made Abdel Kader sad to hear Joseppi believe such fairy tales. No one knew why the Khalifa condemned some and spared others, though everybody took guesses. No, Gamal hadn't saved his life, although it was Gamal who had braved the Khalifa and pointed out that keeping diaries was something nearly everyone in the palace did. The fact that Abdel Kader's diaries were not in Arabic didn't mean he was a spy.

Yet, Joseppi was convinced and Abdel Kader didn't have the heart to dissuade his friend. Usually, it was Joseppi who got into trouble with the Khalifa. Ever ready to please, yet cursed by persistent bad luck, he was in and out of the jail like no other guard in Omdurman. Superstitious to the extreme, Gamal had become his good luck charm, and who was Abdel Kader to ruin it for him? After so many years of seeing his hopes dissolve in despair, Joseppi had become jumpy and nervous just

looking in the direction of the Palace. He would sip at his tea while keeping his head low, worrying so much that finally he would fall sleep from sheer exhaustion, repeating over and over again that this time he'd end up in Reggaf, he knew he would.

"No, you won't," Gamal reasoned. "It's just Orphali who told you the Khalifa was going to put you back in jail. If it's true, the Saier will ask for money and let you sleep outside at night. If anyone's going to Reggaf in chains, it's Orphali's uncle. The Kadi has gone all over town comparing the Khalifa to the former Egyptian Khedive, and himself to the Khedive's principal adviser. Even his chronicles will be burnt."

The last was a sore point with Gamal. The Kadi's chronicles were the only thorough written account of Mahdist rule and the Khalifa frequently consulted Gamal on matters of his early reign. If they were to be burnt Gamal would be forced to hide one copy and place himself in an impossible situation, not unlike Abdel Kader's, who mourned his diaries like stillborn children.

Wasn't it always the same these days, Abdel Kader reflected? Joseppi, the first, the one who worried the most, would drift off to sleep during Gamal's analysis, but Gamal wouldn't be able to stop himself from talking. In the end, Gamal would have talked himself into a misery equal to Joseppi's, and they ended up accompanying each other home, making sure the other didn't jump into the Nile to drown.

Sometimes, before his diaries had been discovered and his liberties curtailed, Abdel Kader would invite Gamal to come home with him. Zeki was pleased when Gamal came, he kept pestering him for gossip, thinking it impossible that there was something Gamal didn't know and they would trade gossip about the Khalifa's court while Abdel Kader saw to the geese he was breeding to keep watch. Food was scarce these days in Omdurman, everything was running out or coming to an end in some way or other, and opportunity makes the thief. Gamal was the only visitor Abdel Kader brought home that Zeki acknowledged, everyone else he would simply ignore, probably because everyone else was usually a woman and Zeki disapproved of temporary wives. The only exception he'd ever made was Amira, and only because he had hated her so much, he hadn't found it possible to ignore her.

Because Zeki admired him – or regardless of it – Gamal always brought little gifts for Abdel Kader's son, a beautifully woven jibba or a decorated spear, and Zeki would throw it for him. He had started throwing spears when he was only eight, the fact that he had such an accurate aim excited him. Even as a child, Zeki had thought of himself as a warrior, he couldn't wait to get on a horse and be sent

into battle. His impatience to inflict wounds on others was sometimes a bit disheartening for Abdel Kader. He liked to point out that even Zeki wasn't invincible.

It had to be said, though, that Gamal's importance at court made Zeki even more scornful of his father, putting Abdel Kader in an awkward position. The last few years, Zeki had thrived on two things. One was the fact that he was the ablest warrior in Madibbo's class – it meant he was set to become the ablest warrior in the Khalifa's service. The other was his feeling of contempt, occasionally mixed with pity, for his father – infinitely multiplied after Abdel Kader's plunder with his notes. It seemed these days Abdel Kader couldn't say anything about military campaigns that Zeki agreed with. Abdel Kader thought he knew quite a lot when it came to warfare in the Sudan, after all he'd been in a high position in the Egyptian government when he was only twenty-three, and that was only the beginning, after the uprising the Khalifa couldn't possibly have trained all his men without Abdel Kader's assistance. Yet he couldn't seem to say a word that Zeki approved.

"Who cares how Europeans win battles? We have enough men to flood the plains with them," Zeki had told him only last week – Abdel Kader had been reminiscing. "We don't need complicated strategies from someone whose own horse has been taken from him."

Abdel Kader didn't think much of it when Zeki said it but he thought about it later after Amira had reappeared in Tamal's harem. Losing her, losing Makkieh, the horse he'd had for nearly a decade, losing his notes and listening to his son declaring him obsolete made him sit under his lemon tree in such a gloomy state that he didn't even bother counting his geese. It was silly of course. Zeki had only just turned sixteen. He didn't know all about the military and politics even if Gamal let it on that Zeki would become an emir one day. It was just Abdel Kader's weak point at the moment. In the beginning the Khalifa had rarely let a day go past without inviting him to sit with him. People knew how much time he spent in the Khalifa's company and were impressed, but these days, after the burning of his Journals, not even a fool would call him powerful. Dismissed like this, it was hard to keep a cheerful face, especially hard because it wasn't an easy life. Not that Zeki knew anything about the workings of Fortuna's Wheel. Zeki's life was more like a bow shot into the sky, there was no doubt his star was ascending, whereas Abdel Kader's search for adventure and fame had taken him on a less predictable path, up into high offices, then down into captivity, up again to become his captor's trusted advisor, but lately, and without recourse, it seemed, down, just down – a palace guard who rarely got paid, who was accused of spying and failed with women, who rode a donkey that didn't even belong to him. He was

someone who bred geese to keep watch over his measly possessions, a man who didn't own a horse and couldn't afford to eat meat. "All good things come to an end," his Aunt Yolanda had been fond of saying, "only bad things continue forever."

In any case, being a captive for all these years, a loyal servant kept close to the heart of his master, as the Khalifa used to describe it, had to have an effect on the way someone thought of himself. So much time spent adulating a powerful madman meant it was hard to come up with something reasonable to say about the true situation of the country. Snippets of news, when they reached Omdurman, were distorted, blown out of proportion depending on the proclivities of the audience. Zeki just didn't understand the effect the Khalifa had on people. He was so bright he didn't even listen to his own teacher anymore.

Abdel Kader turned off the road into a narrow lane that was the first lane to your right if you were heading east past the palaces of the Khalifa's family. He brushed aside the turban that veiled his mouth and nose – early in the morning and close to the palatial garden was about the only time the air smelled good in Omdurman. It was difficult to see the reason for Ranya's nickname for Omdurman so close to the palaces and the mosque but past the Mahdi's tomb the air carried with it the whiff of decomposing animal bodies in the streets, and the closer one got to the market the thicker the air got, until one could see the corpses not only of animals but also of humans, starved or executed, blocking the way. The thought that there were so many without someone to care enough for a proper burial would make Abdel Kader feel immensely lonely. It was a good thing Ranya had been able to joke about it, this way he could say Corpse Colony and not feel quite so panicky. Alongside the path he was riding on, there was Osman's garden now, with the group of mimosa trees turning green against a pink background and the stars beginning to disappear.

Being able to make out the leaves on the trees made his panic subside, it did it every morning. He had survived another night serving the Khalifa, and a new day was about to start. All sorts of things were possible. Was it unreasonable to think his luck was about to change? Spin Fortuna's Wheel with confidence instead of anxiety, like Joseppi. Abdel Kader kept wishing that Joseppi would come home with him some day. There was nothing as tranquil and peaceful in Omdurman as the smell of the palace garden and Abdel Kader's geese. Though now, with Abdel Kader so clearly fallen from grace, Joseppi trembled with nervousness just by association.

Saadalla, the captain of the guards who had accused Abdel Kader of spying, wasn't even such a bad man. It was just that amongst the Khalifa's inner circle of guards there was constant competition for the Khalifa's attention and favour. It had been careless and stupid to allow someone to see him taking notes, even worse in his mother's tongue. Saadalla had just taken what opportunity Abdel Kader had given him.

When he reached the small laneway, Abdel Kader turned to look back at the palaces, a small distance away. It was a bit disappointing that Omdurman, except for the occasional rise, was completely flat. The palaces loomed large even at the distance, overbearing just like their inhabitants, competing with grandeur against the bright ball of sun that was bursting through the narrow lane. Abdel Kader turned and rode into the sun just as he got home.

Hopeful as the sunrise made him feel, it wasn't enough to hide the fact that Umm es Shole was getting very tired. Abdel Kader had had to borrow her for accompanying the Khalifa on his rides ever since the Khalifa had taken Makkieh away from him as punishment. Hassan could be relied on in cases like this, which was good for Abdel Kader because he still remembered how sore he felt back in the days when he had to run barefoot next to the Khalifa. Ranya's money hadn't come yet either, though Abdel Kader had heard from one of Elias' servants that she'd sent him a letter several months ago. Umm es Shole was coming into her years, a skinny donkey with long legs and a strong back who tended to feign lameness when she'd had enough. And after accompanying the Khalifa for a day and a half on his visits, she clearly had had enough. Abdel Kader didn't even have a chance to feed her properly when they were out, which Hassan no doubt wouldn't be pleased to hear.

The quicker Abdel Kader tried to get her home, the worse her limp got. As well, it had to be said that Umm es Shole smelled fairly bad as she was given to farting, which Hassan maintained was what happened to donkeys in old age. Abdel Kader wasn't so sure about it. In his opinion, Umm es Shole's farts were her way of getting her master's attention, which was usually directed at his goat Heba, Hassan's favourite. Instead of sending her outside town with his other goats, which were tended on the block of land Hassan and Abdel Kader owned, he kept her home. Sometimes he even allowed her to sleep on his angareb.

Umm es Shole looked innocent enough while she issued a terrible fart that sneaked its way into Abdel Kader's nose. Coughing, Abdel Kader drummed the donkey's belly with his heels, which he shouldn't have done. There was no animal more stubborn than Hassan's donkey. She gave off another

fart, buckled at her knees, and lay down, leaving Abdel Kader no other choice than to jump off and walk the rest of the way home.

He hadn't been walking long when he heard his geese chatting. He only kept a few at his house, and Yasmine was his favourite, a beautiful Egyptian goose, but she was still in mourning over Yasser's loss, whom Abdel Kader had been forced to sell to pay for what Amira had stolen at his friends' houses. Abdel Kader had heard it said that there were people who didn't like all the hissing and honking geese made but he loved to hear them on his way home. Their morning routine of flapping wings made them sound more numerous than they were, and because he'd had them since they were goslings they regarded him as their parent, greeting him with a lot more yearning than his own son.

When Abdel Kader came into the yard with Umm es Shole limping some distance behind him, his neighbour Hassan was overseeing his merchandise for the day, sitting on the only angareb he hadn't sold at previous occasions, eating cornmeal from a bowl and waiting for customers. Later, he would march with his merchandise to the market and engage in mind-boggling trading and bargaining schemes, which seemed to Abdel Kader, on the few occasions he had accompanied his friend, like a game of pass the parcel.

Hassan placed the cornmeal on the grass so Heba could reach, but Heba, his small brown pet goat who reached just above Hassan's knee, was sniffing around his merchandise instead, preferring to nibble on broken ostrich feathers and scented seeds, which together with ivory tusks and goats was Hassan's main area of expertise.

Hassan was a short potbellied Berber possibly in his sixties – he was vague about his age and didn't have any intention of letting it get in the way of his principal enjoyment, which was marissa, the locally brewed and decidedly illegal beer. He lived on cornmeal unless Selina and his other wives could squeeze out a meat feast from him. Roast mutton was Selina's proclaimed favourite but Hassan was careful with his money and would indulge his household in meat only once in a while.

"Meat makes her quarrelsome and anyway she's got bad teeth," Hassan usually said in his defence. Selina's father had worked in Kordofan for the government before the Mahdist uprising, which was in Hassan's opinion the root of her dietary requests.

“You know, the way her family indulged in meat, what else can you expect her to think about when she looks at my goats?” Hassan said.

It was Abdel Kader’s secret opinion that Hassan didn’t deserve Selina, a sweet grey-haired woman with a mouth of missing teeth and gloomy eyes, who had once been the wife of an important Egyptian official. Her father had killed himself after the siege because of an inability to part with his gold, at least that was what the gossip said, and her husband had escaped to Egypt and married a freed slave. This had left Selina in such a depressed state that all she would ask for now was a piece of mutton every few months. For Abdel Kader, the sadness of it was almost more than he could bear.

Sadness in women, once it left marks in their faces, made Abdel Kader feel strange things, of which protectiveness was the dominant one, and he would try to cheer them up given half a chance. Of course circumstances did not often permit him to do so. He thought it was his weakness for melancholia that made him fall for sad women, women like Amira. It was something Zeki detested in him, but Zeki wasn’t old enough to even notice something so plain as tears – and if he noticed he wouldn’t care.

But Abdel Kader did, tears got to him, which was the main reason he had tolerated Amira’s thievery for so long. He had always felt that she had good reason for turning bad and would, given some time, see the error of her ways. Pregnant when starting in his service, he had decided to claim her child as his though both knew it wasn’t, but her boy was born prematurely and died a week after. Hassan and Gamal called him crazy when he named these circumstances to excuse her behaviour, consisting mostly of stealing from his friends when accompanying him on visits – everything: spoons, knives, clothes, jewellery, rugs. She stole whatever items she could lay her hands on until she was no longer welcome in any of the houses he visited, not even Hassan’s.

Abdel Kader caught sight of Selina standing in the doorway and thought, oh goodness me, she looked so sad he felt obliged to make Hassan become more caring. It didn’t matter she was twice his age, he didn’t care about young or old when he felt tender, although he had a preference for older women. His infatuation with older women surely had something to do with Katharina, who had been the daughter of his commander in the Austrian army, back when he was just twenty but looked twelve years old. His duty in Bosnia had felt nothing like an adventure until he was invited to tea with his commander’s daughter. Tea turned into regular bridge sessions, and then Katharina fell in love with him, although she was almost thirty and had a religious side to her.

Without doubt Katharina made him appreciate older women, though she was so old she was desperate for marriage, which was revealed when she married his older brother Henry while she was back in Vienna to visit a sick aunt.

Hassan looked up from his cornmeal and saw Abdel Kader and his limping donkey, which was a nuisance but he asked about the Fest of Bairam first. Abdel Kader told him that most emirs had arrived with their soldiers and were setting up their tents outside the city walls. Then he squatted down to greet the goat. Heba was chewing on a piece of string and when Abdel Kader coaxed it out of her mouth she bleated at him and walked over to Hassan's other side.

"I have a way scaring women off," Abdel Kader joked. "You know it's still Ramadan?"

Hassan responded with a snort and adjusted his position on the angareb.

"You couldn't hurt that goat's feelings, not if you tried," Hassan said. "When you go in, ask Kapsun to bring me some marissa, the sun is giving me a headache."

"Now she's ignoring me," Abdel Kader said, pointing at Heba. "You should at least hold back with the marissa. How much are you paying in bribes anyway?"

"Enough to keep me alive and drunk," Hassan grumbled. During Ramadan, food and drink in the daytime were punishable by death. Drinking marissa was punishable by flogging and weeks of imprisonment no matter what month, but drinking marissa during Ramadan was the worst and could see Hassan, if not beheaded or hanged, at least without an arm and a leg. Not that Hassan cared. He treated his slaves better than his wives, gave his servants frequent presents and paid bribes to all of the Khalifa's spies and guards. Drinking marissa was what he did, and while waiting for his son Moussa to take the merchandise to the market, Hassan had a tendency to get completely drunk, which, if a customer happened to be of the hard-bargaining type, had the effect of Hassan haggling to the point where he would sell Selina in order to close a sale. Like everyone else, Hassan had dabbled in the slave trade, not liking it quite so much now that he was no longer completely free himself, but still defending it in a sort of roundabout way.

"So what's wrong with Umm es Shole, why didn't you ride her?" Hassan said.

"She threw me off in the lane," Abdel Kader said. "The last two days were too much for her."

Hassan grinned. "Have I ever told you the story behind her name?"

Abdel Kader nodded. He had heard the story many times, but Hassan told it anyway.

“When I sold her first foal, she got so upset that I changed her name to Umm es Shole – Mother of Shole. That calmed her down a bit. That, and bringing Shole back home.”

“She certainly wants to have things her way,” Abdel Kader agreed. “Is Zeki up yet?” Since their horse had been taken from them, Moussa had dropped Zeki off at Madibbo’s on his way to the market. It was usually Abdel Kader’s task to wake his son, but he was running late this morning. “Heba didn’t eat her cornmeal,” he added. Heba had wandered to the back of the yard and was staring at a weed. “You should swap her for one of my sheep. Sheep are less complicated, they have a winning personality.”

“Heba has a winning personality too,” Hassan argued. “But she worries me. She doesn’t eat these days.” He contemplated the communal bowl. The food was hardly touched. “I’ll call Selina to give her some grains. I’m going inside to get the marissa before Kapsun drinks it all.”

It was Gamal who had delayed Abdel Kader this morning. More accurately, it was the vague idea which was spreading through Omdurman that the world, as Mahdists and captives knew it, was coming to an end. Joseppi, at Mona’s insistence, had begun to develop an interest in religion and said there was no doubt the angels would be on the side of the Mahdists when it came to the final battle against the Government troops, but Gamal said this was nonsense and spent the next hours explaining why, of which Abdel Kader caught only bits and pieces. For one thing, Gamal said, everything was scarce and getting scarcer, with the exception of saltpetre, which was turned out in great quantities though doubtful quality. Besides, the number of true believers in the Mahdist cause was unknown – most townspeople were neither on the side of the fanatics nor the Government. They would simply wait to see who won Makki, and then try to adapt. So it might well be that the Government would win – high treason, his remarks, in the palatial gardens! – Joseppi and Abdel Kader were busy shushing him, but whoever knew Gamal knew it was near impossible to make him stop. Then Joseppi joked that if the end of the world arrived no one would notice because it would feel like just another bad day in Omdurman. That was when Abdel Kader’s mind veered off. Too much had been going on in the last few weeks to argue with his friends about “the End.” When the Khalifa discovered and burned his diaries, it had seemed like the end to Abdel Kader, only he had been given a new beginning. Lower rung on the social ladder, publicly humiliated by handing over Makkieh to the man who betrayed his secret (had the Khalifa had

an inkling of all this when he presented the horse to him, so aptly called “shackles”?), scorned by his own son, yet alive, given the possibility to rise like phoenix from the ashes. Perhaps the Khalifa had spared him so that he could help with the preparations for the Feast of Bairam? But he had curtailed Abdel Kader’s liberties so much and taken him down so far that it was difficult for Abdel Kader to see how he could be of help with anything. The Feast of Bairam, the trooping of the colours, games for a people who didn’t have bread. All of Omdurman was swept up in the hysteria that preceded the triennial troop review. There was this immense mass of people that descended onto the plains around Omdurman, all with their belongings and traditions, from the far corners of the country. Abdel Kader had to admit that it did feel like the apocalypse, all these people flocking into their city of gallows and cadavers.

Gamal tried to prove to Joseppi that because of the Khalifa’s cruelty no one in Omdurman could think of anything else but death. The end of the world, he argued, was less a theory of things to come than simply the reality of what they were living in already, a point that made Abdel Kader chuckle. Even Gamal had spent a night in the Saier, Omdurman’s hellhole of a jail, with its stench and filth and torment. Just thinking back Abdel Kader could feel again the weight of the chains around his ankles and hands, the pandemonium when at night time one batch of prisoners after the other was driven from the jail courtyard into the Umm Hagar, the black hole that was to be their quarters for the night, the ground filthy, foul and saturated with human excrement. With all of the prisoners inside, there was only room to stand, or be trampled to death. And when the doors opened again to drive in new prisoners for whom there was no room, the gaolers threw handfuls of blazing straw and grass into this underworld, working their whips heavily on the skin of the prisoners near the door. Yes, this was hell, and fire and blows rained onto the heads of the condemned. Oh, Abdel Kader would do almost anything not to be sent back to this nightmare.

He felt Gamal was right in all he said, and yet, Abdel Kader disliked his argument. Even though captivity could feel like the end, it also gave occasion to a fresh start. His own surrender and capture were the end of the governor Rudolf Slatin, but also the occasion of his rebirth as Abdel Kader, and it was the dervish Abdel Kader who served the Khalifa now, Abdel Kader whose notebooks had been discovered just before the Feast of Bairam, when the colours were trooped and emirs came from as far away as Darfur. One day, when the walls of Omdurman should fall or he finally decided to risk his escape, his captivity over, Rudolf Slatin would emerge once more, again master over his own life, and

the notes which had escaped destruction thanks to Hassan's quick wit would propel him to glamour and fame. Until then, and though he lived in captivity, there was a lot to enjoy. There was happiness in simple things like seeing the sun rise or eating meat when Ranya's money arrived. Being in love with a woman was another form of happiness, though in his experience love tended not to last. Even being in the Khalifa's service could make him happy sometimes. Seeing happiness in friendship and companionship made their life seem a lot less like the apocalypse, he and Joseppi agreed on that, and even Gamal had to admit it felt good not to be alone.

So their discussion had made him late, and he sat down to breakfast with his notebooks laid out before him, which put a sour look on Zeki's face as he came out. Abdel didn't pay much heed to it. Zeki had made such a fuss when he found out that Hassan had hidden some of his father's diaries, he tended to be upset every time he saw the books.

Zeki yawned and sat down, with sleep still in his eyes. He was wearing the blue cotton jibbas the Khalifa had once given Abdel Kader as a gift. He had always been a beautiful boy but lately he seemed to have developed such spectacularly good looks that Abdel Kader stopped chewing his dates for a moment just to look at his face. His son had one of those faces that you just wanted to eternalise, even Amira had said so a few times.

