

# Mahi Binebine: Horses of God, chapter 16

[Sabre s.r.o.](#)



We awoke at ten the next day. Abu Zoubeir had dark rings round his eyes, as if he hadn't slept. Emir Zaid had shaved off his beard during the night and appeared instantly younger. I hardly recognized him. He looked like a schoolboy handing his satchel to the master. They went off together to the back of the room and conferred in hushed tones for a while. They seemed preoccupied. Nouceir and the Oubaida brothers arrived later, having swapped their white

gandouras for modern clothes: striped trousers and blue jackets, which made them look like triplets. They too had shaved and cut their hair. Blackie whistled when he saw them and we all laughed briefly. Nabil and Fuad were on their feet, still drowsy. Hamid seemed calmer than the night before. He tapped me on the shoulder and I was glad we were together again. We all had breakfast in the garage: bread, olive oil and mint tea, with the right amount of sugar. He didn't say Yemma's name but we were both thinking about her. I wasn't very hungry and only ate out of greed, thinking that this was my last meal. Never had food tasted so good. A few rays of sun filtered through the tiny window over the door. It was going to be a beautiful day. A

soothing voice chanted selected verses from the Koran, on cassette. We listened in silence. Every time the Prophet's name was uttered, murmurs of 'Peace and salutations be upon Him' filled the room. In truth, our attention was more focused on our individual itineraries. All six of us would be going to the Genna Inn hotel, but in two groups. Fuad, Nabil and me first, then Khalil, Blackie and Hamid. Emir Zaid and his companions were set to leave the city on another mission. We washed and said a communal prayer, led by Abu Zoubeir. We were in a hurry to join the angels who'd be waiting for us once we'd taken the great leap, who'd look after us and lead us to God. Abu Zoubeir reminded us we should never stop saying our prayers, as Satan would attempt to save the godless using every trick in the book. His guile knew no bounds. He'd breathe doubt in our minds, he'd do anything to break our resolve. We were waging war in the name of God. We were His soldiers. The hour of Jihad was upon us. He congratulated us on being chosen by the Lord to carry out His will. He said there was no reason to fear the enemies of Islam, we had our fates and theirs at the end of a string. We need only to pull on it to dispatch them to hell. Allah is great! Allah is great!

We left the garage in small groups to go to the training room. The harsh sunlight blinded us and it took us a while to get used to the tumult of the street with all its colours. A man on a bike, with a little black boy riding side-saddle on the bar, crashed into Khalil. The boy fell off and blood began streaming from his ear. Khalil did not react, he apologized, though it was the cyclist's fault. Under normal circumstances, the incident would have degenerated into a brawl, with the whole neighbourhood weighing in. Khalil helped the stunned kid get to his feet and handed him back to his father, who immediately went on his way. The dump was crawling with people, as usual. Above the deafening drone of the refuse trucks, Oum Kalthoum's haunting voice wailing from shop to shop, the everyday arguments and the dogs barking, you could still hear the Koran, which some lost blind men were reciting to move people to pity. They'd picked the wrong part of town to beg in and were walking in single file, holding on to each other's djellabas. The leader had a stick, which he was waving wildly in the air because kids were

pestering him. I glanced at Hamid, who smiled at me. We'd done the same at their age. But now he shouted to scare off the little rascals. To my surprise, I found myself reciting the surah along with the blind men.

We passed near Omar the coalman's shop. Blackie stopped for a moment to kiss his father's head. The old man accepted his apologies and said that he could come back home; his mother was unhappy. 'God willing!' he replied, but we knew that God had other plans for us. As for me, I was longing to go and see Yemma, to kiss her hands and feet, with that secret paradise beneath them. I'd have loved to spend a few moments with my father, whom I barely knew. I'd have hugged him, for the first and last time. Said would have bored me to tears, criticizing the Americans' iniquitous policies and their shameful United Nations veto, and I'd have pretended to understand world affairs. And while I was at it, why not drop in on Douar Scouila? I missed Ghizlane terribly. I'd have liked to take her in my arms and say how sorry I was for abandoning her. Sorry for the mute promises my eyes had made, for the vows my mouth had not spoken, which she'd understood all the same. Sorry for letting her brother get mixed up in this venture, when we could have done without his services. Six martyrs for just one place was too many. One would have been enough. But there had to be explosions in different parts of the hotel and at fifteen-minute intervals, to cause maximum damage. In any case, we'd had no say in the matter. The master's decisions were final, because he had them from God. I'm sure Ghizlane would have been glad to see me. She'd have prattled away and that would have made me happy. She'd have ridiculed my pretentious outbursts and I'd have kept on asking her forgiveness, on my knees, for everything I hadn't given her because the good Lord had laid claim to my flesh and blood. I'd have stolen one last kiss and trembled all over again. I'd have told her everything that was making my heart heavy, everything I hadn't been able to say, since the mutinous words wouldn't obey me: 'I will love you for ever, but I'm going, my love, I have no choice. How long must we put up with the humiliation and contempt, living like rats in Sidi Moumen? You see, it's all decided, I'm going to die. I will take revenge on those people who plundered

your childhood and trampled your dreams in the dirt. I will make them pay an eye for an eye for the years of slavery they have made us endure. They will suffer as we have suffered. All those traitors who buried their heads in the sand, I'll yank them up and slit their throats as if they were sheep. Let their children cry the way we have cried. I am going, my love, but promise me you'll go on with your embroidery. You have a gift. I am sure that one day it will be recognized and you'll be able to make a decent living from your art. I know you're looking after Mi-Lalla, but you need to think of yourself, too. She's right, make sure you have a trousseau, because one day, a boy will come and ask for your hand. You must be ready. You'll make a go of it, as ever. Promise me you'll be happy, because you deserve to be. I don't want any harm to come to you. Anyway, you must know I'll always be with you. Even when I'm kissing the houris (now, don't be jealous!), I'll be thinking of you. I'll drink all the elixirs of paradise to your health. And I'll wait for you, because sooner or later we all die. I'm doing it early, for the cause, but there's no hurry for you. You can take your time, have children, watch them grow up. You'll give them the love you never had. I don't want them to live in Sidi Moumen, because there's no hope there. Satan's acolytes have crushed it. If you have a boy, call him Yachine. He's the best goalkeeper the world's ever known. That will bring him luck. I will wait for you in paradise, I swear. Then we'll be able to love each other and kiss, like we did the other night in the darkness, near your house. It felt so good, kissing you.' I stopped my reverie there, as we weren't far from the training room.

Our orders were to follow each other at a distance, not to spread out, to speak to no one, but Emir Zaid and Abu Zoubair looked the other way. They were walking behind, monitoring us discreetly.

At the training room, everything was ready. The Oubaida brothers had prepared the equipment meticulously. There were real explosive charges in the pockets of the vests. We'd done our initiation with bricks. That was why Emir Zaid advised us to be extremely careful. The Oubaida brothers explained to us that once the devices had been set, they were the only ones

who could disconnect them. That gave me goosebumps. Abu Zoubeir hugged us one by one and we all hugged each other. I had tears in my eyes when Hamid put his arms around me. It was my turn to crack, but no one noticed. That said, all of our eyes were glistening. We kept reciting the Koran as we put on the vests, which the Oubaida brothers fastened carefully; we spat on Satan and his army of infidels and we went out to meet our destinies. Fuad, Nabil and I were leaving first. The others would take the next bus. Emir Zaid and his friends escorted us to the wall and disappeared just as they'd come, one night in Sidi Moumen. So we were let loose in the wild like hungry wolves, ready to devour the entire planet.

*Translated from the french by Lulu Norman*