



Um Ali



By Riyam Kafri
Abulaban

S

hajarat al-Durr lay in her blood. Her hands and feet were quickly getting cold. She tried to move, but she felt pinned to the ground. She stared upwards through her heavily lined eyes but saw only

shadows moving around behind a white screen. Her breath became more constrained by the minute. She felt blood trickling down the back of her head and down her neck. She could not feel her left hand, there was no pain, just an empty feeling of nothingness in its place. She tried to move again but to no avail. Her heartbeat faded, her breathing was burdened. Underneath her bright red lipstick, she could feel a blue chill crawl into her lips. Right above her cool removed self hovered the sweet scent of cinnamon, ginger, and milk; it rose into her nostrils and seeped into her clothes, warming her skin. She felt the warmth travel through her body as the fragrance rose into her sinuses, but as she exhaled, a cold senselessness enveloped her, and she sank into darkness. Shajarat al-Durr lay in a pool of her own blood looking magnificent even as she approached death...

Down in the palace kitchens, Um Ali was busy giving orders: milk, bread, sugar, dried fruits, almonds... As she barked directions, she stopped to ask the head chef if there were any pistachios; he assured her that a shipment from Syria had arrived a week ago.

Um Ali was not sure what she was making, but she knew that it had to be sweet and warm. It should burst with celebratory flavor! Her son, Ali, was now sultan of the Mamluks, and she would finally become the rightful sultana until she found him a young appropriate wife from the right background and family. No more commoners-turned-queens in this house, no more bondmaids-turned-sultanas. She wanted this dish to capture the spirit of celebration and the hope of a new king.

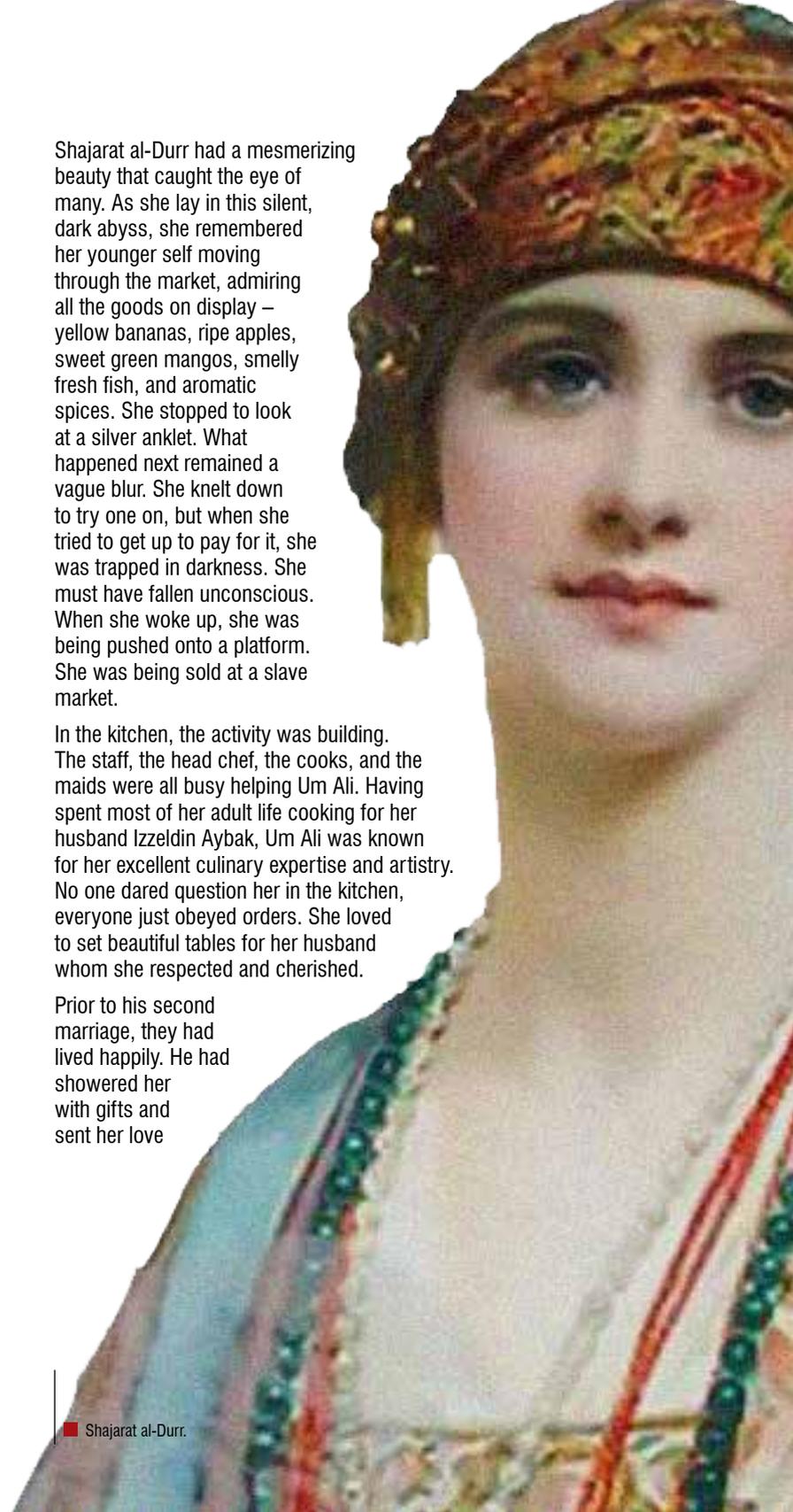
In the upper levels of the palace, Shajarat al-Durr continued to lie in her own blood, waiting for someone to find her. A tear slid down her cheek. Death lingered close, slowly pulling her into a dark abyss. The scent of cinnamon and sweet milk that had invaded her body minutes ago was gone. In her mind, she was young again, standing on display in the slave market in Turkey right after she had been kidnapped.