"Why do you even bother?" Zeki said after a big stretch. "Who wants to hear about your grovelling anyway?" Zeki's hair was curly and cropped very short, and his eyes were blue, which made him stand out from Madibbo's other students. His fingers went through his hair and brushed some lint from his forehead. His forehead was so much like Abdel Kader's brother's, he felt weird to be reminded of Henry every time he looked at his son. But Ranya was much taller than any in his family, and already now Zeki was a head taller than him. Abdel Kader felt he would forever remember the hot days last July, which was the last time he could look in his son's eyes without lifting his chin.

"Umm es Shole limped too much this morning, so I had to walk," Abdel Kader said, "and I wanted to write down everything while it was still fresh in my mind. You have to hurry, by the way, Moussa is nearly ready."

"Moussa is still fast asleep, and you know it."

"Then walk. Madibbo will be waiting."

"I'm not walking," Zeki said in his matter-of-fact voice. He rarely raised his voice and made everything, even questions, sound like he was stating facts.

“Zeki, you need to go, the Khalifa told Madibbo his students have to go to the Mosque. You can’t just stay home because your neighbour’s son is idle. We haven’t got a horse at the moment, you need to adapt,” Abdel Kader said. “When I first surrendered to the Mahdi, I had nothing for the first few years, not even a pair of proper sandals, and still I had to go on with my life.”

“Who said anything about my life?” Zeki answered and looked at him in that way he had which was so smug it put Abdel Kader’s love to the test.

“Prayer is part of life,” said Abdel Kader and felt ridiculous. It was an open secret he didn’t take religion seriously. Not even the Mahdi, back when he was still alive, fooled himself into thinking of Abdel Kader’s conversion as a matter of heart. But Abdel Kader liked structure in his son’s life. Like Hassan, Zeki wasn’t so particular about Ramadan. He finished off the tamarind juice that their servant had brought out and dug into the cornmeal and millet bread that were put in front of them.

“You should tell the Khalifa it’s Amira’s fault I can’t be at the prayers,” Zeki said between two big swallows. “Or his own. And yours. If he hadn’t taken Makkieh away from us, I wouldn’t be late anywhere.”

“The Khalifa felt he had to punish me. Makkieh belongs to Saadalla now, so better get used to it. And I don’t see what Amira has to do with it,” Abdel Kader said, but wished he weren’t always defending her. Gamal and Joseppi had been right about her from the start, she didn’t have an honest bone in her body. On the other hand, he had never met a woman like Amira, and surely her lot was as bad as anything. He felt tender just to think of the way she squinted at him, like a sleepy cat, and he refused to believe that a face like this could be without feelings. Zeki was way too young to understand this, in any case, it was nothing to discuss with your son. It was just, the way he had felt about Amira, he’d been completely swept off his feet, which obviously she hadn’t. So.

“When Mother’s money arrives, we won’t have enough to buy another horse because we will have to pay off the things Amira stole,” Zeki said. “From your friends.”

“She didn’t steal that much. She was confused after the boy died, it was her way of healing. She thought she would do us good. Moussa will be up soon, he’ll take you to Madibbo.” Abdel Kader tried to sound reassuring but Zeki was far too reasonable to be fooled. “Perhaps we could buy a very young horse,” Abdel Kader proposed. “Everybody’s a thief these days, Amira is no exception. We’ll sell off our sheep.”

“The Khalifa told me he came all the way from Darfur on a starving mule, and when he got to Khartoum the people called him a thief and tried to take it from him. After the Mahdi made him Khalifa, he had them hand over their best horses. Now, even his emirs got the finest selection of horses and mules,” Zeki said. “Maybe I’ll be one of them one day.”

“Oh, Zeki,” Abdel Kader said. “The Khalifa’s such a liar, not even the opposite of his lies are true. What’s he doing, telling young boys old stories? He’s twice my age.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” Zeki said.

“Just that it’s unlikely you’ll become an emir,” Abdel Kader said. “People like us don’t belong to the ruling class anymore. We are not trusted. What was he doing talking to you?”

“You mean you are not trusted. He called for Madibbo the other day. You go on being a servant for the rest of your life, if you like, but I won’t.”

“Oh, has the Khalifa forgiven Madibbo? But of course, their friendship goes back a long way,” Abdel Kader said, ignoring the rest. “Perhaps he needs him.”

Zeki smirked at that idea and Abdel Kader had to admit that no other face showed condescension quite as well as his son’s.

“He told Madibbo he was a lame donkey in a lion’s lair, so I don’t think that means he’s letting him command his troops again any time soon,” Zeki said. “Shouldn’t a chronicler like you pay more attention to details? Or is it dreaming?”

Abdel Kader didn’t know. Perhaps because, for a moment, the thought had entered his mind that if the Khalifa could forgive Madibbo, he would forgive him too. Of course, trust someone like Zeki to remind him that forgiveness was not what the world had come to expect from the Khalifa. When Madibbo brought the news of their defeat at Agordat against the Italians, the Khalifa had asked him only two things. The first was his inquiry into how his troops had fared.

“I led them to Paradise,” had been Madibbo’s answer.

“Then why did you not go with them?” the Khalifa replied, and Madibbo had been training boys for the army ever since.

“You know, Zeki, for someone who went around on a lame mule in his youth, the Khalifa surely feels free to criticise an awful lot,” Abdel Kader said.

“Well, things have changed, he’s the Khalifa now,” Zeki said. “People should be careful not to get him cross. It was silly of Madibbo not to fight till his death in the battle.”

"I can't believe you just said that. I thought you loved your teacher."

"Dying is more graceful than surrendering ... Dad."

"Is that how you think about me?"

"We're talking about Madibbo, aren't we? I'm just saying, if the Khalifa's generous enough to let Madibbo live, Madibbo ought to be grateful."

"There's no need to argue with me, Zeki, because I've known the Khalifa way longer than you have," Abdel Kader said, rising from their breakfast.

"Just because you spend a lot of time with someone doesn't mean you know them," Zeki remarked, giving another big stretch.

"So he only called for Madibbo to ridicule him? Is that what his old friends mean to him?"

"He didn't call to see Madibbo, Dad, he called to see me," Zeki said and stood up too. The geese, whom lifelong experience had taught to be weary of Zeki, hissed at him, warning him they'd bite if he came near. "You spent a lot of time with Amira too, Dad, but obviously you didn't know her very well either."

"Why did he call for you?" Abdel Kader wondered aloud, ignoring Zeki's snipe about Amira. The anxiety came back with a flush. Nothing was unthinkable with the Khalifa. Had he come up with a novel way of cruelty? Had he spared Abdel Kader's neck in exchange for his son's?

Zeki gave a shrug. "He wants me to come to the palace and show what I can do."

"Show what you can do?" Abdel Kader said. "What you can do with what?" His stomach muscles clenched and released, and an unbearable pain began to mount in his chest.

"What I can do with a horse and rifle, what else?" Zeki said, beckoning Kapsun to bring more tea.

Abdel Kader let out a sigh. He leaned against the brick wall for support. When he'd regained his bearings, he left the room and walked outside into the yard, right through his honking geese. He had known the Khalifa for over a decade, he was his servant, he saw him every night and most of every day, how could he think of asking his son to perform at the Feast of Bairam? Why the secrecy? The Khalifa must've called for Madibbo and Zeki on the day Abdel Kader wasn't feeling too well. Hadn't he wondered about the Khalifa being so concerned about his wellbeing? All the Khalifa wanted was an opportunity to speak to his son behind his back. But why?

Abdel Kader walked the length of his yard and stood by the thorned wall of bushes that cordoned off his private world. The Khalifa just never stopped, one minute he shared his meal with you, the next he sneaked up on your family behind your back. The very first words the Khalifa said to him the day he was brought in front of him had been confusing like that. He claimed to be his friend and protector, sent him food and servants, cared for him, but then he had him put in chains for nearly a month. It was his way to remind you that your life was his to condemn or pardon.

The geese had given up on waiting for food, they wandered around the yard with their chatter rising and falling, picking wistfully at the sandy ground. The sun was well up by now and it was beginning to get hot. Abdel Kader suddenly felt an urge to take his dervish clothes off. It was absurd of the Khalifa to ask Zeki to perform at the troop review, the boy had just turned sixteen, and Abdel Kader would be too busy in the next four days to look out for him.

By the time he undressed he had decided that he had more important things to worry about, such as where Ranya's money had disappeared to so he could pay for some of the things Amira had stolen, or whether he placed himself into too much danger by keeping his diaries. The fatigue of a night without sleep had begun to set in but he wished his argument with Zeki hadn't brought back Amira to his mind. He yawned and his thoughts went in all directions, which they did when he was very tired. In a state like this he felt vulnerable and raw, not the best time to think of her. Abdel Kader turned again, despite himself he found that his cheeks were getting damp. What use were his tears? Still his thoughts kept returning to Amira. It was true, he still was in love despite all her thievery, and despite what his friends said he kept thinking that perhaps she'd come back, not with Ranya's humour or Gamal's loyalty, not even with Joseppi's dependence, but with that complicated way she had, that innocence he refused to believe was unreal.

By the time Abdel Kader woke up in the afternoon, Hassan's son had come back from the market and Hassan had switched from beer to date schnapps, as was his usual response to a slow day. He was rubbing Heba's back, leaning heavily on her. The bowl of cornmeal was still on the ground, the cornmeal in it hard and dry as bricks.

“So what did Moussa sell?” Abdel Kader asked as he sat down next to Hassan to drink his tea but Kapsun had made it too strong and Abdel Kader poured it into Heba’s bowl. His head was still full with a bad dream he’d had about Amira where she showed up on a young new horse and waved a leather purse around. Somehow, without a word being spoken, Abdel Kader knew the purse contained Ranya’s money.

“Moussa sold the ostrich feathers,” Hassan said with a gloomy face.

“That’s good,” guessed Abdel Kader enthusiastically. The news that Hassan’s lazy good-for-nothing son had been able to move a bunch of bent and broken feathers must have made Hassan proud.

“What’s so good about that?” complained Hassan and offered up a coin for Abdel Kader to inspect.

“Silver,” Abdel Kader said. “Perhaps he didn’t see.”

“What do you mean, he didn’t see? Are you trying to say my firstborn is blind as well as dumb?”

“Some of the fake copper coins almost look like silver,” Abdel Kader said. “What are you going to do with it?”

“What *can* one do with it? If I use it at the market, one of the Khalifa’s spies might notice, and then they will search my place. Again.”

“They didn’t find your marissa last time.”

“You’re such a fool.” Hassan gave a wobbly sigh. “I’m sorry, but it had to be said. This coin is useless to me. He might as well have given the feathers away for free. There is nothing I can buy with this piece of misery. There is no more silver in Omdurman. When I pay with it, everyone will assume I have more hidden somewhere, instead of having paid my dues to the Khalifa’s treasury.”

“Do you?” It was something Abdel Kader had always wondered about.

“If I did, I wouldn’t tell you,” Hassan said with a sour face. His jar was almost empty. He rubbed Heba between the horns, looking at her wistfully. “I think Heba thinks she’s human.” Heba had been chewing on the string of Hassan’s leather sandals and stopped at the mention of her name to stare into the distance.

“No, she knows she’s a goat,” Abdel Kader said. “How is Umm es Shole feeling?”

“Don’t know, haven’t asked,” Hassan said. “I don’t speak donkey.”

“Well, you can use your silver coin when Omdurman is again under Government control,” Abdel Kader said. “Until then, hide it. And teach Moussa to ask for copper the next time.”

“See. Heba’s drinking your tea. Just like a human,” Hassan interrupted, clearly uninterested in discussing his son’s foolery any further.

“No, that’s very goat-like,” Abdel Kader said. “It’s just hibiscus tea. Goats eat everything.”

It was a hot, overcast day, the clouds forming a thick layer over the mountains in the distance. There was so much heat coming off the ground that it gave Abdel Kader a headache to squint at the yard.

“Hassan, has Zeki told you anything about the Khalifa asking to see him?” he asked. Hassan spent so much time with Zeki and had never fallen out with him, so sometimes it was just easier to snoop around Hassan if Abdel Kader wanted to find something out about his son.

Heba suddenly stopped gazing into the distance, bleated and ran the length of Hassan’s yard, where she stopped and bleated again.

“See, human behaviour,” Hassan said.

“How is that human behaviour? I’ve never seen a person bleating at a weed.”

“She’s not bleating at a weed, she wants to mate. Human behaviour.”

“Well, it’s breeding season, perhaps that’s it,” Abdel Kader said.

“Zeki only ever wants to talk about Amira,” Hassan said. “Why did you allow her to steal from us? Don’t you respect your friends?”

“You make it out like I goaded her on,” Abdel Kader complained. “You know I’m nothing without you.”

“Then do your son and yourself a favour, and don’t forget it the next time a pretty face catches your fancy. She wasn’t even so pretty anyway, there was something asymmetrical about her face.”

“She was pretty. Is. She is better looking than half of the Khalifa’s harem.”

“How would you know? Did you have a peek?”

“I think I’ll go and see Elias, perhaps Ranya’s money has come.” Abdel Kader shook his head. It was pointless to argue with Hassan when he was cross about something. “If we’re lucky we can get us at least a mule of some sort.” A pause, then Abdel Kader took a deep breath. “Hassan, did Zeki tell you anything about the Khalifa or not?”

“Don’t come to me snooping about your son’s secrets,” Hassan said. “We all warned you about Amira, yet you still let her steal Selina’s shawl. Besides, he’s nearly a man. Rein him in too much and he will buckle. At least he has secrets. Moussa is too dumb even for that.”

“But I’m his father,” Abdel Kader said, a comment to which Hassan found nothing to add.

Abdel Kader sighed and set off down the sandy path to Elias. Elias lived on the way to the mosque, in one of the whitewashed brick buildings of the upper class, just the right distance from Abdel Kader’s house if you were in the mood for a walk.

When he had come close enough to make out the trees in Elias’ garden, Abdel Kader’s apprehension returned. He half-expected to look up and straight into Amira’s face, sitting on a young sturdy mare right outside Elias’ house. Abdel Kader’s heart jumped when he saw a horse approach, he had taken notice of the dust cloud before and was now convinced that the rider would be Amira.

When the horse came closer, it turned out to be one of Elias’ guards who gave him a toothy grin and waved a hand at him.

“And a good afternoon to you, Abdel Kader,” he called before Abdel Kader could say anything. “I will see if the letter has arrived.” He dug his heels in the pony and sped off along the zariba.

Abdel Kader stared after him, his ears drumming with all the blood that had rushed to his face. His heart beat was slowly returning to normal as the dust cloud on the road settled. Finally he was approached by one of Elias’ servants who handed him Ranya’s letter.

“It came in this morning. Babakr ran into some trouble in Berber and was delayed for weeks,” the servant said. “Elias hopes to see you as soon as the Khalifa’s schedule allows.”

That Elias was so scared of the Khalifa that he didn’t want to have tea with his disgraced brother-in-law seemed worse to Abdel Kader than the fact he rarely helped them out with money. Abdel Kader opened the letter and quickly scanned Ranya’s note. There was no money enclosed. The servant bade him goodbye and went back to Elias’ comfortable house. A skinny cat stretched her paws and retreated under a hole in some thorn bushes. Abdel Kader was standing on the road with a sinking feeling. Instead of sending him any money, Ranya had given him the name of a man who had a camel waiting for Abdel Kader, willing to secure his escape. Perhaps she hadn’t got his last letter, explaining to her that Zeki wasn’t willing to leave Omdurman. Ever since the Khalifa had decided he couldn’t trust him anymore, Abdel Kader felt spies taking note of his every step. Everything he did, said or even

thought was reported back to the palace. Besides, did Ranya really think he would slip away, leaving his only child behind?

When he finally started to walk home it was a slow and uncomfortable affair. Abdel Kader was in no hurry, he was still entertaining his little fancy in which Ranya's money allowed him to buy a horse and some meat to eat, and he wanted to stay in his dream as long as he could. What would Hassan or Gamal and Joseppi have to say about Ranya's money being converted into what they called "escape currency"? What would Zeki say?

Hassan had not slowed down his drinking in the meantime, but when he heard of what happened he sat up on his angareb.

"Do you want to leave?" Hassan asked his friend, but the question in itself was so complicated it required him to pour himself a fresh jar.

"No!" Abdel Kader shook his head. "No. What do you mean, do I want to leave? Zeki belongs to Omdurman. I belong here. The Government troops will come, one of these days, you will see. Until then, I will bide my time. Life's not that bad. Anyway, Zeki needs me. And if I left, my escape would be noticed straight away. The Khalifa would punish Zeki."

"So, would you leave if you could, without the Khalifa punishing your son?"

Abdel Kader gave an exasperated sigh. Why talk about things that were of no use? The Khalifa had set a not too benevolent eye on his prime captive after the discovery of his diaries. The fault was not, as Zeki believed, any failing on Abdel Kader's side, but rather the Khalifa's nature. Sometimes, the Khalifa acted like a lost explorer himself, stranded in a desert or mosquito-infested marshland, with no direction to go. Gamal once said that whomever the Khalifa embraces, he betrays. That was the way he ruled the city, it was the way he ruled his people, and Abdel Kader had a long list of names of men who had suddenly found themselves in chains on a ship to Reggaf. Just think of Madibbo, who could count himself lucky to be still alive and here, and all he'd done was lose a battle.

"You think I should offer this Mohammed to sell the camel and split the money?" Abdel Kader said, showing Hassan Ranya's letter.

"Why would he agree to give you the money if he can have the lot, without the risk of aiding you in your escape?" Hassan said, but then called for Selina to see if any of his servants knew where he could find Mohammed Belal.

Abdel Kader waited for Hassan in the yard. The sun was at its hottest just before it began to set, and he felt a burning in his face but maybe it was just his low mood, he rarely complained about the heat. Hassan was in a bad mood too because Selina and his other wives were quarrelling and demanding him to take sides. He drank another cup of aragi, although the date spirit was still young and gave him diarrhoea practically the moment he drank it, while Abdel Kader spent an eternity convincing Hassan that Selina was most deserving of his support. Then the wives' fight erupted into the yard and their shrieks and hair-tearing brought Hassan's mood to boiling point.

"You!" he roared and grabbed for the nearest arm in reach. It was Selina's. "I will have you sent to the Saier if you don't stop right now."

Like most of Hassan's wives, Selina had occasionally been confined to the women's prison when Hassan had wanted to teach her a lesson. The thought of spending time doing a servant's hard labour quieted her, and in hushed tones the wives took their discussion back inside. When Hassan went in to check if they were getting on again, Abdel Kader waited for him for nearly an hour before he decided that his friend must have fallen asleep.

Gamal had a few good qualities but the best, without doubt, was his compassionate side. Although it was shortly before sunset, he had time for his friend. The moment he saw Abdel Kader walk with Hassan's donkey into his courtyard, he knew something was wrong.

"Did anything happen to Umm es Shole," he asked, assuming Abdel Kader's woes were horse-related.

"She's got a temper and a limp." Abdel Kader took his friend by the arm. "Is that an omen? Is it time for me to leave?"

Gamal, when he found out the source of Abdel Kader's worries, ushered him inside and made him sit down on his most comfortable angareb while his servants brought out dates and honey water. Abdel Kader would have preferred maybe something a little stronger, he knew that Gamal had not only date wine but also a secret stash of grape wine from southern Egypt; perhaps they could find out if the contents were still drinkable after all those years. But Gamal said there was no way he was letting Abdel Kader have alcohol right now, not at this vulnerable stage, besides it was technically still Ramadan. He

was afraid Abdel Kader would fall off the horse carriage if he gave him anything stronger than tea. The carriage had been the Khalifa's idea for this year's Feast of Bairam. It had belonged to one of the former Governors-General of Khartoum and had been stored away in the treasury until two horses were trained well enough to draw the vehicle. At the beginning of the troop review, right after the prayers at sunrise the following morning, it was Abdel Kader's and Joseppi's job to hang on to either side of the horse carriage, which would bring the Khalifa from the mosque through the city gates to a black flag on the western stretches of the parade ground, where his quarters had been set up and from where he could watch his troops file past. Abdel Kader had no fear of falling off, he had been practising it for over a month now, but it was also true that he had a very low tolerance for alcoholic beverages, so he contented himself with the sweetened water.

"Well, do you want to leave?" Without knowing it, Gamal repeated Hassan's question.

But Abdel Kader didn't really want to think about it in so much detail right now. He looked around Gamal's place, hoping some new servants or someone from the palace would show up. He wasn't sure if Gamal knew how often Ranya had made plans for his escape. There was for example April of two years ago, when no other than Babakr Abu Sebiba, the former chief of the Dongola camel postmen, had been sent to Omdurman from Egypt to come for Abdel Kader. Unfortunately, Babakr, sent first to Berber to procure racing camels for the flight, arrived in Omdurman with a new wife instead, aroused the Khalifa's suspicion, became nervous and finally fled back to Cairo by himself. It had taken Abdel Kader months to learn the whole story.

"You see, Gamal, I don't think she understands how impossible an escape is at the moment," Abdel Kader said.

"She knows you're constantly being watched."

"She knows, she knows. But I don't think she really understands. I told her not to do anything until another year or two have passed but there you go, that's her response to it. Ranya has a will of her own," Abdel Kader said. "She's not like you or me. She doesn't listen to reason."

Not that I have much reason left either, Abdel Kader thought, holding up his empty cup for Gamal's servant so that he could refill it. He had to wave it about, Gamal's servants were all clustering in the back around one of the Khalifa's little boy-servants who supplied Gamal's household with all the new gossip in exchange for a measure of durra.

Gamal was a good listener and generous friend, but he was not very patient when someone was indecisive.

“Look, you either take the opportunity and leave or you better try and get some money from Ranya so you can get yourself a horse.”

“A horse, a horse, a kingdom for a horse,” Abdel Kader joked but stopped when he saw Gamal sit stone-faced before him. “We need to see Madibbo.” Abdel Kader told Gamal about Zeki, grateful to have found an opportunity to change the subject. But to his surprise he found his news didn’t seem unusual to his friend at all.

