

VLADIMIR BARTOL

ALAMUT



a novel

Alamut was originally written in 1938 as an allegory to Mussolini's fascist state. In the 1960s it became a cult favorite throughout Tito's Yugoslavia, and in the 1990s, during the war in the Balkans, it was read as an allegory of the region's strife and became a bestseller in Germany, France, and Spain. The book once again took on a new life following the attacks of 9/11/2001 because of its early description of the world of suicide bombers in fanatical sects, selling more than 20,000 copies in a new Slovenian edition.



“First published sixty years ago, *Alamut* is a literary classic by Slovenian writer Vladimir Bartol, a deftly researched and presented historical novel about one of the world's first political terrorists, eleventh-century Ismaili leader Hasan ibn Sabbah, whose machinations with drugs and carnal pleasures deceived his followers into believing that he would deliver them to a paradise in the afterlife, so that they would destroy themselves in suicide missions for him. Flawlessly translated into English (and also published in eighteen other languages), *Alamut* portrays even the most Machiavellian individuals as human—ruthless or murderous, but also subject to human virtues, vices, and tragedies. An afterword by Michael Biggins offering context on the author's life, the juxtaposition of his writing to the rise of dictatorial conquest that would erupt into World War II, and the medley of reactions to its publication, both in the author's native Slovenia and worldwide, round out this superb masterpiece. An absolute must-have for East European literature shelves, and quite simply a thoroughly compelling novel cover to cover.”

—*Midwest Book Review*

“For all of its provocative ideas and sometimes eerily prescient incidents, *Alamut* is also successful simply as an entertaining yarn ... Bartol devises a shifting collage of passions, adventure, and sacrifice. The book's exotic

settings are sumptuously described, and the characters are charismatic and complex—despite the fervent aims of some of them to subscribe to single-minded devotion.”

—*Seattle Times*

“*Alamut* is ... a finely wrought, undiscovered minor masterpiece that offers ... a wealth of meticulously planned and executed detail and broad potential for symbolic, intertextual, and philosophical interpretation.”

—From the Afterword by Michael Biggins, translator

“Whoever wants to understand the success of the Al Qaeda leader’s strategy should read Bartol. It is as if Osama bin Laden himself concocted the most powerful fist of his organization only after reading *Alamut!* The dates line up fatally: The novel was published in Iran in 1995 and was clearly so attractive that it was translated again within four years. In 1996 the suicide attack on the American Embassy in Kenya begins.”

—Bernard Nezmah, *Mladina* (Slovenian newsmagazine)

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VLADIMIR BARTOL

Translated from Slovenian and with afterword by

Michael Biggins



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Afterword

About the Author
About the Translator

NOTHING IS TRUE, EVERYTHING IS PERMITTED.
—The Supreme Ismaili Motto

OMNIA IN NUMERO ET MENSURA

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

“The most blinkered reading of *Alamut*,” writes translator Michael Biggins in his afterword to this edition, “might reinforce some stereotypical notions of the Middle East as the exclusive home of fanatics and unquestioning fundamentalists ... But careful readers should come away from *Alamut* with something very different.”

In publishing this book, we aim to undermine hateful stereotypes, not reinforce them. What we celebrate in *Alamut* is the ways in which the author reveals how any ideology can be manipulated by a charismatic leader and morph individual beliefs into fanaticism. *Alamut* can be seen as an argument against systems of belief that eliminate one's ability to act and think morally. The key conclusions of Hassan ibn Sabbah's story are not that Islam or religion inherently predisposes one towards terrorism, but that any ideology, whether religious, nationalistic, or otherwise, can be exploited in dramatic and dangerous ways. Indeed, *Alamut* was written in response to the European political climate of 1938, as totalitarian forces gathered power over the continent.

We hope that the thoughts, beliefs, and motivations of these characters are not taken as a representation of Islam or as any sort of proof that Islam condones violence or suicide bombing. Doctrines presented in this book, including the supreme Ismaili motto of “Nothing is true, everything is permitted,” do not correspond to the beliefs of the majority of Muslims throughout the ages, but rather to a relatively small sect.

It is in this spirit we offer our edition of this book. We hope you'll read and appreciate it as such.

CHAPTER ONE

In mid-spring of the year 1092 a good-sized caravan was wending its way along the old military trail that leads from Samarkand and Bukhara through northern Khorasan and then meanders through the foothills of the Elburz Mountains. It had left Bukhara as the snow started to melt, and had been underway for several weeks. The drivers brandished their whips, shouting hoarsely at the caravan's draft animals, which were already on the verge of exhaustion. One after the other in a long procession stepped Arabian dromedaries, mules, and two-humped camels from Turkestan, submissively carrying their freight. An armed escort rode short, shaggy horses, glancing in equal measures of boredom and longing at the long chain of mountains that had begun to emerge on the horizon. They were tired of the slow ride and could barely wait to arrive at their destination. They drew closer and closer to the snow-covered cone of Mount Demavend, until it was blocked out by the foothills that absorbed the trail. Fresh mountain air started to blow, reviving the people and livestock by day. But the nights were ice cold, and both escorts and drivers stood around the campfires, grumbling and rubbing their hands.

Fastened between the two humps of one of the camels was a small shelter resembling a cage. From time to time a small hand drew the curtain aside from its window, and the face of a frightened little girl looked out. Her large eyes, red from crying, looked at the strangers surrounding her as if seeking an answer to the difficult question that had tormented her for the entire journey: where were they taking her, and what did they plan to do with her? But no one noticed aside from the caravan leader, a stern man of about fifty in a loose Arab cloak and an imposing white turban, who would blink in disapproval when he caught sight of her through the opening. At those moments she would quickly pull the curtain shut and retreat inside the cage. Ever since she had been

bought from her master in Bukhara, she had been living in a combination of mortal fear and thrilling curiosity about the fate that was awaiting her.

One day, as they neared the end of their journey, a band of horsemen raced down the hillside to their right and blocked their path. The animals at the head of the caravan stopped on their own. The leader and escort reached for their heavy, curved sabers and assumed positions for a charge. A man on a short brown horse separated from the attackers and came close enough to the caravan that his voice was audible. He called out a password and received a response from the caravan leader. The two men galloped toward each other and exchanged courteous greetings, and then the new troop took over leadership. The caravan turned off the trail and headed into the brush, traveling this way until well into the night. Eventually they made camp on the floor of a small valley, from where they could hear the distant drumming of a mountain torrent. They built fires, ate hastily, and then fell asleep like the dead.

When dawn came they were back on their feet. The caravan leader approached the shelter, which the drivers had unfastened from the camel's back the night before and set down on the ground. He pushed the curtain aside and called out in a gruff voice, "Halima!"

The frightened little face appeared at the window; then the low, narrow door opened. The leader's firm hand grabbed the girl by her wrist and pulled her out of the shelter.

Halima's whole body was shaking. *Now I'm done for*, she thought. The commander of the strangers who had joined the caravan the previous day held a black bandage in his hand. The caravan leader signaled to him, and the man wordlessly put the kerchief over the girl's eyes and knotted it tightly at the back of her head. Then he mounted his horse, pulled the girl up into the saddle with him, and covered her in his vast cloak. He and the caravan leader exchanged a few words. Then he spurred his horse into a gallop. Halima shrank into a tiny ball and clung fearfully to the rider.

The sound of the torrent grew closer and closer. At one point they stopped and the rider briefly spoke to someone. Then he spurred his horse again. But soon he was riding more slowly and cautiously, and Halima thought that the path must be very narrow and lead right along the edge of the mountain stream. Cool air wafted up from below, and

terror once again constricted her heart.

They stopped again. Halima heard shouting and clanking, and when they set off at a gallop again, there was a muffled rumbling beneath the horse's hooves. They had crossed a bridge over the rapids.

What followed seemed like a terrible nightmare. She heard a tumult of shouting, as though an entire army of men were quarreling. The rider dismounted without letting her out of his cloak. He raced with her first over level ground, then down some steps, until it seemed to have grown very dark. Suddenly he threw his cloak open and Halima felt someone else's hands take hold of her. She shuddered in near-mortal terror. The person who had taken her from the horseman laughed quietly. He headed off with her down a corridor. Suddenly a strange chill enveloped her, as though they had entered a cellar. She tried not to think at all but didn't succeed. She was sure she was coming ever closer to the last and most horrible moment.

The man who was holding her began to feel along the wall with his free hand, which finally found some object and firmly pushed it. A gong reverberated loudly.

Halima cried out and tried to break free of the man's arms. He only laughed and said, almost kindly, "Don't wail, little peacock. Nobody is going to touch you."

Iron chains jangled and Halima once again saw flickers of light through the blindfold. *They're throwing me in jail*, she thought. The stream roared beneath her and she held her breath.

She heard the tread of bare feet. Someone was approaching, and the man who was holding her handed her off to the newcomer.

"Here she is, Adi," he said.

The arms that took her now were lion-strong and completely bare. The man's chest must have been bare too. She could feel this when he lifted her up. He had to be a real giant.

Halima submitted to her fate. From this point on, she paid close attention to what was happening to her but offered no resistance. Carrying her, the man ran across a springy footbridge that swung unpleasantly under their weight. Then the ground started to crunch beneath his feet, as though it were covered with fine gravel. She could feel the pleasant warmth of the sun's rays and light penetrating her blindfold. And suddenly out of nowhere came the smell of fresh

vegetation and flowers.

The man jumped into a boat, causing it to rock heavily. Halima cried out and clutched onto the giant. He gave a high-pitched, almost childlike laugh and said kindly, "Don't worry, little gazelle. I'm going to row you over to the other side, and then we'll be home. Here, sit down."

He set her down on a comfortable seat and started rowing.

She thought she heard laughter in the distance—lighthearted, girlish laughter. She listened closely. No, she wasn't mistaken. She could already make out individual voices. She felt as though a weight had been lifted from her heart. Perhaps nothing bad awaited her in a place where people were this happy.

The boat pressed up against the shore. The man took her up in his arms and stepped out onto dry land. He carried her a few steps uphill and then set her down on her feet. A loud commotion surrounded them, and Halima heard the slap of many sandals approaching. The giant laughed and called out, "Here she is."

Then he returned to the boat and rowed it back.

One of the girls approached Halima to take off her blindfold, while the rest spoke to each other.

"Look how tiny she is," one said.

Another added, "And how young still. She's a child."

"Look how thin she's gotten," a third observed. "The journey must have done that to her."

"She's as tall and slim as a cypress."

The blindfold slid from Halima's eyes. She was astonished. Endless gardens in the first bloom of spring extended as far as she could see. The girls surrounding her were more beautiful than houris. The most beautiful one of them all had removed her blindfold.

"Where am I?" she asked in a timid voice.

The girls laughed, as though amused by her timidity. She blushed. But the beauty who had removed her blindfold gently put an arm around her waist and said, "Don't worry, dear child. You're among good people."

Her voice was warm and protective. Halima pressed close to her while silly thoughts swam through her head. *Maybe I've been brought to some prince*, she mused to herself.

They led her along a path that was strewn with white, round pebbles. To the right and left, flower beds were laid out symmetrically, filled with

blossoming tulips and hyacinths of all sizes and colors. Some of the tulips were blazing yellow, others were bright red or violet, and still others were variegated or speckled. The hyacinths were white and pale pink, light and dark blue, pale violet and light yellow. Some of them were delicate and transparent, as though made of glass. Violets and primrose grew at the borders. Elsewhere irises and narcissuses were budding. Here and there a magnificent white lily opened its first flowers. The air was saturated with a delirious scent.

Halima was amazed.

They walked past rose gardens. The bushes were carefully pruned, and there were plump buds on the branches, some of them already producing red, white and yellow flowers.

The path led them still farther through thick groves of pomegranates, dense with red flowers. Then came rows of lemon and peach trees. They came upon orchards of almonds and quinces, apples and pears.

Halima's eyes widened.

"What's your name, little one?" one of the girls asked her.

"Halima," she whispered almost soundlessly.

They laughed at Halima so much that tears nearly came to their eyes.

"Stop laughing, you nasty monkeys," Halima's protector scolded them. "Leave the girl alone. Let her catch her breath. She's tired and confused."

To Halima she said, "Don't take them wrong. They're young and boisterous and when you get to know them better, you'll see they aren't mean. They're going to like you a lot."

They came to a cypress grove. Halima heard the purling of water from all sides. Somewhere far off, the water rumbled like rapids funneling into a waterfall. Something glinted through the trees. Halima was curious. Soon she was able to make out a small castle in a clearing, showing white in the sunlight. The castle fronted a circular pond with a fountain. They paused here and Halima looked around.

On all sides they were surrounded by high mountains. The sun bore down on the rocky slopes and illuminated the snow-covered peaks. She looked in the direction from which they had come. Between two slopes forming a gorge at the end of the valley there stood, as if dropped into place by design, an enormous rock resembling a mountain. On its peak stood a mighty fortress which shone white in the morning sun.

"What is that?" she asked fearfully, pointing toward the walls with

two tall towers rising up at either end.

Her protector answered her. "There will be time enough for questions later. You're tired, and first we need to get you a bath, feed you, and let you rest."

Gradually Halima lost her fear and began to observe her escorts carefully. Each of them struck her as more charmingly and beautifully dressed than the last. The silk of their broad trousers rustled as they walked. Practically each girl wore a unique color that suited her best. Close-fitting halters were sumptuously embroidered and decorated with gold clasps, into which gemstones had been set. Beneath these were brightly colored blouses of the finest silk. Each of them wore rich bracelets on her wrists and necklaces of pearl or coral. Some walked bareheaded, while others wore kerchiefs wrapped around their heads like small turbans. Their sandals had been artfully carved from colored leather. Halima looked at her own wretchedness and felt ashamed.

Maybe this is why they were laughing at me before, she thought.

They had approached the castle. It was round in shape and encircled by white stone staircases that led to its entrance. The roof was supported by numerous columns reminiscent of an ancient temple.

An older woman emerged from the castle. She was long and thin as a pole and carried herself very upright and, it seemed, proudly. She was dark skinned with sunken cheeks. There was something intense in her big dark eyes, and her thin, compressed lips gave an impression of obduracy and strictness. From behind her some sort of yellowish cat came trotting out, extraordinarily big, with unusually long legs. It caught sight of Halima and gave a hostile hiss.

Halima cried out in fright and pressed close to her protector, who tried to comfort her.

"Don't be afraid of our Ahriman. He may be a real leopard, but he's as tame as a lamb and wouldn't harm anyone. When he gets used to you, the two of you will become good friends."

She called the animal to come and took firm hold of it by the collar. She spoke to it until it stopped snarling and baring its teeth.

"See, he tamed down right away. Once you get your clothes changed, he'll treat you as family. Now pet him, so he can get used to you. Don't be afraid, I'm holding onto him."

Halima fought back her instinctive fear. From a distance she reached

forward, putting her left hand on her knee and, with her right, gently stroking the leopard's back. The animal arched its back like a housecat and gave a contented growl. Halima jumped back, then laughed along with the other girls.

"Who is this timid monkey, Miriam?" the old woman asked her protector, piercing Halima with her gaze.

"Adi gave her to me, Apama. She's still pretty frightened. Her name is Halima."

The old woman approached Halima, sized her up from head to foot, and inspected her like a horse trader inspects a horse's parts.

"Maybe she won't be quite so useless. We'll just need to fatten her up so she isn't such a wisp."

Then she added with particular anger, "And you say that castrated Moorish animal gave her to you? So he had her in his hands? Oh, that miserable, twisted thing! How can Sayyiduna put so much trust in him?"

"Adi was just doing his duty, Apama," Miriam replied. "Now let's go take care of this child."

She took Halima by one hand, while still holding onto the leopard's collar with the other. She drew both of them up the steps to the building. The other girls followed.

They entered a high-ceilinged corridor that led all around the building. Polished marble walls reflected images like mirrors. Rich carpets absorbed their footsteps. Miriam released the leopard at one of castle's many exits. He leapt away on his long legs like a dog, turning his charming little cat's head back curiously toward Halima, who was now finally relaxed.

They turned into an intersecting corridor and entered a round room with a high, vaulted ceiling. Halima cried out in astonishment. Even in her dreams she had never seen this much beauty. Light poured through a glass ceiling composed of separate elements, each in a different color of the rainbow. Violet, blue, green, yellow, red and pale shafts of light filtered down into a circular pool where the water rippled gently, agitated by some unseen source. The many colors played on its surface, spilling out onto the floor until they came to a stop near the wall, on divans covered with artfully embroidered pillows.

Halima stood at the entrance with her eyes and mouth wide open. Miriam looked at her and gently smiled. She bent down over the pool

and put a hand in the water.

“It’s nice and warm,” she said. She told the girls who had come in after them to prepare everything for a bath. Then she started to undress Halima.

Halima felt ashamed in front of the girls. She hid behind Miriam and cast her eyes down. The girls examined her curiously, quietly giggling.

“Get out, you nasty things,” said Miriam, chasing them away. They obeyed instantly and left.

Miriam gathered Halima’s hair into a knot on the top of her head so that it wouldn’t get wet, then submerged her in the pool. She scrubbed and washed her vigorously. Then she drew her out of the water and rubbed her dry with a soft towel. She gave her a silk blouse and told her to put on the broad trousers brought by the girls. She handed her a pretty halter which turned out to be too big, and then had her put on a brightly colored jacket that reached down to her knees.

“For today you’ll have to make do with these clothes,” she said. “But soon we’ll sew you new ones your size, and you’ll be happy with them, you’ll see.”

She sat her down on a divan and piled up a bunch of pillows.

“Rest here for a while, and I’ll go see what the girls have fixed for you to eat.”

She stroked her cheek with her soft, rosy hand. At that instant they both sensed that they liked each other. Halima abruptly and instinctively kissed her protector’s fingers. Miriam made a show of scowling at her, but Halima could tell that she didn’t really mind. She grinned blissfully.

Miriam was barely gone when Halima felt overcome with fatigue. She closed her eyes. For a while she resisted going to sleep, but soon she told herself, “I’ll get to see it all again in no time,” and then she was asleep.

When she first awoke she didn’t know where she was or what had happened to her. She pushed aside a blanket which the girls had used to cover her while she slept and sat up on the edge of the divan. She rubbed her eyes, then stared at these young women’s kind faces, illuminated in the multicolored light. It was already late afternoon. Miriam crouched down on a pillow beside her and offered her a dish of cold milk, which she emptied greedily.

Miriam poured more milk from a colorful jug, and Halima drank this down in one draft too.

A dark-skinned girl carrying a gilt tray approached and offered her a variety of sweets made of flour, honey and fruit. Halima ate everything in front of her.

“Look how hungry she is, the orphan,” one of the girls said.

“And how pale,” another observed.

“Let’s put some blush on her cheeks and lips,” a beautiful light-haired girl suggested.

“The child has to eat first,” Miriam rebuffed them. She turned to the black girl with the gilt tray. “Peel her a banana or an orange, Sara.”

Then she asked Halima, “Which fruit do you prefer, child?”

“I don’t know either of them. I’d like to try them both.”

The girls laughed. Halima smiled too when Sara brought her bananas and oranges.

She soon felt overcome by so many delicious things. She licked her fingers and said, “Nothing has ever tasted this good to me before.”

The girls burst into uproarious laughter. Even the corners of Miriam’s mouth turned up in a smile as she tapped Halima on the cheek. Halima could feel the blood starting to beat in her veins again. Her eyes shone, her mood improved, and she began to speak openly.

The girls sat around her, some doing embroidery, others sewing, and they began asking her questions. Meanwhile, Miriam had pressed a metal mirror into her hand and started painting her cheeks and lips with blush and her eyebrows and lashes with black dye.

“So, your name is Halima,” said the light-haired girl, the one who had advised coloring her cheeks. “And I’m called Zainab.”

“Zainab is a pretty name,” Halima acknowledged.

They laughed again.

“Where do you come from?” the black girl they called Sara asked her.

“From Bukhara.”

“I’m from there too,” said a beauty with a round, moon-shaped face and ample limbs. She had a delicate, rounded chin and warm, velvety eyes. “My name is Fatima. Who was your master before this?”

Halima was about to answer, but Miriam, who was just then applying color to her lips, stopped her.

“Hold on just a minute. And all of you ... stop distracting her.”

Halima swiftly kissed the tips of her fingers.

“Stop that,” she scolded her. But her scowl wasn’t quite convincing,

and Halima could clearly sense that she had won their general good will. She glowed with satisfaction.

“Who was my master?” she repeated when Miriam had finished coloring her lips. She inspected herself in the mirror with obvious satisfaction and continued. “The merchant Ali, an old and good man.”

“Why did he sell you if he was good?” Zainab asked.

“He was penniless. He’d lost all his money. We didn’t even have anything left to eat. He had two daughters, but their suitors cheated him out of them. They didn’t pay him a thing. He had a son too, but he disappeared, probably killed by robbers or soldiers.” Her eyes filled with tears. “I was supposed to become his wife.”

“Who were your parents?” Fatima asked.

“I never knew them and I don’t know anything about them. As far back as I can remember, I lived in the house of the merchant Ali. As long as his son was still at home, we managed to get by. But then the bad times came. The master would moan, pull out his hair, and pray. His wife told him to take me to Bukhara and sell me there. He put me on a donkey and we went to Bukhara. He asked all the merchants where they’d take me and who they’d sell me to, until he met one who worked for your master. This one swore by the beard of the Prophet that I would live like a princess. Ali settled on a price, and when they took me away he started crying out loud. So did I. But now I can see that the merchant was right. I really do feel like a princess here.”

Misty-eyed, the girls glanced at each other and smiled.

“My master cried, too, when he sold me,” Zainab said. “I wasn’t born a slave. When I was little some Turks abducted me and took me to their grazing lands. I learned to ride and shoot with a bow and arrow like a boy. They were all curious because I had blue eyes and golden hair. People would come from far away to look at me. They said that if some powerful chieftain found out about me, he’d probably buy me. Then the sultan’s army came and my master was killed. I was about ten years old at the time. We were retreating from the sultan’s soldiers, and we lost a lot of people and livestock. The master’s son took over the leadership of the tribe. He fell in love with me and took me into his harem as a real wife. But the sultan took everything away from us, and my master went wild. He beat us every day, but he refused to submit to the sultan. Then the chieftains made peace. Merchants came and started to trade. One

day an Armenian noticed me and started to dog my master about me. He offered him livestock and money. Finally the two of them came into the tent. When my master saw me, he pulled his dagger and tried to stab me, so that he couldn't give in to the temptation of selling me. But the merchant held him back, and then they closed the deal. I thought I was going to die. The Armenian took me to Samarkand. He was revolting. It was there that he sold me to Sayyiduna. But all that is long past ...”

“Poor thing, you've endured a lot,” Halima said and stroked her cheek compassionately.

Fatima asked, “Were you your master's wife?”

Halima blushed. “No. I mean, I don't know. What do you mean?”

“Don't bother her with those questions, Fatima,” Miriam said. “Can't you see she's still a child?”

“Oh, what happened to me was bad,” said Fatima, sighing. “My relatives sold both my mother and me to some peasant. I was barely ten years old when I had to become his wife. He had debts, and since he couldn't pay them, he gave me as payment to his creditor, but he didn't tell him that I'd already become his wife. So my new master called me all kinds of abusive names, beat me and tormented me, and screamed that the peasant and I had cheated him. He swore by all the martyrs that he would destroy us both. I didn't understand any of it. The master was old and ugly, and I'd shake in his presence as though he were an evil spirit. He let both of his former wives beat me too. Then he found himself a fourth one and he was as sweet as honey with her, but he'd just beat the rest of us all that much more. Finally we were saved by the leader of one of Sayyiduna's caravans, who bought me for these gardens.”

Halima looked at her with teary eyes, then she smiled and said, “See, in the end you came here, and things are all right.”

“Enough storytelling for now,” Miriam interrupted. “It will be dark soon, you're tired, and we have work to do tomorrow. Take this stick and wash your teeth with it.”

It was a thin little stick with tiny, brush-like fibers at one end. Halima quickly understood its function. They brought her a dish with water in it, and when she had finished this task, they took her to a bedroom.

“Sara and Zainab will be your companions,” Miriam told her.

“Good,” Halima replied.

The bedroom floor was covered with soft, colorful carpets. Carpets covered the walls and were hung between the lowlying beds, which were covered with tastefully embroidered pillows. Beside each bed was an artfully carved dressing table with a large silver mirror affixed to it. A five-canded gilt candelabra with strange, twisted shapes hung from the ceiling.

The girls dressed Halima in a long white gown of delicate silk. They tied a red cord around her waist and sat her down in front of the mirror. She could hear them whispering about how sweet and pretty she was. *They're right, she thought, I really am pretty. Like a real princess.* She lay down on her bed and the girls put pillows under her head. They covered her with a feather quilt and left on tiptoe. She buried her head in the soft pillows and, in a state of fairy-tale happiness, fell blissfully to sleep.

The first rays of daylight shining through the window awoke her. She opened her eyes and saw the designs on the wall hangings, woven in bright colors. At first she thought she was still with the caravan. On the wall she saw a lance-bearing hunter on horseback chasing an antelope. Beneath him a tiger and a buffalo faced off, while a black man carrying a shield shoved the point of his spear at a raging lion. Beside them a leopard stalked a gazelle. Then she remembered the previous day and realized where she was.

“Good morning, sleepyhead,” Zainab, who had just propped herself up in bed, called to her.

Halima looked at her and was astonished. Her hair poured over her shoulders in ample locks and shone in the sunlight like pure gold. *She's more beautiful than a fairy,* she thought. Enraptured, she returned her greeting.

She looked toward the other bed, where Sara was sleeping, half naked, her full dark limbs shining like ebony. The conversation woke her too, and she slowly began to open her eyes. They glinted like two dark, white-irradiated stars. She fixed them on Halima and smiled at her oddly. Then she lowered them again quickly, like a feline confused by a human stare. She got up, went over to Halima's bed, and sat down on it.

“Last night when Zainab and I went to bed, you didn't notice us,” she said. “We kissed you, but you just murmured something ill-tempered and

turned your back.”

Halima laughed, though she was almost frightened by the other’s gaze. She could also see the light down that covered her upper lip.

“I didn’t hear you at all,” she replied.

Sara devoured Halima with her eyes. She would have liked to hug her, but she didn’t dare. She glanced furtively toward Zainab.

Zainab was already seated at her mirror, combing her hair. “We’re going to have to give yours a wash today,” Sara said to Halima. “Will you let me wash your hair?”

“That would be fine.”

She had to get up so her companions could lead her to a separate washroom.

“Do all of you bathe every day?” she asked incredulously.

“Of course!” the other two laughed. They immersed her in a wooden bathtub and splashed her playfully. She shrieked, dried herself with a towel, and then slid into her clothes with a pleasant, refreshed feeling.

They ate breakfast in a long dining hall. Each of them had her own place, and Halima counted twenty-four in all, including herself. They sat her at the head of the table next to Miriam, who asked her, “So what do you know how to do?”

“I can embroider and sew, and I know how to cook.”

“What about reading and writing?”

“I know how to read a little.”

“We’re going to have to work on that. And what about verse making?”

“I’ve never learned that.”

“Right. You’re going to have to learn all that and quite a bit more around here.”

“That’s fine,” Halima said happily. “I’ve always wanted to learn things.”

“You should know that we enforce strict discipline when it comes to lessons. You will be no exception. And let me warn you about one other thing. Don’t ask questions about things that aren’t directly related to your studies.”

Miriam struck Halima as much more serious and strict than the day before. Still, she sensed that the older girl liked her. “I promise I’ll obey you in everything and I’ll do everything just the way you tell me,” she said.

She could sense that Miriam held some favored rank among all the others, and she grew curious about this, but she didn't dare to ask questions.

For breakfast they had milk and sweet pastries made with dried fruit and honey. Then each of them was given an orange.

Lessons began after breakfast. They went into the glass-ceilinged hall with the pool that Halima had admired the day before. They sat around on pillows, each of them with a black tablet resting on her crossed legs. They got their slate pencils ready and waited. Miriam pointed to a place for Halima to sit and handed her her writing implements.

"Hold it like you see the others doing, even though you don't know how to write yet. I'll teach you later, but for now you can at least get used to the tablet and pencil."

Then she went to the doorway and with a mallet struck a gong that hung on the wall.

A giant Moor holding a thick book entered the room. He was dressed in short striped trousers and a cloak that reached to his feet but was left open in front. He was shod in plain sandals and had a thin red turban wrapped around his head. He let himself down onto a pillow prepared for him and sat facing the girls, his weight resting on his knees.

"Today, my sweet little doves, we continue with passages from the Koran," he said, piously touching his forehead to the book, "in which the Prophet speaks of the joys of the afterlife and the delights of paradise. I see a new young student among you, clear-eyed and avid for learning, hungry for knowledge and pleasing to the spirit. So that no drop of wisdom and holy learning escapes her, let's have Fatima, clear-witted and sharp, repeat and interpret what your careful gardener Adi has so far managed to plant and cultivate in your little hearts."

This was the same Adi who had brought her to these gardens yesterday. Halima recognized his voice immediately. The whole time he spoke she valiantly resisted an urge to laugh.

Fatima lifted her lovely, rounded chin to face the teacher and began reciting in a sweet, almost singing voice, "In the fifteenth sura, in verses forty-five to forty-eight we read, 'Behold, the god-fearing shall come to these gardens and to the springs: enter in peace, for indeed we shall take the ire from their hearts and they shall sit down on pillows with each other. They will feel no fatigue and we shall never cause them to leave

...’ ”

Adi praised her. Then she recited several other passages by heart. When she finished, he said to Halima, “So, my silver doe, fleet-footed and avid for learning, did you hear in the pearls of your companion and older sister what my skill, my depth of spirit has sown in the bosoms of our gentle-eyed houris and nurtured into fulsome buds? You must also blow all childishness out of your heart and listen intently to what my holy learning reveals to you, so that you can be happy both here and in the afterlife.”

Then he began to dictate slowly, word by word, a new chapter from the Koran. The chalk squeaked across the tablets. Moving slightly, the girls’ lips silently repeated what their hands were writing.

The lesson came to an end and Halima caught her breath. Everything had struck her as so silly and so strange, as though none of it had been real.

The Moor stood up, touched his forehead to the book reverently three times, and said, “Lovely young maidens, my diligent pupils, skillful and quick, enough learning and scattering of my wisdom for now. What you’ve heard and dutifully written on your tablets you must now inscribe on your memories and learn thoroughly and by heart. As you do this, you must also instruct this sweet quail, your new companion, in the ways of holy learning and convert her ignorance into knowledge.”

He smiled and a row of white teeth shone brightly. He rolled his eyes portentously, leaving the schoolroom with great dignity.

The curtain had barely dropped behind him when Halima burst out laughing, and some of the others joined her. Miriam, however, said, “You must never again laugh at Adi, Halima. Maybe he seems a bit strange to you at first, but he has a heart of gold and he would do anything for us. He’s expert at many things—the Koran, worldly philosophy, poetry, rhetoric ... And he’s equally at home in both Arabic and Pahlavi. Sayyiduna also has tremendous confidence in him.”

Halima felt ashamed and lowered her eyes. But Miriam stroked her cheek and added, “Don’t be concerned that you laughed. But now you know, and you’ll behave differently in the future.”

She nodded to her and went out into the gardens with the other girls to rake and weave.

Sara led Halima into the bath to wash her hair. First she brushed her hair out, then she undressed her down to the waist. Her hands trembled slightly as she did this, which made Halima slightly uncomfortable, but she tried not to think about it.

“So who is our master?” she asked. Her curiosity had finally gained the upper hand. She realized she held some power over Sara, though she didn’t understand why.

Sara was instantly ready to oblige.

“I’ll tell you everything I know,” she said, her voice quivering strangely. “But you’d better not tell on me. And you have to like me. Do you promise?”

“I do.”

“You see, all of us belong to Sayyiduna, which means ‘Our Master.’ He’s a very, very powerful man. But what can I tell you ...”

“Tell me! Tell me!”

“Maybe you’ll never even see him. I and several of the others have been here for a year already, and we haven’t.”

“What is this about ‘Our Master’?”

“Be patient. I’ll explain everything. Do you know who is first after Allah among the living?”

“The caliph.”

“Not true. And it’s not the sultan, either. Sayyiduna is first after Allah.”

Halima’s eyes widened in a shiver of astonishment. It was as though she were experiencing a tale from the *Thousand and One Nights*, only now she wasn’t just listening to it, she was in the very midst of it.

“You’re saying that none of you has yet seen Sayyiduna?”

Sara bent her face right down over Halima’s ear.

“Not exactly. One of us knows him well. But no one must ever find out that we’re talking about this.”

“I’ll be silent as a tomb. So who’s the one who knows Sayyiduna?”

She already had a clear sense who it might be. All she wanted now was confirmation.

“It’s Miriam,” Sara whispered. “The two of them are close. But you’d better not give me away.”

“I won’t talk about it with anyone.”

“Then it’s all right. You have to like me now that I’ve trusted in you so

much.”

Curiosity tormented Halima. She asked, “Who was that old woman we met in front of the house yesterday?”

“Apama. But it’s even more dangerous to talk about her than Miriam. Miriam is kind and likes us. But Apama is mean and hates us. She knows Sayyiduna well too. But be careful you don’t let on to anyone that you know anything.”

“I won’t, Sara.”

Sara washed Halima’s hair faster.

“You’re so sweet,” she whispered. Halima was embarrassed but pretended not to have heard anything. There was so much more she needed to find out about.

“Who is Adi?” she asked.

“He’s a eunuch.”

“What’s that, a eunuch?”

“A man who isn’t really a man.”

“What does that mean?”

Sara began explaining it to her in more detail, but Halima rebuffed her irritably, “I don’t want to hear about that.”

“You’re going to have to hear about a lot of other things like it.”

Sara was visibly hurt.

The washing finished, Sara began to massage Halima’s scalp with fragrant oils. Then she brushed her hair out. She would also have liked to hug and kiss her, but Halima cast such a menacing look up at her that she was afraid to. She led her from the washroom out into the sun so that her hair could dry faster. A group of the girls weeding flower beds nearby noticed them and approached.

“Where have you two been all this time?” they asked.

Halima lowered her eyes, but Sara responded volubly.

“If only you’d seen how dirty the poor thing’s hair was! It was as if she’d never had it washed in her lifetime. I barely managed to get it under control, but she’s going to need at least one more thorough washing before we get it to where it needs to be.”

Thank goodness Miriam isn’t here, Halima thought. She would have picked up on her bad conscience immediately, and if she’d started asking, Halima wouldn’t have been able to hold back. She would have seen that she hadn’t been able to keep her promise not to ask questions

even for a single day.

When the other girls left, Sara scolded her.

“If you’re going to act like that, everybody’s going to guess that you’ve got secrets. You’ve got to carry yourself like you don’t know anything. That way nobody’s going to start probing ... I’m going to join the others, but you stay out here in the sun and let your hair dry.”

Halima was now alone for the first time since she had arrived in this strange world. She didn’t really know anything—neither where she was, nor what her role was to be. She was surrounded by sheer mysteries. But this wasn’t entirely unpleasant. Just the opposite. She had found her balance in this fairy-tale world quite well. For one thing, there was plenty of fodder for her imagination. *It’s best if I pretend to be ignorant,* she thought. *That way people won’t suspect me, and I’ll be able to get on their good side. And then they’ll be more inclined to take care of me.*

Sara had provided her with more than enough riddles to keep her mind busy. Miriam, whom she had gotten to know as kind and good, now had another, mysterious face. What did it mean that she and Sayyiduna were close? What was Apama’s power that she could be mean but also know Sayyiduna? And that silly Adi, who Miriam said had Sayyiduna’s complete confidence? And finally, who was Sayyiduna, this powerful “Our Master” whom Sara could speak about only in whispers?

She couldn’t hold out long in one place. She turned down a path and started encountering new things. She bent over some flowers and watched and scared off some colorful butterflies that were perching there. Worker bees and bright-colored bumblebees covered in pollen buzzed all around her. Bugs and gnats flew this way and that, all enjoying the warm spring sun with her. She had already forgotten her miserable former life and the arduous journey that had been so full of fear and uncertainty. Now her heart sang with happiness and the joy of life. It was as if she really had found heaven.

Something moved in a coppice of pomegranates. She listened closely. A slender, lithe-legged animal leapt out of the foliage. *It’s a gazelle,* she thought. The animal stood still and looked at her with its beautiful brown eyes.

Halima overcame her initial fright. She crouched down and began

calling it, instinctively mimicking the strange Koran interpreter.

“Gazelle, my little belle, let’s hear you bleat but don’t retreat, my slender-legged, my lissome-legged ... See, I can’t do any more than that because I’m not learned like Adi. Come on, come to Halima, who’s pretty and young and likes the sweet little gazelle ...”

She had to laugh at her own eloquence. The gazelle stepped lightly toward her with its muzzle outstretched and started sniffing and licking her face. It tickled pleasantly, and she began to laugh and offer playful resistance as the animal nudged at her more and more forcefully, until she suddenly felt something else just as live touching her earlobe from behind and breathing into it. She looked around and was petrified with fear. Yellow-furred Ahriman stood right up beside her, eagerly competing with the gazelle in expressions of kindness. She fell backwards, barely landing on her hands. She couldn’t scream and she couldn’t get up. Her eyes full of fear, she stared at the long-legged cat and waited for it to leap at her. But evidently Ahriman had no intention of attacking. Soon he began to ignore her completely and tease the gazelle, catching it by the ear or craning with open jaws toward its neck. They had to know each other well and were obviously friends. Halima regained her courage and put an arm around each animal’s neck. The leopard started to purr and knead like an ordinary housecat, and the gazelle put its tongue against her face again. Halima fawned on them with the sweetest words. She couldn’t grasp how a leopard and a gazelle could be friends in this world when the Prophet had said that Allah was reserving that miracle for the inhabitants of paradise.

She heard her name being called. She arose and went in the direction of the voice. Ahriman padded along behind her. The gazelle kept him company, periodically ramming into him like a baby goat. He didn’t pay much attention to it, only from time to time snapping at its ear.

Her companions were waiting for her and told her it was time for a dance lesson. They tied her hair up on top of her head and led her into the glass hall.

Their dance teacher was a eunuch named Asad, a young man of average height with smooth cheeks and supple, almost feminine limbs. He was a dark-skinned African, but not as black as Adi. Halima thought he was cute and silly at the same time. When he came in, he took off his long cloak and stood before them in nothing but his short yellow

trousers. He bowed slightly with a gracious smile and contentedly rubbed his hands. He called on Fatima to play the harp, and at the sound of the instrument began to twist and turn expertly.

His art consisted mostly of an expressive belly and a strong command of his muscles. Flourishes with his hands and feet were little more than a rhythmic accompaniment to the movements of his belly. First he showed how it was done, then the girls were supposed to try it after him. He ordered them to take off their halters and bare themselves to the waist. Halima was embarrassed, but when she saw how casually the others undressed, she readily followed them. He designated Zuleika as the lead dancer and placed her in front of the rest. Then he sent Fatima to assume her place, and he took a long, thin flute and began to play.

It was only now that Halima began to notice Zuleika. She undoubtedly had the most beautiful figure of any of them. She was first in dancing and Asad's assistant at lessons. Whatever he wanted she performed with precision, with the others imitating her. Flute in hand, he went from one girl to the next, expertly evaluating the agility and movement of their muscles, correcting them and showing how it was done.

After the lesson Halima was tired and hungry. They went out into the gardens, but they couldn't go far, because they had another subject coming up—verse making. Halima complained to Sara that she was hungry. Sara showed her where to wait for her, then slipped into the building and came back in a short while. She put a peeled banana in Halima's hand.

"We're not allowed to eat between meals. Miriam is very strict about that, because she's afraid we'll get fat. She'd punish me for sure if she knew I'd given you anything."

Halima had never heard of anyone not being allowed to eat just so they wouldn't get fat. Just the opposite. The fuller formed a woman or a girl was, the more she was praised, so she hardly welcomed Sara's news. And what to make of the fact that the meals in this strange place consisted of nothing but delicacies?

It was time for the girls to head back to the classroom, where Adi was about to serve as their poetry teacher. This was a subject that struck Halima as fun, and she was immediately excited about it. This day he explained the short verse system of the ghazal, and all of the girls were supposed to use their inventiveness to contribute. Miriam recited the

first verse and was free after that while the girls competed with each other to add verse after verse. After about ten lines they exhausted their resourcefulness, leaving only Fatima and Zainab, who kept doggedly at it until they too finally ran out. Adi left Halima out of both the first and second rounds so she could get the idea of it. She clearly had such a good time listening that Adi called on her to get ready as they moved into the third round. She was a little afraid, but also flattered that he already had this much confidence in her, and part of her also wanted to see how she measured up against her companions.

Miriam delivered the first verse.

“If like a bird on wings I flew ...” Adi waited for a moment, then started calling on them in sequence. They responded.

Zuleika: “I’d always keep the sun in view.”

Sara: “And follow toward the morning dew.”

Aisha: “I’d help the orphaned destitute.”

Sit: “Would sing them songs of every hue.”

Jada: “And guard that all the notes were true.”

Here Adi amiably nodded toward Halima, calling on her to continue.

She blushed and gave it a try.

“So you and I could fly ...”

She got stuck and couldn’t go on.

“It’s on the tip of my tongue,” she said.

They all laughed, and Adi winked at Fatima.

“All right. Fatima, you help her out.”

Fatima completed Halima’s line, “Then you and I could fly, we two.”

But Halima instantly opposed this.

“No, that’s not what I meant,” she said. “Wait, I’ll get it.”

And, clearing her throat, she truly did.

“So you and I could fly to heaven above.”

Her words were met with an outburst of laughter. Red with anger and shame, she got up to run to the door, but Miriam blocked her way.

Then they were all at pains to comfort and encourage her. Gradually she calmed down and wiped her tears away. Adi explained that the art of making poetry was a blossom that could only be attained with prolonged effort and that she shouldn’t despair if she failed the first time. Then he called on the girls to continue, but most of them had already run out of rhymes. On their own, Fatima and Zainab took up a

kind of dialogue.

Fatima: "Let what you've heard, Halima, be for your education."

Zainab: "Fatima, you're the last one to give lessons, in my estimation."

Fatima: "Can I help it if my greater knowledge is an irritation?"

Zainab: "Nonsense, you should know yourself and know your limitations."

Fatima: "All right, it's clear enough to me, my candor brings your indignation."

Zainab: "Not in the slightest. If you must know, your arrogance is the provocation."

Fatima: "Beauty breeds contempt. Plainness has no consolation."

Zainab: "Was that one aimed at me? From you, you overfed mutation?"

Fatima: "Now that's a nice one. Should we all praise your grim emaciation?"

Zainab: "Not on my account. I can't help laughing at your indignation."

Fatima: "Oh, really? And how should I react to your prevarication?"

Zainab: "You think that your attacks can shield you from humiliation."

"Enough, my doves," Adi interrupted them. "You've flaunted your lovely rhymes and learned maxims, you've disputed, gone on the attack, vied with each other and wrestled in spirit, made beautiful music with daggers flying. Now forget your quarrel and make peace. Enough learned elegance and spoken grace. Now off to the dining room with all of you."

He bowed good-naturedly and left the classroom. The girls poured out after him and found their places for dinner.

Breakfast was waiting for them, having been laid out on the table, and this meal was served to them by three eunuchs: Hamza, Telha and Sohal. It was at this point that Halima learned that they had the services of seven eunuchs. Apart from the two teachers whom she already knew, and in addition to the three serving them at table, there were also two garden keepers, Moad and Mustafa. The kitchen was run essentially by Apama. Hamza, Telha and Sohal were simply her assistants.

These three tended the housekeeping. They cleaned, straightened,

washed and maintained order throughout the house. All of the eunuchs, however, lived together with Apama in some garden separated from theirs by moats. The eunuchs had their own building there. Apama lived in a separate house.

All of these details served only to kindle Halima's curiosity. She didn't dare ask questions in Miriam's presence. She could barely wait until she and Sara were alone again.

The meal struck Halima as a regular feast. A succulent wild fowl roast in an aromatic broth, a variety of vegetables, crepes and omelets, cheese, breads, and honeyed pastries with fruit inside. And to wash it all down a glass of some drink that strangely made Halima's thoughts spin.

"That's wine," Sara whispered to her. "Sayyiduna allows us to have it."

After the meal the two of them went to their bedchamber. They were alone and Halima asked, "Can Sayyiduna really permit wine if the Prophet forbids it?"

"He can. I told you he's the first after Allah. He's the new prophet."

"And you say that no one but Miriam and Apama has seen Sayyiduna?"

"No one else except Adi, who is his confidant. But Adi and Apama can't stand each other. Apama can't stand anyone, for that matter. She was very beautiful when she was young, and now that that's all lost she's bitter."

"Who is she, actually?"

"Shhh. She's a horrible woman. She knows all the secrets of love, and Sayyiduna brought her here for us to learn from. You'll hear about that this afternoon. They say when she was young she had lots of lovers."

"Why on earth do we have to learn so many things?"

"That I don't really know, but I think it's so we can be ready for Sayyiduna."

"Are we supposed to be in his harem?"

"Maybe. But now you tell me if you think you like me yet."

At this Halima scowled. It made her angry that Sara asked her such nonsense when she needed to find out so many important things. She lay back on her bed, clasped her hands behind her head, and stared at the ceiling.

Sara sat down next to her and gazed fixedly at her. Suddenly she bent

down over her and began kissing her passionately.

At first Halima ignored her. But eventually the kissing became bothersome and she had to push Sara away.

“I’d like to know what Sayyiduna plans to do with us,” she said.

Sara caught her breath and arranged her hair.

“So would I,” she replied. “But nobody talks about it and we’re forbidden to ask.”

“Do you think it would be possible to escape from here?”

“Are you out of your mind, asking things like that when you’ve only just arrived? If Apama could hear you! Didn’t you see the fortress at the top of the cliff? The only way out is through that. Help yourself, if you dare.”

“Whose castle is it?”

“Whose?! Everything you see around you here, including us, belongs to Sayyiduna.”

“Does Sayyiduna live in that castle?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“And I don’t suppose you know what this country we’re in is called?”

“I don’t know. You ask too many questions. I doubt even Apama and Adi know. Miriam might.”

“Why just Miriam?”

“I told you that they’re close.”

“What does that mean, that they’re close?”

“That they’re like husband and wife.”

“Who told you that?”

“Shhh. We girls figured it out.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Of course you don’t, you’ve never been in a harem.”

“Have you?”

“Yes, I have, sweet thing. If you only knew. My master was sheikh Moawiya. In the beginning I was his slave. He bought me when I was twelve. Then I became his favorite, his lover. He used to sit on the edge of my bed and gaze at me, just like I’m sitting here now. He’d call me his sweet black cat. He fell in love with me. If only I could tell you what it was like. He was a magnificent man. All of his wives were jealous of me. But they couldn’t do anything about it, because he loved me best of all. Their envy and anger alone made them grow older and uglier by the

day. He would take me with him on his expeditions. Then once we were attacked by an enemy tribe. Before our men could set up a defense, their bandits seized me and took me away. They sold me at the market in Basra to a buyer for Our Master. I was miserable.”

She started to cry. Thick, heavy drops fell on Halima’s cheeks and breast.

“Don’t be sad, Sara. Things are good for you here with us.”

“If I knew that you liked me even just a little, I’d feel better. My Moawiya was so handsome and loved me so much.”

“I like you, Sara,” Halima said, letting herself be kissed.

Then she started back in on the questions.

“Was Miriam in a harem too?”

“Yes, but it was different for her. She was like a queen. Two men were killed because of her.”

“Why did she come here, then?”

“Her husband’s relatives sold her to avenge her unfaithfulness to him. She had brought terrible shame on the entire family.”

“Why was she unfaithful to him?”

“You wouldn’t understand that yet, Halima. He wasn’t the right one for her.”

“He must not have loved her.”

“Oh he loved her all right. He loved her so much that it killed him.”

“How can you know that?”

“She told us about it herself when she first came here.”

“Wasn’t she here before you?”

“No. Fatima, Jada, Safiya and I were the first. Miriam came after us. At that point we were all still equals, and only Apama gave us orders.”

“So how did Miriam get to meet Sayyiduna after that?”

“That I really couldn’t say. He’s a prophet, so maybe he sees and knows everything. One day he sent for her. She didn’t tell us that, but we could sense it. Since then we stopped being equals. She started giving us orders, even opposing Apama. Her power grew and grew, and now even Apama has to obey her, and she hates her for it.”

“All of this is very strange.”

Zainab came in and sat down at her dressing table to adjust her hair and put on makeup.

“Time to go, Halima,” she said. “Apama is our next teacher, and you’d

better not cross her. Be careful you don't come running into the classroom at the last minute. Here's some blush and black dye for your cheeks and eyebrows. And rosehip oil for perfume. Miriam gave it to me for you. Come on, get up!"

She and Sara helped get her ready. Then the three of them left for the classroom.

Apama entered, and it was all Halima could do to keep from laughing. But the look in the old woman's eyes and the ominous silence that descended at her appearance were her warning to be careful. The girls stood up and bowed deeply.

The old woman was strangely decked out. Baggy trousers made of black silk flapped around her bony legs. Her halter was red bordered with gold and silver stitching. A small yellow turban with a long heron's feather covered her head, and giant gold hoops encrusted with gems hung from her ears. She wore a necklace of large pearls that had been draped several times around her neck. Her wrists and ankles were adorned with artfully crafted and precious bracelets and anklets. All of this finery only served to highlight her ugliness and decrepitude. On top of it all, she had painted her lips and cheeks a flaming red and shadowed her eyes with black dye so that she truly looked like a living scarecrow. With a wave of her hand she had the girls sit down. Her eyes sought out Halima. Inaudibly she sneered, and then she began to speak in a shrill voice.

"You've done a good job of getting the little one dressed up. Now if we can just get her to stop staring bug-eyed at people, like some young calf that's never seen a bull and has no idea what's coming at her. So listen close and learn something useful. And don't think for a minute that your companions just dropped out of the sky with what they know. Some of them rutted around harems before coming to my school, but it wasn't until they came here that they got an inkling of how challenging an art the service of love is. In India, my homeland, instruction begins at the tenderest age. For it's wisely said that life is short and learning deep. Do you have any idea, poor thing, what a man is? Do you know why that black abomination that brought you to our gardens yesterday isn't a real man? Speak!"

Halima's whole body was shaking. In desperation, her eyes sought out help from those nearby, but the other girls were all staring at the floor.

“I think your tongue has gotten caught in your throat, you hayseed,” the old woman drove at her. “All right, I’ll explain it to you.”

With a kind of wicked pleasure she began to explain the subject of men and women.

Halima was mortified and didn’t know where to look.

“Do you understand now, little one?” she asked her at last.

Halima timidly nodded, even though she hadn’t heard half of it and the half she had was still unclear.

“Almighty Allah himself has commanded me to beat this exalted wisdom into the heads of these silly geese,” she exclaimed. “Can these crickets even imagine how much skill, how much innate instinct is required if you want to fully satisfy your master and lover? Practice, practice, and more practice! Only that will bring you to your goal. Thankfully, providence has robbed you of the opportunity to shame the high art of love with your coltish lust. A man is like a sensitive harp on which a woman must play hundreds and hundreds of different melodies. If she’s clumsy and stupid, then oh, what pitiful sounds will come from it. But if she’s gifted and has learned something, then with her deft hands she’ll be able to produce harmonies on the instrument that have never been heard before. Uncultured monkeys! Your desire should be to make the instrument given to you produce more sounds than anyone ever thought were in it. And may the good spirits never punish me by making me hear some talentless strumming, squeaking and squealing.”

She proceeded to explain in detail what she referred to as her high art and learning, and Halima’s neck, ears and face flushed red with shame. Yet she couldn’t help but listen. A spine-tingling curiosity coursed through her. If it were only she and Sara, or if only it weren’t for Miriam, who was her greatest source of embarrassment, then she might have even found Apama’s descriptions entertaining. As it was, she kept her eyes cast down, for some strange reason feeling guilty and complicit.

Finally Apama finished. She left the classroom with great dignity and without saying or bowing goodbye. The girls rushed outside and went walking through the gardens in groups. Sara clung to Halima, who didn’t dare to approach Miriam.

But Miriam called her of her own accord. She put an arm around Halima’s waist and drew her down a path alongside her. Sara followed them like a shadow.

“Are you starting to get used to our way of life?” Miriam asked.

“Everything seems strange and new to me,” Halima replied.

“I hope it’s not unpleasant.”

“No, not at all. I really like it. There are just so many things I don’t understand.”

“Be patient, dear. That will come with time.”

Halima leaned her head against Miriam’s shoulder and caught a glimpse of Sara, and she had to smile. Sara’s face had a look of tormented jealousy.

People like me, she thought, and her heart leapt.

The path led through some bushy plantings to the edge of the thunderous torrent that dashed through the rocks far below. Halima observed that the gardens must have been built on top of a cliff.

On one of the riverside rocks lizards were sunning themselves. Their backs shone like emeralds.

“Look how pretty they are,” Miriam said.

“Ugh, I can’t stand them. They’re vicious.”

“Why?”

“They attack girls.”

Miriam and Sara both smiled.

“Who ever gave you that idea, child?”

Halima was afraid that she’d blurted out some inanity again, so she answered carefully.

“My former master told me, ‘Watch out for boys! If they jump over the wall and break into the garden, run away from them, because they keep a lizard or a snake under their shirts and they’d let it loose to bite you.’ ”

Miriam and Sara burst out laughing. Sara devoured Halima with her eyes, while Miriam, biting her lip, said, “Well, there aren’t any mean boys here, and even our lizards are completely gentle and tame. They haven’t done anything nasty to anyone yet.”

Then she began whistling. The lizards turned their heads in all directions, as if looking for the person who was calling them.

Halima huddled between Miriam and Sara, where she felt safer, and said, “You’re right. They’re pretty.”

A little pointed head poked out of a crack in a rock and darted its forked tongue out. Halima froze in terror. Its head rose higher and higher and its neck grew longer and longer. Then there was no doubt: a

big, yellowish snake, undoubtedly attracted by Miriam's whistle, had crawled out of the crevice.

The lizards darted to all sides. Halima screamed. She tried to pull Miriam and Sara away, but they held firm.

"Don't worry, Halima," Miriam said, to calm her. "This is our good friend. We call her Peri, and when we whistle she crawls out of her little hole. She's so well behaved that none of us can complain about her. In general we're friends in these gardens, people and animals alike. We're cut off from the rest of the world and take pleasure in each other."

Halima relaxed, but she wanted to get away from there.

"Let's go, please," she pleaded.

They laughed, but complied.

"Don't be so afraid," Miriam scolded her. "It should be obvious that we all like you."

"Do you have other animals?"

"Lots of them. In one of the gardens we have a whole menagerie. But it takes a boat to get there, so sometime when you're free you can ask Adi or Mustafa to take you."

"I'd like that. Is this place we live in very big?"

"So big that you could die of hunger if you got lost in it."

"My goodness! I'm not going anywhere alone again."

"It's not that bad. The garden we live in is actually on an island surrounded by the river on one side and moats on the other three. It's not that big, so if you leave it but don't cross any water, you can't get lost. But over there, at the bottom of that rocky cliff face, is a forest with wild leopards."

"Where did you get Ahriman from that he's so gentle and tame?"

"From that forest. Not that long ago he was still just like a little kitten. We fed him with goat's milk, and even now we still don't feed him meat, so that he doesn't go wild. Mustafa brought him for us."

"I don't know Mustafa."

"He's a good person, like all our eunuchs. He used to be a torchbearer for a famous prince. It was very tough work, so he ran away. He and Moad are the garden keepers. But it's already time to go back to the classroom. Fatima and Zuleika are going to train us in music and singing."

"Oh, I like that!"

The singing and music lesson was a pleasant diversion for the girls. Miriam gave them complete freedom. Changing places frequently, they would play Tartar flutes, strum on the harp and the lute, light into the Egyptian guitar, compose and sing humorous songs, critique each other and argue, while Fatima and Zuleika tried in vain to command their attention. They laughed, told stories, and enjoyed the chance to let go.

Sara once again clung to Halima.

“You’re in love with Miriam. I saw it.”

Halima shrugged.

“You can’t hide it from me. I can see into your heart.”

“So, and what of it?”

Tears welled up in Sara’s eyes.

“You said you were going to like me.”

“I didn’t promise you anything.”

“You’re lying! It’s why I’ve trusted you so much.”

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

It had gotten quiet, and both Sara and Halima turned and listened. Fatima had picked up a guitar to provide her own accompaniment as she began to sing. Beautiful, old songs full of yearning.

Halima was entranced.

“You have to write the words down for me,” she said to Sara.

“I will, if you’ll like me.”

She tried to press close, but Halima pushed her away.

“Don’t bother me now. I have to hear this.”

After the lesson they stayed in the classroom. Each one took up her own work. Some sewed or wove, or headed over to a huge, half-finished rug and resumed work on it. Others dragged several beautifully carved spinning wheels into the hall, sat down at them, and started spinning. They chatted about ordinary things, about their former lives, about men and about love. Miriam oversaw them, walking through their midst with her hands behind her back.

Halima thought about her. She didn’t yet have any work of her own. She listened to one conversation, then another, until finally her thoughts focused on Miriam. If she and Sayyiduna were “close,” what was it that took place between them? When she was in the harem, did she also do the things that Apama had described? She couldn’t believe that. She tried to shake off such ugly thoughts and convince herself that it

couldn't be true.

They had supper right before sunset, then they went for a walk. Suddenly darkness settled on the gardens and the first stars came out above them.

Halima walked down a path hand in hand with Sara and Zainab, conversing with them in half-whispers. The sound of the rapids grew steadily closer as the alien and eerie landscape stretched boundlessly before them. Halima felt a twinge of emotion, bitter and sweet at the same time, as though she were a tiny creature who had gotten lost in a strange, magical world. Everything struck her as mysterious, almost too much so for her to grasp.

A light flickered through the thickets. The small flame started moving, and Halima timidly clung to her companions. The flame got closer and closer, until at last a man carrying a burning torch stepped before her.

"That's Mustafa," Sara said, "the garden keeper."

Mustafa was a big, round-faced Moor dressed in a colorful cloak reaching almost to his feet and tied at the waist with a thick cord. When he saw the girls, he gave a good-natured grin.

"So this is the new little bird that the wind blew in yesterday," he said amiably, looking at Halima. "What a tiny, fragile creature."

A dark shadow danced around the flickering torch. A huge moth had started circling around the fire. They all watched as it nearly grazed the flame, then darted in a broad upward arc and vanished in the darkness. But then it would come back, and each time its dance became wilder. Its circuits around the flame grew narrower and narrower, until finally the fire caught its wings. They crackled, and, like a shooting star, the moth hit the ground.

"Poor thing," Halima exclaimed. "But why was it so stupid?"

"Allah gave it a passion to attack fire," Mustafa said. "Good night."

"That's strange," Halima mused, half to herself.

They returned and went to their bedchambers, undressed, and lay on their beds. Halima's head spun from the day's events. That ridiculous Adi with his rhyming sentences, the agile dance master Asad, tarted-up Apama with her shameless learning, mysterious Miriam, the girls, and the eunuchs. And here she was in the midst of all this, Halima, who for as long as she could remember had dreamt of far-off lands and longed for miraculous adventures.

“It’s fine,” she told herself and tried to go to sleep.

Just then someone touched her lightly. Before she had a chance to scream, she heard Sara’s voice speaking right into her ear.

“Stay completely quiet, Halima, so that Zainab doesn’t wake up.”

She climbed under the blanket and snuggled up against her.

“I told you I don’t want this,” Halima said just as quietly. But Sara showered her with kisses and she felt powerless.

Finally she managed to break free. Sara started to coax her and whisper lovesick words in her ear. Halima turned her back, stuck her fingers in her ears, and fell asleep instantly.

Sara was unsure what was happening with her. Feeling disoriented, she returned to her bed and climbed in.

CHAPTER TWO

At about the same time that Halima arrived by such curious circumstances in the strange, new gardens, a young man on a small, black donkey was also riding along the broad military trail toward the same destination, only from the opposite direction, from the west. It couldn't have been long since he'd removed his childhood amulets and wrapped a man's turban around his head. A downy first growth of beard barely showed on his chin, and his clear, lively eyes had an almost childish look to them. He came from the town of Sava, more or less halfway between Hamadan and the old capital, Rai. Years before, in Sava, his grandfather Tahir had established a circle of the Ismaili brotherhood whose ostensible purpose was to proclaim a renewed veneration of the martyr Ali, but which was in fact dedicated to the subversion of Seljuk rule. At one point the society also inducted a former muezzin from Isfahan as a member. Soon afterwards the authorities raided a secret meeting of the group and imprisoned some of its members. Suspicions centered on the muezzin as a likely informer. He was tracked down and the group's conjecture was proven correct. They secretly condemned him to death and carried out the sentence. Subsequently, the authorities seized the brotherhood's leader, Tahir, and, at the command of the grand vizier Nizam al-Mulk, ordered him beheaded. The brotherhood disbanded in panic, and at that point it appeared that the Ismailis had been banished from Sava forever.

When Tahir's grandson reached the age of twenty, his father told him the entire story. He bade him saddle his donkey and get ready for a journey. He took him to the top of a local tower and pointed out the conical peak of Demavend as it shone snow-covered above the clouds in the infinite distance.

He said, "Avani, my son, grandson of Tahir. Go straight along the road that leads toward the peak of Demavend. When you reach the town of

Rai, ask for directions to Shah Rud, the King's River. Follow it upstream until you reach its source, which is nestled at the foot of several steep slopes. There you'll see a fortified castle called Alamut, the Eagle's Nest. That is where an old friend of Tahir, your grandfather and my father, has gathered all who profess the Ismaili teachings. Tell him who you are and offer yourself in service. This way you will be given the chance to avenge your grandfather's death. My blessing be with you."

The grandson of Tahir put on a crescent saber, bowed respectfully to his father, and mounted the donkey. His ride to Rai was uneventful. At a caravanserai he asked after the easiest route to Shah Rud.

The innkeeper said, "What on earth takes you to Shah Rud? If you didn't have such an innocent face, I'd suspect you wanted to join the chief of the mountain, who gathers all those infidel dogs around him."

"I don't know what you mean," the grandson of Tahir dissembled. "I come from Sava to meet a caravan that my father dispatched to Bukhara, but which seems to have been held up on the way back."

"When you leave town, keep Demavend to your right. You'll come to a well-worn road which is used by caravans coming from the east. Stay on that and it will lead you to the river."

The grandson of Tahir thanked him and remounted his donkey. After two days of riding, he heard the roar of water in the distance. He turned off the path and rode straight toward the river, alongside which a footpath led alternately through sandy open spaces and thick stands of shrubs. The incline of the river grew steadily steeper and the water more thunderous.

When he had thus half-ridden and half-walked his way through a good part of the day, a detachment of horsemen suddenly surrounded him. The attack came so unexpectedly that the grandson of Tahir forgot to draw his saber. When he remembered and reached for its handle, it was of no use to him. Seven sharp spear points were aimed at him. *It's shameful to be afraid*, he thought, but what could he do against such superior power?

The commander of the horsemen addressed him. "What are you prying around in these parts for, greenhorn? Maybe you've come trout fishing? Be careful your hook doesn't get caught in your own throat!"

The grandson of Tahir was at a total loss. If these were the sultan's horsemen and he told the truth, he'd be finished. If they were Ismailis

and he kept silent, they'd take him for a spy. He let go of his sword handle and desperately searched the soldiers' mute faces for an answer.

The commander winked at his men.

"It looks to me like you're searching for something you haven't lost, my underaged Pahlavan," he said, and then grabbed something from between his saddle and stirrup. A white flag, the symbol of the followers of Ali, fluttered on the short stick which he held in his hand.

What if it's a trap? Avani thought. "No matter, I'll risk it," he declared to himself. He jumped off the donkey and reached his hand toward the flag, which the commander had thrust in his direction, and he reverently pressed it to his forehead.

"There you go!" the commander called out. "You're looking for the castle of Alamut. Come with us, then."

He drove his horse forward up the path alongside Shah Rud. The grandson of Tahir remounted his donkey and followed him. The soldiers poured after them.

They drew closer and closer to the mountain range, and the roar of Shah Rud grew worse and worse, until they reached a rocky cliff at the summit of which was a watchtower bearing the white flag. At the foot of this cliff the riverbed veered into a steep canyon.

The commander of the detachment held back his horse and ordered the others to come to a halt too. He waved a flag toward the tower and received a reply that the way was clear.

They rode into the canyon, which was chilly and dark. The path here was narrow but well constructed. In places it had been hewn into the living rock. The river roared far beneath them. At a bend in the path the commander stopped and raised his arm to point ahead of them.

Not far off, the grandson of Tahir saw two high towers which shone white over the dark mountains like a vision from a dream. The way the sun shone on them, they glimmered in its rays.