Shajarat al-Durr had a mesmerizing beauty that caught the eye of many. As she lay in this silent, dark abyss, she remembered her younger self moving through the market, admiring all the goods on display – yellow bananas, ripe apples, sweet green mangos, smelly fresh fish, and aromatic spices. She stopped to look at a silver anklet. What happened next remained a vague blur. She knelt down to try one on, but when she tried to get up to pay for it, she was trapped in darkness. She must have fallen unconscious. When she woke up, she was being pushed onto a platform. She was being sold at a slave market.

In the kitchen, the activity was building. The staff, the head chef, the cooks, and the maids were all busy helping Um Ali. Having spent most of her adult life cooking for her husband Izzeldin Aybak, Um Ali was known for her excellent culinary expertise and artistry. No one dared question her in the kitchen, everyone just obeyed orders. She loved to set beautiful tables for her husband whom she respected and cherished.

Prior to his second marriage, they had lived happily. He had showered her with gifts and sent her love

■ Shajarat al-Durr.



letters while away. She'd prepared the most beautiful tables adorned with candles and incense carefully chosen to heighten the taste buds and edible flowers to clean the pallet. She served water infused with lemon and orange blossom to help calm the nerves and aid the digestive system. After dinner, she served hot sweet tea with mint leaves floating helplessly on top. They had been happy.

Shajarat al-Durr breathed heavily. Her body felt empty, and death slowly cloaked her, but the smell of honey and cinnamon was becoming stronger. She remembered the first time the concubines rubbed her lips with cinnamon-and-nutmeg-infused honey. The taste on her lips made her heart race with excitement, and she felt alive... She had first arrived at the palace as a bondmaid purchased by the late Sultan Assalih Ayyoub. Upon her arrival, she was whisked away by other bondmaids and concubines. They had prepared heated bathwater sprinkled with rose petals. They took off the abaya that she had been wearing for weeks on end and bathed her, inspecting every curve and nodding with a mix of approval and jealousy. She was round enough, plump enough, and her skin was soft enough. They lathered her body with rose oil infused with cinnamon, nutmeg, and cloves. They dressed her in silk garments and colorful abayas, they braided her hair and lined her eyes with dark Arabic *kohl*. When she was ready, they fed her sweet milk and soft bread and then massaged her lips with honey and olive oil. Then they sent her to the sultan's chambers. "Do as you're told, obey, and you will be showered with gifts and jewelry," they said. "If he asks for you, you must go to him. You are

one of us now, and we concubines serve and please."