“Would you give your blessings if the Khalifa wanted him to join the guards?” Gamal asked.

“The guards?” Abdel Kader’s voice came out a few notches too loud. Gamal’s servants looked at him with curiosity. Abdel Kader leaned forward. He tried to stay calm. “The guards, Gamal? Heavens, no! Is that what you think? The Khalifa wants my son to join his guards? No, this can’t be right. He’s barely over fifteen.”

“Well, think about it.” Gamal put his hand on Abdel Kader’s arm. “Omdurman talks. It heralds your son as one of the finest –“

“Gamal, stop. You make it sound like angels and stuff. You’re spending too much time with Joseppi.”

“Why do you think it’s so impossible that the Khalifa wants Zeki to join the guards?”

“Impossible, yes, you’re right. It’s impossible.”

“And if it were not? If it were possible? Would you give your blessing?”

“Would I give my blessing? Gamal, have you lost your mind? He would have to give up his life for the Khalifa,” Abdel Kader said. Gamal cocked an eyebrow. It was true, it was a strange response from someone who’d done exactly that for the past twelve years. He remembered. In the beginning, when he felt his life was over after his surrender to the Mahdi, it was Gamal who had persuaded him not to give up hope. Abdel Kader had spun various escape plans, none of which had born any fruit, and he’d quite given up on the prospect of ever leading a life of freedom again. Then Gamal had come along. He’d spent a lot of time with him when Abdel Kader waited for the Khalifa in the open square outside his palace and pointed out to him that he might as well start to enjoy his changed circumstances. After all, adventure was what Abdel Kader had left Europe for, and besides, there was much to be gained from his new position, Gamal argued, and gave the frequent gifts of servants and concubines

as an example. So Abdel Kader found fresh hope, not at all sure that it was really what he ought to do, and finally he began to think that Gamal was right.

But Zeki was just sixteen, at that age he would never have sworn the pledge of allegiance to anyone, probably not even if Katharina had asked him to, and he had loved Katharina a lot.

“Madibbo says that Zeki could easily become troop leader if he continues his training,” Abdel Kader said.

“And why would he want to become troop leader if he could become chief of the Khalifa’s guards?” Gamal asked.

“Now you have really lost your mind,” Abdel Kader said, but Gamal persisted.

“Think about it. He’s the best.”

“He’s a child.”

“If that’s what he wants, would you still be against it? And why would he *not* want it?”

Abdel Kader didn’t really know why himself, all he knew was the growing suspicion that something was going on in Omdurman. Something concerning his son. Something that made his skin crawl and tingle in a most unpleasant way. Something that made him question his friends’ loyalty. He had the feeling that Hassan, and now Gamal too thought they knew his son better than he did. But Zeki was his son. Being chief of the palace guards was an honour, Abdel Kader was the first to admit. But then his life would be bound to the Khalifa’s, and the Khalifa never left Omdurman. The guards’ main task was to wait for the Khalifa, every day of every week. For someone who dreamed of taking whole countries in battle and who got bored easily, it didn’t make a lot of sense. And if Joseppi was right and the end was coming, if the Government troops were about to descend on Omdurman, would Zeki be prepared to stand and fall for his master? It made Abdel Kader shudder just to think about it.

Besides, there was the Khalifa to consider. Like lions, he left the heads of his prey untouched, but he devoured the rest, dead or alive. What kind of father would he be, sending his son to the lion’s lair?

“Do you think the Khalifa is trying to get more control over me through Zeki?” Abdel Kader asked. “You know how easily impressed Zeki is by power and –” He paused. For a moment he hadn’t been sure whether he was talking about his son or himself. “Could the Khalifa want Zeki to spy on me?”

“Abdel Kader, has anyone ever told you that you shut your eyes to reality?” Gamal said in a voice that was deeply sorry. The cluster of chattering servants was resolving in the back. From the door,

the boy servant flashed a wide smile at him. Even that seemed suspicious to Abdel Kader. What had happened to him in the span of the last few weeks, while Amira's grief and betrayal had reigned over him?

Gamal, fed up with just sitting around and sucking on a date, brought an end to Abdel Kader's contemplations.

"Let's go to Joseppi," he said, even though sunset was nearly upon them and they were expected at the mosque. "You know the Khalifa saw him today."

"Perhaps they finally took Joseppi's chains off," Abdel Kader said to Gamal. For the past month, Joseppi had been forced to serve the Khalifa in shackles, an improvement of the month before, which Joseppi had spent in the Saier. The chain of events that had led Joseppi into jail had been unfortunate even for Joseppi's standards of bad luck, and to be able to fully appreciate it required an understanding of the kind of family Joseppi came from. A family, bourgeois and hypochondriac, had seen Joseppi grow up in Prague as the youngest in a family who sought and feared pain in equal parts. Pain, or its absence, lay at the heart of every Sunday lunch, and the lack of any aches was viewed with great suspicion. An arthritic aunt, who hadn't felt any pain for a few days, might for example say, supported by great sighs and heavy breathing, "God knows, my hands have gotten worse, I can't feel a thing."

That this might be in virtue of the new treatment would be considered inappropriately optimistic. In the same vein, the maternal grandfather would give a smile of satisfaction before announcing that his headache was back, and with a vengeance, just as predicted. Though Joseppi was far removed from his family physically, he'd grown closer to them in spirit the older he got. Behind a soreness in his fingers loomed arthritis; a headache pounding away behind his eyebrows indicated brain fever; indigestion was an ulcer, or at least kidney stones; a cough, bronchitis. And if he happened to be feeling fine, his face would darken, as God only knew what trouble lay ahead.

In this case, the excitement and pressures associated with the Feast of Bairam had given Joseppi a bad headache. Given his low pain threshold he felt so unwell that he had conceded to Mona's wisdom and allowed her to bring a man into his house who claimed to be able to cure headaches by reciting verses from the Koran and spitting in the patient's face. Unfortunately, this man, a certain

Shwybo of the Fellati, had worked up a reputation in Omdurman as an alchemist by claiming to control the jinns who converted copper into silver. A precious metal, silver, and rare – there was no more in Omdurman. More precisely, all the silver coins had been swallowed by the massive vault of the Khalifa's treasury, his Beit-el-Mal. Hungry for more, the Khalifa lent an eager ear to all self-proclaimed alchemists, controllers of jinns, converters of sand to powder and dust to lead. Shwybo, bolder than most, held his trust and had been given incense, drugs, spices and bagfuls of copper coins, setting off to work while the Khalifa waited impatiently for results. And then, who should come along but guileless Joseppi, bent double by the force of his headache and the worry of his duties, guided by his well-meaning wife Mona. Who had said what was unclear to Gamal and Abdel Kader, the only thing they knew for sure was that Joseppi had been conned into handing over his meagre pay to Shwybo in exchange for a cure – spit or otherwise, Joseppi at that point didn't care much anymore. But when the Khalifa sent impatient inquiries as to Shwybo's alchemistic progress, Shwybo, unable to produce any silver, used Joseppi's distractions as an excuse. Bad luck in the extreme.

Both were sent to the anvil in the Saier where the gaolers hammered and cold-welded their anklets and foot chains until the weight was so heavy it cut into Joseppi's flesh. They were sentenced to a life in fetters until the Khalifa's wrath had died down. In Shwybo's case, this would be when he emerged with the first silver coins from his experiments. And in Joseppi's? God only knew.

"Life is suffering", Aunt Yolanda would've said, and it occurred to Abdel Kader that his friend would probably have gotten along well with his aunt.

After a while, however, the Khalifa had seemed mollified. He allowed Joseppi back in his service but when he didn't need him, he sent him back to the Saier, where Mona had been able to secure Joseppi the comfort of a mud-hut in the courtyard, sparing him from spending nights in the Umm Hagar, the common cell where the prisoners were secured each night until sunrise. This was where Gamal and Abdel Kader found Joseppi just before sunset, sitting by himself, visibly shaken, wiping his face with his hands.

"What is going on in Omdurman," Gamal said in a joking voice, "that's changing the Khalifa's lions into lambs?"

Abdel Kader waved off. He'd had enough mention of lion for one day, and it was clear that Joseppi had a tale to tell as well.

Joseppi was a tall man, on the surface by far a more capable soldier than Abdel Kader, but he lacked confidence, and it wasn't wise of Gamal to mention the Khalifa. Even without fetters Joseppi lived in dread of his master more than any form of disease. In all, Joseppi had married every woman the Khalifa had sent to him, even though they were obviously spies, and rarely missed a prayer at the mosque, not even when he was so sick with fever he could hardly walk.

"Why that face, Joseppi, isn't the Khalifa going to take your chains off?" Abdel Kader asked.

"The chains have been doubled, but that's not the worst," Joseppi said. "Idris is losing too many prisoners. From now on, I'll have to spend the night in the Umm Hagar."

That silenced Gamal and Abdel Kader for a moment. The common cell was a punishment like no other. With no ventilation, the groans of men dying of fever and small-pox, in only the dimmest of lights and the din from prayers, curses and the clanking of chains, packed with prisoners dealing blows and uttering curses in their fight for a place near the wall or pillar, there was not enough room to wipe your own nose. Standing room only, the night was spent in agony and fear, sleep an impossibility.

Gamal and Abdel Kader sat down. Abdel Kader was thinking what to say but couldn't really find anything.

"Think about it for a moment," Joseppi said, with a tremble in his voice, as only Joseppi could. "Me alone in the Umm Hagar tonight. They will carry me out in the morning, the life crushed out of me."

"The Khalifa won't allow it," Gamal reassured Joseppi. "He still needs you for the Feast of Bairam."

"I thought he was going to order your chains to be taken off," Abdel Kader said. "What in God's name did you do to make him reconsider?"

"Nothing. It wasn't my fault," Joseppi said.

Gamal and Abdel Kader made doubtful faces.

"Really, you have to believe me. It's Shwybo's fault. He's a fraud. The Khalifa has run out of patience. He had him flogged in the afternoon."

"Of course Shwybo's a fraud," Gamal said. "I guess you can count yourself lucky that you're not getting a flogging too."

This made Joseppi so gloomy he chewed on his lip in a dejected state until Idris, the head-gaoler, walked up to him and told him that the Khalifa had sent for Joseppi to attend the troop review with the other guards. His chains were to be taken off for that purpose.

“But the anklets stay on,” Idris warned Joseppi. “And you are to return to the Saier when you are not on duty.”

“See? I told you the Khalifa wouldn’t risk losing you,” said Gamal as they were leaving the Saier with his arm around Joseppi’s shoulders. “Where’s the bad luck you always claim? Getting released from the Saier just as the sun is setting! I wish the escape money could be handled as easily.”

“Whose escape money?” Joseppi asked with alarm in his voice.

“My escape money, and we think we can convert it into real money,” Abdel Kader said.

Both looked at him as if he’d gone mad, but Abdel Kader pretended not to notice it. To his relief, the close escape from a night in the hell hole prevented Joseppi to say much more than that God would probably show Abdel Kader the right direction. Eager to show his master that he deserved freedom, Joseppi hurried his friends along as the sunset was coming to an end. Abdel Kader wasn’t in quite the same rush. The Khalifa usually spent the night before the Feast of Bairam awake. But then again, it seemed to Abdel Kader that he never slept.

Night time had fallen over Omdurman but they were only a few yards away from the palace. Abdel Kader took his time riding towards the mosque, he dreaded facing the Khalifa and didn’t trust his face not to betray any of the news. But Gamal and Joseppi were already inside, so he got off his horse. He swapped a look with Ahmed, the boy who acted as messenger between the guards and the Khalifa and who usually informed Abdel Kader of any new spies the Khalifa had set up for him.

Ahmed gave an encouraging nod that meant the Khalifa was in a good mood, and it cheered Abdel Kader up but by the time he entered the mosque there was Saadalla, the captain of guards who had brought Abdel Kader’s secret to the Khalifa’s attention and had received Makkieh in return. Saadalla’s face, as he looked at Abdel Kader, was so grim that it ruined the night for Abdel Kader.

Worse than Saadalla’s face was the fact that the Khalifa’s niche in the mosque smelled of camel shit, most likely because one of the Khalifa’s guards had stepped in it. At first the other guards tried breathing through their mouths until the smell went away, but it didn’t work.

“Saadalla, does the man have a blocked nose or what?” Abdel Kader asked. “Someone has to tell him to go outside.”

“Do I look like a messenger to you?” the captain asked.

“Saadalla, you always take things the wrong way. Someone has to tell him is all,” Abdel Kader sighed and went towards the niche. Probably the guard had stepped into the shit on purpose. He didn’t like to spend his time in the mosque and always thought up ways to be sent outside.

Abdel Kader joined the others to find Joseppi standing in the middle showing off his anklets and telling the tale of his close escape, though the only one who seemed to be interested was Sebiba, the other guards were more interested in pushing the man with the offending smell outside, who resisted because a heavy downpour had just set in outside and he didn’t want to get wet.

The Khalifa’s niche was massive, more like a private square inside the mosque, with columns that were connected by beautifully wrought ironwork, and Abdel Kader always felt at home and at peace there. He had spent so many hours in it that he was convinced he would probably still dream about it on his deathbed. Joseppi’s place was next to him, they were positioned to the right of the niche, and when Joseppi assumed his position he tried to adjust his anklets by shaking first one foot, then the other.

“Joseppi, you’re making me nervous, stop wiggling around and just stand still,” Abdel Kader said, his voice almost drowned out by the sound of rain on the roof.

“Shwybo is going to be my ticket to Reggaf, I know he is,” Joseppi said.

The atmosphere among the guards on their side of the Khalifa’s niche was quite gloomy anyway. Mudasser, standing next to Joseppi, had a pregnant wife and was being sent to Berber with Yakup, the Khalifa’s brother, for an indefinite time. And there was Yasser who was from Kordofan and had left a beautiful cousin he was going to marry, only they were both too poor to be wed. Now the Khalifa had found a rich old widow who was crazy about him and the wedding was supposed to be held in another week or two.

Abdel Kader yawned and leant against the wall.

“Why you were in such a rush to leave the Saier I don’t know,” he said to Joseppi. “Listening to prayers all night is worse.”

“One of these days,” Joseppi began, but Abdel Kader waved him off. Just because Joseppi had recently found God didn’t mean he had to as well, but this was a point impossible to argue with Joseppi. Eager to bring Abdel Kader on board, he didn’t stop talking about God and religion for hours, and Abdel Kader usually indulged him. Only tonight, he found, he had other things to think about. Real things.

Important things. Things he would like to see sorted out before his son started a rumour that would sweep like fire through Omdurman.

As Abdel Kader had finished scanning the crowd for faces he knew, he caught a glimpse of the faces he feared. Like a tongue drawn to a loose tooth, he returned his gaze to the Khalifa, who was busy talking to Saadalla. Abdel Kader found it impossible to suppress a smile. Judging by Saadalla's face the Khalifa hadn't told him anything pleasant. The guard looked tight and strained. He was about Abdel Kader's age but stockier with bushy eyebrows that showed whatever emotion went on behind his eyes – outrage at the discovery of Abdel Kader's diaries, satisfaction when his books were burnt, gloating when Abdel Kader handed over Makkieh. Now they showed something more complicated, something Saadalla worked hard to contain, but it seeped from him nonetheless. It was obvious. The Khalifa was giving him a lecture of a most unpleasant sort. Abdel Kader was infinitely relieved not to be at the receiving end.

Now what should he do about Zeki? He dreaded the Khalifa, but he dreaded insinuations even more. He had to get to the bottom of it and had hoped to be able to do so before sunrise. It could have been so easy even a few weeks ago. Before his notebooks were discovered, the Khalifa might have waved him over and instigated a conversation. But now Abdel Kader had been demoted and anyway, the Khalifa was busy with Saadalla. It was nearly time. Abdel Kader dived past Joseppi outside. When the Khalifa was in one of his moods he kept adjusting his skull-cap to keep it from sliding down in his face, he hated ill-fitting garments. In the twelve years that he had known the Khalifa the only change was that he was now fatter, he used to eat only the simple roast meat and asida dishes that his wife Sahra cooked for him, but after the conquest of Khartoum his household had acquired lots of women acquainted with more exotic cookery and he had decided that he had to keep up with his new wives' knowledge.

The rain had stopped and dawn was about to break. Gamal was outside checking the horses and rifles, on his face was an anxious sort of squint but things were going well as far as Abdel Kader could tell. He and the other guards wore Remingtons for the troop review which had been brought out of the Beit-el-Mal. The guards were in full uniform for the approaching festivity, and the turbans were

so large they needed help to wind them around the helmets. Over the years, Abdel Kader had learned the importance of adjusting the turban so it sat right. Together with the helmet, a dervish's headgear could become very heavy and you could end up with a crooked back for the rest of the week. Abdel Kader had his servants fiddle with his turban until he was convinced it sat right.

"The Khalifa was arguing with Saadalla. Perhaps I'll get Makkieh back," Abdel Kader said to Gamal as he was waiting for the turban to be finished. It was a dazzling white and he had to admit that it felt impressive, being a turbaned dervish. The way people gasped when they saw him and the other guards come up on their horses!

"Saadalla is finished but you won't get Makkieh back. Bend this way, Yusef can't reach," Gamal said, pushing a little on his friend's shoulder. While Abdel Kader turned his neck right and left to make sure the turban was on properly, the other guards filed out, Joseppi still wearing his anklets.

"Makkieh is going into the Beit el Mal, along with Saadalla's wife, as everybody knows," Gamal said and moved to Mudasser, leaving Abdel Kader again with the feeling that he was out of touch with what was going on around him. The feeling was becoming familiar, too familiar for Abdel Kader's liking. How come he had stopped noticing such things like the Khalifa absorbing the wife of one of his captains into his own harem? Wasn't that why he, like everyone else, had his spies in the Khalifa's household? There had been a time when he knew the Khalifa had to do a shit before he could even smell the farts, so what had happened? Maybe it was Amira who had made him blind towards Omdurman, as Zeki always said. He had to admit that he hadn't really listened to all the gossip his spies had passed on, often he hadn't even listened to what Gamal and Joseppi were discussing at the moment.

When the Bazingers began to line up on their horses, Abdel Kader climbed carefully on the carriage, taking some deep breaths while waiting for the guards to fall in line behind them.

Past the entrance of the mosque he saw the Khalifa still in the niche, still holding up Saadalla with a stern-looking face, although the guards couldn't start the procession without him. He could hear the people outside rumble and jostle for the best position. They were generally impatient before a parade and pushed their neighbours to get a better spot.

The servants were still adjusting Joseppi's turban. It tilted to the back but finally they gave up and hustled him up on the carriage. The horses were driven by a very handsome Kordofan man named Ebtar Idris, a distant cousin of Ranya. The only thing that could cut through Ebtar Idris' cool demeanour was the sight of his own beautiful face, and occasionally a game of Egyptian dice. Like her cousin,

Ranya had a very high opinion of herself and lacked the submissiveness that was so common among women here. Abdel Kader had done his best to applaud her confidence, even going so far as to marry her, but he soon found out that her confidence didn't require any further boost from him. The thing she said most often towards the end was "There's got to be more to life." Gamal had explained to him that for a woman like Ranya the world was a small place. Some women were like birds, you just couldn't cage them.

High up on the carriage, with all the guards and soldiers finally assembled in the square before the Beit el Amana, where the Khalifa kept his armies guns and weapons, Abdel Kader bit back tears. He was married to a woman he hadn't seen in ten years.

The tears were new but before Abdel Kader had time to wonder why they were coming so easy these days it was finally time to head out. The horses were pawing the ground impatiently, the war-drums were beaten, the Khalifa began to walk towards the carriage, the morning light flooded the square, the carriage began to inch forward, and a moment later, when the bright sun struck the ivory of the war horn, Abdel Kader lifted the rifle over his head and shook it to the cheers of the crowd.

Part 2: The Warrior

Meher

“As if my own father didn’t annoy me enough,” Zeki said to Moussa. “It seems everybody is sticking their nose into my business these days.” You too, he thought but didn’t say anything. Zeki felt generous towards Moussa, he wanted to open up. It flattered him that Moussa sat with him instead of tending his father’s goats. Hassan had plenty of servants to look after his goats but he’d wanted to punish his son for his stupidity in accepting a silver coin. Only Zeki had other plans, and he was used to getting his way.

One of the noses stuck into his business belonged to his teacher Madibbo, who took a fatherly interest in him, which was particularly annoying because Zeki spent a lot more time with Madibbo than with his father. As son of a captured soldier, Zeki’s future was consigned to the Khalifa’s army. The responsibility of his training had been given to Madibbo when Zeki had turned eight. He received the training of an ansar first, and excelled with sword and spear. But his demeanour was not that of a captured slave. Zeki’s aura was like a star that shone, impossible to stop. Madibbo stopped feeling responsible for him and started to feel pride. He took Zeki from the ansars and trained him as a rifleman. To complete his schooling, he was, theoretically, required to attend all five prayers in the mosque, though neither he nor Madibbo took the Khalifa’s orders too seriously. Madibbo said God had chosen him to be a soldier, so be a soldier every second of every day, even when you’re sick or in love. Fight first. God chooses, and God has made his choice. You were either a warrior or something else. Zeki was a warrior. Moussa was – something else.

And that was fine. Zeki didn’t mind being chosen as a warrior. The drill was what he knew and he couldn’t wait to be in a real battle. What Madibbo didn’t realise, though, was that you could be a soldier and plenty besides. There was no need to fear God, as Zeki didn’t believe in God. He believed in Zeki. He did whatever he wanted to at night, or even during the day. But it bothered him that Madibbo had developed such an interest in his life, it was making it difficult to get away with things. For example, Madibbo had begun to impress on Zeki the importance of leading a faithful life. When the faithful dies, he is led straight to paradise, was Madibbo’s credo. Zeki didn’t mind paradise but he wasn’t in a hurry to get there either.