"That is Alamut," the leader said and pressed onward.

Steep mountainsides concealed the two towers once again. The path continued to wind alongside the river until the canyon suddenly opened up. The grandson of Tahir gazed in astonishment. He saw before him a mighty cliff with a fortification whose foundations had been hewn out of the cliff itself. Shah Rud forked into two branches which embraced the cliff as though holding it in a cleft stick. The fortress was an entire small

settlement which gradually rose in height from front to back. Its four corners were marked by four towers, the rearmost of which were much higher than the foremost. The fortress and river together were slung between two steep, impassable slopes and formed a formidable barrier blocking the exit from the canyon.

This was Alamut, the most powerful fortress of the fifty or so that existed in the Rudbar district. It had been built by the kings of Daylam, and it was said to be impregnable.

The commander of the detachment gave a sign, and from the wall opposite a heavy bridge was lowered on iron chains to span the river. The riders rumbled across it, through an imposing arched gateway and into the fort.

They entered a spacious courtyard which rose gradually over three terraces, linked at the center by stone stairways. Alongside the walls to the right and left grew tall poplars and plane trees, beneath which there were real pastures with herds of horses, donkeys and mules grazing on them. In a separate fold there were several dozen camels, peacefully ruminating. To the sides there were barns and barracks, harems and other buildings.

A hustle and bustle reminiscent of a beehive greeted the grandson of Tahir. He looked around in astonishment. Several military units were exercising on the central terrace. He heard the sharp commands, the clanking of shields and lances, the rattle of sabers. In the midst of it a horse would neigh or a donkey bray.

Other men were reinforcing the walls. Donkeys were hauling heavy rocks which the workers then lifted into place with pulleys. Shouts boomed out from all directions, drowning out the sound of the rapids completely.

They dismounted, and the commander asked a soldier walking by, "Is Captain Manuchehr in the guardhouse?"

The soldier came to an abrupt halt and replied, "Yes, he is, Sergeant Abuna."

The commander signaled to the young man to follow him. They turned toward one of the two lower towers. From somewhere came the sound of short, sudden blows accompanied by groans of pain. The grandson of Tahir turned in the direction of the groans. A man, his back bared down to the waist, stood tied to a stone pillar. A huge Moor dressed in short

striped trousers and a red fez stood lashing the man's bare skin with a whip woven together from short straps. With each blow his skin broke in a new place and blood dripped from the wounds. A soldier stood by with a bucket of water in hand and every now and then doused the victim.

Seeing the horror in the eyes of Tahir's grandson, Sergeant Abuna laughed scornfully.

"We don't sleep in featherbeds here, and we don't anoint ourselves with amber," he said. "If that's what you were expecting, you were seriously mistaken."

The grandson of Tahir walked silently alongside him. As much as he would have liked to know what the poor man had done to be punished so harshly, a strange anxiety had stolen his courage to ask.

They passed into the tower entrance. Beneath its vaults the grandson of Tahir realized just how mighty the fortress walls were. Whole strata of rock lay one on top of the other. A dark, damp stairway led them upstairs. They passed through a long corridor and from there into a spacious room whose floor was covered with a simple carpet. Several pillows were strewn about in the corner, and on them half sat and half lay a man of about fifty. He was well fed and had a short, curled beard shot here and there with filaments of silver. He wore a large white turban, and his coat was embroidered in silver and gold. Sergeant Abuna bowed and waited for the man on the pillows to speak.

"What's this you bring me, Abuna?"

"We caught this boy on reconnaissance, Captain Manuchehr. He says he was coming to Alamut."

At these words the captain slowly rose, and the grandson of Tahir saw rising up before him a man as big as a mountain. He planted his fists at his sides, fixed his gaze on the boy, and shouted in a booming voice, "Who are you, wretch?"

The grandson of Tahir flinched, but he quickly recalled his father's words and remembered that he had come to the castle of his own free will to offer himself in service. Regaining his composure, he replied calmly, "My name is Avani and I'm the grandson of Tahir of Sava, whom the grand vizier ordered beheaded many years ago."

The captain looked at him half in surprise and half in disbelief.

"Are you telling the truth?"

"Why should I lie, sir?"

“If this is so, then know that your grandfather’s name is written in gold letters in the hearts of all Ismailis. Our Master will be pleased to count you among his warriors. That is why you’ve come to the castle?”

“Yes, to serve the supreme commander of the Ismailis and to avenge my grandfather.”

“Good. What have you learned?”

“Reading and writing, sir. Also grammar and verse making. I know almost half the Koran by heart.”

The captain smiled.

“Not bad. How about the military arts?”

The grandson of Tahir felt at a loss.

“I can ride horseback, shoot with a bow, and I can manage with a sword and spear.”

“Do you have a wife?”

The young man blushed deeply.

“No, sir.”

“Have you indulged in debauchery?”

“No, sir.”

“Good.”

Captain Manuchehr turned to the sergeant.

“Abuna! Take ibn Tahir to dai Abu Soraka. Tell him that I’ve sent him. Unless I’m completely mistaken, he’ll be glad to have him.”

They both bowed and left the captain’s chamber, and shortly they were back in the courtyard. The pillar to which the man being flogged had been bound was now free. Only a few drops of blood testified to what had happened there. Ibn Tahir still felt a faint shudder, but now he was filled with a sense of his own safety, since clearly it meant something to be the grandson of the martyr Tahir.

They turned up the steps leading to the center terrace. To their right was a low building, perhaps a barrack. The sergeant stopped in front of it and glanced around, as if looking for someone.

A dark-skinned youth in a white cloak, white trousers and white fez came hurrying past. The sergeant stopped him and said politely, “The captain has sent me with this young fellow to his worship dai Abu Soraka.”

“Come with me,” the dark-skinned youth grinned broadly. “His worship the dai is just now teaching us poetry. We’re on the roof.” And,

turning to ibn Tahir, he said, "Are you here to become a feday? There are quite a few surprises in store for you. I'm novice Obeida."

Ibn Tahir followed him and the sergeant without having quite understood.

They came out onto the rooftop, the floor of which was covered with coarsely woven rugs. Some twenty youths, each of them dressed in white just like Obeida, sat on the rugs, knees and feet to the floor. At their knees they each held a tablet on which they wrote down whatever was dictated by an old man in a white cloak sitting in front of them with a book in hand.

The teacher rose when he saw the newcomers. His face knitted into ill-tempered wrinkles, he asked the sergeant, "What do you want from us at this hour? Can't you see a lesson is underway?"

The sergeant coughed nervously while novice Obeida imperceptibly blended in among his companions, who were curiously inspecting the stranger.

Abuna said, "Forgive me for bothering you during instruction, reverend dai. The captain has sent me with this young man, whom he wants you to have."

The old missionary and teacher studied ibn Tahir from head to toe.

"Who are you and what do you want, boy?"

Ibn Tahir bowed respectfully.

"My name is Avani and I'm the grandson of Tahir, whom the grand vizier had beheaded in Sava. My father has sent me to Alamut to serve the Ismaili cause and to avenge the death of my grandfather."

The old man's face brightened. He ran to ibn Tahir with outstretched arms and heartily embraced him.

"Happy eyes that see you in this castle, grandson of Tahir! Your grandfather was a good friend of mine and of Our Master. Abuna, go and thank the captain for me. And you, young men, take a good look at your new companion. When I tell you the history and struggles of the Ismailis I won't be able to bypass the famous grandfather of this young man, the Ismaili Tahir, who became the first martyr for our cause in Iran."

The sergeant winked at ibn Tahir, as if to say job well done, and then vanished through the opening that led downstairs. Dai Abu Soraka squeezed the young man's hand, asked him about his father and how things were at home, and promised to announce his arrival to the

supreme commander. Finally he ordered one of the novices sitting on the floor. "Suleiman, take ibn Tahir to the bedroom and show him the place of that good-for-nothing who got banished to the foot soldiers. Make sure he washes the dust off himself and changes his clothes so that he's ready for evening prayers."

Suleiman jumped to his feet, bowed to the old man, and said, "I'll make sure, reverend dai."

He invited ibn Tahir to follow him, and the two of them descended to the lower level. Halfway down a narrow hallway Suleiman lifted the curtain covering a doorway and let ibn Tahir through.

They entered a spacious bedroom. Along one wall there were about twenty lowlying beds. They consisted of big linen ticks stuffed with dried grass and covered with horsehair blankets. Each had a horse saddle for a pillow. Above them was a series of wooden shelves affixed to the wall. These held a variety of essentials arranged in strict order: earthen dishes, prayer rugs, and washing and cleaning implements. At the foot of each bed stood a wooden framework which supported a bow, a quiver with arrows, and a lance and spear. Jutting out from the wall opposite were three bronze candelabras with many branches, a wax candle stuck in each of them. In the corner stood a pedestal supporting a jug of oil. Twenty heavy, curved sabers hung on pegs beneath the candles. Beside them were as many round woven shields with bosses made of bronze. The room had ten small, grated windows. Everything in it was clean and kept in perfect order.

"This one is vacant," Suleiman said, pointing to one of the beds. "Its former occupant had to join the infantry a few days ago. Here's where I sleep, next to you, and Yusuf of Damagan sleeps on the other side. He's the biggest and strongest novice in our group."

"You say my predecessor had to join the infantry?" ibn Tahir asked.

"Right. He wasn't worthy of becoming a feday."

Suleiman took a neatly folded white cloak, white trousers and a white fez off a shelf.

"Come to the washroom," he said to ibn Tahir.

They proceeded to the next room, which had a stone tub with running water. Ibn Tahir bathed quickly. Suleiman handed him the clothes and ibn Tahir slipped into them.

They returned to the bedroom, and ibn Tahir said, "My father has sent

his greetings to the supreme commander. When do you think I'll be able to see him?"

Suleiman laughed.

"You might as well forget that idea, friend. I've been here for a full year and I still don't know what he looks like. None of us novices has ever seen him."

"Then he's not in the castle?"

"Oh, he's here. But he never leaves his tower. You'll hear more about him over time. Things that will make your jaw drop. You said you're from Sava. I'm from Qazvin."

While he spoke ibn Tahir had a chance to study him closely. He could scarcely imagine a more handsome youth. He was as slim as a cypress, with a sharply angular but attractive face. His cheeks were ruddy from sun and wind and a healthy blush permeated his dark skin. His velvety brown eyes gazed out at the world with the pride of an eagle. A light down of a beard showed on his upper lip and around his chin. His entire expression projected courage and daring. When he smiled he showed a row of strong white teeth. His smile was sincere, with just a shade of scorn, yet not at all offensive. *Like some Pahlavan from the Book of Kings*, ibn Tahir thought.

"I've noticed that you all have sharp, hard faces, as though you were thirty. But judging by your beards you can't be more than twenty."

Suleiman laughed and replied, "Just wait a fortnight and you won't look any different from us. We don't spend our time picking flowers or chasing butterflies."

"I'd like to ask you something," ibn Tahir resumed. "A while ago down below I saw them whipping a man who was tied to a pillar. I'd like to know what he did to deserve that punishment."

"He committed a grievous crime, my friend. He'd been assigned to accompany a caravan traveling to Turkestan. The drivers weren't Ismailis and drank wine on the journey. They offered him some and he accepted it, even though Sayyiduna has strictly forbidden it."

"Sayyiduna forbids it?" ibn Tahir asked in amazement. "That injunction holds for all believers and comes straight from the Prophet!"

"You wouldn't understand yet. Sayyiduna can forbid or permit whatever he wants. We Ismailis are bound to obey only him."

Ibn Tahir was incredulous, and he began to feel vaguely anxious. He

probed further.

“Earlier you said that my predecessor got sent to the infantry. What did he do wrong?”

“He talked about women, and very indecently.”

“Is that forbidden?”

“Absolutely. We’re an elite corps, and when we’re inducted we’ll serve only Sayyiduna.”

“What are we being inducted into?”

“I already told you—the fedayeen. Once we finish school and pass all the tests, that’s the level we’ll be at.”

“What are fedayeen?”

“A feday is an Ismaili who’s ready to sacrifice himself without hesitation at the order of the supreme commander. If he dies in the process, he becomes a martyr. If he completes the assignment and lives, he’s promoted to dai and even higher.”

“All of this is completely new to me. Do you think the test will be very hard?”

“No question about it. Otherwise why would we be preparing for it from dawn to dusk every day? Six have already failed under the load. One of them dropped dead on the spot. The other five asked to be demoted to the infantry.”

“Why didn’t they just leave Alamut instead of letting themselves be humiliated like that?”

“Listen, Alamut is not to be trifled with, my friend. Once you’re in the castle you don’t just walk back out alive as you please. There are too many secrets around here.”

The novices came storming into the room. On the way they had washed in the washroom and gotten themselves ready for evening prayers. A giant almost a head taller than ibn Tahir collapsed on the bed next to his.

“I’m Yusuf of Damagan. I’m not a bad person, but I don’t advise anyone to provoke or make fun of me, or you’ll get to know my other side.”

He stretched his powerful limbs as if to underscore what he’d said.

Ibn Tahir smiled.

“I’ve heard you’re the biggest and strongest in the group.”

The giant sat up instantly.

“Who told you that?”

“Suleiman.”

Disappointed, Yusuf stretched back out on his bed.

The youths were ribbing each other. Obeida walked over to ibn Tahir and opened his Moorish lips.

“How do you like it here so far, ibn Tahir? Of course, it’s hard to say when you’ve just arrived. But once you’ve been in the castle for four months like me, everything you’ve brought with you from outside will evaporate.”

“Did you hear what that black ass said?” Suleiman sneered. “He’s hardly dipped his beak in Alamut’s honey and he’s already giving lessons to others.”

“Maybe I should give you some, you stupid blockhead,” Obeida responded, enraged.

“Easy, brothers,” Yusuf growled from his bed. “Don’t set a bad example for the new guy.”

A broad-shouldered, bowlegged youth with an earnest face approached ibn Tahir.

“I’m Jafar of Rai,” he introduced himself. “I’ve been in the castle for a year, and if you need any help with lessons, just let me know.”

Ibn Tahir thanked him. One after the other the novices approached him to introduce themselves. Afan, Abdur Ahman, Omar, Abdallah, ibn Vakas, Halfa, Sohail, Ozaid, Mahmud, Arslan ... Finally the littlest one of them stood in front of him.

“I’m Naim, from near Demavend,” he said.

The others all laughed.

“No doubt one of the demons that live inside the mountain,” Suleiman teased him.

Naim looked at him angrily.

“We go to school a lot,” he continued, “and there’s a lot we have to learn. Do you know our teachers? The one who agreed to accept you is the reverend dai Abu Soraka. He’s a famous missionary who’s traveled through all the lands of Islam, teaching. Sayyiduna appointed him as our superior. He teaches us the history of the Prophet and of the holy martyrs who’ve fallen for the Ismaili cause. Also grammar and poetry in

our native Pahlavi.”

“Did you hear that chatterbox? The littlest one in the bunch, and he’s the biggest talker.”

Suleiman laughed and the others joined him. Then he continued.

“Soon you’ll get to know your teachers first-hand, ibn Tahir. Just remember that dai Ibrahim, who teaches us dogma, algebra, Arabic grammar and philosophy, is a good friend of Sayyiduna. You’re going to have to know everything by heart for him, and you don’t want to get on his bad side. Then there’s the Greek al-Hakim. He’ll tolerate anything you blurt out, just as long as you say something. Captain Manuchehr doesn’t put up with back talk. Everything you do for him has to be done right now. The quicker you are in carrying out his commands, the more he’ll like and respect you. Dai Abdul Malik is young, but Sayyiduna puts a lot of trust in him. He’s strong and hardened, able to endure tremendous exertion and pain, and he has no patience for anyone who doesn’t know how to grit his teeth. He teaches us strength of will. His class is the most important one after dogma ...”

“Hey, don’t scare our little dove here,” Yusuf interrupted, “or he might turn tail and run. Look, he’s white as a sheet.”

Ibn Tahir blushed.

“I’m hungry,” he said. “I haven’t had a thing to eat all day.”

Suleiman gave an amused laugh.

“You’re going to learn a whole new way of fasting here, friend. Just wait until you get to know dai Abdul Malik.”

They heard the drawn-out blast of a horn.

“Time for prayers!” Yusuf called out. Each of them grabbed a rolled-up rug from his shelf and hurried up to the roof. Ibn Tahir also reached for the rug that lay rolled up above his bed and followed the others.

Dai Abu Soraka was waiting for them on the rooftop. When he saw that they were all assembled and had spread their rugs out beneath them, he turned to face west, toward the holy cities, and began the sacred ceremony. Reciting the prayers aloud, he cast himself down on his face, reached his arms out, and then sat back up again, as the laws of the faithful command. When he finished, he rose back to his full height, reached his arms out toward heaven, then fell to his knees again, bending forward and touching his forehead to the ground. He prayed as follows:

“Come, al-Mahdi, anointed and awaited one. Deliver us from pretenders and save us from the infidel. O, Ali and Ismail, holy martyrs, intercede for us!”

The novices copied his gestures and repeated the words after him. Then, suddenly, it had grown dark. The steady, sustained voices of other worshippers reached them from the neighboring roofs. Ibn Tahir felt a strange, anxious thrill. It was as if everything he was experiencing at this moment wasn't real, but rather the product of some wonderfully vivid dream he was having. And then there was the open appeal to Ali and Ismail, something the faithful outside of Alamut could only do behind securely barred doors. He was puzzled and confused.

They rose, returned to their sleeping quarters and stowed the rugs back on their shelves. Then they went to supper.

The dining room was a vast hall in a wing opposite the building's sleeping quarters. Each novice had his own place by the wall. Small stools made of woven willow branches were set out on the floor, and they either sat down on these or crouched beside them. Three among the novices were picked out in sequence and acted as servers. They brought each of their companions a large piece of bread baked either from grain or from dried figs or apple slices. One of them poured milk from large earthen jugs. The novices were served fish several times a week, and roast ox, lamb or mutton once a week. Abu Soraka supervised and ate with them. They had their supper in silence, intent only on the meal.

After supper they broke up into smaller groups. Some of them went out onto the rooftop, while others dispersed among the fortress ramparts.

Yusuf and Suleiman took ibn Tahir along to show him the fortress.

The bustle of activity had subsided. The castle stood enveloped in silence, and now ibn Tahir could distinctly hear the roar of Shah Rud, which evoked a strange longing in him. Darkness surrounded them, while in the sky tiny stars shone with a piercing gleam.

A man with a burning torch in hand walked across the courtyard. Torchbearing guards appeared in front of the buildings on the upper terrace and took up positions at the entrances. There was a long row of them, and they stood motionless. A light breeze floated in from the

mountains, bringing an icy chill with it. As the torch flames flickered, the shadows of the buildings, trees and men danced mysteriously over the ground. All around them the fortress walls were illuminated, but with a strange light. The buildings, towers and battlements appeared completely different in it than they did by day. It all seemed like a fantastic vision, enormous and alien.

They had walked alongside most of the wall that surrounded the lower and middle terraces.

“Don’t we want to go up there too?” ibn Tahir asked, pointing toward the buildings rising behind the torchbearers.

“No one but the commanders can go up there,” Suleiman explained. “The men who guard Sayyiduna are giant Moors, eunuchs, whom the supreme commander received as a gift from the Egyptian caliph.”

“Is Sayyiduna in his service?”

“We don’t know for sure,” Suleiman replied. “It could also be the other way around.”

“What do you mean?” ibn Tahir asked, baffled. “Didn’t Sayyiduna take Alamut in the caliph’s name?”

“That’s a story in its own right,” Yusuf offered. “You hear one thing and another. I’d advise you not to ask about things like that too much.”

“I thought the caliph of Cairo was the supreme head of all Shia, including the Ismailis.”

“Sayyiduna alone is our commander and we obey no other,” both Yusuf and Suleiman intoned at the same time.

They sat down on a rampart.

“Why doesn’t the supreme commander show himself to the faithful?” ibn Tahir asked.

“He’s a holy man,” Yusuf said. “He studies the Koran all day, he prays, he writes instructions and commandments for us.”

“It’s none of our business why he doesn’t show himself to us,” Suleiman asserted. “That’s just how it is and nobody but him needs to know why it has to be that way.”

“I imagined all this very differently,” ibn Tahir admitted. “Out there people think that the Ismaili leader is gathering an army at Alamut, and that he’s going to use it to strike at the sultan and the false caliph.”

“That’s irrelevant,” Suleiman replied. “The main thing that Sayyiduna demands from us is obedience and a holy passion for the Ismaili cause.”

“Do you think I’m going to be able to catch up with you, since you’ve already made so much progress?” ibn Tahir worried.

“Do everything your superiors tell you, and do it without hesitation, and you’ll achieve what you need to,” Suleiman said. “Don’t think that obedience is an easy thing. The evil spirit of rebellion will begin speaking to you, your body will refuse to follow your will’s dictates, and your reason will whisper a thousand reservations about the orders you get from your commanders. You need to be aware that all of that resistance is just the cunning design of demons intent on turning you away from the true path. Be brave and overcome all resistance in yourself, and you’ll become a powerful sword in the hand of Our Master.”

There was a sudden burst from the horn.

“Time to sleep,” Yusuf said, getting up.

They returned to their area and headed for their sleeping quarters.

Several wax candles were alight in the room. Some of the youths were undressing, while others had already climbed into bed.

Presently Abu Soraka entered the room. He checked to see if they were all present and everything was in order. Then he set a short ladder up against the wall and put the candles out.

On a stand in a corner a small flame glimmered in an oil dish. The dai went toward it to light his own short taper. Then he stepped quietly to the exit and lifted the curtain carefully so that the flame wouldn’t ignite it. He slipped through the opening, and his footsteps faded down the hallway.

An early morning reveille roused the youths from their sleep. They washed, performed morning prayers, and had breakfast. Then they took their saddles and weapons and hurried outdoors.

In an instant the entire fortress had risen to its feet. The novices went to the horse stable and arranged themselves in two rows alongside their animals, with a sergeant standing at the head of each row. Captain Manuchehr rode in, inspected the unit, and ordered them to mount. Then he had the bridge raised, and, one after the other, they thundered across it and out into the canyon.

They rode past a watchtower and out onto a vast plateau. For the

newcomer's benefit the captain explained the basic commands again. Then he divided the unit into two groups and ordered the groups to ride off in separate directions. First came turns in formation, and then charges, both Turkish and Arab. For the first time in his life, ibn Tahir experienced the sight of a massive assault, and his heart began to pound with pride. Then they dismounted and practiced brandishing swords, throwing snares and spears, and shooting with bow and arrows.

They returned to the castle in time for second prayers. Ibn Tahir was so exhausted he could barely stay upright in his saddle. When they dismounted and returned the horses to their stable, he asked Suleiman, "Do you have military exercises every day?"

Suleiman, who was as fresh and serene as if he'd just returned from a pleasant walk, laughed and replied, "This is just the beginning, friend. Wait until dai Abdul Malik gets hold of you. That's when it really starts to come at you fast and furious."

"I'm so hungry I can't see straight," ibn Tahir complained. "Can't you get me something to eat?"

"Be patient. We're allowed to eat three times a day, no more. If they caught you eating outside of set mealtimes, they'd lash you to the pillar, like you saw happen to that soldier who drank wine."

Back in their quarters they stowed their weapons, washed, fetched writing implements from the shelves, and went up onto the roof.

A tall, thin man in a winding cloak appeared before them. His cheeks were sunken and his eyes hollow. His gaze was gloomy, and his nose was thin and hooked like a hawk's beak. His sparse, graying beard reached almost to his chest. His thin, bony fingers clutched at a stack of papers like the claws of a bird of prey. This was dai Ibrahim, the old and venerable missionary and good friend of the supreme commander. To begin, he performed second prayers with the novices. He pronounced the words half-audibly in a dull mutter, but when he came to invoke the Mahdi, his voice boomed wild and hollow, as though he were beating a drum.

Then he began the lesson. He explained Arabic grammar, tediously citing its strict rules, which he illustrated with examples from the Koran. The pencils squeaked obediently across the writing tablets. At most, one of the students would dare now and then to draw an audible breath.

Ibn Tahir found the lesson relaxing. His command of grammar was

good, and it was a relief to know that this subject wasn't going to cause him trouble.

Dai Ibrahim bowed grimly when he had finished. With great dignity he lifted the hem of his roomy cloak in order not to trip on it, then he vanished through the steep passageway downstairs.

A whisper rose up among the novices. They waited a while longer so as not to run into dai Ibrahim, then they rushed out into the courtyard. There they assembled in two rows according to height.

Suleiman said to ibn Tahir, "Now you get to meet dai Abdul Malik. Here's my advice: grit your teeth and focus your will. One fellow dropped dead during these exercises once. Trust in Allah and in the wisdom of Our Master."

Yusuf stood at the head of the first row. Somewhere toward the middle was Suleiman, and at the end was ibn Tahir. At the head of the second row was Obeida, and Naim was at its far end.

A gaunt giant stepped before them with an impetuous stride. He had an angular face and a hard, piercing gaze. When he noticed ibn Tahir among the novices, he asked him, "What's your name, hero?"

"I'm Avani, grandson of Tahir of Sava."

"Good. I've already heard. I hope you prove worthy of your famous grandfather."

He stepped back several paces and called out, "Footwear off, then over the wall!"

In an instant the sandals dropped from their feet. The novices sprinted toward the ramparts and began scaling the wall. Their hands reached into crevices and apertures and held onto stony prominences.

At the sight of the steep wall ibn Tahir felt his courage fade. He didn't know how or where to start.

Above him he heard a voice whispering, "Give me your hand."

He looked up and saw Suleiman, who was holding onto an opening in the wall with one hand while offering the other.

Ibn Tahir took hold of it. With iron strength Suleiman pulled him up.

"There. Now follow me."

And he did. Suddenly he found himself atop the wall.

The others were already crawling down the other side into an abyss. At the foot of the wall Shah Rud was frothing. Ibn Tahir looked down into it and felt his head spin.

“I’m going to crash,” he said fearfully.

“Stay right behind me,” Suleiman whispered to him. His voice was firm and commanding.

He began his descent. Each time he found a firm foothold, he offered a hand and then a shoulder to ibn Tahir. They worked their way down the wall into the abyss, carefully and with clenched teeth. It seemed an eternity to ibn Tahir before they reached the rocks bounding the river.

Ibn Tahir caught his breath. He looked up horror-struck. The wall rose straight up before him. He couldn’t believe he had scaled it.

Abdul Malik appeared on top of the wall. He planted his feet far apart and called out, “Back to your places!”

They began climbing back up. Ibn Tahir kept close to Suleiman. He followed him foothold by foothold until finally, having traversed the wall’s inner face once again, he felt level ground beneath his feet.

The novices were catching their breath. Ibn Tahir tried to thank Suleiman but was abruptly shrugged off.

They put their sandals on and resumed their places in formation.

“Next time we’ll use a rope,” he whispered, “and that will have to go lightning fast.”

Abdul Malik smiled sarcastically and said, “What was wrong with you today that you didn’t finish first as usual, Suleiman? Feeling a bit lazy, perhaps? Or just a shade short of courage? Or maybe the newcomer seduced you with his example? The two of you were holding onto each other like ticks. Now show him you’re a hero. Step forward and hold your breath.”

Suleiman stepped in front of ibn Tahir and compressed his lips. He looked straight ahead, but with an indeterminate gaze, as if fixed on the far distance. Ibn Tahir grew fearful when he realized that Suleiman had stopped breathing. His face became more and more flushed and his eyes, dull and expressionless, began to widen strangely in their sockets. Ibn Tahir feared for him. He was, after all, at fault for this cruel punishment befalling his companion.

Abdul Malik stood face to face with Suleiman. He folded his arms on his chest and observed the young novice with expert attentiveness. Suleiman was beginning to suffocate, his neck swollen and his eyes horrifically bulging out of their sockets. Suddenly he staggered, as though standing on a ship’s deck, then dropped to the ground like felled

timber.

“Outstanding,” Abdul Malik approved.

Suleiman’s breaths could be heard again, and his eyes came back to life. Slowly he lifted himself off the ground and returned to his place.

“All right. Obeida! Let’s have you show us how much progress you’ve made with your willpower,” Abdul Malik ordered next.

Obeida’s dark face turned ashen gray. He looked around in desperation and hesitantly stepped forward.

He held his breath. His facial color turned bright brown, and he quickly began to show signs of suffocation.

Abdul Malik watched him coolly. Ibn Tahir thought he was quietly mocking him. Obeida staggered and gently fell to the ground.

Abu Malik grinned meanly. Secretly, the novices standing in formation also laughed. The dai prodded the youth with his foot and said with mock kindness, “Up now, get up, little dove. Did something bad happen to you?” Then he added severely, “What was it like?”

Obeida rose to his feet. He smiled, half timidly and half at a loss.

“I passed out, reverend dai.”

“How do the Ismailis punish a lie?”

Obeida flinched.

“I couldn’t take it anymore, reverend dai.”

“Fine. Take the whip and punish yourself.”

From the stack of equipment that the teacher had brought with him, Obeida took a short leather whip. He unfastened the buttons on his long coat at the chest and bared himself to the waist. He then tied the sleeves together to keep the clothes from slipping off his body. His brown shoulders were full and muscular. He swung the whip over his head and lashed at his back. There was a snap and a red stripe appeared etched in the dark skin. He yelped, then resumed flogging himself.

“What a delicate boy,” Abdul Malik sneered. “Lay into it, hero!”

Obeida began lashing his back from the sides. The blows became sharper and more frequent. Finally he passed into a state of frenzied self-laceration. The whip sliced into inflamed areas and his skin began to rip in places. Blood ran down his back and trickled onto his white trousers and cloak. He beat himself mercilessly, as though he were his own worst enemy.

Finally Abdul Malik raised a hand and called out, “Enough!”

Obeida let go of the whip and dropped to the ground moaning. Abdul Malik ordered Suleiman to take his companion to the washroom to clean and dress his wounds. Then, turning to the novices and looking at ibn Tahir, he spoke.

“I’ve often explained to you the meaning and purpose of our exercises. Today there’s a newcomer in your ranks, so it makes sense for me to do so once again. The spirit, mind and passion of man could fly like an eagle, if only a great obstacle hadn’t been put in their way. That obstacle is our body, with all its weaknesses. Show me a youth who doesn’t have high-flying aims! And yet only one in a thousand of them is ever realized. Why is that? Our body, which is inclined to sloth and cheap comfort, fears the difficulties that the realization of our lofty goals would pose. Its base passions cripple our will and our nobler desires. Overcoming those passions and freeing the spirit of their bonds is the purpose of our exercises. Strengthening the will and channeling it toward a definite and suitable goal. For that is the only way we become capable of great feats and efforts of self-sacrifice. Not, then, by becoming like those thousands who are imprisoned by their own body and its weaknesses, but by aspiring to the level of that *chosen one* among them who is the master of his body and its weaknesses. That is our goal! That is how we will be able to serve Our Master and carry out his commands.”

Ibn Tahir listened to him eagerly. Yes, this was what he had unconsciously always wanted: to overcome his weaknesses and serve a greater purpose. Nothing that he had just experienced seemed frightening to him anymore. It was with utter conviction that he now responded when Abdul Malik asked him if he had understood.

“I understand, reverend dai.”

“Step forward and hold your breath!”

Ibn Tahir obeyed without a second thought. He gazed ahead into the distance, as he had seen Suleiman do earlier, and he drew a deep breath. It seemed as though everything around and within him became suddenly quiet. His vision began to blur. He could feel his veins straining, and he wanted to breathe again, but he controlled himself. An odd buzzing started in his ears and his legs felt unusually weak. He regained consciousness for a brief moment, then surrendered to dimness, but with the last glimmer of a thought he still knew—*I have to, have to hold out!*—

until total darkness engulfed him. He swayed and pitched to the ground, exhaling as he fell.

“How was it?” Abdul Malik asked him, laughing.

Ibn Tahir rose to his feet.

“Fine, reverend dai.”

“This boy has potential,” he said. Then, turning to ibn Tahir, he added, “That was just an introduction to breathing exercises, a test to see how much command a person has over his body. The real lessons have yet to begin. We’ve already made substantial progress.”

Obeida and Suleiman rejoined the group.

Abdul Malik gave a new order. Some of the novices began quickly digging at a certain place in the ground. They dug out a ditch that must have been made ready beforehand and then filled in with lightly packed sand. It was rectangular and not particularly deep. In the meantime, some of the others had retrieved a pan filled with glowing coals from a nearby building and dumped them into the pit. They fanned the coals, then Abdul Malik spoke.

“With sustained practice, mastery of the body and force of will can attain a level where they don’t just overcome a person’s weaknesses but even nature itself and its laws ... New boy! Open your eyes and see the truth of my words!”

He stepped out of his sandals, lifted his cloak so it reached his knees, and belted it at that level. Then he rolled up his tapered pant legs and stood in front of the pit of glowing coals, staring ahead.

“He’s focusing his thoughts and mustering his will,” ibn Tahir’s neighbor whispered to him.

Ibn Tahir held his breath. Something said to him, “You’re experiencing great things now, grandson of Tahir. Things that people on the outside don’t even dream about.”

Suddenly Abdul Malik began to move. Slowly, probingly, he stepped a foot out onto the glowing coals, then quickly and as straight as a cypress waded across them. He came to a stop on the other side, gently shaking his head as if waking up from a dream. Then he returned to the novices and, with a pleased look on his face, showed them his feet. There wasn’t a trace of a burn on them.

“This is what a person can achieve if he trains his will properly,” he said. “Who would like to repeat the experiment after me?”

Suleiman volunteered.

“Always the same one,” Abdul Malik complained irritably.

“Then I’ll try,” Yusuf spoke up. There was a slight hesitation in his voice.

“Over live coals?” Abdul Malik asked, with a barely perceptible smile.

Yusuf anxiously looked around.

“Wait until we heat up the plate,” the dai said indulgently.

Just then Jafar said that he’d like to try.

“Good show,” Abdul Malik praised him. “But first tell me what you have to think about in order to focus your will.”

“Allah, great and all-powerful, keep me from being burnt. And I won’t be,” Jafar responded.

“Good. But do you have the necessary confidence?”

“I do, reverend dai.”

“Then go in the name of Allah.”

Jafar stood in front of the rectangular pit and began to focus his thoughts and his will. The novices noticed that several times he decided to start across the fire but then reconsidered.

Abdul Malik said to him, “Free yourself, shake off the convulsions and go in confidence. Allah is master of our fate.”

Then Jafar set off from the edge like a boat sets off from the shore, and he walked briskly and safely over the embers. Once on the opposite side he stood still for a while, as if dazed, then he slowly looked back over his shoulder. Behind him he saw the glowing, smoking coals, and a blissful smile came over his pale face. He visibly caught his breath.

“Truly, a brave young man,” Abdul Malik exclaimed.

A whisper of acclaim also passed among the two ranks of novices.

“All right, Suleiman! Now you show your mettle too, though we’ve already seen before that you’ve got it.”

Abdul Malik was in a good mood. Suleiman obeyed him with obvious relish. He collected himself and then walked over the embers as though he were long since used to it.

“Now let me try too,” Yusuf said, growing angry. He thrust his chest out, tightened his muscles, and stepped up to the pit. He tried to focus, quietly murmuring the prescribed words, while at the same time flinching at the thought that he still might get burned. He was on the verge of stepping onto the embers, but when he looked at what lay

ahead, he started waving his arms like a swimmer who wants to dive into cold water but doesn't quite trust himself, and he lurched backwards.

Abdul Malik smiled.

"Think of Allah and his help and forget everything else," he advised him. "What do you need to fear if he's with you?"

Finally, when he'd lost patience with his own hesitation, Yusuf gently approached the embers with one foot. But he instantly yowled and jumped back in fright.

A suppressed snigger coursed through the ranks.

"You've got courage, but your will is weak," the dai said.

Yusuf hung his head and returned to his place.

"Could I try?" ibn Tahir asked shyly.

"The time hasn't come for you yet, grandson of Tahir," Abdul Malik replied. "But I have confidence that some day you'll be among the first."

The novices dragged a heavy metal plate out of a barrack. They fanned the embers again and then set the plate over them.

Abdul Malik called on them to walk over it. They did so in a single file, twice, three times, four times in succession. The plate got hotter and hotter and burnt their soles worse each time. When it was red hot, Yusuf hopped around on it like a madman, frying and burning himself as if in punishment for his earlier failure.

Ibn Tahir's soles were also getting burnt. He gritted his teeth and told himself that it didn't hurt, but to no avail. He couldn't focus enough. The unwonted exertion wore him out, and he was afraid that he might faint.

Finally Abdul Malik called out that the exercise was over and that they should put the equipment away. Then the two rows formed for one last time. He stepped before them, sternly sized the novices up, and told them to think about everything they had seen and heard. Then he bowed slightly and walked away with the same long, impetuous stride as when he had first appeared.

The novices returned to the rooftop, where dai Abu Soraka instructed them in poetry, in their native language of Pahlavi. Ibn Tahir immediately shone in this subject. For each genre of poem he knew examples from Firdausi, Ansari and other older poets. Abu Soraka practically glowed with satisfaction. He praised him in front of all the others.

“Indeed, the military arts and training in force of will are indispensable to any fighting Ismaili. But it is equally as important that he train his spirit in the word, so he can become agile and learn to express his thoughts precisely and accurately. I am delighted to have found a bright student in you, grandson of Tahir.”

The time of the third prayers arrived and Abu Soraka led the youths in performing them on the spot. He hadn't yet finished the invocation of Ali and Ismail when ibn Tahir, unused to so much exertion, passed out. Naim, who was next to him, noticed that he remained prostrate when the rest of them had risen. He bent over him and saw that his face was as yellow as desert sand. He called to Yusuf and Suleiman, and the novices immediately surrounded their comrade. Someone quickly brought water, and with its help they soon brought ibn Tahir back to consciousness. Yusuf and Suleiman led him into the dining room. It was already time for dinner.

Once ibn Tahir had eaten his fill, his strength quickly returned. Yusuf gave him a good-natured pat on the back.

“Don't worry about it,” he said. “Soon you'll get hardened, and then you'll be able to hold out for a day or two without eating, however much you have to exert yourself. Fasting is nothing unusual for us. Abdul Malik sees to that.”

“What should we do with the donkey you arrived on?” Abu Soraka asked.

“Keep it here,” ibn Tahir answered. “My father won't need it, and it could be useful here.”

“As you say,” the teacher responded. “And now don't think about home anymore. You've broken your last tie to the outside world, and from now on your thoughts should turn entirely to the business of Alamut.”

After dinner the novices removed to their sleeping quarters for a short rest. They stretched out on their beds and talked. Even though ibn Tahir was exhausted, he still wanted explanations for many of the troubling things he didn't yet understand.

“I'm curious what the relations between us and the soldiery are like,” he asked. “Also, what's the relationship between the dais and Captain

Manucehr? And what are the ranks among the Ismailis at Alamut?"

Yusuf and Jafar were first to respond.

"For Ismailis every believer occupies a precisely defined place. The lasiqs are the society of ordinary followers. Next above them are the refiqs, conscious and militant believers who teach the lasiqs about the fundamental truths. Lasiqs who have been educated this way can become soldiers, while the refiqs who are in the fortress serve as their immediate superiors, the corporals and sergeants. We novices of the feday have our own special place. As long as we remain in training, we're responsible to the officers immediately above us. But once we're consecrated, we'll only obey the orders of the supreme commander or his designated representative. Then come the dais, who know the higher truths and propagate our doctrine. Captain Manucehr, who is the commander of the fortress, holds a rank equivalent to theirs. Then above him are the grand dais, or the dais of all dais, of whom there are currently three: 'dai eldoat' Abu Ali, who came to Alamut recently from Syria; 'dai eldoat' Buzurg Ummid, which means 'great hope,' who is the commander of the castle of Rudbar; and 'dai eldoat' Husein Alkeini, who seized the fortress of Gonbadan in Khuzestan in the name of Our Master. At the very top of the structure is the head of all Ismailis, Our Master, Hasan ibn Sabbah."

"What an intelligent arrangement!" ibn Tahir exclaimed.

"But the differences within the ranks are more sharply drawn than that," Suleiman said. "For instance, dai Abdul Malik is just barely beneath dai Ibrahim, but a bit above dai Abu Soraka, even though he's younger. But he has a stronger record in fighting for the Ismaili cause, and that's the decisive factor in determining rank. There are also differences between us. For instance, since you just arrived at the castle yesterday, you're just a shade beneath any of your colleagues. But when you distinguish yourself for the Ismaili cause in any way, or if you do better than others at examinations, then you'll have pushed your way forward to a position that's more appropriate to your accomplishments and abilities."

"Does all this precise differentiation of ranks have any special meaning?" ibn Tahir asked.

"Very much so," Suleiman replied. "At the moment of truth every Ismaili knows his place. Everyone knows exactly whom he commands

and whom he obeys, so that any confusion or misunderstanding is made impossible at the outset. Does it make sense now?”

“Yes, it does,” ibn Tahir replied.

The sound of the gong called them to duty. Since it was too hot on the roof during the afternoon, their lesson was held in the dining room.

This time dai Abu Soraka explained the origins of Islam and the history of Ismailism. To help the newcomer catch up, he first asked the novices some questions about the material he had already covered. Then he proceeded with the day’s new material.

“By giving his only daughter Fatima as wife to Ali, the Prophet designated Ali as the successor to his throne. But after his death his cunning father-in-law Abu Bakr shamelessly tricked the proper heir and assumed the throne of leader of the faithful himself. On that day the Prophet’s magnificent edifice was split in two. On the left side are those who recognize the treacherous Abu Bakr as legitimate heir. Their flag is black and their book is the Sunna, an oral tradition that is a heap of miserable lies and false witness about the Prophet. Their capital is Baghdad, which is now ruled by false caliphs from the Abbasid dynasty. Abbas was the criminal uncle who used flattery and lies to persuade the Prophet to accept him as a believer only after it became unmistakably clear that he would be victorious. The patron of the Abbasids is the sultan, Malik Shah, a Seljuk Turkish dog whose vagabond clan came from the land of Gog and Magog to seize the Iranian throne.

“On the right are those of us who recognize Ali as the only legitimate first imam, just as the Prophet commanded. Our flag is white, and our capital is Cairo in Egypt, for the caliph who rules there is descended from Ali and Fatima, the Prophet’s daughter.

“The usurper Abu Bakr was followed by two more false imams, Omar and Othman. When Othman died, the people demanded that Ali finally become the Prophet’s representative. He was so elected, but he soon bled to death from the knife of a hired killer. His son Hasan succeeded him, but soon had to cede his place to Moawiya. In the meantime the people demanded that Husein, another of Ali and Fatima’s sons, assume the throne. But Husein died a martyr’s death in the valley of Karbala. From that time on, the pureblooded descendants of the Prophet have lived in the deserts and mountains, persecuted and killed by the false imams and their criminal shield bearers. Truly! The fate that Allah holds in his

hands is not something we have read in books, but it is noble for us to mourn for the martyrs.

“We have said that the legitimate representatives of Ali and Fatima’s dynasty came to rule in Cairo. We recognize them—this is true—but with certain reservations. These reservations are our secret, which we plan to reveal to you over time. For today, suffice it for us to recite the succession of imams who followed Husein, the Prophet’s third legitimate representative. The fourth was Husein’s son, Ali Zain al-Abidin, whose son Mohammed al-Bakir was the fifth. Jafar as-Sadiq was the sixth. A dispute arose over the seventh, because Jafar as-Sadiq had two sons, Musa al-Kazim and Ismail. Those who recognize Musa al-Kazim as the seventh imam have another five successors, the last of whom is Mohammed, destined to return someday as al-Mahdi. Indeed, al-Mahdi will come, but from the line of Ismail, not that of Musa al-Kazim. We believe in this because we know the real facts. Thus, we recognize only the seven known imams, the last and greatest of whom was Ismail. It is true, one branch of his line attained conspicuous power in Egypt. But where is the other, larger and more important branch? For the moment we know only that the branch in Cairo is simply preparing the way to victory over the usurpers and heretics, for the ultimate leadership of all Islam. For it has been said that the six great prophets—Adam, Noah, Ibrahim, Moses, Christ and Mohammed—will be followed by a seventh and greatest, al-Mahdi, who will come from the line of Ismail. It is him we await and him that we fight for. Truly, I tell you there are great mysteries afoot in the fortress of Alamut!”

For the first time ibn Tahir was hearing the essence of the Ismaili doctrine. It seemed mysterious to him, and he was anxious to hear more revelations.

Abu Soraka left and was followed in the classroom by the Islamicized Greek Theodoros, whom they called al-Hakim, or the Doctor. He was a pudgy little man with a pointed beard and a thin, black mustache. He had pink, plump cheeks, but a nose so straight and long that it nearly reached the level of his full, red, almost feminine lips. His chin was soft and padded. He had round, laughing eyes, and when he spoke you couldn’t tell whether he was serious or kidding. The novices called him dai, even though he hadn’t been consecrated. They knew that the supreme commander had brought him back with him from Egypt. He

was a trained physician and taught a variety of subjects, foremost among them the structure and functioning of the human body. He was considered a kind of sophos, or wise man, who had tried to reconcile the teachings of the Koran with Greek philosophy. During his lectures on diseases, poisons and varieties of death he would quote Greek thinkers, especially the skeptics, cynics and materialists. Listening to him, the novices would widen their eyes in amazement, and many of them thought his teachings were rather godless. For example, his explanation of the origin of man was part Koran, part Greek philosophy, and part his own creation.

“Allah created Adam from the four elements. First, he took hard material, but it was inelastic and fragile. He crumbled it into dust, and then he took another element—water. He mixed this with the dust and got clay, which he used to knead the form of man. But that form was soft and changed shape every time it was touched. Therefore, he created fire and used it to dry out the external surface of the human form. Now man had a skin which was elastic. But he was very heavy, so he removed some of the matter from his chest, and to keep the outer walls of the empty space that formed this way from collapsing, he filled the hollow with a fourth element, air. In this way the human body was completed, and to this day it consists of those four original elements—earth, water, fire and air.

“In order to bring man to life, Allah breathed a soul into him. Being of divine origin, the soul is exceptionally sensitive to the harmony of the elements in the human body. As soon as the equilibrium among them is disturbed, the soul departs the body and returns to its origin, which is Allah himself.

“Disturbances of the harmony among the elements can be of two kinds—natural or magical. Natural disturbances can result in one of four kinds of death. If, as the result of a wound, the body loses its blood, it is deprived of the element of water and the result is death. If we strangle someone by the throat or otherwise make breathing impossible, we’ve deprived him of the element of air, and he suffocates and dies. When a person freezes, he’s been deprived of the element of fire. And if a person is dashed against some object, his solid matter is shattered and death is inevitable.

“The magical causes of death, also referred to as medical, are far more

intriguing. They are caused by the mysterious natural substances we call poisons. The object of natural science is to learn to recognize and also produce these substances. Every Ismaili can and should benefit from this knowledge ...”

This subject was also a source of great amazement for ibn Tahir. It was new to him, and he couldn't figure out why it was necessary to study it.

Bowing and smiling, the Greek left them, and dai Ibrahim appeared before the novices once again. A deathly silence prevailed, and ibn Tahir could sense that their next subject was an important one.

This time dai Ibrahim taught them Ismaili doctrine. He would pose a question and then point his finger at the novice who had to answer it. The questions and answers followed in rapid succession, short and abrupt.

Ibn Tahir listened intently.

“What are the peris?”

“The peris are evil female spirits who ruled the world before Zarathustra banished them to the underworld.”

“Who was Zarathustra?”

“Zarathustra was a false prophet and fire worshipper, banished by Mohammed to dwell among the demons.”

“Where do the demons dwell?”

“In Mount Demavend.”

“How do they show themselves?”

“By the smoke that comes out of the mountain.”

“How else?”

“And by the wailing voices we can hear coming from there.”

“Who are the Seljuks?”

“The Seljuks are Turks who came storming in from Gog and Magog to seize power over Iran.”

“What is their nature?”

“They have a dual nature—half human and half demon.”

“Why?”

“Dævas, or evil spirits, mated with human women, who then gave birth to the Seljuks.”

“Why did the Seljuks adopt Islam?”

“To disguise their true nature.”

“What are their intentions?”

“To obliterate Islam and establish the rule of demons on earth.”

“How do we know that?”

“Because they support the false caliph in Baghdad.”

“Who is the most bitter enemy of the Ismailis in Iran?”

“The sultan’s grand vizier, Nizam al-Mulk.”

“Why is he a sworn enemy of the one true teaching?”

“Because he is an apostate.”

“What is his most blasphemous crime?”

“His most blasphemous crime was to offer ten thousand gold pieces for the head of Our Master.”

Ibn Tahir shuddered. It was true, the grand vizier was a criminal who had ordered his grandfather Tahir beheaded. And now he had set his sights on the Ismaili supreme commander himself.

Through these questions and answers, dai Ibrahim reviewed the material he had presented so far. Then with a wave of his hand he gave the sign that he would now continue lecturing. Quickly the novices set their tablets on their knees and prepared their writing implements. Posing questions and then answering them himself, dai Ibrahim began dictating the nature of the power granted to the supreme commander of the Ismailis.

In amazement ibn Tahir wrote everything down.

“Who gave Sayyiduna power over the faithful? The Egyptian caliph Mustansir indirectly, and Allah directly.

“What is the nature of this power? This power is of a dual nature, natural and supernatural.

“What is his natural power? That he is the master over life and death of all Ismailis in Iran.

“What is his supernatural power? He has the ability and right to send anyone he wants to paradise.

“Why is Sayyiduna the most powerful of all men who have ever lived on earth? Because Allah has given him the key that unlocks the gate to paradise.”

The fourth prayer marked the end of the school day. The novices gathered on the roof to review what they had learned that day. A lively debate developed around ibn Tahir.

“What I saw and heard in Abdul Malik’s lesson is clear to me,” he said. “But I don’t understand what dai Ibrahim meant by the maxim that Allah had given Sayyiduna the key to the gate of paradise.”

“What is there to wonder about here?” Yusuf spoke up. “That’s what Sayyiduna teaches and our duty is to believe it.”

“Fine, but I just don’t understand whether we’re supposed to take it literally or see it as some kind of parable,” ibn Tahir continued to probe.

“A parable?!” Yusuf lost his temper. “That’s how it’s been said and how we’re supposed to take it.”

“Then that would mean a new miracle has taken place,” ibn Tahir persisted.

“Why shouldn’t it have?” Yusuf said.

“Why shouldn’t it have?” ibn Tahir replied. “Because the Prophet said explicitly that miracles occurred only in ancient times. He disallowed them during his own reign and afterwards.”

Yusuf didn’t know how to respond.

Then Jafar spoke. “We don’t need to see a miracle in the fact that Allah gave Sayyiduna the key to paradise. After all, even the Prophet didn’t view his journey to heaven with the archangel Gabriel as a miracle.”

“All right, then let’s assume that Sayyiduna was just the recipient of Allah’s special favor,” Ibn Tahir continued. “That still leaves the question of when, where and in what manner Allah granted Our Master the key to the gate of paradise.”

“Allah appeared to Sayyiduna in the form of a burning bush or a pillar of smoke,” Suleiman suggested, “the way he appeared to the earlier prophets. He could have given him the key that way, like he gave Moses the tables of the law on Mount Sinai.”

“I can picture all of that,” ibn Tahir said, growing more and more impassioned. “I just can’t accept that we live alongside such a glorious and powerful prophet.”

“Maybe you don’t feel worthy?” Suleiman said with a smile. “In what way are we any worse than people of earlier times?”

Ibn Tahir glanced around him in distress. He saw faces that expressed extreme religious fervor. No, they couldn’t understand what was perplexing him so much and forcing him to doubt.

“I think what’s more likely than Suleiman’s conjecture,” Jafar offered,

“is that Allah sent some angel to take Sayyiduna to heaven. There Allah could have easily handed him the key to paradise.”

“One way or the other,” ibn Tahir summarized, “the question now is what is the nature of this key. Because we have to assume that neither Allah, nor paradise, nor any of the things in it are made of the same substance as our world. So how is it possible that there is an object among us, here on earth, that’s made of the substance of the other world? Could we perceive it with our senses? And if we could, would it still be a heavenly object?”

“You ask an excellent question, grandson of Tahir,” Yusuf brightened, rubbing his hands in satisfaction.

“If you ask me, this discussion has gone beyond what’s allowed,” Naim warned.

“Who asked you, cricket?” said Suleiman, drowning him out. “As though we cared what you think.”

“In the Koran it’s written,” said Jafar, “that after death the righteous will partake of heaven and its joys in forms that are similar to those on earth. The blessed will have the same senses they had in this world, and the same pleasures. Seen that way, objects in the other world won’t differ much from objects here. And so the substance that the key to paradise is made of could resemble the substance of earthly things.”

Obeida had listened attentively and in silence the entire time and now was smiling slyly.

“I’ve got a good explanation that could clear up this whole riddle of Allah’s key,” he said. “We’ve heard that this key opens the gate to paradise and that it’s in the possession of Sayyiduna, who lives among us, on earth. So this key opens the gate to paradise from the outside, from earth’s side. That means that, regardless of the nature of paradise, Sayyiduna’s key opens the gate from earth, so it has to be made of an earthly substance.”

“You’ve hit on it perfectly!” Yusuf exclaimed.

“An elegant explanation,” ibn Tahir consented.

“Obeida is as cunning as a lynx,” Suleiman laughed.

“We need to ask dai Ibrahim if it really is the right answer,” Naim worried.

“You wouldn’t be very welcome with a question like that, my little bundle of joy,” Suleiman countered.

“Why not?” Naim asked irritably.

“Because, in case you haven’t noticed, the reverend dai Ibrahim requires us to answer only what we’ve been asked. If you, my little snotpicker, tried to outshine him, you’d be making a fatal miscalculation.”

The novices all laughed, while Naim flushed red with rage. But Yusuf, for whom convoluted and learned discussions were a huge pleasure, glared at Suleiman angrily, while he said to his companions, “Come on, keep going, fellows.”

But then the horn summoned them to the fifth prayer.

After supper ibn Tahir was overcome with fatigue and chose not to go for an evening walk with the others. He withdrew to the bedroom and lay down on his bed.

For a long time he was unable to close his eyes. Images of everything he had been experiencing at Alamut passed before his eyes. Perhaps the affable dai Abu Soraka and strict Captain Manuchehr reminded him most of his former life outside the castle. But the half-absurd, half-enigmatic al-Hakim, and then dai Abdul Malik, endowed with his monstrous powers, and most of all the mysterious and grim dai Ibrahim, had introduced him to a completely new world. And he had already begun to recognize that this new world had its own hard and fast rules, that it was organized and governed from within, from the inside out, and that its structure was consistent, logical, and complete. He hadn’t entered it gradually. He had been yanked into it. And now, here he was at its very heart. Just yesterday he had been on the outside, over there. Today he was Alamut’s completely.

He felt overcome with sorrow at taking leave from that former world. He felt as though the way back was now blocked forever. But he could already sense in himself an intense anticipation of the future, a passionate curiosity about the mysteries that he sensed all around him, and a firm determination not to lag behind his peers in anything.

“All right, then. I’m in Alamut now,” he said, almost out loud. “Why should I need to look back?”

But then, one more time, he summoned his home, his father, his mother and sister before his mind’s eye, and he silently bade them

farewell. The images began to fade, and in sweet anticipation of new things to come he fell fast asleep.

CHAPTER THREE

Soon Halima had fully adjusted to her new surroundings and new life. By some strange, inexplicable circumstances she always got whatever she wanted. Mainly this consisted of everyone liking her, both people and animals. Occasionally even Apama would twist her withered lips into an indulgent smile at some foolishness. Halima took full advantage of her position, becoming both stubborn and a tease, and taking it for granted that the world just naturally submitted to her wishes, which for the most part were tame enough.

Sara succumbed to her first and most abjectly of all. Halima's slightest nod was her command, and it made her happy if she could be compliant to her in every way. She was a born slave, loyally enduring Halima's every annoyance and whim. Whenever Halima in any way showed a preference for one of her other companions, Sara would become dejected and miserable.

That's how things were by day.

But at night, barely had the girls burrowed into their pillows and Zainab fallen asleep, than Sara would creep over to Halima's bed, slide in under the blanket, and start kissing and caressing her. Halima resisted at first, to some degree. With time, however, she managed to grow used to it and learned to quietly tolerate it. She figured that she probably had to make some sacrifice for the countless services that Sara performed for her by day. But she was incapable of taking Sara's constant jealousy. Halima enjoyed lavishing her favor in all directions. She liked throwing her affections at everyone, flattering first one person, then another, and she couldn't stand to have anyone holding her back. Whenever she caught Sara watching her with eyes full of woeful jealousy, she would torment and provoke her on purpose. When they were alone later and Sara rained reproaches on her, she usually threatened never so much as to look at her again.

Apparently Sara had some inherent need to serve someone out of love and subordinate herself to that person's every wish, even at the price of endlessly excruciating jealousy. By contrast, Halima took pleasure in life, in her youth, in the sun, like a bird or a butterfly. It struck her as perfectly natural for her to become the center of interest and attention, and to have the world revolve around her.

In her free time she would wander through the gardens, which were growing more and more lush with flowers, draw in the scent of the innumerable roses one after the other opening their sumptuous petals, pick flowers to decorate the rooms, and play tag with Ahriman and the gazelle, whose name was Susanna. She had walked through her domain in all directions, exploring all its hiding places, and she had seen with her own eyes that the gardens were in fact surrounded by water on all sides. And, on the opposite banks, she had seen more gardens and woods stretching as far as the eye could see. Truly, it was as though they were living in the midst of a real paradise.

Soon she even ventured as far as the rocks where the lizards sunned themselves and Peri the yellow snake lived. She kept at a respectful distance, although silently she tried to persuade herself that Miriam was right, and she recited out loud, "How pretty the lizards are, really!" She even tried to whistle like Miriam to summon Peri the yellow snake from its hole. But even before the little creature poked its pointed head out, she went flying in the opposite direction and didn't dare look back until she was among people again.

It was in that very spot that Adi and Mustafa found her once. They wanted to give her a little scare and tried to sneak up on her. But Halima was like a mouse on its guard. She heard a noise and looked back, and when she saw the two Moors creeping up on her, she ran.

Adi, who lagged behind, called to Mustafa, "Catch her! Catch her!"

And indeed, within a few strides Mustafa caught up with her. He picked her up in his powerful arms and carried her back to Adi. Halima flailed, thrashed, and bit all around her and screamed for them to let her go, while the eunuchs enjoyed themselves and laughed.

"Let's give her to the lizards," Mustafa said.

Halima wailed so much they actually got frightened.

“No, let’s play ball with her instead,” Adi suggested. He stepped back several paces, held his arms out, and said to Mustafa, “Throw her to me.”

“Clasp your hands around your shins,” Mustafa instructed her. “There you go! Hold onto your wrist tight!”

Halima was beginning to enjoy this adventure. She did as Mustafa told her, and in the next instant she went zipping through the air like a ball into Adi’s arms. She screamed as though she were being flayed alive, but now it was more out of the thrill of the game and a delight in the sound of her own voice.

The screams lured Ahriman, who came to see what unusual things were going on. He stood next to Adi with his eyes and his entire head following the living ball as it flew through the air from one set of arms to the other. Apparently the game amused him, because he started to purr in contentment.

“Have you noticed how soft and round she’s gotten?” Mustafa asked.

Adi laughed heartily and continued, “My dear little kitten’s paw, my sweet little pastry, hope of my learning and faithful client of my yearning for wisdom. Look how you’ve grown, how you’ve filled out, half-stone.”

When she had completed several of these airborne circuits, they suddenly heard a furious shriek coming from the opposite shore.

“Apama!” Mustafa shuddered, quickly setting Halima back down on her feet. She instantly bounded down the path and vanished into the undergrowth.

“Oh, those abominations! Those debauched animals!” Apama howled from the opposite shore. “I’m going to denounce you to Sayyiduna and he’ll order you both castrated again. You’ve trampled my most beautiful flower, my delicate rosebud.”

The eunuchs exploded with laughter.

“What are you howling about, you loathsome mutt, you aged slut?” Adi mocked her. “Just wait, we’ll grind you with stones and shatter your bones, you vicious witch, you cross-eyed bitch.”

“You stinking wether,” Apama rasped. “So you’ve gotten a yen for young flesh, you castrated goat. Praise be to Allah that they clipped off your manhood while they still could, you broken-horned, black demon! Oh, how satisfying to know you couldn’t, even if you wanted.”

Adi replied amid a renewed barrage of laughter.

“Don’t you see how we scoff at you, you old baboon, absurd old loon! We could have all seven prophets at once, while you’d be falling all over yourself if some lone old dog so much as looked at you.”

Filled with impotent rage, Apama nearly lost control. She went flying to the water’s edge as though she meant to jump in and wade through it. Adi drew out one of the oars that he kept hidden behind a bush, leapt to the water, and skillfully slapped at its surface, sending a large spurt that drenched Apama.

The old woman wailed, while the eunuchs doubled over with laughter. Adi tossed the oar back into the bushes, then took off running with Mustafa. Apama waved her fists at them, swearing vengeance.

For the moment she took all her revenge on Halima. That same day she berated her in front of all her companions for being sneaky and rotten, and she called every punishment of this world and the next down on her head. Halima felt guilty for giving in to Sara, and she really did see herself as rotten, especially now that she dared to look Miriam so innocently in the eyes right after making love with Sara. It was because of this that Apama’s accusations struck her to the quick. She lowered her eyes and blushed deeply.

But when Apama had gone, Miriam reassured her that she shouldn’t take the old woman’s reproaches too much to heart, since everyone knew she was mean and hated the eunuchs; and, moreover, that none of the girls for a minute doubted the perfect innocence of their game. This profession of trust struck Halima as so undeserved and shook her so much that she had to withdraw to a corner where she could vent her tears of self-pity. She swore then to reform and stop giving in to Sara. But giving up old habits is hard, and everything continued as it was.

The days lengthened and the evenings were full of mysterious life. Crickets chirruped in the gardens, and frogs responded from the canals. Bats swooped past the lighted windows, silently catching winged insects. On evenings like these the girls’ most delicious pleasure was to listen to the stories and fairy tales that Fatima told.

Fatima was a remarkable woman in every respect. She knew a thousand wonderful things and never seemed to be at a loss. She knew a

hundred riddles, and once she had revealed the answers to all of them, she came up with new ones day after day. She knew all of the songs that were sung from the far south of Arabia to Egypt and Syria and all the way to the north of Turkestan. But she also had other talents. In the midst of a grove the eunuchs had set up for her a longish building made of glass, inside of which, on branches broken off of the mulberry trees that grew at the river's edge like willows, she raised silkworms. She liked to say that their cocoons would provide enough silk to clothe every girl in the gardens.

The girls most enjoyed hearing her tell stories from the *Thousand and One Nights* and from Firdausi's *Book of Kings*. She was no less inventive than Scheherazade at telling these stories. Whatever the tooth of time had chipped away from her memory she compensated for out of her own imagination. Many stories were her own creation from start to finish.

Of all the stories, the one about the sculptor Farhad and Queen Shirin seemed to affect the girls most. It made them think of Miriam, and they had Fatima tell it to them over and over. It moved them deeply, and each time Halima would dissolve in tears. Like Miriam, Shirin was also a Christian. Her beauty was so great that even flowers would hang their heads in shame and envy whenever she walked through the lawns and gardens. She became the wife of the most powerful king of Iran, Khosrow Parviz. The whole nation rebelled when they learned that their new queen was an infidel. But the king loved her so much that he subdued all his opponents. Yet Khosrow Parviz was not only a strong ruler, he was a wise man too. He knew how fleeting earthly beauty is. And so, in order to preserve the beloved face and exquisite body of his wife forever, he summoned the most renowned sculptor of his time, Farhad, to sculpt her in marble. As the young artist gazed at the queen's heavenly form day after day, he came to love her with an undying love. Wherever he was, whatever he did, by day and asleep, everywhere, her heavenly face was with him.

Finally he was no longer able to conceal his passion. The statue and the queen grew more and more alike. His work, the look in his eye and the sound of his voice all betrayed the storm in his heart. One day even the king noticed. In a rage of jealousy he drew his sword, but Shirin stepped in front of the sculptor and shielded him with her body. In gratitude for his creation, Khosrow Parviz spared his life, but he

banished him to the barren mountains of Bizutum forever. There, Farhad went mad with longing and unrequited love. In his pain and passion he seized his hammer and chisel and began to sculpt an enormous image of Shirin out of the mountain's rocky ridge. To this day you can see it, a godlike queen emerging from her bath. In front of her is the king's horse Shebdis, young and muscular.