But Shajarat al-Durr had other plans. She was going to find her way out of this. She could not spend the rest of her life a concubine in a sultan's castle. She was too intelligent and beautiful for such a fate. So on the first night, she entered Assalih's chamber, outwardly shy yet inwardly determined. He cupped her chin with his hand and lifted her head. She met his gaze with a smile. He was mesmerized, and before he knew it, was in love. She entertained him with stories, song, and dance. She lured him with her wit and sense of humor, and sure enough, he fell in love with her. He could not get enough of her company and decided to make her his wife.

Shajarat al-Durr might have first entered the sultan's chamber a concubine, but she emerged from it a queen and the mother of Amir al-Moiminee Khalil (prince of Muslims, heir to the sultan's throne). She'd become powerful, and the legend of her wisdom traveled through the land. Even as she lay approaching death, coaxing it to wait just a bit longer, she looked majestic.

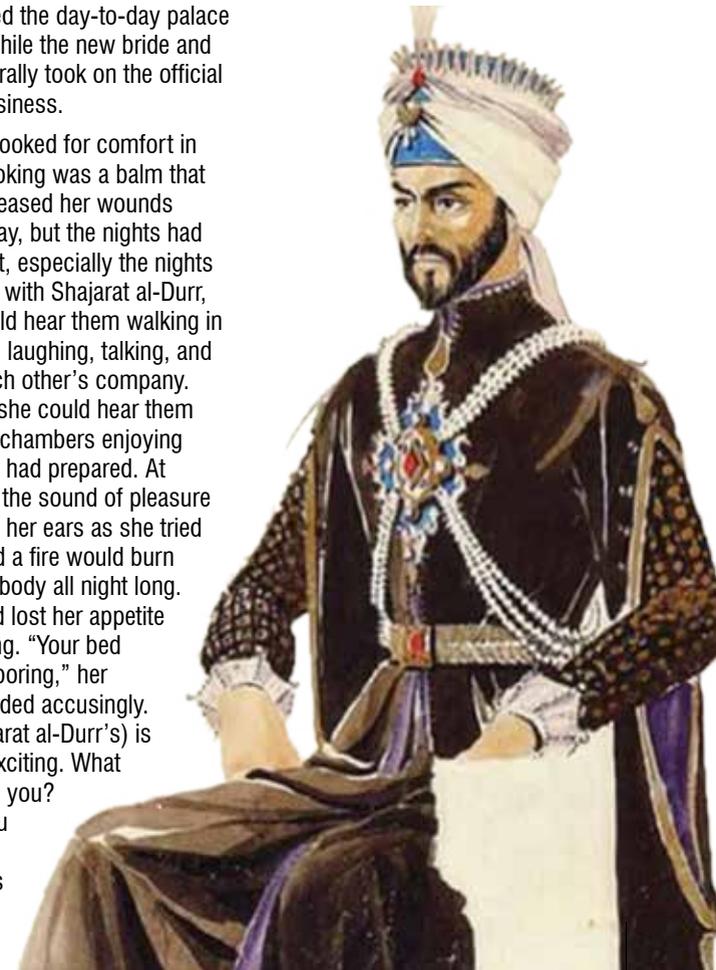
Under any other circumstance, Um Ali and Shajarat al-Durr would have been fast friends. Two powerful, wise women who loved their husbands endlessly and served their homes faithfully. But fate had other plans. When Assalih Ayyoub and his son Khalil were killed in battle, Shajarat al-Durr had become sultana. To remain in power, she'd married Izzeldin Aybak, commander in chief of the sultan's army and the husband of Um Ali.

Um Ali was happy with the way the dish was turning out, a round taste of milk, cinnamon, nutmeg, and

honey. Moving around the kitchen with agility and excitement, she felt more alive than she had in a long time. When Izzeldin had come to her with the news of his second marriage, Um Ali had taken it as a direct hit to the heart. She'd tried to talk him out of it, begged him to spare their happy marriage, and pleaded with him not to make her a *durra* (a co-wife). In the end, she knew that this was a sacrifice she would have to make if her son Ali was to become sultan one day. So, she swallowed her pain and moved into the palace as Izzeldin requested. She managed the day-to-day palace functions, while the new bride and sultana naturally took on the official kingdom business.