Then there was Moussa. Madibbo had never trusted him, rightfully so, Zeki had to admit, but nonetheless it was irritating. Moussa was the key to many doors for Zeki, and both Madibbo and Zeki

knew it, only Zeki doubted his teacher knew the full extent of the kinds of doors Moussa had been opening lately. Hassan, unlike his own father, wasn't a captive of the Khalifa but a rich slave trader who had sworn allegiance to the Mahdi early on. Moussa was a privileged son with lots of time on his hands. Whenever Zeki could find an excuse to skip mosque, Moussa would wait for him outside.

Concerning Moussa. What bothered Zeki the most of all was that Madibbo, who had never actually said he disliked Moussa, had never said he liked him either and had, in the past few months, begun to ignore Zeki's friend so pointedly even someone as thick-skinned as Moussa had begun to take notice. And why couldn't Madibbo spare a friendly word for Moussa? After all, Moussa had once almost been invited to visit the Khalifa's son. And apart from all the fun he had organised in Zeki's life, he had also brought up the subject of marriage.

That's how Meher came into the picture. One of Moussa's friends told Moussa about a rich widow, a relative of the Khalifa, who was searching for a suitable husband for her only daughter, who might not be a great beauty, the rumour went, but she wasn't without charms either, and besides, her mother was immensely rich.

So Moussa, with a lot of time on his hands, had managed to get an invitation to her house for Zeki and himself.

"What if I don't feel like coming?" Zeki had asked, to which Moussa had found nothing to reply, not that Zeki had wanted an answer. Nobody kidded himself in getting Zeki to do anything he didn't like, and there was none better than Moussa to attest to that.

On the day, Zeki had woken lazy and dreamy and had almost decided not to go. Who was he to allow a rich old widow to gape at him? Moussa's puppy eyes didn't improve his mood. But then the thought that after Amira, damn her soul, not too many households in Omdurman welcomed him, swayed his mind.

Moussa must've sensed Zeki's mood swing and pointed out the regular feasts the widow served her daughter's suitors. There was never much to eat at home. Besides, as Moussa told his friend, marriage was the only option to escape from his father's luckless household, so why not marry? Even better, rich?

"I thought you had an eye on her," Zeki said and flung a stone at his father's geese.

"There are many options for me," Moussa said. "I haven't even told Father yet. Guma said it's an open house. May the best win."

“What’s wrong with these geese,” Zeki said and searched the ground for another stone. “They just won’t shut up.”

“They always do that when someone is in the yard,” Moussa replied. “That’s just what geese do. Dumb birds.”

“Don’t kid yourself.” Zeki got up and took a long stretch. “If I come along, I’m not coming to watch, you should know that.”

“I know. I don’t want you there to watch, I want you to be one of the suitors.”

Moussa was kidding himself. Zeki shrugged. It wasn’t his problem. But his friend must have felt it too. He first offered to ask his father if Zeki could ride Umm es Shole to Meher’s house, and when Hassan said that Abdel Kader had taken the donkey to the Khalifa, Moussa acted as if Zeki would have to stay behind. In the end, he took him along on his mare, like he always did, but it had taken him just a bit longer to offer, that’s all. As if it wasn’t annoying enough that Zeki didn’t have a horse to ride. It all put him in such a foul mood that he was ready to jump off the horse again and stay after all. When Moussa saw his snide remark backfire, he caved in quicker than a mud wall during the rain season, even offered to get off the horse for a while and walk beside Zeki, leaving Zeki the satisfaction to find he could twist his friend’s arm as easily as ever.

But if he had thought the widow was easy prey he would have guessed wrong. It was plain to see from the way she spoke and looked in his eyes that she was used to people obeying her will. Still, her hands were trembling as she greeted Zeki in the courtyard and ushered him to an angareb. Her shaking continued as she sat down next to her daughter. She was twitching and wriggling, unable to sit still. Whenever a new guest arrived she left Zeki’s side unwillingly, retracing her steps back to him quickly. Yet, next to him she just wouldn’t stop fidgeting about. The shaking proved too much also for the widow. After ten minutes, she abandoned her guests and Zeki was free to wander about the courtyard. In Omdurman he had only ever seen such green abundance in Osman’s palace. But if anything, the widow’s garden was even more lavish than the one of the Khalifa’s son. Zeki was pleased with himself for having found a way into this little paradise.

It also became quickly apparent that the widow was completely taken with him. When she came back to her guests, she took no notice of the other young men, some of whom were the offspring of influential men and rich merchants. Zeki never felt embarrassed under the stare of others. Perhaps a bit indignant at times, and when someone gaped too openly it could make him haughty. But with Meher,

he didn't mind. From the way she lived, it was obvious that she had great taste. If anything, her staring was a compliment. But he felt embarrassed for the others. There was for example Moussa, sitting on his angareb, trying to sip his tea in a way that would attract the widow's attention, and there was Osman, not the Khalifa's son but rich nonetheless, gossiping his way into the widow's ear. Meher finally noticed the amount of displeasure the others were showing and pretended to direct her attention to them, but it was plain to see that she couldn't wait to glance again at Zeki.

As they were leaving, Meher touched Zeki's arm as if by accident and asked if he would come again the next day. That a rich widow should blush so shyly after his promise to return gave Zeki a wave of confidence. The next day, when it was only Moussa and Zeki, Meher politely informed Moussa that he didn't have to come again the day after, but he was welcome to partake of anything her household had to offer, the servants would prepare for him what he desired.

So Moussa sat with a sour face in a far corner of the courtyard and popped dates in his mouth, while the widow showed Zeki around her place. By the time they rode home, Moussa was so furious he refused to ask Hassan to lend Zeki Umm es Shole to see the widow the next day.

"I told you, you're kidding yourself," Zeki said and jumped off Moussa's horse.

"Where are you going?"

If Zeki didn't care for one thing, it was when his friend started pleading with him. "None of your business," he just said, why even argue, but he went back to Meher. She was bound to have a horse or mule she could lend him.

When Zeki reappeared shortly after on one of Meher's horses he scanned the road for Moussa, but for once his friend hadn't waited for him. Zeki found Moussa's behaviour irritating, he would've liked to discuss Meher and her daughter with him.

And there was plenty to discuss. Zeki now made his way to Meher practically daily, and still, Meher hadn't announced who would get her daughter's hand. The widow seemed content to sit with him in the courtyard and watch him eat what her servants had cooked.

One day Meher told him a little secret about herself. Her mother, the daughter of a high Ottoman official, was once betrothed to the Mahdi and had lived in his enclosed harem until she died. From her, she had inherited some fine clothes, a whole room in her house was filled with them, and how would Zeki like to inspect them? Zeki could see no reason to refuse. Whether it was fine food or fine clothes, he never said no. They spent half an afternoon in the house picking out turbans and jibbas. Meher

would gladly have given him the whole room of clothes but Zeki found he liked best the white jibba of a Dervish emir, it was of such fine material that it practically glowed in the dark and was sewed with such craftsmanship as Zeki had never expected to wear. He saw that both Meher and her daughter were completely taken with the way he looked in it. Meher's daughter always had pumpkin seeds in her mouth and when she got excited she chewed them so fast the shells littered the floor before the servants could sweep it.

Meher's daughter, the woman he was supposedly wooing, was perhaps the only drawback of going to Meher's house. Apart from that Meher was generous and polite, and with impeccable taste, the complete opposite of about every woman his father had ever brought home. The temporary wives of his father were all the same, an embarrassment as long as they stayed with him and a fiasco when they left, and why? Just because his father refused to marry the wives the Khalifa selected for him. What did it matter the Khalifa's choices were spies? It wasn't as if his father's concubines didn't sell him out for money. Some were liars or thieves on top of it, like Amira. Now Meher was a different story altogether. An older woman and a widow, with an oaf as a daughter, he hadn't thought too much of her when they met but she was growing on him. Meher was small and delicate, with a bird-like nervousness, and her hair, twisted in little ringlets, was already greying. Her daughter, the rich heiress, looked nothing like her mother. She was tall and stout, without any of her mother's subtleties. In fact, Zeki had to admit that she was the perfect match for Moussa, a thought that hurt. Yet, Zeki would have married her gladly if it meant he could spend more time in Meher's company. There was no doubt that both mother and daughter were taken with him, they never stopped staring at him, which had turned it into a strange sort of courtship.

So one day, when Zeki felt this had been going on long enough, he arrived after a long day of riding and reciting verses at Madibbo's and washed himself in Meher's courtyard before walking up to the house with just a long line of white muslin wrapped around his shoulders. He was practically half-naked, water still gleaming on his skin, and he thought Meher's daughter might faint, she got so excited when she saw him that pumpkin seed shells were flying through the air. After he dressed, Meher had him sit next to her daughter, she watched them for a long time, and then, abruptly, she changed the whole game. Meher told first the servants, then her daughter to leave them alone and offered him a dish herself.

Finally, Zeki thought, here it comes, but nothing else happened for a long time. Meher just sat there, while the air got so thick between them one could have cut it with a knife. At last, Meher just gave a defeated sigh and then asked him if he wanted to marry her, her daughter's hand would go to Moussa.

Zeki was at first so surprised he was speechless. Moussa would've dearly loved to hear this. At the same time steam would be coming out of his ears with fury. After all, Zeki could end up as his father-in-law. He studied Meher's face to see how serious she was. Maybe she was joking and he'd better start preparing himself for defeat. But she was composed, for once her hands weren't trembling, she looked at him with a still and pleading face. Meher clearly wanted him for herself.

"I know we never spoke about the possibility," she said. "So don't say anything now unless you agree."

"Are you sure about it?" he asked, but he knew that she was.

Meher didn't say anything, she just gave a nod, in her way she was a very confident woman. There were times, like when they were sitting in the courtyard earlier or picking out clothes, when they were both laughing about the same thing, and Zeki would often forget how old she was. He had to agree with Meher. Best not to say anything until he had thought it through.

The Khalifa

At first, Zeki was determined to let Moussa stew a while but then something happened that needed talking through. For not even twenty-four hours after Meher's proposal, Zeki received an even more extraordinary proposal. Out of the blue, Madibbo and his students were called to the Khalifa. They didn't go to the palace, as Zeki had first hoped, but instead found the Khalifa near the camel market on the vast desert plains outside Omdurman, where the Feast of Bairam was to be held within a few days. Noise from the market travelled to them as people were getting ready for the feast, and a camel's high-pitched bleat sliced the air. It didn't seem to have an effect on the Khalifa. He remained sitting with half-closed eyes on the ground on a palm mat, Zeki's father nowhere in sight, and then he waved a lazy hand, giving command for them to start their exercise. As he watched Madibbo's students, he didn't say a word to Madibbo or anyone. His presence was unnerving. The Khalifa didn't just watch boys on horses unless he had something in mind. His behaviour was so brusque that some of the boys missed their target, others fell off the horse. But not Zeki. There wasn't much that could upset him when he was riding a horse or shooting a rifle.

When he'd had enough, the Khalifa beckoned Madibbo to come over and had a few words with him. Madibbo looked anxious. It bothered Zeki to see his teacher, the great Madibbo, the warrior whom his father had surrendered to, tremble before the Khalifa like a leaf in the wind. But after a few words the teacher nodded at Zeki and Zeki walked over.

"What a pleasure to meet you, Zeki," the Khalifa said, giving him a benevolent smile. "You are a skilled rider."

Then, without even mentioning his father's name, the Khalifa told him the Feast of Bairam was a good opportunity to look for a replacement for Saadalla, and he had decided to take Zeki from the army and use him as his private guard.

Zeki had no idea how to respond. He looked at Madibbo for guidance but found his teacher had deserted him. Madibbo was just sitting before the Khalifa with a strained face. Zeki was on his own.

The Khalifa didn't help. He was a challenge to Zeki's nerves though his smile seemed benevolent and genuine. Had he heard right? To replace Saadalla? Did that mean the Khalifa had forgiven his father? Or was it unrelated to him? And why should he even care? Zeki had plenty of loyalty, often put to the test during his father's long captivity. But over the years his loyalty had just melted away, foregrounding other, more important things. For example, Zeki had realised that he could take care of himself. Let Amira shame their household by stealing from their friends. Soon enough he would make his mark in the world, and that's where the association with his father's name would end.

But replacing Saadalla? That bite might be too big to chew. To face the Khalifa every day was another bite that might choke him. There were about fifty new stories of the Khalifa's cruelty each day. Just on his way to Madibbo Zeki would pass by countless gallows with decomposing bodies, you could hear about the lashings in jail and see the maimed and amputated survivors of his cruelty.

Yet, if there was one thing Zeki had learnt from his father's example, it was that he was not going to be a servant himself. "If you fly high, you fall deep", his father cautioned him often but as far as Zeki was concerned he'd rather fall deep. "If you fly, people think you're an eagle", he'd respond to his father. "If you crawl, people step on you because you're a worm."

So Zeki said, "This is a great honour, Khalifa Abdullahi. I'm flattered but not at all sure that I am a suitable choice."

"If you think it's because you're not married, don't worry. I have a wife in mind for you," the Khalifa replied, not unfriendly.

What was it with the Khalifa and his rush to see everyone in his service get married? His father had once explained that the Khalifa was master of many chains, some metal, others invisible. "Family is just one more way to tie you to Omdurman," he had explained but Zeki didn't believe him. If you wanted to leave hard enough, you left. His mother was proof enough.

"Oh no, not at all. In fact, I'm about to get married. You need not worry about it," Zeki said.

The Khalifa was so surprised he studied Zeki more carefully and the benevolence vanished from his face. All he said was, "Well, Zeki, I think you would make a fine guard and you surely don't want to say the Khalifa is mistaken?"

"Of course not," Zeki said. "I'm the best. We just need to find out where my service to you will be most beneficial. I was trained for the battlefield."

Zeki's reply left the Khalifa speechless for a moment before he gave a roar of laughter. "Life is full of surprises", he said. "To think that someone like your father could have a son like you." To Zeki's relief that was all the Khalifa mentioned about his father. Instead, he told Zeki the story about thieves trying to steal his mule in Khartoum, and Zeki decided the Khalifa was not as bad as everybody said he was, he was even handsome in a lazy kind of way. Normally Zeki didn't like men who'd let themselves go, in a physical sense, like Moussa, who was already flabby at sixteen, but on the Khalifa it worked, in a brutal kind of way, it even enhanced his power.

And then, god knows where it came from, Madibbo found his courage and praised the Khalifa's wisdom for noticing Zeki. That was when the Khalifa interrupted him and said, "Well, let's hope Zeki doesn't prove to be a lame donkey in a lion's lair like you," and with this remark he left. Even though Madibbo tried not to show it, Zeki could see how hurt his teacher was, which infuriated him like nothing else. Had Madibbo not an ounce of self-respect to allow the Khalifa such ridicule? Hadn't the Khalifa just told them his story of how he had arrived in Khartoum like a beggar, people trying to take advantage of him? It wasn't skills like Madibbo's or his own that had turned the Khalifa into the Mahdi's successor, it was just cruelty and determination. Better dead than humiliated like this, Zeki swore.

"You didn't tell me you're getting married," Madibbo finally said, in a tone as if it was Zeki's holy duty to inform him about everything. He gave a disappointed sigh, which irritated Zeki just as much as the tears.

"What shall I do about the Khalifa?" Zeki asked.

Madibbo wiped his face with his scarf and watched the servants trail away with the horses.

"I guess I'll do it," Zeki continued. "I need some experience, and anyway, he just wants to try me out as one of his guards."

"No, you'll replace Saadalla, the captain of the guards," Madibbo said. "Saadalla is gone, this is the way the Khalifa destroys him. Who knows, maybe he will destroy your father too."

"Why bring up my father?" Zeki asked. "It's got nothing to do with him."

"He's a guard of the Khalifa too," Madibbo said. "It's got everything to do with him."

"It's ridiculous to call him a guard, he's a captive," Zeki said. "And why should I have pity with Saadalla? He's the one who landed my father in trouble in the first place."

"Who's the girl you're engaged to?" Madibbo asked and stopped wiping his face, watching Zeki closely. Zeki rolled his eyes, why bother? Everybody was gone and Madibbo was becoming obsessed, so Zeki left too.

When Zeki saw Moussa outside Hassan's house as he came home, he decided to forgive him and told his friend about the Khalifa. Moussa became so excited at the thought of his friend among the palace guards, he tripped over Heba and sent pots and pans flying to the ground. The din woke up Hassan, who remembered that Moussa still needed to be punished. He cursed at his son, then sent him to the fields and went back to bed.

"You don't have to go straight away, what's the rush," Zeki said and Moussa agreed.

"To think you'll be one of them," Moussa said and pointed with his chin in the direction of Zeki's house.

"What do you mean, one of them? I'm nothing like my father."

"But he's a guard too."

"I'm not going to be a guard, I'm going to be the *captain* of guards."

"Same difference. You'll still be his son."

Zeki stared in Moussa's face. He couldn't believe his friend had just said that. It just went to show how a few hours of separation had exploded into a world of difference.

"I'll be the captain. Fight first. Remember. That's what Madibbo always says. I'll be son later." Even someone as slow as Moussa had to understand what that meant.

Moussa shrugged. "Madibbo never talks to me." Then something else crossed his mind. "So it means you'll spend even less time at home," he said. He seemed sad.

Zeki felt a wave of irritation. There they were again, Moussa's puppy eyes, which seemed to speak of a longing Moussa couldn't express in words. Zeki stood up. He had no time for this. Moussa was clearly not the right person to speak to, and as for Meher's decision to marry her daughter to him, let Moussa find out from someone else.

The relief was acute when Zeki got to Meher. He didn't even have to say anything, Meher just sat them down on two angarebs and her servants brought out the usual feast. They sat and watched the sky turn indigo, it was one of the things he liked about Meher that she didn't pry, she could just sit and wait until he felt like telling her everything.

"The Khalifa called us to him today. Outside town at the camel market. He needs a replacement for Saadalla."

"The captain of the guards."

"He wants me."

"Do it," Meher said without giving it a second thought.

"Why do you want me to become a guard?" Zeki asked.

"Because then you'd stay in Omdurman," Meher said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"I wasn't going to leave," Zeki said.

Meher smiled as if she knew a million things about him that he didn't.

"You didn't *know* you were going to leave," Meher said. "But everybody leaves sometime. What's there to hold you back?"

Zeki swallowed. Had he misunderstood Meher's offer last night? Wasn't she interested in marrying him anymore?

Meher sensed his mood swing straight away. She put her fingers on his hand, light and delicate like a bird.

"I don't fool myself into believing I'm reason enough to hold you back," she explained. "I have a grown daughter. It is highly unlikely that I will bear you any children. I may seem exciting now, but this will wear off. Truth be told, I had my spies inform the Khalifa about you. My spies tell me he was very impressed with you today. 'Different from his father', he said."

"The Khalifa said that?"

"So I was told."

It was hard not to smile about that. Growing up Zeki had heard a dozen times a day that his father was the Khalifa's prize captive. Zeki didn't understand why. His father had been a high Ottoman official but his easy surrender made you wonder how he ever got in that position, all the grovelling he did made him more suitable for geese farming.

"Oh I don't know," Zeki said. "Everybody talks about his cruelty."

"He *is* cruel but he wouldn't be to you," Meher said. "The Khalifa likes obedience. But what impresses him the most is a man standing up for himself."

The golden bloom of a mimosa tree landed in Zeki's hair. Meher reached out and picked it up. It wasn't usual for Meher to touch him, and certainly not without shaking, but she did it. He wanted to kiss her, after all they soon might be married and shouldn't a man kiss his bride?

At that point, Meher did kiss him, not a hard kiss but more a graze of her lips like they were a flower falling on his face. He felt he could relax his body into her, take a breath, think things through.

"Meher," he said. "You did mean it when you asked me to marry you, didn't you?"

"Yes, Zeki, I did," she said. "I never meant anything more in my life."

"What would it be like?" he asked. He felt a little cautious about marriage. What if Meher turned out to have some bad habits?

Meher's eyes lit up, she obviously enjoyed talking about their future.

"Well, Zeki," she said, after some deliberation, "I'm older than you and more experienced. Most likely we wouldn't have any children. But clearly, the best thing about it is that I'm very rich."

Here, Zeki had to agree and he was relieved that she had been the first to mention it. Not having to worry about a horse to ride and his father's thieving women was better than Meher could imagine.

"My money will make Omdurman comfortable for you," Meher said. "If we are careful about it."

"You are not scared the Khalifa will take it away?"

"He won't, as long as we don't show off. Besides, you will be in his service most of the time anyway."

No doubt, Zeki thought. His world would run along the lines of a small triangle, mosque, palace and Meher's house.

"So if you say yes, my money will be yours," she said. "You will be better off than you dreamed."

Then she touched his chest. "I want you, Zeki," she said. "You are different from all the other suitors. No comparison with Moussa. You're strong-willed and you know what you want. You're like me."

Zeki felt Meher was right about everything. He'd felt it too. They both knew what they wanted.

"All young men in Omdurman, I mean the rich ones, they're predictable, boring. They are like pebbles in the river, they land wherever you throw them. But you are different. You desire things that are greater than money or wives."

Zeki listened keenly. What was it that gave Meher such insight into him, after so short a time?

"And I want to be part of your desires," she said. "If you say yes, my money can help you get everything you want."

"I'm not saying yes or no," Zeki said. "Though it's more likely I'll say yes. I know we have a lot in common. I know your money is what I need to buy alliances. But would it be a full marriage with – everything?"

"Sure it would, at first. Like I said, I'm old," she said. "I'm more than double your age. Children are doubtful."

"So what about it?" he asked. "What if I want to have children?"

"Of course you want children, many children. If you let me choose your other wives, you won't have reason to complain."

He suddenly felt cautious, that didn't sound right. Why would Meher insist on choosing his other wives? But Meher grinned, her teeth were perfect, even women half her age didn't often have such white teeth, her looks were definitely growing on him.