The king then sent a messenger to the mountains of Bizutum with false news that the queen had died. Farhad had no interest in outliving her. In his unbearable agony he threw himself on an axe, splitting his chest in two. As he fell, the blade stuck in the ground, and behold, drenched in the blood of the sculptor's heart, the axe handle turned green, blossomed, and produced fruit. That fruit is the pomegranate, which in memory of Farhad's death is cleft like his breast was, and which bleeds when you wound and open it. And that is why to this day it is called Farhad's apple.

The girls listened to this story dewy-eyed. Only Miriam stared at the ceiling, apparently indifferent. Her eyes were curiously dry and seemed to be staring into some remote distance. Later that night both Safiya and Jada, who slept in the same bedroom as Miriam, heard Miriam tossing and turning in her bed.

They also liked hearing stories about the ancient Iranian hero Rustam, who in a duel unwittingly killed his own son Suhrab; then the tales of Ali Baba and the forty thieves, and of Aladdin's lamp, and the ones from the Koran, which Fatima tailored in her own unique way. If she told how Potiphar's wife, Zuleika, fell in love with Joseph, they all automatically turned to look at their companion Zuleika and smiled at her. In Fatima's telling the Egyptian wasn't a wanton sinner, just a tender lover before whom the young Joseph didn't dare to lift his eyes. Gradually, in Fatima's stories each of the girls got her counterpart, with whom she privately compared herself or was compared by the others.

Every now and then the girls would organize a banquet, where the food and drink would be exquisite. On those days Apama would be particularly mean-spirited, while Miriam quietly beamed. Among the girls it was rumored that Miriam had obtained Sayyiduna's permission for these holidays as a solace to her companions. Apama was bitter that she had to do the cooking for these feasts.

On such occasions the eunuchs would bring in a catch of fish, and

Moad and Mustafa made a point of leaving first thing in the morning with their bows and falcons to hunt for fowl. They would row off in their boat down a long canal until they reached a stretch of shore where the wild vegetation extended all the way to the sheer cliff faces at the foot of the Elburz. That particular spot was a hunter's paradise.

On one such occasion Halima asked Miriam if she could join the hunters in the bush, but Miriam thought the journey too dangerous for a girl. She told her to join Adi, instead, who was planning to go to the livestock island for poultry and eggs.

Adi seated Halima in the boat and set off rowing down the canal in the hunters' wake. Somewhere at the canal's midpoint he veered off into a tributary and with steady oar strokes began to approach the island where they kept the domesticated and farm animals.

It was a spectacular morning. The sun had not yet reached the valley, but its rays were already gilding the mountain slopes and snow-covered peaks. Hundreds of birds chirped and sang. Others splashed themselves in the water, took flight, and dived for fish. Tall reeds grew up against the shore, as did irises and water lilies. A silver heron stood in water up to its belly and poked its long beak at the bottom. When it saw the boat peacefully gliding over the water's surface, it straightened up proudly. Bristling its crest, it magisterially lifted its legs out of the water and headed toward the shore.

Halima gazed after it in sheer delight.

"It's not afraid," she said, "just angry that we've interrupted its breakfast."

"Yes, all of the animals we keep in the gardens are as good as tame," Adi agreed. "No one does them any harm."

They came alongside the heron, but the bird ignored them as it calmly groomed itself with its beak.

Here and there a fish glinted as it snapped at a fly. Dragonflies stirred and darted over the water's surface. Despite all this animation, the entire scene had something solemn about it.

"How beautiful all this is!" Halima exclaimed.

"Yes, it's pretty," Adi said dully. "But freedom is far more beautiful."

Halima was puzzled.

"Freedom, you said? Aren't we living in freedom here?"

"You don't understand because you're a woman. I'm telling you, a

jackal starving in the desert is happier than a well-fed lion in a cage.”

Halima shook her head, not understanding.

“Are we in a cage?” she asked.

Adi smiled.

“I was just talking,” he said. “Let’s forget about it now. We’re there.”

The boat brushed up against the shore and they stepped out onto dry land. A barely discernible footpath led through the thick undergrowth of willows and poplars. They reached a rocky ridge where a variety of strange grasses and rare flowers grew. Then they headed across a broad meadow that ended in a coppice of trees from which crowing, squealing and wild snarling sounds seemed to emanate.

Halima timidly took hold of Adi’s hand. At the edge of the coppice she could see large cages with fluttering birds and pacing animals. When they drew close, some of the birds started flying at the bars in panic, and two large wild leopards charged at them with a furious snort.

This left Halima shaking. Adi set down the big basket he had brought along and began feeding the beasts. Gradually the animals calmed down, each one consuming its food.

“Normally Moad and Mustafa take care of this,” Adi said. “But they’ve gone hunting today, so the work has fallen to me.”

Hidden behind some shrubs was a long, low-slung coop for poultry. Adi crawled into it and began collecting eggs and putting them into a small basket.

“Now go away from here,” he said, smiling awkwardly. “I’ve got some work to do that you shouldn’t see.”

Halima hurried away toward the cages. In the meantime Adi strangled several chickens, ducks and geese. The shrieking of the birds struck Halima to the marrow. In terrible fright she clasped her hands to her ears.

Adi came back from the henhouse. He threw a rag over the dead fowl and then showed Halima some of the animals.

“If those two leopards were free like Ahriman, they’d tear me to pieces, wouldn’t they?” Halima wondered aloud.

“Maybe. Or they might run away. Leopards are afraid of people.”

“Then why do you keep them in cages?”

“Sayyiduna needs them for their offspring. They’re mates, and Sayyiduna wants us to raise him some hunting animals. He has lots of

friends who are princes, and those are the people he'll give them to."

"Is it true that young leopards are like kittens?"

"Yes, it is. Only they're cuter and a lot funnier."

"I'd like to have one."

"If you're good, I'll bring you one to keep while he's still young."

"Do you really think Sayyiduna would allow it?"

Adi smiled.

"You have powerful friends."

Halima blushed. She knew that he meant Miriam.

"Why does Apama hate you?" she asked.

"Oh, she hates the whole world. She fears Sayyiduna, though. But she especially hates me because once I ... how can I say this."

"Tell me, Adi, tell me!"

"It's stupid. Only please, don't blab to anyone about this. You see, when Apama first came to the gardens she would constantly drop hints about how she and Sayyiduna had been close years before, and how he had given her his heart in Kabul. She wanted to make it clear to us that, now that Sayyiduna had become powerful, he had summoned her to the castle for those same reasons. She behaved arrogantly, dressed up in silks, decked herself out in jewelry, painted her face, walked around with this mysterious smile, and constantly sneered at everybody else. Even me, who had known Sayyiduna since his days in Egypt, when I guarded him from his enemies with my own body. Completely by accident I caught her one day in the midst of some very human business. She was even more ludicrous and repulsive than usual. I burst out laughing, and from that moment not a day has passed that she hasn't cursed me to no end. She suspects that I revealed her shame to the others, so it would suit her fine if we all dropped dead. And if she weren't so afraid of Sayyiduna, she'd have poisoned us all by now."

"Is she really so mean?"

"She's mean because she's a slave to her arrogance, even though she suffers so much. She doesn't want to be old, but she knows she is."

They walked still farther into the woods, where they came upon a cage of monkeys. Halima shouted with joy as she watched them chase each other across the bars, swing on ropes, perform gymnastics, and pinch each other.

"We used to have a bear too," Adi said. "But he ate too much, so

Sayyiduna ordered us to kill him. We also have some cattle, a she-camel, four horses and several donkeys on the island. And we have the only dogs and cats. But nobody can come to our island except us. That's Apama's doing, through Sayyiduna."

"Does Sayyiduna ever visit the gardens?"

"I can't tell you that, dear child."

"I want to know what he's like."

"He's hard to describe. He has a beard and he's a very powerful man."

"Is he handsome?"

Adi laughed.

"I never thought about it, little cat's paw. He's not ugly, for sure. I'd be more inclined to call him awe-inspiring."

"Is he tall?"

"I wouldn't say so. He's at least a head shorter than me."

"Then he must be very strong."

"I don't think so. You could probably flatten him with one arm."

"Then how can he be so awe-inspiring? Does he have a big army?"

"Not particularly. But even in Egypt, where he was all alone and a foreigner, he inspired so much fear that the caliph ordered him arrested one night and put on a boat that took him out of the country. His enemies could have murdered him, but they didn't dare."

"Strange, very strange," Halima thought out loud. "Is he friends with the sultan?"

"No. The sultan is his worst enemy."

"Oh my, what if he attacked us! What would become of us then?"

"Don't worry. He'd go home with a bloody head—that is, if he still had one on his shoulders."

"Does Sayyiduna have many wives?"

"You ask too many questions. He has a son, that much I know, and supposedly two little monkeys like you."

Halima looked hurt.

"What do you suppose he would think about me?" she wondered, half to herself.

Adi laughed.

"He has a lot of other things to worry about, at least for the moment."

"I'll bet he dresses in pure silk and scarlet."

"It depends. I've also seen him wear sackcloth."

“I’ll bet he only dresses like that so people won’t recognize him. Is he a king?”

“More than a king. He’s a prophet.”

“Like Mohammed? I’ve heard that Mohammed was really handsome and had many wives. Some really young ones too.”

Adi roared with laughter.

“Oh, you ... nosey little robin, you! What won’t that little head come up with!”

“Are women afraid of him too?”

“Women most of all. Apama, for example, is as tame as a dove around him.”

“What does he do to them?”

“Nothing. That’s just the point, that everyone is afraid of him despite that fact.”

“Then he must be very mean and bossy.”

“No, not at all. He likes to laugh and joke. But when he looks at you, the world stands still.”

“Does he have such frightening eyes?”

“No, I don’t know. But it’s about time for you to stop asking so many questions. What it is about him that’s got everybody afraid, I don’t know. But if you ever get a chance to see him, you’ll have the feeling that he knows your every thought, even the ones you’ve never shared with anyone. It will seem as though he sees straight to the bottom of your heart, and there’ll be no point trying to seem better or pretending, because you’ll feel in your bones that he sees and knows everything.”

Halima shuddered as all her blood rushed to her cheeks.

“Oh, I don’t think I’d like to meet him. People like that are the scariest of all.”

“What have I been telling you? Now let’s go get the basket and head back home. And you, my little gazelle, keep that little pestle locked up behind those pearls of yours and be as silent as a fish about what we’ve been talking about.”

“I will, Adi,” Halima promised, and hurried after him toward the boat.

That evening the girls gathered around the pool in the great hall. The room was festively decorated, with twice the usual number of candles

burning in the chandeliers, and oil lamps flickering with a variety of colored flames set out in the corners. The whole room was decked out with greenery and flowers.

Three of Apama's assistants served the girls with food and drink. On bronze platters they brought in roasted birds, pan-fried fish with lemon, fruit and pastries, and they poured wine from earthen jugs into cups which the girls dutifully emptied. What began as subdued whispering soon turned into resounding laughter and pervasive twittering. Apama, who for a time observed all this with restrained anger, eventually went away in a rage.

"You're responsible for this going well," she shouted at Miriam.

"Don't worry, Apama," Miriam laughed in response.

She could hear her still muttering to herself as she walked away down the corridor.

"Shameful. Shameful!"

At this point Asad and Adi joined the meal, and soon afterward Moad and Mustafa too. They also ate and drank, and the revelry became universal.

"Let's start the show," Fatima proposed. They all agreed with her.

They began by reciting verses. Some presented excerpts from the Koran, while others offered passages from Ansari and other poets. Fatima recited her own work.

Soon she and Zainab were engaged in a rhyming duel. The eunuchs, who had never witnessed their agility, laughed themselves into tears. Adi praised them profusely. His face shone with happiness and pride.

When the recitations were over, it was time for dancing. Fatima and several of the others went for their instruments, while Miriam, Halima and Zuleika began dancing. When they finished their group performance, Zuleika continued by herself. Slowly at first, in time to the beating of the gong, then faster and faster her body twisted. Finally, she leapt up onto the edge of the pool, spun around in place with such frightening speed that it took everyone's breath away, and then, like a gust of wind, vanished amid her bed pillows.

The girls all shouted with delight. Halima ran over and hugged her impetuously. The eunuchs filled their cups and they all drank to Zuleika's health.

The wine had already gone to their heads. They began singing, kissing,

and hugging each other. They pulled pranks on each other, exchanging gibes and taunts in jest. But the queen of all this silliness was Halima, whose head began spinning with the first cup of wine. Convinced she had become as light as a butterfly, she had the feeling that invisible wings were lifting her off the floor. Soon after Zuleika's dance she was overcome with vain rivalry, and she insisted that the musicians play a dance for her. She began twisting and spinning, imitating Zuleika's movements. Everybody laughed at her, which only served to incite her to even greater buffoonery. Finally she too jumped up onto the edge of the pool. Her companions screamed and Miriam ran to catch her, but it was too late. She had lost her equilibrium and tumbled into the water.

In an instant they were all around her. Adi's powerful arm reached into the water for her and lifted her out of the pool. She coughed up the water she had inhaled, looked fearfully at Miriam, and started crying and laughing all at once. Miriam scolded her and led her into her bedroom, where she rubbed her down with a towel and changed her clothes. When the two of them returned, she was quiet and tame for a while. But several cups of wine restored her courage. She went to the entrance and struck the gong several times as a sign for everyone to be quiet.

"My companions and lovely family ones," she began, trying to imitate Adi. "Here you see Halima, young and lovely, whose head the wine has made all muddly."

The girls and the eunuchs burst out in laughter.

"Don't go on, Halima," Miriam said to her. "It's not working."

"I just wanted to apologize to everyone," Halima responded, hurt.

Miriam got up from her bed, went over to Halima, and led her back to her bed pillows. There Halima felt so vulnerable that the tears flowed profusely. She took Miriam's hand and kissed her fingers, one by one.

That whole evening Sara was unable to assert herself. She was used to having Halima all to herself that time of day, and now she watched her every movement jealously. All evening Halima had paid no attention to her. Now, as she lay next to Miriam, kissing her fingers, she instinctively turned to look for her, and she caught a glance that was full of jealous despair. She smiled at her vainly and defiantly began stroking Miriam's hair, face and neck. She pressed up close to her, hugged her, and kissed her passionately on the lips.

Sara was suffering the torments of hell. She emptied one cup after the other. Finally she couldn't take it any longer. She burst out crying and ran toward the door.

Halima pulled away from Miriam and ran after her. Her conscience had stung her and now she wanted to comfort Sara.

In an instant Miriam understood everything. The blood left her cheeks. She stood up.

"Sara! Halima! Come here!" she called out in a harsh voice.

Timidly and with eyes lowered, the girls approached her.

"What is this about?" she asked sternly.

Halima fell to Miriam's feet, clasped her hands around them, and wailed.

"So that's it," Miriam said blankly.

"No, no, it's not my fault!" Halima cried out. "Sara seduced me!"

Miriam pushed Halima away. She stepped over to Sara and gave a powerful slap to her face. Soundlessly, Sara fell to the floor.

Miriam turned her back on them both. When she saw the half-frightened, half-amused faces around her, her lips formed a faint smile.

"Sara!" she called out. "Collect your things and move to the windowless cell at the end of the corridor, immediately. That's where you'll sleep until you reform. Get up and go! And don't let me see you tonight again!"

Halima already felt infinitely wretched about having betrayed Sara so cheaply.

Sara got up, cast a sad look at Halima, and quietly disappeared from the hall.

Halima scooted on her knees over to Miriam, lifted her arms in a gesture of supplication and looked at her with tearful eyes.

"And you, you little sinner, are going to move into my room," Miriam told her, "so I can keep my eyes on you. We'll see if you can mend your ways. Safiya and Jada can move in with Zainab."

At that instant Halima felt that blue sky had opened up above the hell into which she had just been thrown. She hesitated to believe what she'd heard, but she gathered her courage and lifted her eyes to see smiles on her companions' faces. She even broke a smile through her tears.

Unobserved, the eunuchs had already disappeared from the hall.

"It's time for bed," Miriam said.

One by one, and much subdued, the girls left for their rooms.

Hesitantly, Halima waited in the doorway.

“What are you standing there for?” Miriam said to her gruffly. “Go get your things and bring them back here.”

It was only now that Halima truly believed it. Yes, she was a sinner, outcast and condemned. She had also lost Miriam’s favor. But for all that she had also received the most wonderful gift. She was going to sleep in Miriam’s room, breathe the same air as her, enjoy her uninterrupted presence. And she was going to be in immediate contact with the mystery itself!

She barely noticed her companions smiling at her. They whispered to each other how pretty and sweet she was, and they threw her little kisses. She cast glaring looks at them as she went to her former bedroom for her things. Zainab, Jada and Safiya helped her. She was hopelessly ashamed. She stared at the floor and looked upset. With their help she made a bed for herself in Miriam’s room, quickly undressed, and hid under the blanket, as though she’d already fallen asleep. But her ears picked up every sound in the room. Finally Miriam came. Halima could hear her taking her clothes off and unfastening her sandals. Then—and her heart stood still for an instant—she made out quiet footsteps approaching her bed. She could feel Miriam’s gaze, but she didn’t dare open her eyes. And then—joy of joys—a gentle kiss touched her forehead. She suppressed the shiver that threatened to course through her body, and soon fell asleep.

This was the beginning of magnificent days for Halima. She was no longer burdened by a bad conscience as before. Ever since her transgression had been revealed and she had accepted punishment for it, her heart had become light and joyful. She still felt a bit awkward toward her companions. They would smile at her knowingly and threaten in jest to seduce her. She would make her tiny hand into a fist, shake it at them, and give them nasty looks. She became even more audacious about turning her nose up at people and things, and she didn’t mind if she became the center of attention again as the “little sinner.”

Sara avoided her, and Halima also felt awkward whenever they met. More than once she noticed that Sara’s eyes were red from crying. At

meals she was the recipient of her pained and reproachful glances. One day she finally mustered enough courage to approach her and say, "You know, Sara, I never meant to betray you. Really I didn't. It just came out."

Tears streamed down Sara's face, and her lips trembled. She would have liked to say something, but she couldn't. She covered her face with her hands and ran off.

But all these things struck Halima as trifles against the enormous happiness of being able to sleep in the same room as Miriam. She put herself entirely at her service. She did slightly regret that Jada and Safiya had had to leave Miriam on account of her. They were twin sisters and as alike as two peas. Of all the girls they were the meekest and most submissive. For a long time, whenever she saw one of them by herself, Halima couldn't tell whether it was Jada or Safiya. The only joke they played was to tease her by each pretending to be the other, which made them laugh till they cried. For some time after being forced to leave Miriam's room they were visibly dejected. But eventually they bonded with Zainab, and together they formed an inseparable threesome.

As long as Halima still slept with Zainab and Sara, she had remained afraid of the night. Now she couldn't wait for it to come. On the evening of the second day Miriam said to her, "Don't ask me about anything and don't tell anyone anything. I'm here to watch over all of you."

These mysterious words provoked any number of thoughts in Halima. But for the moment she simply observed quietly. Miriam always came to bed last. Beforehand Halima arranged her bed nicely for her, then undressed and climbed into it, pretending she'd already fallen asleep. But through the barest slit of her eyelids she would watch Miriam come into the room, undress distractedly, and put out the candles. Then she would listen as she approached and gently kissed her. Finally, in a state of supreme bliss, she'd fall asleep.

Once, in the middle of the night, she awoke with the sense that something was amiss. She became afraid and was about to call for Miriam. But when she looked toward her bed, she saw nobody was in it. A mysterious panic seized her.

"Where has she gone?" she wondered. *Maybe she's looking in on the others*, she thought. *No, she's with Sayyiduna*, something inside of her answered with utter certainty.

With Sayyiduna? Chasms of mystery opened up within her soul. Acutely, she sensed her own frailty. She hunched together into a tight ball and held her breath. And she listened.

But Miriam refused to appear. Sleep abandoned her entirely. She thought, she shuddered with fear, and she enjoyed her shivers of curiosity, since she felt she had finally struck on the nerve of the mystery. The stars began to fade and the first birds began to chirp. Then the curtain that covered the doorway was gently pulled aside. Like a ghost Miriam noiselessly entered, dressed in a cloak that was trimmed in sable. She warily glanced in Halima's direction, then tiredly unfastened her cloak, letting it drop from her shoulders. Standing before her bed in her nightgown, she unfastened her sandals and sank into her pillows.

Halima was unable to fall asleep until the moment the gong sounded, signaling time to get up. Then for a moment she sank into a brief, deep sleep. When she awoke, Miriam was standing beside her bed as usual, smiling at her.

"You tossed in your sleep a lot last night," she told her sweetly. "You must have had some bad dreams."

And at that instant Halima really couldn't say whether it had all just been a dream or not. She got up, pale and exhausted, and was reluctant to look anyone in the eye all that day.

Since that night Miriam became more trusting toward Halima. In their free time she would teach her writing and have her practice her reading. They both enjoyed this process. Halima would muster all her ability to avoid embarrassing herself in front of her teacher, and as a result she made quick progress. Miriam was generous with praise. As an incentive she would tell her stories from her childhood, about life in her father's house in Aleppo, about the battles between the Christians and the Jews, about the wide seas and the ships that came from far-off lands. Through all this they grew quite close, becoming like older and younger sisters.

One evening when Miriam entered the bedroom and undressed, she said to Halima, "Stop pretending you're asleep. Come over here."

"What? Over there? Me?" Halima asked, startled.

"Or maybe you don't want to? Come on. I have something to tell you."

Trembling all over, Halima crawled in beside her. She lay on the very

edge of the bed for fear of giving away her excitement, and out of some incomprehensible reluctance to touch her. But Miriam pulled her close anyway, and only at this point did Halima feel free to press close.

“I’m going to tell you about the sorrows of my life,” Miriam began. “You already know that my father was a merchant in Aleppo. He was very rich and his ships sailed far to the west, laden with precious wares. As a child I had everything my heart desired. They dressed me in exquisite silks, adorned me with gold and gems, and three slaves were at my command. I got used to giving commands and it only seemed natural that everybody should submit to me.”

“How happy you must have been!” Halima sighed.

“Would you believe that I wasn’t particularly?” Miriam replied. “At least it strikes me that way now. My every wish was fulfilled immediately. But what kind of wishes? Only those that could be satisfied with money. The silent, secret ones that a girl’s heart loves to dream about so much had to stay buried deep inside me. You see, I’d learned the limits of human powers early on. When I wasn’t yet fourteen, a series of misfortunes befell my father, one after the other. It began with my mother’s death, which sent my father into a period of profound grief. He didn’t seem to care about anything anymore. From his first wife he had three sons who had become merchants in their own right. One of them lost his entire fortune and the other two stepped in to rescue him. They dispatched their ships to the shores of Africa and waited for their earnings. But then came the news that a storm had destroyed their vessels. All three of them turned to their father. He reunited with them and they sent more ships to the Frankish kingdom. But pirates seized them and overnight we became beggars.”

“Oh, you’d have been better off poor from the beginning!” Halima exclaimed.

Miriam smiled. She drew Halima closer to her and continued.

“All these misfortunes struck us before two years had passed. And then Moses, a Jew who was considered the richest man in Aleppo, came to visit my father. He said to him, ‘Look here, Simeon’—that was my father’s name. ‘You need money, and I need a wife.’ ‘Go on, get out,’ my father laughed at him. ‘You’re so old your son could be my daughter’s father. It would be more seemly for you to be thinking of death.’ Moses refused to let himself be put off—at that time, you see, the whole town

was saying I was the prettiest girl in Aleppo. ‘You can borrow from me as much as you want,’ he continued. ‘Just give me Miriam. She’ll be fine with me.’ My father took all this talk of courtship as a joke. But when my half-brothers found out about it, they begged him to strike a deal with Moses. Father’s situation was hopeless. He was also a good Christian and didn’t want to give his child to a Jew. But as frail and depressed as he was after all those misfortunes, he finally relented and let Moses take me as his wife. No one ever asked me about it. One day they signed a contract and I had to move into the Jew’s house.”

“Poor, poor Miriam,” Halima said through tears.

“You know, in his way my husband loved me. I would have preferred a thousand fold for him to hate me or be indifferent. He tormented me with his jealousy—he locked me inside my chambers, and because he could tell that I found him disgusting and was cold to him, he’d gnash his teeth and threaten to stab me. There were times when I thought he was crazy, and I was terribly afraid of him.”

Miriam fell silent, as though she had to gather her strength for what she was about to say. Halima sensed a secret approaching and she trembled. She pressed her cheeks, burning like white-hot iron, to Miriam’s breast and she held her breath.

“My husband,” Miriam resumed presently, “had a habit that deeply injured my modesty. The fact that I had finally become his property after all completely impaired his faculties. He would tell his business associates about me, describe my virtues, my modesty, my physical features in the most vivid terms, and boast that he had become master of the greatest beauty far and wide. Obviously he wanted them to envy him. You see, he would tell me repeatedly of an evening about how his friends had gone green with envy when he described my virtues and his enjoyment of them. You can imagine, Halima, how much I hated him then, and how revolting I found him. When I had to go to him, I felt as though I were going to my execution. But he would laugh and make fun of the greenhorns, as he called his younger associates, and say, ‘Ah, but for money everything is available, my dear. Even an old hen won’t look twice at a poor man, no matter how handsome he is.’ All this talking made me terribly angry and bitter. Oh, if I’d known just one of those greenhorns then, I would have shown Moses how much he was deluding himself! But what happened was the last thing I would have expected.

One day one of my maid servants pressed a tiny letter into my hand. I unrolled it and my heart began to race at its very first words. Even today I remember it down to the last syllable. Listen and I'll tell you what it said."

Halima trembled in rapt attention, and Miriam continued.

"The letter said: 'Sheik Mohammed to Miriam, the flower of Aleppo, the silver-shining moon delighting the night and illuminating the world! I love you and have loved you endlessly ever since I heard Moses, your accursed jailer, exalt your beauty and virtues to the heavens. Just as wine goes to an infidel's head and intoxicates him, so has word of your perfection intoxicated my heart. Oh, silver-shining moon. If you knew how many nights I have spent in the desert dreaming of your virtues, how vividly you've stepped before my eyes, and how I've watched you like the rosy dawn ascending. I thought that distance would cure me of longing for you, but it has only intensified it. Now I have returned and bring you my heart. Know, flower of Aleppo, that sheik Mohammed is a man and does not fear death. And that he comes close to inhale the air that you exhale. Farewell!'

"At first I thought the letter was a trap. I called the servant who had delivered the letter to me and insisted that she tell me everything honestly. She started crying and showed me the silver piece that some son of the desert had given her as payment for delivering the letter to me. What sort of son of the desert? I asked. Young, and handsome too. My whole body trembled. I was already falling in love with Mohammed. Of course, I thought, how would he have dared to write me the letter otherwise, if he weren't young and handsome? And then I suddenly became afraid that he might be disappointed when he saw me. I reread that letter over a hundred times. By day I kept it next to my breast, and at night I carefully locked it away in a chest. Then came a second one, even more passionate and beautiful than the first. I was aflame with my secret love. And finally Mohammed arranged a nighttime meeting on the terrace outside my window. That's how familiar he already was with my surroundings. Oh, Halima, how can I explain to you how I felt then? That day I changed my mind a dozen times. I'll go, I won't go—back and forth endlessly, it seemed. Finally I decided not to go, and I held to that all the way up until the appointed time, when I went out onto the terrace, as if obeying a secret command. It was a marvelous night. Dark

and moonless, although the sky was littered with tiny shining stars. I felt feverish and chilled by turns. I waited on the terrace like that for some time. I was just starting to think, *what if all this is just a ruse? what if someone wanted to play a trick on me and taunt old Moses?* when I heard a voice whispering, 'Don't be afraid. It's me, sheik Mohammed.' A man in a gray cloak vaulted over the railing as light as a feather, and, before I knew it, he had me in his arms. I felt as though worlds were being born and I was seeing infinity. He didn't ask if I wanted to go with him. He took me by the waist and carried me as he climbed down a ladder into the garden. On the other side of the fence I could see several horsemen. They took hold of me so he could scale the wall. Then he pulled me up into the saddle with him. Off we galloped, out of the city and into the dark of night."

"And all that happened to you?" Halima gasped. "Lucky, lucky Miriam!"

"Oh, don't say that, Halima. It breaks my heart when I think of what happened after that. We rode all night. The moon rose from behind the hills and shone on us. I felt horrible and wonderful all at the same time, like when you listen to a fairy tale. For a long time I didn't dare look in the face of the horseman who had me in his embrace. I only gradually relaxed and turned my eyes toward him. His gaze, like an eagle's, was fixed on the road ahead of us. But when he turned to look at me, it became soft and warm like a deer's. I fell in love with him so hard that I would have died for him on the spot. He was a magnificent man, my sheik Mohammed. He had a black mustache and a short, thick beard. And red lips. Oh, Halima! While we were on the road I became his wife ... They chased us for three days. My stepbrothers, my husband's son and a whole pack of armed townsmen. Later I found out that, as soon as they discovered I'd escaped, they interrogated all the servants. They discovered Mohammed's letter, and my husband Moses had a stroke, the pain and humiliation were so great. Both families immediately took up arms, mounted their horses, and set out in pursuit. We had gotten quite a ways out into the desert when we caught sight of the band of riders on the horizon. Mohammed only had seven men with him. They called out for him to drop me so that his horse could gallop faster. But he just brushed them off. We changed horses, but even so our pursuers kept getting closer and closer. Then Mohammed called on his

friends to turn their horses around and charge at our pursuers. He set me down on the ground and, saber in hand, led the seven in their charge. The groups of horsemen collided, and superior numbers prevailed. One of my half brothers was killed, but so was Mohammed. When I saw that I howled in agony and started to run. They caught me right away and bound me to the saddle, and they tied Mohammed's dead body to the horse's tail."

"Horrible, horrible," Halima moaned, covering her face in her hands.

"I can't tell you what I felt then. My heart became hard as stone and stayed open to one passion alone—the passion for revenge. I still had no inkling of the humiliation and shame that awaited me. When we arrived back in Aleppo I found my husband dying. Still, when he saw me, his eyes came to life. At that moment he seemed like a demon to me. His son tied me to the deathbed and lashed me with a whip. I gritted my teeth and kept silent. When Moses died I felt relieved. It was as though the first part of the revenge had been fulfilled.

"I'll only briefly describe what they did with me then. When they felt they'd tortured me enough, they took me to Basra and sold me there as a slave. That's how I became the property of Our Master. And he promised to take revenge for me on the Jews and the Christians."

Halima was silent a long time. In her eyes Miriam had grown to the stature of a demigod, and she felt that through their friendship she had also gained immeasurably.

Finally she asked, "Is it true that Christians and Jews eat little children?"

Miriam, still lost in her terrible memories, suddenly shook loose from them and laughed aloud.

"It's not out of the question," she said. "They're heartless enough."

"How lucky that we're among true believers! Miriam, tell me, are you still a Christian?"

"No, I'm not."

"Maybe a Jew then?"

"No, I'm not a Jew either."

"Then you're a true believer, like me!"

"Whatever you say, sweet child."

"Does Sayyiduna like you very much?"

"I told you not to ask me questions," she frowned at her in mock

displeasure. "But since I've told you so much already, I'll tell you this. It's possible that he likes me, but what's certain is that he needs me."

"How does he need you? I don't understand."

"He's alone and he doesn't have anyone he can open up to."

"Do you like him?"

"You wouldn't understand. He's not sheik Mohammed, but he's definitely not Moses either. He's a great prophet and I admire him a lot."

"He must be very handsome."

"Silly kitten! Are you trying to make yourself jealous by asking me these things?"

"Oh, in spite of everything, you're so lucky, Miriam," Halima said, the thought coming from the bottom of her heart.

"Be quiet, cricket. It's late and you've got to sleep. Now go back to bed."

She kissed her, and Halima quietly slipped into her own bed. But she was unable to fall asleep for a long, long time. In her mind she went over everything she had heard from Miriam. And she imagined the abduction and horse ride in Mohammed's embrace so vividly that she could feel his breath and the touch of his mustache on her cheek.

She shuddered from some strange sweetness, and she was glad it was dark and no one could see her. But when, in her imagination, she saw the dead body of Mohammed tied to the horse's tail and being dragged along, she buried her little face in her pillow and sobbed. And, crying, she fell asleep.

Once, not long after that, she came upon a scene that filled her with a strange revulsion. She was roving around the gardens and exploring the underbrush as usual, when she suddenly heard some odd whispering coming from behind a bush. Quietly she approached the place. Sara and the eunuch Mustafa were lying in the grass, doing things that Apama usually talked about in her lessons. She shuddered. She wanted to flee, but some invisible power bound her to the spot. It took her breath away, and she was unable to look away from the pair. She stayed put until they rose to leave.

She wondered if she should tell Miriam what she had seen, to avoid having to keep another secret from her. But hadn't she already betrayed

Sara once before? No, she couldn't accuse her again. Instead she'd pretend she hadn't seen anything. It was just an accident that she'd discovered this anyway.

And when, subsequently, she actually managed to keep quiet, she felt relieved. She was able to look Sara in the eye again. It was as though she were settling an old debt to her with her silence.

CHAPTER FOUR

In the castle, meanwhile, ibn Tahir was undergoing the greatest transformation of his life. For several days after his arrival everything kept spinning and going hazy before his eyes, as though someone had struck him on the head with a heavy club. But he quickly adapted to the new order. After a fortnight had passed, not only was he one of the best novices, but he had also become a passionate and fervent adherent of Ismaili teachings. His face also underwent a striking change. The softness and roundness of his cheeks disappeared. They collapsed, and the expression of his face became harsh and determined. He appeared to be a full ten years older than when he had arrived.

During this time he had gotten to know his companions, their superiors, and the school's overall curriculum thoroughly.

Captain Manuchehr didn't just train them in military maneuvers, he served as their geography instructor as well. Leaving the castle, he would ride so far south with them that when they turned to face their point of departure they could see the peak of Demavend jutting above the surrounding mountains. This he chose as the orientation point for his explanations. When he still served in the sultan's army, he had traveled across this entire realm several times. Now, on a huge sheet of parchment, he drew all the major mountain ranges, all the most important cities and markets, and all the military and caravan routes. He spread the map on the ground before the novices, using Demavend to determine the compass points, and began describing the location of individual geographic features and crossroads. To bring the lesson to life and heighten his listeners' zeal, he wove recollections of his life in the military into his descriptions. And each novice was assigned the task of determining the location of and distance to his hometown. As a result, these lessons were among everybody's favorites.

A new subject that al-Hakim taught was particularly unusual.

Formerly this man had moved in court circles in the West. He was familiar with the life of the courts in Byzantium and Cairo, as well as in Baghdad. He had been the guest of many powerful princes and had seen numerous peoples, whose ways and traditions he had thoroughly studied. Now he distilled all this experience into a particular subject which he imparted to his students. He taught them how the Greeks, Jews, Armenians and Arabs greeted each other, what their customs were, how they ate, drank and enjoyed themselves, and what they did for a living. He showed them how to appear before this or that prince, what various rulers' ceremonies required, and he provided them with the basics of the Greek, Hebrew and Armenian languages. Through all of this he performed like some Greek tragedian, playing first an exalted prince, then a meek petitioner, walking about tall and proud one minute, then falling face first to the floor or bowing low before phantoms, while smiling half-ingratiatingly and half-slyly. The novices had to imitate him, playing parts with him and exchanging greetings in foreign languages. Every now and then the proceedings were interrupted by riotous laughter, and the learned Greek would willingly join in.

Besides dogma and Arabic grammar, dai Ibrahim also explicated the Koran and taught algebra and mathematical disciplines. Ibn Tahir soon came to feel genuine admiration for him. He felt as though dai Ibrahim knew everything. When he interpreted the Koran, he would also make philosophical digressions, talk about other faiths, and share the basics of Christianity, Judaism, and even the mysterious Indian teachings proclaimed by the Buddha, alongside other pagan beliefs. He would explain in detail why all those faiths were in error, and demonstrate how much truer were the teachings of the Prophet, which found their most perfect expression in the doctrine of the Ismailis. In conclusion he would condense all these reflections into concise sentences, which the novices had to write down and then memorize.

Once dai Abu Soraka came to class with a thick paper package under his arm. He unwrapped it carefully, as though it contained something mysterious and valuable, then pulled out a stack of minutely inscribed sheets of parchment. He set these down on the rug before him and put his heavy hand over them.

"Today I will begin to teach you about the life of Our Master. You will hear about his suffering, his struggles, and the great sacrifices he has

made for the Ismaili cause. This stack of writings in front of me now is the result of his untiring efforts. All of this was written carefully by his hand for you, so that you can learn from his life what it means to sacrifice yourself for the just cause. That's why I want you to take careful notes on everything you're going to hear, and then learn it well. Behold, here is the fruit of his labors on your behalf."

The novices stood and approached the writings that lay in front of the dai. In silent admiration they looked at the beautifully inscribed sheets, which rustled as they slid through their teacher's fingers. Suleiman wanted a closer look and reached for one of the sheets. But Abu Soraka quickly stretched his hand out, as if protecting the writings from desecration.

"Have you lost your mind?!" he exclaimed. "This is the manuscript of a living prophet."

The novices gradually returned to their places. In a reverent voice, the dai started to introduce them to the life and achievements of their supreme commander. To begin with, he wanted to provide them with a brief outline of the external events, so it would then be easier to shift to the details that were described in the sheets before him. They heard that Sayyiduna, their commander, had been born sixty years ago in Tus, that his name was Hasan and that his father Ali came from the famous Arab clan of Sabbah Homairi. In his early youth he had gotten to know several Ismaili teachers and missionaries and immediately sensed the absolute rightness of their doctrine. His father himself had secretly been a devotee of Ali. In order not to awaken suspicion, he had sent the young Hasan to Nishapur to study with the Sunni refiq Muafiq Edin. It was there that Hasan become acquainted with the present grand vizier Nizam al-Mulk and with the astronomer and mathematician Omar Khayyam. They were fellow students who, when they fully realized the falseness of the Sunni faith and the vanity of its exponents, resolved to devote their lives to the Ismaili cause. They swore that whichever of them first attained success in public life would help the other two advance, so that they could more effectively serve the one true cause.

The grand vizier failed to keep his promise. On the contrary! He lured Sayyiduna to the sultan's court, where he had set a dangerous trap for him. But Allah protected his chosen one. He wrapped him in the cloak of night and led him to Egypt and the caliph there. But even there, jealous

individuals rose up against him. He overcame them and, after much wandering, returned to his homeland. Allah gave him the fortress of Alamut so that he could use it to launch the struggle against false teachings and ultimately overcome the false rulers and despots. His entire life is strewn with miracles, mortal danger and the grace of Allah. Abu Soraka continued.

“Once you hear all these wondrous stories, which seem more like legends than truth, you’ll know Our Master to be a true and powerful prophet.”

And in the following days he began recounting in detail the most improbable events and experiences from the life of the supreme commander. The novices’ picture of a strong prophet gradually took shape, and it became their most fervent wish to see him in person someday, and to prove themselves to him through some feat or great sacrifice, because meaning something in his eyes meant the same thing for them as rising far above the mass of humanity.

By day, ibn Tahir no longer marveled at anything. He was a keen observer and an obedient student. He did everything the moment demanded of him, and he felt that everything had to be precisely the way it was.

In the evening, however, when he lay with his hands clasped behind his head and stared at the reddish flame emanating from the oil dish on its stand in the corner, he suddenly realized that he was living in some strange, mysterious world. He felt anxious and often he would wonder, “Are you, lying here, really the same Avani who used to tend father’s herd in Sava?” He felt that the world he was now living in and his former world were divided by the same kind of abyss that divides the world of dreams from the waking world.

He escaped from those dreams by writing poems. During poetry lessons, dai Abu Soraka asked the novices to celebrate in verse some personage or event of significance to the Ismailis. They had to write poems about the Prophet, about Ali, about Ismail and the glorious martyrs and their feats.

Ibn Tahir felt most drawn to Ali, the Prophet’s son-in-law, and he composed a poem about him that so impressed Abu Soraka that he

showed it to Sayyiduna. His fellow disciples learned it too, and soon ibn Tahir was known throughout Alamut as a poet.

ALI

First to know the Prophet, after his bride,
At the time when he wasn't yet ten,
In every battle he stood by his side,
And for him he selflessly bled.

The Prophet gave him his daughter to wife,
Fatima, the most beautiful girl,
He chose him to serve as caliph for life,
And then he let history unfurl.

Betrayed and defrauded of all of his rights
At the death of the Prophet he was.
And this was not the end of his plight:
He gave up his life as Allah's.

His holy relics lie in Najaf,
Enshrined in a gold-covered dome,
And the faithful who go there to worship Allah
Shed tears in the martyr's name.

Encouraged by his first success, ibn Tahir continued his experiments with poetry. Suddenly he felt that he had discovered a means both of expressing something of that eerie feeling that frightened him in the evenings and getting rid of it at the same time. He tried to fit everything that had seemed alien and obscure to him into verse, so that he could face it directly. Some of these efforts eventually became common property among the residents of Alamut, many of whom could recite them by heart. Two poems about Alamut and Sayyiduna were particular favorites.

ALAMUT

Where the Elburz rise up to the sky,
Where untamed waters flow

WHERE UNRAINED WATERS FLOW,
Where mountain torrents froth and spray
Enough to thwart every foe—

A mysterious castle stands on a rock,
Going back to the kings of Daylam.
Enclosed on all sides by a powerful wall,
It stands fast against arrows and storms.

At one time eagles nested there,
And hawks perched with their prey.
All predators found it a suitable lair,
So Alamut is its name.

Four towers guard the keep on the cliff,
Holding its mystery safe
From unholy hands grasping to pry
The sacred mystery away.

SAYYIDUNA

A powerful ruler controls Alamut
Like an eagle in its nest.
He guides and judges his followers,
For the sultan he cares not a whit.

Unseen, unheard, yet everywhere
You can sense his all-powerful hand.
There's no telling when and even less where
His retribution will land.
He was chosen by Allah and sent into the world.
He has suffered at numberless hands;
If you don't count the Prophet and Ali,
There has not been a holier man.

Around him so many wonders take place
That would baffle a Christian or Jew.

For his loyalty, faith, and his countless travails,
He opens heaven's gate to a few.

Poetry also played a role in their rhetoric lessons. Suleiman and ibn Tahir would compete with each other in front of all the others. Suleiman was the quicker, ibn Tahir the more reasoned speaker. Yusuf was most miserable of all during these lessons. He often claimed to ibn Tahir that he would rather spend the whole day doing maneuvers in the sun for stern Manuchehr, or even lash himself, jump around on a white hot metal plate, and perform all ten excruciating breathing exercises, which they had begun to master. There was only one thing that he feared as much as poetry, rhetoric, grammar and algebra, and that was Abdul Malik's fast. That was the one time when he felt that life and everything they did in the castle was senseless and empty. He would be overcome with a desire to lie down, go to sleep, and never wake up again.

Otherwise there were no particular issues that bothered Yusuf, and very little that surprised him, with the exception, perhaps, of ibn Tahir's ability to compose poems that he hadn't read anywhere and that hadn't been dictated to him. Publicly he called him a magician, but in private his earthbound imagination insisted that ibn Tahir had to have some secret source somewhere that he drew his art from. That the poems he knew had been composed by poets, this much he understood. But that had been in the dim, dark past, back when heroes still walked the earth and did battle with demons and other supernatural beings. But that his companion, who slept in the bed next to his and was a head shorter and a lot weaker than him—that this person could be one of those poets was something his simple brain refused to accept. He could more or less understand that Sayyiduna was a great prophet, despite the fact that the two of them lived in the same castle. Sayyiduna was invisible and found it unnecessary to appear to anyone. Ibn Tahir argued and joked with Yusuf every day. Despite these doubts he sincerely admired him and was proud of their friendship.

Although he was a peerless swordsman and snare thrower and always the first to volunteer for any dangerous ordeal, Suleiman easily got jealous of the successes of others. Once, when somebody praised Yusuf and ibn Tahir to him, he replied, "One's a fool and the other's full of himself."

Even so, the three of them were inseparable. Whenever others attacked Suleiman's companions, he defended them. He would become furious and refute them.

"When you're able to withstand as much exertion and throw a spear as far as Yusuf, then you can talk."

Or regarding ibn Tahir, he might say, "If you had just a fraction of his intellect in your heads, you wouldn't just be full of yourselves, your heads would be so puffed up they would have exploded long ago."

But nobody held these taunts against him, because it wasn't just Yusuf and ibn Tahir who liked him, but the whole school, including the teachers.

One of the strictest injunctions was against any discussion of women or matters of sexuality in general. Thus it was that it took the novices' breath away when Ibrahim unexpectedly touched on this delicate subject in one of his lessons. He had just spoken about the Prophet's wives. Then he cleared his throat, lowered his gaze, and fixed it on the young men sitting in front of him. He began in a grave voice.

"The Prophet himself did not forbid believers to marry and enjoy a life shared with the opposite sex. He himself provided the model of a steadfast spouse and good father. And yet at the same time he set a luminous goal before all believers—martyrdom for the holy faith and the greatest reward for this sacrifice—eternal joy in the gardens of paradise. Following his august example, the earliest believers were able to combine the two—a pleasant life with women and courageous sacrifice for his teachings. But when the Prophet died, dissension grew among his believers. The men just wallowed around in harems and fought for power and other earthly possessions. Forgotten was the Prophet's commandment to sacrifice for the great cause, to fight sword in hand, even to die a martyr's death for it ... Now Sayyiduna has drawn a line between that and his own actions. On that side are Baghdad and the Seljuk tyrants with their depraved adherents. On this side are you and us. You who are about to be consecrated as fedayeen are an elite corps whose ultimate purpose is sacrifice and martyrdom for the holy cause. You must therefore be different from them in every way. This is why Sayyiduna has issued the strictest injunction for you: you must neither marry nor otherwise succumb to any kind of debauchery. As if you already inhabited the heavenly gardens that have been created for you,

you are forbidden to speak of impure things. You are also forbidden to think about them or secretly submit to them in your imagination. Nothing is hidden from Allah! And Sayyiduna has been chosen by Him and designated to be your guide. The strictest punishments await any who would violate this injunction. Whoever is caught in an unseemly conversation will be immediately demoted to foot soldier. One of your rank has already met with that punishment. Once you've been consecrated, whoever has intercourse with a woman or, still worse, marries, will be put to a hideous death. First, the executioner will put out his eyes with a red-hot iron. Once the worst pain has passed, his limbs will be pulled out of his living body, one by one. The supreme commander has deemed these punishments appropriate for anyone who violates his commandment.”

The novices felt an icy shudder at these words. They didn't dare look each other in the eye. Some of them vividly imagined the horrific punishments. They tensed up, and barely stifled sighs escaped from a few of them.

When dai Ibrahim saw the effects of his words, an imperceptible smile passed over his unmoving face. He continued in a much gentler voice.

“Don't be frightened by Sayyiduna's injunction. It only appears to be cruel. Because who among you would even think of trading the reward that awaits you for your sacrifices, for the dubious pleasure that violating Sayyiduna's commandments could offer you? Each of you who is steadfast in carrying out what you're commanded to do will be given eternal delights! And what delights! As martyrs for the holy cause you will enter into gardens where streams flow clear as crystal. You'll recline on soft pillows amid pavilions of glass and stroll in the shade of lush, leafy trees through perfectly tended gardens. You'll be surrounded by flower beds full of exquisitely shivering blossoms. Fair-limbed girls with dark eyes shaped like almonds will serve you the choicest food and drink. They'll be at your service! Allah specially created these girls so that they will retain their youth and virginity, even though they submit completely to your wishes ... Once you are consecrated, you'll be ready to earn these delights. Allah has given Sayyiduna the key to the gardens intended for you. Sayyiduna will open the gates to paradise for whoever carries out his commandments faithfully. How can anything deter you from the path to this reward?”

That evening the novices gathered on the rooftop and ibn Tahir said, “Our teachers have encouraged us to use our free time to talk about anything we’ve learned in the course of the day. Today dai Ibrahim explained why Sayyiduna forbids us to be unchaste in word and thought as well as action. I don’t think we’d be violating that injunction if we discuss everything we’ve heard, the way we usually do, and come to some conclusions about how to act so that we can avoid temptations more easily.”

These words frightened some of the novices.

“I’m against it,” Naim said. “Dai Ibrahim forbade us to talk about unchaste things. You heard the punishments for violators.”

“Don’t make a mountain out of a molehill, Naim,” Jafar countered. “We are allowed to discuss anything our teachers have lectured about on the same day. Nobody can punish us for discussing the subject intelligently and matter-of-factly.”

“Just as long as the subject’s not women and other indecent things!” Naim grew excited.

Yusuf lost his temper.

“Over the parapets with the runt!”

Frightened, Naim backed away toward the exit.

“Stay here!” Suleiman yelled at him. “That way you can’t claim later that you weren’t here. And if you don’t stop being a pest, some of your fur is going to fly tonight after the lights go out.”

Ibn Tahir began.

“Let me speak frankly and directly so that we get these things out in the open at once. I’m convinced that none of us would even think of actually having an affair with a woman. We wouldn’t even talk about it, from here on out. We can control our actions and our tongue. But how are we supposed to govern our thoughts when they attack us in moments of weakness—not to mention our dreams? For while Iblis doesn’t hold power over our will, he does hold power over our imagination and our dreams. For instance, on a number of occasions I’ve deliberately tried to refrain from indecent thoughts. And I’ve been on the verge of thinking that I’d won. But then a lewd dream comes to you, as if inspired by some evil spirit, and the whole following day your imagination is its prisoner. So you start over, until you slip again. But the injunction is ironclad and refuses to recognize this natural weakness. How do we deal with that?”

Suleiman responded, “Why worry our heads over this? Dreams are just that: dreams. Nobody can be held accountable for them, any more than for every thought that runs through your head.”

“He’s right!” Yusuf exulted. “It’s like he took the words right out of my mouth.”

“No, I don’t know if that works,” ibn Tahir mused. “The injunction is definite and clear, so there has to be some way for us to overcome our weakness.”

Jafar joined in.

“You’ve hit on it exactly, ibn Tahir. If the injunction is as it is, then it has to be possible for us not to violate it. Each of us has to resist the insinuations of the evil spirit with all his might. That way we can liberate our thoughts and even our dreams from its influence.”

“I’ve tried that,” ibn Tahir said. “But human weakness is enormous.”

“It’s not smart to pick a fight with a more powerful opponent,” Yusuf grumbled.

Then Obeida, who had been listening silently until then, smiled knowingly.

“Why all the speeches and arguments, friends,” he said, “when in fact the matter is much simpler than that? Do you think Sayyiduna could give us a commandment we couldn’t fulfill? I don’t think so. So listen. Hasn’t Sayyiduna promised us a reward for our endurance, for our sacrifice? He has, and it’s the heavenly delights in the gardens of the beyond. Let me ask you: is a righteous man allowed to look forward to his future reward? You’ll all say, of course! So we also have every right to look forward to the joys that Sayyiduna has promised as our share after death. In our thoughts we can look forward to the beautiful gardens and the bubbling springs, we can imagine the choice food and drink that we’ll be served, and finally, in our imagination we can also enjoy the embrace of the dark-eyed maidens who will be assigned to serve us there. Where’s the impurity in that? If the evil spirit ever assaults us with its temptations, we can elegantly sidestep it with thoughts of the exquisite heavenly gardens where we’ll be able to lord over things to our heart’s content, without having a bad conscience to spoil our fun. That way we can please both Allah, who will have prepared the gardens for us, and Sayyiduna, who will reward us by opening the gates that lead into them—and ourselves, because we can

give free rein to our imagination without sinning.”

The novices approved loudly and in high spirits.

“You’re incredible, Obeida!” Yusuf exclaimed. “How come I didn’t think of that myself?”

“Obeida draws an ingenious conclusion,” ibn Tahir suggested. “Formally there’s nothing wrong with it. But in my opinion impure desires are still indecent, even if we set them in the framework of the heavenly gardens.”

“I think you’re upset you didn’t think of it yourself,” Obeida snapped.

“No, ibn Tahir is right,” Jafar said. “Sin is still sin, wherever you do it. You can’t get around as clear an injunction as Sayyiduna has given us with some trick.”

“You’re trying to spoil everything for us with your brooding,” Yusuf said angrily. “As far as I’m concerned, Obeida is right, and nobody can keep us from looking forward to the reward that’s going to be rightfully ours.”

“As you see fit,” Jafar observed and shrugged his shoulders.

In the evenings, when torches flickered in front of the supreme commander’s building, when the gurgling of Shah Rud could be heard in the distance, and when the evening horn sounded its call to prayer and bed, a painful melancholy would come over the novices. The day’s hard schooling with its demanding tasks and discipline was behind them, and their thoughts could roam free. Some of them sought solitude where they could indulge their feelings of homesickness, while others talked about what it was like out there, where life was completely different.

“I wish I were a bird,” Suleiman said one night. “I’d fly to see what my two sisters are doing. Our mother is dead, and father has two other wives who also have children. My sisters will be a burden to them, and I suspect they’ll treat them badly. They’ll want to get rid of them. I’m afraid they’ll persuade my father to sell them to the first suitor who comes by. Oh, I can’t tell you how this is eating at me.”

He clenched his fists and buried his head in them.

“My mother is very old,” Yusuf said, brushing his heavy paw across his eyes. “She has a hard time tending the livestock and pastures, and I’m afraid the neighbors cheat her because she’s all alone. Why did I ever

leave her?”

“That’s right, why?” ibn Tahir asked.

“It was her wish. She said to me, ‘You’re a strong Pahlavan, my son. The Prophet himself would be proud of you. And if your father, who cherished the martyr Ali more than anything in the world—if your father were still alive, he’d surely send you to study the true faith with one of the dais who serve the true caliph ...’ At that time the grand dai Husein Alkeini was traveling through our area, recruiting for Our Master. I went to him and he sent me here, to Alamut.”

“And you, Naim, what brought you to the fortress?” ibn Tahir pursued.

“My village isn’t far from here,” Naim replied. “I heard that a powerful dai at Alamut was assembling an army to lead against the infidel sultan. Back home we were all true believers, so my father didn’t have any objection to my leaving to serve Sayyiduna.”

“And you, Suleiman?”

“What is there to say? People were saying there was going to be a war and that a grand dai who had caused a lot of miracles to happen had taken over Alamut in the name of the caliph of Egypt, and that he was planning to attack the sultan from there. ‘Things are going to happen here, Suleiman,’ I told myself. Dai Abdul Malik was traveling through our area and I joined him.”

“Our clan had always been faithful to Ali,” Obeida said. “There were nine of us brothers and someone had to leave home. I asked my father and he gave me his blessing.”

“How about you, Jafar?”

“I studied the Koran, the Sunna and the history of Islam scrupulously, and I realized that Ali had been wrongly deprived of the Prophet’s legacy, and that the caliph of Baghdad was unjustly occupying the regent’s throne. An Ismaili dai visited our area—it turned out to be our superior, Abu Soraka—and I had some learned discussions with him. I agreed with his teachings and I asked my father for permission to go with the missionary. When he heard that my teacher was headed for Alamut, to join Sayyiduna, he gladly consented. People were already saying about our supreme commander that he was a very holy man.”

These conversations helped them get over their homesickness, their feelings of loneliness and their isolation from the world. When the sound

of the horn roused them from their sleep the next morning, the vulnerabilities of the evening were already forgotten. The cold water in which they washed was a foretaste of the new day's rigor. Once again they stood with both feet firmly in Alamut. Their only concern was whether they would be able to answer their teachers' questions well and whether their superiors' expectations would be too great. Their spirits untroubled and high, they devoted themselves to working for the Ismaili cause.

One morning, when the novices and Manuchehr returned to Alamut from their maneuvers, Abu Soraka addressed them.

"Today you have a free day. The dais from the surrounding fortresses have come to get further instructions from the supreme commander. Also, we will report to them on your successes and failures. Keep quiet and use the time to study."

The novices were overjoyed. They ran to their sleeping quarters to fetch their tablets and notes. Some of them took them out onto the ramparts, while others, more curious, sat around the courtyard in the shade of the buildings and kept a watchful eye on the building of the supreme commander.

The guard out front had been reinforced. The black spear carriers stood as motionless as statues. From time to time some dai or other would dart past, dressed in his ceremonial white cloak. The novices would immediately whisper to each other whatever they knew about him. If it was someone they didn't recognize, they would try to guess who it might be.

There was a commotion in front of the guard tower on the lower terrace. A group of horsemen had ridden in through the main gate. Soldiers bounded toward them and held their horses so they could dismount. An unassuming little man in a billowy cloak who had jumped off a short, shaggy white horse hurried up the steps, surrounded by others who followed him with evident respect.

"Abu Ali! The grand dai! I know him," Suleiman exclaimed, instinctively rising to his feet.

"Let's get out of here," Yusuf proposed.

"No, let's wait!" ibn Tahir said. "I'd like to see him close up."

In the meantime the group had drawn closer to them. Soldiers who happened to be nearby were turning toward the new arrival and bowing respectfully.

“They’re all of them dais,” Suleiman whispered, his voice trembling excitedly. “Abu Ali went to get them himself.”

“Look! Dai Ibrahim and dai Abdul Malik are in the crowd,” Yusuf exclaimed.

In his billowy cloak Abu Ali strode across the terrace with great dignity, his whole body swaying solemnly as he went. He smiled affably at the soldiers saluting him. It was obvious he was aware of how much a friendly smile from him meant to his devotees. His face was covered with wrinkles. A sparse, grayish beard and drooping mustache to match surrounded his almost toothless mouth. When he walked past the novices, they bowed to him tautly. His little eyes beamed with joy. He drew one hand out from beneath his cloak and waved kindly to them. He bore an uncanny resemblance to a little old woman.

When the group of dais had gone past, the novices straightened back up.

“Did you see! We were the only ones he waved to!” Suleiman exclaimed, his voice shaking with happiness. “Abu Ali is second only to Sayyiduna!”

“It’s a shame he isn’t a little more imposing,” Yusuf suggested.

“Do you really think intelligence depends on height?” Naim countered.

“Looking at you, I could believe it.”

“I like his simplicity,” ibn Tahir said. “He smiled at us as if we were all old friends of his.”

“Even so, he has a lot of dignity,” Naim continued.

“He’s a learned and accomplished man,” Suleiman observed. “But I can’t imagine he was ever much of a soldier.”

“Could that be because he didn’t come storming in with a saber?” Naim said angrily. “Most of the dais I’ve seen have a frail appearance. They’re the leaders, and the muscular louts are their helpers.”

“I’d like to see Abdul Malik get his hands on them,” Suleiman snorted. “Then we’d see how frail the dais are.”

“What does Sayyiduna look like?” ibn Tahir asked.

They looked at each other.

Naim spoke.

“Nobody has ever told us.”

The great assembly hall occupied almost all of the ground floor of an entire wing of the supreme commander’s building. All morning long teachers, missionaries and other Ismaili dignitaries congregated there. They came from Rudbar and Qazvin, Damagan and Shahdur, and even from far-off Khuzestan, where grand dai Husein Alkeini led the Ismaili cause. As they waited for instructions from the supreme commander, they chatted with the locals and exchanged news with each other.

Heavy curtains covered the windows. The candles of numerous chandeliers illuminated the hall. Set atop tall stands in the corners were pans with resin, from which small flames flickered and crackled, sending a pleasant, heady scent throughout the room.

Beneath one of these lamp stands several people had gathered around the Greek Theodoros. These included the military commander of the castle at Rudbar, Captain ibn Ismail, the portly and whimsical dai Zakariya, and the young Egyptian Obeidallah, who knew the doctor from his days in Cairo. They were in a jocular mood, and laughter frequently punctuated their conversation.

“So you were with ibn Sabbah when he took over the castle, doctor?” the Egyptian asked his host. “Some incredible stories have been circulating about how it was taken. One has it that ibn Sabbah tricked the former castle commander into handing it over to him. Then there’s another that has him bribing the commander. I still don’t know what the truth is.”

The Greek laughed loudly, but said nothing.

Captain ibn Ismail signaled to the men to draw close. Then he spoke.

“I suspect it would be all right to explain to the young man how ibn Sabbah got Alamut into our hands. I wasn’t present myself, but one of my subalterns who at the time was assisting our commander has told me the story.”

Obeidallah and the portly Zakariya listened attentively. Theodoros frowned scornfully and kept at a distrustful distance.

“As you know,” ibn Ismail continued, “the sultan’s representative at the castle of Alamut was the stalwart Captain Mehdi. I didn’t know him personally, but I’ve heard that he wasn’t especially bright. Ibn Sabbah

had luckily escaped the traps set by the grand vizier and had finally fought his way through to Rai, where the commandant of the city, Muzaffar, was one of his great friends. Muzaffar helped him muster a force of seventy men, which included the subaltern who told me this story. Well, our commander got the notion of taking over Alamut, which had far and away the strongest fortifications of any castle in the region. He conferred with Muzaffar and finally came up with the following scheme ...”

While the Egyptian and the portly dai attentively followed this story, the doctor chuckled ambiguously. The captain noticed this, and it made him both flustered and angry.

“Why don’t you tell the story if you know better?” he asked, offended.

“But you can see, I’m all ears,” the Greek apologized with more than a touch of sarcasm.

“Let him make faces,” the Egyptian said, growing impatient. “We know him. He’s always pretending to know more than others.”

Ibn Ismail continued.

“So our commander devised his scheme and visited Mehdi in the castle of Alamut. He told him, ‘I am a dai and I have traversed half the known world. Now I’ve had enough of traveling and I’ve come here to find a peaceful retreat for myself. Sell me as much land outside of your walls as an ox hide will cover. I’ll give you five thousand gold pieces for the land.’ Mehdi practically burst with laughter. ‘If you really can give me that much money, I’ll give you the land you want on the spot.’ He assumed it was impossible for a poor dai to have that much wealth. Ibn Sabbah reached beneath his cloak, pulled out a bagful of gold pieces and started counting out the money. Mehdi couldn’t believe his eyes, and he thought, ‘What can it hurt the castle if I sell the old dai a scrap of land beneath its walls? And I’ll get rich overnight.’ So they took an ox hide, let the bridge down over Shah Rud, and walked across it out onto the rocks under the castle walls. Ibn Sabbah pulled a sharp blade out from under his belt and started using it to cut the hide into thin strips. One after the other, officers and soldiers came over to stare at what the odd stranger was doing. No one even imagined what the dai might have in mind. When the hide was completely cut up, ibn Sabbah tied the strips together, drove a stake into a crevice, and fastened to it one end of the cord he’d created. Then, with the other end of the cord in hand, he

began to circle the fortress. It was only at this point that it dawned on Mehdi. ‘Thief! Swindler!’ he shouted at ibn Sabbah and reached for his sword. At that instant there was a thundering sound over their heads. They looked up in fright. A band of horsemen with sabers drawn was galloping across the bridge and into the fortress. Ibn Sabbah laughed. ‘Too late, friends,’ he said. ‘The castle is mine now, and if you so much as touch a hair on my head, none of you will escape alive. But I keep my deals, Mehdi! Take the five thousand gold pieces and go with your people wherever you want.’ ”

Al-Hakim burst out laughing. He held his well-fed belly while tears streamed from his eyes, and he giggled so much that it hurt.

The Egyptian and the corpulent dai also laughed, though half at a loss. They couldn’t understand what the Greek was making fun of. Only Captain ibn Ismail challenged the doctor, with a furious stare.

“Oh, how naïve can you get?” the Greek brayed through his laughter. “So you’ve fallen for it too, old fellow! And Hasan and I actually cooked that morsel up just for the sultan.”

“So the subaltern tricked me?” The captain lost his temper, the blood racing to his cheeks and eyes. A vein on his forehead bulged with anger. “I’ll strangle him, I’ll thrash him like a dog!”

“You’d wrong him if you did, ibn Ismail,” the Greek said. “Because what he told you was the pure truth, at least as far as he was concerned. But not as far as you’re concerned. You rank higher. You should be able to guess what really happened.”

“Stop being so arrogant. Tell us!” the captain said angrily.

“First of all you should know that the previous commander of this castle, Mehdi, was from the line of Ali. To win him over to his side, the sultan appointed him to be his representative, a high post, before he was even thirty. But to keep any possible danger at arm’s length, he posted him to the edge of the world, which is to say here, to Alamut. And here the aspiring young man was bored to death. From morning to evening he would drink, gamble and fight with his officers and subalterns. For the evenings he assembled a huge harem of women, dancers, singers and other performers, and the people in Rai could only whisper about what went on there. He tamed a whole flock of falcons, and leopards went hunting with them in the neighboring mountains and forests. And all the time he’d curse the sultan and the caliph and swear that he would wreak

bloody revenge against them. Word of his doings undoubtedly reached Shah Malik, but the ruler thought, 'Let him curse me as much as he wants, but when the barbarians attack from across the border, he'll have to defend against them, if he values his own head.' When ibn Sabbah arrived in Rai, Muzaffar told him about all of this. I was also there, and once Muzaffar arranged for us to meet with Mehdi on one of his hunts. Hasan had received a nice sum of gold coins from the caliph of Cairo. He offered the commander five thousand to turn the castle over to him. He could use the money to travel to Cairo, where ibn Sabbah had recommended him to his friends and where the young pleasure seeker could take advantage of life in the big city. Mehdi was immediately ready. They just needed to find a cover for the sell-out, so that the sultan wouldn't persecute his kin. Ibn Sabbah just happened to be ready to play another of his old tricks on the sultan. He said, 'I'd like to seize Alamut at one truly amazing but nonetheless ridiculous stroke, so that all of Iran talks about it and the sultan laughs and thinks to himself: ibn Sabbah is still the same old clown. However you look at him, he's a jokester through and through. Let him have his fun for now.' We weighed a dozen options. Then the old legend of how Dido took Carthage came to me. I mentioned it to Hasan and he immediately seized on it. He exclaimed, 'That's just what I needed, brother!' So he and Mehdi devised a plan down to the minutest details. In the process the three of us laughed so much that we practically choked. And then, my dear captain, everything happened precisely the way your valiant soldier told you."