Um Ali had looked for comfort in her role. Cooking was a balm that temporarily eased her wounds during the day, but the nights had been difficult, especially the nights Izzeldin was with Shajarat al-Durr, and she could hear them walking in the gardens, laughing, talking, and enjoying each other's company. Sometimes she could hear them in Izzeldin's chambers enjoying a dinner she had prepared. At other times, the sound of pleasure would reach her ears as she tried to sleep, and a fire would burn through her body all night long. Slowly she'd lost her appetite for everything. "Your bed is cold and boring," her husband chided accusingly. "Hers (Shajarat al-Durr's) is warm and exciting. What happened to you? I thought you understood the vantages of this

arrangement. You are the head of this household; you are the mother of Amir al-Moiminee (prince of Muslims/heir to the throne). This marriage will secure your future." Um Ali would not respond; she wanted to tell him that she would rather have lived and died a pauper than spend one more day as a *durra*. She understood that men were free to take more than one wife, and Izzeldin could marry again, but for her this was God's punishment on Earth. The thought that she was to share him with another woman for



■ Sultan Izziddin Aybak.



■ Mamluk castles in Egypt.

the rest of her life felt like lemon juice poured on a gaping wound.

Every night Izzeldin tried to comfort her with words as soothing as warm amber tea, hoping that his kindness and attention would melt the chill between them. His gentle words were met with hot tears and pungent accusations. Soon, the worries of the day would weigh heavily on him, and he would drift off to sleep, leaving her to nurse her loss alone.

Shajarat al-Durr was still on the floor, traveling in and out of consciousness. Her memories played in front of her. She remembered Assalih Ayyoub and Khalil, her son. How the news of their concurrent deaths had nearly killed her. Assalih had provided her with safety, her elevation to queen had restored her dignity, but his death had been a great loss to her. She knew she had the power to steer her own destiny, but the little girl who had been kidnapped still feared the unknown, and with his death, this fear rose from the depths to expose Shajarat al-Durr to her worst nightmares. So, she acted quickly,

proposing marriage to Izzeldin. He was a demure man, soft-spoken and kind. He was also easily controlled and would allow her to rule the country. He was no threat at all, unlike his wife. Shajarat al-Durr was not fooled by the injured look Um Ali wore around the palace. She knew that underneath it slept revenge, and it would only be a matter of time before it was awakened. Something had to be done. In no time, Izzeldin would fall in love with Shajarat al-Durr, and she would ask him to divorce Um Ali and banish her from the palace. What Shajarat al-Durr did not expect was that the very same divorce and banishment that would rid her of Um Ali would become the reason she was now nearing her death.

Um Ali pulled out the best bowls they had and laid them on the kitchen table with meticulous purpose. The cook picked up the hot dessert pot and walked behind her as she ladled the sweet pudding into the bowls. She was glowing with excitement, a few strands of her hair dangled from underneath her scarf. Her bracelets

chimed together as she moved from one bowl to the other. For the last few months, since she had moved to the palace, she'd found safety and solace in the kitchen. She would expertly pluck *molokhiyyeh* (jute mallow) leaves and cook them into a soupy stew. She would roast chicken on the side and serve it with rice and roasted garlic. She would lather oil and spices on legs of lamb and slowly cook them all day to a sweet tenderness. The heat from the kitchen had warmed her chilled insides, the kneading of dough released her anger, and the hot amber tea nursed her broken heart. For a few hours a day, she could trick herself into believing that she was adjusting to her new life. Or at least she had hoped so, until those hopes were crushed one day.

Um Ali crushed roasted pistachios to decorate the individual bowls. The entire palace was now smelling of cinnamon and honey. Servants were peeking into the kitchen to ask what smelled so good. Um Ali ignored them and continued to work silently and methodically. The roasted pistachios crumbled under the pressure of her mortar and pestle like she had crumbled at the news of the impending divorce. Sharing Izzeldin with another woman was one thing, but losing him entirely to her was more than she could bear. She had taken the news with a deathly silence. Hiding her tears from him she ran to the kitchen, picked up the first knife she saw, and, like a madwoman, chopped the *molokhiyyeh* leaves that had been sitting on the cutting board. In her chopping frenzy, she cut her finger and bled all over the leaves. Wrapping the injured finger with the end of her scarf, she continued to work while plotting her next steps.