"Just bear in mind, Zeki, that even though I'm jealous, I'm also a lot older than you," she said. "My jealousy won't keep you from having fun."

"And you?" he asked. He felt it was necessary to know, after all, he had never been married.

"Zeki, there's no one who can rival you," Meher said. "I couldn't believe it when I saw you for the first time. But if I'm wrong, and it's not likely that I am, but if, and I did get bored with you, then all of what's mine will be yours."

"So, you're absolutely sure about it?" Zeki asked. The fact that Meher seemed so certain gave him butterflies. It had suddenly occurred to him that he could be moving out of his father's house very

soon. That thought definitely required some getting used to. He would have to hear Hassan's opinion, Hassan knew a lot about relationships, especially the ones that had gone sour.

"Yes, Zeki, I am," she said.

"Have you ever met my father?" he said. It was something he had meant to ask since Meher mentioned the Khalifa. Chances were she had met him more often than Zeki would feel comfortable with. Meher gave another chuckle.

"Everybody has met your father," she said. "He's been in my courtyard on occasions when the Khalifa came to see me."

"So you know about Saadalla and the diaries," Zeki said. "Did you know he's kept some?"

"Well, I wouldn't go around Omdurman repeating what you just told me, not if you like your father," she said. "Though it may be hard to see, the Khalifa must value your father in some way. Why else would he humour him?"

Why indeed? Everybody knew he had kept his notes for when he got back to Egypt. But Meher didn't really seem interested in discussing his father.

"He seemed friendly. I think I heard him speak to my servants once," Meher said. She took Zeki's hands. "Please marry me, Zeki," she said. "Don't say no."

There was no way he would say no, not after Meher had painted their future in such bright colours.

"Agreed then, that's it, let's do it," he said and gave Meher a kiss, a real one this time, after all, Meher had said theirs would be a complete marriage, and Meher looked happy. It was late when she called her servants and told them to escort Zeki home.

He was hoping to find Hassan awake and Moussa asleep. There was a good chance for it. Moussa went to bed early when Zeki wasn't around, while Hassan, spending his afternoons in a daze of marissa, enjoyed the cool nights and liked to strike up conversations with anyone who strolled into his courtyard.

Zeki was lucky, Hassan was indeed still awake and sitting on the angareb, delirious and alone except for Heba, who had not only managed to chew off half of Hassan's sandal but had also nibbled a hole in the angareb and was presently trying to lick the dried cornmeal from a bowl.

"Zeki, do you think I should send Moussa with the next caravan to Berber?" Hassan asked. "Give him some experience? Maybe I'm holding him on too tight a leash."

“Forget it, you’ll never see your son again, he’ll be robbed and imprisoned before the sun has a chance to set. You need Moussa to go to the market for you anyway,” Zeki said, feeling Moussa’s leash was long enough as it was. “Besides, he might be getting married soon.”

“No way. Who would have him?” Hassan made a face. “I’m not holding my breath. Though I’m busy looking for a wife for him.”

“Hassan, shall I tell you a secret?” Zeki asked. It was time to sober Hassan up. “I’m getting married.” It was the first time he said it aloud, and it gave Hassan such a start that he spilled his drink.

“She’s an older woman, you don’t know her, she’s older than my father, even, but rich,” he said. “What’d you say?”

“Well, she’s rich enough to send you home with a beautiful horse,” Hassan said. “I guess you won’t have to wait for Moussa to get around anymore.”

“Yes, about Moussa. This woman, she has a daughter. And guess who’s going to get married to her?”

All of a sudden Hassan’s face grew tight. Zeki began to feel annoyed. What was it with all this crying, first his teacher, now Hassan? But to his credit Hassan tried to blink his tears away as soon as he saw Zeki’s face.

“Oh boy, that’s one sort of a secret,” Hassan said. “Where is this good-for-nothing son of mine anyway? Bring him out here and let him explain himself. Whenever was he going to tell me about it? And Zeki, don’t take that the wrong way, but you are a bad influence on him. Just because you constantly do things behind your father’s back doesn’t mean I want my son to do the same.”

“Go easy on him, he doesn’t know it yet.”

Hassan shook his head. “Oh boy. That sounds just like my Moussa. Getting married without even knowing it.” Hassan coughed and spat phlegm on the floor. “Marriage, eh. I guess this will spoil your father’s plans of escape.”

Once Hassan had told him of Ranya’s letter, Zeki thought he was going to explode. How could his father risk his future like that? If the Khalifa heard about it, it would be the end of Zeki’s future too. How could he help his father if he kept living between two worlds?

“So, is he going to actually do it?” Zeki asked. After all it was his future too that his father kept jeopardising and he felt he had a right to know.

“When is the wedding?” Hassan asked instead. He felt uncomfortable admitting that he’d gone to sleep instead of helping Abdel Kader make a choice.

Now Zeki became uncomfortable too because he and Meher hadn’t talked about it in such detail. Hassan’s questions made him realise that Meher was still a riddle to him.

“Oh, and the Khalifa wants me to take over from Saadalla,” Zeki said.

Hassan gave a chuckle. “A lot to absorb for your father, isn’t it? What will he say when he hears you’re getting married?”

“Well, we don’t have to tell him right away,” Zeki said. “So remember, it’s a secret. I don’t want him to go to Meher for money or anything.”

“You’ll have to tell him sooner or later, after all, she’s going to be his daughter-in-law,” Hassan said, his voice trailing off. Clearly, he’d had enough excitement for one day, and also enough marissa. Zeki gingerly took the jar out of his hand, then went after Heba and picked up the bowl of cornmeal and brought it inside.

“Zeki,” mumbled Hassan half asleep, “could it be you and Moussa were swapped at birth? You are so like me.”

Zeki yawned and stood for a moment. All was still except for the sound of Heba tipping around the house, looking for something to eat.

“I like you, Hassan,” he said as he finally walked over to his own house, “but we are nothing alike.”

Part 3: The Diplomat

The Feast of Bairam

The large road leading from the mosque to the parade ground outside the town walls was swarmed with people, obliterating buildings, trees and stalls like clouds of locusts. It was impossible to see anything, feel anything, do anything that wasn't seen, felt or done by everyone else, so Abdel Kader gave himself over to the moment. It didn't work. At times like this, he wished nothing more than that his conversion had been truly a matter of the heart. He longed to feel what the rest felt with at least as much zeal. To be an ansar, a soldier of god, and be swept away by the grandiosity of the spectacle, feel their rejoicing with every inch of his body, make it his own. He tried again, falling into the yells and shouts of the others. A glance to Joseppi made his voice even louder. Joseppi, as only Joseppi could, had truly given himself over to the spirit of the moment, while Abdel Kader continued wearing his mask. He couldn't, just couldn't. When he stopped for a moment to listen to what was going on inside him, there was nothing at all that resembled the frenzied crowd around him. Yet, here he was, swept up in a crowd as vast as this, a part of it, not its enemy. There was a surge of certainty that what he felt and had in Omdurman was big enough to keep him here. He thought how he would reply to Ranya's letter. Only a fool would leave during the Feast of Bairam.

At least one thousand horsemen had heeded the call of the Khalifa to join in the celebrations of the end of Ramadan. For weeks, Omdurman had been bursting at the seams, overflowing in all directions but the river, and still there came more emirs with their tribes and soldiers. They were all here now, marrying the religious to the military, as they followed the Khalifa through the city walls to the western plains. The Khalifa had searched for novelty. On usual parade days he rode white camels. At last year's Feast of Bairam, he had chosen an impressive charger. Now, he sat perched on the old Government horse carriage, wearing his suit of mail and helmet with a red turban wound around, surrounded by two hundred horsemen, all, men and horses, clad in mail.

What Abdel Kader saw when he turned his head was red, the red of turban tied under the chins the red girdle thrown over the shoulder. And horses, their bodies radiating heat like one great big oven. Soldiers' boots drumming nervous flanks, the smell of horses like a blanket, so alive their blood seemed almost visible in the air. The Khalifa's carriage slowly inched towards the black flag in the centre of the flags. Abdel Kader wasn't able to see one thing, but that's where they were pushed towards, and he

knew that once he could see further than the man next to him, that's what he would see, the Khalifa's black flag, and all the other flags of the emirs of Sudan. From there he would be able to see the hills that stretched around them all the way north to Kerreri. The air, where it wasn't mingled with dust and sand from the horse's hooves, was clear, the blue of the sky pastel. It promised to be a hot day.

The emirs had come from everywhere. Each with their own flag rode at the head of his division. Then came the cavalry, armed with rifles, after them the sword and spear men, and behind them the thick excitement of Omdurman, pushing elbows, shoving hands, trampling feet, men, women and children like a stampede. People who were particularly taken with the moment would make a mad dash at the nearest soldiers to wrestle the spears from their hands. They would wave them about for a wild, victorious moment before being kicked to the ground by the enraged soldier, livid at the humiliation. There was no end to it, and Abdel Kader felt smaller than a snail at the display of such euphoria.

As the soldiers had finally fallen into a straight line, the Khalifa, still on the horse carriage, still in the company of Abdel Kader and Joseppi (whom he hadn't acknowledged even with a nod), inspected them. A relative silence had fallen over the crowd, and Abdel Kader began to feel better, less crowded in, less left out. Then the Khalifa returned to the centre of the flags.

The hills to the west and north were quite visible now that the dust and sand had settled. As the Khalifa scanned them, so did every pair of eyes, even Abdel Kader's, who feared what came next. Jinns had made their home in the hills ever since the days of the Mahdi. They had assisted them in the storm of Khartoum and the annihilation of the old Omdurman Fort. Abdel Kader believed in ghosts and spirits even less than in god, but that was beside the point. Presently, the Khalifa made a sign for Farag, and his slave stepped forward to lift the Khalifa off the carriage. While Khalifa Abdullahi retired in a small hut that had been erected for him near the flags, the soldiers and townspeople waited. The sun rose. One of the horses that pulled the carriage gave a loud fart. Its tail stiffened and lifted in the air. Abdel Kader waited for the inevitable, but after a while the horse relaxed its tail and searched the dust for grass. Flies danced around the portion of his face that was not covered by the turban. He tried to blow them away every time one of them rested on his lips. The toe in his sandal became itchy and the sun burnt down on them. Still, the Khalifa stayed inside his hut, deep in conversation with the jinns around them, indulging in a vision while his people in the open broke out in a sweat.

Some horsemen began again with their displays of horsemanship. The soldiers would dash a few hundred yards ahead, then violently rein in their horse until they were on their hind legs, have the

horse dance around for a few staggering moments, before rushing back to their troops. Frantic, mad, inexplicable like their unexpected victory over the Government. A horse in brass head-armour neighed and Abdel Kader's heart broke a little. There she was, of his Makkieh, in Saadalla's hands, for whom she ran faster than ever in her life. Saadalla pulled hard and Makkieh almost sat down on her legs. Abdel Kader blinked a tear away. They fell back in line, the Khalifa still in his hut.

"Ah, for God's sake," Abdel Kader heard Saadalla say. Makkieh had emptied her bowels on their way back, and some had gotten on his legs. Abdel Kader grinned.

"The only animal that shits more than a horse is a guinea pig," Joseppi said.

Finally, the Khalifa emerged and began to relay his vision to the rest.

"Egypt," he began, "shall be the jewel in our crown," upon which the crowd erupted in endless cheers and wild dance.

When they had safely returned to the *beit el amana* and waited for the Khalifa to dismiss them, Abdel Kader's mood was as good as it got. Everything had gone smoothly and his feeling of insincerity, of hoaxing his master and friends, had subsided. The Khalifa retired to his house by the bank of the river and the guards relaxed a little. Abdel Kader tried to get Gamal or Joseppi to come with him to the market place to eat, but Gamal hadn't been dismissed yet. The Khalifa wanted him close by, perhaps to write some letters to the emirs who hadn't come. Joseppi had lost his appetite from worrying too much about being sent back to the Saier, so Abdel Kader asked Sebiba, one of the youngest guards, who could sometimes seem a little lost. He came from Kordofan and was homesick a lot.

They decided to go to one of the public eating houses at the market, Abdel Kader felt like meat, but wasn't sure if he could afford it. But first he wanted to stop over at Osman Digna's quarters. He liked the old emir from Darfur, who always put up his tent as close to the Khalifa's palace as the Khalifa allowed. Alliances, like the waves on the water, were hard to predict. Which ones would topple and which would roll over others, coming out on top? Another way to measure an emir's influence was by how far out of town the Khalifa had ordered his huts to be put up during Bairam, and Abdel Kader, who considered Osman Digna a friend, had watched with consternation the yards increasing between his favourite emir from Darfur and Khalifa Abdullahi.

At Osman's tent, a charming young woman named Gazala brought them some tea. Abdel Kader knew her from the previous year and she clearly loved that Abdel Kader had come by, her gaze was stronger than the tea she poured. Gazala had very sweet eyes and looked about the same age as

Sebiba. Like the year before, she lingered over her duties and exchanged some words with Abdel Kader. Even Sebiba, feeling low and homesick, warmed to Gazala and noticed how sweet her eyes were. Abdel Kader was pleased, and although Gazala seemed to have fallen for him he was resolved to give this opportunity a pass. Amira was still fresh on his mind, and besides, Gazala couldn't have been much older than Zeki.

It was good to be near friends, and to eat and drink again during the day. In the mid-morning light the sky had lost its pastel and was moving towards white. All the activity of the previous week had almost obliterated any patches of grass and bush outside the town. The remaining vegetation was taken care of by the horses and camels that wandered between the white tents and grazed. The wind had picked up as Sebiba and Abdel Kader walked among the huts and flapping tents and colourful flags of the emirs. The rain of the previous night had left some little pools of water in the wet sand and Sebiba cursed as he stepped into one by accident.

Osman Digna's servants were talking as the two guards took a walk through their assembly of huts. Sebiba seemed to feel the significance of the moment and puckered his bottom a little, filling his whole spindly self with importance as he accepted an invitation and sat down. Abdel Kader felt a bit more tired. The years were gone when he had shared Sebiba's enthusiasm. Bringing the Khalifa a little closer to the emirs he liked had felt like his holy duty back then. Now, he saw it in the reverse. He wasn't bringing Khalifa Abdullahi closer to his friends, he was removing himself from the Khalifa, and a good thing this was. Out of favour, out of luck and out of money, emirs like Osman Digna were probably the only ones who hadn't heard of his sorry state, and Abdel Kader resolved to enjoy the attention as long as it lasted. Gossip travelling faster than the south winds, by around midday there wouldn't be a dog begging for a bone from him.

Osman Digna's tent was actually where he had met Amira the previous year. Tending to the guests together with Gazala, she made her move on the last night of the troop review, and was given to Abdel Kader the next morning as a parting gift. The news that Amira was no longer with him spread more quickly among the emir's slaves than the news of his diaries, and there was a woman named Dina who had carried a water skin up from the river every day during the last troop review just when Abdel Kader came by. Since there was no longer a need to fear Amira's jealousy, Dina resumed her interest in the ex-governor. She had beauty scars on her cheeks and a tattooed lower lip, which was quite

attractive on her. Abdel Kader gave her an encouraging smile. It lifted his spirits to know that both Gazala and Dina were taking the trouble to run into him this morning.

Another thought put a damper on things, though. The place where Osman Digna had put up his tent and the straw huts for his people was not far from Madibbo's place. Abdel Kader had planned to grab something to eat and then go home for a quick nap – already it was late in the morning and he would have to be back at the Khalifa's place when the Khalifa was ready to ride from his river abode to the mosque. But the thought of Khalifa Abdullahi possibly trying to entice Zeki didn't leave him alone, and after another minute Abdel Kader gave a frustrated sigh and hurried across to Madibbo's. Zeki wasn't there, which irritated Abdel Kader even more.

"I thought the Khalifa had given you the responsibility for my son," he said but Madibbo waved off.

"Abdel Kader, who is Zeki's fiancée?"

"What on earth gave you the idea he's engaged?" Abdel Kader said. "We haven't even spoken about marriage yet."

"Oh, it's useless to look after your son when he keeps dodging us both," Madibbo said. "I swear to you, Abdel Kader, your son is either getting married or beheaded. He himself told the Khalifa that he was engaged."

"So it's true, then. The Khalifa really called you to him?"

"Yes, but not to his palace. He was outside at the camel market."

"What did he want?"

"I don't know, find a new camel for himself."

"What did he want from Zeki?"

"Abdel Kader, you won't believe me. He wants your son to take over from Saadalla. So what's that about his fiancée? You don't want to tell me that Zeki looked the Khalifa in the eye and lied?"

"No, you're right," Abdel Kader said. "Not even Zeki has the nerve to do that. Could be he made up a fiancée to sound more interesting. You know what he's like when he feels insecure, and he probably felt insecure with the Khalifa."

"He didn't look it."

"Well, he's a great actor. He never would admit it, but he can become quite boastful. The Khalifa's presence must have unnerved him at least a tiny bit."

“It was strange, though, because the Khalifa offered to find him a wife, and Zeki said he had already found one.” Then Madibbo remembered something else. “The Khalifa hasn’t forgiven me yet, he called me a lamb in a lion’s lair,” Madibbo said. He sounded like he had been drinking.

“Why would you listen to what he has to say?” Abdel Kader said. “Besides, if you’re a lamb, what would that make me? Believe me, all these years ago, when I surrendered to you, I surrendered to a lion.”

Madibbo looked relieved but Abdel Kader didn’t want to give up so soon.

“So tell me, what did the Khalifa say? What is this, replacing the chief of guards with a sixteen-year-old boy?”

“He said he would call for Zeki today or tomorrow. And that he was looking for a replacement for Saadalla.”

“So it’s true about Saadalla. Where is he going?”

“No one knows. Reggaf, most likely. Did you see how he worked Makkieh this morning?”

Abdel Kader nodded. The memory was still raw.

“At least you’ll get her back.”

“Do you think? No, the Khalifa would give her to Zeki, if he really takes over for Saadalla. I don’t understand it. What on earth does the Khalifa want to do with my son?”

Madibbo looked like he’d love to take a guess but he had to resume work and Abdel Kader went back to Sebiba. They ate lamb at Osman Digna’s tent, but it was hard for Abdel Kader to concentrate on what Sebiba was talking about. A father can be forgiven for missing some minor events in his son’s life, but his son’s career and engagement shouldn’t be among them. Abdel Kader didn’t like the direction this was taking, and he didn’t care for his son’s lackadaisical attitude either, as if neither his employment in the Khalifa’s palace guards nor his engagement mattered. Besides, there were other things happening that Abdel Kader was struggling to make sense of, for example Ranya sending escape money at a moment when the Khalifa was just waiting for an excuse to send him to Reggaf.

It seemed too late now to head back home for some rest, so Abdel Kader found a place near the Khalifa’s river house and stretched under one of the straw shades that lined the streets of Omdurman to give its people relief from the sun’s strong rays. Sebiba had decided to stay at Osman Digna’s tent, undoubtedly hoping for Gazala to find another excuse to come out. Abdel Kader shut his eyes but found sleep, even though it should have come easily, elusive. Sometimes, this tended to

happen, and he would feel overtired and unable to sleep at the same time. His thoughts circled Zeki and Ranya, his future and his past. What was it that gave him the impression the present couldn't go on like this forever? His star was sinking, for one. And the sad part was that he didn't even care. Even if Zeki didn't believe him, he had been someone once. Enta el wahid. The only one, the Khalifa had said. The only one to train his troops. The only one to put together a proper troop review. The only one to send on campaigns. The only one of his captives he could trust. Now, all was gone, trust, ability, exceptionality, and he found himself lying here, not giving nearly as much a damn as he should. Neither upset nor frightened nor enraged. Bothered, maybe. A little compromised. Inconvenienced, sure. Sad about the loss of Makkieh and his books. But what he really was, was tired.

But Zeki. Zeki's life was tied to Omdurman – why shouldn't it be a good one? He shouldn't blame his son for his secrecy. Zeki was just waiting to grab what was available to him. Until now Abdel Kader just never had the courage to face the facts. He hadn't been that much older than Zeki when he rode his camel into Sudan looking for adventure, and he had got adventure, on the order of the Khalifa making him a Dervish guard. And all the fuss everyone had made about his diaries. Could he really be blamed for thinking of his captivity as something that would, someday, come to an end? Even the Khalifa, when he felt like gloating, called him his prize captive. Wasn't it natural for a captive to think of escape, think of a life beyond the desert? How should he have known that the convergence of the two Niles, the spot where the river forked into two, was also a fork in his life path? He had chosen one path out of necessity. But in his diaries, he wrote down every little detail and sketched with great accuracy, because he dreamed of another path, one that led him back to Egypt and onward to great fame. Zeki didn't understand because he was still too young, and because he had a warrior's appetite for, well, war.

The resolve grew in Abdel Kader to decline Ranya's offer. Zeki needed a guiding hand. He was still only a child, about to be sucked into a whirlwind of palace intrigues. He needed someone to stay guard. If only he were allowed to write, he would have pulled out his diary to make sense of the confusion around him. The longing inside him became so strong for the words he used to write, the diaries he had composed, the paper that had gone up in flame. If Zeki really needed someone's help to find his way around the Khalifa's palace, was he the right man for it?

Abdel Kader recalled the last day he had been ordered to the palace. A day of shame and chains, even though the morning had begun so auspiciously. He had spent the night at home, coming

out of his fever and starting to feel better. The Khalifa had ordered him to rest. How thoughtful of his master, Abdel Kader had thought and wished for Amira's soft touch. But Amira had gone to the market to buy meat. Ah, he could almost taste the lamb on his tongue, and he stretched out lazily. Times like this ...