At this tale they all nearly split their sides laughing.

"What came of Mehdi?" the Egyptian asked after the initial hilarity had settled.

"You came from Cairo, he went to Cairo," the Greek replied. "And this minute he's probably living it up with the same maidens you enjoyed before him."

"I would have wagered a hundred to one," the corpulent dai said, "that our ibn Sabbah had turned into a serious man ever since the grand vizier banished him from the court at Isfahan. Everywhere people speak about him with nothing but the greatest respect, and many consider him a living saint. But judging from what you've just told us, he's still the same old prankster and buffoon."

"It's not good to talk about that too much," the Greek said much more

quietly. “There’s been a change in our commander ever since he settled at Alamut. He stays in his tower night and day and won’t receive anyone except Abu Ali. All of his orders go through him. It’s an uneasy feeling when you never know what he’s doing.”

Abu Ali entered the hall where the newly arrived dais were assembled. They all rose from their pillows and bowed. The grand dai smiled at them graciously and greeted them. He called on them to seat themselves so they wouldn’t be too far away, and then he addressed them.

“Honorable assembly of Ismaili dais and commanders! Our Master Hasan ibn Sabbah sends you his blessing. At the same time he asks you to excuse his absence. The administration of our vast brotherhood, the drafting of new laws and decrees, and age prevent him from physically participating in our assembly. He will be present in spirit, and he has authorized me to handle all important matters. Likewise, I will report our discussions to him and any particular wishes you may have.”

The news that the supreme commander would not take part in the assembly had a painful effect on the visiting dais. They thought he was slighting them, that he had set up a barrier between them and himself, and that he had retreated to some remote and rarefied place.

Heavysset dai Zakariya whispered to the Greek, “Is this another one of his pranks?”

The Greek replied, “It’s possible. I’m just afraid this prank might cost us our necks.”

The grand dai called on the teachers to report on their novices’ successes and failures. The school supervisor Abu Soraka went first. He began by describing the overall curriculum to the visiting commanders, then he explained what they had learned from him so far.

“The most outstanding of all the novices,” he said, “is a young man from Sava, the grandson of Tahir, whom the grand vizier had beheaded some twenty years ago. Not only is he exceptionally bright, with a good memory, but he also has a gift for poetry. Next after him, I would single out Jafar, an exceptionally serious young man who is a scrupulous student of the Koran. Then Obeida, who is clever, if not always dependable. Then Naim for his industriousness ...”

Abu Ali jotted the names down and added comments after each one. Ibrahim also accorded ibn Tahir first place. But Captain Manuchehr praised Yusuf and Suleiman ahead of all the others. In Abdul Malik’s

assessment, Suleiman held first place, followed immediately by ibn Tahir. The doctor was by and large satisfied with all of them and didn't name specific names.

The visiting dais were astonished to hear about such demanding and extensive schooling. What they heard filled them with a vague distrust, because the ultimate meaning and purpose of this education were incomprehensible.

Once the teachers were through with their reports, Abu Ali rubbed his hands in satisfaction.

“As you've just heard, we at Alamut are by no means asleep. All of Our Master's calculations since he took hold of this castle two years ago have proven correct. The sultan is still in no hurry to cut short our ownership of this fortress, just as Hasan ibn Sabbah predicted two years ago. And the barbarians across the border don't care who controls it. If they want to invade, they'll have to attack it, whether it's us or the sultan's forces sitting here. And we would have to defend it, just as they would. We have made good use of the time the sultan has granted us at the castle out of these considerations. Our commander has carried out a complete reorganization of Ismaili life. Every believer has been trained to be an unyielding soldier, and every soldier is also a fervent believer. But of all our initiatives, the supreme commander considers the one that founded our school for fedayeen to be the most important. This school will produce our elite, who will be ready to make any sacrifice. It is still too early for us to foresee the full implications of this institution. I can only tell you this in the name of Our Master: the axe that will cut down the tree of the Seljuk line will soon be sharpened. The day may not be far off when the first blow will ring. This entire region as far as Rai is sympathetic to the Ismaili cause. And if, as our delegates from Khuzestan tell us, the grand dai Husein Alkeini is about to incite a mass rebellion against the sultan that will engulf that entire region, then we already know approximately when we will have to put our power to the test. But most likely some time still remains until that happens, and, until then, honored dais and commanders, act as you've acted until now. Which is to say, recruit new followers to our cause, one man at a time.”

While he had begun his address in an ordinary, steady voice, as he progressed he grew more and more impassioned. He gesticulated, winked knowingly, and smiled. Then he rose up from the pillows on

which he had so far been sitting cross-legged, and he stepped out into the midst of the dais. He continued.

“My friends! I bring you a special order from Sayyiduna. Don’t let your success in recruiting new adherents dim your vision! Right now every individual counts. Don’t let the large numbers of our coreligionists seduce you into thinking, ‘Why should we still try to recruit this or that individual if he doesn’t have status or wealth?’ That individual may be the one person who will tip the balance in our favor. Don’t shy away from the effort! Go from person to person and try to persuade them. The most important thing is that you first gain their trust. Don’t go at it the same way each time, but alter your tactics from one case to the next. If you see that one person is strictly religious and has unbounded faith in the Koran, show the same qualities in yourself. Tell him that under the Seljuk sultans the faith is degenerating, and that the caliph of Baghdad has become their slave. If he counters that the imam of Cairo is a foreigner and a pretender, agree with him, but keep insisting that things are not right with the representative in Baghdad either. Your job will be easier if the object of your recruitment is a devotee of Ali or at least sympathetic to those teachings. If you see that he’s proud of his Iranian ancestry, tell him that our movement has nothing in common with the Egyptian regime. But if he has been unjustly slighted by the locals, reassure him that if the Egyptian Fatimids come to rule over us, he’ll find full justice. Whenever you come across a more intelligent man who secretly or even publicly mocks the Koran and its articles of faith, tell him that Ismaili doctrine is fundamentally identical to free thought, and that the teaching of the seven imams is just sand in the eyes and bait for the ignorant masses. Work each individual in accordance with his nature and his views, unobtrusively leading him to doubt the rightness of the existing order. At the same time, show yourselves to be modest and content with little, behaving in accordance with the ways and customs of whichever land you’re in and whichever class you’re dealing with, and in all insignificant things concur with your partner in conversation. He should have the impression that, although you may be learned and experienced, you still value him highly and place a great deal of weight on guiding him to the one true way. Once you’ve won his trust in this way, you may proceed to the second step of the plan. You will explain to him that you belong to a religious order that aims to establish justice

and truth in the world and settle accounts with foreign rulers. Involve him in passionate discussions, pique his curiosity, appear mysterious, hint and promise until you've completely confused him. Then demand that he swear an oath of silence, explain the doctrine of the seven imams, if he believes in the Koran you should demolish his faith, talk about our readiness and the unbeatable army just waiting for the order to attack the sultan. Force him to swear more oaths, confide in him that there is a great prophet at Alamut who has the fealty of thousands and thousands of believers, and so prepare him to vow his loyalty to us. If he's wealthy, or if his financial circumstances are at least bearable, extract large sums of money from him, so that he feels bound to us. Because long experience has shown that men hold tightly to whatever they've invested their money in. Out of those funds distribute trivial amounts to the poor among your followers, and do this at rare intervals, so that you keep them on a string. Tell them that these are just advance payments on the reward that they will receive from our supreme commander for their loyalty to the Ismaili cause. Once the individual is entirely in your hands, keep entangling him even more securely in your nets. Tell him about the horrible punishment that awaits apostates, about the saintly life of our leader and about the miracles that take place around him. From time to time return to that region and don't overlook a single one of the alliances you've established. For as Our Master has said, no one is so small that he can't serve our cause."

The dais and commanders listened to his speech with intense interest. From time to time he focused on one or the other of them, speaking and gesticulating as though he were communicating just with him.

"Now or never!" he cried out toward the end. "Let that be our motto. You are hunters and fishers of souls. Our Master chose you for that, and now he's sending you back into the world to carry out his instructions. Be fearless, for all of our strength, all of our believers, and all of our warriors stand behind each one of you."

Then he brought out a chest of money and began to settle accounts. Abdul Malik sat down beside him and opened a large book containing a record of who had already received how much, and how much additionally the supreme commander was allotting each of them now.

"From now on each one of you will receive a fixed wage every year," Abu Ali said, "which you should view as a reward for your loyalty and

your work. The greater an individual's successes and accomplishments, the higher the amount allotted to him will be."

The commanders began making their various requests. One of them had several wives and children, another had a long trip ahead of him. A third wanted to take the money for his comrade who had been unable to come, and a fourth lived in a region noted for its exceptional poverty. Only the representative of the grand dai of Khuzestan, Husein Alkeini, had actually brought something—three full bags of gold pieces—and asked nothing for himself or his superior.

"Here's a man who can serve as a model for you all," Abu Ali said, heartily embracing the delegate from Khuzestan.

"Robbery's good business," al-Hakim whispered to dai Zakariya with a knowing wink. Word had it that Husein Alkeini, on instructions from the supreme commander himself, preyed on the caravans that plied the routes out of Turkestan, and that this was one of the principal revenue sources that allowed Hasan ibn Sabbah to maintain his far-flung brotherhood.

When the disbursals were complete, the local commanders hosted a banquet of roasts and wine for their visitors and engaged them in more confidential discussions. They unburdened their cares and concerns to each other, and more than a few of them expressed serious doubts in the ultimate success of the Ismaili cause. They talked about their family concerns. One had a daughter at Alamut, another had a son someplace else, and between them they weighed the possibilities of marrying them off. Each one wanted to keep his family under his protection, and so they spent a long time arguing about who would have to let go of his child. And when these old friends had finally drawn close enough again, they turned to examine the supreme commander and his personal affairs.

Both of Hasan's daughters, Khadija and Fatima, lived under Abu Soraka's care in his harem. Khadija was thirteen, Fatima eleven. Hasan never called for them or asked about them since turning them over to Abu Soraka.

The dai told the delegate from Khuzestan, his guest, that the two girls were completely cowed, and that they shook at the mere mention of their father's name. Abu Soraka couldn't approve of that kind of treatment and was a very gentle father himself. What had become of Hasan's wives, nobody knew. They weren't at the castle.

The delegate from Khuzestan in turn described how the fortress of Gonbadan, which Husein Alkeini had conquered, was inhabited by the commander's son Hosein. He and his father had quarreled, and as punishment his father turned him over to the grand dai of Khuzestan to serve as a common foot soldier.

“That Hosein really is like a wild animal,” the delegate said. “But if I were his father, I would have kept him close by. Because if you can keep an eye on him, you'll have the best chance of reforming him, or at least making some difference. But this humiliation has just reinforced Hosein in his stubbornness and spite. And Husein Alkeini has more than enough problems with him.”

The guests stayed at Alamut for three days, and at dawn on the fourth day they left, each to his own destination.

Life at the castle settled back into its routines, until an unexpected visit turned them inside out again.

CHAPTER FIVE

One hot midsummer day an old man of about sixty came riding up to Alamut accompanied by some fifteen horsemen. The guard outside the entrance to the canyon stopped him and asked who he was and what brought him to the castle. He said that he was the former mayor, or *reis*, of Isfahan, Abul Fazel Lumbani, that he was coming from Rai, and that he had extremely important news for the supreme commander from the *reis* there. The officer on duty immediately rode up to the fortress to inform his superior of the arrival of the strangers.

This was right after the third prayer. The novices' afternoon break had just begun when the sound of the horn called them to assembly. They swiftly pulled on their sandals, put on their cloaks, reached for their shields and weapons, and hurried out into the courtyard. Captain Manuchehr and dais Abu Soraka, Ibrahim and Abdul Malik were already waiting, mounted on horseback.

The young men also mounted their horses.

"Something's happening," Suleiman whispered to his neighbor, drawing air in through his nostrils. His eyes shone in anticipation.

At that moment Abu Ali ran out and mounted his short, shaggy white horse. His short legs clamped onto the animal's flanks and belly as though they had grown together. He galloped to the head of the group of novices and called out to them.

"Men! I am giving you the honor of escorting a respected man who is a good friend of Our Master. This man is the former *reis* of Isfahan Abul Fazel, who hid the supreme commander for four months while the grand vizier pursued him. It is only fitting that we give him a welcome worthy of his distinction and contributions to our cause."

He spurred his horse and galloped off with the escort over the bridge and into the canyon.

Meanwhile, Abul Fazel had started to lose his patience. He kept

turning anxiously toward the canyon into which the guard had disappeared, his horse shifting its footing beneath him as though sensing his mood.

At last the troop of horsemen came pouring out of the canyon. Among them was Fazel's old friend Abu Ali, who came galloping up to him and embraced him right from the saddle.

"It's a pleasure to be the first to welcome you to Alamut," Ali said.

"Thank you, I'm glad too," Abul Fazel replied. His voice conveyed mild displeasure. "However, you didn't set any records for speed. It used to be others had to wait for me to receive them. But as they say, what goes around comes around."

Abu Ali laughed.

"Times change," he observed. "Just don't be angry, old friend. I wanted you to have an escort worthy of your high standing."

Abul Fazel was visibly mollified. He stroked his handsome silver beard and shook hands with the other dais and Manuchehr.

The captain gave an order and the detachment of novices galloped off toward the plateau in perfect formation. At a certain distance the detachment suddenly split into two columns which rode off in separate directions and then appeared to disperse haphazardly. Then came a harsh whistle, and the columns instantly rematerialized, whereupon the column leaders bellowed a command, and the horsemen charged each other with their lances lowered. It appeared as if they were about to do battle, but at the last moment they just slid past each other in fine formation, turned their horses around, merged into a single column again, and returned to the place where they had begun.

"Fine boys, an exemplary troop," Abul Fazel exclaimed in admiration. "It really made me sweat when they charged each other."

Abu Ali gave a satisfied smirk.

He gave a command, and they set out through the canyon to the fortress.

When they reached Alamut, Captain Manuchehr dismissed the novices. He also gave orders for the reis's escort and animals to be looked after. Then he followed their guest and the dais to the assembly hall.

Along the way, Abul Fazel inspected the fortress and its buildings and

was amazed at the large numbers of soldiers and grazing livestock.

“Why, this is a regular military camp, friend,” he said at last. “I was expecting to run into a prophet at Alamut, and maybe meet with a general. I can’t believe that what I’m seeing around me is the work of the ibn Sabbah I knew.”

“Didn’t I say you’d be surprised by a thing or two?” the grand dai laughed. “In fact, there are at most three hundred and fifty men at Alamut. But, as you saw, the soldiers are so well trained that it’s a sheer joy, and we have plenty of livestock and provisions. In each of the neighboring fortresses we have two hundred warriors who are all passionately dedicated to our cause. The whole region is sympathetic to us, and in case of a threat we can assemble up to fifteen hundred men at Alamut in a snap.”

“Even so that’s too little, far too little,” Abu Fazel muttered.

Abu Ali looked at him surprised.

“What do you mean?”

“You can’t be planning to resist the sultan’s entire army with that handful of men?”

“Of course we are. But there’s no threat at the moment, is there?”

Abul Fazel shook his head.

“I have to talk to ibn Sabbah,” he said.

The dais exchanged glances.

They reached the highest terrace and walked past guards bearing maces and into the building of the supreme commander.

The other dignitaries were waiting for them in the assembly hall. Abul Fazel’s eyes sought his old friend in vain.

“Where is ibn Sabbah?” he asked.

Abu Ali scratched his beard and replied, “I’ll go inform him of your arrival. The dais will keep you company and offer you something to eat and drink while you’re waiting.”

He hurried off. Abul Fazel called out after him.

“Tell him that I didn’t make this long trip for the fun of it. Reis Muzaffar has sent me with an important message. He’ll regret every minute that he keeps me waiting.”

Ill-tempered, he sat back amid the pillows. The dais sat around him,

while servants brought him food and drink.

“You’d think I was the one being offered a favor,” he murmured, half to himself.

“Don’t be upset, honorable sheikh,” Abu Soraka said. “This is the custom at Alamut.”

“The supreme commander hasn’t left his chambers since he took over the castle,” Ibrahim explained. “For days and weeks at a time he doesn’t speak with anyone except the grand dai.”

“I know those ploys,” Abul Fazel replied. “When I was still reis of Isfahan, I’d let anyone I particularly wanted to soften up wait outside my door for a long time. But that same door was left wide open to good friends. Ibn Sabbah himself could testify to that.”

“We’ve heard, honorable sheikh, that you once hid him in your house for four months while the grand vizier was trying to hunt him down,” the Greek said and winked at him conspiratorially.

The reis laughed out loud.

“Did he tell you that I thought he was crazy?” he asked. “I’d just like to know who in my shoes would have thought differently.”

“I’ve also heard parts of that story,” Abu Soraka offered. “But I don’t know exactly what took place.”

“If you’d like, I can tell you,” the former reis said, clearing his throat.

The dais quickly propped more pillows around him so he could stretch out more comfortably as his audience drew closer.

He began.

“It’s been many years since I last saw ibn Sabbah. It appears he’s changed quite a bit since then. But when I first met him, he was an incomparable jokester and a pleasure seeker without equal. The whole court would laugh at his jokes. No matter how bad the sultan’s mood was, ibn Sabbah could lighten it with a single prank. You can imagine how jealous the grand vizier became of him. Eventually he played the ultimate trick on him. At any rate, Hasan safely escaped to Egypt and within a year almost nobody at court remembered his name anymore. Except for the grand vizier, of course, who quite rightly feared whatever revenge he might take. So when he got word that ibn Sabbah had left Egypt, he issued a secret order to all of his spies throughout the land that they were to sniff out his whereabouts and get rid of him, if they found him. But it was as though he’d vanished into thin air.

“One day some sheikh all bundled up in a traveler’s cloak stepped out from behind the curtain over the door to my room. I was so frightened I almost had a stroke. When I regained my senses, I shouted to the servants, ‘Hey, blockheads! Who let this man in the house?’ Then the man tugged a corner of the cloak away from his mouth, and who do I see gaping at me but my old friend Hasan, hale and hardy and smiling from ear to ear. But this is when I really got scared. I hurriedly pulled the double curtain back over the doorway. ‘Have you gone out of your mind?’ I asked him. ‘You’ve got a hundred of the vizier’s henchmen on your tail, and you come strolling right into Isfahan and foist yourself off on a law-abiding Muslim, practically in broad daylight.’ He laughed and slapped me on the back just like in the old days. ‘Ah, my dear reis,’ he said. ‘How many friends I had back when I was still lording it over the sultan’s court. But now that I’m out of favor, they all shut their doors in my face.’ What could I do? I liked him, so I kept him hidden in my house. It’s true, he had to spend the entire time in his room. But he was patient, and he would spend whole days scribbling on some scraps of paper with his pen, daydreaming, and—whenever I’d visit him—entertaining me with funny stories and jokes.

“Once, though, he surprised me with a really strange statement. And what was particularly unusual was that he laughed slyly and ambiguously as he made it, like he always did when he was making a fool of someone. Of course I assumed he was joking and figured it would be appropriate for me to laugh with him. Here’s what he said: ‘Dear friend, I need just two or three men on whom I can depend unconditionally, and in less than a year I can bring down the sultan and his empire.’ I laughed so hard I practically burst my gut. But he suddenly became deadly serious, seized me by the shoulder, and gazed deep into my eyes. That look sent shivers down my spine. Then he said, ‘I am absolutely serious, reis Abul Fazel Lumbani.’ I jumped back and stared at him as though he were from some other world. Who wouldn’t gape if somebody, and a nobody at that, told him that he and two or three men were going to topple a state that stretches from Antioch to India and from Baghdad all the way up to the Caspian Sea? It immediately occurred to me that he’d gone mad from his long exile and fear of being pursued. I said a few reassuring words and cautiously slipped out of his room. I ran to see a doctor and asked him to give me something to cure

madness. After giving it a lot of thought, I offered Hasan that medicine. He turned it down, and at that point I felt he didn't trust me anymore."

The commanders laughed heartily at this story.

"That's really a good one!" the Greek exclaimed. "It suits him perfectly."

"And what do you think of Hasan's statement today, honorable sheikh?" Abu Soraka asked.

"I'm afraid, really afraid, that he was dead serious."

He looked at each one of them, shaking his head in complete bafflement.

Abu Ali returned and announced to their guest, "Let's go! Ibn Sabbah is waiting for you."

The reis slowly lifted himself off the pillows, excused himself with a slight bow, and followed the grand dai.

They traversed a long corridor, at each end of which a black giant stood supported by a heavy mace. They came to a narrow, winding staircase that led steeply up to the top of the tower, and they started to climb.

"Leave it to ibn Sabbah to choose the top of a tower for his quarters," the reis complained after a while and wiped the sweat from his brow.

"As you say, respected friend."

The stairway narrowed as it got steeper. The grand dai climbed it as though he were twenty years old. The former reis, on the other hand, puffed and wheezed fiercely.

"Let's rest for a minute," he said at last. "I'm out of breath. I'm not young anymore."

They stood for a moment while the reis caught his breath. Then they continued their ascent.

But after a while Abul Fazel blustered again.

"By my father's beard! Is there no end to this damned stairway? Has that old fox made his den so high up so he can keep making fools of the rest of us?"

Abu Ali quietly chuckled. As they approached the top of the stairway the former reis was barely able to breathe. He had his head lowered, so right up to the end he didn't notice the guard standing at the top. As he

negotiated the last steps, he nearly collided with two bare black legs. Startled, he lifted his head then practically jumped back in fright. In front of him, like a bronze statue, stood a half-naked Moor, as big as a mountain and as powerful as a bull. At his feet rested a mace so heavy that the reis could barely have budged it using both hands.

Abu Ali laughed as he supported the old man to keep him from falling back down the stairs. Abul Fazel carefully stepped around the guard, who remained in place, silent and motionless. As the reis proceeded farther down the corridor, he turned to look behind him one more time. He caught sight of the gaze that was following him. The Moor's eyes shifted to track his progress, their huge whites showing.

"I've never seen a sultan or a shah with a guard like this," the guest grumbled. "Not pleasant company, an African armed with a mace like that."

"The caliph in Cairo sent Hasan a whole detachment of these eunuchs as a gift," Abu Ali said. "They're the most dependable guards you can imagine."

"No, this Alamut of yours is not much to my liking," the reis commented. "No conveniences or comforts that I can see."

They reached a door outside of which stood a guard similar to the previous one. Abu Ali uttered a few words and the Moor raised the curtain.

They entered a sparsely appointed antechamber. The grand dai cleared his throat and something moved on the other side of one of the rugs hanging on the wall. An invisible hand lifted it, and out from beneath it appeared the supreme commander of the Ismailis, Hasan ibn Sabbah. His eyes shone cheerfully as he hurried over to his old acquaintance and firmly shook his hand.

"Look who's here! My host from Isfahan! Don't tell me you've brought me another cure for madness?"

He laughed jovially and invited both of the old men into his room.

The reis found himself in a comfortably decorated room that was reminiscent in every respect of a scholar's quarters. Along the perimeter, several shelves were covered with books and documents. The floor was covered with rugs, over which were strewn various astronomical instruments, measuring and calculating equipment, slates and writing implements, and an ink pot and several goose quills, also for writing.

The visitor took all this in with astonishment. He couldn't reconcile what he had seen in the fortress below with what was now before him.

"So you're not bringing me a cure for madness?" Hasan continued to jest, smirking and stroking his handsome beard, which was still almost completely black. "If not, then what philanthropic cause has brought you to this end of the earth?"

"I most definitely haven't brought you any cure for madness, dear Hasan," the reis finally said. "What I do have for you is a message from Muzaffar: The sultan has issued an order and the emir Arslan Tash has set out from Hamadan with an army of thirty thousand men to take Alamut. Its vanguard, the Turkish cavalry, could reach Rudbar today or tomorrow and will be outside your castle within a few days."

Hasan and Abu Ali exchanged quick glances.

"So soon?" Hasan asked and thought for a moment. "I didn't count on such quick action. Something must have changed recently at the court."

He invited his friends to have a seat amid the pillows and then dropped down beside them, shaking his head pensively.

"I'll tell you everything I know," Abul Fazel said. "Just be sure you make ready to evacuate the castle."

Hasan was silent. The reis discreetly looked him over. He wouldn't have thought he was already sixty years old. He was still youthfully agile. His skin was fresh and his large, intelligent eyes were lively and penetrating. He was more average height than tall. He was neither thin nor fat. His nose was long and straight, his lips full and distinct. He spoke loudly and directly and almost always with a tinge of facetiousness or concealed mockery. But whenever he grew thoughtful, his face underwent a painful transformation. The smile vanished and something dark and almost hard appeared in his features. Or he would seem absent, focused on something invisible, as people endowed with a powerful imagination sometimes are—an aspect that would arouse fear in those who were dependent on him. Overall it could be said that he was a handsome man. It bothered many that he often seemed to be conscious of his own virtues.

"Speak, I'm listening," he told the visitor, knitting his brow.

"In case you don't yet know," the reis began slowly, "I can tell you that your old enemy Nizam al-Mulk is no longer grand vizier."

Hasan flinched, and his whole body shuddered.

“What did you say?” he asked, as though he couldn’t believe his ears.

“The sultan deposed Nizam al-Mulk and named the sultana’s secretary as interim vizier.”

“Taj al-Mulk?” Abu Ali asked, overjoyed. “He’s our ally.”

“Not now that the sultana expects her little son to be proclaimed heir to the throne, as the law states,” the reis explained.

“What treachery,” the grand dai murmured.

Hasan remained silent and pensive. He leaned forward and began drawing odd circles on the carpet with his finger.

The two old men also fell silent. They watched his movements and waited for him to say something.

“If the sultana’s secretary has replaced Nizam al-Mulk, then it’s clear that our situation at the court has fundamentally changed,” Hasan said at last. “That crosses my plans a bit. I had thought I’d have peace until next spring. By then I would have completed my preparations. Now, I’m just going to have to speed them up.”

“Oh yes, I almost forgot the most important thing,” the reis interrupted him. “Nizam al-Mulk may have lost the viziership, but he’s been given an order to eliminate the Ismailis as soon as possible.”

“Then it’s a struggle to the death,” Abu Ali said grimly. “For the grand vizier that’s the same thing as ordering a wolf to clear out the sheepfold.”

“No, we’re no sheepfold yet, that’s for sure,” Hasan laughed. He had silently come to some decision, and his previous cheerfulness had returned.

“We need to take quick action,” he concluded. “What does Muzaffar think? Is he ready to help us?”

“He and I discussed all the possibilities at length,” Abul Fazel replied. “He likes you and he’s ready to cover your retreat from the Turkish cavalry. But he’s also helpless against the main force of the emir’s army.”

“I understand, I understand,” Hasan said. The old mischievous smile played around his mouth and eyes. “So where does His Excellency advise me to retreat to?”

“That was precisely the subject of our most heated discussions,” the reis observed. He acted as though he hadn’t noticed Hasan’s devilishness. “There are only two routes open to you: a shorter one to the west, leading through the untamed Kurdish lands to Byzantium and from there

to Egypt, and a longer one to the east. Muzaffar recommends the eastern route. At Merv, or even as soon as Nishapur, Husein Alkeini could join you with his army, and then the two of you could retreat toward Kabul and on to India, where any one of the local princes would be glad to give you asylum.”

“An excellent plan,” Hasan said, encouraged. “But what if my army isn’t able to hold out against the Turkish cavalry?”

“We talked about that possibility too,” the reis said, moving close to Hasan. “If a retreat with your full contingent seems out of the question, then Muzaffar offers you and those closest to you refuge with him. That’s why he sent me here.”

“Muzaffar has a sharp mind and I won’t forget his consideration for me by any means. But he can’t see into my mind or into my heart.”

Hasan’s voice abruptly turned dry and realistic.

“Alamut cannot be taken,” he continued. “So we stay. We’ll wipe out the Turkish cavalry, and by the time the sultan’s army reaches the fortress, we’ll be ready.”

Abu Ali looked at Hasan with shining eyes, eyes full of trust. But Abul Fazel was frightened.

“I’ve always seen you as a deft and capable man, my dear Hasan,” he said. “Lately your reputation has risen so much that you’re talked about throughout all of Iran. And with your intrigues at court you’ve proven that you’re a highly gifted statesman. But what you’re proposing now fills me with real concern and trepidation.”

“My work is only half completed,” Hasan replied. “Until now I’ve trusted to my statesmanship. But now I’m going to see what *faith* can accomplish.”

He gave that word particular stress. He turned toward the grand dai and spoke.

“Go call the commanders to council. All men should go to battle stations immediately. Tomorrow our novices are going to have to pass a test so they can be sworn in as fedayeen. They need to know everything.

“You will conduct the grand council in my absence. Tell the commanders that we have visitors approaching, and that I have ordained that we will wait for them here. Have each of them share his thoughts. Once you’ve heard them out, come back and report everything to me. Have the captain order his men to make all preparations for the defense

of the castle.”

“Everything will be done as you command,” the grand dai said, and hurried out.

The rumble of drums and a blast from the horn called the men to arms and the commanders to assembly. With a serious mien, Abu Ali awaited them in the great hall. The dais and the officers filed in.

When they were assembled, the grand dai looked them over and spoke.

“The sultan has deposed the grand vizier and ordered him to crush the Ismailis. The emir of Hamadan, Arslan Tash, has set out for Alamut with thirty thousand men. A vanguard of Turkish cavalry will reach Rudbar today or tomorrow. Within a few days black flags could be waving outside our castle. The mayor of Rai, Muzaffar, has promised us help. But our own preparedness is an even surer thing. Sayyiduna has sent me to find out how you think we can best resist an attack. Once he hears your recommendations he will take the necessary steps.”

Sitting on their pillows, the commanders exchanged surprised glances with each other. Here and there some of them whispered remarks to their neighbors, but for a long time none of them rose to speak.

“Captain, you’re an experienced soldier,” Abu Ali finally said to Manuchehr. “What do you think is our first priority?”

“We don’t have anything to fear from the Turkish cavalry,” the captain replied. “The fortress is ready for an attack, and anyone who takes it on will be badly burned. But how long we can hold out under siege against thirty thousand men with machines and assault equipment—that’s a difficult question.”

“How long will our food stores last?” the Greek asked.

“A good half year,” the captain replied. “But if we can dispatch a caravan to Rai, then Muzaffar will supply us for another half year.”

“That’s important,” Abu Ali commented, noting something down on his tablet.

Abdul Malik spoke next.

“Here’s what I think,” he said. “We mustn’t let ourselves get locked up in the fortress too soon. We can wallop the Turks on an open battlefield, especially if Muzaffar really does send help. The core of the sultan’s

army is still a long way off.”

The young officers who were present enthusiastically supported his plan.

“We mustn’t rush into things,” Abu Soraka commented. “We have to bear in mind that we have our wives and our children with us in the castle. They’d be finished if we were foolhardy enough to risk a battle in the open.”

“Haven’t I always said,” Ibrahim said, losing his temper, “that women and children don’t belong in the fortress with warriors?”

“I’m not the only one who has his family here,” Abu Soraka countered. By this he was referring to Hasan’s two daughters.

Dai Ibrahim angrily compressed his lips.

“I have the perfect suggestion,” al-Hakim said, laughing. “Let’s put our wives and children on the camels and donkeys and send them to Muzaffar. We can use that same caravan to bring needed foodstuffs back to the castle. There you’d accomplish three things at one blow. We’d reduce the number of mouths to feed, we’d rid ourselves of painful concerns for our families, and the caravan wouldn’t make half its trip for no purpose.”

“Good idea,” Abu Ali acknowledged, making some more notes on his tablet.

The discussion grew more and more impassioned. They tallied all the things they would need at the castle, argued about the rightful duties of various commanders, and recommended first one thing, then its opposite.

At last Abu Ali gave a sign that the assembly was over. He told the commanders to wait for their precise instructions and returned to join Hasan at the top of the tower.

In the meantime Hasan had learned from the former mayor of Isfahan what recent changes at the court had caused the sultan to move so suddenly. Up until that point he had had very good connections to court circles, considering that Taj al-Mulk, vizier to the young sultana Turkan Khatun, had been his confidant.

Sultan Malik Shah had legally designated his first-born son, Barkiarok, heir to the throne. He was the sultan’s son by his first wife. Just then the

twenty-year-old heir apparent was conducting a military campaign against a number of rebellious princes on the border with India. The young sultana used this absence to secure the Iranian throne for her four-year-old son Mohammed. Most strongly opposed to this plan was Nizam al-Mulk. The sovereign vacillated, submitting first to the influence of his old vizier, then to the charms of his young wife. The grand vizier had powerful support, primarily in the caliph of Baghdad and the entire Sunni clergy. The sultana had the support of Nizam's numerous enemies and the many individuals whom his power had reduced to insignificance. But so that her side could gain a counterweight against the Sunni clergy as well, the sultana's vizier sought out contacts with the Shia, among whom Hasan's Ismaili sect had the greatest influence. This court intrigue was practically made to order for the master of Alamut. He assured the sultana that his adherents throughout Iran would support her cause. Taj al-Mulk promised him that he and Turkan Khatun would try to prevail on the sultan not be too concerned about Hasan's exploits in the north of Iran.

In the course of two years the sultana and her secretary had kept their word. Whenever Nizam al-Mulk pressed the sultan to move against the Ismailis, the two of them would downplay Hasan's exploits and point out that the grand vizier's efforts were no more than the result of his personal hatred for Hasan ibn Sabbah. The sultan was glad to believe this. Since he was more inclined to Nizam's side in the choice of an heir, he was all the more willing to concede to the sultana and her vizier when it came to the Ismailis.

Now reis Abul Fazel told Hasan what Muzaffar's messenger from the court at Isfahan had told him. When Nizam al-Mulk learned that Husein Alkeini had become ensconced in the fortress of Gonbadan and was rousing all of Khuzestan against the sultan in Hasan's name, he was nearly frightened to death. He knew that he and Hasan still had a grim score to settle, and this led him to resort to extreme measures with the sultan. Years before he had manipulated Hasan's disgrace in the sultan's eyes by using a trick to portray him as a flippant jokester who had tried to deprive him, the vizier, of his position at court. The sultan grew angry, and Hasan was forced to flee Isfahan overnight. Since then the sultan had been unable to view Hasan's exploits as a serious matter. Now the grand vizier confessed to him that he had tricked Hasan back then,

and that the Ismaili leader was in fact a dangerously capable man. The sultan went pale with insult and rage. He shoved the old man, who was abjectly bent down on his knees before him, and withdrew to his chambers. From there he issued a decree that Nizam had ceased to be grand vizier and that the sultana's secretary would fill that position in the interim. Simultaneously, Nizam was issued an order in the strictest terms to defeat Hasan and eliminate the Ismailis immediately. It goes without saying that the sultana and her secretary could now abandon their ally of convenience since her worst opponent had been eliminated and the two of them now had unlimited influence over the sultan.

After these tumultuous events, the sultan and his entire court set out to travel to Baghdad, so he could visit his sister and her husband, the caliph. He wanted to persuade the latter to designate the son he had had by his sister as his heir.

By the time Abu Ali returned with his report, Hasan had been fully informed of the intrigues at the court in Isfahan. He now listened carefully to the advice of his commanders. When the grand dai had finished, he got up and started pacing back and forth across the room. In his mind he was surveying the situation and deciding what to do.

Finally he said to Abu Ali, "Take the tablet and write."

The grand dai sat down, crossed his legs, set the tablet on his left knee, and reached for his pencil.

"I'm ready, ibn Sabbah," he said.

Hasan stopped beside him so he could see over his shoulder and began half-dictating, half-explaining his instructions.

"Concerning the Turkish cavalry," he said, "Abdul Malik is right. We mustn't let ourselves become surrounded in the castle too soon. We'll wait for them out in the open and defeat them there. We have to be sure that Muzaffar gets his units here to help us in time. Abu Ali, you will have command of the force that meets the sultan's vanguard. Manuchehr will be responsible for the defense of the fortress. This will put his nose out of joint, because he loves the smell of battle, but we need his skills to make sure the castle is ready for any eventuality.

"Next, and this is very important, we need to get rid of all unnecessary mouths to feed and other appurtenances. By tonight after last prayers Abdul Malik is to load the harems, both wives and children, on our pack animals and set out with his caravan. Muzaffar is a kind soul and will

have no choice but to take on responsibility for our live cargo. Send a messenger to Rai immediately, so that he's informed in advance. He's to have foodstuffs ready for our caravan to transport back, and he should immediately dispatch as many of his men to Alamut as he can spare. Tell him he can put the women and children straight to work, so that he doesn't incur too much of a loss ... And what are your plans, my dear Abul Fazel?"

Smiling, he cast a stinging glance at the reis.

"I'll be taking off with Abdul Malik's caravan," the former mayor replied. "I wouldn't be caught in this mousetrap when the sultan's army arrives for anything in the world. Muzaffar's and my advice has not been in vain. I've done my duty, and now the only thing remaining for me is to make a quick exit."

"Your decision suits my plans perfectly," Hasan laughed. "Your presence will be enough to protect the caravan, so that Abdul Malik will only have to take a handful of men along. Muzaffar should add a few men of his own for the trip back. I'm counting on you to look after our harem kin."

Then he turned back to Abu Ali.

"Send a messenger to Rudbar immediately with an order for Buzurg Ummid to come to Alamut. I need him personally. It's a pity Khuzestan is so far that Husein Alkeini couldn't get here in time. But he needs to be informed too. Things will happen here that will make our remote descendants gape in awe ..."

He chuckled to himself quietly, absorbed in his own thoughts. He was silent for a while, then he spoke to the reis.

"Listen, Abul Fazel! I have the impression you still take me for an idiot, like you did in our Isfahan days, because what you see is an army of thirty thousand soldiers marching against our handful of men. But what you don't see are the angels gathered to help and protect us, like they once protected the Prophet and his people in the battle of Beder."

"Always joking, you're still always joking," Abul Fazel replied with a sour smile. He was a little offended, because he thought Hasan was making fun of him again.

"I'm not joking, no, old friend," Hasan said cheerfully. "I'm just speaking a bit in parables. I'm telling you, I've got such surprises ready that people won't believe their own ears. I'm going to show the world

what kind of miracles *faith* can work.”

Then he resumed dictating instructions. Finally he gave orders to Abu Ali.

“Inform everyone of the tasks I’ve assigned them. Select your messengers and write out the appropriate commands. They must set out at once. Have Abdul Malik bring my daughters to me before he leaves. Once you’ve taken care of all that, assemble all the men and tell them that the sultan has declared war on us. Order the novices to get ready, because tomorrow morning will be the beginning of their test. Be firm and demanding with them, squeeze everything they can do out of them. Threaten them that they won’t earn their ordination. But tomorrow evening you’ll assemble them in the mosque and ordain them as fedayeen. Make that the most solemn moment of their lives and their highest achievement in this world. All of this following the model that you and I experienced in Cairo ... Is all that clear?”

“Perfectly clear, ibn Sabbah.”

Hasan dismissed both of the old men. He stretched out on his pillows and once more thought through all of the measures he had just taken. When he was certain he hadn’t left out anything of major significance, he drifted peacefully off to sleep.

All this time the men stood waiting in the courtyard under the baking sun. They watched their senior officers disappearing inside the building of the supreme commander for long periods of time. The soldiers could barely control their impatience.

The novices were assembled in two rows in front of their building. They stood as straight as cypresses, gazing fiercely ahead. The honor of having been chosen to escort the old dignitary still filled them with pride, but gradually their patience eroded too.

Suleiman was first to break the silence.

“I’d like to know what’s going on,” he said. “Maybe there’s going to be an end to this schooling after all.”

“I think you’d like to have a beard before you’ve even got peach fuzz,” Yusuf scoffed at him.

The ranks snickered.

“Well, I think you’re afraid of the fat on your belly melting,” Suleiman

shot back. "Which is why you're none too enthusiastic whenever the drums and trumpet sound."

"I'm just curious which one of us the enemy will spot first."

"You, no doubt. With your long shanks you'll stick up proudly from behind my back."

"Cut it out," ibn Tahir intervened. "You don't even know yet where the lion is that you're planning to skin."

"If I were a fly, I could hear what the commanders are talking about now," Obeida said.

"You'd be even happier to be a fly when the enemy shows up," Suleiman laughed at him.

"If heroes won battles with poisonous tongues, you'd be first among them," Obeida replied. "All of Iran would tremble at the sight of you."

"Hmm, a certain Obeida would also tremble at the sight of my fist," Suleiman returned.

Sergeant Abuna hurried past. He whispered to the expectant youths, "It looks like things are going to get hot, boys. The sultan's forces are bearing down on us."

They fell silent. At first they felt anxious, but gradually that feeling gave way to enthusiasm and wild excitement.

"At last!" Suleiman said, the words coming from the bottom of his heart.

They exchanged glances. Their eyes and cheeks glowed. Now and then one or the other of them smiled. Their imaginations began to work. They saw heroic deeds before them, and they saw themselves accomplishing arduous tasks, earning glory and immortality.

"Damn! When is this waiting going to be over?" Suleiman lost his temper. He couldn't stand being at peace anymore. "Why don't they order us to mount and attack the infidels?"

Abuna and two other men led three horses across the courtyard—two of them black, plus Abu Ali's Arabian.

Somebody whispered.

"Sayyiduna is going to speak."

The word sped through the ranks.

"What? Who's going to speak?"

"Sayyiduna."

"Who says? The Arabian belongs to Abu Ali, and one of the black

horses is the captain's."

"So whose is the third?"

The guards outside the entrance to the high command stood stiffly to attention and shouldered their arms. The grand dai and other commanders came out of the building. Abu Ali, the captain and dai Ibrahim mounted the horses that the sergeant had brought out. The other leaders headed off toward their various detachments, stood before them, and ordered them about face toward the building of the supreme commander.

Abu Ali and his two escorts trotted out to the edge of the upper terrace. He raised his arm in a call for silence. A deathly quiet came over both of the lower terraces. The grand dai stood up slightly in his stirrups and called out in a powerful voice.

"Ismaili believers! In the name of Our Master and supreme commander. A time of trial and decisiveness has come. With weapons in hand you must now prove your devotion and your love for the holy martyrs and for our leader. At the sultan's command, his henchman, the son of a dog Arslan Tash, has set out with a large army to slaughter all of us true believers. Within a few days the trumpets of his cavalry will sound outside of Alamut and the black flag of the dog Abas will flutter in front of our fortress. I therefore now order in the name of Our Master that from this moment on, by night and by day, no one will part with his weapon. Whoever disregards this order will be put to death as a rebel. When the trumpet sounds, you are all to be at your assembly points within the time allotted. Your officers will give you detailed instructions ..."

He turned his horse around, looked out toward the novices, and called out to them.

"You who are prepared to sacrifice yourselves, hear the command of Our Master! Tomorrow you will be called to a test. Whoever passes it will be ordained in the evening. I appeal to you: focus your mind and spirit, because for each of you ordination into the fedayeen will be the most illustrious moment of your life ..."

He turned again to face the entire force. His voice thundered throughout Alamut.

"Warriors for the Ismaili cause!" he shouted. "Remember the words of the Prophet: battle like lions. Because fear saves no one from death!"

There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his Prophet! Come, al-Mahdi!”

There was a rush among the novices, as though lightning had struck in their midst. The great day of trials had arrived and none of them was ready for it yet. Their faces pale, they looked at each other as they returned to their rooms.

“Now we’ve got the devil to pay,” Suleiman exclaimed. “We don’t know how to do a thing, and it’d be best if we just volunteered for the infantry.”

“Right, let’s all volunteer, and then they can do with us what they want,” Obeida seconded.

Yusuf was the most fainthearted of them all. He kept wiping the sweat from his brow and quietly hoping that some ray of hope would finally shine forth.

“Will it really be that bad?” he asked timidly.

“You’ll croak for sure, you make such a good target,” Suleiman grinned at him maliciously.

Yusuf sighed piteously and buried his face in his hands.

“But what are we going to do?” Naim asked.

“Why don’t you jump into Shah Rud? That’d be the best thing for you,” Suleiman said to him.

Then ibn Tahir spoke.

“Listen, fellows. Do you really think Our Master chose us as novices so that he could humiliate us now by putting us in the infantry? We’ve got some skills! My suggestion is that we grab our notes, get together, and review everything we’ve studied so far.”

“You tutor us! You lead the review for us!” the novices called out one after the other. Ibn Tahir suggested they go out on top of the building. They sat down on the rooftop, each with his tablets and notes in hand, and ibn Tahir asked them questions, explaining whatever they didn’t understand. Gradually they calmed down, though now and then one or the other of them shivered when he remembered the coming day. Somewhere deep down, they all still felt trepidation at the prospect of their test. They all forgot about the approaching enemy.

On the lower terrace, next to the left-hand guard tower, concealed by

dovecotes, poplars and densely planted cypresses, stood the harem building. Abdul Malik swooped in among the women and children like a hawk, urging them to get ready for immediate departure. Cries, shrieks, wailing and mindless commotion followed his command. The eunuch guards observed all this with indifference until the dai made them start helping the women with the move.

In the meantime a dozen drivers had led camels and donkeys up to the building. Husbands came to bid farewell to their wives and children.

Abu Soraka had two wives in the castle. The first was the same age as him, an elderly and toothless little woman. She had borne him two daughters who were married and living in Nishapur. The dai had been attached to her since his youth, and he needed her like a child needs its mother.

The second was younger and had borne him a daughter and a son, which he kept in his harem with Hasan's two children. He loved this wife tenderly and, now that she was leaving, he suddenly realized how much he was going to miss her. He fought hard to keep from showing his feelings.

Al-Hakim had a beautiful Egyptian wife, whom he had brought with him from Cairo. She hadn't given him any children. The word in the harems was that before her marriage she had led the life of a woman of the streets. He liked to describe her beauty to other men, cursing his enslavement to her and her power over him, but each time a caravan stopped at the castle, he would look for some exquisite gift to buy her. An old Ethiopian woman did all the work for her, while she lay amid her pillows, applied her makeup, dressed in silks, and spent whole days daydreaming.

Captain Manuchehr had a single wife at the castle, but he had brought along three children from his two former wives. Now he briefly bade farewell to all of them. He was afraid of losing his edge if he lingered with them too long.

And so the men with wives and children in the castle took leave of their families and returned to their manly duties.

Abu Soraka and al-Hakim ran into each other along the way and had a brief conversation.

"Now the castle's really going to feel empty," Abu Soraka commented.

"I have to admire the philosophers who claimed that, next to food and

drink, the pleasures of women were the only worldly good worth striving for,” the Greek replied.

“But our supreme commanders get by without them,” the dai answered him.

The physician frowned scornfully.

“Come on now, you’re talking like a schoolboy.”

He took Abu Soraka by the sleeve and spoke to him now in the barest whisper.

“What on earth do you think our masters have got hidden behind the castle? A litter of cats? Come on! They’d be stupid not to take advantage of it. You and I have never had such plump geese as they’re raising down there.”

Abu Ali came to an abrupt stop.

“No, I can’t believe that,” he managed to say at last. “I know they’re up to something down there, but I’m convinced it’s for the good of us all, not for their private enjoyment.”

“So don’t believe me if you don’t want to,” the doctor replied, almost offended. “Just keep in mind that the master always saves the best pieces for himself.”

“I’d almost forgotten something,” reis Abul Fazel said when he came to say goodbye to Hasan toward evening. He winked knowingly and continued.

“I have indeed brought you something, though not a cure for madness. I think it might cheer you up. Can you guess?”

Hasan smiled, at a loss. He looked first at the reis, and then at Abu Ali, who was standing to the side.

“I really can’t imagine,” he said.

“Ah, but I won’t hand it over until you’ve guessed,” the reis teased him. “You have riches aplenty, you disdain finery. All of your needs are modest, except one. Can you guess now?”

“You’ve brought me a book.”

“Good shot, Hasan. It’s something written. But by whom?”

“How should I know? Maybe one of the ancients? Ibn Sina? No? Then is it a modern writer? It’s not al-Ghazali, is it?”

“No, that’s not what I’ve brought,” the reis laughed. “He’d be just a

little too pious for you. The writer whose work I've brought is much closer to you."

"In Allah's name, I have no idea who you mean."

Abu Ali smiled and asked, "May I try too?"

"Go ahead, I'm curious," Hasan said, his courage flagging.

"I'd wager that the reis has brought you something written by your old friend Omar Khayyam."

The reis nodded, smiling broadly. Hasan slapped his forehead.

"How could I not remember!" he exclaimed.

"I've brought you four poems that an acquaintance of mine copied in Nishapur from Omar Khayyam himself. I thought they'd give you pleasure."

"You couldn't have brought me a finer gift," Hasan said. "I'm enormously grateful to you for your thoughtfulness."

Abul Fazel took a package out from under his cloak and handed it to Hasan. Hasan unfastened the ribbons and looked inside.

He paused, lost in thought.

"This is odd," he said after a while. "News on the same day from both of my old schoolmates, Nizam and Khayyam."

A eunuch came through the doorway and announced the arrival of Abdul Malik and Hasan's daughters.

"Go now, friend," Hasan said, putting his arm around the reis's shoulder. "Take care of our women and our children. Maybe someday you'll need something. Remember me then and know that I'm in your debt."

He nodded to Abu Ali and they both left him.

Abdul Malik held the curtain back and Hasan's daughters Khadija and Fatima timidly stepped in. They stood up against the wall next to the doorway, while the dai proudly approached the supreme commander.

"I've brought your daughters, Sayyiduna," he said.

Hasan cast a fierce glance at the girls.

"What are you perched there for, like two soaked chickens? Come closer!" he shouted at them. "Your mother burdened me with the two of you so that every time I'd look at you I'd think of her and get angry. I've taken you in as my sense of fatherly duty required. Now you'll go along

with the rest of the harem chattel to Muzaffar's in Rai."

He turned to Abdul Malik.

"And you tell Muzaffar to give them only as much food as they earn with their weaving. The fact that they're my daughters should be irrelevant. If they're disobedient, he should sell them as slaves, keep half of the money to cover his expenses, and send the other half to me. That's all! Now off to prayers with you, and then the open road!"

The girls scurried out the door like two little mice. Hasan kept Abdul Malik behind for a moment.

"Muzaffar will know how to handle them. He's a wise man and he has a pack of children, himself."

The girls waited for the dai outside the entrance. They were both crying.

"Did you see how handsome he is?" the younger one asked.

"Why does he hate us so much?" the older one sobbed through her tears.

Abdul Malik led them down from the tower. He tried to comfort them.

"Don't worry, little quails. Muzaffar has a good heart. He has lots of children, and you'll get to play and have fun with them."

CHAPTER SIX

A cook brought supper, but Hasan didn't notice. Lost in thought, he pulled a torch out of its stand by the wall and lit it with a candle. With a practiced, careful gesture he drew aside a carpet hanging on the wall so that it wouldn't catch fire, and he stepped through an entrance into a narrow passage from which a short stairway led to the top of the tower. Holding the torch over his head, he lit his way and soon reached the upper platform. He drew in the fresh, cool air and stepped up to the battlements. He raised the blazing torch high up in the air and three times drew a circle with it over his head.

Soon, from down below, out of the dark, came a like response. He waved the torch once more in acknowledgment, then returned to his room. He put the torch out by sliding it into a kind of quiver, and then wrapped himself up in a loose-fitting coat. Once more he drew a carpet aside, this time one hanging on the opposite wall, and stepped through a low entrance into a cramped, cage-like space that was completely upholstered with soft rugs. He lifted a mallet up off the floor and used it to strike a metal gong. A sharp sound reverberated down a hidden cord to the foot of the tower. Suddenly, the cage moved and, with Hasan in it, began sinking on a cleverly contrived pulley that was operated from below by unseen hands.

The trip to the bottom was slow. Each time Hasan took it, anxious feelings overcame him. What if part of the mechanism suddenly failed? Or if the rope broke and the cramped cage crashed to the stone floor with him in it? What if one of the Moors he was so dependent on deliberately wrecked his device and sent him to his doom? What if, in a moment of clarity, one of these eunuchs became aware of his humiliated human state and clubbed his master on the head with a mace? One of these terrifying Egyptian guards, whom he tamed like wild animals with his gaze, who were entranced by him, like snakes are by their master's

flute? He had done everything possible to ensure their loyalty. They would obey no one else in the world besides him. Whoever had to walk past them walked in fear, and even Abu Ali would get an eerie feeling when he met them. They were the unquestioning instrument that made him fearsome even to his dais and other commanders. Through them he exerted pressure downward onto his subordinates. And so that he could squeeze them from below as well—this was why he had been preparing his fedayeen. He refused to delude himself; the dais and commanders believed in nothing and for the most part sought only personal gain. Involuntarily he found himself comparing this human mechanism with the pulley that lowered him into the depths. If a single component of it failed, if a single presumption was false, the whole edifice would collapse. A single inaccurate calculation and his life's work would crumble to dust.

The machine stopped and the cage came to rest at the bottom of the tower. The Moor who had just been operating the pulley lifted the curtain. Hasan stepped out into a chilly vestibule where the flame of a torch fluttered in the silent breeze. He fixed the eunuch with his gaze. He felt completely relaxed again.

“Let the bridge down!” he ordered gruffly.

“As you command, Sayyiduna.”

The Moor reached for a lever and threw his whole weight into it. One of the walls began to descend, and the sound of gurgling water could be heard. Light shone through the opening. A segment of star-strewn sky appeared. The bridge had been let down over the river, and a man with a torch was waiting on the other side.

Hasan hurried toward him. The bridge lifted up after him and the entrance to the castle closed.

“What's the word, Adi?” he asked.

“Everything is going well, Sayyiduna.”

“Bring Miriam to the left-hand pavilion, where I'll wait for her. Then you can go get Apama and deliver her to the right-hand one. But don't say a word to either of them about the other.”

“As you command, Sayyiduna.”

They both smiled.

At the end of a sandy path they came to a transverse canal. They climbed into a boat, which Adi started rowing. Soon they turned into an

arm of the canal and finally came to a stop alongside a sandy bank. A path led them slightly uphill and then over level ground past gardens in bloom to a glass pavilion that shimmered in the night like a crystal palace.

Adi unlocked the door. He went inside and lit the resin in the lamps that were set out in each corner. In the middle of the pavilion, water glistened in a circular pond. Hasan turned on a pipe and a jet of water shot up practically to the ceiling.

“So I don’t get bored while I’m waiting,” he said and lay down on some pillows next to the wall. “Now go get Miriam.”

He listened to the rippling of the fountain and the trickle of the water. He was so absorbed in listening to it that he didn’t notice when Miriam entered.

“Peace be with you, grandson of Sabbah,” she greeted him.

He started, then cheerfully motioned to her to join him.

She set down a basket of food and drink, unfastened her cloak so that it slipped off her shoulders, and dropped to her knees beside him. She kissed his hand, which he pulled away in mild embarrassment.

“What progress are the girls making?” he asked.

“Just as you’ve prescribed, ibn Sabbah.”

“Good. School’s over now. The sultan has dispatched his army after us. We’ll be able to see them from the castle within a few days.”

Miriam’s eyes opened wide. She looked at Hasan, who was faintly smiling.

“And you can be so calm about this?”

“What else can I do? Whatever is fated to happen will happen. So I don’t see any reason why you shouldn’t pour me some wine, if you brought any.”

She stood up and poured two cups. She was wearing the pink silken gown in which she slept. Hasan inspected her. Her white, translucent hands tipped the jug over the cups. She was like perfection itself. Hasan suppressed the sigh of some unwonted ache that had suddenly crept over him. He knew he was old and that all things come too late in life.

She offered him a cup. They toasted. For an instant she discerned a moist glistening in his eyes, and she had a vague sense of what it meant. Then the old, roguish smile appeared around his lips and he spoke.

“You must have wondered what I need these lush gardens and the

glass pavilions for, or what I plan to do with all the young girls that I've had educated in such a ... unique way. But you've never asked me about these things. Believe me, I have great respect for your discretion."

Miriam took hold of his soft but strong right hand, inspected it, and spoke.

"It's true, grandson of Sabbah, I haven't asked those questions, but privately I've thought a great deal about your intentions."

"I'll give you a kingdom if you've guessed."

Hasan's smile was half mocking, half kind.

"And if I do know?"

"Go ahead."

"Don't you intend for these gardens to be your followers' highest reward for their devotion and self-sacrifice?"

"Far from it, my dear."

"That was what I thought. Otherwise I don't have any idea."

Miriam felt discouraged.

Hasan was enjoying himself. He continued.

"Once you complained to me—do you remember?—that you were horribly bored with the world and that there was nothing that interested or entertained you anymore. That's when I began telling you about the Greek and Islamic philosophers, when I introduced you to the science of nature and of man's secret drives, and described, as best I could, the nature of the universe. I told you about my journeys, about my failed exploits, about the princes, shahs, sultans and caliphs. Several times I mentioned that there were some other things I needed to tell you, but that the time for that hadn't arrived yet. Once I asked you if you would like to help me bring down Sultan Malik Shah. You smiled and answered, 'Why not?' I gave you my hand then to show I accepted your offer. Perhaps you thought I was joking. Tonight I've come to take you up on your word."

Miriam looked at him with inquiring eyes. She didn't know what to make of these strange words.

"There's one other thing I'd like to remind you of, my dear. There've been many times when you've sworn to me that after all that life has dealt you, it was no longer possible for you to believe in anything. I replied that both life and my studies had led me to the same conclusion. I asked you, 'What is a person permitted, once he's realized that truth is

unattainable and consequently doesn't exist for him?' Do you remember your answer?"

"I do, ibn Sabbah. I said something like this: 'If a person realized that everything people call happiness, love and joy was just a miscalculation based on a false premise, he'd feel a horrible emptiness inside. The only thing that could rouse him from his paralysis would be to gamble with his own fate and the fate of others. The person capable of that would be permitted anything.' "

Hasan whistled in delight.

"Very nice, my dear. Tonight I'm giving you a chance to amuse yourself with your own fate and the fate of others. Does that please you?"

Miriam drew her head back slightly and looked at him seriously.

"Have you come to ask me riddles?"

"No, I've just brought you some poems of Omar Khayyam's to read to me. As it happens, tonight I need to think about my old friend. That mayor of Isfahan whom I told you about, the one who thought I was crazy, gave them to me as a present today—quite a coincidence. He's the one who's told me to expect a less than friendly visit."

He untied the package and handed it to Miriam.

"You're always thinking of things to please me, ibn Sabbah."

"Not at all. I just wanted to give myself the pleasure of hearing your voice. You know I'm not much good at these things."

"So shall I read?"

"Please do."

She leaned her head against his knee and read:

And if the Wine you drink, the Lip you press,
End in what All begins and ends in—Yes;
Think then you are TO-DAY what YESTERDAY
You were—TOMORROW you shall not be less.

"How wise," Hasan observed when she'd finished. "All of us think too much about 'later,' and as a result the 'now' continually recedes from us. A whole view of the world in four lines ... But go on. I didn't mean to interrupt."

Miriam read:

Come, fill the Cup, and in the fire of Spring
Your Winter garment of Repentance fling:
The Bird of Time has but a little way
To flutter—and the Bird is on the Wing.

Hasan laughed, but his eyes were moist.

“My old friend knows what’s pleasant in the world,” he said. “A slight dizziness in the morning from wine, a beautiful girl at your feet, and then you really are like a king.”

Miriam continued:

The face flushed red, soon followed by the Heart—
Hand reaching out to test the Vintner’s Art:
In every drop a little bit of Me
And all the drops together form a World apart.

“The universe is in you and you’re in the universe. Yes, Omar once said that.”

Hasan grew pensive.

“How I love him! How I love him!” he whispered, half to himself.

Miriam concluded:

A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,
A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread—and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness—
Oh, Wilderness were Paradise enow!

“What a simple truth!” Hasan exclaimed. “Spring in bloom and a girl pouring wine in your cup. Who needs paradise after that! But our fate is to struggle with the sultan and forge our dark plans.”

Both of them were silent for a while.

“Earlier you were going to tell me something, ibn Sabbah,” Miriam finally said.

Hasan smiled.

“That’s right, there’s something I’ve been wanting to tell you, but I don’t know how best to go at it so you’ll understand. For twenty years I’ve carried around a secret inside me and hidden it from the world, and now that the time has come for me to share it with someone for the first

time, I can't find the words."

"You're becoming more and more difficult to understand. You say you've been carrying a secret around for twenty years? And this secret has to do with these gardens? With overthrowing the kingdom of Iran? This is all very murky."

"I know. It has to be, until I explain it. These gardens, those girls, Apama and her school, and ultimately you and I, the castle of Alamut and what's behind it—all these things are elements of a long-range plan that I've transformed from fantasy into reality. Now we'll see if my assumptions have been right. I need you. We're on the verge of a great experiment. There's no going back for me. It's hard for me to express this."

"You always amaze me, Hasan. Speak. I'm listening carefully."

"To help you understand me better, I'll reach far back into my youth. As you know, I was born in Tus and my father's name was Ali. He was an opponent of Baghdad and the Sunna, and I often heard discussions of these things at home. All these confessional disputes about the Prophet and his heirs seemed vastly mysterious and attracted me with an uncanny force. Of all the warriors for the Muslim faith, Ali was closest to my heart. Everything about him and his descendants was full of mystery. But the thing I found most moving was the promise that Allah would send someone from his line into the world as the Mahdi, to be the last and greatest of the prophets. I would ask my father, I would ask his relatives and friends to tell me what would be the signs of al-Mahdi and how we were to recognize him. They weren't able to tell me anything specific. My imagination was fired up. One moment I saw the Mahdi in this or that dai or believer, in this or that peer, and on lonely nights I would even wonder if I weren't the awaited savior myself. I burned, I practically burned to learn more about this teaching.

"Then I heard that a certain dai by the name of Amireh Zarab was hiding in our town, and that he was fully initiated into all of the mysteries of the coming of the Mahdi. I asked around about him, and one older cousin of mine who wasn't particularly fond of the Shia told me that the dai belonged to the Ismaili sect, and that the adherents of that sect were secretly sophists and godless freethinkers. Now I was really interested. Not yet twelve years old, I sought him out and immediately leapt at him with my questions. I wanted to hear from his

mouth whether the Ismaili doctrine was really just a cover for freethinking and, if so, what that meant for the coming of the Mahdi. In a tone of the utmost derision, Amireh Zarab began explaining the Ismailis' external doctrine: that Ali was the Prophet's sole legitimate heir, and that Ismail's son Mohammed, the eighth in the line of Ali, would some day return to earth as al-Mahdi. Then he split hairs about the other Shiite sects and blasted the ones that held that the twelfth imam, who wouldn't be from the line of Ali, would appear to the faithful as al-Mahdi. All of this squabbling over individuals struck me as trivial and pathetic. There wasn't the slightest hint of a mystery about it. I returned home, dissatisfied. I decided that from then on I wouldn't worry about these doctrinal disputes and that, like my peers, I would enjoy more readily attainable things. And I probably would have succeeded, if only another Ismaili refiq by the name of Abu Nedjm Saradj hadn't passed through our town about a year later. Still furious at his predecessor for not being able to reveal any mysteries to me, I searched him out and began deriding him for the pedantry of his doctrine, which I said was every bit as ridiculous as Sunnism. I said that neither he nor his adherents knew anything definite about the Mahdi's coming and that they were just leading poor, truth-seeking believers on.

