



Translated extract from

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Sherko Fatah
The Dark Ship

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Prologue

It was a summer's day, hot, but so windy that one didn't really notice. The shadows of clouds raced darkly over the plains and slopes, like blimps soaring through the dark-blue sky. It might have been the most beautiful day of his life, not because of the soft light and the gentle wind, but because on this late day which was passing away lazily, for the first time he felt the profound calmness that beauty bestows, and also learned its futility.

At this time of the year, the old women went out to gather healing herbs. They knew when to go out to a special place to find certain plants. They did not have to go far, just up the hills. There he saw them, a small crew following the not quite overgrown paths as they had done so many times before. They were talking and laughing loudly: out here, they were finally amongst themselves, far away from rooms and rules for a few hours. If they had looked around, they too would have noticed the untouchability of the wild grasses, the umbels and the warm stones. But they swung their baskets, and their colorful dresses fluttered in the air; they were too preoccupied with each other. He almost envied them the unreflecting way they were set into the day, which spread around them like a huge open window. He went after them when they disappeared behind the hills, just to keep seeing them, tiny figures, but not lost, and stopped when he reached the top of the hill. He no longer felt the isolation out here, the rough wasteland; instead he saw the landscape like an open hand. He was breathing heavily. I am still a child, he thought briefly, my lungs are not wide enough for this day. And even if they were, he sensed, I could never enter it far enough.

The women had spread out in the distance and begun to gather herbs. Like a weak echo that the rocks swallowed rather than reflected, the noise arose. It was a helicopter, illuminated by the late light which made even its camouflage paint look cheerful. He shaded his eyes with his hand and looked up. He saw the main and the rear rotor and heard the swelling thunder. But nothing, not even this machine, was able to disturb the deep peace that lay over the hills. The helicopter passed, came back and circled above him in a wide arc. At the open side hatch, two soldiers kneeled, and one of them waved to him. Anything could happen on this day, and so he waved back without fear. The helicopter went its way and sank down to the ground with an unreal slowness. He had felt the child's secret wish, and now it was coming true; it was landing – far away, but it was landing. Maybe they will take me with them, was his next thought, maybe I can fly with them.

He started to run, waving and shouting; there were sharp-edged stones and thistle bushes in his way, but nothing made him stumble and nothing stung him. Far ahead of him, the helicopter was clouded in whirling dust; dry blades of grass sailed through the air. It's too far, I can't make it, he thought when he saw the two soldiers jump out and run over to the women in a crouch. The women had put down their baskets, laid their hands on their hips or at their foreheads, and looked towards the men. He saw how the men drove them towards the helicopter, saw it vaguely through the dust, and then he stopped. I can't make it, he thought again with regret, but he was consoled by the fact that it had happened at all, this completely extraordinary thing. He stood and saw them lift off, jerkily at first, then inexorably, as if they were being pulled toward the sky, until they left the cloud of dust beneath them. The helicopter leaned to one side very gently and again flew a wide curve, climbing higher and higher until it swam through the sky freely. He

looked after them and waved again. And indeed, the machine came closer, its thundering got louder and louder until he covered his ears. With his head tilted back, he saw the women. And then they fell, one after another they fell through the hatch, with their arms spread wide they sparkled in the light, and the wind tore at their clothes as if to stop them.

Part One

1.

Kerim remembered the ever-same ritual. His mother called him and his brothers together. Together, they got out an old woollen blanket, tattered from washing, and spread it on the floor. Sometimes, sheets of newspaper had to do. They placed the pots and bowls in the middle and sat on the floor, as if around a campfire. There were spoons, but since they were amongst themselves most of the time, they ate with their hands. Everyone took as much as they liked, and reached into the pots without hesitation.

Sometimes, in his weaker moments, it seemed to Kerim that the memory of this way of eating was the only thing he had left of his family. For when he thought back to it, they all stood before his inner eye, more clearly than any other time: his mother, who was always present but whom he hardly ever saw eating. Her hands were what he remembered, and her delicate forearms, visible because she had pulled her sleeves up. He saw Imat, the older of his brothers, before him, slender and pale, taking tiny portions of rice and even selecting the okra pods by size before placing them in his mouth tentatively, as if his lips were sore. Ali, on the other hand, was more like him, Kerim, and his father. Always hungry and close to his mother, he reached out from under cover. He liked to eat, and ate a lot for his age. Finally, his father also appeared before Kerim's inner eye, usually tired after his long workdays. His heavy, protruding belly made him appear slumped when he sat on the floor. Kerim remembered the dark rings under his eyes, clearly visible in the flickering light of the television. Turned halfway towards the screen which hung above their heads and halfway towards his family, always rather silent without seeming lethargic: that is how Kerim encountered his father in his memories.