A great din had broken out outside the hut. When Abdel Kader rose to investigate, there was Saadalla in the doorway, shoving him back inside. In the confusion and the noise, Abdel Kader had trouble finding out what it was everybody wanted. They wanted something. Hassan came over to lend his friend a hand, and he too was manhandled out of the door and into the courtyard. Only when he started complaining in a loud voice about his maltreatment did the guards let him go. Abdel Kader wasn't so lucky. Zeki looked confused and a little frightened, but he refused to look in his father's direction, even though Abdel Kader tried frantically to make eye contact with his son. At some stage, Hassan slipped back inside Abdel Kader's house, but he had trouble remembering what had happened and when. At one point, Saadalla tipped his possessions in the dust of the courtyard and ripped them apart. He waved a diary triumphantly in the air. His written words. How terribly wrong Abdel Kader felt when he realised the direction this was taking.

"But this is nothing. Just notes," he tried to explain as he glanced over to Hassan, who, looking nonpartisan, dropped a few of Abdel Kader's diaries to the ground and buried them in the sand with his toes.

"This is not nothing. It's everything," Saadalla said and marched him off to the Khalifa. And he proved to be right, didn't he? It was everything they needed to accuse him of espionage. And even after the Khalifa forgave him, offered him one of his cousins in marriage, lifted him off the ground and told him to burn his books so they would never have to talk about it again, even then Abdel Kader knew in his heart of hearts that this was everything. And it went up in flames.

Joseppi

When Abdel Kader got back to the Khalifa's quarters he was almost late – he had spent too much time thinking thoughts that were of little help in his present situation. Gamal was agitated as he usually was during troop reviews, he always assumed the worst. It was hard to satisfy him on such occasions, so he berated Abdel Kader as soon as he stepped into his sight. The Khalifa's guards were supposed to accompany the Khalifa back to the mosque, and from there to his palace.

“Gamal, I just took a nap, I haven’t slept since yesterday morning,” Abdel Kader said, though sleep was the one thing he hadn’t done. “Guess what rumour Zeki has started this time? Madibbo just told me, Zeki said he’s engaged.”

“Nonsense. Why would he do that without consulting me first?” Gamal said.

“Because he’s a secretive little bugger,” Abdel Kader had wanted to say but didn’t because Gamal had already moved on. Abdel Kader had wanted to tell his friend that Zeki’s pretend marriage was the lesser of his problems. Zeki would have to be married off at some stage and comfortably so. In his view the only difficulty was to find a girl Zeki wasn’t bound to get bored of. Abdel Kader didn’t want his son to enter a loveless marriage or worse, get hurt. So if it was true and Zeki was engaged, they would have to make sure the girl was right for him. For a moment, just as Joseppi and two other guards got on the horses next to him, he thought of Ranya, doubtless Ranya would have loved to find a match for her son. But before he had time to wonder what kind of girl Ranya would have picked the Khalifa finally emerged from his house and mounted the carriage.

Sometimes, the days after Ramadan can get a little out of hand. This was particularly true for the years after the famine, with the slow recovery of the people. Especially after the troop review, which reminded everyone of their victory over the Government, people became boisterous. The relief of being able to partake of food and drink during the day. The fun of hosting a festivity. The impressive quantity of their soldiers. The quarrels such cramped quarters produced. The splendour of the Mahdi’s tomb and the ruins of Khartoum. These things added up, made the people of Omdurman feel patriotic. The sun had the adverse effect on the Khalifa’s guards, who began to feel a bit slack, after all they had been up since the previous night and had spent most of their time waiting. The soldiers had begun to distract themselves according to their means and temperament. Even the horses were lifeless and unwilling.

So when Khalifa Abdullahi emerged from his house and resumed his place on the carriage, the horsemen were perhaps a bit slow to form a firm square around him. They entered on the road leading up from the river to the mosque, and as they were drawing level with the black dome of the Mahdi’s tomb, a great commotion broke out. Pilgrims and townspeople alike had been informed by the sound of the war horns that the Khalifa was coming towards them. When they caught sight of him, the people were swept up in such euphoria that hundreds flocked around him with shouts of loyalty and oaths of allegiance. The guards did their best to keep them at bay, for the sheer mass of people threatened to squash the life out of the Khalifa. Abdel Kader thought that they were all going to be trampled to death

and frantically, he commenced to fight the crowd off as it was being pushed towards him, striking both guards and civilians, harder even as he was struck in return. In no time, the Khalifa's carriage was at the centre of a general fight. Abdel Kader recognised Saadalla's voice, and Joseppi's calling for help, so he tackled the people who were climbing onto the carriage, pushed them away and, with the help of Sebiba and a handful of other guards, cleared enough space to get the Khalifa through the crowd and into his niche at the mosque. The carriage lay abandoned in the street, a thick cloud of people around it. Abdel Kader found it impossible to say if Joseppi was being rescued or murdered.

A little later, Joseppi was brought inside the mosque by a group of servants. Abdel Kader rushed to him and found them wringing a piece of rag in water and dabbing Joseppi's head and neck with it. Finally, he was brought around, but all he could do was babble. Someone had taken his turban and helmet off. Abdel Kader wasn't able to see if they had made off with his friend's uniform.

"This is so like you, Joseppi," Abdel Kader could hear Gamal say behind his back and turned, relieved to see his friend join their little group. "To be carried off by an army of people like some sugar cube."

"Yeah, well, Saadalla made a mistake," Abdel Kader said. "He should have kept a closer watch. He knows how easily these things can get out of hand."

"So do you, and so does Joseppi. Are you hurt?" Gamal said.

"When I fell I felt a sharp pain in my ankle, like it snapped in half," Joseppi said.

"Well, we'll bring you back to my place and send for someone who will look at your hand, let's hope it's not broken, your fall wasn't actually that bad," Gamal said.

"Yes, you were lucky, Joseppi," Abdel Kader said. "It looked like they were going to trample you to death with joy."

"Thanks, Abdel Kader, I don't think that's helpful," Gamal said.

Abdel Kader thought his friend didn't look too bad, dusty and bruised, with a few tears in his uniform, but overall he didn't look like he'd just escaped a frantic mob. He didn't want to take a look at Joseppi's foot though, a sprained ankle wouldn't be that bad, but Abdel Kader had once seen an open fracture and didn't feel like seeing one again in this lifetime. He told Joseppi that he would go with him to Gamal's place and hurried to get his own helmet taken off.

That's when Khalifa's messenger appeared and got hold of his elbow, and Abdel Kader was ushered to Khalifa Abdullahi inside the niche. It was just like the Khalifa, picking the worst moment to

Abdel Kader got down on the sheepskin in front of the Khalifa, crossed his hands over his chest and kept his eyes to the ground.

“How are you today, Abdel Kader,” the Khalifa said, only it wasn’t a question and he didn’t really expect an answer. He got one nevertheless.

“Not too good, Khalifa, I’ve got to go with Joseppi and see to it that his wounds get treated,” he said.

“You are merciful to your brothers, my friend,” the Khalifa said with a smile that gave his words all the wrong meaning. “It would have been great luck for Joseppi to get killed on such a joyous occasion. Great luck. He would have gone straight to heaven.”

“He didn’t,” Abdel Kader said.

“No, he didn’t. But I called you to talk about something else,” the Khalifa said and Abdel Kader took a deep breath. Here it comes, he said to himself. He closed his eyes for a moment. He had hoped to talk to the Khalifa about Zeki but now he wasn’t so sure anymore that he wanted to know. If the Khalifa really wanted Zeki to join the guards he somehow had to prevent it because nothing, Abdel Kader felt, could put his son in a worse position. However, since the Khalifa would consider his offer an honour, no doubt, Abdel Kader’s refusal would have to be as careful as a Nile crossing. What would he say? That Zeki was still too young? That he was inclined to be quick-tempered? That he didn’t want his son’s bad behaviour to reflect on him?

“About the horse carriage,” the Khalifa said at that moment. “I didn’t enjoy the ride today. Not one bit.”

“I’m very sorry to hear it, Khalifa.”

“So I’ve been thinking.”

“Yes, Khalifa?”

“That for next year’s Feast of Bairam, I want to go back on the charger I had last year. We’ll return the carriage to the beit el man.”

“Very well, Khalifa.”

“Impractical. That’s what I’ve found it to be. And not as comfortable as it looks.”

“It seemed not as smooth as it used to be.”

“That’s all.”

As Abdel Kader got up to leave, the Khalifa waved him back. "By the way, who is the woman your son is going to marry?" he asked.

"I haven't arranged his marriage yet, Khalifa. Zeki is not engaged. It's probably just a rumour someone spread," Abdel Kader said. He could see two or three servants outside bringing forward a mule, tying it to Joseppi's angareb, which was turned into a sort of stretcher.

"Well, Zeki told me," the Khalifa said. "He wasn't lying. Seems he's found himself his own wife. I want to know who it is." And with this he let Abdel Kader go. He had to hurry to catch up with Joseppi's improvised ambulance.

"You know, now I'm scared." Joseppi's face was whiter than it had been for a long time. There was obviously an amount of pain involved because Joseppi had tears in his eyes.

"You never know, Gamal said it wasn't all that bad, maybe it's not broken and you'll feel better after a day or two," Abdel Kader said, fully aware that to expect Joseppi to look at the bright side was like expecting the Nile to dry out. "Besides, every cloud has a silver lining. You'll spend tonight at Gamal's house instead of the Saier. I hear Gamal has vouched for you."

"You're right, things could have been even worse," Joseppi said, trying to put on a brave face. "I could have been squashed to death inside a prison cell instead of outside."

"If you don't stop talking about death, I'm going to vomit," Abdel Kader said. "You're not going to die, just show a little trust."

"The Khalifa won't keep me in his service," Joseppi said. "I've failed to keep him safe. What good am I to him now?"

Gamal waited for them in his courtyard and promised Joseppi to send for Mona as soon as they had found someone to look at Joseppi's ankle. Finally the doctor, an old Egyptian, came in, took a quick look and had their worst fears confirmed. Joseppi's ankle was broken albeit the good news was it wasn't an open fracture, but there was a lot of swelling and he would need to have his bone set. Abdel Kader got a bit pale in the face, it meant a lot of pain for Joseppi, who wasn't one to deal well with pain in the first place. Gamal looked pale too but then he just gave a grim nod.

He said well, let's do what needs to be done, but the doctor said they'd have to wait for his assistant to help set the bone. He was going to give Joseppi a special drink so he could sleep in relative comfort until the next day and hopefully still be out by the time his assistant had arrived. After that, if

the procedure was a success, Joseppi would be in need of rest for some time, and pray to God the tissue didn't become infected.

Fortunately, the doctor had already given Joseppi his special powder so that he didn't hear all that was said. He dozed off while they were talking about where to put him until the next day. It was agreed Gamal would look after him, the only one the head gaoler trusted.

Joseppi was soon in deep sleep. Gamal said it made him tired to watch Joseppi sleep so well and he would try and get some rest too, which wasn't exactly what Abdel Kader had hoped to hear. He was tired but not sleepy and didn't feel like being left alone. If he went to sleep now, he'd just ponder Joseppi's fate, the fact that his best friend had broken his hand and would most likely have to quit his service for the Khalifa was even more depressing than the thought that Ranya hadn't sent him any money, or the fact that Zeki was setting up a harem for himself behind his back. It was midday. He could either try to snatch a few hours of sleep in the courtyard of the Khalifa's palace, or he could finally get to the bottom of at least one of the rumours Zeki had started. If he could get a hold of his son, he would be able to find out who the girl was he was engaged to. All else, Abdel Kader hoped optimistically, would fall into place after that.

Umm es Shole wasn't pleased with being taken out of the stable so quickly, but this time Abdel Kader didn't fuss about her. His aim was to ride her to Madibbo's, track down Zeki's whereabouts and, together with his son, pay a visit to his future wife. He didn't get so far.

For one, Madibbo was nowhere to be seen, confirming Abdel Kader's fears that the ex-general had given in to marissa. Next, and while he was waiting outside Madibbo's quarters with a desolate face, who but Dina should stroll by on her way to Osman Digna. The full water skin seemed too heavy for her bright smile and the least Abdel Kader could do to lighten up her lot was to accompany her. The thought occurred to him that Dina had taken considerable trouble to make sure he noticed her, and wouldn't it be mean-spirited not to reward her efforts? It was an awkward time to feel lonely, the market place was bustling with activity and simply walking through the stalls, avoiding camel droppings and other filth, made Abdel Kader feel better. He enjoyed the buzzing as he walked Dina to Osman Digna's tent.

There were soldiers searching for a place to celebrate, wives searching for their husbands, servants searching for pots and children searching for each other. Just as Abdel Kader went through a group of children chasing a cat, he suddenly felt hopeless at the thought that nothing would prevent the

Khalifa from acquiring Zeki for his guards. He had spent nearly thirteen years doing whatever the Khalifa wanted him to do, and had managed to refuse him only twice, when the Khalifa had arranged marriages for him. If he wanted Zeki to replace Saadalla, he would get him because Abdel Kader didn't have the energy to fight him, even though he thought it was a mistake. But then again, there wasn't much sense in objecting if Zeki himself wanted to join the guards.

It occurred to Abdel Kader that Zeki and the Khalifa were in a way similar when it came to it. They didn't allow anything to stand in their way, and they both had a clear vision of where they wanted to go. The difference was that the Khalifa was the successor of the Mahdi and representative of the Prophet Mohammed, whereas Zeki was the son of a captive, not much more than a slave. Zeki just happened to know exactly what he wanted to achieve in life and pursued it with an iron will, whereas Abdel Kader himself didn't have much in terms of willpower. This had made them drift apart ever since Zeki had stopped holding his hand. He had a mind of his own about pretty much everything.

At Osman Digna's tent Abdel Kader didn't have to wait too long for Dina, but long enough for Gazala to spot him. The change of her smile into a frown upon realising that he hadn't come for her made Abdel Kader feel so sad he almost changed his mind and turned around. But there was Dina, and Abdel Kader felt thirsty now. It had been a while since his last marissa. Usually he could take it or leave it but he felt that a day like this had to include all the alcohol he could get away with. He asked Dina if she felt like accompanying him to Hassan to see if he had some beer left but she seemed to think that was unnecessary. She said she knew some marissa girls who had plenty of beers, all he needed to do was accompany her to a cousin's residence at the marketplace.

Abdel Kader agreed after a moment's hesitation, naturally her cousin's residence would turn out to be a brothel and he didn't know about visiting one. Under the Khalifa, brothels were as illegal as the alcohol that could be obtained in them, but perhaps it was just what he needed to take his mind off things.

It was always interesting to visit a brothel, only in Dina's case, as it turned out, it was horrible. Her cousin's residence consisted of a scatter of low mud huts. Dina explained that they were very basic but low maintenance was their one good point. Abdel Kader nodded in agreement. It had to be that, after all there wasn't much that could be maintained, aside from the rubbish that piled up out back and smelled about as bad as if it had been right under Dina's bed.

Dina said she hoped the smell didn't bother him, you got used to it after a while and she didn't even take notice of it anymore. It was her theory that the quicker you got used to it the better, since there wasn't much you could do about it anyway. She'd spent her life in brothels and was convinced that taking offence at things like bad smell just weakened your spirits. The floor was littered with all kinds of things, clothes were among them, also insects and, judging by the sound of noisy scuttling, enough rats for an army of cats to feast for a year. Dina's bed was strewn with scarves in bright colours, ostrich feathers and mother of pearls, evidently she lived what she preached and didn't allow the mess to undermine her strong will.

Abdel Kader was seriously reconsidering his decision. What was he doing here? In a few hours, the Khalifa would want his guards to accompany him back to the mosque, and this trip between palace and mosque would be repeated until midnight. He needed his sleep, had gone too long without it, and felt the throbbing of a headache behind his eyes. True, Dina had been making an effort when she went for water as he came around but that could be misleading, the sun was still strong and the day's potential for turning for the worse seemed considerable. Still, Dina had promised beer, she had whetted his appetite and as it turned out the marissa girls had been busy brewing beer alright. Abdel Kader drank quite a bit. He was hungry as well but it was clear by the look of Dina's establishment that the mention of food would've been considered extravagant. So he stayed hungry, wondering what he was doing, sitting in this bug-infested place drinking beer when he could have had a good few hour's rest and enjoyed a hearty meal with his friends afterwards. Just as he decided to spend the remainder of the Feast of Bairam far removed from Osman Digna's tent, Dina put her hand on Abdel Kader's thigh before he had time to put the beer jug down. She must've sensed his scepticism and seemed to think that she had to act fast. One hand was brushing her clothes off the bed while the other went out for a feel between his legs. Abdel Kader caught sight of a coral-coloured scarf. Amira would have looked stunning in it. Ranya would have looked stunning in it. He shook his head. He had to stop thinking of every woman in his life. He kept waiting for the beer to have an effect while Dina wrestled with his clothes, not that it took much time, she had a lot of practice with soldier's uniforms, a fact that made Abdel Kader feel tender. So what if she lived in a rubbish pile, at least she didn't steal like Amira had. He hugged her for a while afterwards and watched her fall asleep before he snuck out and made his way home, from where he sent a servant to the Khalifa informing him that he had been taken suddenly ill. Zeki, Abdel Kader had decided, could be anywhere, and he felt the safest bet was to wait for him at home. Besides,

Dina and the marissa had accomplished what the night without sleep hadn't been able to – Abdel Kader was so tired he did all he could to prevent himself from falling asleep while riding Umm es Shole home.

Part 4: The Captain of the guards

Sunrise

When his father's geese woke him, it was still dark outside. Zeki cursed and tried to get back to sleep but the geese wouldn't shut up. When Zeki looked to his father's bed of course it was empty. There was going to be the troop review in the morning, and his father would be at the Khalifa's. Zeki went into the courtyard. It didn't seem fair to be the one who always got woken up by the geese. The geese's behaviour, once they spotted Zeki, was ambivalent. Geese are social creatures, but contrary to common belief they are not dumb. Experience had taught them to keep their distance from Zeki, who lifted a few smooth stones off the ground and took aim. He dropped them as he heard a horse approach. One of the Khalifa's messengers arrived, saying he had been sent to inform Zeki that the Khalifa was expecting him in the afternoon.

"Doesn't he ever sleep?" Zeki asked. He felt grumpy. Patience was not one of his strong points, but still, things were moving a bit fast even for him. He hadn't even had a chance to ask Gamal about joining the guards, and there was the Khalifa, expecting him to be ready this afternoon.

"Be there after the midday prayer," the messenger said. "Pick up a horse from the Beit el Mal this morning."

The Khalifa's treasury was like a giant department store, complete with a section for slaves, concubines, and horses. Zeki wondered what else the Khalifa would present him with. "Any horse I like?"

"Adlan will select one for you. We'll see you in the afternoon."

"I'll be there." Zeki picked the largest of the stones and flung it at Yasmine, his father's favourite goose. She hissed at him but didn't dare to come near enough to peck at his feet.

"What did you do that for?" Hassan asked. He had come over the second he'd spotted the Khalifa's messenger in Zeki's courtyard. "That was a mean thing to do."

Zeki shrugged. "She woke me up. Why do geese have to make so much noise?"

"That's what geese do, Zeki. Don't let your father fool you. He doesn't just keep them for their pretty feathers. They are very good watchdogs. You don't want to open your eyes and find your house got broken in, do you? What did Wadi want from you?"

"Nothing."

“Nothing? But why would the Khalifa send Wadi to you if he had nothing to tell?”

“Is Moussa up? I need him to take me to the Beit el Mal.”

“Not even last month’s thunderstorm could wake Moussa up. Why the Beit el Mal?”

“The Khalifa presents me with a horse and wants me to visit him in the afternoon.” Zeki tried to keep an even face but couldn’t quite conceal the pride in his voice.

Hassan looked doubtful. “What’s with the rush? Why doesn’t he wait until after the troop review?”

“What did Moussa say when you told him he’s engaged?”

“I told you, he’s asleep. I’ll leave the honour of telling him to you, after all it was you who set it up,” Hassan said. “But Zeki, listen. Moussa doesn’t have your brains, or looks, or anything, really. It’s a good thing you’re marrying a mother-and-daughter pair. Be his friend.”

Zeki felt annoyed. Moussa had been one of his closest and oldest friends, their friendship went all the way back to when his mother still lived with them. He didn’t need Hassan’s help to remember. Hassan gave a chuckle. He seemed to find the situation funny.

“You know what, Zeki, I do hope you’ll become a palace guard,” he said. “You and your father serving the Khalifa together. We’ll be in for a lot of fun.”

Zeki ignored Hassan’s words, he lost his interest when things got too complicated. The geese brought him back, they were pecking at the enclosure and he didn’t see why he had to put up with their racket, after all it was his father’s fault they were feeling neglected. If he didn’t give them so much attention all the time, they wouldn’t miss him when he was away. Zeki told the servants to shut up the geese with some food or cook them for breakfast and accompanied Hassan back to his own house, where Hassan’s servants were busy packing up the merchandise that would go to the market.

“I’m thinking of hiring one of these storerooms at the market,” Hassan said and chased Heba away, who tried to get her teeth on a bale of cloth. “It’s too much work, taking it home every night. If Omdurman wasn’t full of thieves, I could just leave it there and save myself a whole lot of trouble.”

“You could leave it there and have Moussa guard it at night,” Zeki suggested but Hassan just gave him an odd sort of look. “And have my son killed by a mob of half-starved beggars? No, thank you, not now that he’s getting married.”

Heba gave an annoyed bleat. She was the most spoilt goat Zeki had ever seen, and she wasn't used to being denied anything. When she realised Hassan had no intention of letting her get to his wares, she went for the bowl of cornmeal the servants had brought out for Zeki and Hassan to share.

"Get away from him, you evil witch!" Hassan said. The previous night had given him a bad headache. Heba was obviously in heat, her bleats had gotten a lot louder and more desperate overnight, contributing to Hassan's bad mood. What a mad house, Zeki thought. Between Hassan's goats, his father's geese and whosever horse or donkey they could borrow for the day, there didn't seem enough room for him.