"The whole time I was raining this abuse down on him, I expected him to leap at me and throw me out the door. But the refiq listened to me patiently. I noticed a sort of satisfied smile playing around his mouth. When I finally ran out of words, he said, 'You've passed the test with honors, my young friend. I predict that one day you will become a great and powerful dai. You've reached the point where I can reveal the true Ismaili doctrine to you. But first you have to promise me that you won't share it with anyone until you've been initiated.' His words struck me to the quick. So my hunch had been right after all, and there *was* a mystery? I made the promise with my voice shaking, and he told me, 'The doctrine of Ali and Mahdi is just bait for the masses of believers who hate Baghdad and venerate the name of the Prophet's son-in-law. However, to those who can understand, we explain, as Caliph al-Hakim established, that the Koran is the product of a muddled brain. The truth is unknowable. Therefore we believe in nothing and have no limits on what we can do.' It was as though I'd been struck by lightning. The Prophet a man with a muddled brain? His son-in-law Ali an idiot for

believing him? And the teaching of the coming of the Mahdi, that glorious, mystery-laden teaching of the coming of a savior, just a fairy tale dreamt up for the common masses? I shouted at him, ‘What is the point of deceiving people?!’ He looked at me sternly. ‘Don’t you see we’ve become slaves of the Turks?’ he said. ‘And that Baghdad is in league with them, and the masses are discontented? To them the name of Ali is sacred. We’ve used it to unite them against the sultan and the caliph.’ My tongue felt paralyzed. I ran home as if I were out of my mind. I threw myself down on my bed and cried. For the last time in my life. My magical world had been dashed to pieces. I got sick. For forty days and nights I hovered between life and death. Finally the fever broke. My strength came back. But it was an entirely new person reawakening to life.”

Hasan stopped speaking and grew pensive. Miriam, who hadn’t moved her gaze away from his mouth the whole time, asked him, “How is it, ibn Sabbah, that you believed that godless doctrine right away, when the previous teacher had completely disillusioned you?”

“Let me try to explain it to you. It’s true that the first dai had proclaimed a number of very definite ‘truths,’ but behind them I sensed something that aroused my suspicion. They didn’t fulfill my curiosity, my longing for truth, for some higher knowledge. I tried to accept them as the real truth, but my heart rejected them. It’s true, I didn’t immediately grasp what the second teacher told me, either. But his doctrine settled on my soul like a vague premonition of something dark and awful that would someday open up to my understanding. My reason tried to reject it, but my heart welcomed it in. When I recovered from the illness, I decided to order my whole life in such a way that when I matured I would reach a state where the refiq’s assertion would go without saying—or else that I would clearly recognize its fallacy. ‘You have to test whether the refiq’s claims hold,’ I told myself, ‘in real life.’ I decided to study everything, not leaving out anything that people knew. The opportunity soon came. Youth being what it is, I couldn’t keep quiet about it. I started discussing the issues troubling my spirit with anyone who cared to listen. My father already had the reputation of secretly being a Shiite and got frightened. To dispel suspicions that he was an infidel, he sent me away to a school in Nishapur, run by Muafiq Edin, a man known widely as a learned lawyer and a Sunni dogmatist. That’s

where I got to know Omar Khayyam and the eventual grand vizier, Nizam al-Mulk.

“There’s not much to say about our teacher. He quoted a lot of authors and he knew the Koran from the first sura to the last by heart. But he wasn’t able to satisfy my passion for knowledge one whit. So the encounter with my two classmates was all the more powerful. The eventual vizier was from Tus, just like me, and we both shared the same name: Hasan ibn Ali. He was eight to ten years older than I was and his knowledge, especially of astronomy and mathematics, was already quite extensive. But issues of faith, the search for truth in its own right—none of this mattered to him. That’s when it first dawned on me what huge gaps there are between individuals. He had never heard of Ismaili teachers passing through Tus, and he had never gone through any kind of intellectual crisis that practically cost him his life, as I had. And yet he had a powerful intellect, superior to most others.

“Omar, on the other hand, was completely different. He was from Nishapur and he seemed to be quiet and meek. But when we were alone he’d make fun of everything and be skeptical of everybody. He was totally unpredictable, sometimes so amazingly clever that you could listen to him for days on end, then he’d become introspective and moody. We grew very fond of him. We would get together in his father’s garden every evening and make great plans for the future. The scent of jasmine wafted over us while the evening butterflies sucked the nectar from its flowers. We would sit in an arbor, shaping our fate. Once—I remember it as though it were last night—in the grips of some desire to show off to them, I told them I was a member of a secret Ismaili brotherhood. I told them about my encounters with the two teachers, and I explained Ismaili doctrine to them. I identified the struggle against the Seljuk rulers and their lackey, the caliph of Baghdad, as being at its heart. When I saw how astonished they were, I cried out, ‘Do you want us, the descendants of the Khosrows, of the kings of Iran, of Rustam, Farhad and Firdausi, to be the hirelings of those horse thieves from Turkestan? If their flag is black, then let ours be white. Because the only shame is in groveling before foreigners and bowing down to barbarians!’ I had hit a sore spot. ‘What should we do?’ Omar asked. I replied, ‘We have to try to climb up the social ladder as quickly as possible. The first one to succeed should help the other two.’ They agreed. All three of us

swore allegiance to each other.”

He fell silent and Miriam drew closer to him.

“It’s true, life is like a fairy tale,” she said in a thoughtful voice.

“But somewhere,” Hasan continued, “at the bottom of my heart, I still missed those fairy tales from my earliest youth, my tenacious faith in the coming of the Mahdi and the great mysteries of the Prophet’s succession. That wound still bled secretly, my first great disillusionment still stung. But the evidence was mounting in support of the thesis that nothing was true! Because just as much as the Shiites defended their claims, the Sunnis defended theirs. What’s more, Christians of all sects, Jews, Brahmans, Buddhists, fire worshippers and pagans were just as passionate about their teachings. Philosophers of all persuasions made their claims and refuted each other, one claiming there was only one god, another that there were many of them, and a third claiming there was no god and that everything happened by pure coincidence. More and more I began to see the supreme wisdom of the Ismaili dais. Truth is unattainable to us, it doesn’t exist for us. What then is the proper response? If you’ve concluded that you can know nothing, if you don’t believe in anything, then everything is permitted, then follow your passions. Is that really the ultimate possible knowledge? Studying, learning about everything, this was my first passion. I was in Baghdad, Basra, Alexandria, Cairo. I studied all the sciences—mathematics, astronomy, philosophy, chemistry, physics, biology. I delved into foreign languages, other peoples, other ways of thinking. And the Ismaili doctrine kept making more and more sense. But I was still young and it began to bother me that the vast majority of humanity was entangled in ignorance and subject to stupid fabrications and lies. It occurred to me that my mission on earth was to sow the truth, to open mankind’s eyes, to liberate it from its false assumptions and especially from the frauds who were responsible for them. Ismaili doctrine became my flag in the struggle against lies and illusions, and I saw myself as the great torchbearer who would light the way for mankind out of its ignorance. How sadly mistaken I turned out to be again! All of our brotherhoods accepted me as a great warrior for the Ismaili cause, but when I explained my plan to enlighten the masses to the leaders, they shook their heads and warned me against it. At every step they undermined me, and it was then I realized that the leadership was intentionally

withholding the truth from the people and keeping them ignorant for selfish reasons. So then I started addressing the masses directly during my travels. At bazaars, in caravanserais and on pilgrimages I told them that everything they believed in was illusory, and that if they didn't shake off the fairy tales and the lies, they would die thirsting for and bereft of the truth. The result was that I had to flee from a hail of stones and ugly curses. Then I tried to open just the brighter individuals' eyes. Many of them listened to me carefully. But when I would finish, they would reply that they had had similar doubts themselves, but that it seemed more practical to them to hold onto something solid than to grope their way through eternal uncertainty and endless negation. Not just simple folk from the masses, even the more exalted minds preferred a tangible lie to an ungraspable truth. All my attempts to enlighten individuals or groups came to nothing. Because truth, which for me stood at the summit of all values, was worthless to the rest of humanity. I abandoned my would-be mission and gave up. I had wasted many years with those efforts. I went to see what my two classmates had achieved in the meantime, and I found out that I'd lagged far behind them. My namesake from Tus had entered into the service of a Seljuk prince, and just then, in recognition of his statesmanship, the sultan at that time, Alp Arslan Shah, had invited him to serve as vizier at his court. Omar had gained a reputation as a mathematician and an astronomer and, true to his youthful promise, Nizam al-Mulk was providing him with a government annuity of twelve hundred gold pieces. I felt a desire to visit Omar on his estate in Nishapur. I set out on the journey—it will have been a good twenty years ago now—and surprised my old classmate amidst his wine, girls and books. My appearance must not have been particularly reassuring, because as imperturbable as he was, he looked startled when he saw me. 'What's happened to you!' he exclaimed once he recognized me. 'A person would think you were coming straight from hell, you look so parched and sunburnt ...' He hugged me and invited me to stay with him as his guest. I made myself right at home too, finally enjoying witty and wise conversations over wine after so many years. We told each other about everything that had happened to us. We also confided our life experiences and intellectual theories to each other, and to our mutual surprise we determined that both of us had come to surprisingly similar conclusions, though each in his own way. And he

had barely moved an inch away from home, while I had wandered through practically half the world. He said, 'If I needed confirmation that I was on the right track in my search, I heard it from your mouth today.' I replied, 'Now that I'm talking with you and we're in such complete agreement, I feel like Pythagoras when he heard the stars humming in the universe and merging with the harmony of the spheres.' We talked about the possibility of knowledge. He said, 'Ultimate knowledge is impossible, because our senses lie to us. But they're the only mediator between the things that surround us and our thoughts, our intellect.' 'That's exactly what Democritus and Protagoras claim,' I agreed. 'That's why people condemned them as atheists and praised Plato to high heavens, because he fed them fairy tales.' 'The masses have always been like that,' Omar continued. 'They're afraid of uncertainty, which is why they prefer a lie that promises something tangible to even the most exalted truth if it doesn't give them anything to hold on to. There's nothing you can do about it. Whoever wants to be a prophet to the masses has to treat them like children and feed them fairy tales and falsehoods. That's why a wise man always keeps his distance from them.' 'But Christ and Mohammed wanted good for the masses.' 'That's right,' he replied. 'They wanted good for them, but they also recognized all their utter hopelessness. Pity moved them to conjure up fairy tales about an otherworldly paradise that would be theirs as a reward for their suffering in this world.' 'Why do you think Mohammed would have let thousands die for his teachings if he knew they were based on a fairy tale?' 'Probably,' he answered, 'because he knew that otherwise they would have slaughtered each other for even baser reasons. He wanted to create a kingdom of happiness on earth for them. To do that, he invented his dialogues with the archangel Gabriel, otherwise they wouldn't have believed him. He promised them heavenly delights after death, and in so doing made them brave and invincible.' I thought for a while and then told him, 'It seems to me that there's no longer anyone who would joyfully go to his death just for the promise of getting into heaven.' 'Nations age too,' he replied. 'The thought of paradise has atrophied in people and isn't a source of joy anymore like it used to be. People only keep believing in it because they're too lazy to seize onto anything new.' 'So do you think,' I asked him, 'that a prophet preaching paradise to win over the masses today would fail?' Omar laughed. 'No

question. Because the same torch doesn't burn twice and a wilted tulip won't bloom again. People are contented with their little comforts. If you don't have the key to open the gates to paradise before their eyes, you might as well give up any thought of becoming a prophet.' I grabbed at my head as though I were thunderstruck. Omar had jokingly articulated a thought that began spreading through my soul like wildfire. Yes, people wanted fairy tales and fabrications and they were fond of the blindness they blundered through. Omar sat drinking wine. But at that moment a powerful and immutable plan was born in me, the likes of which the world had never seen. To test human blindness to its utmost limits! To use it to attain absolute power and independence from the whole world! To embody the fairy tale! To turn it into such reality that our remotest descendants would talk about it! To conduct a great experiment on man!"

Hasan pushed Miriam away from himself and jumped to his feet. Agitated like she had never seen him before, he began pacing furiously around the pool. There was something almost monstrous about him. It occurred to her that he might be mad. She had a vague intimation of the meaning of his words. She asked him in a timid voice, "So what did you do then?"

Hasan came to a sudden stop. He regained his composure and a smile, part teasing, part mocking, played over his lips.

"What did I do then?" he repeated after her. "I looked for a chance to make the fairy tale come true. I came here, to Alamut. The fairy tale has come to life, paradise has been created and awaits its first visitors."

Miriam stared fixedly at him. Looking him in the eye, she said slowly, "You could be the one I once dreamt you might be."

Hasan smirked in amusement.

"So who am I, then?"

"If you'll permit me to express myself allegorically, the horrible dreamer from hell."

Hasan burst out in a strange laugh.

"Quite charming," he said. "Now you know my intentions and it's time for me to give you specific instructions. Any resident of these gardens who gives anything away to the visitors will be put to death. You will remain silent about everything. I will make no exceptions. I hope you've understood me. You must impress upon the girls that for greater reasons

they have to behave as though they were really in paradise. This is your assignment for now. Get ready for it. Expect me again tomorrow evening. Good night!”

He kissed her gently, then strode off quickly.

At the river bank Adi was waiting for him with the boat. He got down into it and quietly ordered, “To Apama!”

His old friend was waiting for him in a pavilion very similar to the previous one. One minute she was sprawled luxuriously on the pillows, but by the next, already overcome with impatience, she had gotten up and begun roaming about the room. She kept looking toward the door, talking to herself, growing angry and cursing in a half-whisper, gesticulating as she tried to make some point to her invisible interlocutor. When she heard footsteps, she straightened up proudly and moved a few paces toward the entrance.

When Hasan caught sight of her he could barely suppress a sarcastic smile. She was dressed in her finest silk. The entire contents of her jewelry chest were hanging around her neck, from her ears, on her wrists, hands and feet. On her head she was wearing a magnificent gold diadem studded with glinting gemstones. This was almost precisely the way she had been dressed when he first met her at a dinner given by some Indian prince in Kabul thirty years before. But what a difference between that Apama and this one! Instead of taut, supple limbs, a bony framework covered with faded, darkish, wrinkled skin. She had painted her sunken cheeks a screaming red, and her lips as well. She had daubed black dye on her hair, eyebrows and lashes. She struck Hasan as a living image of the impermanence of everything made of flesh and bones.

She hastily kissed his right hand and invited him to sit down on the pillows with her. Then she scolded him.

“You’ve been with her. There was a time when you wouldn’t leave me waiting long enough to sit down.”

“Rubbish,” Hasan said, his eyes flashing in annoyance. “I’ve called you here on important business. Let’s drop the past. What’s done is done.”

“So you have regrets?”

“Did I say that?”

“No, but ...”

“No buts! I’m asking you if everything is ready.”

“Everything is as you’ve instructed.”

“The gardens will be having visitors. I need to depend on you completely.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll never forget what you’ve done for me, rescuing me from poverty at my age.”

“Fine. How is the school coming along?”

“As well as can be expected with a flock of silly geese sitting in it.”

“Good.”

“I feel I have to warn you about something. Those eunuchs of yours don’t seem dependable to me.”

Hasan laughed.

“The same old story. Don’t you know any others?”

“I don’t mean that you can’t depend on them. They’re too scared for that. But I suspect some of them still have some remnants of manhood left in them.”

Hasan’s mood brightened.

“So have you tried any of them?”

Indignantly she drew away from him.

“What do you think I am? With beasts like that?”

“Then what gave you this curious idea?”

“They’ve been flirting with the girls and it’s very suspicious. They can’t hide anything from me. And there’s something else ...”

“Well?”

“Recently Mustafa showed me something from a long way off.”

Hasan shook in silent laughter.

“Don’t be crazy. You’re old and bleary-eyed. It was something else he was shoving your way, just to make fun of you. You don’t really think he’d get hard from just looking at you?”

“You insult me. But just wait until they ruin your girls.”

“That’s what they’re there for.”

“But maybe there’s just one you might feel badly about?”

“Oh, cut it out. Don’t you see I’m old?”

“Not so old you couldn’t fall head over heels in love.”

Privately Hasan was supremely amused.

“If that were true, you’d have to congratulate me. Unfortunately I feel like an extinct volcano.”

“Don’t pretend. But it’s true, at your age something more mature would be more suitable.”

“Maybe Apama? Come on, old girl. Love is like a roast. The older the teeth, the younger the lamb needs to be.”

Tears welled up in Apama’s eyes, but finally she swallowed the barb.

“Why do you stick to just one? Haven’t you heard that a frequent change keeps a man fresh and active? The Prophet himself set the example. Recently I was looking at one young quail in the bath. Everything about her is firm and taut. Immediately I thought of you. She’s barely fourteen ...”

“And her name is Halima. I know, I know. I held her in my arms before even you saw her. It was I who handed her to Adi. But let me tell you, for a wise man even one is too many.”

“But why does it have to be her? Haven’t you had your fill of her yet?”

Hasan chuckled inaudibly.

“It’s been wisely said, ‘Be modest and oat cakes every day will taste better to you than heavenly foods.’”

“I don’t see how you don’t get tired of her self-important ignorance!”

“In these matters milky skin and pink lips outweigh even the profoundest erudition.”

“Once you told me, and I remember it perfectly, that you learned more in those three months that we were together than in the previous ten years.”

“Learning suits youth, the pleasure of teaching—old age.”

“But tell me, what is it about her precisely that attracts you?”

“I don’t know. Maybe some vague affinity of hearts.”

“You say that to hurt me.”

“It didn’t even occur to me.”

“Even worse!”

“Oh, cut it out. Spending your old age being jealous?”

“What did you say? Me, jealous? Apama, the priestess of love, before whom three princes, seven heirs apparent, a future caliph and more than two hundred knights and noblemen fell on their knees? Apama is jealous? And of a bumpkin, of a christened slut like that?!”

Her voice shook in fury.

Hasan spoke to her.

“My dear, those times are gone. That was thirty years ago, and now

your mouth has no teeth, your bones have no flesh, your skin has no succulence ...”

She began to sob.

“Do you think you’re any better off than me?”

“Allah forbid that I think anything of the sort! The only difference between us is this: I’m old and I’ve reconciled myself with it. You’re also old, but you hide the fact from yourself.”

“You came here to make fun of me.”

Large tears rolled down her cheeks.

“Not at all, old girl. Let’s be wise. I sent for you because I need your skills and experience. You just said yourself that I rescued you from poverty by inviting you to my castle. I give you everything you want. I’ve only ever valued the things in people that make them stand out from others. That’s why I deeply admire your knowledge of the arts of love. I’m declaring my complete confidence in you. What more would you want?”

She felt touched and no longer cried. Hasan silently laughed to himself. He bent toward her and whispered in her ear.

“Do you still really want to ...?”

She looked at him abruptly.

“I can’t help it,” she said and clasped onto him. “That’s how I am.”

“Then I’ll send you a healthy Moor.”

Offended, she pulled away from him.

“You’re right. I’m too ugly and too old. It’s just so incredibly painful that so much beauty is gone forever.”

Hasan rose and spoke dispassionately.

“Get the pavilions ready for their guests. Clean and scrub everything. Make sure the girls don’t blather or poke around into things. School is over now. Great things are about to happen. Expect me again tomorrow. I’ll give you precise instructions. Is there anything you’d like?”

“No, my master. Thank you. Are you sure you wouldn’t like to try some other one?”

“No, thanks. Good night!”

Miriam returned to her room with a heavy heart. What Hasan had told her that evening had been too much for her to absorb so quickly. She

sensed that a terrible intellect was at work here, one for which everything around it—people, animals, inanimate nature—was just a means for fulfilling some grim vision. She loved that spirit, was afraid of it, and little by little was beginning to despise it. She felt a powerful need to unburden herself, to exchange a few words at least with a creature devoid of evil. She approached Halima's bed and watched her through the murk. She had the sense she was only pretending to sleep.

"Halima!" she whispered and sat down on the edge of the bed. "I know you're pretending. Look at me."

Halima opened her eyes and pushed the blanket off her chest.

"What is it?" she asked timidly.

"Can you keep a secret?"

"Of course I can, Miriam."

"Like a tomb?"

"Like a tomb."

"If they found out I'd told you, they'd have both our heads. The sultan's forces are besieging the castle ..."

Halima shrieked.

"What's going to happen to us?"

"Shh. Be quiet. Sayyiduna is looking after us. From now on every act of disobedience means a death sentence. There are difficult trials ahead of us. So you know: no matter who asks, you mustn't tell anyone where we are or who we are."

She kissed her on both cheeks and climbed into her own bed.

That night neither one of them closed her eyes. Miriam felt as though mountains were revolving inside her head. The whole world was perched on a knife's edge. Which direction would it tip in the days to come?

Halima shivered with delight ... What a marvelous adventure this whole life was! The Turks besieged the castle and Sayyiduna defended it from them without anyone ever seeing or hearing a thing. And still they were in the grips of great danger. How mysteriously beautiful it all was!

CHAPTER SEVEN

Early the next morning the youths mounted their horses and with their instructors flew out of the fortress. Two by two they thundered across the bridge in perfect order and then raced through the canyon in unbroken formation. Those riding closest to the river's edge were no more than a few inches away from a steep escarpment. Yet no one slid into the stream.

On the plateau Manuchehr brought them to a halt at the foot of a low-lying, gently sloped hill. The novices shivered with feverish tension. Their disquiet communicated itself to the horses, which began neighing impatiently beneath them. Finally, Abu Ali came riding up, accompanied by dai Ibrahim. He spoke briefly with the captain and then rode with the other dais to the top of the hill.

Manuchehr gave an order and the two battle lines went flying off in different directions. Both of them made difficult and complex turns, then attacked and evaded each other, all in a highly coordinated way and without any mishaps.

From the hilltop, sitting on his shaggy white Arabian horse, Abu Ali observed the maneuvers taking place below and gave instructions to the dais.

"Manuchehr has done a fine job of training them," he said, "I can't deny that. But I'm not sure if this Turkish approach is suited to mountainous terrain. In the old days we used to attack individually and take down whatever came under our swords, then scatter again in a heartbeat. We'd repeat that kind of assault two or three times until there was no enemy left."

During the next exercise, when the boys changed their method of attack by breaking the lines and going at each other individually, his eyes shone with satisfaction. He stroked his straggly beard and nodded in recognition. He dismounted, led his horse down the shady side of the

hill, stopped and spread a carpet out over the ground, and lowered himself down onto it so that he sat resting on his heels. The dais, who had followed him, gathered around.

The captain had given another order. The novices leapt off their horses and took off their cloaks to reveal light, scaly armor. In place of their turbans they pulled on tight battle helmets. They let down their lances and reached for their shields and spears instead.

As foot soldiers they proved themselves just as capable. The captain shot a discreet glance at the grand dai and caught him quietly smiling.

Next came the individual military arts. They set up targets at a suitable distance and archery practice began. Out of ten shots, ibn Tahir and Suleiman missed only one each. The others fared almost as well.

Then they competed in spear throwing. Just as they had all been sitting on pins and needles at first in the grand dai's presence, wordlessly carrying out their commands, now that he had begun nodding approval, they gradually relaxed and grew more enthusiastic. They began to gibe and encourage each other. Each of them wanted to stand out and give his very best. Yusuf outdid them all with his powerful throwing arm. Suleiman refused to be defeated. His whole body was taut with exertion.

"Leave some strength for all the other oxen you're going to have to kill," Yusuf taunted him.

Suleiman compressed his lips, drew the spear back and sprinted forward. The weapon went darting through the air. But he didn't outthrow Yusuf who, at his next throw, surpassed himself.

"Outstanding," Abu Ali praised him.

But no one was a match for Suleiman at sword fighting. They were matched up in pairs, and whichever of the two was defeated dropped out of the competition. Ibn Tahir defeated Obeida and ibn Vakas, but then succumbed to Yusuf's more powerful assault. Suleiman forced his competitors out, one after the other. Finally, he and Yusuf had to square off. He hid behind his shield, with his eyes looking out over it, mocking his opponent.

"Now show you're a hero," he taunted him.

"Don't rejoice too soon, my fleet-footed grasshopper," Yusuf replied. "You didn't do so well at spear throwing."

They faced off. Yusuf knew that weight was his advantage, so he lunged at his competitor with all his might. But Suleiman, with his long

legs, had planted his feet far apart and was able to evade the attacks by shifting his torso without losing his footing. With a sudden feint he was able to trick his opponent into moving his shield to the wrong side, at which point he dealt an elegant blow to his rib cage.

The novices and commanders all laughed. Yusuf snorted with rage.

“One more time, if you’ve got it in you!” he shouted. “You won’t trick me this time.”

Manuchehr was about to intervene, but Abu Ali signaled to leave them alone. The two crossed swords again.

Yusuf lunged like a raging bull and began hacking away at Suleiman’s shield. Suleiman smiled at him from behind it. He stood puffed up on his long legs, adroitly shifting his weight. Suddenly he stretched far forward and jabbed Yusuf straight in the chest from under his shield.

He garnered loud approval.

Abu Ali rose, took the sword and shield from his neighbor’s hands, and called on Suleiman to fight with him.

All eyes turned toward them. Abu Ali was an old man and no one would have guessed he was still capable of fighting. Confused, Suleiman looked toward the captain.

“Carry out the order,” came the reply.

Suleiman hesitantly assumed his stance.

“Don’t let it bother you that I’m not wearing any armor, my boy,” the grand dai said benevolently. “I’d like to see if I’m still in practice. I think I may still be.”

He struck Suleiman’s shield in provocation. But Suleiman obviously didn’t know what he was supposed to do.

“What are you waiting for? Go to it!” the grand dai said angrily.

Suleiman prepared to attack. But before he knew it, his sword went flying out of his hand. An elbow as big as a child’s head had sprung out of his opponent’s cloak.

A whisper of amazement coursed through the ranks. Abu Ali laughed roguishly.

“Shall we try once more?” he asked.

This time Suleiman got seriously ready. He lifted his shield up to his eyes and carefully studied his dangerous opponent from over the top of it.

They began. For a time Abu Ali expertly repulsed his lunges. Then he

attacked forcefully himself. Suleiman started to evade him, hoping to trick him with his feints. But the old man was ready for anything. Finally he struck unexpectedly, and Suleiman's sword went flying out of his hand a second time.

Smiling in satisfaction, Abu Ali returned the sword and shield.

"You'll make a fine warrior, Suleiman," he said, "once you have a few dozen battles behind you, like I do."

He waved to Manuchehr to indicate that he was satisfied with their progress. Then he turned toward the novices, who were assembled in two smart rows, and spoke to them.

"Now you'll get a chance to show how much progress you've made in controlling your willpower. Your teacher Abdul Malik is away, so I will test you in his absence."

He approached them, coolly sizing them up with a glance, and ordered, "Hold your breath!"

Ali's gaze went from one face to the next. He watched the novices turn red, the veins on their necks and at their temples swell, and their eyes bulge in their sockets. Suddenly the first one tipped over. Ali walked right up to him and watched him with interest. When he saw him breathing again, he nodded in satisfaction.

One after the other the novices pitched to the ground. Abu Ali looked at the dais and the captain and mockingly observed, "What do you know, like pears in autumn."

Finally only three were left: Yusuf, Suleiman and ibn Tahir. The grand dai approached them and studied their nostrils and mouths.

"No, they're not breathing," he said quietly.

Then Yusuf started to sway. First he dropped gently to his knees, then he crashed to the ground, hard. He began breathing again, opened his eyes, and stared blankly around.

Suddenly, like a felled tree, Suleiman collapsed.

Ibn Tahir lasted a few seconds longer. Abu Ali and Manuchehr exchanged approving glances. Finally he also began to sway and fell over.

Abu Ali was about to give the order for the next exercise, when a messenger from the castle rode up at a wild gallop and called for him to return to the supreme commander immediately. The exercises would continue in the school building that afternoon.

The grand dai ordered them to mount and was the first to gallop off into the canyon.

Soon after the novices had ridden out from the castle that morning, a lookout atop one of the towers noticed a strange pigeon flying around the dovecote. He informed the keeper of the messenger pigeons, and the keeper rushed up the tower with his crossbow loaded. But meanwhile the little creature had settled down and tamely let itself be caught. A silken envelope was wrapped around one of its legs. The dovecote keeper ran to the building of the supreme commander and handed the pigeon to one of Hasan's bodyguards.

Hasan opened the envelope and read.

"To Hasan ibn Sabbah, commander of the Ismailis, greetings! The emir of Hamadan Arslan Tash has attacked our forces with a large army. The fortresses west of Rudbar have already surrendered to him. We were prepared and repulsed a cavalry attack, but that force has proceeded on toward Alamut. An army is approaching to lay siege to the fortress. Awaiting your immediate orders. Buzurg Ummid."

This pigeon was dispatched before my messenger reached Rudbar, Hasan thought. Or else the Turks intercepted the messenger on the way. The battle dance has begun.

He smiled at his composure.

"If only the boys were already initiated," he told himself.

From a cabinet he took a swath of silk similar to the one the pigeon had around its leg and wrote an order on it for Buzurg Ummid to ride to Alamut immediately. He was about to send for one of the Rudbar pigeons, when the guard brought him yet another winged messenger, which had one of the keeper's arrows through its throat. Hasan took the message from its leg. It was covered with tiny writing.

"To Hasan ibn Sabbah, commander of the Ismailis, greetings! Emir Kizil Sarik has set out against us with the entire army of Khorasan and Khuzestan. The smaller fortresses have surrendered to him and the faithful have fled to us at Gonbadan, where we are under siege by the enemy. The heat is unrelenting and our water will soon run out. Food is also running short. I have given the order to hold out, but your son Hosein tries to persuade our men to cede the fortress to the sultan's men

in exchange for safe passage. Awaiting your decisive instructions. Husein Alkeini.”

Hasan went blue in the face. His lips contracted in a terrible rage. His whole body shook. He began to fly around the room like a man possessed.

“That criminal son!” he shouted. “I’ll throw him in chains. I’ll strangle him with my own hands!”

When the grand dai arrived, he wordlessly handed him both letters. Abu Ali read them carefully. Then he spoke.

“For the life of me, I can’t think of any way to save these two fortresses. But you said you’re keeping a powerful weapon in reserve, and I trust you.”

“Good,” Hasan replied. “I’m sending several pigeons to Rudbar and Gonbadan with instructions. My treacherous son and all other malcontents are to be put in chains. Let them starve and go thirsty. Everyone else is to hold out to the last man.”

He wrote a second letter and sent for pigeons for both fortresses. With Abu Ali he attached the silken patches with orders around their legs, then carried them up to the top of his tower and released them.

When he returned he addressed the grand dai.

“First, the novices have to be initiated. They’re the rock on which I plan to build the fortress of our power. How did they do at the tests?”

“I’m satisfied with them,” Abu Ali replied. “Manuchehr and Abdul Malik have turned them into warriors without equal.”

“If only Buzurg Ummid were already here,” Hasan muttered half to himself. “Then the two of you could see the surprise I’ve prepared for you.”

“Indeed, I’ve been having to stifle my curiosity for too long as it is,” Abu Ali said, laughing.

After third prayers the novices resumed their examinations. They gathered with their instructors in the dining hall, and when Abu Ali arrived, the questioning began.

Right away they noticed a change in the grand dai since morning. He

sat on pillows, leaning against the wall and staring grimly at the floor in front of him. He seemed not to be listening to what the novices were saying, but pondering something completely different instead.

Abu Soraka began with questions about the history of the Ismailis. The first four of them had already answered, and it seemed as though the exams were going to run as seamlessly as they had in the morning. But as the fifth youth was speaking, the grand dai suddenly interrupted him and began asking the questions himself.

“Poor,” he said when he didn’t get an absolutely precise answer.

Abu Soraka quickly resorted to ibn Tahir, who answered everything well.

“Let’s move on,” the grand dai commanded. “I’d also like to hear the ones who are less well versed.”

Jafar and Obeida safely negotiated the danger. When Abu Soraka called on Suleiman, Abu Ali laughed scornfully to himself.

Suleiman’s answers were short and abrupt, as though he were infallible in everything. But nearly everything he said was insufficient or even completely wrong.

“You do a poor job of dueling with the truth, my boy,” Abu Ali said, shaking his head. “A feday has to have a mind that never misses.”

Suleiman stepped back, exasperated.

Finally it was Yusuf’s turn. Although the novices were nervous for him, they also found him good sport.

Abu Soraka had saved the easiest question for him. He had to name the imams from Ali to Ismail. But Yusuf was so flustered that the name of the third imam stuck in his throat.

“By the beard of the martyr Ali!” the grand dai shouted. “I wash my hands of so much ignorance.”

Abu Soraka looked furiously at Yusuf, who had slumped back down, half dead.

After Abu Soraka came al-Hakim, who had an easier time avoiding this predicament. He knew that Abu Ali wasn’t familiar with his philosophical theories of human nature, so he nodded approval at every answer, no matter how wrong it was.

The novices were thoroughly versed in geography. The captain smiled in satisfaction and Abu Ali quickly passed over this subject.

Soon grammar, account-keeping and poetry were also taken care of.

The grand dai didn't intervene again until the topic was dogma, on which he placed a great deal of importance. Ibrahim posed his clear and simple questions, which the novices answered well, for the most part.

"Now let's probe the extent of our novices' native intelligence," Abu Ali said, interrupting the questioning. "Yusuf, our great spear-throwing champion, tell us who is closer to Allah: the Prophet or the archangel Gabriel?"

Yusuf got up and stared at him with a look of desperation on his face. Abu Ali asked each of his neighbors on down the line. One answered the Prophet, the next the archangel. But none of them was able to explain his choice.

The grand dai grinned malevolently.

"You decide, ibn Tahir," he said at last.

Ibn Tahir rose and calmly proceeded to respond.

"Allah sent the archangel Gabriel to Mohammed with the announcement that he had been selected as Prophet. If Allah hadn't meant to distinguish Mohammed above all others, he could have entrusted his archangel with the prophet's mission directly. Because he didn't do that, Mohammed now stands ahead of the archangel Gabriel in heaven."

"That's the right answer," Abu Ali said. "Now explain this to us: what is the relationship between the Prophet and Sayyiduna?"

Ibn Tahir smiled. He thought for a moment and then answered.

"The relationship between Sayyiduna and the Prophet is a relationship of younger to older."

"Fine. But who holds greater power over the faithful now?"

"Sayyiduna. Because he has the key that opens the gates to paradise."

Abu Ali rose and all the others stood up after him. His gaze went from one novice to the other. Then he spoke in a solemn voice.

"Go and bathe and put on your ceremonial clothes. Be glad. The greatest moment of your lives is approaching. At the time of fifth prayers you will all be initiated."

With a faint smile he bowed, then strode quickly out of the room.

A messenger from Rai came rushing in and announced to Hasan that the cavalry Muzaffar was supposed to send him was already on the way.

They could expect it to arrive at the castle that night. Right behind him one of the scouts rode in and informed Hasan that the Turkish vanguard was moving toward Alamut with great speed and could be outside the walls by late that night or early in the morning.

Hasan at once had Abu Ali and Manuchehr summoned to him. He received them in his antechamber and told them the news. He spread a map out on the floor and the three of them reviewed the best options for showing their teeth to the sultan's forces.

"I'll send a messenger to intercept Muzaffar's people," Hasan said. "The best thing will be for them not to join us in the castle at all. Instead, Abdul Malik will guide them toward the road that leads from Rudbar. They'll wait in ambush there until the Turks ride past. Then they'll follow them at a safe distance. We'll meet the enemy outside of Alamut, while they press them from behind. It will be like grinding them between two millstones."

Abu Ali and the captain agreed with the plan. They selected an officer to ride with several men to meet Muzaffar's people. Manuchehr left to issue the necessary orders. Hasan asked the grand dai how things were going with the novices.

"There isn't a prophet hiding in any one of them," Abu Ali laughed. "But they are all full of passion and their faith is unshakable."

"That's the main thing, yes, that's the most important," Hasan replied, rubbing his hands. Both of them were starting to feel feverish as the decisive events approached.

"Now go oversee the novices' initiation. Here, I've put together the text of an oath for them. You'll speak to them about the solemnity of the moment, you'll speak about the heroic deeds of the martyrs, enthusiastically, passionately. Fire up their young souls and fill them with fervor and determination. Threaten them with horrible punishment, threaten them with damnation if they aren't absolutely obedient to us in every way. For so many years I've dreamed of educating followers like these in accordance with my plan, of reshaping their character to suit my needs, so I could build my institutions on them. At last, at last I've lived to see the day!"

"You know I've always trusted your wisdom," Abu Ali said. "I'm convinced that you also have good reasons for what you're doing now. But I can't help thinking that it would be wiser if you initiated the

novices yourself. Look, they're so eager to see you at last, for you to make an appearance, to feel that you're a living person and not just some invisible force that they have to obey. It would elevate the event immeasurably."

"That's all true, but I won't do it."

Hasan grew pensive and looked down at the floor. Then he continued.

"I know what I'm doing. If you want to make use of people as means to an end, it's better to keep a distance from their concerns. What matters is that you stay free to act and that your heart doesn't dictate to you. When Buzurg Ummid comes, I'll explain everything to both of you. The flag that you'll give to the fedayeen is ready. Go and do what I've said. This initiation is more important than victory over the Turks."

The great assembly hall in the building of the supreme commander was turned into a mosque for that evening. For the first time the novices were permitted to enter that part of the fortress. The guard of mace-bearing eunuchs had been reinforced. The Moors were in full battle gear, with armor, helmets and shields. Anxious feelings beset the novices as they entered the hall, which was solemnly empty and draped all around with white curtains. They wore white cassocks and tall, white fezzes, and they were barefoot, as the commandment states. The dais were also dressed in white. They arranged the novices by groups, whispering instructions to them on how to behave during the ceremony. The novices shivered in excitement. They were pale and exhausted and some of them were feeling faint.

The horn sounded last prayers. Abu Ali entered, also wearing a loose white cassock and with a tall, white fez on his head. He walked straight through the hall, finally coming to a halt in front of the novices. The commanders stood in two rows beside him. The ceremony had begun.

Abu Ali began by conducting the evening prayers in a steady voice. Then he turned toward the novices and began speaking about the meaning of that evening's initiation, about the joy they must be feeling about it, and about the obedience they owed to Sayyiduna and his deputies. He told them about the bliss of the martyrs and the importance of the example they had set, which should become their highest goal.

"The most glorious moment of your lives is approaching," he said. "You are about to become an elite force, fedayeen, those who give their lives for the holy cause. Among hundreds of thousands of the faithful,

only the twenty of you are receiving this honor. But a day of trials is also approaching, when you will have to prove your faith and obedience to Sayyiduna in battle. The enemy is fast approaching Alamut. Is there anyone among you who will waver at the crucial moment? Is there anyone among you willing to incur the punishment of a shameful death for treachery? I know there are not any such among you. I have spoken to Sayyiduna about you and asked him to approve your initiation. In his benevolence he has granted my wish. Do you wish to prove unworthy of his kindness and my trust? In his name, I am about to initiate you, all of you, as fedayeen. I will pronounce the oath, and all of you, each using his own name, will repeat it after me. Once you have sworn, a great transformation will take place in you. You will cease being novices and will become the elite of Our Master. Now listen and repeat each word after me!”

He stretched out his huge, shovel-like arms and lifted his gaze toward the ceiling. He spoke in an enraptured voice.

“I, ..., solemnly swear by Allah, the Prophet Mohammed, Ali and all the martyrs, that I will carry out every order of Our Master or his deputy without any hesitation. I commit myself to defending the Ismaili flag with my life and to my last breath. With this oath I accept initiation into the fedayeen, from which no one can release me, except Sayyiduna. As Allah is God and Mohammed is his Prophet. Come, al-Mahdi!”

The solemnity of the moment deeply affected the novices. Their faces were waxen and their eyes shone as in a fever. A blissful smile played on their mouths. They were filled with an unspeakably sweet feeling. They had arrived at the goal of their long and persistent efforts. They accepted the initiation they had so fervently longed for.

Abu Ali signaled to Ibrahim, who handed the flag to him. The grand dai unfurled it, revealing the words of the fifth verse of the twenty-eighth sura glinting on its white surface in gold embroidered letters: “And we wished to be gracious to those who were being depressed in the land, to make them leaders and make them heirs.”

“Ibn Tahir,” he called out. “Come forward! To you, first among the elite, I give this banner. Let this white flag become the symbol of your honor and your pride. Should you let an enemy trample it, you let him trample your honor and your pride. Therefore, guard it more zealously than the apple of your eye. As long as a single feday is living, the enemy

is not to lay hands on it. The only path to it leads over your dead bodies. Select the five strongest from your ranks. Lots drawn among them will determine the flag bearer.”

As in a dream, ibn Tahir took the flag from his hands. He went back and stood holding it at the head of the fedayeen. The moment marking the highpoint of his life was receding, and the unspeakably sweet feeling that had filled it was already turning into a burning ache for some wonderful, lost thing. This he realized: the moment he had just experienced, and that was so hopelessly short, would never come again.

In the meantime, messengers had been coming to and going from the castle. Abdul Malik had been informed in time and, with Muzaffar’s detachment, changed course for the road that the Turkish cavalry would be taking. Scouts were dispatched in the direction of the enemy and formed an unbroken chain that could communicate using predetermined signals. The reconnaissance service worked impeccably.

When Abu Ali returned from the initiation, Hasan relaxed.

“At least that’s taken care of.”

Then he ordered the grand dai to assemble the units he needed and head out with them onto the plateau outside the canyon, where they were to wait for the sultan’s vanguard.

“What about the fedayeen?” Abu Ali asked.

“This battle is made to order for them,” Hasan replied. “You’ll take them with you and Abu Soraka will continue to be their commander. But the two of you make sure they don’t get killed. I’m saving them for bigger things. So don’t expose them to too great a danger. Give them the prestigious jobs instead. For instance, have them shoot the first arrows that start the battle. But the first hand-to-hand clash should be borne by the older soldiers. Send the fedayeen into battle only after victory is certain or, of course, in case of extreme peril. If the opportunity comes, have them seize the enemy’s flag. I’m counting on you. You’re the pillar on which I’m building our common future.”

After he had dismissed Abu Ali, Hasan left for the gardens behind the castle.

“Take me to Miriam’s pavilion and then bring Apama there,” he ordered Adi. “This is no time for quarrels.”

Miriam came to meet him. He told her that he had sent for Apama.

“That woman has been behaving very strangely since last night,” she said with some concern. “You must have given her some special instructions.”

“The time for playing games is over,” Hasan replied. “Now all of us who have any responsibility have to focus all our efforts, if the plan is to succeed and if the enemy is to be destroyed.”

Adi brought Apama in. She examined the arrangement of the pavilion with a jealous eye.

“What a lovely little nest the two of you have made,” she said scornfully. “Like real lovebirds.”

“Abu Ali has ridden out with an army to defend the castle, which the sultan’s forces could attack at any minute,” Hasan began, as though he hadn’t heard what Apama had said. He motioned both women toward the pillows and then lay down on them himself.

The old woman was overcome with fright. Her eyes went from Hasan to Miriam.

“What will become of us?” she asked in a stammering voice.

“Everything will be fine, if my orders are carried out to the letter. Otherwise there will be a massacre here, the likes of which the world has never seen.”

“I’ll do everything you command, my master,” Apama assured him and poured wine into his cup.

“That’s precisely what I expect from both you and Miriam. Listen closely. The first thing we need is for the gardens to take on the appearance of something otherworldly. In other words, for them to give simple and unlearned visitors the impression of paradise. Not by day, of course, because their location and the surroundings would give too much away. I mean by night. That’s why we need, first and foremost, powerful illumination. This would show off every detail of the gardens in a special light, and everything outside of them would be lost in impenetrable darkness. Apama, do you remember that evening your Indian prince arranged for you in Kabul?”

“Oh, master! How could I forget, we were so young and radiant then!”

“I’m only concerned about a few of the details. Do you recall how

astonished you were by the fantastic colored lanterns from China that turned night in the gardens into the most magical day? When everything was bright and yet totally strange, new and different?”

“Yes, when our faces went from yellow to red, green, blue, then all different colors at once. It was divine. And in the midst of all that, our burning passion ...”

“Most praiseworthy, indeed. But what I want to know from you is whether you remember those lanterns well enough to be able to replicate them.”

“You’re right. What’s over is over. There’s no point in talking about it. Now it’s time for others to have their turn. Do I remember the lanterns, you ask? Of course I could reproduce them, as long as I had enough parchment and dye.”

“You’ll have it. Would you also be able to decorate them with appropriate designs?”

“We have a girl who’s a master at those things.”

“She means Fatima,” added Miriam, who had been listening to their dialog and quietly smiling. “Everyone could help Apama with this.”

“You’ll need everyone, because everything has to be ready by tomorrow evening. Have the eunuchs prepare the food and drink. I hope there’s still enough wine in the cellars.”

“More than enough.”

“Good. I’ll visit the gardens tomorrow between third and fourth prayers. I want the girls to see me and have their zeal reinforced. And hear directly from me how they’re supposed to behave toward their visitors. I won’t tolerate any jokes. If any of them in any way lets on that she’s not one of the houris and that the gardens aren’t paradise, she’ll be finished, no questions asked. It shouldn’t be too hard, I don’t think.”

“Each one of them thinks she’s a princess already,” Apama added.

“The two of us will be sure to coach them into their roles,” Miriam commented anxiously.

“The threat of death will do its work,” Hasan said. “Make sure all three pavilions are fully ready for visitors tomorrow. The girls assigned to them should be made over from head to foot, dressed all in silk, gold and gemstones. Made up so that they themselves could be convinced that they’re girls from heaven. I hope the school has done its job in that respect.”

“Don’t worry about that, my master. Miriam and I will take care of everything.”

“Tell me, since you know best, what kind of appearance should I make to those monkeys in order to produce the strongest impression?”

“You need to look like a king,” Miriam replied. “That’s how the girls imagine and want you to be.”

“You’ll need to have an entourage,” Apama added, “to make your arrival more ceremonious.”

“Aside from the eunuch guards and my two deputy commanders, no one can know about the existence of these gardens. I’ll have to make do with them. But tell me, what do those little chickens imagine a king looks like?”

“A proud gait and an exalted facial expression—that’s what their king needs to have,” Miriam said with a smile. “And most important of all, a scarlet cape and a gold crown on his head.”

“Amusing, really. The wise man has to disguise himself if he wants respect and confirmation from the people.”

“That’s how the world is,” Apama added.

“Well, we have plenty of rags and baubles like that in the castle. All that was taken care of ahead of time.”

Hasan laughed. He leaned toward Apama and whispered in her ear.

“Do you have that tincture ready that causes the skin to contract? The visitors should get the impression that they have perpetual virginity beside them.”

Apama burst out laughing and nodded. Miriam had only caught the last few words and blushed.

“Are the baths and everything that goes with them ready?”

“Everything is in order, my master.”

“Good. Get to work in earnest tomorrow morning and then wait for me with the girls. Good night.”

Adi rowed him noiselessly back out of the gardens.

Now that he was alone in his rooms, he thought everything through one more time. For twenty years he had prepared steadily and unflaggingly for this moment. Twenty long years. He had never wavered or been frightened by anything in his path. He had been hard and demanding toward himself. He had also been hard and demanding toward others. All just to realize his goal, to embody his dreams.

What a fairy tale life was! A youth full of dreams, an early manhood full of restless searching. And now, in his mature years, the old dreams were starting to become reality. He was the master of thirty armed fortresses. He was the commander of thousands of believers. He lacked only one tool to assume absolute power. To become feared by all the potentates and foreign despots far and wide. That tool was the plan just now on the verge of being launched. A plan built on thorough knowledge of nature and human weakness. An insane and wild plan. A plan calculated in every respect.

It suddenly occurred to him that he might have overlooked some trifling detail that could bring down the whole conceit. A strange fear gripped him. Had he perhaps miscalculated somewhere?

He tried in vain to escape into sleep. The strange uncertainty unsettled him. He had in fact never seriously thought about the possibility of his entire edifice collapsing. He had, after all, taken every possibility into account. Now that fear was haunting him.

“Just get through this night,” he told himself. “Then it will be fine.”

He became short of breath. He got up and went to the top of the tower. Up there was the immeasurable starry vault. Beneath it roared the river. Next to it were the gardens, harboring their strange life. The first embodiment of his strange dreams. Out there, in front of the castle, his army was waiting for the arrival of the sultan’s vanguard. They had all submitted to his leadership without reservations. Did any of them have a hint where he was leading them?

It occurred to him that he could escape all of this. Leap over the ramparts and disappear into Shah Rud. That would be the end of his responsibility forever. He would be spared everything. What would happen with his people then? Maybe Abu Ali would announce that the supreme commander had been lifted up into heaven. Like Empedocles. And they would venerate him as a great prophet and saint. Maybe they would find his corpse. What would they say then?

He felt the awful attraction of the depths. Convulsively he seized onto the ramparts. He was almost lured into the abyss.

He relaxed only after he returned to his room. Soon he was overcome by sleep.

He dreamt he was still at the court in Isfahan, as he had been sixteen years before. A huge throne room. All around nothing but grandees and

dignitaries. In an elevated space, Sultan Malik Shah half sits, half reclines and listens to his report. He's twirling his long, thin mustache and sipping wine. Standing next to him is the grand vizier, his former schoolmate, who winks at him roguishly. He, Hasan, is reading the report and turning its pages. Suddenly all of the sheets are blank. He is unable to proceed. His tongue gets stuck. He begins stammering incoherently. The sultan fixes two cold, hard eyes on him. "Enough!" he shouts and points to the door. His knees get weak. The hallway shakes with the hellish guffawing of the grand vizier.

He shot upright out of his sleep, drenched in sweat, his whole body shaking.

"Praise be to Allah," he whispered, relieved. "I was just dreaming."

Then, comforted, he fell fast asleep.

CHAPTER EIGHT

It was a clear, starry night, one of those nights when we think we can hear the heartbeat of the universe. A snowy chill blowing down from Mount Demavend did battle with the dampness evaporating out of an earth still warm from the sun.

One after the other the warriors rode through the canyon. Abu Ali was at their head. Every fifth horseman swung a torch above his head, lighting the way for those who came behind him. Moths darted around the flames, flew into them, and burned up. The clatter of hooves echoed off the rocky canyon walls. The commands of the officers and sergeants, the shouts of the camel drivers, and the neighing of the horses merged in a mighty din that drowned out the roar of the mountain stream.

The fedayeen set up camp behind a lookout ridge. They were well covered. They pitched their tents, lit their campfires, and posted guards. Some two hundred paces away from them the other warriors, horsemen, lancers and archers had settled in atop a hill overgrown with shrubs. At the bottom of a small gully they kindled low-burning fires, warmed themselves next to them, and roasted an ox. They spoke in muffled tones and laughed excitedly. Anxiously they cast glances at the figure atop the guard tower, his outlines motionless against the horizon. Those who had drawn lookout or guard duty wrapped themselves in their jackets and lay down to get their sleep in early.

The fedayeen were overcome with fatigue from their examinations and the excitement of their initiation. Following Abu Soraka's advice, early that morning they had wrapped themselves in horse blankets, which they had brought with them, and tried to sleep. Over the last two days they had become so used to surprises that the impending battle didn't particularly disturb them. Some of them went right to sleep. Others extricated themselves from their blankets and began poking the fires, which had almost gone out.

“Praise be to Allah, we’re done with school,” Suleiman remarked. “Waiting for the enemy at night is a whole different thing from spending your days polishing your butt on your heels and scratching at tablets with a pencil.”

“I just wonder if the enemy’s going to come at all,” ibn Vakas worried. In school he had been one of the quietest and most unobtrusive, but with danger looming, battle fever suddenly awakened in him.

“That would be just great,” Yusuf said. “So all the preparation and all the excitement would be for nothing, and we wouldn’t even get a Turk within sword’s length.”

“It would be even more entertaining if, after all your work and effort, they got you within sword’s length,” Suleiman joked.

“Our fate is written in the book of Allah,” Jafar remarked indifferently. He had drawn the lot to become flag bearer. He tried to subdue the vanity that threatened to show through in him with his submission to fate.

“But it would be stupid if we struggled so much in school, just so the first savage who comes along can do us in,” Obeida added.

“Cowards die a thousand times, a brave man only once,” Jafar pronounced.

“Do you think I’m a coward just because I’d prefer not to die right away?” Obeida said angrily.

“Stop going at each other,” Yusuf said, trying to pacify them. “Look at ibn Tahir staring at the stars. Maybe he thinks he’s looking at them for the last time.”

“Yusuf is becoming a wise man,” Suleiman laughed.

Several paces away, ibn Tahir lay wrapped in his blanket, staring at the sky.

“How wonderful this life of mine is,” he said to himself. “Like the fulfillment of some distant dreams.” He remembered his childhood in his parents’ home and how he would listen to the conversations of the men who gathered around his father. They would discuss the issue of the true caliph, refer to the Koran, refute the Sunna, and talk to each other in whispers about the mysterious Mahdi from the line of Ali, who would come to save the world from lies and injustice. “Oh, if only he would come during my lifetime,” he had wished back then. He envisioned himself as his defender, just as Ali had been for the Prophet. Instinctively

he kept comparing himself with Mohammed's son-in-law. He had been the Prophet's most ardent follower and had fought and bled for him from his early childhood, and yet, after his death he was deprived of his legacy. When the people finally elected him, he had been treacherously murdered. It was for these very reasons that ibn Tahir had come to love him most. He was his shining example, the paragon on which he most tried to model himself.

How his heart beat when his father sent him to Alamut to enter Sayyiduna's service! He had heard that this man was a saint and that many people regarded him as a prophet. From the very beginning, something had told him: this is your al-Mahdi, this is the one you've been waiting for, whom you've been longing to serve. But why didn't anybody see him? Why hadn't he initiated them into the fedayeen? Why had he chosen as his intermediary that toothless old man who resembled an old woman more than a man and a warrior? Until now, until this moment, it had never occurred to him to doubt that Sayyiduna was really in the castle. In this instant of illumination he felt terrified at the thought that he may have been living a delusion, and that Hasan ibn Sabbah wasn't at Alamut at all, or that he wasn't even alive anymore. In that case Abu Ali would be the one leading the Ismailis, and all of the dais and commanders would have some secret agreement with him. Abu Ali, a prophet? No, someone like him couldn't be, shouldn't be a prophet! Maybe they invented Sayyiduna, unseen and unheard, precisely for that reason, in order not to repel the faithful. Because who would want to recognize Abu Ali as the supreme commander of the Ismailis?

The castle concealed a great mystery, this much he sensed. At night, this night, it began to distress him as never before. Would he ever be given the chance to remove the veil from it, to look it in the face? Would he ever see the real, living Sayyiduna?

He heard the clatter of horse hooves. Instinctively he reached for his weapons. He got up and looked around. His companions were asleep, wrapped tightly in their blankets. A messenger had arrived. He could see him communicating in whispers with Abu Ali. A brief order followed and the guards put out the last remnants of the fires. The enemy was approaching.

A quiet peace came over him. He looked at the stars glimmering above him, small and sharp. He became aware of how small and lost he was in

the universe. And that awareness was almost pleasant. *Eventually, I may get to paradise*, he thought. *Oh, if only I could!* he fervently whispered to himself. *Heavenly maidens with dark eyes and white limbs will be waiting for me there.* He recalled the women he had known: his mother, his sisters, and other relatives. *The houris must be completely different*, he thought, *in a way that makes it worthwhile to shed blood for them in this world.*

He tried to imagine himself actually arriving in paradise and entering through an iron gate grown over with ivy. He looked around and tried to find all the things the Koran promised. He pulled the blanket more tightly around himself. Now he really was in paradise. A beautiful maiden was walking toward him. He was half aware that he was dozing off and starting to dream. But it was pleasant and he was afraid of breaking the delicate threads. And so, at last, he fell asleep.

The sustained sound of a trumpet called them to battle. Drums began beating and the army jumped to its feet. The fedayeen hastily put on their sword belts, fastened their helmet straps, and grabbed their spears and shields. They stood in formation and, without having yet quite awakened, looked at each other questioningly.

“A messenger has just announced that the sultan’s forces are approaching,” said ibn Vakas, who had taken the last watch.

Abu Soraka stepped before them and ordered them to get their bows and quivers ready. Then he led them to the top of the hill and had them assume positions on the ground next to the guardhouse. For a while they waited with bated breath, but when no enemy appeared, they reached into their knapsacks and pulled out dried figs, dates and pieces of hardtack to chew on.

The horses had stayed at the foot of the hill, with two soldiers keeping watch over them. From time to time they could hear them whinny and neigh restlessly.

Daybreak came. The fedayeen looked toward the hillside where the rest of the army had camped. Abu Ali had assembled the horsemen behind some of the overgrowth. The riders stood next to their horses, holding their lances or sabers, a foot in one stirrup. On top of the hill the archers crouched with their bows drawn.

The grand dai inspected his units for their readiness. Behind him

walked a soldier leading his horse by the reins. At last they reached the fedayeen, and Abu Ali climbed to the top of the tower.

Soon afterward a tiny white dot appeared on the horizon. Abu Ali came flying out of the guardhouse and, out of breath, pointed it out to Abu Soraka.

“Ready your bows!” the dai commanded.

The white dot grew visibly larger and a lone rider emerged from it. They could see him wildly spurring the horse on. Abu Ali watched, blinked, and squinted. Finally he called out.

“Don’t shoot! He’s ours!”

He mounted his horse and raced down the hill. He waved to several horsemen to join him. He grabbed the flag from one of them and galloped on toward the approaching rider, waving it.

Confused and frightened, the rider turned his horse aside, but when he saw the white flag, he drove the animal toward Abu Ali.

At that instant Abu Ali recognized him.

“Buzurg Ummid!” he called out.

“Abu Ali!” The rider pointed behind himself.

All eyes were trained on the horizon. A black line appeared along it, bending strangely and constantly growing. Then individual riders could be made out. Over their heads fluttered the black flags of the caliph of Baghdad.

“Ready your bows!” Abu Soraka commanded again.

Abu Ali and Buzurg Ummid joined the soldiers on the hillside. They were trembling with excitement, ready to attack.

“Find your man!” came the command to the archers.

The enemy horsemen were already quite close. One rode ahead of the others, leading the way. They turned toward the entrance to the canyon.

“Fire!”

Arrows flew toward the Turks. Several horses and riders dropped to the ground. For a moment the cavalry paused, then its commander, who was visible to all by the enormous plume that fluttered atop his helmet, called out.

“Into the canyon!”

At that instant Abu Ali gave a sign. He dashed down the slope on horseback with the others behind him and cut the Turks off at the entrance to the canyon. Lances flew past lances and sabers glinted over

their heads. White flags mingled with black ones.

The fedayeen watched the battle from the top of the hill. They were seized with an indescribable enthusiasm. Suleiman shouted, "Let's go! Mount up! Charge!"

He was already racing downhill toward the horses, when Abu Soraka lunged at him and held him back.

"Are you crazy!? Didn't you hear the order?"

Suleiman howled in powerless rage. He flung his bow and lance aside and threw himself on the ground. He started writhing around as though he were out of his mind. He bit his knuckles and cried.

The Turks, who had been scattered by the unexpected attack, had now regrouped and were charging toward the canyon again to force their way through. Their commander had concluded that the entire Ismaili army was here outside Alamut, and that the fortress itself must be only lightly defended. The fedayeen watched in painful trepidation as the first casualties fell from Alamut's ranks. Watching the battle with their arms crossed was intolerable.

Abu Soraka kept his watch toward the horizon. At last a second swarming line appeared there. The fedayeen didn't notice it, but Abu Soraka's heart pounded in elation when the white flags of the martyr Ali appeared, fluttering above them.

Now came the moment when he could send the fedayeen into battle. His eyes sought out the enemy's regimental flag and he pointed it out to them.

"Mount up! Go capture the enemy's regimental flag! All of you, in full force, to battle!"

The youths whooped for joy. They went flying down the hillside and leapt onto their horses in a flash. They brandished their bare sabers, and Jafar raised the white flag high up in the air. They all broke out at once toward the enemy and with their first thrust pressed them toward the river.

Chaos broke out among the Turks. Suleiman grimly brought down his first opponent. Jafar went flying with the flag into a gap that had opened up, and the other fedayeen pressed close behind him. Yusuf roared and thrashed wildly around, causing the frightened Turks to yield way. Ibn Tahir tirelessly hacked away at a small round shield, behind which a bowlegged Tatar was hiding. The latter had dropped his useless lance

and was jerkily trying to pull his heavy saber out of its sheath in time. Finally the arm he held the shield with gave out. Covered in blood, he tried to slip away from the battle.

Suleiman and the others alongside him knocked several more of the enemy off of their horses. The white flag drew closer and closer to the black one.

The Turkish colonel finally guessed what the fedayeen were trying to do.

“Defend the regimental flag!” he howled, so that friend and foe alike could hear him.

“Let’s go for their leader!” ibn Tahir called out.

The Turks crowded around their flag and their commander. At that moment Abdul Malik and Muzaffar’s men slammed into them. The clash was horrible. The Turks dispersed to all sides of them like chaff.

Suleiman had not lost sight of the enemy flag bearer, just as ibn Tahir still tracked the colonel, who was shouting, “Retreat! Each man for himself! Rescue the flag!”

At that point ibn Tahir had fought his way up to him. Their sabers crossed. But Muzaffar’s men came racing up. Several Turks tried to hold them back. A hopeless tangle ensued, burying the colonel and his horse. Ibn Tahir extricated himself. He turned to look for the enemy flag bearer. He caught sight of him racing alongside the stream with Suleiman close behind. He rushed after him to help, and several of their comrades followed.

Suleiman rode alongside the flag bearer. The Turk was wildly whipping his horse. He shoved his lance out to the side to repel his pursuer. Suleiman was riding abreast of him. Suddenly his opponent turned his horse and Suleiman was struck by the lance. The unexpected blow was so strong that it threw him from his saddle.

Ibn Tahir howled. He spurred his horse on and within an instant was riding alongside the flag bearer. He realized vaguely that Suleiman was on the ground, possibly dead. But now only one thing mattered: to carry out the assignment, to seize the enemy’s flag.

He forced the Turk right up to the edge of the stream. Suddenly an avalanche of earth broke loose under the horse’s legs. It crashed into the rapids with the rider on it.

Ibn Tahir hesitated for a moment. Then he raced down the steep

embankment into the river. For an instant the water covered him and his animal. Just as quickly they came back to the surface. They waded after the Turk, who was holding his flag out of the water. They caught up with him. Ibn Tahir slashed at his head with his sword. The arm holding the flag dropped and the Turk vanished under the waves. The black flag fluttered again in ibn Tahir's hands.

A victorious shout greeted him from the shore as the current carried him downstream with tremendous speed. His horse was beginning to choke. The fedayeen raced down the river bank alongside him and shouted encouragement to hold out.

By exerting all his strength he finally drew the horse toward the shore. The horse felt firm ground beneath its legs, but the current was still dragging it downstream. One of the fedayeen jumped off his own horse, got on his stomach, and held a long lance out toward ibn Tahir. Meanwhile the others unwound snares and threw them to their comrade so he could tie the horse to them. Eventually they pulled them both out of the stream.

"What happened to Suleiman?" he asked when he was standing on the bank again. Unthinkingly he handed the enemy banner to ibn Vakas.

The fedayeen looked at each other.

"That's right, what's happened to him?"

They turned to look back. Suleiman was slowly walking toward them, downcast and leading his horse.

Ibn Tahir hurried toward him.

"It's only thanks to you that we seized the enemy's flag."

Suleiman brushed the comment aside.

"What's the point. For once I had a chance to do a great deed, and I failed. I can tell, fate is against me."

He grabbed his leg and cursed. His comrades helped him onto his horse, and they headed back toward their camp.

The victory over the Turks was complete. The enemy commander and a hundred and twelve of his men had fallen. They took thirty-five wounded enemy captive. The rest had scattered to the four winds. Horsemen pursuing them returned, one after the other, and reported how many of them they had managed to kill. The Ismailis themselves

lost twenty-six men. Slightly more than that had been injured.

Abu Ali ordered a large ditch dug at the foot of the hill, into which they threw the enemy dead. He had the Turkish colonel beheaded and his head stuck onto a lance atop the watchtower. Manuchehr and his men arrived from the castle and listened downcast to the victors' raucous accounts of the course of the battle. Al-Hakim and his assistants hurriedly treated the wounded and had them carried on litters to Alamut. He knew he still had hard work ahead of him there.

When the wounded had been tended to and the enemy bodies disposed of, Abu Ali ordered for the trumpet to sound the return. The soldiers loaded their fallen comrades and plunder onto the camels and donkeys, mounted their horses, and, amid impetuous shouts, returned to the castle.

Hasan had observed the course of the battle from his tower. He saw the Turks rushing in and Abu Ali cutting off their path. He saw the fedayeen joining the battle and Muzaffar's horsemen, with Abdul Malik at their head, assuring victory. He was extraordinarily satisfied.

A gong sounded the arrival of news for him. No one was allowed atop his tower, under punishment of death, not even his eunuchs. He went back into his room. Buzurg Ummid was waiting for him there.

Hasan rushed toward him and embraced him tightly.

"Now I'm perfectly happy!" he exclaimed.