His father ran a small restaurant, almost outside their town. It was no more than a hut, cluttered with wooden benches and chairs; the roof had a large hole in one place, covered with a makeshift mat. Over time, this mat had weathered, and especially during the early evening hours, it let a lovely light – or so it seemed to Kerim – into the hut. But nobody except him noticed.

Most of the guests were travelers in transit, stopping on their way through the mountainous north of the country. The restaurant was very close to one of the large highways by which one could cross the entire country. Kerim remembered the yellowish and brown space, the babble of voices and the smoke curling above the guests' heads. Near the mat, the smoke filled the beams of incoming light as if they were vessels of glass. Kerim's mother was very unhappy that the hole in the roof was never fixed properly. But her husband never found the time. His life was determined by the preparation of the meals. As long as Kerim knew him, food was the only thing that seriously occupied him.

Even before he left for school, Kerim had to work. It was his job to prepare the small kitchen located in an annex of the hut. The day began at four in the morning, because that was when the taxi drivers arrived. They were always on the road and got special rates at the restaurant, and in exchange they made occasional deliveries for Kerim's father. At that early hour, only broth or spit-roasted innards were served. That was normal; later in the day, guests could choose between chicken or mutton and the broth to go with them. There was always a side-dish of rice, cooked in huge batches in an enormous black cauldron. His father left the stirring and the emptying and refilling of the cauldron completely to Kerim; later, he also put him in charge of the gas containers which a silent man regularly delivered on a wooden cart. This was a bit more expensive than picking them up oneself at the shop, but he installed them himself and checked the gasket with a match. Kerim knew this man all his life, without ever having exchanged more than a few sentences with him.

As far as he could remember, food was the central pillar in his life. He disliked this recurring ritual and the amount of work it created. Sometimes he simply observed his father, hunched over and wheezing from the heat in the narrow kitchen, watching him hastily prepare the many plates that Kerim's mother would collect again half an hour later. Even as a child, Kerim felt certain that he never wanted to do this work himself.

Behind the hut was a windowless shed with a tin roof which was also used for slaughtering, when necessary. Kerim only went into this dark space rarely, for he couldn't bear the stifling heat and the smell. In the middle was a heap of severed sheep's heads, each with open, glassy eyes and its tongue hanging out. Some boys from the poorer families in the neighborhood worked for Kerim's father in the shed. They cleaned the heads and cut out the tongues. Once, just to familiarize him with the procedure, his father had explained it to him: the tongues had to be cut out through the soft spot in the lower jaw, since it would be too cumbersome through the mouth. In their dirty pants and shirts, the boys squatted on the ground, surrounded by the smell of blood, and threw the long tongues into tin bowls standing next to them. They looked up at Kerim curiously, but didn't say a word. Sunlight fell on the dark floor only in a broad swatch from the door, and it seemed as if it brought the swarms of flies with it.

In his father's opinion, such work was not for Kerim, his oldest son. He taught him to cook as a matter of course, as he had to be available to help in the kitchen. Still, Kerim went to school regularly. His father even had a helper who accompanied him to the bazaar with an old flatbed truck to buy supplies when Kerim was away.

It seemed that there was nothing his parents would not have done to enable him to have a good education. For this reason, his father did not like it when Kerim went to the shed to watch the boys. Maybe he was afraid that some element of the dismal, wordless activity would rub off on his son and ruin him. Kerim grew up with the feeling of being destined perhaps not for greatness, but certainly for something better.

He began to grow fat very early on. In the beginning, nobody noticed; there were a number of pudgy children in the neighborhood. But they did not keep up with Kerim. When he was seven years old, he was the fattest child far and wide. His mother often admonished him not to eat the leftover food. Finally, she even sent him outside, so that he would get more exercise. But she did

all that secretly, trying not to be noticed by her husband. For Kerim's father had the girth of three men, and nothing about this bothered him. He was not tall, and would have had a slender figure with delicate wrists and ankles. However, eating had changed him completely.

Kerim's mother already knew his father when he weighed over 100 pounds less. Sometimes she wove this memory into their evening conversations. She liked to dwell on this topic. Her face lit up, her almond-shaped eyes narrowed, she seemed cheerful. When Kerim remembered this later on, he realized what he could not know at the time: this was the only small irreverence his mother was allowed – and she enjoyed it as much as she could. In the meantime, his father would squat on the bench upholstered with pillows, smiling peacefully, and breathing hard as always.

“He was thin as a child when I saw him for the first time,” she said. “He was skinny as our goat, you know, the little grey one...”