"Will you let me use Moussa's horse to get to the Beit el Mal?" Zeki asked. He had a feeling it was better to get the horse quickly before Hassan could think of another use for it, but as it turned out it was already too late.

"Better still, I will wake Moussa to take you," Hassan said. "On the way you can tell him about his fiancée. Besides, it will do him good to see what someone can achieve when they apply themselves to their work. Perhaps you will rub off on him a little." He pointed over the enclosure to Zeki's house. "I wish your father were back, his geese are giving me a headache."

Contrary to Zeki, whose foul mood in the morning was legendary, Moussa wasn't a grumpy riser, even less so when his father told him he was to take Zeki to the Beit el Mal. He jumped into the yard with the energy of a five-year-old, ate cornmeal while his servant saddled the horse, and gaped at Zeki with wide wondering eyes, all at the same time.

Morning

The rains had set in early this year, and last night had seen three or four heavy deluges. Moussa's horse stepped carefully through the water around the market place that, having found no other outlet, had overflowed into yards and taken its toll on the mud walls of houses. The sunlight turned puddles into kaleidoscopes and wet leaves gleamed in bright green. Latecomers for the troop review rushed through the streets with the excitement of Bairam, and Zeki wished Moussa would hurry up. He wanted to get his horse before the Khalifa returned from the parade ground and he ran danger of running into his father.

"Why didn't you go to the troop review?" Moussa asked.

“To see my father hanging on his stupid horse carriage? He doesn’t even own a horse anymore after the Khalifa took Makkieh from us,” Zeki said. Sometimes it almost choked him how mad he was with his father.

They weren’t even close to the river bank and they could already make out the golden glow of the mountain of grains that was piled high in the granary of the Beit el Mal. Nothing could be further from the sandy plains outside Omdurman than the lush green gardens along the river bank. Up and down the Nile, water wheels drew and distributed water over fields golden with wheat and maize. Gardens, like the one in Khartoum, were overflowing with figs, pomegranates, lemons, bananas and grapes. Date palms clustered around the landing places where the small ferry boats took on new customers, and canoes bobbed gently on the river. The smell of fish hung heavy in the air.

Zeki and Moussa made their way to one of the gigantic yards of the Beit el Mal, where cattle and camel auctions were held on regular days. Everything looked deserted now that the Khalifa was holding his troop review. Most likely, Moussa’s horse was the only one not at the parade ground, and Hassan paid large sums in bribery for his good-for-nothing son. Well, as Moussa was quick to point out, his father also paid bribes to continue drinking marissa and smoking tobacco in peace, so it didn’t matter too much in his opinion that his lazy constitution contributed to his father’s expenses.

Against expectations, a servant was waiting for them near the stables and led them to a slender, ash coloured pony covered in white spots.

“This is Aisha,” the servant said, and the horse danced nervously in her box at the mention of her name. “She’s only a little over four years old, so you’ll have to train her.”

Zeki nodded eagerly. He couldn’t wait to get his hands on Aisha, pull himself up on her back and ride her out into the clear day.

“How will you feed her?” Moussa said and Zeki gave an angry sort of snort. He hated it for his friend to interrupt his idle daydreams. Why did he have to point out the dire situation he and his father were in?

“The Khalifa has given orders to supply you with half a measure of dhurra,” the servant said.

“That will be quite enough, thank you,” was all Zeki said and led Aisha out of the stable. He wasn’t planning on keeping her at home anyway. Rather, he wanted to see if Meher could put them up. There was no way he would let his father, or one of his dirty thieving women, lay her hands on his horse, and so Meher seemed the safest bet.

Moussa and Zeki rode in silence from the Beit el Mal. It occurred to Zeki that he hadn't told his friend of his engagement yet, and that Hassan expected him to enlighten his son for him. He felt annoyed by both Hassan and Meher, why did they expect him to do their work for them? He would have rather taken Aisha for a good ride, she was stiff with nervousness about her new master, perhaps he could even ride her over to Madibbo to show her off. He decided to get it over and done with as quickly as possible and just told Moussa that Meher expected him to marry her daughter Esmet, while he himself was going to be Meher's husband. Moussa's grin upon the news was so awkward it seemed to slip off his face. Zeki became impatient. He was going to be Meher's husband, in control of a large household, and the captain of the palace guards in a few days. He felt he was beginning to outgrow his friendship with Moussa. Also, the thought occurred to him that he needed to find Gamal. Gamal would tell him how to respond to the Khalifa's offer, and if Gamal knew anything about Meher he would share it with him. More importantly, he could tell Zeki how to behave in front of the Khalifa so Zeki would make a good impression from the start. So Zeki began to make his farewells and started to ride off but Moussa took hold of his hand, he suddenly seemed incapable of riding home by himself. Zeki found it embarrassing, he could see people watching from the shade of a tree behind them.

"Let me go, I just remembered I have to see Gamal," Zeki said but for the first time Moussa didn't back down.

"Let's go over there and talk," he said, his face was red and he seemed unsteady as he rode with Zeki to the shade.

"You know, it's funny," Moussa said. "I've always felt we two are connected in some way. I just never thought it would be like this."

Zeki shrugged, so Moussa thought they were extending their friendship by becoming family, what was the big deal? But Moussa's behaviour made him nervous, his friend held on to his hand as if scared to let go.

"My father will think it's great," Moussa said, and then, out of the blue, he asked Zeki if he'd ever wanted there to be more to their friendship, he'd had the urge on a number of occasions, Moussa admitted, still rubbing Zeki's hand and making Zeki nervous with it.

"So, wait, is there more to you and some of your other friends?" Zeki asked, as far as he was concerned it didn't matter much in Omdurman, he'd even sometimes had the impression that Gamal

and Joseppi loved one another more than friends, it certainly didn't concern him, but it wouldn't make him consider Moussa's offer either.

Instead of answering, Moussa took Zeki's hand which had somehow slipped from his embrace, before going on to say that he'd never done it, but if he did, he, Zeki, would be the only one he would consider.

"Doesn't change a thing," Zeki said and turned Aisha, telling Moussa that people were watching when his friend didn't want to let him go. That made Moussa finally back down.

"Zeki, we're family now," he said, upon which Zeki just buried his heels into Aisha's sides and left, so what if Moussa had the last word, it wasn't like he was trying to prove anything.

Midday

The Khalifa was heading midday prayers at the mosque, but to Zeki's surprise, neither Gamal nor his father were in attendance. Zeki was determined to track down Gamal before he had to go to the Khalifa, it wasn't so much his nerves that made him feel he needed to see his father's friend, it was more that a lot was going on in his life and if he couldn't find at least one person to talk things through, he had the feeling he'd explode.

Something gave him the idea to go past Gamal's house and see if he was there. Gamal's house was located not far from the Khalifa's palace. It was one of the few whitewashed buildings and Gamal had gone to considerable trouble to decorate the walls with beautiful rugs, most of them Egypt and Abyssinia and as gifts from the Mahdi and Khalifa Abdullahi. When Zeki entered the courtyard he found Gamal sitting in his little garden in some old jibbas, in which he didn't look so elegant, his scrawniness made him look like a beggar, and Zeki thought it was a good thing Gamal made an effort to dress well most times.

"Zeki, where did you get these jibbas, they absolutely glow," Gamal said. He made a point of always complimenting Zeki on something or other whenever he saw him.

"Where did you get yours, they're so dirty they could stand up by themselves," Zeki said in reply, to which Gamal shrugged and observed that the dirtier the jibbas, the richer the man, which was certainly true for Omdurman, no one with wealth wanted to draw the Khalifa's attention or the attention of thieves to him.

"Bad news, Zeki, Joseppi broke his ankle today," Gamal said.

“Did he actually manage to fall off the Khalifa’s carriage,” Zeki asked but felt sorry for how it came out. He wished Joseppi well even though it was true that the guard was weak-willed like his father.

“No, he’s the victim of a mob, you could say. People get so fanatical about these things. I missed you at the troop review by the way. Very inspiring. Anyway, Joseppi didn’t have such good luck as your father, he got caught up in the commotion. Nothing good ever happens to that man.”

So far as Zeki could see that was the most obvious anyone could ever say about Joseppi. Joseppi’s broken ankle didn’t seem out of the ordinary. On the contrary, considered by Joseppi’s standards of bad luck it would have been unusual had nothing happened to him.

“So how is he now?” Zeki asked, secretly glad for the distraction. Both the Khalifa and Meher were too great a subject to broach straightaway.

Gamal gave a funny kind of smile in response.

“Well, the bone’s set, Joseppi’s committed to bed for the moment,” he said. “When he gets better we’ll see what we can do with him. If he gets better.” Then a thought crossed his mind.

“Zeki, why did you tell the Khalifa you were engaged?” Gamal said and Zeki was so glad it was Gamal who opened the door to these tricky topics, he spilled the beans about the rich old widow wanting to marry him.

“I can’t believe you’ve gotten engaged behind your father’s back.” Gamal couldn’t decide whether Zeki’s engagement belonged to the good or bad category. Gamal had heard of Meher but didn’t really know her, even though her mother had been in the Mahdi’s harem and both he and Meher knew the Khalifa quite intimately.

“The Khalifa wants to see me today after the midday prayer,” Zeki said and watched Gamal’s face for a response. To his surprise, his friend looked grave.

“Zeki, I need to ask you now, do you know what you’re going to do when the Khalifa offers you a place in his guards? Are you sure you want to enter the Khalifa’s service? You’re a great soldier, but you’re not even sixteen yet. Once you’ve married Meher you’re free. She is rich, she could send you with merchants to Cairo. You could even meet your mother if you wanted.”

Gamal’s point was that the Khalifa wanted to get rid of Saadalla but this didn’t mean Zeki had to commit his life to the palace guards, especially since there was a rich merchant widow who had not only the money but also the influence to send him a long way away from Omdurman. “Is there no hope you’ll ask your father for guidance?” Gamal said.

Zeki didn't even bother with an answer.

"I really wish you wouldn't dismiss your father so readily, there's a lot you could learn from him," Gamal said. "He's the only captive who was ever close with the Khalifa. He's taken quite a few risks in his life, sometimes it's worth hearing him out."

Then he shook his head. "Of course sometimes the risks he takes are completely unnecessary, I guess that's why he ends up keeping forbidden notebooks and dealing with the consequences."

Zeki's thought was that all, not just some of the risks his father took were unnecessary, that's why his life was constantly ruined by his father. It wasn't even so much the diaries he was angry about, more the fact that his father had honestly believed he could get away with it. Didn't that speak of a naivety that was bordering on stupidity? What should he be more ashamed of? That his father was a traitor or that he was so unbelievably stupid?

To Zeki's relief, Gamal didn't tell him he was too young to get married or something like that, it was not that Gamal thought marriage wasn't serious, only he'd been around the Khalifa for too long to think of anything as absolute, obviously things could change in the blink of an eye, and why not take advantage of the fact that there was a rich woman who wanted to marry a good-looking boy? As to the Khalifa, however, Gamal wasn't as forthcoming.

"It seems you have made up your mind, and anyway, if the Khalifa has already chosen you, there's not much you can do," Gamal said. "Of course you could pretend to be a horrible marksman, but I suppose there isn't much hope you would do that?"

Zeki shook his head. He didn't see why he had to fail on purpose just so the Khalifa wouldn't replace Saadalla with him.

Gamal gave a bitter sort of smile.

"Thought so," he said. "Then just be yourself, the Khalifa likes obedience but is impressed by manly behaviour. Though how you and your father will both serve as palace guards of the Khalifa is quite frankly beyond me."

Afternoon

To ride Aisha through the palace gates was like nothing Zeki had ever experienced. The afternoon heat wasn't letting up but Zeki didn't feel a thing other than the joy of Aisha trotting full of life. Sure, she was as nervous as anything, an as yet untrained horse that would be about as much work as a disobedient child. Still, the potential. Zeki was in awe of what she would be able to achieve under his tutelage, and he wasn't ashamed to say it. He couldn't remember having ever felt happier, and to ride her into the Khalifa's courtyard, with everybody's eyes on him, was a promise to his future as sweet as sugar dates. The Khalifa received him with an army of guards and servants. Zeki pretended he didn't care and kept his eyes on the Khalifa. Still, he was almost a hundred percent sure his father wasn't present, and was annoyed with himself that he felt relieved. He had as much right as the next person to be here, the Khalifa had asked him to perhaps take over from Saadalla, and look at the horse the Khalifa had given him for this occasion! Why would he feel good or bad or anything, really, that his father wasn't around to witness him taking over the guards?

His annoyance with himself made him look haughtier than he felt, which in turn had an effect on the way he carried himself in front of the crowd that had gathered. The way everyone looked at Zeki didn't intimidate him. On the contrary, he flourished. His whole life was an examination, right from the day his father had dropped him off into Madibbo's care. Omdurman had always been convinced there was something more or less in him. A captive's son, a soldier's son, the son of the enemy, the son of a servant. His whole life he had waited for a chance like that. If he were to join the palace guards, if he were to replace Saadalla, Zeki at that moment resolved to do it. Zeki did everything the Khalifa asked him to do without saying a word, not even when he missed a target, though he missed only once. No one said much, it seemed that the Khalifa had already made up his mind and that he just wanted to see for himself what the whole town was talking about. The Khalifa was quiet too, but not tired, the feast hadn't exhausted his energies, he looked fresh and mean as always, just in a quiet mood, reflective. Finally he said, "Thank you, Zeki, your aim is extraordinarily accurate, how do you like Aisha?"

Then he dismissed them all except for his little army of boy servants, they had to stay close in case he thought of something he needed.

On his way out, he crossed paths with Saadalla, who didn't seem as unfriendly as he should have been. The only thing he wanted was that Zeki should ride home and see how his father was feeling, he'd heard he was unwell, and then he parted ways.

Zeki didn't really have the patience to see his father right now. What he felt like was going to see Meher and marrying her straight away. It was the same with joining the palace guards, Zeki couldn't wait for his future to begin. His father would only dampen his spirits, and besides, once he laid eyes on Aisha, he might try to claim her for himself. Let him ride Umm es Shole or walk, if he felt like it. What Zeki decided to do, instead, was go to Meher, whose presence he desired like a parched man wanted water.

Sunset

Even the excitement of riding Aisha couldn't mask the fact that the air was getting sultry with heat. The air was so absolutely still that not even a leaf moved. People were carried away with festivities and Zeki was too full with Aisha and the Khalifa to pay much attention, but suddenly someone exclaimed and Zeki turned his face to the sky. He saw a cloud of dust moving in from the east, so dark and grey it matched Aisha's hair. People around him began to hurry as the clouds were banking up, and Aisha started again with her nervous dance, only this time Zeki could feel how she trembled and sweated under him with anxiety. Zeki rode her as hard as he could towards Meher's house. He didn't feel sure he had it in his power to make Aisha stop once they reached Meher, but there was nothing he could do about it anymore. The clouds hung low in the sky, so low they were touching the ground. All of a sudden the wind picked up. First there was only a rustling of leaves but soon it turned into a raging storm. The day had been swallowed up by darkness, the only source of light was rays of blood red sun shining through the wall of dust clouds. Approaching Meher's gate, Zeki wasn't able to say if it was open or closed, it was so dark now he had trouble making out the street before him, but if it was closed it was too late now. There was no stopping Aisha, who was a bundle of raw nerves. The gate was open. Zeki reined Aisha in as soon as they passed the wall, she fought him, her instincts were telling her to run, but Zeki pulled her harder than anything in his life, he willed her to stop, willed her to calm down, willed her to accept him as her master, and Aisha succumbed. Servants rushed towards them with lights, it was so dark now that Zeki had to call out for Meher, and then Aisha was taken away from him and he was led into the relative safety of Meher's house. No doubt they sat in more comfort than they would

have in his father's house of mud bricks, Meher's house was built from burnt brick and limestone and servants moved about with lights in their attempt to chase away the black that had set in around them. Omdurman was obliterated. As the sandstorm passed over them, fine dust penetrated the house and covered everything, people, food, furniture. Meher held Zeki's hand while they sat together, feeling the heat of the storm overpower them, and when Zeki turned to say something, he felt sand on his lips and in his mouth, his voice raspy like a child's. When the daylight returned, they could hear the sound of rain on the roof like footsteps. The smell of rain made the air humid and settled the fine sand.

When Meher inquired after the Khalifa and who the horse was he had ridden, Zeki began to remember what an eventful day it had been and told her everything, down to and including Moussa's proposal, which made Meher chuckle and gloat. She obviously liked a good laugh and Zeki got the impression that Meher was by far the smartest person in Omdurman. She easily outshone his father, which Zeki had to admit wasn't so difficult, but he became convinced that her mind was also sharper than Gamal's. She seemed to operate on a different level altogether.

The thing with Meher was that while it seemed like a fantasy when he talked about her, once he was with her and they were sitting next to each other and he had started to tell her a few things, life with her became completely real. He didn't feel there was so much he didn't know about her when they were together, even though there was.

"So, what's the plan. When are we getting married?" Zeki said.

"Well, we could do it anytime after September," Meher said. "That's when I expect my relatives from Kordofan. They can't come before then because of the rains."

Zeki had to admit that this came as a surprise, he hadn't really given much thought to a big wedding ceremony.

"Why does your family have to come at all?" he asked, the thought of a proper wedding made him nervous.

"I know our meeting was unusual, but I will marry off my daughter like you would an only child, and our wedding will be the same," Meher said. "It will be as big a festivity as possible without giving the Khalifa cause for suspicion – or jealousy."

Zeki had stopped listening at the mention of his father. So far he hadn't given any thought to the two of them meeting. It had never dawned on him that Meher could want to speak with him. It was

hard enough to imagine becoming Moussa's father-in-law. He hadn't even given proper thought to the complications in that, and now Meher wanted to bring in the rest of her family and his father too.

"I love it when you're nervous." Meher's sudden kiss startled him but it was pleasant, just one of the sweet little kisses she liked to give when there was no one around. She was very sweet, she held him for a long time and waited for his anxiety to pass. As she watched him, his nerves finally calmed down, maybe it wouldn't be so bad to have a big wedding. Meher pointed out that they had to do it the traditional way, it couldn't be just the two of them, after all she also had her daughter to consider, and with Moussa came a large family.

"I don't mind Moussa's family, but do we really have to tell my father?" Zeki asked. "Why do you even want to meet him? He betrayed the Khalifa."

"I want to meet him because he's your father," Meher said. "That he's betrayed the Khalifa shouldn't bother you so much. He's a captive. In a way, we all are."

Zeki couldn't think clearly for a moment, his anger was back, what was Meher doing defending his father, didn't she know what life was like when you'd fallen into the Khalifa's disgrace?

"He lives just so he can leave Omdurman, that's his big hope. His only goal is to pass his notes about the Khalifa on to his own people."

Meher didn't seem thrown by that bit of information.

"That makes me pity him," she said. "But it doesn't make him a bad man. He's a captive to both the Khalifa and his desires to become famous. My mother was a captive too, but I still loved her. It's not a good thing that you can't love your father."

"This has nothing to do with love," Zeki said. Why didn't Meher understand? At home, everything was transitional, everything was under threat. But at Meher's it was calm, there were no surprises.

"You're too young to be like that," Meher said when he told her. "You're a boy."

"Don't call me a boy."

"You're a young man who's angry with his fate. Why did fate make you a captive's son? It should've made you the son of the Khalifa. But you can't make your father disappear just because of who he is. He will want to meet the wife of his only child, he has a right to it."

"Why can't I just stay here until the wedding? I need a place for my horse. I can't take her home," Zeki said.

“You may stay, and your horse may as well,” Meher said to Zeki’s relief, but put a condition on it. She insisted he go home and tell his father first, she didn’t care how mad he was, he had to tell him what was going on before he could come back to her.

Part 5: The Captive

Before sunset

"If God had a reason to create women, I'm not sure he had this in mind," Joseppi said. Abdel Kader was sitting beside him and trying to cheer him up, which was like trying to make the sun shine less bright, it was impossible.

The youngest of Joseppi's wives had been with him in the morning and they had had a fight. It was true, the other wives didn't like her, and there was constant quarrel going on in Joseppi's household. But this was no reason for Mona to threaten Joseppi with running away with one of the prisoners that had been sent to do a servant's work in their house. Probably it was the Khalifa's fault, he'd sent the prisoner as a token of his appreciation and good will. "It's impossible for me to take a breath in peace at home, they're watching every step I take," Mona complained, accusing Joseppi of having set up his other wives as spies. Abdel Kader conceded that she had a point. Mona was a passionate tobacco smoker and kept her tobacco hidden in a hole in the ground. The other wives, jealous at the attention she was getting from Joseppi, just waited for a slip up to pounce at her.

Joseppi had half made up his mind to divorce Mona, and Abdel Kader argued against it. He had never liked Mona all that much, there was no reason to deny it now, but he thought that in Joseppi's present state his friend should count himself lucky to have someone like her. At least she cared for him, which was more than could be said of his other two wives, who seemed to have been absorbed back into their melting pot of relatives as soon as Joseppi had fallen off the carriage. So he promised to keep an eye on Joseppi's household and see to it that all the wives lived in relative harmony until Joseppi had recuperated well enough to leave Gamal's house.

"Could be she doesn't like the idea of you living at Gamal's," Abdel Kader said. "This will change once she sees you're getting better. She really cares for you, Joseppi. She said so herself."

"I know she wants to take care of me, but will she do it with less bickering?" Joseppi asked.

Abdel Kader didn't really know how to respond to it, it wasn't as if he was in top form today. The sun was nearly setting again, it was time for another round of night duties at the Khalifa's, but he'd only got a few hours sleep during the day, and most of it had been ruined by an upset stomach. The brief interlude with Dina, in particular the beer, had been rough on his health.