In contrast with Abu Ali, Buzurg Ummid was a man of striking appearance. He was tall and strong and had an aristocratic face. His magnificent black beard was curled, with silver threads showing only here and there. His lively eyes expressed will and determination. His lips were full and well articulated, though sometimes, when he laughed, they hinted at inflexibility and even cruelty. Like the other leaders he was dressed Arabian style in a white cloak and white turban, from which a wide kerchief draped down onto his shoulders. But his clothing was cut from choice fabric and tailored to fit. Even now, with a long and arduous ride just behind him, he looked as though he had dressed expressly for a formal occasion.

"The Turks nearly got me under their sabers," he said, smiling. "Yesterday after third prayers your carrier pigeon brought me your

order. I had barely managed to give instructions to cover my absence, when your messenger came swimming up Shah Rud with the news. The Turks had positioned a large detachment in front of the castle, and your man had to ford the water on his horse so they wouldn't catch him."

Then he described how he had taken a shorter route on the other side of the river and finally managed to outdistance them. Barely a hundred paces ahead of them, he forded another stream, and he became infernally fearful that Hasan's men wouldn't be able to let the bridge down for him or, if they did so, that the Turks would be able to charge into the fortress right behind him.

Hasan rubbed his hands in delight.

"Everything is working out beautifully," he said. "You and Abu Ali are going to get to see what I've come up with. You'll be so amazed your head will spin."

Abu Ali returned and Hasan embraced him, grinning.

"Truly, I wasn't mistaken about you," he said.

He had him describe the course of the battle in detail. He was particularly interested in the fedayeen.

"So the grandson of Tahir, our poet, seized the regimental flag? Excellent, excellent."

"Suleiman was right behind their flag bearer, but he fell, and ibn Tahir finished the job," Abu Ali explained. "The Turk slid into the river on his horse, and the poet chased after him and took the flag away from him."

Then he provided a count of the casualties and described their plunder.

"Let's go to the assembly hall," Hasan said. "I want to congratulate my men on their victory myself."

Al-Hakim assigned several fedayeen to work with his assistants, so they could see in real life how the injured were cared for and treated. They helped him straighten out broken limbs and bandage wounds. Some of the wounded had to have large wounds burned out, so that the entire infirmary smelled of burnt flesh. The injured shouted and wailed, and their cries were audible throughout the fortress. Those who had to have a limb sawed off lost and regained consciousness repeatedly and bellowed most hopelessly of all.

“This is horrible,” ibn Tahir whispered to himself.

“How lucky that we fedayeen came away intact,” Yusuf remarked.

“War is something terrible,” Naim said.

“It’s not for little doves like you, that’s for sure,” Suleiman laughed.

“Leave Naim alone,” Yusuf shot back. “He was at my side the whole time, and I wasn’t hiding.”

“You were roaring so loudly the Turks had to hold their ears instead of fight,” Suleiman joked. “Small wonder our cricket hid under your wings.”

“You couldn’t get to the Turkish flag, no matter how hard you tried,” Obeida snorted at him.

Suleiman went pale. He didn’t say a word but watched al-Hakim as he approached another injured man.

The Greek was a capable physician. The cries and moans of the injured didn’t bother him a bit. Now and then he would comfort a patient with an encouraging word, but otherwise he did his job skillfully and matter-of-factly, like a craftsman at work. In the process he explained the basics of dressing wounds to the fedayeen, seasoning his words with his personal wisdom.

A Turk had broken Sergeant Abuna’s arm. Al-Hakim approached him, removed the improvised sling, took a board from the hands of a feday and used it to straighten and then reinforce the broken limb.

While the sergeant gnashed his teeth in pain, the Greek spoke to the fedayeen.

“The human body’s predisposition to harmony is so strong that the separate parts of a broken limb long to be reunited and fused. The power of this passion for reestablishing the whole is so great that even wrongly adjusted parts will reunite. The skill of a good doctor is in knowing the body’s true structure, avoiding that kind of irregularity and being able to rejoin the parts of a broken limb in accordance with nature.”

By the time he had finished with the Ismaili wounded, he was dead tired. He saw how many Turkish wounded were still waiting for him, and he sent ibn Tahir to ask Abu Ali what he should do with them. He secretly hoped he could deal with them more quickly, perhaps even “curing” some of the more critically wounded with a dependable poison.

Ibn Tahir ran into Abu Soraka, who went to ask the grand dai.

The order came back: “Treat the Turks as carefully as if they were our

friends. We need them as hostages.”

The doctor cursed and threw himself back into his work. Now he no longer offered encouraging words to the groaning wounded, and he didn't bother to explain anything to the fedayeen. He left the easier jobs for his assistants. Of the fedayeen, Obeida proved to be the most capable.

It wasn't until late afternoon that he finished treating wounds and setting broken bones. He gave his assistants appropriate orders and then left to find the commanders.

Meanwhile the commanders were talking about the day's exploits over food and wine in the assembly hall. They shared conjectures about the supreme commander's next moves and what advantages the day's victory might bring them. They all praised Abdul Malik for carrying out his assignment so brilliantly.

Their mood reached a high point when Hasan appeared in the hall with the two grand dais. His face shone with satisfaction, and as he and the commanders greeted each other, his cheeks trembled from smiling.

“I have excellent assistants in you,” he said as they sat over the platters and jugs. He particularly praised Abu Ali, who had led the entire expedition. Then he turned to Abdul Malik and asked him how he had fared with the harems at Muzaffar's. He acknowledged his successful contribution to the battle and thanked him for it. He also praised Abu Soraka for leading the fedayeen and carrying out his instructions so precisely. Then he looked at Captain Manuchehr. A roguish smile came over his face.

Manuchehr had not been participating in the discussions. He was sulking because he had been forced to stand with his arms crossed while the others were winning battle laurels. He stared gloomily ahead, eating little and drinking a lot. His gigantic body shuddered when he was accosted by Hasan's grinning gaze.

“There are two men among us,” Hasan said, his voice wavering slightly with suppressed deviltry, “who have earned themselves the highest recognition for their sacrifices today. For a true soldier, the highest honor is in facing the enemy. And not just the highest honor but the greatest joy too. Whoever is forced to forgo that honor and that joy for a higher cause proves that he's a real man, and he deserves special recognition.”

He looked at the astonished faces around him. Then he grew serious and continued.

“As I said, there are two men among us who had to forgo that honor and joy today, even though at heart they are true soldiers. Those two are Manuchehr and myself. The reasons for our having to do this are obvious. I have my satisfaction from the fact that you who fought the battle proved yourselves. Manuchehr has the honor of being designated by me as emir and commander of the forces of all Ismaili castles.”

He rose and approached Manuchehr, who also stood up, his face red with surprise and embarrassment.

“Surely you’re joking, Sayyiduna,” he stammered.

“By no means, my friend,” Hasan replied, embracing him. “The order has been signed and Abu Ali will deliver it to you.”

An approving murmur coursed through the assembly of commanders.

“What’s more, your share of the plunder will equal that of the other commanders,” he added. “Yes, speaking of plunder, let’s talk about apportioning it now.”

Abu Ali recounted how many animals and weapons, how much money and other valuables had fallen into their hands that morning.

“Manuchehr and each of the commanders who fought in the battle will get one horse and one suit of armor each,” Hasan determined. “Plus ten gold pieces as well. Muzaffar’s men will likewise each get ten gold pieces, and his officers and sergeants will also get armor. We will send Muzaffar ten horses, ten camels and two hundred gold pieces as a sign of thanks for sending us help. The families of the dead will get fifty gold pieces each. The rest of the plunder is to be divided among our men. The fedayeen are to get nothing. For them, the fact that they got to fight today is reward enough.”

When they had apportioned the booty, Hasan spoke again.

“We must strike while the iron is hot. The news of the Turkish vanguard’s defeat will spread like wildfire all through Iran. It will lift the courage of our coreligionists and friends, and it will strengthen the doubters. Many who secretly approved of our actions will now feel emboldened to support us openly. Our comrades in fortresses under siege will be encouraged to hold out. Our enemies will be forced to reckon with us, and some of them will feel their hearts race in their treacherous breasts.”

Here he was thinking of the grand vizier, and the commanders nodded as a sign that they understood.

“Now, following the victory, we can count on a large influx of new believers,” he continued. “The entire district of Rudbar is friendly to us, and fathers are going to send their sons to the castle to become Ismaili warriors. Abu Soraka, you will receive them and make selections as you’ve done until now. The youngest, strongest and most clear-headed are to become fedayeen. But the condition remains that they must not be married or have lived a dissolute life. In short, they mustn’t know women and their delights. All the other able-bodied ones are to be inducted as soldiers. We’re going to augment the old rules and add some new ones. Whoever was in the castle before the battle will have certain advantages. The ones who distinguished themselves are to be promoted. Each individual’s rank, duties, rights and obligations are to be clearly stipulated. We will promulgate stricter laws. Everyone must simultaneously be a soldier and a believer. We will extirpate every earthly desire. Today is the first and last time we will permit the soldiers to drink wine, because Muzaffar’s people are in the castle. Let them find out that we are the masters of what is and isn’t allowed. As time goes on they will unwittingly be working for us. Oh yes, from now on let the recruitment of new followers be one of our highest priorities. We will release the fedayeen into the land like a swarm of bees, to talk and bear witness on our behalf. We are also going to work on the prisoners, so be sure they are well taken care of. The sultan’s army is approaching, and it may not be long before it has us surrounded. We need people who know their way around in it. They’ll go among the men and spread our faith and our zeal. This is how we must try to weaken its foundations, and the rest will topple of its own accord.”

He ordered Abdul Malik to select a sufficient number of men and set out with them early the next morning for the fortress at Rudbar to disperse the Turkish vanguard, if it was still there. Then he was to take a detachment and scour the surrounding territory from Qazvin to Rudbar and wipe out any pockets of the enemy. At that point he was to send scouts to intercept the sultan’s army.

Then he bade farewell to the commanders, nodded to the two grand dais, and left with them for his chambers.

All that day Muzaffar's men and the men of Alamut boisterously celebrated the victory. On the lower and middle terraces fires were hastily lit, over which fat oxen and plump lambs were roasted on spits. They crouched around them or sat resting on their heels, waiting impatiently for their portion of roast. The pleasant smell of sizzling meat teased their nostrils. To allay their appetite, they tore off pieces of bread and stuck them under the spits to catch and absorb the dripping fat. They talked raucously about their feats of the morning, trying to outdo and outshine each other, boasting of real and imaginary heroism and exaggerating the numbers of the enemy killed. There were some arguments and some names called. Whenever a lamb or an ox was done, they attacked it with their knives. Each of them wanted the best piece. They began threatening each other with their fists, even with weapons. The sergeants had their hands full trying to pacify them. Finally it became apparent that there was enough roast meat for everyone and that there was no point in fighting over it.

Then donkeys were led in bearing huge wineskins. Groups of ten men were given tall jugs, into which the sergeants began pouring wine.

"Who's given us permission to drink wine?" they asked.

"Sayyiduna," the sergeants answered. "He's the commander of the Ismailis and a new prophet."

"Can he allow what the Prophet has forbidden?"

"Of course he can. Allah has given him the power to issue commandments and prohibitions. He's also given him the key that opens the gate to heaven."

Unused to wine, the soldiers soon got drunk. They cheered the supreme commander and the Ismailis, deliberated and argued about him and his teachings, and asked the men of Alamut for explanations. Many of them decided that, once they finished their service to Muzaffar, they would return to the castle to serve Hasan.

The fedayeen gathered on the roof of the school building and watched the noisy goings-on below. They roasted a lamb and, when they had eaten their fill, they continued their discussion of the day's events. They drank no wine. They felt they were an elite force. Instinctively they looked down on the men chaotically swarming around the fires. Those who had been helping the doctor treat the wounded talked about their impressions. But the seizure of the flag remained the focus of discussion

and analysis for a long time.

CHAPTER NINE

At the same time that the army of Alamut was battling with the sultan's vanguard, the gardens behind the castle were becoming as busy as an anthill.

At first light Adi ferried Apama over to the girls. The old woman was furious when she saw they were all still asleep. She grabbed a mallet and began banging the gong wildly.

The girls rushed terror-stricken from their bedrooms, a hail of curses greeting them.

"Lazy monkeys! Sayyiduna will be here any minute, and you're all lazing about in your beds as though it were a holiday. He'll have all our heads if he catches you like this."

They dressed quickly. A feverish feeling came over them as they realized that their master would be visiting the gardens. Apama and Miriam assigned them their work. They set to it enthusiastically.

Apama flew among them like a woman possessed.

"If I could only tell them what's in store for them," she murmured loudly enough for the girls nearest her to hear. She managed to fuel real chaos among them, and Miriam had to work hard to maintain order.

Hasan had sent parchment, dyes, candles and everything else needed for making the lanterns. Apama explained to Fatima what needed to be done. Fatima immediately set to work, and within a short time the first lamp was ready. They made the room dark and lit a candle in the lantern.

The girls squealed in delight.

"Stupid geese! Stop wasting time gawking and get to work!" Apama scolded them.

Fatima immediately divided the labor. One group of girls transferred her designs onto parchment, another mixed the dyes, a third used them to paint the sides of the lamps, a fourth cut them out, and a fifth pasted

the various parts together. They carried the finished lamps out to the fish pond to let them dry in the sun. They quickly grew in number.

The whole time, they talked about the arrival of Sayyiduna.

“I imagine him coming here like a king,” Jada said. “He’ll be dressed all in gold and scarlet.”

“He’ll come like a prophet,” Halima contradicted.

“I suppose he told you that himself,” Jada teased her.

Halima was just on the verge of revealing what Miriam and Adi had confided to her. But at last she managed to control herself. Apama was close by and could start questioning her.

“Mohammed was a prophet and a king at the same time,” Fatima said.

“Are you talking about Sayyiduna?” asked Apama, who was walking by. She grinned maliciously.

“Some of you may lose your heads before the night is over,” she added. “This evening you’ll be getting another visit, and any one of you who gives away who you are and where you are will be beheaded immediately. Which of you has enough sense in her head not to blurt that out?” Terrified, they turned to look at Miriam.

“Apama is right,” she explained to them. “Sayyiduna has had these gardens modeled on paradise itself. From now on you’re going to have to behave as though you really are in heaven. You’re not ordinary girls anymore, you’re houris. You need to take on that role, which shouldn’t be so hard if you try. But if any one of you gives us away to our visitors, she’ll have to die immediately.”

“I’m not even going to open my mouth,” Sara said. “That way I won’t have to worry about letting anything slip.”

“You’re going to have to respond in detail to everything they ask you about,” Apama retorted.

Halima burst into tears.

“I’m going to hide so nobody sees me.”

“Just try,” Apama upbraided her. “We’ll put you on the rack.”

The girls were seized with fear. They kept quiet and worked diligently.

“Oh, what’s the use,” Fatima remarked at last. “What will be, will be. I’ve been in a harem where we had to act and pretend constantly. Men, especially when they’re still young, aren’t all that bright. It’s easy to fool them. Playing houris in these gardens won’t be that difficult either.”

“I just had a thought,” Zuleika said. “Maybe this is why we had to

learn those passages in the Koran that describe life in paradise. What do you think?"

Miriam smiled. She herself hadn't made that connection before. Now she had to acknowledge again how carefully Hasan had thought through every small detail.

He really is the horrible dreamer from hell, she thought.

"You're right, Zuleika. Let's review what we know from the Koran," Zainab suggested.

"Girls! You've all got imaginations!" Fatima said, encouraging them. "Imagine you're in paradise and everything else will come of its own accord."

"The more naturally you behave, the easier it will be to do a good job," Miriam added, coaching them. "Don't overdo anything. Act as though it's the most natural thing in the world that you're houris. So don't even talk about it, unless you're asked."

Halima had calmed down in the meantime. Her old curiosity drove her to ask, "But why does Sayyiduna want us to pretend we're in paradise?"

"Because," Apama said, dismissing her, "that way little monkeys like you will learn to keep their mouths shut."

Moad and Mustafa returned with hunting bags full of partridges, quail, water fowl and fish. Apama and her assistants went to the kitchen to clean and prepare them.

The girls began breathing easy again.

But Halima's curiosity kept troubling her.

"And the visitors we have to tell that we're houris—what will they be like?"

Her question was met with laughter.

"First of all, you mustn't tell them that," Miriam scolded her playfully, "because it has to be obvious and go without saying. Second, Sayyiduna is visiting us to give us detailed instructions. But just so you don't trouble your head about it, I'll tell you what I think about our visitors. They could be handsome young men."

Halima turned as red as a poppy. All the others looked at her. She lowered her eyes and stamped her foot on the floor.

"I'm not going to be there."

"You'll have to be," Miriam said sternly.

Halima banged her foot on the floor once more.

“I won’t be there.”

“Halima?!”

Miriam flushed red with anger.

“So you’re going to ignore Sayyiduna’s command?”

Halima kept silent and compressed her lips. Finally she relented.

“And what will happen then?” she asked tamely.

Miriam laughed.

“You’ll see.”

The other girls started to tease her.

“You’re going to have to kiss them,” Fatima said.

“And do all those things you learned from Apama,” Sara added.

“I’ll throw something at both of you if you don’t leave me alone,” she threatened them.

“Get to work!” Miriam admonished them. “Let’s not waste time chattering.”

In a corner, Sara pasted and sewed the lamps together. Halima took refuge with her. Lately they had become friends again, but on a different basis, as Halima would say. Fatima had carved some dice for her out of hardwood and Halima had developed a real passion for gambling. Sara became her faithful partner in this. They played for all kinds of things: nuts, bananas, oranges, candy, kisses. They would even play to decide who loved whom. If one of the girls invited Halima to spend the afternoon nap with her, she would pull the dice out of her pants belt and throw them to decide what to do.

Even now she got them out and asked Sara to play with her. They hid behind sheets of parchment that they had set up. Sara had saved a few leftover nuts and bet those. If she lost, they went to Halima. If she won, Halima would have to give her a kiss for each one. Sara soon lost all of the nuts. Now she had to let her ear be pulled as a penalty.

Halima always won.

“I get to pull your ear four times,” she said meanly.

Sara began watching her suspiciously.

“Why do you squint at the dice each time before you throw them?” she asked.

“I just do.”

Sara suggested they throw the dice to find out which one of them would get the most handsome boy.

Halima got the higher number.

“You’re cheating, Halima. I saw you move the dice in your hand to get a higher number. Then you just put them on the floor. Either play like I do or I’m not going to be your partner anymore.”

Halima tried and lost.

Sara scoffed at her.

“See? When you don’t cheat, you lose.”

“I don’t want to do this anymore,” Halima said. “It’s not fun at all when I don’t win.”

“Is that right? How about if I cheated?”

“You’d better not!”

“Well, how do you like that! So you get to cheat as much as you want, while I have to be satisfied with being your dupe?”

Miriam approached them.

“What’s going on with you two again?”

Sara quickly hid the dice with her knee.

“We were arguing about the best way to paste these together.”

Miriam used her foot to push Sara’s knee to one side.

“And what’s that down there?”

She saw the dice and got furious.

“So that’s it! Sayyiduna is coming here any minute and the two of you are just throwing dice. Well go ahead, throw them! Tonight you’ll be throwing your heads!”

She looked at Halima sharply.

“These are your dice, Halima. You’re a hopeless sinner. What am I going to do with you?”

She picked up the dice and took them away.

“Just this much for now,” she said.

Tears came to Halima’s eyes. She smiled defiantly and said, “I don’t care about the dice anyway, if you’re not going to let me win. It’s your fault for picking an argument.”

They continued with their work.

“I do think it would be nice,” Sara remarked, “if our visitors thought we were houris. That way they’d fall in love with us, don’t you think?”

Halima seized at this immediately.

“It’s a shame we don’t have the dice anymore. We could throw them to find out which one of us they’ll fall in love with most.”

“You’d just cheat again. It’s good Miriam took them away. I already know which one of us they’ll like best.”

“You think it’s you. It wouldn’t even occur to them.”

“What do you know about what men like, you innocent monkey! You’ll hide in a corner and nobody will even notice you.”

Tears streamed from Halima’s eyes.

“I’ll tell them what you’re like,” she said.

“Just try. They’ll die laughing.”

“You just wait. I’ll tell them you’re in love with me and you won’t leave me alone.”

Sara’s eyes flashed.

“You?!”

Halima got up.

“But it’s true!”

She laughed, wiped her tears away, and went to join another group.

The girls were gradually overcoming their fear of the dangerous task that awaited them. Lighthearted laughter mixed with the grating of scissors and knives.

“Tonight, when everything is lit up, it will really look like we’re in paradise,” Zuleika remarked. “I’m not afraid at all anymore. We’ll all be wearing veils, and we’ll be singing and dancing like real houris.”

“Sure, it’s easy for you. You’re pretty and you know how to dance,” Safiya sighed.

“You’re all pretty and you all know how to dance,” Miriam said.

“At least we’ll have a change from all this monotony,” Fatima said. “And we’ll be useful for something. All that work and studying would be wasted otherwise.”

“Will Sayyiduna really have us beheaded if we slip up?” Jafa still worried.

“No doubt about it,” Miriam said. “He does what he says he’ll do. So don’t be foolish. Think before you go blurting things out.”

“I don’t know, I’m not scared at all,” Fatima remarked.

“And what if one of us makes a mistake?” Safiya asked.

“Then one of the others will have to fix it,” Fatima explained.

“How do you mean, fix it?”

“Say, by turning it into a joke or shifting its meaning somehow.”

“I want to be next to you,” Jada said.

“Me too. Me too.”

They each voiced the same wish.

Fatima smiled at so much trust.

“Just don’t be too afraid, girls. When a person has to do something, she does it. I have a feeling everything’s going to go just fine.”

Whole stacks of lamps were already done.

“You see, you can make things work if you want them to,” Miriam praised them. “Now come with me. I want to show you something.”

She took them to a room that had always been kept carefully locked. She opened it. The girls’ eyes widened in astonishment.

What they saw was a warehouse full of clothing. Gowns made of silk and brocade, capes with sable linings, veils, beautifully braided sandals. All the most exquisite things that the bazaars of Samarkand and Bukhara, Kabul and Isfahan, Baghdad and Basra could offer were stacked high in this narrow space. Gold and silver diadems encrusted with jewels, pearl necklaces, gold bracelets and anklets covered with precious stones, fine turquoise jewelry, earrings with diamonds and sapphires, expensive chains—everything was here in abundance.

The girls could only gape.

“Whose is all this?” Halima asked.

“It’s all the property of Sayyiduna,” Miriam said.

“It’s true, Our Master is rich.”

“Richer than the sultan and the caliph.”

“All this is meant for you to use,” Miriam explained. “Each of you take whatever suits you best and keep it in your room.”

She had the girls start trying on the silken robes and veils. She draped heavy brocade capes around their shoulders and adorned them with rings, bracelets, anklets and earrings, passed out halters and sandals, and hung necklaces around their necks. She handed each of them an artfully crafted metal mirror and a chest containing amber and scents. She fitted them with diadems, ribbons, small turbans and other head coverings.

The girls were swimming in luxury. Each of them felt like a fairy-tale princess.

“This way it won’t be hard at all to imagine we’re houris!” Halima exclaimed. Her cheeks shone with excitement.

“Didn’t I tell you?” Fatima said. “Eventually we’ll stop believing we’re ordinary girls.”

Halima pulled on a light veil. She put on a cape and then let it slip off her shoulders, as she'd seen Miriam wear hers when she came back from visiting Sayyiduna that night.

"My goodness, how beautiful she is!" Sara exclaimed.

Halima blushed.

"When our visitors come we probably won't be dressed like this, will we?" she asked.

"Dummy! Why do you think you're trying them on?" Miriam laughed.

"I'll feel ashamed."

Each one collected her finery and took it to her room.

Suddenly the horn sounded.

Apama came rushing in from the kitchen.

"Hurry everyone, get ready! Sayyiduna is coming."

During this time Hasan had been having an extensive discussion with the grand dais in his chamber. He lit several lamps and drew curtains over the windows. A eunuch brought in a large jug of wine. The men dropped down on the pillows and the jug made a circuit from mouth to mouth.

Hasan began.

"I've had you summoned from Rudbar, Buzurg Ummid, to familiarize you and Abu Ali with my last will and testament. I had wanted Husein Alkeini to be here too, but events got ahead of me and Khuzestan is too far away for me to send for him. This concerns the principles of succession within our institution."

Abu Ali laughed.

"You talk as though you were planning to bid the world farewell tomorrow. Why the hurry with this? Maybe Buzurg Ummid and I will bite the dust before you do."

"You mentioned Husein Alkeini," Buzurg Ummid remarked, "but what has happened to your son Hosein that you've forgotten about him? After all, he's your natural heir."

Hasan jumped to his feet as though he'd been bitten by a snake. He began pacing around the room and shouting.

"Don't remind me of that oafish calf! My institution is founded on reason, not on idiotic prejudices. Son! Son! What son? Do you expect me to dash my beautiful plan to pieces, to leave it to some idiot whom

dumb luck made my son? I prefer to follow the example of the Roman church, which puts only its most capable in charge. Realms built on blood and kin soon go into decline. The institution of Rome has been standing for a thousand years! Sons? Brothers? In spirit you're all my sons and brothers. It was spirit that conceived my plan."

The grand dais almost took fright.

"If I had known I was going to upset you so much with my remark, I would have kept quiet," Buzurg Ummid said. "But how was I to know that your views on kinship and succession were so ... well, so unique?"

Hasan smiled. He was a little ashamed that he'd lost control.

"I also continued to put stock in blood relations when I came back from Egypt," he replied, seemingly in apology. "They brought me my son, who was so beautiful and strong it was a joy to look at him. 'I'll see my own youth in him,' I thought. I took him into my house and ... how can I make you understand my disappointment? Where was that passion for finding the truth, where was that higher calling that shook my soul when I was his age? I couldn't find even a trace of it in him. To begin with I told him, 'The Koran is a book with seven seals.' His response was, 'It's not up to me to unseal them.' 'But aren't you just a little moved to discover a mystery known to only a few?' 'No, not even the slightest bit.' I found this indifference incomprehensible. To stir him, I told him about the struggles of my youth. 'And what has all your trouble gotten you?' That was all the impression his father's confessions made on him. In order to shock him, in order to jolt him out of his torpor, I decided to tell him our ultimate secret. 'Do you know what our faith teaches as the highest wisdom?' I called out to him. 'Nothing is real, everything is permitted.' He brushed it off. 'I dealt with that when I was fourteen years old.' The realization that I had struggled my whole life long to make, for whose ultimate confirmation I risked all dangers, visited all schools, studied all the philosophers—he had figured out and was done with by the age of fourteen. 'Maybe he was born this wise,' I thought. But he didn't understand even the most elementary lessons of science. I was exasperated at so much dimwittedness. I handed him over to Husein Alkeini to serve as a foot soldier."

The grand dais exchanged glances. Buzurg Ummid had been thinking of his son Mohammed, whom he loved dearly. Had he really been planning to send him to Hasan for schooling as a feday? He felt goose

bumps down his spine.

Abu Ali asked, "Ibn Sabbah, earlier you said that our institution is based on reason. What exactly do you mean by that?"

Hasan clasped his hands behind his back and started pacing slowly back and forth.

"The concept of my rule isn't entirely new," he said. "Ninety years ago Caliph Hakim the First tried something similar in Cairo, when he proclaimed himself the personification of God. But apparently the self-willed distinction affected his reason. He went soft in the head and ended up believing in his divine origins. On the other hand, his dais left us with a legacy that's all the more valuable. I'm thinking of our supreme motto, which Hakim made use of to support his doings."

"Don't you think, ibn Sabbah," Abu Ali continued, "since so many people have found out about this principle of ours, that its value has depreciated?"

"There's a strange double edge to the maxim that nothing is real and everything is permitted, as I just showed you with the pathetic example of my son. For those who by nature aren't meant for it, all it means is a heap of empty words. But if someone is born for it, it can become the north star of his life. The Carmatians and Druzes, to which Hakim the First belonged, recognized nine grades that their novices had to fight their way through. Their dais courted new adherents with tales of Ali's family and the coming of the Mahdi. Most of these converts were satisfied with simple legends like those. The more ambitious ones pressed the dais for more answers and were told that the Koran is a kind of wondrous metaphor for higher mysteries. Those who still weren't satisfied had their faith in the Koran and Islam undermined by their teachers. If somebody wanted to press even further, he learned that all faiths are equal in their accuracy or inaccuracy. Until, finally, a small, elite handful was ready to learn the highest truth of all, based on the negation of all doctrines and traditions. That grade required the greatest courage and strength from a man. Because it meant that he would spend his whole life without any firm ground beneath his feet and with no support. So there's no need to worry about our principle losing its effectiveness, even if a lot of people find out about it. Most of them won't understand it anyway."

"Now I see," Abu Ali said. "Earlier you said you'd summoned us on

account of your testament and the succession. What moved you to start thinking about those issues? You're still strong and healthy."

Hasan laughed. He continued to pace the room with deliberate steps. The grand dais followed him closely with their eyes.

"Nobody knows what the next day will bring," he replied. "The testament I plan to leave behind is such that the one who executes it will have to familiarize himself thoroughly with certain details. And because I've chosen you and Husein Alkeini as my heirs, today I want to reveal the plan that will become the foundation of our institution at least to the two of you who are present. True, my idea is based in part on the experience of Hakim the First and the Roman church. But its real essence is entirely my own invention. Let me explain."

He lay down near them and a kind of childlike smile played across his face—the kind of smile that people have when they know what they have to say could make others laugh or even view them as crazy. Grinning like this, he spoke.

"Do you recall that Mohammed promised heavenly luxuries in the beyond to those who fell fighting for Islam with sword in hand? He said they would stroll over meadows and fields and lie next to gurgling springs. Flowers would blossom around them and they would inhale their intoxicating scent. They would consume delicious foods and choice fruit. Lovely-limbed, dark-eyed maidens would serve them in glass pavilions. And despite the services these maidens would provide them, they would remain modest and virgin forever. They would pour them wine from gilt pitchers, wine that would never make them drunk. The days of eternity would pass for them in luxury and incessant pleasure ..."

The grand dais watched him closely and nodded now and then.

"We're quite familiar with all of this," Abu Ali smiled. "Trust us."

"Good," Hasan said. "You see, borne along on these promises, the first believers fought like lions for their leader and his teachings. Whatever he ordered them to do, they did happily. They say some of them died with a smile on their lips, seeing in spirit the otherworldly delights that awaited them. Alas, after the Prophet's death, this faith and trust in his promises faded. The ardor faded and the faithful began seizing on to a more dependable principle: that it's better to have something than to seek it. Because nobody had ever returned from the beyond to say

whether what the Prophet had proclaimed was really true. If we compare ourselves and our concept with the Prophet's and with Islam's, we see what an easy position Mohammed had in comparison with us. Because only the kind of faith typical of the first adherents of Islam can work miracles. Without it an institution of pure reason, as I've conceived of ours, can't be realized. So my first objective has been to cultivate adherents who will have that kind of faith."

"Congratulations, ibn Sabbah," Abu Ali interrupted. "The fedayeen proved this morning that you've succeeded."

"My friend, do you think I don't know how far our fedayeen still lag behind Mohammed's first believers? But let me also tell you this: I need to achieve more, far more than he achieved."

The grand dais exchanged glances, smiling.

"You're chasing us, as though you were the leopard and we were the prey," Buzurg Ummid remarked. "You're smiling that enigmatic smile of yours, and we're already dying to find out where you're headed with these strange meanderings."

"My plan is enormous," Hasan resumed. "That's why I need believers who will long for death so much that they won't be afraid of anything. In fact, they'll have to be in love with death. I want them to chase after it, seek it out, beg it to have mercy on them, as though it were a hard and unwilling maiden."

Abu Ali and Buzurg Ummid laughed out loud. They thought that Hasan was leading them on in his usual way, and that the cleverest thing for them to do would be to show that they didn't believe him.

Hasan continued unperturbed.

"Our institution needs to be so strong that it can resist any foe and, if necessary, the whole world ... It ought to become a kind of supreme supervisory council for the planet. Our believers' infatuation with death will help us achieve that. Because by making it possible for them to die we'll be demonstrating our special grace to them. Of course, they won't be choosing the way they die. Every death we approve has to bring us a great, new victory. That is the essence of my plan and, at the same time, the testament that I want to reveal to you today."

Despite the smile that accompanied his words, his voice resonated with a strange zeal. The grand dais didn't know what to think.

"I wonder if today's victory over the Turks aroused your pride and

you're joking with us now, or if ..."

Abu Ali's words got stuck in his throat.

"Yes ...? Go on!" Hasan laughed. "Most likely you've come to the same conclusion as reis Lumbani when I was his houseguest in Isfahan. I see into your hearts. You're thinking, 'He's gone mad.' And yet wait till you see the surprises I've prepared for you."

Abu Ali was silently angry.

"One way or the other," he said irritably, "as long as people remain as they are now, nobody is going to fall in love with death, much less go chasing after it. Unless you're able to create a new kind of human being. Everything else is a joke or insanity."

"That's just what I'm after!" Hasan exclaimed joyfully. "To sneak into the workshop of Allah himself, and since the man is old and feeble, take over his work. Compete with him in artistry. Take the clay in my hands. And then truly create a new human being."

Abu Ali indignantly turned to Buzurg Ummid.

"And he calls Hakim the First crazy!"

Buzurg Ummid blinked at Hasan. He had been listening attentively to their dialog the whole time. He sensed that the supreme commander must be keeping something very special up his sleeve.

"At first you spoke of your testament," he said, "then of the heavenly pleasures that the Prophet promised to those who fell in service to his cause, after that of a realm that will be able to withstand the whole world, and now you say you want to create a human being who will genuinely long for death. Now I'd like to hear what the connection is between all these things."

"The connection between these things is all too simple," Hasan replied, smiling. "As my testament I want to leave you the institution I have invented. The power of that institution will be built on a completely new kind of man. His distinctive trait will be an insane desire for death and blind devotion to the supreme commander. We can achieve both of these things through his utter faith—what faith!—his firm knowledge that the joys of paradise will be waiting for him after death."

"That's a good one!" Abu Ali said angrily. "Earlier you said that faith in the beyond faded after the Prophet's death, and now you're proposing to build our brotherhood on it. The devil take it, because I sure won't!"

Hasan roared with laughter. It pleased him whenever he was able to make his assistant angry about something.

“Well, what do you think, Abu Ali, my friend,” he asked, “what would be needed to incite in our recruits such faith in the delights of heaven that they would be stark raving determined to die, so they could partake of them as soon as possible?”

“Open the gate to paradise and show it to them,” Abu Ali replied irritably. “Let them get a taste of it. After all, you teach that you have the key. I’d gladly die then too.”

“I’ve brought you just where I wanted you to be!” Hasan exclaimed, jumping to his feet. “Come follow me, men! I’m going to show you the key that opens the gate to paradise.”

He bounded over to the wall as though he were twenty years old and drew aside the carpet that hid the passageway leading to the top of the tower.

“Let’s go!” he called out and led them to the upper platform.

The grand dais looked at each other behind his back. Abu Ali pointed to his forehead and arched his brows questioningly. Buzurg Ummid raised a hand to signal patience.

They came out onto the terrace. This was the first time even Abu Ali had been here. It was a regular observatory. A large tablet lay on the ground. The paths of the earth and the other planets around the sun and the course of the moon and the zodiac had been charted on it. Smaller tablets were densely covered with equations. Geometric figures—circles, ellipses, parabolas and hyperbolas—were drawn on some of them. Scattered all around were rulers and scales of all kinds and sizes, astrolabes, compasses and other trigonometric equipment. A sundial had been drawn on the ground in the middle of the platform, the position of its hour hand calculated precisely. A small shed had been set up for all this equipment in case of bad weather. Next to the shed was a kind of flower bed with a glass cover that had been lifted up. Nothing grew in it except for some weed on long stalks that resembled nothing so much as an upended broom.

The grand dais took all this in quickly. Then the top of the tower opposite them drew their attention. A huge, black, mace-bearing guard stood on top of it, motionless as a statue.

The sun warmed the platform, but a pleasant mountain breeze cooled

the air and brought the fresh smell of snow.

“You’d think we were up in the mountains,” Buzurg Ummid said, deeply inhaling the cool air.

“Don’t tell us you’ve set up this nest so you can gaze into heaven more easily,” Abu Ali laughed. “So is this the key that opens the gate to heaven?”

“Precisely, from this observatory I can look into paradise,” Hasan replied with a knowing smile. “But the key that opens its gate is in that flower bed over there.”

He approached it and pointed to the plants growing in it.

The grand dais followed behind him. They looked at each other and shook their heads.

“Hasan, Hasan,” Abu Ali said. “When are you thinking of letting up on all the jokes? Bear in mind that all three of us are getting on in years. A little more seriousness wouldn’t hurt. I won’t deny, today has been a great day and a little practical joke never hurt anyone. But you’ve been toying with us all morning!”

Hasan looked him steadily in the eyes.

“This is the key that opens the gate to heavenly delights,” he said emphatically.

“That weed?”

“Yes. End of joke.”

He pointed to some pillows next to the shed and invited them to sit down with him.

“The herb that I just showed you is Indian hemp, and its sap contains some quite unusual characteristics. Just what those are, I’ll explain to you now. In Kabul I was once one of many guests of a wealthy Indian prince. The banquet lasted all night. As morning approached and the guests were leaving, the prince kept a few of us behind and led us to a special room that was draped in carpets from floor to ceiling. A few lamps glimmered dimly in the corners, leaving the room half-dark. ‘I’ve prepared something special for you, friends,’ he said. ‘Would you like to see landscapes and far-off cities that none of you has ever seen? I’ll take you there. Look! In this little box I have a magic vehicle from the *Thousand and One Nights*.’ He unlocked a gilt box and showed us some little balls that resembled ordinary pieces of candy. ‘Take one and eat it,’ he offered. One after the other, we did as he said. At first, when I had

the ball in my mouth, I thought I was eating candy and the prince was playing a joke on us. But when the outer surface melted, I got a bitter taste in my mouth. 'I just hope it isn't poison,' I thought. And in fact, a kind of dizziness started to come over me. Suddenly I noticed something very strange. The colors on the carpets were starting to become much more vivid. At this point I'd stopped thinking about poison. All my attention was focused on the unusual color phenomenon on the wall, when I noticed that even the images on the carpets had begun to change. Just a minute before I'd seen a black-bearded man sitting surrounded by odalisques. But he suddenly disappeared, and the odalisques started to dance. 'But this is impossible, this is just a picture,' I said to myself. When I looked closer, I saw that the odalisques were in fact depicted as dancing, but that they were completely motionless. 'But this can't be a picture,' I thought. The bodies were so plastic and the pink of their skin was so vivid that I couldn't accept that it was an illusion. In the process I completely forgot that there were several other men around me. I was so engrossed in this unusual phenomenon on the wall. The colors became more and more vivid, and people detached themselves from the wall and came staggering out into the middle of the room. There they danced and tumbled, while I began feeling warmer and more pleasant inside. 'Maybe I'm the magician who's causing all these changes,' it suddenly occurred to me. As a test, I silently ordered my objects to assume new positions. My order was carried out in an instant. A feeling of infinite personal power came over me. I saw myself as a magnificent king who controlled space and the objects in it and was independent of time and the laws of the universe. I was simply amazed that I'd never before discovered these wonderful powers of mine. 'I wonder if I'm any less powerful than Allah?' I said to myself. I swam in enjoyment of this miraculous omnipotence. Strangely physical and plastic cubes that were dazzlingly illuminated in the most garish colors started accumulating in front of my eyes. It took my breath away when I saw they were building a city bigger and more magnificent than Cairo, more elegant than Baghdad and mightier than Alexandria. Powerful minarets shot into the sky, and gold, silver, yellow, red and green cupolas arched over the roofs. My soul bathed in magnificence and bliss. 'Yes, now you really are Allah,' something in me said. God! Ruler of the universe! The images before me started to break up. I sensed that I had already experienced some climax

and that I was returning to normality. A terror of losing so much delight came over me. With all my might I tried to stay at my earlier high. But my limbs felt weak, the colors in the pictures were fading, my head was growing heavy, and suddenly I lost consciousness. I woke up dizzy and with a feeling of enormous disgust. I recalled the images I had seen and the feelings I'd experienced. Had I been awake? Or had I dreamt them? I couldn't tell. I had been aware of everything as though I'd been awake. But if I'd been awake, could I have seen things that weren't there? My head was splitting. A servant brought me cold milk. It was only then that I realized I wasn't alone in the room. The other guests were lying around me. They were groaning and their cheeks had a strange pallor. I straightened myself up and quietly slipped out of the house ...”

The grand dais hung on his lips, motionless all this time. When he paused for a moment, Abu Ali asked him, “And do you know what was in those balls that gave them such a marvelous power?”

“Listen,” Hasan continued. “Toward evening of that same day a strange sense of unease came over me. I couldn't stay in one spot, or figure out what it was I was missing, and suddenly I found myself in our prince's house. The master welcomed me with a smile, as though he'd been expecting me. ‘The other guests are here too,’ he told me. ‘You see, anyone who has ever had one of those balls craves to re-experience again and again the delights that he felt the first time. And if he does it again, he gradually becomes a slave to the narcotic, succumbing to it so badly that without it he'd have to die. I want to warn you about that, so I'm not going to give you any new balls or even reveal to you what they contain.’ Within a few days my sense of unease subsided. But my curiosity had been piqued, and I swore I would find out what substance was in those little balls. Luck favored me. Back then the most beautiful odalisque in Kabul was a certain Apama. I think I've already told you about her, and there may be a surprise in store for you on that account.”

Hasan smiled enigmatically. He continued.

“I was an enterprising, hot-blooded fellow and didn't know of a thing or a power that could hold me back if I had a passion. The prince had acquired Apama, and it was at his place that I won her heart. We would meet in his gardens late at night and enjoy the delights of paradise in forbidden embraces. In no time she had completely ensnared her master. Once, when I told her about the curiosity that had been tormenting me,

she wrung the secret from him. The substance in those little balls is called hashish, or hashash, and it's produced precisely from the Indian hemp you see in that flower bed."

They held close to the shed, which was protecting them from the heat of the sun. When Hasan had finished, all three of them remained silent for a while. Abu Ali wrinkled his brow and stared at the ground. Buzurg Ummid gazed out at the mountainside. At last he spoke.

"I'm beginning to see what you're actually aiming at. I suppose that you plan to use the sap of this plant to incite wild fervor in our believers, awaken in them a passion for renewed pleasure, and in this way enslave their will."

"And you expect some particular benefit from that?" Abu Ali grumbled. "By taking away their ashash, or whatever it's called, you expect to influence their personalities in a way that sends them rushing into death? I'm sorry, that strikes me as a miscalculation. Even if they couldn't live without this narcotic, there's no law that says they have to sacrifice themselves the way you want. At your age you really could have spared yourself this little experiment. That you would expect them to believe that those little balls take them to paradise is beyond my comprehension. So instead, let's discuss like grown men how we're going to move against the sultan's huge army, which is drawing closer every day."

"I second everything you've said," Hasan said with a sly smile. "Concerning the might of the enemy that's approaching, we have two choices. Either we can quickly throw a caravan together and try to escape to Africa, as the wise Muzaffar advised us, or we can rely on a miracle. As you know, I've decided in favor of the miracle. But there's still time to reconsider."

"By Mohammed's beard!" Abu Ali shouted. "With you an honest Muslim never knows where he stands. I'd like to hear you speak directly for once."

"Fine, I'll give it a try. Didn't I mention to you a while ago that I not only have the key to paradise up here, but that I can also watch what's going on in paradise? You already know what's on this side of the tower. But haven't you ever had the urge to see what's on that side? Go ahead, step up to the battlements."

The grand dais hurried quickly to the edge of the terrace. They leaned

out over the battlements so they could look down. They were struck dumb with astonishment. They saw beneath them, as on a huge map, lovely groves and gardens in full blossom. Two arms of the river embraced them in a huge arc. Canals cut through and divided them, so that they were surrounded by water on all sides, like islands. Pebble-strewn paths shone white across them. Amid stands of cypresses, glass-covered pavilions glinted like crystal palaces. Round fish ponds with fountains were set inside them. Running around one of these were little creatures that seemed as buoyant as butterflies.

“A miracle, a real miracle,” Buzurg Ummid whispered at last.

“The poet of the *Thousand and One Nights* would be envious,” Abu Ali agreed.

Hasan rose and joined them. A satisfied expression came across his face.

“Imagine that you were with me at that prince’s house in Kabul,” he said. “You’ve swallowed the balls of hashish, you’ve experienced alongside of me all those wonderful delights of the spirit that I described to you, and now you’ve lost consciousness. Then you wake up, and you’re no longer in the dark room where you fell asleep. Instead you’re in these gardens below, surrounded by beautiful maidens ready to serve you in precisely the ways described in the Koran. What would you think?”

“You’re incredible, ibn Sabbah!” Abu Ali exclaimed. “If I were young and inexperienced, by the beard of the martyr Ali, I’d think I’d really wandered into the gardens of paradise.”

“But how and when did you create all of this?” Buzurg Ummid asked.

“The kings of Daylam who built Alamut also laid the foundations of these gardens. The castle’s later owners neglected them. They vanished in an overgrowth of grasses and vines. Apparently my predecessor, the noble Mehdi, didn’t even know how to get to them. But I had heard some rumors about them, and since the notion of using gardens like this had long since occurred to me, I put all my effort into getting the castle. Then I measured and calculated everything myself. I drew up a precise plan, and when the eunuchs came from Egypt, I carried it out with them. So, piece by piece I created this paradise. Apart from the eunuchs and me, the two of you are the only ones in the castle who know about it.”

“Aren’t you afraid the eunuchs could betray you?” Buzurg Ummid

asked.

“You don’t know them, these eunuchs of mine,” Hasan replied. “They talk to no one but me. Their commander, Captain Ali, is blindly faithful to me. Besides that, each of them knows that if he blurted anything out, it would be his death sentence. I depend on them.”

“Don’t you think that the victims your paradise is meant for will see through your deception?”

Abu Ali gave Hasan a cunning glance.

“That’s why I’ve chosen youths who haven’t yet tasted love with a woman. There’s no one more gullible than a boy like that. Because only a woman can turn a male into a whole man. She confers knowledge on him, makes it possible for him to mature. He loses his spiritual innocence together with his physical innocence. This is why everything drives a boy toward that fateful event. Blinded by this unfamiliar passion, he’s ready to believe in anything just to attain his goal.”

“And who are these youths?”

Hasan smiled. He looked at him without responding.

“The fedayeen?”

“Your words.”

A chilly silence fell over the tower. The grand dais gazed down into the gardens. Hasan watched them with a kind of indulgent scorn.

“Can’t you speak?” he asked. “Yesterday we lost twenty-six of our men in battle with the sultan’s vanguard. If we take on the main force of his army, we’re all finished. All I need is several heroes who will make the kings and rulers of the whole world tremble. I summoned you today to show you how these men are going to be trained. Tonight you’ll join me for an experiment in altering human nature. Abu Ali, you know the fedayeen. Name the three of them who are most different from each other in terms of their abilities and character. We first have to test what kind of person is most useful to our purposes. Three gardens are waiting for their visitors.”

Abu Ali looked at Hasan and went pale.

“How do you mean, ibn Sabbah?”

“Bring me three fedayeen with completely different personalities.”

Abu Ali stared at him, unable to get a word out.

“I’ll help you. Who was the stalwart who attacked the Turks first?”

“Suleiman.”

“Who is the strongest in the group?”

“Yusuf.”

“Ibn Tahir will make three. I’m particularly curious about him. If he doesn’t see through it, nobody will.”

Buzurg Ummid broke out in a cold sweat. He recalled wanting to send his son Mohammed to the school for fedayeen as a way of demonstrating his unwavering trust in Hasan. Now he only wanted to get him as far away from Alamut as possible. He would send him to Syria or Egypt.

Hasan looked at them askance with concealed derision.

“Have you got a bone stuck in your throats?” he said. “Don’t get scared prematurely. I’ll provide you with such an argument for my actions that you’ll be the envy of any classical lover of wisdom. Now to my wardrobe! We’re going to deck ourselves out and go visit my paradise like real kings.”

He led them into a smaller space next to his room. Two eunuchs had laid out clothes. Hasan retained one of them and told the other to go give the inhabitants of the gardens a sign that Sayyiduna was approaching.

Wordlessly and with the help of the eunuch, the three of them changed clothes. They pulled on cloaks of heavy white brocade. Hasan draped a scarlet cape around his shoulders, and the grand dais put on blue ones. The capes were edged in precious white fur. Hasan set a gold tiara with various embedded jewels on his head. The grand dais put on turbans, with gold, conical caps in the middle. Hasan put on gold sandals, his companions, silver ones. They strapped on long, curved sabers with intricately carved handles. Then they returned to the commander’s room.

“By the beard of the martyr Ali,” Abu Ali exclaimed when they were alone. “Decked out like this I could actually start believing I was a king.”

“I’m going to make you more powerful than any king,” Hasan said.

He beckoned them into the chamber that he normally used to descend to the bottom of the tower alone. He gave a signal and they suddenly started to sink. Abu Ali started waving his arms and almost pulled his companions down.

“Damned magic!” he cursed when the first fright had passed. “You’re not thinking of taking us into hell?”

“You surround yourself with things that make a person feel downright

haunted,” Buzurg Ummid said.

“There’s nothing unusual about this machine,” Hasan explained. “It was invented by Archimedes. Its essence is a pulley mechanism, such as you often find at desert wells.”

A detachment of the commander’s bodyguard was waiting for them in the vestibule. The soldiers were wearing armor and helmets and were armed from head to foot. Strapped around their waists was a sword, over their shoulder they held a mace, and in the other hand was a heavy spear. Drummers and trumpeters walked ahead of them.

They lowered the bridge and crossed over into the gardens, where they were greeted by eunuchs and ferried along the canals to the central garden.

CHAPTER TEN

The girls rushed to their bedrooms and quickly prepared for their audience. They changed clothes and put on various adornments. Then they assembled in front of the building. They were terribly excited. Some of them were shaking from head to toe. Miriam arranged them in a broad semicircle and calmed them down. Apama, beside herself, was running back and forth in front of them and desperately grabbing at her head.

“Look at them! Just look at them!” she sighed. “They’ll be the ruin of me. What will Sayyiduna say? He’s such a strict and exacting master.”

Suddenly she came to a stop in front of Halima.

“O all the Prophets and Martyrs! Look at you, Halima! One pant leg down to your heels and the other barely covering your knee.”

Frightened, Halima quickly adjusted her clothes.

Some of the girls looking at Apama began to grin. She had done a poor job of fastening her pant belt, leaving half her belly visible. Miriam went over to her and quietly brought her attention to the mistake.

“I knew it! They’ll ruin me.”

She ran into the building and adjusted things there. She came back with an expression of great dignity.

The boats landed and Hasan disembarked with his entourage. The eunuchs arranged themselves four abreast, drums beat, and horns and trumpets sounded.

“Whoever is addressed by Sayyiduna, kneel and kiss his hand!” Apama whispered angrily.

“Should we fall to our knees when he appears?” Fatima asked.

“No,” Miriam replied. “Just bow deeply and stay there until he orders you to straighten up.”

“I’m going to faint, I know it,” Halima whispered to Jada.

Jada said nothing. She was pale and swallowing hard.

Along the way, Hasan and his retainers inspected the gardens.

“Neither Khosrow nor Bahram Gur installed such luxurious gardens,” Buzurg Ummid observed.

“Nushirvan could have learned from you,” Abu Ali remarked.

Hasan smiled.

“These are all just preparations, means to the end that we’re planning to test this evening.”

They reached the middle of the garden and caught sight of the girls gathered in their semicircle in front of the building. Apama and Miriam stood in front of them. They gave a sign and the girls all bowed to the waist at one time.

“That old woman is the famous Apama,” Hasan said to his friends and laughed.

“Such is the end of worldly fame,” Abu Ali sighed quietly and with a slight sneer.

“Enough bowing!” Hasan proclaimed. “Greetings!”

Apama and Miriam approached him and kissed his hand.

Now Hasan and his friends inspected the girls.

“What do you think, will this look enough like paradise?”

“If anybody had sent me among houris like these when I was young, I wouldn’t have needed that ashash of yours to believe in paradise,” Abu Ali grumbled in response.

“It’s true, all perfect beauties,” Buzurg Ummid remarked.

The musicians fell silent, and Hasan signaled that he was about to speak.

“Girls from our gardens,” he began. “Your superiors have taught you what we expect from you. We will tell you right now that we will know no mercy for any one of you who violates our commandments. But to all of you who faithfully carry them out, we will be merciful and magnanimous. This morning our army defeated the sultan’s forces, which are in service to the false caliph. The whole castle has celebrated the victory with us. We have come to give you a treat as well. Wine and other delicacies will be made available to you. But we have also decided to send you the three young heroes who most distinguished themselves in yesterday’s battle. Welcome them as your husbands and lovers! Be gentle with them and deny them no kindness. We are granting them this favor at the command of Allah. One night God’s messenger came for us

and led us through the seven heavens to the throne of God. 'Ibn Sabbah, our prophet and vicar,' the Lord said. 'Take a good look at our gardens. Then return to earth and build an exact replica of them behind your castle. Gather young beauties in them and in my name command them to behave as houris. Into these gardens you will send the most valiant heroes who have fought for the just cause. As a reward, let them believe that we have received them into our dwelling place. For it is given to no one, save the Prophet and you, to cross over into our domain during his lifetime. But because your gardens will be identical to ours, the visitors to them will be deprived of nothing, if they believe. When they die, a resumption of those joys will await them in our realm for all eternity.' Thus spoke the Lord, and we have carried out his order. We expect that you will behave toward your visitors like real houris. For only if that happens will their reward be complete. There are three of these heroes: Yusuf, fearsome to enemies, good to his friends. Suleiman, handsome as Suhrab, bold as a lion. Ibn Tahir, brilliant as Farhad, solid as bronze. And a poet, as well. Yesterday these three seized the enemy's flag. Yusuf cleared the way, Suleiman attacked, ibn Tahir reached for it. They are deserving that we send them to paradise. If you should reveal yourselves and disillusion them, you will be beheaded this night. This is my immutable will."

The girls trembled in fear. Everything was spinning before Jada's eyes. She dropped down to her knees and passed out. Hasan pointed to her. Miriam ran for a jug of water and brought her to.

Hasan called Apama and Miriam aside.

"So, the three gardens are ready," he said. "How are things going with the girls?"

"They're all ready," Apama replied.

"Good. In each of the gardens one of them is to be the leader and assume responsibility for success. Which are the bravest and most capable ones?"

"I would name Fatima first," Miriam said. "She's adroit and skilled in all the arts."

"Fine. And after her?"

"I'd say Zuleika. She's first in dancing and isn't bad in other areas."

"Excellent. She sounds made to order for Yusuf. Suleiman should get Fatima. The third one will be you, Miriam."

Miriam went pale.

“You’re joking, ibn Sabbah.”

“Today’s not the time for jokes. It will be as I’ve said. Ibn Tahir is as quick as a snake, and if I trusted him to anybody else, he’d see through the deception.”

“Hasan!”

Tears welled up in Miriam’s eyes. For Apama, satisfaction battled with sympathy. She withdrew.

Hasan continued with mild irony.

“Who told me recently that nothing in the world gave her joy anymore, and that only some risky game could allay her terrible boredom?”

“So you’ve never loved me in the slightest?”

“Far more than that. I’ve needed you and still do. But why don’t you answer my question?”

“The game you’re playing with me is painful.”

“But think what a unique opportunity I’m giving you tonight,” Hasan went on in the same ironic tone. “You’re going to need all your intellect, all your skill, all your charm if you want to ensure that this young man believes in paradise.”

“You’ve destroyed me.”

“I didn’t think my feelings were that important to you. But what’s decided is decided. I expect you to carry out your assignment. Otherwise I won’t be able to make an exception.”

Miriam collected herself. *I’ve got to be strong*, she told herself. *I can’t let him see all of my weaknesses.*

“I’m ready,” she said.

“Thank you.”

He returned to the girls.

“Zuleika!” he called out. “Pick seven companions. They’ll help you welcome Yusuf, and you’ll be responsible for your success.”

“Yes, Our Master.”

She turned to face the others and began boldly calling out.

“Hanafiya! Asma! Habiba! Little Fatima! Rokaya! Zofana!”

“And take that little one that fainted too,” Hasan said. “Then you’ll have enough.”

Next it was Fatima’s turn.

“Zainab! Khanum! Turkan! Shehera! Sara! Leila! Aisha!”

Halima looked beseechingly at Fatima. When she didn't call her, she insisted.

“Take me too!”

At the same instant Hasan spoke.

“That will be enough.”

But when he heard the girls laughing at Halima's plea, he said with a gleeful grin, “Go on, take her too, Fatima.”

With Fatima, Sara and Zainab, whom should she be afraid of now? She rushed up to Hasan, fell to her knees, and kissed his hand.

“Just be smart, tadpole,” he said.

He patted her kindly on the cheek and sent her back to join the others. She got back in line, blushing and dizzy with happiness.

Miriam checked to see who was left. Safiya, Khadija, Sit, Jovaira, Rikana and Taviba were still there. Now she had herself under control again.

Hasan called the leaders to join him.

“The eunuchs will bring the heroes to the gardens while they're asleep. Fortify them with milk and fruit to begin with. Before the visitors arrive, each girl is allowed to drink one cup of wine for courage. No more than that! You can have more after the youths are drunk themselves, but don't overdo it! You'll report to me about everything in detail afterwards. Listen for the signal to wrap things up. The horn will sound three times. Then you should take a cup of wine and dissolve a substance in it that you'll get from Apama. The youths are to drink it immediately. They'll fall asleep and the eunuchs will carry them back out.”

When he had made all these arrangements, he looked toward the girls one more time. Then he bowed slightly in farewell. Adi and Apama were waiting for him by the boats. He gave them his final instructions.

“Give this to the leaders. Don't let the visitors see you. But keep an eye on Miriam. She mustn't be left alone with her hero.”

Then, with his entourage, he returned to the castle.

Once in the castle, Hasan dismissed his two friends. He had himself hoisted to the top of the second tower, where his bodyguards, the

eunuchs, lived. A horn announced his arrival. Captain Ali came running toward him and reported that everything was ready.

Fifty black giants stood in two rows the length of the hallway. Armed, motionless and erect, they stared fixedly ahead. Hasan reviewed them without saying a word. Every time he stood before them, a sense of danger came over him. It wasn't a disagreeable feeling, in fact it gave him a peculiar kind of pleasure. He knew that if a single one of those hundred arms reached out, he would never again see the light of day. And yet, why didn't any of them do that? Because all fifty eunuchs had been prepared to execute his every order blindly? Where did he get this power that he exerted over people? "That's the power of intellect," he explained it to himself. These castrated beasts feared nothing in the world, except strength of character.

When he had finished reviewing all his men, he called Captain Ali aside to issue orders.

"After last prayers wait for me in the cellar with nine men. I'll bring you three sleeping youths from my tower. You'll take them to the gardens on litters. Adi will be waiting for you there. Tell him the names of the sleeping heroes, and he'll show you where to take them. Don't let it bother you if they moan or toss and turn on the way there. But if any of them lifts the cover or gives a sign that he's woken up, have whoever is accompanying that litter cut his throat. The same holds for the trip back. You can turn any corpses over to me. Do you understand everything?"

"I understand, Sayyiduna."

"After last prayers, then."

He gestured to the captain farewell, walked back past the motionless rows of guards, and took one lift down and the other up into his tower.

Abu Ali lived in rooms within the center of the supreme command building. He had given one of his rooms to Buzurg Ummid when the latter had arrived at the castle. When they returned from the gardens, they changed clothes and then locked themselves in Abu Ali's quarters.

For a while they looked at each other silently, trying to guess each other's thoughts. Finally Abu Ali asked, "What's your feeling about this?"

"I was just about to ask you the same thing."

"Ibn Sabbah is a great man, no doubt about it."

"Yes, a great man ..."

“But sometimes I think ... this is just between the two of us, what we say here. Agreed?”

“Absolutely.”

“Sometimes I think he must be terribly overwrought, that maybe he’s not completely right in the head ...”

“Indeed, sometimes his ideas strike me as insane ... at least the ones that are alien to us ordinary mortals and even provoke horror in us.”

“What do you think of his plan, this unusual testament that he plans to leave us as his legacy?” Abu Ali queried.

“King Naaman comes to mind for me in this case. Senamar built the magnificent palace at Habernak for him. In gratitude, the king ordered him thrown over the battlements of his own building.”

“Right, the fedayeen are going to get Senamar’s reward for their devotion.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Me?”

Abu Ali thought for a moment. His life had been empty since he had lost his two wives and his two children. Some fifteen years ago, because of his proselytizing, he had had to flee Qazvin for Syria. He had left two wives at home: Habiba, who had borne him two children, and the younger Aisha, who was the joy of his life. Three years later he went back. Habiba told him that during his absence Aisha had had an affair with a rich youth from the neighborhood. Abu Ali went mad with jealousy. First he slaughtered the seducer, and then his unfaithful wife. He also hated Habiba for revealing Aisha’s unfaithfulness to him. In his first flush of anger he loaded her and the two children onto camels and took them to Basra. There he sold them into slavery. Later he searched everywhere for them, but in vain. Finally Hasan had called on him to unite with him. Now his work for the Ismaili cause was the entire substance of his life.

He replied, “It’s not for me to choose. I’ve said ‘a’ and that means I’ll say ‘b,’ as well.”

Buzurg Ummid stared gloomily at the floor. He was a tough soldier at heart. In Rudbar he had once ordered fifteen men beheaded for breaking their vows and trying to leave the Ismaili ranks. Against an enemy he found any trick, any violence permissible. But pulling a trick like this on your own most faithful adherents?

“What does he plan to do with the fedayeen when they come back from the gardens?” he asked.

“I don’t know. If the experiment succeeds, I imagine he’ll use these ‘ashashin’ as a terrible weapon against his enemies.”

“And do you think he’ll succeed?”

“That is written in the stars. I think his idea is crazy. But his plan for taking over Alamut seemed crazy to me too. And yet, he succeeded.”

“He’s so alien to me that I can barely follow him.”

“The madness of great men works wonders.”

“I have a son who is dear to me. I’d been planning to send him to Hasan’s school. Allah himself has guided me not to do that. Now I’m going to send him to the opposite side of the world. A messenger should reach him tonight.”

Buzurg Ummid loved his life and his wives. His first, Mohammed’s mother, had died in childbirth. He had been disconsolate for many years. Later he took a second one, then a third and a fourth, and now he had a whole haremful of them in Rudbar. The favors of all of them put together barely compensated for his grief at the loss of his first one. He was from an Ismaili family and so was unable to advance in the sultan’s service. He had traveled to Egypt, and the caliph there had sent him to Hasan, who provided him with means, position and power. He was an outstanding commander, but he lacked any creativity, so he needed someone from whom he could get precise orders.

“It’s true, we have no choice but to stand by Hasan. If he perishes, we’ll perish with him. But if he succeeds, that success will offset the harshness of his means.”

“I don’t suppose we really have any other choice. I admire Hasan, which makes it easier for me to go through thick and thin with him.”

Following this conversation, Buzurg Ummid hurried to his room and wrote his son a letter.

“Mohammed, my son, joy of my life! I urge you not to come to Alamut. Leave for Syria or, if possible, for Egypt. Look up my friends there and tell them I’ve sent you. They will take you in. Listen to a father’s love speaking. My heart won’t rest until I know that you’ve arrived there.”

He found a messenger and dispatched him to Muzaffar in Rai.

“Keep to the east,” he warned him, “so that the sultan’s vanguard

doesn't take you captive. Muzaffar will tell you where you can find my son Mohammed. Seek him out and give him this letter. If you do this, when you return you'll get a handsome reward."

He gave him some money for the road. When he saw him leaving the castle, he felt a great weight lifting from his shoulders.

Toward evening the doctor and Abu Soraka settled down on the roof of their empty harems. They had large pieces of roast and plenty of wine before them. They reached heartily for both, gazing through the foliage of the trees at the commotion in front of the castle, and philosophizing.

"Now here's a colorful life for you," the Greek said in good spirits. "Years ago, when I was studying in Byzantium, I would never have dreamed that in my old age I would be celebrating some Ismaili victory in some fortress far away in the north of Iran. I thought those noisy banquets back in Sodom and Gomorrah would go on forever. And then, for a handful of gold pieces, you practically lose your head. They put me in chains and threw me in prison. Instead of paying my debts for me, my pals just vanished, so I wound up on a galley. Later I was sold into slavery and wound up as physician to the caliph of Cairo. Ibn Sabbah's prestige at the court was high then, and I had the good luck to be assigned to him. Something he saw in me made him buy me and take me with him as a free man. And today I'd be a perfectly happy man, if only Hasan hadn't made us empty the harems."

Abu Soraka smiled.

"The only consolation is that we've all been equally deprived."

The doctor winked at him.

"You think? What's that back there, behind the castle? Perhaps mosques for Hasan and his grand dais?"