Kerim and his brothers listened to her attentively, even if they had heard all this many times before. For them, it was an opportunity to see their father differently than they knew him. In any case, they could try. They glanced at the wheezing man surreptitiously, taking care not to let him notice. But it was almost impossible to recognize in him the man she was describing.

“I had to force him to eat,” she reported. “He certainly would have starved. No matter what I cooked for him, he only nibbled at it. Like a mouse. I had to look for the places where he had taken something.”

Kerim knew his father as a man of few words. Even where the kitchen was concerned, he simply gave instructions and explained only the essentials. But he also remembered a sense of security in his presence. When they walked through the city's alleys at midday, he threw a mighty shadow on the walls next to him. His father held him firmly by the hand, and thus Kerim could not even escape this shadow and its extension when he stayed behind briefly and let himself be pulled along.

Kerim could not have said whether his father – and his family in general – was popular in their neighborhood. Respected, certainly, the restaurant took care of that. But on the street, people always kept a polite distance.

Maybe it was due to his being from an Alevi family. Kerim learned little about this, since his father seemed to have only scant memories of it. They had lived in Tunceli in Turkey; the word itself seemed to have sprung from some fairy-tale.

“The village was high up in the mountains,” his father told him. “Like a swallow's nest – one couldn't see any track leading up there from below. This was very important, because it made it difficult for normal Muslims to get there. The Chaldeans lived the same way, everyone who was different. But we had to fear the state. Once, a policeman came to our village and looked around. The people showed them their houses and the assembly hall, where everyone, men and women, prayed and danced. When he was done with his inspection, he said to the village eldest: ‘You have no mosque.’ The old man answered: ‘We have our prayer house.’ – ‘You need a mosque, let us build one,’ the policeman said. The village eldest thought about this, since it was obviously

an offer. Then he said: 'What we need is a school for our children, we need books and teachers.' The policeman shook his head: 'First, you must build a mosque, and maybe some day you will get a school to go with it.'"

His father told such stories rarely. He also taught his sons only indirectly what he himself had learned as a child: it was a feeling of not really belonging anywhere. During his childhood, Kerim envied his classmates for their religious rituals. His parents expected other things of him, since they themselves hardly ever prayed. That was not extraordinary; there were many families who only prayed on high holidays. And yet, their faith seemed a matter of course, or at least close to them. What Kerim saw, on the other hand, was a certain pretense: in order not to damage the restaurant's reputation, his father adapted to Muslim rules as necessary. Sometimes he even went to the mosque. His most important concession was buying a live sheep for the Festival of Sacrifice. He diligently obeyed all the rules for the slaughter: he laid the animal with its head towards Mecca, said a prayer and let it bleed thoroughly before distributing most of the meat to the poor people of the neighborhood who convened in the restaurant's yard every year and waited for it. Some were the parents of the boys who worked in his shed.

Only much later did Kerim understand how skillfully his father prevented all from noticing what he really was at heart: a man without faith. The inconspicuous names of all his children, his behavior towards the neighbors, it was all an act of conformity. He lived for his family and his business, all higher matters were alien to him. When Kerim was about six and began to pray in a corner next to the kitchen, just like he had seen others do it, he did it without knowing what one was supposed to say and how often one was supposed to bow. His father came to look in on him and put a stop to the whole thing like a silly children's game, since he needed him in the kitchen.

Kerim remembered exactly that on this day, a sacrificial animal stood in the yard as well. This time, it was a dark brown cow. He observed the animal for an hour, perched on the small staircase leading to the back yard. It was tethered to a wooden pole, looking for the sparse, dry bushels of grass and very gradually moving in a wide circle. Since the rope wound around the pole, its radius became smaller and smaller. But it didn't notice, even when it shook its head, tightening the rope. Its path continued around the pole. Finally, one of its hind legs became entangled. But it was unable to move backwards. And thus it stood crookedly at the wooden pole, one leg pulled up, staring straight ahead. It lowed very briefly, but then fell silent again and lowered its heavy head, as if to continue grazing. However, it could no longer reach the ground.

Kerim did not move. Leaning against the rickety railing, he observed the animal silently. He was not amused by the grotesque sight it offered for the next half hour, tied up like that. He could not shake off the thought of this incident. He had waited for it to move in the opposite direction, half coincidentally, half because of the pain. He waited for a long time, and without compassion. But the cow would not do it. Only once, it seemed close to a solution of its problem: flies had settled at the corners of its eyes, and it shook its large head to get rid of them. This loosened the rope somewhat. There was some space at its flank, and if it had taken one single step backwards, over the slack rope, it could have moved freely again, even turned around. Instead, however, it hesitated briefly and then used its small freedom to push forward again. This time, it tied itself up for good.