Abdel Kader rode through the streets back to the Khalifa's palace, where he met Gamal outside in the courtyard. Gamal was in a bad mood too, and the rush to get Abdel Kader to join the other guards could easily have turned into an unnecessary fight. When Gamal hurried Abdel Kader off Umm es Shole, a little notebook slipped from under Abdel Kader's belt onto the ground. Gamal started berating his friend about the danger he put himself in with keeping notes, and of being so careless about it on top of it. He felt it was irresponsible of Abdel Kader and could land all of them, including Zeki, Hassan and Joseppi in jail. While Abdel Kader admitted it was risky to keep notes he felt his friend was unfair in his criticism. First, it wasn't as if he was spying, though he would have a hard time convincing the Khalifa of it. He just wanted to remember as much as possible, after all that's what an explorer did, he didn't just go out exploring, he wrote a book about it. The last thing Abdel Kader wanted to do was put any of his friends or Zeki in danger, and Gamal knew that. In any case, Gamal only picked on him when he felt guilty about something, and Abdel Kader felt he had to find out what his friend was guilty of.

Outside the Khalifa's tent was Sebiba, and unlike them he was in a great mood. Abdel Kader thought for a moment it had something to do with Gazala, but apparently Sebiba's brother was coming to Omdurman to join the Khalifa's guards.

"You look better already," Abdel Kader said, relieved that Sebiba's loneliness was about to be cured. His own problems seemed to grow bigger, however, because the Khalifa wanted to see him straight away and had him sit down before him.

"Abdel Kader, is a broken ankle contagious, why do you look worse than Joseppi," the Khalifa said.

"Sire, I'm not sure you were told but I wasn't feeling well today. A bout of fever," Abdel Kader said. "I took some time to rest in the afternoon but didn't get much sleep because of Joseppi's accident. I worry about him." Abdel Kader could tell that the Khalifa wasn't listening.

"Abdel Kader, you surely know that I invited your son to the palace today. He was here this afternoon and I decided that he'll replace Saadalla," the Khalifa said.

"I didn't know," Abdel Kader said.

"Is that so? Gamal was here too, I thought he told you," the Khalifa said, which solved the puzzle of Gamal's guilty conscience. It made Abdel Kader wish his friend would have an accident similar to Joseppi's, what did he mean by not telling him about it?

“In any case, I presented Zeki with a young horse. He will be well looked after. Zeki will replace Saadalla and I want you to give your consent.”

The Khalifa signed for his servants to hand Abdel Kader the plate with dates, something he hadn't done for a long time. Quite a few of the guards were looking on jealously, Abdel Kader knew of several who hadn't thought this sign of reconciliation possible.

It wasn't only that Abdel Kader was against Zeki joining the guards. It came all so unexpected. He couldn't deny experiencing a feeling of glee at the thought that Saadalla was being dismissed. But he hadn't had time to talk about it with Zeki or even had a chance to think it through. What would it mean for his son's future or his own? Would it improve Abdel Kader's standing at the palace or did he make himself even more vulnerable with allowing his son to become one of Khalifa Abdullahi's guards? No, not one. *The* one. El wahid. The main one. Abdel Kader glanced at the Khalifa, who looked like everything had been settled, and the reality was that it had because there wasn't anything Abdel Kader could do against the Khalifa's wish.

What was even worse than not knowing how the Khalifa's decision would play out was that Gamal and Zeki hadn't told him about it. Not only was his luck down, it seemed that everybody was against him, Zeki, Gamal, the Khalifa, and for all he knew even Hassan.

“Abdel Kader, why do you look so gloomy?” the Khalifa asked. “Zeki has a bright future ahead of him. He's going to get very far. I never thought you would want to stand in his way.”

“I don't want to stand in his way. I just want the time to think about it. Zeki is still a boy, only sixteen, he isn't ready to become a guard yet,” Abdel Kader said. “Besides, I don't want to have Saadalla against me.”

The Khalifa grinned in a way that was even more hurtful than the words he had chosen not to say, and Abdel Kader felt increasingly irritated by the thought that he was helpless against the Khalifa. It was nearly time for him and the other palace guards to accompany the Khalifa back to the mosque. He hadn't felt so desperate in a long time, not even in the early days of his captivity had he felt so alone and friendless. It was hurtful to think that the Khalifa assumed he wanted to stand in his son's way. He wanted everything for Zeki. He just hadn't thought it would come in this form. He wasn't so blind that he hadn't noticed how people looked at Zeki but in his opinion Zeki was too young to find his way around the palace intrigues.

A servant approached the Khalifa with an urgent message from an emir, and the Khalifa waved Abdel Kader away.

"We will find a better time to talk," he promised and Abdel Kader walked quickly into the courtyard. Abdel Kader just stood for a moment without saying a word but Gamal sensed what was wrong.

"I'm sorry, Abdel Kader, I don't know what came over me," Gamal said. "I know I should have told you about Zeki. I guess it's all been too much in the past few days. I'd like to make it up to you. Will you do me the favour and have tea with me?"

It looked like the Khalifa was still being held up by the emir so they had Gamal's servant bring tea and refreshments to a place in the far corner of the courtyard because Gamal said he couldn't think properly in close vicinity to the Khalifa when he was tired, and needed more space.

The effect that the presence of so many people, horses and camels had had on Omdurman was disastrous, but Abdel Kader felt too dull to take proper notice. There was some sort of haze in the air that seemed to have the same effect on everyone around, even the children chasing one another in the street outside the gate seemed muted, or perhaps he'd just gotten accustomed to all the background noise. His nose had definitely gotten used to the attack of odours that enveloped the town and which stemmed from the combined emanation of humans and animals. They sat down in a shady place. Abdel Kader asked the servant to buy some cornflour bread from a hawker, but when he brought it, Abdel Kader was too tired to eat. Mainly he drank tea, hoping the fluid would somehow rectify his transgressions with Dina. Gamal's apology meant much to him, he could understand that his friend had found it difficult to know what to do. When Gamal told him that Zeki had carried himself well before the Khalifa, Abdel Kader began to feel even excited for his son and decided to just accept it and give his blessing. Why shouldn't Zeki's future start right now?

"What do you think Ranya would say?" he asked Gamal. Gamal had known Ranya well and frequently professed expertise on the matter of what she would've said or thought in a particular situation.

"Ranya would be happy," Gamal said, and who knew, probably he was right.

Just as they got back to the palace to see if the Khalifa was ready to ride to the mosque, Gamal said, "Abdel Kader, there's something else I haven't told you because I wasn't sure how you'd take it."

“Gamal, when will you stop keeping things from me,” Abdel Kader said. “Has it got anything to do with Zeki getting married?”

“So you do know,” Gamal said. “But, now listen to this, do you know who he’s getting married to? He’s met an older widow who’s very rich. Apparently she’s taken quite a fancy to him and wants to marry him straightaway.”

Abdel Kader took the news in better spirits than his friend had supposed.

“Do you know how old she is?” Abdel Kader asked.

“I got the impression he didn’t know for sure, but she may be in her forties,” Gamal said. “She won’t bear him any children.”

“Gamal, my first love was a woman who was more than double my age,” Abdel Kader said. “Looking back on it, that was the happiest time in my life. So, let’s hope Zeki will be as lucky as I was.”

Back at the palace, the Khalifa’s messenger was already looking for Abdel Kader, and for once Abdel Kader was happy to see him.

“I’ll give him my blessing and that’s that,” said Abdel Kader as the messenger ushered him to the Khalifa, who had summoned his kadis and was giving them instructions on a case.

The Khalifa glanced at Abdel Kader and waved the kadis away. “I hear you’re going to give your blessing,” he said but then called back one of the kadis and told him something he’d forgotten.

While Abdel Kader sat on the palm mat he got so tired he was afraid he might fall asleep in front of the Khalifa, or worse, have a terrible dream with the Khalifa in it.

The Khalifa didn’t talk long with the kadi and asked Abdel Kader if he wanted some tea.

“Thank you, Sire, that would be most refreshing,” said Abdel Kader, who felt he had tea coming out of his ears. “So, when will Saadalla be replaced?”

“He is being taken care of as we speak,” the Khalifa said. “But that’s not all I wanted to discuss with you. Let’s talk about you.”

That didn’t sound good and Abdel Kader thought that maybe the Khalifa had heard about Dina and his sojourn in the illegal brothel, or worse, someone had told him about the little book that had slipped from under his belt. He wanted to tell the Khalifa not to bother with a reprimand, the splintering headache and upset stomach he had were all the warning he needed.

“Is it something that I’ve done, Sire?” he asked the Khalifa.

“No, your conduct is beyond reproach. You’re a credit to the palace guards,” the Khalifa said in the same kind of tone in which he’d warned Abdel Kader not too long ago that where there’s no fire there’s no smoke, meaning all the gossip about Abdel Kader had to be true. “No, I want to find out if you’re happy with your service here,” the Khalifa asked and seemed tired for the first time Abdel Kader had known him.

“I couldn’t be happier, you know that,” Abdel Kader said. The Khalifa’s question had taken him by surprise. What was he going to do, make him captain of the guards like Zeki?

“You’ve served me since you surrendered in Dara, right?” the Khalifa said. “How many years has it been? Twelve? You know what I think? I think you’ve earned yourself your retirement, get some well-deserved rest.”

Abdel Kader’s feeling of tiredness was blown away. The Khalifa had never mentioned his retirement before though it was one of his favourite habits. He was always sending guards he no longer trusted into retirement. Then, after a month or so, he invented some crime they had committed, had them thrown in chains and shipped off to Reggaf. But Abdel Kader had thought he was safe. Maybe the Khalifa had made up his mind to punish him for his diaries or for drinking marissa though he should know that all his guards went to brothels once in a while.

“Well, Sire, I don’t know why you think I’m in need of rest,” he said. “I get all the rest I could possibly want. Besides, with Zeki’s engagement I can’t afford to retire.”

“Ah, I get the impression you don’t have to worry about that, Zeki’s fiancée is rich enough. And we have ways to look after you even in retirement, you know?” the Khalifa said. “There are even guards who have found retirement more profitable than employment. Besides, you don’t have to stay a palace guard forever to show your loyalty.”

Abdel Kader didn’t want to argue. He had never even thought it would come to this. Except for the early months of his captivity, when the Khalifa had adopted him into his service only to throw him into jail, he had felt safe the whole time. What was the Khalifa going to do, turn him into a beggar?

“Has it got anything to do with the diaries I kept?” Abdel Kader asked. “I swear I only kept them for my personal use. In any case, I burnt them all, just as you ordered.”

The Khalifa sighed in the way he had as if every word Abdel Kader said was making it only worse. At least he wasn’t getting angry. “Abdel Kader, look around,” the Khalifa said. “You know all the guards in my service. How many of them have been with me for twelve years?”

Well, none, Abdel Kader had to admit. The longest serving was Joseppi, who had been with the Khalifa just under ten years. "I know. But I'm still trustworthy," Abdel Kader said. "I have never deceived you. It was me who turned your men into soldiers. Haven't I been of value to you?"

The Khalifa looked more tired by the minute. "You might always be valuable," he said. "I would argue with anyone who denied that you have been an excellent help. You might still be valuable in the next twenty years. But that doesn't mean you will still be a palace guard."

Abdel Kader's heart sank. That the Khalifa wasn't angry just made it more real. "This is not really about Zeki, is it," Abdel Kader said. "Are you telling me that I'm no longer one of your guards?"

"Abdel Kader, you're no longer one of my guards," the Khalifa said. "As of this moment."

Abdel Kader didn't say a word. He was trying to think what that meant for his future. Would he have to learn a trade, pretend he knew how to make saltpetre, work in the mint? What would he do? Gamal would know. Of course, if the Khalifa planned to send him to Reggaf as prisoner, he could spare himself the trouble of looking for a new master. Reggaf would be the end of him.

"Sire, what's the reason?" Abdel Kader asked. The low feeling had given away to utter tiredness. He didn't even feel afraid, he just wanted to know.

"Well, since you mentioned your trustworthiness, let's talk about trustworthy. Saadalla is no longer trustworthy," the Khalifa said. "We need a new captain of the troops. It's going to be your son. As for you, all these years I've never fully trusted you. As Muslim you are my servant but your loyalty is with your old masters. It is true that your diaries have been burnt but who guarantees me you're not writing new ones? If you escaped to Egypt, my secrets would accompany you. Now I've got your son in my service, I no longer need you. Any campaign you lead against me, you lead against your only son." A smile spread on his face. "You could be a grandfather soon, you know?"

Abdel Kader nodded slowly.

"Times have changed," the Khalifa replied. "I no longer fear you. I no longer need you. And I don't even need to kill you. I don't care if you have been valuable in the past, you mean nothing to me now."

"I never thought of turning against you," Abdel Kader said.

The Khalifa gave a little shrug and leaned back. "Perhaps not in so many words," he said. "Twelve years ago you were the most useful asset in Omdurman. Do you remember the times?"

Not when you're about to dismiss me, Abdel Kader thought. Once in a while he'd think back to the early days in Omdurman, after the Khalifa released him from jail and made him his aide. He had been present through all the troop reviews and thousands upon thousands hours of training. When he tried to think about twelve years ago, the years just seemed to melt into one another.

"I want you to go home," the Khalifa said. "You look unwell. Do you need a horse?"

That was new. The Khalifa wasn't in the habit of showing concern about his guards. "I've got Umm es Shole, I'm alright," Abdel Kader said.

"Then go now and get some rest," the Khalifa said. "I will send for Zeki in the morning."

The way the Khalifa dismissed him caused Abdel Kader to feel even worse. The Khalifa wasn't thinking about him anymore, he was looking towards the future. It meant there was no point in arguing with him. He didn't want him as his guard anymore, the man he had named Abdel Kader no longer existed.

Meanwhile people were still eating and celebrating the Feast of Bairam. Everybody seemed determined to make the most of it. But Abdel Kader couldn't even imagine making it home, he was so tired. He barely made it out of the palace, not too tired though to marvel at the Khalifa's patience. Had he decided to play father against son for all these years, from the moment of his surrender?

It was riding away from the Khalifa that made him feel hurt. Twelve years of service had made him develop feelings for the place. Even the thought of never seeing the Khalifa again made him lonely. He was used to being surrounded by absolute power. As Gamal once said, once you've been a master's servant, it's hard to become nothing.

His loneliness improved once he got to the path leading to his home. Wasn't that what home was supposed to be? A place that made you feel less alone on days like this? It was unusual for him to come home at sunset, everything smelled differently, even the palace gardens seemed more fragrant in the dark. He heard a little bleat and saw a goat rummaging among the sandy rocks for something to eat. It wasn't one of Hassan's goats, as far as Abdel Kader could tell.

When he rode up to his house, he saw that Hassan and Heba were asleep on the angareb. Heba woke up when Abdel Kader got off his donkey, and walked towards him in search of something to eat, but Hassan didn't stir.

Abdel Kader checked in his house and found Zeki asleep, a blanket loosely covering his young body. Wasn't it odd? Somehow he'd missed the moment his son had crossed over into adulthood. By

tomorrow morning, his son, who was sleeping here with one leg dangling out of bed, would be in charge of the Khalifa's palace guards. He would make enemies and friends. People would praise his skills with horses and Remingtons. They would sing about his bravery and talk about his good looks. Maybe his rich old widow wasn't too old to give him a child, making *him*, Abdel Kader, a grandfather.

How sad for Ranya, Abdel Kader thought as he got into bed. Zeki had been a loving son when he was little. And now, even though he was a bit too good at keeping secrets, it was still overwhelming to see all the possibilities opening up. What a thing to miss for a mother, Abdel Kader thought, so tired that for the first time since he arrived in the Sudan he didn't write down his notes in a book.

Morning

It was bright daylight when he awoke, feeling hung-over although he had only drunk tea the previous night. For a while he just lay on his bed, listening idly to all the little noises that came in through the cracks in the wall, without giving them too much thought. A bleating goat, no doubt it was Heba, wandered around the house, still in search for food and a mate. So was a goat the wiser for not pursuing more complicated things, or, put the other way, would his life have been any simpler had it not involved the pursuit of fame? Could a goat feel bored, Abdel Kader thought. An interesting question, he had to ask Hassan, surely his friend had an opinion about it.

Speaking of Hassan, there he was, chatting to someone in his usual singsong voice. Abdel Kader didn't even try to make out the words, his head felt too sore to allow certain things back in. Like the fact that his sixteen-year-old son was going to replace Saadalla, the man who had first discovered Abdel Kader's diaries. Now a youthful voice joined Hassan's baritone, the confidence and matter-of-factness left no doubt it was Zeki's. Zeki had always felt more comfortable discussing certain things with other people than his own father, but for once Abdel Kader didn't feel jealous. Was it that his heart knew already something his brain was slow to admit? Zeki would need plenty of friends once he commenced his service. Wise old men like Gamal and Hassan, and loyal friends like Joseppi would make sure he survived his years of service, with all the intrigue and gossip that went on. And a rich devoted wife, like the woman he was going to marry, would ensure Zeki had the necessary means to make powerful friends and forge useful alliances. According to Gamal she was not without influence in the Khalifa's court. Who knew, perhaps one day his son would become an emir, like he'd said so carelessly a few days ago.

The dull thud of earthenware on wood told him that tea was being served before his nose registered the smell. Gamal, Hassan, Joseppi, the unknown widow, his son's fiancée. And he, what would he do to keep his son safe? Heba seemed to have found something in the grass outside his bedroom wall, he could hear her pushing something along in the courtyard and tried to guess by the sound of it what it was. His own geese were on the other side of the house in their enclosure, and Abdel Kader felt a pang, he hadn't checked on them for days. Hopefully his servants had remembered to give them food. Geese could be strange creatures, jealous and clingy like lovers, no doubt they didn't appreciate his neglect. Yasmine, his favourite one, would ignore him for days if she felt unappreciated.

When Abdel Kader appeared in the courtyard, Zeki and Hassan fell silent.

"It's a wonderful morning, why didn't you wake me?" Abdel Kader asked and sipped slowly at his tea.

"Who knows where you are, you never tell anyone," Zeki replied. "Your geese have been driving us mad, they made noise all night."

Abdel Kader felt that was unfair, if they'd been so noisy he would've heard them and not been able to fall asleep himself.

"Hassan, do goats get bored?" he asked.

"Not Heba, she's too scheming, she always conspires how to get what she wants," Hassan said. "You look awful, are you getting sick?"

"The Khalifa has dismissed me," Abdel Kader said. "As of today I'm no longer one of his guards."

"What?" Zeki made room for his father to sit and was all ears, he wanted to hear everything about it. Abdel Kader drank his tea and told them what the Khalifa had said.

"So I'm a pawn," Zeki said. He sounded disappointed. "The Khalifa only appointed me to get at you?"

"No Zeki, he wouldn't replace Saadalla with you if he didn't feel you could protect him," Abdel Kader said. "He knows you're the best shooter and rider in Omdurman."

"So why is he dismissing you?"

"He no longer needs me," Abdel Kader said. "He didn't need me for a long time. But he feared me. Now that you're in his service he no longer has to be afraid of what I know and who I might tell. He knows I would never put you in danger."

“Why didn’t he simply kill you instead of playing me against you?” Zeki said. It definitely bothered him that the Khalifa had an ulterior motive but Abdel Kader felt that was something Zeki would have to get used to in the Khalifa’s service. He rarely did anything without a secret plot.

“He could’ve. But Khalifa Abdullahi likes to play. If he had executed me, he’d have lost you, lost your loyalty.” It occurred to Abdel Kader that perhaps all those years he’d had the Khalifa pinned down wrong. He wasn’t so much a lion, he was more like a cat, he liked to play with his prey.

“So what are you going to do now?” Zeki wanted to know, which was something Hassan was interested in too. He leaned so far forward that for a moment he almost lost his balance.

“I’m going to take your mother up on her offer,” Abdel Kader said.

Hassan argued Abdel Kader was likely to make a mistake. “Why not think about it a bit longer?” he said. His point was that there was no rush to make a decision right now. Zeki kept mostly quiet, which was unusual for him.

“No, Hassan, I might not do it if I think about it any longer,” Abdel Kader said. “Which means I’m going to miss your wedding, Zeki.”

Zeki didn’t seem to think that was such a bad thing, though his face showed relief that Abdel Kader had heard about the wedding from someone else. Abdel Kader wondered if his son had ever intended to tell him, but this thought filled him with so much sadness that he quickly concentrated on the bright side.

“It’s a good thing you’re marrying someone older, she’ll be able to give you lots of advice,” he said, which seemed to bother Zeki a little, as usual when he implied that Zeki needed advice.

Abdel Kader went over to his geese and spent a long time with them, not always thinking about the geese. There were things he’d wanted to tell his son which he felt he couldn’t, and it took him some time to determine whether that was good or bad. The good thing was that it would take some days to organise his escape, but they had to do it before the rains started in earnest. He would still have time to make up his mind about the things he wanted to say, which had mainly to do with advice about his marriage and his service for the Khalifa. Most likely Zeki wouldn’t want to hear it though, and Abdel Kader couldn’t blame him, after all he was a man without a woman himself, a servant without a master, who would listen to him?

In the afternoon Abdel Kader made his way to the merchant Ranya had mentioned in her letter. Though Zeki had spent the morning at home there hadn’t been any fight between them. He’d even

promised his father to look after the geese when he was gone. Abdel Kader secretly thought Hassan would be the better choice. He knew how much Hassan loved his geese and would make sure they not only got food and water but also plenty of attention, whereas Zeki would spend most of his time either at the palace or with his wife.

The merchant's house was in one of the more confusing parts of Omdurman, where huts seemed to grow like flat-headed mushrooms between established houses, changing the course of the street. When Abdel Kader finally found the right place, a short man answered the door, his beard almost white.

"I'm Abdel Kader," Abdel Kader said senselessly, since the man had showed recognition straight away. "I'm told you have a camel waiting for me." The man moved aside to let Abdel Kader in, and as he stepped through the door, he saw Omdurman's walls giving way to the plains with the parade ground, and behind that the desert, its freedom endless and intimidating.