Abu Soraka looked at him carefully.

"Do you still think that Hasan built harems for himself back there?"

"What else? I've learned that caravans have brought many beauties to the castle. Did any of us see them?"

"I don't believe that. I know there have been some preparations back there. But I've never doubted that they were intended for an absolute emergency, for an escape, in case a siege lasted too long."

"You're an easy touch. I know Hasan. He's a philosopher. And, as

such, he knows that the quest for pleasure is the first and foremost purpose of life. He'd have to be some kind of an idiot otherwise, when he has everything at his disposal. What else is there besides what we perceive with our senses? That alone is the truth and that's why it's wise to follow your passions. Because the worst misfortune is not to be able to attain something that your instincts drive you to want. In that regard I have to praise ibn Sabbah as a wise man. He's found a way to provide himself with everything. Husein Alkeini spent an eternity looting caravans for him all through Khorasan and Khuzestan. Now he's even collecting a tax from his believers for him. Not a bad idea!"

"He's a great master," Abu Soraka said. Privately he worried that some invisible ears might hear them talking about the supreme commander so irreverently.

The Greek laughed loudly.

"A great and excellent master, even! Just think: when he and I were in Egypt, he had a terrible falling out with the commander of the caliph's bodyguard, Badr al-Jamali. Everyone was afraid for his life. But he just up and went to the caliph and made him a great bargain. You see, he knew they were planning to put him on a ship that night. So he promised the caliph that he would recruit followers for him in Iran and help bring down Baghdad. He got three heavy bags of gold pieces for that. And he's still got the caliph in a vice. If too much time goes by with no caravans from Egypt, he sends a messenger there and tells him he'll start working for himself. Then suddenly the caliph gets all busy. He squeezes his people for more tax and the solicitous rayah in Egypt pays so that Our Master can afford God knows what luxuries beneath the castle of Alamut. That's why I really have to consider him a true philosopher. While you and I, meanwhile, can sit and wipe our tears over our absent wives ..."

Abu Ali suddenly appeared on the rooftop.

The dai and the doctor were visibly frightened.

"Peace be with you, friends," he greeted them amiably, smiling at their embarrassment. "I've come for you, Abu Soraka. You need to inform Yusuf, Suleiman and ibn Tahir that I'll expect them between fourth and fifth prayers in front of the supreme command. They're going to appear before Sayyiduna, so they need to get themselves ready appropriately. Good evening!"

The fedayeen were excited when they heard that three of them were going to see Sayyiduna that evening. They wondered and tried to guess why he would have summoned them.

“He’s planning to reward them for their courage in battle,” ibn Vakas ventured.

“What courage?” Obeida jeered. “I’m not referring to ibn Tahir. He actually seized the flag from the Turks. But what business do Suleiman, who let himself get thrown from his horse with his saddle, and Yusuf, who vanquished his fear by roaring—what business do they have with Sayyiduna?”

“Suleiman had the most kills. And Yusuf helped him open a path for the others,” Jafar said.

“Yes, that’s right,” Naim confirmed. “I was there.”

“You?” Obeida mocked him. “You were hiding behind Yusuf’s back so the Turks wouldn’t see you.”

“You Moorish eyesore!”

Naim walked off angrily.

During this time, the chosen three bathed and prepared for their audience that evening. All three of them were excited, but Yusuf was practically shaking.

“How are we supposed to behave?” he asked in a voice that was both timid and childlike.

“However the grand dai tells us to,” ibn Tahir offered.

“By the beard of the martyr Ali,” Suleiman exclaimed, goose bumps and cold sweats coming over him in anticipation. “I would never have dreamed I would soon have the honor of standing before Sayyiduna. We must have done something this morning to deserve this distinction.”

“Do you really think that’s what he’s summoned us for?” Yusuf wanted to know.

“I think you have a bad conscience,” Suleiman laughed. “Maybe he’s just summoned ibn Tahir and me for that. And you, so he can scold you for sounding off without shooting a single arrow.”

“Stop trying to scare me. You’re the one the Turk unsaddled.”

Suleiman bit his lip.

“Wait till you’re standing in front of Sayyiduna,” he said a while later. “We’ll see how clever your responses are then.”

Yusuf got upset.

“Do you think Sayyiduna is Abu Soraka, and that he’ll be asking me about the seven imams?”

“Both of you be careful you don’t go too far,” ibn Tahir intervened.

They put on white cloaks and close-fitting white pants. Then they put tall white fezzes on their heads, and in this ceremonial dress they rejoined their comrades.

They were unable to eat. The other fedayeen inspected them jealously. As they were leaving, Naim asked ibn Tahir, “When you get back, are you going to tell us what it was like and what Sayyiduna is like?”

“Anything you want to know,” ibn Tahir impatiently replied.

Abu Ali was waiting for them outside the entrance to the supreme command. He noticed that their faces were feverishly preoccupied. *If only they knew what they’re getting into!* was the thought that flashed through his mind. Then he spoke.

“Be brave. When you go in, bow deeply until Sayyiduna gives you permission to stand back up. Whomever he speaks to must kiss his hand reverently. Be brief and sincere in your responses. Because Sayyiduna sees into everyone’s soul.”

They climbed up the tower steps. As they reached the Moor at the top, Suleiman practically ran into him. He leapt back in fright, then scanned the floor ahead of him as though he were looking for whatever he had bumped into.

“Even I’d be afraid of this one,” Yusuf whispered to ibn Tahir.

They entered the antechamber, and all three were seized with a great anxiety.

The curtain rose and a resonant voice called out.

“Come in!”

Abu Ali went ahead, and Suleiman followed him boldly. Yusuf’s teeth were chattering. He waited for ibn Tahir to go ahead of him. Then he had no choice but to go in after them.

Next to Buzurg Ummid, whom they already knew, stood a man wearing a simple gray burnoose. A white turban covered his head. He was not tall, nor did he seem fearsome or particularly stern. This was Sayyiduna, the unseen commander of the Ismailis.

They stood next to each other and bowed.

“Fine, that’s fine, friends,” he said.

He approached them, smiling half ironically, half in encouragement.

“I’ve heard about your exploits in the battle with the sultan’s vanguard,” he began. “I’ve called you here to reward you for your loyalty.”

“You, ibn Tahir,” he said, turning toward him, “you have entertained me as much with your poems as you have with the seizure of the enemy’s flag.”

“And you, Suleiman, you have proven yourself to be a daring warrior and an incomparable swordsman. We’ll need you again.”

“And you, dear Yusuf,” he continued with a very peculiar smile, “for assailing the enemy like a roaring lion, you have also earned my praise!”

He offered each one his hand, but so hastily that they barely had time to kiss it.

Their eyes shone with pride. How could he have recognized each one of them without having ever seen them before? Had Abu Ali described them to him so precisely? In that case, their achievements must have been considerable.

The grand dais stood off to the side. Their faces revealed nothing aside from intent curiosity.

Hasan continued.

“Yesterday we tested your abilities, this morning your courage. But we haven’t yet tested you in the most important thing. We have saved this test for this evening. I want to find out how firm your faith is.”

He straightened up and approached Yusuf.

“Do you believe in everything your instructors have taught you?”

“I do, Sayyiduna.”

His voice was timid, but it conveyed genuine conviction.

“And the two of you, ibn Tahir and Suleiman?”

“I believe, Sayyiduna.”

“Do you firmly believe, Yusuf, that the martyr Ali was the Prophet’s sole legitimate heir?”

“I firmly believe, Sayyiduna.”

Yusuf was almost amazed he was asking him these kinds of things.

“And you, Suleiman, do you believe that his sons Hasan and Husein were wrongly deprived of their legacy?”

“Of course I believe, Sayyiduna.”

“And you, ibn Tahir, do you believe that Ismail is the seventh true imam?”

“I do, Sayyiduna.”

“And do you believe that al-Mahdi will come as the last great prophet and bring truth and justice to the world?”

“I believe that too, Sayyiduna.”

“And you, Yusuf, do you believe that I, your commander, have been given powers by Allah?”

“I believe, Sayyiduna.”

“And you, Suleiman, that I do everything that I do in His name?”

“I believe, Sayyiduna.”

Now Hasan walked right up to ibn Tahir.

“Do you believe, ibn Tahir, that I have been given the power to admit anyone I want into paradise?”

“I believe, Sayyiduna.”

Hasan listened closely. Ibn Tahir’s voice still conveyed unwavering conviction.

“Yusuf! Is your faith so firm that you would rejoice if I said to you, ‘Go to the top of the tower and throw yourself into the depths, because you will go to paradise?’ ”

Yusuf’s face lost its color. Hasan gave a barely perceptible smile. He looked at the grand dais. They were smiling too.

After a brief hesitation, Yusuf spoke.

“I would rejoice, Sayyiduna.”

“If now, this instant, I commanded you, ‘Go to top of the tower and throw yourself off!’ Yusuf, oh my Yusuf! I can see into your heart. How small is your faith! And you, Suleiman, would you truly rejoice?”

Suleiman replied in a resolute voice.

“I would truly rejoice, Sayyiduna.”

“If I ordered you this instant? Look, you’ve gone pale. Your tongue is decisive, but your trust wavers. It’s easy to believe in things that require no sacrifice from us. But when we have to prove our faith with our lives, then it begins to waver.”

He turned toward ibn Tahir.

“Now let’s have a look at you, poet. Do you assuredly believe that I have been given the key to the gates of paradise?”

“I assuredly believe, Sayyiduna, that you have the power to admit into

paradise anyone you consider worthy.”

“But what about the key? I asked you about it.”

Ibn Tahir twitched.

“I’m trying to believe, but I don’t know what the nature of that key is supposed to be.”

“So all you believe in is the doctrine of Ali and the imams?” Hasan exclaimed. “But we need believers who believe in everything our laws say.”

A silence followed that was unbearable for the fedayeen. Their knees shook in agitation. Cold sweat beaded on their foreheads.

Finally Hasan spoke in a hollow voice.

“Then you consider me a liar?”

All three of them went pale.

“No, Sayyiduna. We believe everything you say, Sayyiduna.”

“And if I tell you that I really do have the key to the gates of paradise?”

“Then we believe, Sayyiduna.”

“I can see into your hearts. You would like to believe, but you can’t. Why is that, ibn Tahir?”

“You know everything and see everything, Sayyiduna. It’s hard to believe in something that our mind can’t grasp. The spirit is willing, but the intellect resists.”

“You’re sincere and I like that. But what would you say if I really took you to paradise, so you could test it with those hands of yours, with those eyes and ears of yours, with that mouth of yours? Would you believe then?”

“How could I deny it then, Sayyiduna?”

“That’s gratifying. This morning you proved yourselves in battle. But I knew your weakness, and I’ve summoned you now to make you firm and decisive in your faith as well. And so I have decided to open the gate to paradise to you tonight.”

The youths’ eyes widened in unspeakable amazement. They were terrified and didn’t think they had heard right.

“What are you staring at me for? Aren’t you glad that I’m marking you out this way?”

“You said that ...”

Ibn Tahir stammered to a halt.

“I said that I would open paradise up to you, and that is what I’m going to do. Are you ready?”

Some invisible force put all three of them on their knees. They touched their foreheads to the floor in front of Hasan and stayed that way.

For a moment Hasan glanced at his friends. Their faces conveyed stern interest.

“Stand up!” he commanded.

They obeyed. He pulled a candle out of a chandelier and used it to light an area behind the lift. Three low cots had been prepared there. They were covered with rugs that reached down to the floor.

“Lie down on the cots!” he ordered.

He handed the candle to Abu Ali and gave Buzurg Ummid a jug of wine to hold. He took a gold box off a shelf and unlocked it. He approached the fedayeen, who, pale and miserable, were trembling on the cots.

“The way to paradise is long and arduous. Here are food and drink to fortify you. Take them from my hands.”

He went from one youth to the next, putting into each one’s mouth a tiny ball that he took from the gold box. Yusuf was so excited that at first he couldn’t open his jaws. Suleiman and ibn Tahir tried to swallow the ball as quickly as possible.

At first it tasted pleasantly sweet. Then came a disgustingly bitter taste. Hasan ordered them to drink wine to get rid of it. Then he watched closely for the effects.

First to intoxicate the youths was the strong wine, to which they weren’t accustomed. Everything spun before their eyes, so that they had to lie down flat. Yusuf groaned like a felled ox. Then he began to yield to a dizzy slumber.

For his comrades, drunkenness battled with a terrible curiosity. *What if I’ve swallowed poison?* was the thought that came to ibn Tahir. But countless fantastic images that began chasing each other were already pressing down on him. He could only follow them with his gaze like a mesmerized young ox.

Hasan saw his timid, wide-open eyes.

“What are you looking at, ibn Tahir?”

Ibn Tahir didn’t hear him. He was staring at the images drawing him

along, until he submitted to them completely.

Suleiman was angrily battling the phantoms that threatened to distort his reality. Just a moment earlier he had seen the faces of the three commanders intently looking at him. But in the next instant a marvelous apparition was enticing him to watch it. At first he suspected Hasan had given him poison. But soon he forgot that thought. His internal battle had exhausted him, and the images had become so strong that he finally succumbed to them completely.

Yusuf moaned and tossed for a while. Then he fell fast asleep. Soon Suleiman and ibn Tahir followed him.

Hasan took thin, black blankets and threw them over the youths. Then he gave a sign and all six of them descended to the base of the tower.

Hasan's bodyguard met them. Hasan quietly gave Captain Ali several more instructions. Then, in teams of two, the Moors picked the cots up by their handles and, accompanied by a third, carried the youths into the gardens.

The commanders waited silently for them to come back. Hasan asked them quietly, "Is everything in order?"

"Everything is fine, Sayyiduna."

Hasan gave a deep sigh.

"Let's go to the top of the tower," he said. "All of this is unfolding like a Greek tragedy. Praise be to Allah, the first act is over now."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

By evening, preparations in the gardens had been completed. The girls dispersed just as the supreme commander had determined. Miriam and her companions remained on the central island. The eunuchs rowed Fatima and Zuleika and their entourages to their designated gardens. Viewed from the castle, Fatima was to the left and Zuleika to the right of their permanent residence. Canals separated the three areas. Shah Rud embraced them at their circumference, drowning out voices in its roar, so that sounds from one island didn't carry over to the others.

With the girls' help, the eunuchs strung cords from shrub to shrub and from tree to tree around the pavilion, and then hung from them the lanterns that had been fashioned that morning. They were all sizes and shapes, and of varying designs and colors. When night fell, they set about lighting them. The surroundings came to life in a thoroughly new light, in new shapes and shadows. Everything was changed. The girls stared in amazement. They looked at each other. As they strolled down the paths, their faces and bodies glowed first in one color, then another. Spider-like shadows danced over them. Everything was quite wonderful and unreal. It was as though an image that they normally only saw in dreams had materialized. All around, where the band of light ended, everything was dense, impenetrable darkness. Neither the mountains nor the castle nor the stars could be seen.

The pavilions were practically buried in flowers. A fountain gurgled in the center of each of them, its streams of water falling to all sides and glinting in thousands of rainbow-like pearls. Food sat out on low, gilt tables, arranged on silver and gold trays. Braised fowl, baked fish, exquisitely prepared desserts and whole stacks of assorted fruit—figs, melons, oranges, apples, pears and grapes. Each table was surrounded with six jugs of wine. Off to the sides were dishes of milk and honey.

At the time of the fifth prayer Adi rowed Apama from garden to

garden one last time. She inspected everything closely and then issued final instructions. She handed Miriam, Fatima and Zuleika two little balls each, for putting the visitors to sleep—the second in case the first wasn't fully effective. As she left she spoke to them.

“Don't give the boys a chance to ask too many questions. Keep them busy. Above all, get them drunk, because Sayyiduna is just and strict.”

Once she had left, the girls knew that the decisive moment was approaching. Their leaders told them to drink a cup of wine to bolster their courage.

Fatima's pavilion was the most lively one. The girls stifled their nervous impatience by shouting and laughing. The magical lighting and the wine did their job. In numbers their fear dissipated. The pending visit roused no more than the shivering excitement of an unfamiliar adventure.

“His name is Suleiman and Sayyiduna said that he's handsome,” Leila remarked.

“I think you're already out to get him,” Sara sniffed at her.

“Look who's talking, the horniest one in the bunch.”

“Let's have Halima start,” Khanum suggested.

But Halima was nerve-wracked.

“No, no, I for sure won't.”

“Don't be afraid, Halima,” Fatima comforted her. “I'm responsible for our success, and I'll tell each of you what to do.”

“Which of us is he going to fall in love with?” Aisha asked.

“Your wiles aren't going to help you much,” Sara belittled her.

“And your black skin even less.”

“Stop arguing,” Fatima pacified them. “It doesn't matter whom he falls in love with. We serve Sayyiduna, and our only duty is to carry out his orders.”

“I think he's going to fall in love with Zainab,” Halima said.

“Why do you think that?” Sara asked angrily.

“Because she has such pretty golden hair and such blue eyes.”

Zainab laughed at this.

“Do you think he'll be more handsome than Sayyiduna?” Halima persisted.

“Look at this little monkey,” Fatima exclaimed. “Now she's gone and fallen in love with Sayyiduna.”

“I think he’s handsome.”

“Halima, at least for tonight don’t be stubborn. Sayyiduna isn’t for us. You mustn’t talk about him like that.”

“But he’s fallen in love with Miriam.”

Sara was furious.

“And have you fallen in love with Miriam?”

“Don’t you ever blurt out anything like that again!” Fatima scolded her too.

“How is he going to be dressed?” Aisha wondered.

Sara grinned broadly.

“Dressed? He’ll be naked, of course.”

Halima put her hands out in front of herself.

“I won’t look at him if he is.”

“Listen!” Shehera suggested. “Let’s compose a poem for him.”

“Good idea! Fatima, go ahead.”

“But we haven’t even seen him yet.”

“Fatima is afraid he won’t be handsome enough,” Sara laughed.

“Don’t push me, Sara. I’ll give it a try. How about this: Handsome fellow Suleiman—came to paradise ...”

“Silly!” Zainab exclaimed. “Suleiman is a hero who fought the Turks. It would be better to say: Fearless warrior Suleiman—came to paradise ...”

“Now isn’t that poetic!” Fatima bristled. “Funny you didn’t sprain your tongue ... Now listen to this: Bold gray falcon Suleiman—came to paradise. Caught sight of lovely Halima—could not believe his eyes.”

“No! Don’t put me in the poem!”

Halima was terrified.

“Silly child! Don’t be so serious. We’re just playing around.”

The girls around Zuleika were more preoccupied. Jada could barely stay on her feet, and Little Fatima retreated to the farthest corner, as though she would be safer there. Asma asked lots of silly questions, while Hanafiya and Zofana were arguing over nothing. Only Rokaya and Habiba maintained some degree of composure.

Zuleika was full of impatient anticipation. The honor of leading her section had gone to her head. She daydreamed about how the unknown,

handsome Yusuf would fall in love with her and her alone, disdaining all the others. Among so many maidens, she would be the chosen one. And she deserved it, after all. Wasn't she the most beautiful, the most voluptuous of them all?

When she had drunk her cup of wine, she grew mellow in a very particular way. She was blind to everything around her. She took up her harp and began to pluck the strings. In her imagination she saw herself as loved and desired. She charmed, she conquered, and without realizing it, she gradually fell in love with the stranger they were awaiting.

Despite all the luxury, everything was bleak and grim around Miriam. The girls in her pavilion were among the shyest and least independent. They would have liked to press close to Miriam and seek support from her. But Miriam was distant from them with her thoughts.

She hadn't thought that the realization Hasan didn't love her would affect her so much. And maybe that wasn't even the real cause of her pain. Worst of all she knew that she was just a means for Hasan, a tool that would help him attain some goal that had nothing to do with love. Calmly, without jealousy, he was handing her over to another for the night.

She knew men. Moses, her husband, had been old and disgusting. But without her ever having articulated it, it was clear to her that he would rather die than allow another man to touch her. Mohammed, her love, had risked and lost his life to get her. When they later sold her in Basra, she never lost sight of the fact that any master who bought her wouldn't let another man near her, even though she was a slave. She still preserved this faith in herself when she became Hasan's property. His decision today had shaken the foundations of her self-confidence and humiliated her to the core.

She would have cried if she could have. But it was as though her eyes were no longer capable of tears. Did she hate Hasan? Her feelings were strangely complex. At first it had been clear that she had no choice but to throw herself into Shah Rud. Then she decided to take revenge. That desire faded too, and gave way to profound sorrow. The more she thought about it, the more she realized that Hasan's behavior had been utterly consistent. His views, full of contempt for everything the masses

held sacred and indisputable, his ambivalence about all received knowledge, his absolute freedom of thought and action—hadn't all these things charmed and irritated her countless times? Those had been words. She herself was too weak to either dare or be able to turn them into actions. Likewise, she hadn't assumed that he was that powerful.

Now she was beginning to understand this side of him too. In some way he had been inclined toward her, and perhaps he even liked her. She felt she had to respect him. For him, understanding something intellectually was at the same time a commandment to make it happen. His intellectual conclusions were also obligations. How many times had she told him that she was no longer capable of truly loving anyone, that she couldn't believe in anything, and that she didn't recognize the existence of universally applicable laws of behavior? She had acted as though she had long since shaken off any prejudices. With his last decision, hadn't he shown that he believed her? That he respected her?

Nothing was clear to her anymore. No matter what she thought, no matter how much she tried to understand it all, ultimately she was left with the pain, with the knowledge that she had been humiliated, and that for Hasan she was just an object that he could move around however his interests dictated.

Furtively she was drinking more wine than she should and emptying cup after cup. But she felt she was just getting more and more sober. Suddenly she realized that she was actually waiting for someone. Strangely, all that time she hadn't once thought of ibn Tahir. Hasan had told her that he was exceptionally bright and a poet. Something strange came over her, as though she had been brushed by an invisible wing. She shuddered, sensing the nearness of fate.

She picked up her harp and pulled her fingers across the strings. It groaned, plaintively and longingly.

"How beautiful she is tonight," Safiya whispered. She glanced toward Miriam.

"When ibn Tahir sees her, he'll fall in love right away," Khadija commented.

"How nice that will be," Safiya grew excited. "Let's compose a poem for them."

"Would you like for him to fall in love with her that much?"

"Absolutely."

Wordlessly the grand dais accompanied Hasan to the top of the tower. Once out on the platform, they noticed a dull glow that attenuated the starlight on the side where the gardens were located. They went with Hasan up to the battlements and looked over the edge.

The three pavilions were awash in a sea of light. They were illuminated both inside and out. Through their glass towers and walls, everything moving inside them could be seen, infinitely reduced in size.

“You’re a master without equal,” Abu Ali said. “I’d say you’ve sworn to take us from one surprise to the next.”

“It’s like magic from the *Thousand and One Nights*,” Buzurg Ummid murmured. “Even the most serious doubts fade in the face of your abilities.”

“Wait, don’t praise me too soon,” Hasan laughed. “Apparently our youths are still sleeping down there. The curtain hasn’t even gone up yet. We won’t see if the work was worth it until that happens.”

He described the arrangement of the gardens to them, and which of the threesome was in which pavilion.

“It’s completely incomprehensible to me,” Abu Ali said, “how you were able to come up with the idea for this plan. The only explanation I can think of is that you must have been inspired by some spirit. But not by Allah.”

“Oh, for sure it wasn’t Allah,” Hasan replied, smiling. “More like our old friend Omar Khayyam.”

He told his friends about how he had visited him twenty years before in Nishapur, and how he had unwittingly provided him with the inspiration for his experiment of this evening.

Abu Ali was astonished.

“You mean to say you’ve had this plan since then? And you didn’t lose your mind? By the beard of the martyr Ali! I couldn’t have held out for a month if I’d come up with anything so superb. I’d throw myself into making it happen, and I wouldn’t give up until I either succeeded or failed.”

“I decided I would do everything humanly possible to make sure I didn’t fail. An idea like this grows and develops in the human soul like a baby in its mother’s body. At first it’s utterly helpless, it lacks a clear shape, it just provokes a passionate longing that drives you to persist. It has a tremendous power. It gradually haunts and possesses its bearer, so

that he doesn't see or think of anything else but it. His only desire is to embody it, to bring this wonderful monster into the world. With a thought like that in your gut, you really are like a madman. You don't ask if it's right or wrong, if it's good or bad. You act on some invisible command. All you know is that you're a means, in thrall to something more powerful than yourself. Whether that power is heaven, or whether it's hell, you don't care!"

"So all twenty years you didn't even try to realize your plan? You didn't even have a soul to share it with?"

Abu Ali couldn't comprehend this. Hasan just laughed.

"If I had shared my plan with you or any of my friends, you would have thought I was a fool. I won't deny that I did try, in my impatience, to realize it. Prematurely realize it, to be sure. Because subsequently I always realized that the obstacles that came across my path kept me from making irrevocable missteps. The first attempt to carry out my plan came shortly after Omar Khayyam provided it to me. You see, he had advised me to appeal to the grand vizier to fulfill his youthful vow and help me advance, as he'd already done for Omar. Nizam al-Mulk obliged me, as I'd expected. He recommended me to the sultan as his friend, and I was accepted into the court. You can imagine I was a more entertaining courtier than the grand vizier. I soon won the sultan's favor, and he began advancing me ahead of the others. Of course, this was just grist for my mill. I was waiting for an opportunity to ask the sultan for the command of units in some military campaign. But I was still so naive that I didn't reckon with the bitter jealousy that my successes aroused in my former schoolmate. I found it perfectly natural for the two of us to compete. But he took it as a great humiliation. This came out when the sultan wanted to have an account of all the income and expenses of his enormous empire. He asked Nizam al-Mulk how soon he could pull all the necessary numbers together. 'I need at least two years to complete the task,' the vizier estimated. 'What? Two years?' I exclaimed. 'Give me forty days and I'll have a meticulous list covering the whole land. Just give me your officials to work with.' My classmate went pale and left the room without a word. The sultan accepted my proposal, and I was happy to have the chance to prove my abilities. I recruited all of my confidants throughout the empire for the job, and with their help and that of the sultan's officials, I actually managed to collect the numbers on all the

revenues and outlays in the country within forty days. When the deadline came, I appeared before the sultan with the records. I started to read, but I had barely gotten through a few pages when I realized that someone had substituted the wrong lists. I started stammering and tried to supply the missing information from memory. But the sultan had already noticed my confusion. He lost his temper and his lips began to tremble with rage. Then the grand vizier said to him, ‘Wise men have calculated that it would take at least two years to complete this task. So how else is a frivolous idiot who boasted he would complete it in forty days to answer, but with incoherent prattle?’ I could feel him laughing maliciously inside. I knew he had played this trick on me. But there was no joking with the sultan. I had to leave the court in disgrace and head for Egypt. In the sultan’s eyes I remained a shameless buffoon. Since then the grand vizier has been living in fear of my revenge, and he’s done everything to try to destroy me. That’s how the first chance to realize my plan fell through. And I don’t regret it. Because I greatly fear the birth would have been premature ...”

“I’ve heard about your dispute with the grand vizier,” Abu Ali said. “But the story takes on a whole different aspect when you learn all its details. Now I understand why Nizam al-Mulk is such a mortal enemy of the Ismailis.”

“I encountered more favorable conditions in Egypt. Caliph Mustansir Billah dispatched Badr al-Jamali, the commander of his bodyguard, to meet me at the border. In Cairo I was greeted with highest honors as a martyr for the cause of Ali. Soon the whole situation was clear to me. Two parties had formed around the caliph’s two sons, each wanting to secure the succession for its protégé. The elder son, Nizar, was also the weaker one, like the caliph himself. The law was in his favor. I soon managed to get both him and his father under my influence. But I didn’t reckon with the determination of Badr al-Jamali. He was champion of the younger son, al-Mustali. When he realized I was beginning to overshadow him, he had me arrested. The caliph was frightened. I quickly realized this was no joking matter. I cast aside all the high-flying dreams I’d been nurturing for Egypt and agreed to board some Frankish ship. My fate was finally sealed on that boat. Out at sea I noticed that we weren’t sailing for Syria, as Badr al-Jamali had promised, but far out west along the coast of Africa. I knew everything would be lost if they

put me ashore anyplace near Kairouan. Then one of the storms that are typical for that part of the ocean started up. I had secretly received several bags of gold pieces from the caliph. I offered one of them to the captain if he would change course and put me ashore on the coast of Syria. He would have the perfect excuse that the storm had carried him off course. The gold tempted him. The storm kept getting worse and worse. The passengers, almost all of them Franks, began to despair. They prayed out loud and commended their souls to God. I, on the other hand, was so satisfied with the deal I'd made that I sat down in a corner and calmly ate some dried figs. They were amazed at my composure. They didn't know we'd turned about and were heading in the other direction. In response to their questions I told them that Allah had told me we were going to land on the coast of Syria and nothing bad would happen to us along the way. That 'prophecy' came to pass, and overnight they saw me as a great prophet. They all wanted me to accept them as adherents of my faith. I was terrified by that unexpected success. I had just vividly demonstrated to myself what a tremendous force faith is, and how easy it is to awaken. You just need to know a little bit more than the ones who are supposed to believe. Then it's easy to work miracles. These are the fertile grounds out of which the noble blossom of faith grows. Suddenly, everything was clear to me. Like Archimedes, in order to carry out my plan I would need a single fixed point, and the world would come unhinged. No honors, no influence over the masters of the world! Just a fortified castle and the means to alter it according to my concept. Then the grand vizier and the mighty of the world had better look out!"

Hasan's eyes flashed in a strangely threatening way. Abu Ali had the feeling that he was in the presence of a dangerous beast that could strike at any instant.

"Now you have that fixed point," he said somewhat reassuringly, yet with faint distrust.

"Yes," Hasan replied. He stepped away from the battlements and lay down on some pillows spread out on the roof. He invited his friends to join him. Pieces of cold roast and platters and jugs full of wine were waiting for them. They started eating.

"I have no hesitation about deceiving an enemy. But I don't like to trick a friend," Buzurg Ummid suddenly spoke up. He had been quiet

and thoughtful the entire time. Now the thoughts unexpectedly poured out of him.

“If I understood you right, ibn Sabbah,” he continued, “the strength of your institution would be built on our deception of the fedayeen, our most exceptional and devoted followers. We would be responsible for that deception in the most cold-blooded and premeditated way. To achieve it, we would have to make use of unprecedented trickery. Your concept is magnificent, indeed, but the means for realizing it are living human beings, our friends.”

As though expecting this objection, Hasan calmly responded.

“Essentially, the power of any institution is predicated on followers who have been deceived. People vary according to their powers of perception. Whoever wants to lead them has to take this range of abilities into consideration. The masses wanted miracles from the prophets. They had to perform them if they wanted to keep their respect. The lower the level of consciousness, the greater the fervor. So I divide humanity into two fundamentally different layers: the handful that knows what really is, and the vast multitudes that don't know. The former are called to lead, the latter to be led. The former are like parents, the latter like children. The former know that truth is unattainable, while the latter reach their arms out for it. What else can the former do, but feed them fairy tales and fabrications? What else are those but lies and deceptions? And yet, they're moved to do this out of pity. So if deception and trickery are inevitable for leading the masses toward some goal that you see and they don't understand, then why shouldn't you be able to use that deception and trickery to build a deliberate system? As an example I could name the Greek philosopher Empedocles, who during his lifetime enjoyed the practically divine veneration of his students. When he sensed his last hour approaching, he climbed to the top of a volcano and threw himself into its jaws. You see, he had predicted he would be taken up into heaven alive. But by accident he lost a sandal at the edge of the chasm. If they hadn't discovered it, the world might still believe today that he had passed into the beyond alive. If we think about this carefully, he couldn't have committed this act out of self-interest. What use would it have been to him if when he was dead his students believed in his divine assumption? Let's rather assume that he was so sensitive that he didn't want to smash

his faithful students' vision of his immortality. He sensed they expected lies from him, and he didn't want to disappoint them."

"That kind of lie is essentially innocent," Buzurg Ummid replied after some consideration. "But this trick that you're setting out for the fedayeen is a matter of life and death."

"Earlier I promised I would share the philosophical basis of my plan in detail with both of you," Hasan resumed. "For that we need to be completely clear about what's in fact happening in the gardens. Let's separate this anticipated event into its elements. We have three youths who might believe that we've opened the gates to paradise for them. If they were really convinced of that, what would they experience? Are you aware of that, friends? A bliss, the likes of which no mortal has ever known."

"But how totally wrong they'd be," Abu Ali laughed, "is something only the three of us would know."

"And what do they care if we know?" Hasan replied. "Do you perhaps know what will happen to you tomorrow? Do I perhaps know what fate has in store for me? Does Buzurg Ummid know when he will die? And yet these things have been decided for millennia in the composition of the universe. Protagoras said that man was the measure of everything. What he perceives, is; what he doesn't perceive, is not. The threesome down there are going to experience and know paradise with their souls, their bodies and all of their senses. So it becomes paradise for them. You, Buzurg Ummid, were shocked by the delusion I've drawn the fedayeen into. But you forget that we ourselves are the victims of the delusions of our own senses every day. In that sense I would be no worse than that supposed being above us, which various faiths claim has created us. That we were given undependable senses in the process is something that Democritus already recognized. For him there are no colors, no sounds, no sweetness or bitterness, no cold or warmth, just atoms and space. Empedocles guessed that all our knowledge is channeled to us by our senses. What isn't contained in them isn't contained in our thoughts. So if our senses lie, how can our knowledge be accurate if it has its origins in them? Look at those eunuchs in the gardens. We've given them the most beautiful girls to guard. They have the same eyes as we do, the same ears and the same senses. And yet! A small incision in their bodies was all it took for their image of the world

to be changed entirely. What is the intoxicating scent of a young girl's skin to them? The repulsive evaporation of sweat. And the touch of firm, maidenly breasts? Unpleasant contact with an alien, fatty body part. And the hidden entrance to the summit of human desire? A dirty waste passage. So much, then, for the reliability of our senses. A blind man doesn't care about the radiance of a garden in bloom. A deaf man is impervious to a nightingale's song. A eunuch is indifferent to the charms of a maiden, and an idiot thumbs his nose at all the wisdom of the world."

Abu Ali and Buzurg Ummid couldn't help laughing. They felt as though Hasan had taken them by the arm and was leading them down a steep, winding stairway into a deep, dark abyss which they had never even dared look into before. They sensed that he must have thoroughly thought through everything he was telling them now.

"You see, if someone—like me, for instance—has truly realized," Hasan continued, "that nothing he sees, feels or perceives around him is dependable; if he's had that flash of awareness that he's surrounded on all sides by nothing but uncertainties and obscurity, and that he's constantly the victim of delusions, then he no longer feels these to be anything inimical to man, but more like a kind of life necessity that sooner or later he'll have to make peace with. Delusion as one of the elements of all life, as something that's not our enemy, as one of a number of means by which we can still act and push forward at all—I see this is as the only possible view of those who have attained some higher knowledge. Heraclitus saw the universe as a sort of dumping ground heaped up without any plan and regulated by time. Time is like a child playing with colored pebbles, stacking them up and then scattering them again. What a lofty simile! Time is like a ruler, like an artist. Their passion for building and creating mirrors the purposeless will that governs worlds. It calls them to life and then shoves them back into nothingness. But while they last, they are unique and self-contained and submissive to their own strict laws. That's the kind of world we're in. We're subject to the laws that rule in it. We're part of it and we can't get out. It's a world in which error and delusion are important factors."

"All-merciful Allah!" Abu Ali exclaimed. "I'd say you've also built a world ruled by unique laws, Hasan! You've built your own world, colorful, strange and awful. Alamut, that's your creation, ibn Sabbah."

He laughed and forced a smile from Hasan too. Buzurg Ummid looked at the commander and listened to him, thinking about the things he said and being amazed. He was gradually sliding into areas that were completely unknown and alien to him.

“There’s a fair amount of truth in your joke, Abu Ali,” Hasan continued, with his earlier smile. “I told you down below already that I had crept into the creator’s workshop and watched him at work. Supposedly out of pity he has concealed our future and the day of our deaths from us. We do the same thing. Where the devil is it written that our life on this planet isn’t just such a delusion?! Only our consciousness decides whether something is ‘for real’ or just a dream. When the fedayeen wake up again, if they learn that they’ve been in paradise, then they’ll have been in paradise! Because there’s no difference between a real and an unreal paradise, in effect. Wherever you’re aware of having been, that’s where you’ve been! Won’t their pleasures, their joys be just as great as if they’d been in the real heaven? Epicurus wisely said that the avoidance of pain and suffering and the quest for pleasure and personal comfort were the only models for human life. Who will have experienced a greater share of happiness than our fedayeen, whom we’ve transported to paradise? Seriously! What I’d give to be in their place! To be conscious just once of enjoying the delights of heaven!”

“What a sophist!” Abu Ali exclaimed. “If you put me on a rack and tried to persuade me, as you’re doing now, that I was cozier there than if I were lying on a soft feather bed, by the beard of Ismail, I’d laugh myself silly.”

Hasan and Buzurg Ummid burst out laughing.

“It’s time to have a look at what our heroes are doing,” Hasan said at last.

They rose and stepped up to the battlements.

“Everything is still quiet,” Buzurg Ummid summed up. “Let’s get back to our conversation. Ibn Sabbah, you said you would like to be conscious of having been in paradise. What will the fedayeen experience out of the ordinary, even if they do have that awareness? They’ll eat food they could have elsewhere and enjoy girls like thousands of others under the sun.”

“Don’t!” Hasan replied. “It isn’t all the same to an ordinary mortal whether he’s a guest in a king’s palace or in a simple caravanserai, even

if they serve him the same food in both places. He also knows how to distinguish between a princess and a milkmaid, however much alike they may look otherwise. Because our pleasures don't just depend on our physical senses. They're a highly complex phenomenon, influenced by a whole range of circumstances. The maiden you see as a perpetually virginal houri will give you a completely different kind of pleasure than one you see as a bought slave."

"Just now you've reminded me of a certain detail," Abu Ali said, interrupting him. "It's written in the Koran that the maidens of paradise will never lose their innocence. Have you accounted for that? Be careful that your entire plan doesn't collapse over a detail like that."

Hasan laughed uproariously.

"There's not all that much virginity down there to begin with," he replied, "which is part of the reason why I sent for Apama to come from Kabul. Believe me, her reputation as the finest lover from Kabul to Samarkand was well deserved. Let me tell you, after a dozen lovers she was still just as delicate as a sixteen-year-old maiden. She knew a secret of love which seems perfectly simple when it's explained to you. But if you don't know about it, you could well believe in perpetual, self-renewing virginity. It's a mineral compound which, when properly applied in solution, contracts the skin and could easily lead a beginner to the wrong assumption that he's dealing with an untouched virgin."

"If you've thought of that too, then you're Satan incarnate," Abu Ali said, laughing.

"Look! One of the fedayeen is awake!" Buzurg Ummid exclaimed.

All three of them held their breath. Through the glass roof they could see the girls surrounding the youth, who was apparently telling them something.

"That's Suleiman," Hasan said, instinctively lowering his voice, as though fearing he could be heard from the gardens. "He's the first mortal who has ever awakened in paradise."

A deathly silence fell around Fatima when the eunuchs brought Suleiman into the pavilion. Wordlessly, they took him by the feet and shoulders and laid him down on some pillows. Then, just as noiselessly, they left with the empty litter.

The girls barely dared to breathe. They stared at the body, which was draped in a black coverlet. Zainab whispered to Fatima that she should uncover their sleeping guest.

Fatima approached him on tiptoe, bent over him to pull the coverlet off and remained there, motionless. However much she had expected, she hadn't imagined Suleiman would be this handsome. He had rosy cheeks like a girl's, and just barely covered by a light down. His cherry-red lips were slightly open, and a row of pearl-white teeth shone through them. His eyelashes were long and thick and cast finely articulated shadows on his cheeks. He lay on his side, with one arm under his body and the other hand lightly clasping the pillows.

"How do you like him, Halima?" Khanum asked in a subdued voice.

"I already don't care for him."

"Careful! The two of you are about to devour him with your eyes."

Sara quietly grinned.

"You would have already, if only you could," Zainab teased her.

"Look who's talking!"

Fatima picked up her harp and began plucking its strings. When she saw that Suleiman was still asleep, she grew bolder and began singing half-aloud.

"Go ahead and talk as if you were alone," Fatima said. "We may have to wait a long time yet before he wakes up."

Being able to converse in a normal voice put the girls at ease. They started joking, teasing one another and laughing at each other.

Suddenly Suleiman began to stir.

"Look, he's about to wake up!" Zainab called out.

Halima covered her eyes.

"No, he's just having a dream," Sara sighed with relief.

Halima looked again.

"Just don't you cause me any trouble," Fatima threatened her.

Then Suleiman rose up on his arms, opened his eyes for a moment and then shut them again. Then he opened them up wide again and stared dully at the girls' half-frightened, half-curious faces. Then he shook his head, murmured something unintelligible, and lay back down where he had been.

"Do you suppose he thought he was dreaming?" Aisha whispered.

"Go to him, Fatima, caress him," Zainab advised. "Maybe that will

rouse him.”

Fatima noiselessly sat down on the pillows beside him. She hesitated for a few moments, then very gently stroked his cheek.

Suleiman twitched. He turned over and his arm slapped against Fatima’s thigh. It stung as though a flame had touched her. She held her breath and listened in shivering anticipation.

Once more Suleiman sat up. He forced his eyes open and stared at Fatima, who was trembling in front of him. Without a word, like a machine, he put his arms around her and pressed her close. Just as unconsciously and dully, he took possession of her.

Fatima wasn’t sure what had happened to her. Just as absently, she asked him, “Do you love me, Suleiman?”

Suleiman was bent over her. He gazed impassively at her face. He murmured, “Go on. You’re beautiful, but I know this is just a dream. Damn, if even these have to get spoiled.”

Fatima flinched and shook off her rapture. Embarrassed, she looked at her companions.

Suddenly she became aware of her duties. She envisioned the horrible punishment that the supreme commander had promised if the experiment failed. She pushed Suleiman away from her and spoke reproachfully.

“Aren’t you ashamed, Suleiman? You’re in paradise and yet you swear!”

“Paradise?”

He hurriedly rubbed his eyes. Then he looked around. His eyes widened in amazement.

“What, what is this?” he stammered.

He began to touch himself and the things around him. He picked up a pillow and fearfully touched Fatima.

Then he got up. He stared at the splashing fountain, walked up to the pool, and dipped a hand into it.

“Oh, praise be to heaven!” he whispered. “I really am in paradise.”

The girls watched him timidly and with bated breath. What if he saw through it? They’d lose their heads. But would they be able to deceive him all night?

Fatima was the first to get her bearings.

“You’ve come a long way. Are you thirsty?” she asked.

“Oh, I’m thirsty,” he whispered.

She nodded and Sara brought a dish of cold milk. He took it out of her hands and greedily emptied it.

“I feel reborn,” he said, and a smile passed across his face.

“Come. Let’s bathe you,” Fatima said.

“All right. But look away.”

They obeyed him. Sara and Zainab giggled furtively.

“What are you laughing at?” he asked mistrustfully as he undressed.

“It’s the custom here!”

He slid into the water.

“How nice and warm it is,” he revealed.

His dizziness had passed. He was still amazed, but at the same time felt more relaxed.

“Give me a towel,” he asked out loud.

In an instant he had what he wanted.

“I’d like to see you bathe too.”

Fatima nodded. They unwound themselves from their veils and climbed into the water. Halima hid, but Sara led her to the pool. They began splashing each other. Shouts and laughter began echoing through the pavilion.

Suleiman pulled on his robe and lay down on the pillows.

“This place is really fun,” he said, smiling.

He felt weak and enormously hungry. He looked with covetous eyes at the food waiting on the tables in the corner.

Fatima dressed and approached him.

“Are you hungry, Suleiman?” she asked with angelic charm.

“I’ll say.”

They served him quickly.

He lit into the food like a starved wolf. His strength visibly began to return.

“Pour him some wine!” Fatima whispered.

He drank it in huge gulps. He looked at the beauties who were serving him. Their skin gleamed through their veils. He started getting dizzy with desire.

“Is all this mine?” he asked.

As a test he seized Aisha by the hand and pulled her toward him. She didn’t resist.

Right after her, Leila snuggled up to him.

“Get him drunk, charm, seduce him,” Fatima was telling the girls in a whisper.

The wine gradually went to his head.

“By the beard of the martyr Ali!” he exclaimed. “Sayyiduna was telling the truth. He really does have the key to the gates of paradise.”

He hugged and kissed them all, one after the other.

“I just hope I haven’t died,” he suddenly worried.

“Don’t be afraid,” Fatima reassured him. “Tomorrow you’ll be back at Alamut serving Sayyiduna.”

“Do you know him too?”

“We’re in paradise!”

“Then you also know that we gave it to the infidels this morning?”

“Of course we know. You pursued the Turks and ibn Tahir seized the enemy flag.”

“Allah is great! If I told this to Naim or Obeida, they’d laugh in my face.”

“Is their faith so weak?”

“By the beard of the Prophet, I wouldn’t believe it either, if the two of them told me something like this. Where are ibn Tahir and Yusuf?”

“Also in paradise, like you. Once you’re back in the other world, you can meet and tell each other what you’ve seen and experienced.”

“It’s true, in Allah’s name. Strange things can happen to an honest Muslim.”

Feeling pleasantly tipsy, he began to tell them about Alamut, about his teachers and comrades and about that morning’s battle with the Turks.

The girls sat around and listened to him, their hearts smitten. His was the first manhood they had felt in these gardens, and he was a magnificent boy, on top of it all. One after the other, they each fell in love with him.

Fatima sat down with her harp and began plucking the strings and humming softly. Now and then she cast a loving glance at him.

“Fatima is composing a poem,” Khanum whispered.

Halima was hiding behind her. She had her fingers over Khanum’s shoulders and stole a glance at Suleiman from time to time. She liked him very much. His confident storytelling, his forthright, hearty laughter, his boldness—all of this charmed her. She was angry at herself

for it, but she was already quite bedazzled.

From time to time as he spoke, he caught the admiring look of her eyes. Besides that and the fingers on Khanum's shoulders, he couldn't see a thing. He thought for a moment and realized he hadn't touched her yet. He already knew Fatima, Sara, Zainab, Aisha and Leila by name.

"Who's the little one hiding behind your back?" he asked Khanum.

"Halima."

They all laughed.

Suleiman looked around in confusion. The fingers and big eyes had suddenly disappeared behind Khanum.

"Come closer, Halima," he said. "I haven't even seen you yet."

Khanum, Shehera and some others grabbed her and pushed her toward Suleiman. Convulsively, she clung onto carpets and pillows and dragged them all with her.

"Is the little scamp still so shy?"

"Yes, she is. She's even afraid of lizards and snakes."

"But you won't be afraid of me, will you? I'm not a Turk or some other infidel. They're usually the ones who are afraid of me."

He tried to kiss her. But she slipped away from him and stubbornly hung her head.

"What does that mean?" he was perplexed.

Fatima made some noise in the corner. Halima at once put her arms around his neck and hid her face on his chest.

"I can't stand having them around me," she whispered.

"All of you go join Fatima," he ordered.

How wonderfully alluring she is, he thought.

Her arms clasped onto him tighter and tighter. Her face was as hot as forged iron.

"O Allah, how sweet she is," he whispered and pressed her close.

Then Sara offered him wine. While he drank, Zainab quickly changed the pillows.

"It's strange, none of them has been this lovely or this sweet," he murmured.

Halima crept off into a corner and buried her face in some pillows. She dropped off to sleep immediately.

Fatima cleared her throat.

"I'm going to sing a song about this evening," she said with a

charming smile. Dimples showed in her cheeks.

“Excellent!” Suleiman approved. He stretched back on the pillows, cradling his head in his hands.

“Now listen!”

Fatima began, to the accompaniment of her harp.

Suleiman gray falcon
Came to paradise,
Caught sight of fair Fatima,
Could not believe his eyes.

He wrapped himself around her
Like a brave white swan,
Took all she had to offer,
Became her only one.

Then came sweetest Aisha
Ready to make love,
She steals Fatima’s husband,
Now Aisha is his dove.

Leila becomes heartsick
Seeing Suleiman,
So she leaps upon him—
Now it’s her he wants.

But then Turkan sees this,
And she’s in his lap.
She’s a girl who pleases,
He’s not one to nap.

And then yet another
Wins his fickle heart.
This is dark-skinned Sara
With her lustful art.

Enough of sultry beauty,
Enough of darkened hues,
Zeinab brings a new thing

Zainab brings a new thing,
Zainab's eyes are blue.

Allah gave Halima
Long legs and slender hips.
She'd be a prize for the sultan,
The boy is drawn to her lips.

Khanum and Shehera together
Stretch out their arms for him.
One takes him by the shoulders,
One takes him by his limbs.

Meanwhile poor Fatima
Keeps plucking at the strings.
She watches her faithless sweetheart,
How painfully it stings.

Then Suleiman comes to her,
How handsome a hero he is!
He kisses her eyes in contrition,
For Fatima it's sweetest bliss.

Then all the girls together
Dance around him in a ring.
They chant aloud in chorus,
In unison they sing:

Heaven wasn't much until we met
This noble Pahlavan.
So let's call out together now:
Long live our Suleiman!

Shouts, laughter and loud acclaim greeted Fatima's song. The girls drew Suleiman toward the center and began dancing around him. They called out to him and cheered him.

He was barely able to get away from them. He ran over to Fatima and hugged her exuberantly.

“What an excellent song!” he said, smiling. “You have to write it down for me. Will Naim and Obeida ever be impressed.”

“But you can’t take anything with you from paradise,” Fatima cautioned. “You’ll have to learn it by heart.”

The noise finally woke Halima. She looked around, puzzled.

“What happened?”

“Fatima composed a song,” Sara replied. “And you were in it.”

“Then it must be silly.”

She burrowed into the pillows again and tried to go to sleep.

Then Suleiman spotted her. He came up and shook her by the shoulder.

“How can you sleep when there’s a guest in the house?”

He sat down beside her and she snuggled up to him. He could feel the pleasant warmth of her breath, and its rhythmic regularity soon put him to sleep.

“How adorable they are,” Aisha said.

“Let’s let them rest.”

Fatima called to Zainab.

“Let’s compose a song about them,” she suggested quietly.

The other girls drank up and continued having fun. They danced, jumped into the pool, cracked jokes, and laughed.

The song was ready, and Fatima told the girls to wake Halima and Suleiman. Both of them opened their eyes at the same time, saw each other, and laughed.

“Boy, if old Yusuf could see me now!”

Suleiman was enormously happy. The girls offered him more wine. He refused a cup and drank straight out of the jug.

“There’s no sultan that has it this good!”

“Now listen, you two! Fatima and Zainab are going to sing you a song.”

He lay back on the pillows and drew Halima toward him.

Fatima and Zainab began.

Of all the houris in heaven,
Halima least mastered the plan.
She’d scowl at sixes and sevens
If anyone mentioned a man.

She fled from serpents and lizards.
What she thought of them wasn't wise:
That Allah had made them to slither
And eat up little girls alive.

At times she cast furtive glances
At the eunuchs' ludicrous ploys.
At night she'd secretly wish
That they could be real boys.

And barely had Suleiman entered
Than her heart felt in heaven at last.
She lost her head, time expanded,
And the days of her childhood were past.

When Suleiman stretched his hands out
Toward her maidenly breasts and waist,
She moaned so softly and sweetly,
And her breath was taken away.

She lowered her eyes and she trembled,
And she practically fainted away.
She longed, she desired, she resisted,
And she even blushed red with shame.

Secretly she may have figured
That she might not suit his tastes.
Whatever she'd learned she'd forgotten,
And that could mean total disgrace.

And yet, when the thing finally happened
That is wont at these times to occur,
Her face and her eyes shone resplendent
With a happiness totally hers.

The girls laughed. But Halima was all red with shame and anger. Suleiman was grinning in satisfaction. He was already so drunk that he could barely have gotten up.

“I’ll throw these pillows at you if you don’t keep quiet!”

Halima shook her tight, little fist at them.

Then, in the distance, a horn sounded gloomily. Once, twice, three times. The girls fell silent. Fatima went pale. In secret she prepared a pellet for the wine.

Suleiman listened too. He rose with difficulty. He could barely stay on his feet.

“What does that mean?” he asked, perplexed.

He walked toward the door, as though meaning to leave the pavilion.

“One more cup, Suleiman.”

Fatima could barely conceal her worry.

The drink was ready. The girls drew Suleiman back onto some pillows.

“What are you going to tell Naim and Obeida about your experiences in paradise?” Fatima asked, to deflect his attention from more dangerous thoughts.

“Naim and Obeida? Oh, those Turks won’t believe me. But I’ll show them. Just let them doubt! I’ll shove this in their faces.”

He showed them his clenched fist. Fatima offered him the cup to drink. He emptied it as an afterthought.

A heavy drowsiness came over him right away. He tried to resist it with the last of his strength.

“Give me something to take as a keepsake.”

“You can’t take anything with you.”

He could see he would get nowhere with Fatima. His weakening right hand instinctively felt for Halima’s wrist. A gold bracelet slipped into his palm. He hid it beneath his robe and then fell fast asleep.

Halima didn’t betray him. How could she have? She had fallen in love with him with all her heart.

There was complete quiet in the pavilion. Fatima silently took the black coverlet and spread it over the sleeping youth.

They waited.

“It’s not things in themselves that make us happy or unhappy,” Hasan told his friends in his observatory when they lay back down on their pillows. “It’s rather the thought, the conviction that we have about them. Take an example: a miser buries a treasure at a secret location.

Publicly he gives the impression of a pauper, but in private he enjoys the knowledge that he's a wealthy man. A neighbor finds out about his secret and takes his treasure away. The miser will continue enjoying his wealth until he discovers the theft. And if death comes to him before that, he'll die in the happy knowledge that he's a rich man. It's the same with a man who doesn't know that his lover is betraying him. Provided he doesn't find out, he can live happily his whole life. Or take the opposite situation. His beloved wife could be the model of faithfulness. But if some lying tongues persuade him she's been unfaithful, he'll suffer the torments of hell. So you see, neither things nor actual facts decide our happiness—or unhappiness. Instead, we're completely and exclusively dependent on our notions, on our perceptions of them. Every day reveals to us how false and error-ridden these perceptions are. What frail legs our happiness rests on! How unjustified our grief often is! Small wonder that the wise man is indifferent to both of them. Or that only simpletons and idiots can enjoy happiness!"

"Your philosophy is none too much to my liking," Abu Ali commented. "You're right, we're constantly making mistakes in life and we're often the victims of wrong beliefs. But does that mean we have to forego every pleasure because it's based on false assumptions? If a person were to live by your wisdom, he'd have to spend his whole life in doubt and uncertainty."

"Why did you get so upset earlier at my sending the fedayeen into paradise? Aren't they happy? What possible difference is there between their happiness and the happiness of somebody else who is just as ignorant of its true foundations? I know what's bothering you. You're bothered that the three of us know something that they don't know. And despite that, they're still better off—than I am, for instance. Imagine how any pleasure would be ruined for those three if they even suspected that I'd deliberately drawn them into something about which they had no knowledge. Or that I knew something more than they do about everything that's happening to them. Or if they sensed they were just playthings, helpless chess pieces in my hands. That they were just tools being used in some unknown plan by some higher will, some higher intellect. I'll tell you, friends, that sense, that sort of suspicion has embittered every day of my life. The sense that there could be someone over us who surveys the universe and our position in it with a clear

mind, who could know all sorts of things about us—maybe even the hour of our death—that are mercilessly veiled from our intellect. Who could have his own particular designs for us, who perhaps uses us for his experiments, who toys with us, with our fates and our lives, while we, the puppets in his hands, celebrate and rejoice, imagining that we actually shape our own happiness. Why is it that higher intellects are always the ones so hopelessly dogged about discovering the secrets of natural phenomena? Why is it that wise men are always so passionately committed to science and racking their brains about the universe? Epicurus said that a wise man could enjoy perfect happiness if he didn't have to be afraid of unknown heavenly phenomena and the mystery of death. To subdue or at least explain that fear, he devoted himself to science and the exploration of nature.”

“Very learned,” Abu Ali remarked. “But, if I understood you right, your philosophizing could be abbreviated to this assertion: you're secretly hounded by the fact that you're not Allah.”

Hasan and Buzurg Ummid both laughed.

“Not a bad guess,” Hasan said. He stepped up to the battlements and pointed toward the part of the sky where it was dark, from where a thousand tiny stars intensely shone.

“Look at this limitless vault of heaven! Who can count the stars scattered across it? Aristarchus said that each one of them is a sun. Where is the human intellect that can grasp that? And still, everything is efficiently arranged, as though it were governed by some conscious will. Whether that will is Allah or the blind operation of nature is irrelevant. Against this limitlessness we are ridiculous invalids. I first became aware of my smallness in comparison with the universe when I was ten years old. What haven't I experienced and what hasn't faded since then? Gone is my faith in Allah and the Prophet, gone is the heady spell of first love. Jasmine on a summer night no longer smells as wonderful, and tulips no longer bloom in such vivid colors. Only my amazement at the limitlessness of the universe and my fear of unknown meteorological phenomena have remained the same. The realization that our world is just a grain of dust in the universe, and that we're just some munge, some infinitely tiny lice on it—this realization still fills me with despair.”

Abu Ali leapt up on his bowed legs and began thrashing around as though he were defending himself from invisible opponents.

“Praise be to Allah that he made me modest and spared me those concerns,” he exclaimed half in jest. “I’m more than glad to leave those things to the Batus, the Mamuns and the Abu Mashars.”

“Do you think I have any other choice?” Hasan replied with a kind of headstrong irony. “Yes, Protagoras, you were great when you spoke the maxim that man is the measure of all things! What else can we do, after all, but make peace with that double-edged wisdom? Limit ourselves to this clod of dirt and water that we live on and leave the expanses of the universe to superhuman intellects. Our domain, the place suited to our intellect and will, is down here, on this poor, little planet. ‘Man is the measure of all things.’ The louse has suddenly become a factor worthy of respect! All we need to do is to impose some limits. Exclude the universe from our field of vision and be content with the terra firma we stand on. When I grasped that intellectually—do you see, friends—I threw myself into reordering things in myself and around myself with all my might. The universe was like a huge, blank map for me. In the middle of it was a gray spot, our planet. In that spot was an infinitely tiny black dot, me, my consciousness. The only thing I know for sure. I renounced the white space. I had to delve into the gray spot, measure its size and count its numbers, and then ... then gain power over it, begin to control it according to my reason, my will. Because it’s a horrible thing for someone who’s competed with Allah to end up on the bottom.”

“Now at last I understand you, ibn Sabbah!” Abu Ali exclaimed, not without some playfulness. “You want to be the same thing on earth that Allah is in heaven.”

“Praise be to Allah! At last a light has gone on in your head too,” Hasan laughed. “And high time. I was beginning to wonder whom I was going to leave my legacy to.”

“But you did finally fill in the blank space on the map,” Abu Ali said. “Where would you have found a place for your paradise otherwise?”

“You see, the difference between those of us who have seen through things and the vast masses stumbling through the dark is this: we’ve limited ourselves, while they refuse to limit themselves. They want us to get rid of the blank space of the unknown for them. They can’t tolerate any uncertainty. But since we don’t have any truth, we have to comfort them with fairy tales and fabrications.”

“The fairy tale down there is developing fast,” said Buzurg Ummid,

who had been looking into the gardens from the battlements when he caught their last words. "The second youth is awake now and the girls are dancing a circle dance around him."

"Let's have a look," Hasan said, and went with Abu Ali to join him.

The girls watched with bated breath as Zuleika uncovered the sleeping Yusuf. He was so tall that when the eunuchs were bringing him in, his feet had stuck out over the end of the litter. Now his powerful body appeared as the blanket was removed.

"What a giant! He could hide you under his arm, Jada," Zofana whispered, to gather more courage.

"You wouldn't have that much to boast about around him yourself," Rokaya said, cutting her off.

In the meantime Zuleika had knelt down beside him and was studying him raptly.

"What do you suppose he'll do when he wakes up?" Little Fatima worried. She covered her eyes with her hands, as though she were trying to avoid an unknown danger. She was among the most timid of the girls, and to distinguish her from the first Fatima they called her Little Fatima.

"He'll gobble you up," Habiba teased her.

"Don't scare her. She's skittish enough as it is."

Rokaya laughed.

But Yusuf kept on sleeping. He merely turned his back on the light that was glaring in his eyes.

Zuleika got up and joined the girls.

"He's as fast asleep as if he were unconscious," she said. "But isn't he a splendid hero? Let's sing and dance for him, so that he'll be pleased when he wakes up."

Each girl picked up her instrument. They began playing and singing softly. Zuleika and Rokaya reached for the drums and tried dancing a leisurely step.

Jada and Little Fatima were still trembling with fear.

"Why don't you two sing?" Zuleika asked angrily. "Do you think I don't see you're just moving your lips?"

"This is what Suhrab, the son of Rustam, must have been like," Asma commented.

“Don’t tell me you see yourself as the lovely Gurdafarid?”

Zuleika laughed.

“Don’t laugh, Zuleika. You’re no Gurdafarid yourself.”

In response, Zuleika began writhing and provocatively displaying her charms.

“Look, Zuleika has already started trying to seduce him,” Asma laughed. “But her hero is asleep and doesn’t notice her.”

“Just like Yusuf of Egypt, who didn’t care for Potiphar’s Zuleika!” Rokaya exclaimed.

“That’s right! Yusuf and Zuleika! How perfect it is.”

Jada was delighted at this discovery.

“Let’s write a song for them,” she suggested.

They set their instruments down and put their heads together. They began crafting verses. Eventually there was a fight, and Zuleika intervened.

Then Yusuf raised himself up on his arms and looked around. Suddenly he began laughing heartily.

The girls shrieked in terror.

“Oh, no! We’ve been discovered! He’s heard everything!”

Zuleika grabbed her head and stared at the girls in despair.

Yusuf shuddered, shook his head, closed his eyes, and then opened them again. Then he began staring at the girls with an expression of utter amazement.

“Allah is great! This isn’t a dream!”

At this point Zuleika found her bearings. Gently swaying, she approached and sat down on the pillows beside him.

“Of course it’s not a dream, Yusuf. You’ve come to paradise. We’re the houris who have been waiting for you.”

Yusuf touched her cautiously. He got up, walked around the pool, and with an uncertain look examined the girls, who followed him with their eyes. When he got back to Zuleika, he exclaimed, half to himself, “By all the martyrs! Sayyiduna was right. And I didn’t believe him!”

Then he slumped down onto his cot. He felt weak and had a bitter taste in his mouth.

“Where are Suleiman and ibn Tahir?”

“Also in paradise, just like you.”

“I’m thirsty.”

“Bring him some milk,” Zuleika ordered.

He emptied a dishful of it.

“Do you feel better now, you weary traveler?”

“I feel better.”

“What were you laughing at when you woke up?”

Yusuf tried to think back. Suddenly he was overcome with laughter again.

“Oh, nothing. Just some stupid dream.”

“We’d like to hear about it.”

“You’ll laugh at me. Sayyiduna gave me this little ball, and suddenly I felt I was flying upward. If I thought about it, I realized I was still lying in the same place. Oh, by the seven prophets! How did I get here then? I couldn’t have really been flying, could I?”

“Of course you were flying, Yusuf. We saw you float through the air and into our home.”

“All-merciful Allah! Is that true? Wait, let me tell you what I dreamed after that, if I was even dreaming at all. You see, I’m flying over these vast landscapes and I come to a huge desert. Beneath me in the sand I catch sight of the shadow of a hawk that’s moving just like me. ‘A bird of prey is hunting you, Yusuf,’ I say to myself. I look up, I look down, then left and right. No trace of a bird. I wave with my left arm, I wave with my right. The shadow beneath me repeats the same movements with its wings. (I have to tell you that as a boy tending my father’s herd, I often saw shadows like that sweep over the ground. The animals would get scared and run away from them. So I know something about these things.) ‘You can’t have changed into an eagle, Yusuf?’ I think. Then I’m above a huge city. I’ve never seen anything like it. Palaces like mountains, with squares, mosques with different-colored cupolas, minarets and towers like an army of lances. ‘Could this be Baghdad or even Cairo down there?’ I say to myself. I come flying over a huge bazaar. Lots of commotion coming from down there. I come to a stop in front of a tall, slender minaret. Some caliph or other is standing on it, shouting and endlessly waving his arms. It seems like he’s hailing someone and bowing to him. The minaret bows down with him. I look around to see who the bowing is for. But I don’t see anyone. ‘Now there, Yusuf,’ I say to myself. ‘You’ve come pretty far up to have caliphs and minarets bowing to you.’ Then I realize that the caliph is Sayyiduna. I’m

terror-struck. I look around for a way to escape. But Sayyiduna jumps from the top of the minaret like a monkey and starts dancing strangely on one leg. He's surrounded by flute players, like the ones who come from India and tame snakes, and Sayyiduna begins to twist in a circle to their music like a madman. What can I do? I start laughing out loud. Then I see all of you around me. Really, really strange! Reality outdid my dream."