She moved from the stove to the table where a big vat of dough was resting. She kneaded the dough for bread, and with every turn of the dough, her anger turned into pain that then moved into a lump in her throat and rose to form tears in her eyes that fell onto the dough, softening it gently. She cut the dough and passed the pieces to one of the maids to bake. She walked out of the kitchen for fresh air, leaving the staff in shocked silence. A plan had been swirling in her head. Revenge was past due, and she was going to get it.

Um Ali was now sprinkling pistachios into every bowl just as she had sprinkled poison into Izzeldin's tea for the past seven nights. She smiled, remembering how quickly he'd fallen back into her arms; all it took was seven days and seven meals.

After he'd informed her of the divorce, she requested to see him privately. Dressed impeccably, she went to his chambers and asked him to spend one last week with her as a goodbye gift. She would prepare the meals every day, and instead of him eating alone, she would secretly join him for a few hours. They would eat, talk, and enjoy the pleasures of each other's company, and then he would retire to his queen. Izzeldin was charmed and immediately agreed. After all, he'd never stopped loving her company. For seven days, Um Ali went about her daily business as usual, but in the afternoon, she snuck into Izzeldin's chamber and shared beautiful food, conversation, and pleasurable company. In the evenings, she pretended to pack her belongings and cried out loud so that everyone in the palace heard her lamenting her fate and divorce.

During this week, she cooked and served the best foods. Izzeldin would sit down to tables filled with lamb grilled to perfection, bread baked to impeccable softness, rice scented with saffron, roasted almonds, and sweet *ka'ak* baked with honey or covered with sugar. She lured him with her cooking and charm, and for those few hours, they both forgot the reality that awaited them just outside their doors. Every meal ended with sweet-minted tea that he drank with her before she left him. On the last night of their seven-day feast, the food was especially delicious; the tea was extra sweet – although with a slightly bitter aftertaste. Izzeldin felt weak, but he thought he must be just drunk on the scrumptiousness of Um Ali's food. He walked to Shajarat al-Durr's chamber where she waited for him with more tea.

Shajarat al-Durr lay in cold silence now. This must have been what Izzeldin felt right before he died in her bed. She was still trying to understand what had happened. She'd woken up to find him dead, the palace guards accusing her of killing him by lacing his tea with a deadly poison. She denied it and recounted what had happened: He had arrived in her chambers the night before, not feeling well; they drank tea like always. He fell asleep quickly, and she did too. In the morning, she found him and called them immediately. She pleaded her innocence as they frantically searched her chambers for evidence. They found a small vial of poison hidden in her abaya. She was immediately stripped of her title, and Ali Amir al-Moimineen was called in to assume the throne. She was left

in her room under heavy guard until her fate was decided.

In Um Ali's chamber, the maids offered to dress her in black, but instead, she chose a bright red abaya, lined her eyes with dark *kohl*, and massaged her neck with rose oil. She was the sultan's mother now! She ordered all her maids to walk her to Shajarat al-Durr's chambers. Shajarat al-Durr stood up when Um Ali barged into her chambers and accused her of stealing her husband and killing him. Shajarat al-Durr denied murdering Izzeldin, and the two women started to fight. Um Ali ordered her maids to beat Shajarat al-Durr with their wooden slippers, and she watched them crush her like garlic being crushed by a pestle in a mortar. Shajarat al-Durr fell onto the ground. She was bleeding from her head, her arms, her chest, and her legs. Um

Open Theme

Ali picked her up and said, "I killed Izzeldin and now I am going to kill you. You will die, and everyone till the end of time will think that you were the bondmaid-turned-queen who murdered her kind and loving husband!" Shajarat al-Durr could not answer, blood was pooling in her mouth. Um Ali threw her onto the floor again and ran to the kitchen laughing hysterically. A dessert must be made in celebration of her triumph and the rise of her son as sultan!

Down in the palace kitchen, Um Ali finished decorating the bowls, each with a gold coin, the new Sultan's gift to his people. She left one bowl for her to taste and ordered the rest to be distributed across the city. She sat on a chair, cupping the hot bowl of pudding in her hand and lifted a spoon to her mouth to take the first bite. Up in the royal chambers, Shajarat al-Durr breathed her last and lay on the floor looking magnificent in death.

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