The girls laughed.

"That really was an odd dream," Zuleika said. "It accompanied you as invisible wings brought you to us."

Then he noticed the tables on which food had been set out. He felt ravenous. He inhaled the smell of the food and his eyes sparkled.

"Would you like to eat?" Zuleika asked. "It's written that you have to wash first. Look, water, nice and warm, all ready for you."

She kneeled down beside him and began undoing his sandals. The others tried to remove his robe. He resisted.

"Don't resist, Yusuf," Zuleika said. "You're in paradise, and everything we do here is decent."

She took him by the hand and drew him along after her toward the pool. He threw aside the cloth he had wrapped around his hips and slipped into the water. Zuleika unwound her veils and followed him. She removed the fez from his head and handed it to her companions for safekeeping. She helped him wash and splashed him in fun.

After he stepped out of the pool and dried himself with a towel, they offered the food to him. He attacked the many delicacies, devouring everything within arm's reach. "Allah is great," he said. "Now I know I really am in paradise."

They offered him wine.

"Didn't the Prophet forbid it?"

"Don't you know the Koran says that Allah permits it in paradise? It won't go to your head."

Zuleika compelled him to drink. He was very thirsty and emptied a full jug in one draught.

He stretched back onto the pillows, feeling pleasantly tipsy. Zuleika snuggled up to him and placed his head in her lap.

"Boy, if only Suleiman and ibn Tahir could see me now!"

He felt like a god. He couldn't resist starting to tell them about his

heroic exploits of that morning. Rokaya kneeled in front of him and continued to serve him food and wine. When he had finished, the girls picked up their instruments and began playing and singing the song they had just composed. Yusuf listened to them. His heart melted with tenderness and swelled with pride.

SONG OF YUSUF AND ZULEIKA

Zuleika's body is taut and tumescent,
Like a bow in a hunter's hand, ready to shoot.
Whose heart should Zuleika aim at?
Let's make it this hero's, Yusuf by name.

Our Zuleika is a heavenly maiden
Made for your pleasure, to grace Allah's world.
She's the loveliest one of us, do you hear, Yusuf?
For the Turks you were man enough, are you for her?

Be careful, don't be like Yusuf of Egypt,
Cruel and hard, don't shatter her heart.
Our Zuleika is no other man's woman—
She's meant just for you, she's yours from the start.

There are no dark eyes as alluring as Zuleika's,
No breasts are so fair, no skin so like silk.
Her lips are the petals of a blossoming tulip,
And her embrace offers joys at your will.

Zuleika wrapped her arms around Yusuf's neck and drew his head close to hers. Gently, caressingly, she kissed him on the lips.

His head spun with delight. Before he knew it, she had risen again and given the girls a signal. They reached for their instruments and began playing a dance melody.

She raised her arms so that her breasts became taut, and she began bending at the waist. At first she danced lightly, barely moving, solemnly and with great dignity. Yusuf watched her with aching eyes. He was overcome with a languorousness that made it impossible for him to think. All he saw was the beautiful body twisting and dancing before

him.

“Allah is great,” he whispered to himself.

Zuleika’s dance became more and more animated and expressive. She gyrated her waist faster and faster, undulating from top to bottom like a waterfall, with artful quivers animating each of her limbs in succession. Finally she began spinning wildly around her axis, ten times, twenty times, and then, like an arrow out of a bow, she went flying into Yusuf’s arms. Instinctively he embraced her, pressed close to her, and forgot about the rest of the world. Rokaya approached the pair on tiptoe and spread a coverlet over them.

A while later, when Yusuf awoke from a pleasant slumber, he was again amazed. In his half-sleep he had become afraid that he would be back at Alamut when he woke up, and that it would turn out he had just dreamt everything. But now, not far away from himself, he saw the seven girls surrounding Zuleika. In itself, paradise didn’t seem all that mysterious to him. He felt rather comfortable around these girls, so that it was a real pleasure to be with them. Their beautiful limbs shone white through their veils. He saw Zuleika’s taut breasts, and he felt a dull twinge of desire. His face flushed red, and the recollection of the moments of pleasure made his thoughts spin.

“Will anyone in the fortress ever believe me when I tell them about all this?” he wondered.

Meanwhile, the girls were discussing something among themselves. “Now let us have some fun with him,” Rokaya whispered to Zuleika.

“You’ve got no business barging in on my affairs. I’m in charge, and I’ll tell you when I need you.”

“Well, what an egotist! Does she think Sayyiduna sent us here just to watch?”

Rokaya was red with anger.

“Let Zuleika make the decisions,” Jada said, trying to pacify her.

“Be quiet, you little dwarf. She’d like to have him all to herself.”

“Be glad he hasn’t noticed you. Otherwise he’d start doubting he’s really in paradise.”

Zuleika looked down her nose at her.

Rokaya was about to fly into a rage. At that moment they noticed that Yusuf was awake again and watching them. Zuleika’s eyes glinted angrily. They quickly picked up the platters and jugs and began serving

him. She herself got down on one knee beside him and, with the loveliest of smiles, asked him, "Did you rest well, my dearest?"

Instead of responding, he wrapped a heavy arm around her belly and pulled her tightly toward himself. As he did this, though, his eyes slipped over her shoulder to take in the other girls. He noticed Jada and Little Fatima, who were kneeling on pillows up against the wall and half-timidly, half-admiringly staring at him. He winked at them encouragingly and thought, *Nothing wrong with those two turtledoves.*

"What are you looking at, dear?"

Zuleika could sense that his thoughts were elsewhere.

"Out the windows. I just now noticed how light it is out there. I'd like to go have a look at paradise."

"I'll take you, Yusuf."

"Let's take the others along, so they don't get lonely."

He nodded to Jada and Little Fatima.

"Why don't you go with them if you prefer their company. I can wait here."

This almost frightened Yusuf. He could hear a stern accusation in Zuleika's voice.

"Zuleika, that's not what I meant. I just felt sorry about leaving them here alone."

"Be quiet. I can see through that. You've gotten tired of me."

"As the Prophet and the martyrs are my witnesses, I'm not lying."

"You're in paradise and you swear?"

"Why won't you listen to me, Zuleika?"

"Admit it. You like Little Fatima and Jada."

Yusuf didn't know how else to excuse himself.

"All right, let's go, Zuleika. The others can do whatever they want."

The tears gleaming in her eyes were subdued by a victorious smile.

"Follow along behind us. So that you're close by if we need anything."

They left the pavilion.

Yusuf looked at the strange lighting and shook his head.

"Nobody at Alamut is going to believe that I really saw all this with my own eyes."

"Do they have so little trust in you, Yusuf?"

"Don't worry. I'll throw anybody who refuses to believe up against a wall."

They walked on the paths through the fragrant gardens. Yusuf and Zuleika, arm in arm, walked in front, and behind them came the seven other girls.

“What a magical night!” Jada gasped. “It keeps seeming more and more like the real paradise.”

“How do you suppose Yusuf must feel, if he believes it really is!” Rokaya observed.

“Would you believe, if you suddenly woke up in these gardens like he did?” Asma wondered.

“I don’t know. Maybe, if I hadn’t seen anything of the world yet.”

“Our Master is an unusual man. Do you think that Allah really commanded him to create these gardens?”

“Don’t ask questions like that, Asma. He’s a powerful master, maybe even a magician. You have no idea if maybe he isn’t listening to us now.”

“I’m scared, Rokaya.”

Jada clung onto her tightly.

“Sayyiduna said I would spend only this night in paradise. Do you think he’ll send me here again?” Yusuf asked.

Zuleika flinched. How should she answer him?

“I don’t know, Yusuf. I just know that when you leave that world forever, you’ll be our master and we’ll serve you eternally.”

Yusuf felt a strange anxiety. He held onto Zuleika more tightly.

“Are you sorry you’ll have to leave us?”

“Of course I am, Zuleika.”

“Will you think of me?”

“I’ll never forget you.”

They embraced.

A chilly breeze roused them.

They returned to the pavilion.

They began to drink. Yusuf, who had sobered up in the cool air, was soon tipsy again. He had new courage. While Zuleika was busy pouring wine, he drew Jada close and kissed her.

“Will you be mine when I come here for good?”

In response she wrapped her delicate arms around his neck. The wine had given her courage too.

Zuleika looked back at them. Her eyes flashed angrily.

Jada pulled away from Yusuf and timidly crept away.

Yusuf began laughing. Red with embarrassment, he went over to Zuleika and whispered to her.

“Didn’t you see, I was just joking?”

“Don’t lie to me. It’s just good I’ve found out who you are in time.”

He tried to embrace her.

“Leave me alone! Go, follow your heart.”

She turned her back on him. Then through the glass she saw Apama’s face looking at her threateningly. Another instant and she was gone.

But Zuleika was suddenly sober.

“Oh, Yusuf, Yusuf! Don’t you realize I was just teasing you? You’re master over me and all of us.”

She took him by the hand and gently led him over to the girls.

“You reign here and can choose as you wish.”

They gave him more to drink, and his heart melted with pride and delight. Now he really was a true ruler, master over the souls and bodies of these seven girls, owner of magnificent gardens and a fabulous pavilion. Only here and there through the drunkenness he had a flashing realization that he would have to leave soon. But a new jug of wine helped to drown the sorrow that threatened to overtake him.

The signal reverberated, and Zuleika prepared the drink. Her hand shook as she dropped the ball into the cup. Little Fatima covered her eyes. Jada fought back a sigh. Yusuf drank the wine, oblivious to everything. Soon he dropped back onto the pillows and fell fast asleep. The girls covered him. A chill blew over him, as though the sun had been blotted out.

“Actually, it’s still not clear to me,” Abu Ali said atop the tower, “what benefit you’re expecting from these ‘ashashin’ if your experiment succeeds tonight. Do you really think you’ll build the strength and power of the institution on them?”

“Absolutely. I’ve scrupulously studied all types of rule known to history. I’ve tried to discern their strengths and weaknesses. No ruler has ever been wholly independent. The chief obstacles to his sway have always been time and space. Alexander of Macedon swooped down on half the world with his armies and subjugated it. But he hadn’t yet

attained the apogee of his potential when death took him. The rulers of Rome expanded their power, generation by generation. They had to conquer every inch of ground by the sword. If space didn't thwart them, it was time that clipped their wings. Mohammed and his heirs settled on a better method. They sent out missionaries to enslave spirits. This way they softened up the resistance, and lands fell into their laps like ripe apples. But wherever the spirit was strong—among the Christians, for instance—their advance broke down. The church in Rome employs an even better system. Its succession isn't dependent on kinship and blood, as it is for the Muslim caliphs, but on nobility of intellect. Only the best mind ascends to the position of leadership. Intellect is also what binds the faithful together in such a strong system. So it appears that the church has overcome the slavery of time. But it's still dependent on space. Wherever its influence doesn't extend, it has no power and it has to make do with that. It has to negotiate and compromise with its opponents and seek out powerful allies.

“I've conceived of an institution that's powerful enough in itself that it won't need any allies. Until now, rulers have fought with each other through their armies. They've also used their armies to conquer new lands and subdue powerful opponents. Thousands of soldiers have fallen for an inch of land. The rulers, however, have rarely had to fear for their own heads, but they are the ones our blows are meant for. Strike the head, and the body will fall. A ruler who fears for his own head is ready to make concessions. So the greatest power would belong to whoever can keep the rulers of the world in fear. But in order for fear to be effective, it has to have a real basis. Rulers are well protected and guarded. Only beings who not only do not fear death, but who passionately desire it can really threaten them in these circumstances. Tonight's experiment is about creating such beings. My plan is to fashion them into my living daggers, able to overcome time and space. They're to spread fear and awe, not among the masses, but among the crowned and anointed heads of the world. Let every potentate who opposes them live in mortal terror.”

There was a long silence on top of the tower. The grand dais didn't dare look at Hasan or each other. Finally, Buzurg Ummid broke the silence.

“Everything you've told us so far, ibn Sabbah, is perfectly clear and

simple on the one hand, yet so unprecedented and horrible on the other, that I almost have to think that this plan couldn't have been concocted in a mind dealing with the actual laws of the known world. I'd sooner ascribe it to one of those grim loners who confuse dreams with reality."

Hasan smiled.

"Apparently you too think I'm a madman, like Abul Fazel once did. But that's only because you're seeing reality from a well-worn path. Indeed, that's the reality of mediocrity. How much more realistic is the person who crafts a plan that's never been tried before—and still realizes it. Take Mohammed, for instance. Everyone in his district of Mecca laughed at him at first when he told them his idea. All they saw in him was a half-crazy dreamer. His ultimate success showed that his calculations were more realistic than the hesitations of all the doubters. I'll submit my plan to the same test."

"All these consequences would be obvious to me, if I could believe that the change you've predicted is really going to take place in the fedayeen," Abu Ali said. "But how can I believe that a living person would ever long for death, no matter how convinced he is that paradise is waiting for him in the beyond?"

"My assumption isn't just founded on my knowledge of the human soul, but also on my knowledge of how the human body functions. I've traveled through more than half the world, either on horseback, or on donkeys or camels, on foot or by boat, and I've gotten to know countless peoples, their ways and traditions. I've experimented with all kinds of human behaviors, and today I can tell you that the entire human organism, spiritual and physical, lies before me like an open book. When the fedayeen wake up again in Alamut, their first feeling will be regret that they're no longer in paradise. They'll be able to mitigate that regret by talking about the experience with their colleagues. In the meantime, the poison of the hashash will be at work in their bodies, awakening an irrepressible desire to enjoy it again. That desire will be inseparable from their assumptions of heavenly bliss. In their mind's eye they'll see their beloved girls and virtually die longing for them. The erotic humors will regenerate in their systems and awaken new passion verging on madness. Eventually this condition will become unbearable. Their fantasies, their stories and visions will infect their surroundings completely. Their churning blood will blot out their reason. They'll no

longer reflect, they'll no longer make judgments, they'll just pine away with desire. We'll provide them with comfort. And when the time comes, we'll give them their assignment and promise them that paradise will be open to them if they carry it out and perish. They'll look for death and they'll die with a blissful smile on their lips ...”

At that moment a eunuch called him from the tower entrance.

“Sayyiduna! Apama asks that you come to the central garden immediately.”

“All right.”

Hasan dismissed him.

When he returned to the platform, he spoke excitedly.

“Apparently something is not right with ibn Tahir. Wait for me here.”

He wrapped his cape more tightly around himself and from his room descended to the base of the tower.

CHAPTER TWELVE

It was deathly quiet in Miriam's pavilion when the eunuchs brought ibn Tahir in. They set him down and then, as silently as evil spirits, went out again with the litter.

Safiya pressed close to Khadija and sank her frightened eyes into the motionless body that lay under the black blanket. The other girls sat around the pool, petrified. Miriam knelt in an elevated area, leaning against her harp. She was staring ahead vacantly.

Her pain had just reintensified. So, Hasan really cared so little for her that he had sent her a lover! O, if she were to betray him without his knowing it, how much more she would love him afterward! Yes, she hated him now, she had to hate him. And along with him she also hated this youth, this blind, naive creature he had delivered into her care this evening. Her beauty and her skill were supposed to seduce him into believing he was in paradise! How thoroughly she despised him!

The body moved under the blanket. The girls held their breath.

"Rikana! Uncover him."

Miriam's voice was cold and firm.

Rikana obeyed her hesitantly. They were amazed when they saw ibn Tahir's face. He seemed to be almost a child still. A first light down had barely begun to grow on his chin. His white fez had slipped off his head. He had a high forehead and thick hair cut short. Long lashes covered his eyes. His red lips pressed lightly together.

"That's ibn Tahir, the poet!" Khadija whispered.

"He's the one who seized the Turks' flag this morning," Sit said.

"He's handsome," Safiya observed.

Now Miriam looked at the sleeping guest. A smile passed over her lips. This is not how she had pictured her victim.

And this business about his being a hero and a poet? It seemed ridiculous to her.

“Why, he’s still a child,” she said to herself.

She felt somewhat relaxed now, after all. The challenge of convincing him he was in heaven began to appeal to her. Actually, the task Hasan had assigned her was fairly interesting. What a strange and wonderful man, that master of hers! His idea was either insane or magnificently horrible. Now he had set the apparatus in motion. She was one of its most important cogs. Wasn’t that a sign of his trust? Wasn’t it just petty vanity that had kept her from understanding him? After all, high drama had always been her passion. Hadn’t Hasan given her the perfect opportunity to get back into it? What did life have to offer her otherwise, except broad farce?

The other girls also felt a weight lift from their shoulders when they saw ibn Tahir’s young face. Even timid Safiya observed, “It won’t be hard convincing him he’s in paradise.”

Miriam drew her fingers over the strings of her harp.

“Start singing and dancing!”

The atmosphere in the pavilion grew relaxed. The girls picked up their instruments and their drums and got ready to dance. It was a delight to watch them free their limbs from their veils. Miriam smiled at them once they were moving and undulating seductively, as though their new guest were already watching them.

“He’s still not going to wake up,” Sit observed in frustration, setting down her drum and little bells.

“Let’s sprinkle some water on him,” Rikana suggested.

“Are you crazy?” Khadija scolded her. “What kind of first impression of paradise would he have then?”

“Keep singing and dancing,” Miriam said. “Let me try to bring him to.”

She knelt down beside him and gazed intently at his face. His features struck her as handsome and aristocratic.

She lightly touched his shoulder with her hand. He twitched. She heard some incoherent muttering. She felt both fear and intense curiosity at the same time. What would he say, what would he do, when he found himself in this strange place?

Softly she called him by name.

He shot up lightning-fast. He opened his eyes wide and looked around confused.

“What is this?”

His voice was shy and trembling.

The girls' singing and dancing came to a halt. Their faces expressed intense strain.

Miriam quickly regained her footing.

"You're in paradise, ibn Tahir."

He looked at her astonished. Then he lay back down.

"I was having a dream," he muttered.

"Did you hear that? He can't believe he's in paradise," Khadija whispered, distraught.

Not a bad start, Miriam thought. Once again she touched him and called his name.

He sat up this time too. His eyes remained fixed on Miriam's face. His lips began to quiver. His eyes expressed amazement verging on terror. He looked at himself, felt himself, and began looking at the room around him. Then he drew a hand across his eyes. His face was as pale as wax.

"This can't be true," he whispered. "This is crazy! This is a trick!"

"Doubting ibn Tahir! Is this how you repay Sayyiduna's trust?"

Miriam looked at him reproachfully, but with a smile.

He stood up and his eyes began darting from object to object. He went up to the wall and touched it. He went up to the pool and dipped a finger in its water. Then he cast a frightened look at the girls and returned to Miriam.

"I don't understand," he said in a trembling voice. "Last night Sayyiduna summoned us and ordered us to swallow some bitter-tasting little balls. I fell asleep and had all kinds of strange dreams. And now I'm suddenly awake in some completely different place. What's that out there?"

"Those are the gardens you know about from the Koran."

"I want to see them."

"I'll take you there. But wouldn't you like to bathe and have something to eat first?"

"There will be plenty of time for that later. First I have to know where I am."

He went to the doorway and drew the curtain aside.

Miriam accompanied him. She took him by the arm and led him through the vestibule. They came outside and paused at the top of the steps.

“What an amazing sight!” he exclaimed when he saw the fabulously illuminated gardens before him. “No, there’s nothing like this at Alamut. And I don’t know a place like it anywhere nearby. I must have been asleep a long time for them to carry me this far away!”

“Aren’t you afraid of being so irreverent, ibn Tahir? Do you still refuse to believe you’re in paradise? Hundreds of thousands of parasangs separate you from your world. And yet, when you reawake at Alamut, just one night will have passed.”

He stared at her. Again he passed his hands over his body.

“So I’m dreaming? It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve sworn that something I was dreaming was for real. I remember how one time, back at my father’s house, I discovered a jug full of gold pieces. ‘I used to just dream that I’d discovered treasure,’ I told myself. ‘But today it’s really happened.’ I poured the gold pieces out of the jug, counted them, and laughed to myself. ‘Praise be to Allah that this time it’s no dream,’ I sighed. Then I woke up. It really had been a dream. You can imagine how disappointed I was. This time I’m not going to be fooled. Though this dream is amazing and very lifelike. But that could be due to Sayyiduna’s pellets. I’d rather not be disappointed when I wake up.”

“Do you think I’m just an image in your dream, ibn Tahir? Wake up, then! Here, look at me, feel me!”

She took his hand and ran it over her whole body.

“Can’t you feel that I’m a living being like you?”

She took his head in her hands and looked deep into his eyes.

He shuddered.

“Who are you?” he asked uncomprehendingly.

“Miriam, a girl of paradise.”

He shook his head. He went down the steps and continued past the dozens of multicolored lanterns with moths and bats darting around them. Unfamiliar plants grew alongside the path, strange flowers and fruit he had never before seen.

“Everything seems enchanted. It’s a regular dreamscape,” he murmured.

Miriam walked at his side.

“So you still haven’t figured it out? You’re not on earth now, you’re in heaven.”

Music and singing came from the pavilion.

He paused and listened.

“Those voices are just like on earth. And you, you have perfectly human traits. It can’t be like this in heaven.”

“Are you really so ignorant of the Koran? Doesn’t it say that in paradise all things will be as they were on earth, so that the faithful will feel they’ve come home? Why are you surprised, if you’re a believer?”

“Why wouldn’t I be surprised? How can a living being, a man of flesh and blood get into heaven?”

“So the Prophet lied?”

“Allah forbid that I even think such a thing.”

“Wasn’t he here during his lifetime? Didn’t he appear before Allah, flesh and blood that he was? Didn’t he ordain that on the day of judgment flesh and blood would be reunited? How do you propose to partake of the food and drink of paradise, or enjoy yourself with the houris, if you don’t have a real mouth and real body?”

“Those things are promised to us only after death.”

“Do you suppose it will be easier for Allah to bring you to paradise when you’re dead?”

“That’s not what I meant. But it’s what has been said.”

“It’s also been said that Allah delivered to Sayyiduna the key to open to the gates to paradise for whomever he wishes. Do you doubt that?”

“What an idiot! I have to keep remembering that I’m just dreaming. But everything, this conversation with you, your appearance, these surroundings are all so vivid that I keep getting fooled. Such a pity it’s not for real!”

What a close game, Miriam thought.

“A pity! So you still don’t believe, ibn Tahir? Your stubbornness amazes me. Come take another good look at me.”

She approached a lantern that had a tiger’s head painted on it, jaws open and eyes gleaming. Ibn Tahir looked first at her, then at the lantern above her head. Suddenly he caught the scent of her perfumed body.

A new, insane thought flashed through him. Somebody must be making fun of him.

“This is a fiendish game!”

His eyes flashed in fierce determination.

“Where is my saber?”

Furiously he grabbed Miriam by the shoulders.

“Admit it, woman! All of this is just a mean trick!”

Pebbles crunched on the path. A heavy, dark body bounded through the air and knocked ibn Tahir to the ground. Mute with fear, he found himself looking into two wild, green eyes above him.

“Ahriman!”

Miriam took hold of the leopard and pulled him off of ibn Tahir.

“Poor thing! Now do you believe? You just about lost your life.”

The animal sat down tamely at Miriam’s feet. Ibn Tahir picked himself up off the ground. Everything was becoming more and more confusing for him. He should have woken up just now from fright, if he were only dreaming. So could it be true? Where was he?

He looked at the girl bending down over the strange, long-legged cat. The animal arched its back, let itself be petted, and purred contentedly.

“There mustn’t be any violence in paradise, ibn Tahir.”

She laughed so sweetly that it coursed through his marrow and into his heart. So what if he was the victim of a trick? So what if he was just dreaming and would eventually have to wake up? What he was experiencing was extraordinary, wonderful, fantastic. Was it really that important for everything around him to be true? He was really experiencing this, and that was the main thing for him now. Maybe he was mistaken about the reality of the objects. As for the reality of his feelings and thoughts, there was no mistaking those.

He looked around. Far off in the background he thought he could see something dark rising high up toward the sky, like some sort of wall.

That was Alamut.

With his hands he shaded his eyes against the light and looked hard.

“What’s that back there, rising up into the sky like some wall?”

“That’s the wall of al-Araf, which divides paradise from hell.”

“Absolutely amazing,” he whispered. “Just now I thought I saw a shadow moving on top of it.”

“Probably one of those heroes who perished for the one true faith with a weapon in hand, fighting against the will of their parents. Now they gaze longingly into our gardens. They can’t come here because they violated the fourth commandment of Allah. They don’t belong in hell because they died as martyrs. So they’re made to look in both directions. We enjoy, they observe.”

“Then where is the throne of Allah, and the All-Merciful with the

prophets and martyrs?”

“Don’t expect paradise to be like some earthly landscape, ibn Tahir. It’s boundless in its extent. It begins here, beneath Araf, and then stretches onward through the eight infinite regions to the last and most exalted realm. That’s where the throne of Allah is. The Prophet and Sayyiduna are the only mortals who have been allowed there. This initial section is designated for ordinary elected ones like yourself.”

“Where are Yusuf and Suleiman?”

“They’re also at the foot of Araf. But their gardens are far away from here. Tomorrow back at Alamut the three of you can tell each other where you’ve been and what each of you experienced.”

“Sure, if my impatience doesn’t get to me first.”

Miriam smiled.

“If your curiosity gets too much for you, just ask.”

“First of all tell me how you know so much.”

“Each of the houris was created in a particular way and for particular purposes. Allah gave me knowledge to satisfy a true believer with a passion for knowing.”

“I’m dreaming, I’m dreaming,” ibn Tahir muttered. “That’s the only explanation. And yet no reality could be more vivid than this dream. There’s a perfect consistency to everything I see and everything this beautiful apparition tells me. That’s the difference between this and ordinary dreams, where everything is disjointed and usually vague. All of this must be the work of some incredible skill of Sayyiduna’s.”

Miriam listened intently to what he was muttering.

“You’re so incorrigible, ibn Tahir! Can you really think that your paltry intellect has embraced all the mysteries of the universe? There are so many more things that are veiled from your eyes! But let’s leave the disputations behind for now. It’s time for us to rejoin the houris, who I’m sure are longing to see their dear guest again.”

She released Ahriman and sent him bounding off into the bushes. She took ibn Tahir by the hand and led him toward the pavilion.

At the foot of the steps she heard a soft whistle. She started. Apama must have been listening in and wanted to talk to her now. She led ibn Tahir into the central hall and gently pushed him toward the girls.

“Here he is,” she called out.

Then she quickly ran back through the vestibule.

At the far end of it Apama was waiting.

“Apparently you’re keen on losing your head!”

She greeted her with these words.

“So is this how you carry out Sayyiduna’s orders? Instead of getting the boy drunk and confused, you engage in discussions of Allah and paradise with him while he’s still perfectly sober.”

“I have my own mind and can judge for myself what’s best.”

“Is that so? You plan to seduce a man with those things? Haven’t you learned anything from me? What use are your red lips and white limbs, then?”

“It would be best if you disappeared, Apama. He might see you, and then his last shred of faith that he’s in paradise will evaporate.”

Apama would have liked to rip her apart with her eyes.

“Slut! You’re gambling with your life. It’s my duty to tell Sayyiduna. You just wait!”

She disappeared into the bushes, while Miriam hurriedly returned to the central hall.

While she and ibn Tahir had been out, the girls had gotten slightly tipsy. They danced and sang, and were in an animated and playful mood. They drew ibn Tahir in amongst themselves, surrounding him and pushing food and drink on him.

When Miriam came in, they fell silent for a moment. They noticed the displeasure on her face and were afraid that they might have caused it.

Miriam hurried to comfort them.

“Our guest must first wash off his earthly fatigue. Be at his service and help him bathe.”

Ibn Tahir shook his head firmly.

“I won’t bathe with women around.”

“You are our master and we will do as you command.”

Miriam called the girls and left the hall with them. When ibn Tahir was convinced no one could see him, he dashed over to the beds, grabbed the pillows, inspected them, and felt under them. Then he went over to the tables set with food and picked up one piece of fruit after another, feeling and sniffing them. A number of them he didn’t know at all. He searched his memory to see if he hadn’t heard descriptions of them. From the food he went to the carpets hanging on the walls and looked to see what was behind them. He found nothing that could

provide him with any indication of the land he was in. He felt unwonted apprehensions coming over him.

He asked himself if perhaps he really was in paradise. All of his surroundings seemed alien and unfamiliar. No, a lush valley like this with gardens full of exotic flowers and strange fruit couldn't exist amidst his barren uplands. Was this really still the same night he had been summoned before the supreme commander? If it was, then the only possibilities were that he was the victim of some incredible trick and Sayyiduna's pellet had conjured these false dreams, or that everything truly was as Ismaili doctrine taught, and Sayyiduna really had the power to send anyone he wanted to paradise.

Confused and divided, he took off his robe and slid into the pool.

The water was pleasantly warm. He stretched out on the bottom and yielded to its lazy pleasure. He didn't feel like getting out of the pool, though he knew the girls could come back any minute.

Soon the curtain over the entrance was drawn aside and one of the girls looked through the opening. When she saw that ibn Tahir wasn't frightened and was smiling at her, she went in.

The others followed her.

Rikana said, "Finally ibn Tahir has realized he's master here."

"Just say whenever you're ready to get out and we'll give you a towel."

They vied with each other to do him favors.

But when Miriam entered, his awkwardness returned. He asked for a towel and his clothes.

Instead of his robe they offered him a splendid coat of heavy brocade. He put it on and belted it. He looked at himself in a mirror. This is what princes looked like in old pictures. He smiled. He couldn't resist feeling that he had undergone a change.

He stretched out on some pillows and an all-out banquet began. The girls served him, one after the other. Miriam gave him wine to drink. She couldn't shake off some strange, relaxed lightheartedness that progressively overwhelmed her. While each glass she drank before ibn Tahir's arrival had made her more sober, now she suddenly felt the pleasant effects of the wine. She felt like having a good talk and having a good laugh.

"You're a poet, ibn Tahir," she said with a charming smile. "Don't

deny it, we know. Let's hear one of your poems."

"Who made you believe that?" ibn Tahir blushed as red as scarlet. "I'm not a poet, so I have nothing to offer you."

"Would you rather hide? Isn't that false modesty? We're waiting."

"It's not worth talking about. They were just exercises."

"Are you afraid of us? We're a quiet and appreciative audience."

Khadija asked, "Are your poems love poems?"

"How can you ask something like that, Khadija?" Miriam contradicted her. "Ibn Tahir is a warrior for the true doctrine and is in service to the new prophet."

"Miriam is right. How can I write poems on a subject I know nothing about?"

The girls grinned. They were pleased to have such an inexperienced youth in their midst.

Ibn Tahir looked at Miriam. A sweet terror came over him. He recalled the previous evening, the evening before the battle, when he lay in the open air outside of Alamut, gazing at the stars. A far-off longing for some unknown thing had taken hold of him then. He was tender and sensitive, and he loved his companions, especially Suleiman, whom he saw as a model of human beauty. Didn't he have an intimation even then that he would soon encounter another face even more beautiful, more perfect than his? At least at that instant, when he looked into Miriam's eyes, he felt as though he had been waiting precisely for her and nobody else. How heavenly everything about her was! Her finely arched white brow, her straight nose, her full red lips, whose curve had an ineffable charm, her large, doe-like eyes, which gazed at him so intelligently, so omnisciently: wasn't this image the perfect incarnation of some idea he had always carried inside himself? What power must be inside those pellets of Sayyiduna's, that they could animate his imagination and reconstruct it outside of him as this fabulous creature? Whether he was dreaming, or whether he was in heaven or in hell, he sensed he was on the way to some gigantic yet unknown bliss.

"We're waiting, ibn Tahir."

"Fine. I'll recite several poems for you."

The girls arranged themselves comfortably around him, as though in anticipation of a special treat. Miriam lay on her stomach and leaned against him, her breasts grazing him lightly. His head began spinning

with a strange, aching sweetness. He lowered his eyes. In a quiet, unsure voice he began reciting his poem about Alamut.

But soon an intense fervor came over him. Indeed, the words of his poem struck him as impoverished and empty, but his voice gave them a completely different meaning, something of what he was feeling inside.

After "Alamut" he recited the poems about Ali and Sayyiduna.

The girls understood the hidden feelings that his voice conveyed. How clearly Miriam sensed that he was speaking to her and about her! With no resistance she yielded to enjoyment of the knowledge that she was loved, and loved perhaps as never before. An enigmatic smile arched her lips. She listened intently within herself. The words ibn Tahir was speaking reached her as though over a great distance. She started only at the poem about Sayyiduna. If only he knew!

"All of it is worthless!" he exclaimed when he finished. "It's miserable, totally empty. I feel hopeless. I want to drink. Pour me some wine!"

They reassured him and praised him.

"No! No, I know too well. Those aren't poems. Poems have to be completely different."

He looked at Miriam. She was smiling at him, a smile that struck him as unfathomable. That's how a poem should be, he suddenly realized. Yes, that's how a real poem ought to be! Everything he had admired and loved until now had just been a substitute for her, the one he had gotten to know tonight.

In delectable horror he realized that he was in love for the first time, and that this love was vast and deep.

Suddenly he became aware that they weren't alone. The presence of the other girls began to bother him. Oh, if they were alone now, as they had been earlier, he wouldn't bother asking a hundred irrelevant questions! Now he'd take her by the hand and look into her eyes. He would tell her about himself, about his feelings, about his love. What difference would the nature of the gardens they were walking in make to him now! Whether they were the figment of a dream or reality, he didn't care. What mattered was that his feelings for this heavenly apparition were as real as life. Hadn't the Prophet said that life in this world was just a shackled image of the beyond? But what he was feeling now, and what had given rise to that feeling, couldn't be the shackled image of something unknown. It was itself exalted. It was perfect in its own right.

But perhaps his body was still lying in the dark room at the top of Sayyiduna's tower. And a fragment of his self had split away from his soul and was now enjoying all this luxury. One way or the other, Miriam's beauty was reality and so were his feelings for her.

He took her by the hand, by her delicate, rosy, wonderfully shaped hand, and pressed it to his forehead.

"How hot your forehead is, ibn Tahir!"

"I'm burning," he whispered.

He looked at her with glowing eyes.

"I'm all aflame."

So much passion! Miriam thought. Her heart was moved. *Will I catch fire too, around so much ardor?*

He began to kiss her hand. Hotly, unthinkingly. He took hold of the other and began kissing them both.

She looked over his head. Her eyes seemed absorbed in thought. *This is how Mohammed loved me when he carried me off from Moses's. Only he was more mature, wilder.* She felt stung by the thought. *Why do all the best things come too late?*

The girls were crestfallen when they saw that ibn Tahir wasn't paying any attention to them. They grew quieter, talking in whispers, and they felt more and more awkward around the enraptured couple.

At last ibn Tahir whispered to Miriam.

"I'd like for us to be alone."

She went over to the girls and asked them to go to their rooms and entertain themselves there.

They obeyed her. Some of them were hurt.

"You want to have everything for yourself," Rikana said softly. "What will Sayyiduna say when he hears you've fallen in love with another?"

Miriam just smiled playfully.

"Girls, we'll take the wine with us! We'll be the only ones having fun, if that's how it has to be."

Taviba made peace with fate. Miriam could sense her power, and so didn't take offense. She gave each one of them a kind look, and she gently hugged Safiya.

"We'll compose a song about how you've fallen in love," Sit threatened. "When we come back we'll sing it so he can hear."

"Go ahead, compose it and sing it."

She dismissed them and returned to ibn Tahir.

He was feeling awkward, and this carried over to her too. She poured wine into both their cups and toasted him.

They gazed into each other's eyes.

"You were going to tell me something, ibn Tahir."

"Every word is too pale to express what I feel now. I feel as though I've undergone an illumination. I've understood so many things in this short time! Do you know the story of Farhad and the princess Shirin? Since I first saw you, I've felt that we've already met somewhere before. Now I've finally figured it out. You're how I've always imagined the princess Shirin. Except that the image in front of me now is far more perfect. Don't smile at this, Miriam. As Allah is in heaven, now I understand poor Farhad. To look at so much beauty every day, and then be separated from it forever! Wasn't that a punishment from hell? Farhad couldn't help but go mad. He couldn't help but carve the image he'd constantly had before him out of the living rock. Allah, how horrible his pain must have been! For there can't be anything more terrible than to be aware every day of the loss of such limitless happiness that will never come again."

Her eyes were lowered. She was half kneeling, half leaning on the pillows. Her body shone through her veils like a marble statue. The oval shape of her face, her arms and legs, her size, everything was in such wonderful proportion. He stared at her, mesmerized. He felt as reverent as before a sacrament. His soul was shaken by so much perfection. He moaned with delectable pain. Suddenly he noticed tears dropping on his hands.

Miriam was frightened.

"What's the matter with you, ibn Tahir?"

"You're too beautiful. I can't bear your beauty. I'm too weak."

"You crazy, silly boy!"

"Yes, I'm crazy, I'm insane. This instant Sayyiduna and the martyr Ali mean as much to me as the emperor of China. I could dislodge Allah from his throne and put you in his place."

"You really have gone mad! Those are blasphemous words. You're in paradise!"

"I don't care. Let me be in heaven or in hell. As long as you're with me, my Shirin, my heavenly Shirin."

She smiled.

“You mistake me for another. I’m not Shirin. I’m Miriam, a girl of paradise.”

“You’re Shirin. Shirin. And I’m Farhad, doomed to be separated from you and go mad with the pain.”

What fiendish wisdom to send this passionate boy precisely to her! Indeed. Ibn Sabbah was the horrible dreamer from hell.

Her decision was quick. She wrapped her arms around ibn Tahir’s neck and brought her face close to his. She looked deep into his eyes from close up. His entire body began to shake. A weakness overcame him, as though his body were too fragile a vessel for the violent passion overtaking it.

She kissed him on the lips.

He didn’t move. He didn’t embrace her. Slowly he began to lose consciousness. The summit of bliss was approaching.

During this time the girls had crowded together in one of the bedrooms. They threw some pillows down on the floor and spread out comfortably on them. They poured themselves full cups of wine and began drinking in earnest. They grew more and more boisterous. They began to sing, then they bickered, and made peace again, kissing and hugging each other.

This was the mood that Apama found them in. At first she cautiously lifted the curtain. But when she was convinced there was no danger of intruding on their guest, she walked in noisily.

“Where have you got the visitor? Where is Miriam?”

She was shaking in anger and agitation.

“They’re in the room alone.”

“Is this how you carry out Sayyiduna’s orders? This will mean your heads! The woman could be giving away secrets to that boy this very minute, and you sit here whinnying like a bunch of fillies!”

Some of them burst out in tears.

“Miriam ordered us to leave them alone.”

“Go back to them this minute! Throw yourselves at the boy and try to get out of him how many of our secrets the slut has revealed to him. One of you come report back to me. I’ll be waiting behind the white rose

bush to the left of the pool.”

When they entered the central hall, they were greeted by a strange sight. Ibn Tahir lay motionless and pale like a corpse. Only a blissful smile played across his lips. Miriam was bent over him, gazing intently into his face. Slowly she turned her eyes from him and caught sight of the companions. She could tell from their timidity that something must have happened. She got up and went over to them.

“Apama?” she asked.

They nodded. She shrugged indifferently.

“Did you compose a song?”

“We did.”

Ibn Tahir had woken up. He rubbed the drowsiness from his eyes and looked around serenely.

“With your permission, we’ll sing for you.”

“A song? It would be a pleasure.”

Ibn Tahir was visibly cheered.

They lifted their harps and bells and began boldly singing.

Among the maidens in paradise
Was one named Miriam.
She had been fashioned for love’s delights
Like no single other one.

Her skin was as pale as milk,
Exuding the scent of a rose.
Framed by dark tresses, like a
Golden moon, her face would glow.

With dark eyes and luscious lips,
Full and red as a poppy,
Slender arms and lissome legs,
And a bearing as grand as a queen’s.

But of all the maidens Allah
Singled her out especially.
For as fair of face and limb as she was,
More astounding was her acuity.

She was familiar with all of the mysteries
That fill both heaven and earth.
She was keen on the sciences, fond of the arts,
And found in them the highest worth.

And how does this maiden fare tonight,
The princess of knowledge and wit?
She seems to have been taken by surprise,
And there's a curious blush on her cheek.

Of course the rest of us know
What's happened here, what's gone awry.
Her Pahlavan has laid her low,
He's stolen her heart on the sly.

And now this princess, this Miriam of ours,
As much as she may show reserve,
Is head over heels, inside and out
In love with this hero of hers.

Meanwhile Apama had sent for Hasan. Adi waited for him and ferried him down the canal to a concealed location.

"Why did you call for me?" he asked irritably.

"Don't be angry, master. Everything is going fine, except in this garden. Either Miriam doesn't know, or doesn't want to know, how to overwhelm an unfledged boy."

She relayed what she had heard and observed.

"It appears to me Miriam has chosen the right approach. Ibn Tahir is quite different from the other youths. Is that all you called me here for?"

"Chosen the right approach? You say that to me, when you know that there wasn't a man who could resist me? So I'm a bungler, and Miriam is the artist?"

Hasan suppressed a smile.

"Why bicker? Miriam just has different views about these things."

"She has views? Merciful heavens! And where would she have gotten them? From her old Jew, maybe? Or from that desert wild man?"

"What if she has them from me?"

“You’re trying to humiliate me. Just remember, I have a sense she’s going to betray you to the boy. She’s fallen in love with him.”

Due to the darkness she didn’t notice the flush that suffused Hasan’s face. But she did sense that she had touched a sore spot.

“They’re kissing and cooing like doves. He’s a poet, you know, and that never fails to have an effect on a woman’s heart. From now on she’s going to worry about him. She intentionally sent the girls out of the room so she could be alone with him. She’s going to warn him to be careful.”

The ground crunched under footsteps. Adi had brought Rikana. She shuddered when she saw Hasan next to Apama.

“Don’t be afraid. What are the two of them doing now?”

“It looks like ibn Tahir has fallen in love.”

“And Miriam?”

Rikana lowered her eyes.

“I don’t know.”

“I’d like to speak with her,” Hasan said.

Rikana looked at Apama, perplexed.

“What are you shilly-shallying about?” he asked.

“How am I supposed to tell her? And what if ibn Tahir goes with her?”

“She has to come. She’ll find an excuse.”

She bowed and dashed off. When she came in, Miriam quietly confronted her.

“Did you see Apama?”

“Yes. And Sayyiduna is down by the water. He’s waiting for you. Think up an excuse to tell ibn Tahir and go see him.”

Miriam went back to ibn Tahir.

“Do you really love me?”

“You doubt it?”

“Prove it. Write me a poem.”

Ibn Tahir panicked.

“How is a wretch like me supposed to compose something worthy of you? Miriam, don’t put me to shame.”

“If you love me, write a poem.”

“How could I? With you around ...?”

“Don’t worry. I won’t get in your way. I’m going out to the gardens to pick you some flowers. In the meantime, you write a poem about your

love.”

She turned to face the girls.

“You stay here with him and play him some music.”

As she left, she whispered to Rikana.

“Don’t let him out of the hall. You’re all responsible.”

With her coat on, she hurried into the gardens.

Near the boats she caught sight of Hasan. He took firm hold of her hand.

“Does he believe he’s in paradise?”

“He’s in love, so he believes he’s in paradise.”

“That’s not an answer. You look different to me somehow. You know there will be no mercy if the boy doesn’t prove himself.”

“I guarantee he will. Now tell Apama to stop lurking around like a ghost and interfering with my work.”

“It would be better if you’d kept cool. Be careful you don’t lose control of the reins.”

Had she heard right? Hasan felt hurt? So he did care about her, after all.

“Don’t worry, ibn Sabbah. I have the reins firmly in hand.”

“I expected no less. How did you excuse yourself when you left?”

“I gave him an assignment. I told him to write me a poem.”

He took her by the arm and led her a few paces away from the shore.

“Do you think he’s fallen very much in love?”

“Absolutely.”

“And you?”

“Does that matter to you?”

“Probably not. Otherwise I wouldn’t have asked.”

“Ibn Tahir is a gifted youth. But he has a long way to go before he’s a man.”

“Go back now and put him to sleep as soon as possible.”

She couldn’t help giggling slightly.

He kissed her on the forehead and rejoined Apama.

“It looks like the master is jealous.”

“Maybe. In any case, less jealous than Apama is.”

He waved to her as they parted and then ordered Adi to ferry him back to the castle.

“When I’m back in the tower, I’ll give a sign to the trumpeters. There’s

been enough excitement for tonight.”

Something was weighing down on his heart. He remembered Omar Khayyam, lying amidst his pillows in Nishapur and drinking wine, a beautiful girl serving him while he writes poems and laughs at the whole world. He was free to contemplate and perceive. To enjoy perfect tranquility. At this instant he envied him.

“Yes, he drew the best lot of the three of us.”

The girls noticed that Miriam had returned smiling. She brought in a whole armful of flowers and strewed them around ibn Tahir, who was leaning over a tablet covered with writing. They immediately felt relieved.

“Did you write the poem?”

“I tried, at least.”

“He already read us some of it,” Sit said. “Your head will spin.”

“I’m dying of curiosity.”

She picked up a pellet and held it firmly in her fist. She dropped to her knees beside ibn Tahir. She leaned up against him, looking over his shoulder at the tablet. She imperceptibly dropped the pellet into his cup.

He read:

Oh, how could I, like some new Farhad,
Sense how fast, how fast love comes.
How could I guess
How strong its power is,
That it could dwarf my feelings for
the Prophet and Sayyiduna,
And for the martyr Ali,
Who till now was closest to my heart.

Allah, who sees into our soul,
Who fashioned Miriam more beautiful than Shirin,
Who sees and knows and understands us all:
What should I do now,

That love has overwhelmed my heart so,
That all I see and hear and feel is her,

The one you've placed in heaven—
Miriam, dearest, soulmate of my soul?
Allah, please, reveal if everything that fills my heart
And soul is just some test.
Will I then like Adam, father of us all,
Be expelled from heaven too?
Perhaps you wanted me to see the prize
In store for when I set my sword aside forever.
What should I do to merit
This great bounty now, without delay?

My dearest Miriam! Till now I've been a blind man.
My heart thrashed with its longing,
My mind stalled with its thoughts.
Now everything is clear.
My heart has found its peace, my mind its goal.
And unimagined bliss enfolds me, Miriam,
When I look into your eyes.

Tears glistened in Miriam's eyes. To hide them, she quickly kissed him. It hurt so much, she could have died.

Poor boy, she thought. So sincere, so good and so young. There's no place in his heart for lies and deception. And I'm the one who has to get him ready to be Hasan's sacrifice.

"What's wrong, Miriam?"

"You're so young and so good."

He smiled and blushed.

He had grown thirsty. He emptied his cup.

Suddenly he felt weak. His head began to spin. New vistas appeared before his eyes. He grabbed his head and fell backwards.

"I'm blind! Allah, I'm blind! Where are you, Miriam! I'm sinking. I'm flying through space."

The girls were frightened. Miriam embraced him.

"I'm here, ibn Tahir. With you."

"I can feel you, Miriam," he said and smiled in exhaustion. "O Allah, everything is changed. I was just dreaming. Allah, I'm flying back the same way. Before I just dreamed I'd arrived in the holy city of Cairo. Do

you hear, Miriam! I entered the caliph's palace. It was dark all around me. Oh, the same darkness is around me now. Hold me tight, Miriam, so I can feel you! It was dark in the great hall. If I looked back toward the doors it was perfectly light again. But when I looked toward the throne, I was blinded. I heard the caliph's voice. It was Sayyiduna's voice. I looked toward him. I was blind. I looked back toward the entrance and the hall was brilliantly illuminated. All-merciful Allah! Such weakness! I can't feel you anymore, Miriam! Give me a sign, bite me, bite me below my heart, hard, so I can feel you, so I know you're still with me."

She drew his coat aside and bit him below the heart. She felt unspeakably miserable.

"Now I can feel you again, Miriam. Oh, what vistas! Look! That city beneath me! Look at that golden cupola and those green and red rooftops! Do you see that azure tower? There's a thousand banners fluttering around it. Nothing but long, colored flags. Oh, how they flap in the wind. Buildings and palaces are flying past me. Oh, how fast! Hold on to me, I beg you, hold on to me!"

He fell over and groaned deeply.

The girls were terrified.

"Misfortune is going to befall us," Sit said.

"It would have been better if we'd leapt into the river," Miriam murmured.

Ibn Tahir was in a deep state of unconsciousness.

"Cover him with his robe!"

They obeyed. Miriam lay back and stared, dry-eyed, at the ceiling. When Abu Ali and Buzurg Ummid had been left alone atop the tower, they looked at each other questioningly. Then they looked out over the battlements for a long time.

Finally Buzurg Ummid asked, "What do you say to all of this?"

"We're in a net from which it's going to be hard to disentangle ourselves."

"I say, 'As Allah is Allah, so ibn Sabbah is insane.' "

"A dangerous companion, at any rate."

"Do you think we should stand by with our arms crossed and just watch? What does a tiger do when he runs into a wolf snare?"

Abu Ali laughed.

"He bites through it."

“Well?”

“So bite through it.”

“Aren’t you afraid he could send the two of us to some paradise like this?”

“If it’s a good one, we won’t resist.”

“We won’t resist even if it’s a bad one.”

He stepped right up to Abu Ali.

“Listen, Abu Ali. Tonight there’s still time. It’s just the three of us on top of this tower.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“May I confide in you?”

“One crow doesn’t attack the other. Better the two of them take on the eagle.”

“Let’s wait at the entrance for when he comes back. I’ll strike him over the head from behind with my sword handle, to knock him out. Then we can throw him over the battlements into Shah Rud.”

“And the faithful?”

“We’ll make them believe he never returned from the gardens.”

“But the eunuchs will know that he did. We won’t get out of here alive.”

“By the time the truth comes out, you and I will already be God knows where.”

“There isn’t a believer who wouldn’t risk his life to avenge him. The net really is drawn around us tight.”

“All action requires risk.”

“It would be less risky for us to wait for the succession.”

“Hasan is insane.”

“Not so insane he couldn’t guess what we’re thinking.”

“Are you afraid?”

“You aren’t?”

“It’s exactly why I’d like to be able to breathe easy again.”

“I know he already senses our thoughts. Keep as quiet as a tomb. The eunuchs are a terrible weapon.”

“The fedayeen could be even worse.”

“All the more reason for us to keep quiet. They’ll be a weapon in our hands, as well as his.”

“You could be right, Abu Ali. Hasan is a fearsome master. There’s no

going back for us. We've been initiated into his secret, and any deviation could mean death."

"Let's just follow nicely in his footsteps."

"Listen! He's coming back. I'll admit, this experiment of his tonight is really unusual."

"More than that. It's extraordinary."

At that moment Hasan came gasping to the top. He cast a quick glance at the grand dais and smiled.

"I hope you haven't been too bored, my friends. You had quite a bit to talk about, and I trust you didn't lose any time."

"We were worried about how things were progressing in the gardens, ibn Sabbah. What did Apama call you for?"

"Feminine jealousy. The old and the new philosophies of love had come into conflict down there. The dangerous question of how best to seduce a man had to be decided."

The grand dais burst into laughter. They felt a pleasant relief. The crisis was over.

"I think you prefer the new theories to the old ones," Abu Ali said.

"What can we do. The world is constantly evolving and we have to give up the old to make way for the new."

"I assume ibn Tahir fell into the grip of the new theory?"

"Well, look at you, Abu Ali. You'll become a great psychologist yet!"

"You're an odd lover, by the beard of the Prophet! If I cared as much for a woman as I do for a torn robe, I'd sooner kill her as let another have her."

"You've already demonstrated that, dear Abu Ali. Which is now why you have neither the old nor the new 'theory.' As far as my case is concerned, you must bear in mind that I'm a philosopher and value above all what's tangible. And that is not going to change in the slightest in one night."

Abu Ali laughed.

"Also a good point," he said. "But I believe that principle holds for you only in matters of love. Didn't somebody say this morning that he planned to build his institution on pure reason?"

"You're after me like a hound after game," Hasan heartily laughed. "Do you really think those two opposites are irreconcilable? How could body and spirit go hand in hand otherwise?"

“If hell knew any saints, then you’d be such a saint.”

“By all the martyrs! My princess is of the same opinion.”

“A happy coincidence, indeed.”

Abu Ali winked at Buzurg Ummid. Hasan lit a torch and gave a sign to the trumpeters in the gardens.

“Enough heavenly pleasures for tonight. Now let’s see what results we’ve gotten.”

He received a response from the gardens, then extinguished his torch and set it aside. “Yes, yes, they’ve got it easy down there,” he said, half to himself. “They’ve got somebody over them to think and make decisions for them. But who’s going to relieve us of our sense of responsibility and our agonizing internal conflicts? Who will drive away our sleepless nights, when every second that brings you closer to morning resembles a hammer stroke to your heart? Who will save us from the terror of death, which we know ushers in the great nothing? Now the night sky with its thousands of stars still reflects in our eyes. We still feel, we still think. But when the great moment comes, who’s going to provide balm for the pain we have from knowing that we’re setting out into the eternal dark of nothingness? Yes, they have it easy down there. We’ve created paradise for them and given them confidence that eternal luxuries await them after death there. So they really do deserve our envy.”

“Did you hear, Buzurg Ummid? Hasan could be right.”

“So, has it begun to make sense to the two of you? We know that we’re masters of an infinitely tiny point of the known, and slaves to the infinite mass of the unknown. I’d compare us to some vermin that glimpses the sky overhead. ‘I’m going to climb up this stalk,’ it says. ‘It looks tall enough that I should get there.’ It starts in the morning and climbs until evening. Then it reaches the top and realizes that all of its efforts were in vain. The earth is just a few inches below. And above it the starry sky arches just as immeasurably high as it did when it was on the ground. Except that now it doesn’t see any path leading farther upward, as it did before it started to climb. It loses its faith and realizes that it’s nothing against the inexplicable vastness of the universe. It is robbed of its hope and its happiness forever.”

He nodded to the grand dais.

“Let’s go! We need to welcome the first believers ever to return to

earth from paradise.”

The girls around Fatima noticed through the glass that the eunuchs were approaching with the litter.

“Like three gravediggers,” Sara said.

“Fatima! Uncover Suleiman so we can take one more look at him,” Zainab asked.

Fatima exposed the sleeping youth’s face. He lay peacefully, breathing almost imperceptibly. There was something childlike to his appearance now.

The girls stared at him wide-eyed. Halima put her fingers in her mouth and bit down on them. She felt unbearably miserable.

Fatima quickly covered him up again.

The eunuchs entered and wordlessly lifted him onto the litter. They left just as silently.

The curtain had barely dropped behind them when the girls burst into tears. Halima shrieked with pain and fell to the floor like a stone.

When the Moors carried Yusuf away, only Jada and Little Fatima cried. Zuleika mutely followed their arrival and departure with her eyes. Pride didn’t permit her to give free rein to her emotions.

“Now your fame is over too,” Hanafiya prodded her when they were alone again. “You had a husband for one night. Now you’ve lost him forever. Those of us who didn’t have him at all are better off.”

Zuleika tried to say something nonchalant in reply. But the pain was so much for her that she rolled up on the floor and buried her head in some pillows.

“You’re heartless, Hanafiya,” Asma said angrily.

“I didn’t mean it that way.”

She went over to where Zuleika was and stroked her hair. Others also came and tried to comfort her. But Zuleika kept crying until she fell asleep.

When the eunuchs walked out with ibn Tahir, Miriam called on the girls to go to their bedrooms. There were few of them that night, because the

ones who had been with Fatima and Zuleika stayed in their pavilions.

Miriam also slept alone. But tonight, of all nights, she wished Halima were there, with her lively talkativeness. Who knows how she made it through this fateful night? What had happened with the other girls? She worried about them. If only morning would come!

Oppressive thoughts stayed with her all the way to dawn.

The eunuchs brought their live burden into the cellar. Hasan asked them, "Is everything all right?"

"Everything is fine, Sayyiduna."

They set the litters down inside the cage. The three commanders went in behind them. In silence they waited for the invisible arms of the Moors to lift them to the top of the tower.

Once there, Hasan uncovered the sleeping youths.

"They look exhausted," Buzurg Ummid whispered.

Hasan smiled.

"They'll sleep until well into the morning. Then comes the awakening, and then we'll see if we succeeded."

He left the curtain over the entrance to the cell raised, so that the youths would have enough air. He posted a guard to the door. Then he dismissed his two friends.

"This brings us to the end of the second act of our tragedy. I'll see you tomorrow. Good night."

Down in the gardens the eunuchs were extinguishing and removing the lanterns. Some of them had already burnt out. Here and there a flame still flickered in the night. One light after the other sputtered out. It grew darker and darker all around. Startled moths fluttered over the men's heads. Bats swooped after the night's last vermin. An owl hooted from a thicket. The snarl of a leopard answered it.

The last lamp had sputtered out. It was a wonderful summer night with its thousands of mysteries. Stars shone in the sky, blinking and shimmering, remote, inexplicable riddles.

Mustafa circled a torch above his head, causing it to flare. He lit the path ahead of him with it, and six eunuchs followed him to the boats.

“Let’s look in on the girls on the way,” dance master Asad suggested. “This evening was a hard test for them.”

They went to the pavilion where Fatima was asleep with her companions. Asad pushed the door open and lifted the curtain over the entrance. Mustafa entered the room holding his torch high.

The girls all lay athwart the pillows. Some of them were completely naked, others were barely covered with coats or blankets. One or the other had already managed to remove her jewelry. Most of them, however, were still wearing theirs. Their lovely, soft limbs sank lightly into the silk and brocade. Their breasts rose and fell.

“This one sure mowed them down,” Asad said in a low voice. “They’re strewn around like casualties on a battlefield.”

Mustafa shuddered. The torch practically slid out of his hand. He bounded outdoors and hurried back toward the river, wailing out loud.

“Man is a beast. O Allah! What have they done to us?”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The following morning the grand dais joined Hasan, as agreed. He told them, "I was just with the boys. They're all still asleep. It's time for us to rouse them."

They entered his chambers. He pulled the curtains aside, letting sunlight pour into the room. They looked inside the lift. The youths lay on their cots sleeping peacefully, just as they had the night before. The commanders approached them. Hasan inspected them closely.

"They haven't changed a bit on the outside since last night. What their souls are like is something we're about to find out."

He shook Yusuf by the shoulder.

"Yusuf, do you hear me?! It's broad daylight outside and you're still asleep!"

Yusuf opened his eyes in alarm. He lifted himself up on his elbows and shook his head in confusion. He stared at the commanders dully and without understanding.

Gradually things began to dawn on him. His face took on an expression of utter astonishment.

"What on earth were you up to last night that you've slept so late?"

Hasan smiled roguishly. Yusuf timidly raised his eyes.

"I was in paradise by your grace, Our Master."

"Must have been quite a pleasant dream, my boy."

"No, no, I really was in paradise."

"Go on! Your friends are going to laugh at you if you tell them that."

"I know what I know, Sayyiduna. I really was in paradise."

"Then do you believe that I've been given the key to the gates of paradise?"

"I know it now, Sayyiduna."

The loud talking woke Suleiman. He sat up on his cot and furrowed his brow. His eyes went from Hasan's face to Yusuf's.

Suddenly he remembered everything. His hands eagerly fumbled over his body, and he felt Halima's bracelet under his robe. His face also showed tremendous amazement.

"See, now Suleiman is awake too. What on earth were you doing last night that you've slept so long?"

"I was in paradise by the grace of Our Master."

"Oh, go on. Who's going to believe that?"

"Let anybody just try to doubt me ... What I mean is, I have proof that I was really there ..."

"Proof? Show it to me."

Suleiman realized too late that he had misspoken. He tried to talk his way out of it.

"I don't even know how this got into my hand. I was feeling weak, I tried to grab onto something, and suddenly I was holding a bracelet in my hand. After that I don't remember anything."

"Show it to me!"

Reluctantly Suleiman handed Hasan his prize. The commander inspected it from all sides and then handed it to the grand dais.

"Remarkable, indeed," he said. "It appears to be a genuine heavenly bracelet."

"Zuleika had one like it," Yusuf interrupted. "But she told me I couldn't bring it back with me to this world."

"Suleiman, Suleiman," Hasan said, shaking his head. "It seems rather strange to me how you came by this jewelry. Are you sure you didn't rob paradise itself?"

Suleiman turned pale.

"I was afraid that Naim and Obeida wouldn't believe me. So I kept it ..."

"Do you have a reputation among your comrades for being such a liar?"

"I myself wouldn't believe them if they ever told me anything like this."

"In any event, I'm keeping the bracelet. The next time I send you back to paradise, I'll give it to you to take along. You be sure to apologize to them then."

In the meantime ibn Tahir had also awakened. He shook off his dizziness. He listened to the conversation wide-eyed.

Gradually his memory of the evening's events also returned. Suddenly he felt his chest under his heart. He shuddered. He felt the impression of Miriam's teeth.

Hasan turned toward him.

"I've been hearing some remarkable things from your comrades. Last night I left them in this room alongside you, and now they're trying to make me believe that they didn't spend the night here at all, but traveled straight into the beyond. At least you have always been a deliberate, cool thinker. Rescue me from the obligation of believing them. Otherwise I'll be terrified of staying in this place, knowing that night phantoms can grab you by the arms and legs any minute and carry you off into God knows what unknown lands."

"I know you're joking, Sayyiduna. You yourself know full well who caused our nighttime journey, and now you want to put me to a test."

"What? Ibn Tahir, even you claim you didn't spend the night here? Then would that mean it's not just symbolic that I hold the key to paradise in my hands?"

"Forgive me, Sayyiduna. Doubt will never creep into my heart again."

"Fine. Well, friends, what will you tell your comrades if they ask you where you spent the night?"

"We'll tell them that we were in paradise by the grace of Our Master."

"Very good. I hope that from now on your faith will remain firm and unshaken. That it will be that kind of faith about which it has been said that it can move mountains. Go back to your comrades now."

He called a guard and ordered him to lead them out of the tower.

When he was left alone with the grand dais, he relaxed visibly.

"That turned out the way I expected."

Abu Ali leapt toward him.

"On my word," he exclaimed. "You've found the Archimedean point."

Both of them embraced him.

"I was skeptical about your success right up to the last minute," Buzurg Ummid confessed. "Now I think you've actually succeeded in changing human nature. You've forged a terrible new weapon in these ashashin!"

"The third act is now at a close," Hasan said and laughed. "We could give it the title 'Awakening' or perhaps 'Return from Paradise.' "

The invitation to the three comrades to meet the supreme commander,

and even more their absence overnight, caused the fedayeen to engage in some lively speculation and discussion. They talked about it in their sleeping quarters until late in the night, expecting the invitees would return and satisfy their curiosity.

“At last we’ll hear what Sayyiduna is like,” Obeida said.

“Why on earth do you suppose he summoned them?” Naim wondered.

“Why? Probably so he can scold them for seizing the Turks’ flag this morning.”

Obeida grinned.

“I wasn’t asking you. I was hoping to hear some more intelligent opinions.”

“You can’t be thinking he was going to send them off to heaven?” Abdullah mocked. “He called them so they could join the commanders for the banquet as a reward.”

“You could be right,” Jafar said.

“So why are they taking so long to come back?” Obeida speculated. “Maybe he gave them some special assignment and they’ve already left the castle?”

“Why hash through all this over and over?” Abdur Ahman commented. “Until they come back and tell us themselves where they’ve been and what they’ve seen, we can’t guess a thing. So it’s better that we go to sleep and get a well-deserved night’s rest.”

The next morning they had already been on their feet for a long time when the three absentees suddenly reappeared. They ran toward them as they approached, and surrounded them.

“Let’s head into our quarters,” Suleiman said. “We’ll talk there. I’m hungry and my arms and legs feel like they’ve been ground up in a mortar. I can barely stay on my feet.”

They entered their quarters and the three of them collapsed on their beds. They brought them some milk and bread.

Suleiman asked, “Who wants to speak?”

“You go ahead and start,” Yusuf replied. “I’m too impatient. I don’t think I could get it across to them. If I saw they weren’t following me, I’d get angry. And that wouldn’t be right either.”

They crowded together around their beds.

“Do you believe in miracles?” Suleiman asked.

The fedayeen looked at each other.

“The ancient ones, sure,” Naim said. “The Prophet forbids us to believe in new ones.”

“Oh, you spoil-sport! What does Sayyiduna teach?”

“I’m not aware he’s said anything about miracles.”

As Suleiman kept questioning them, Naim grew cautious.

“Haven’t you learned that Allah delivered the key to the gates of paradise into Sayyiduna’s hands?”

A tense silence followed. Suleiman looked victoriously from one face to the next. When at last he had sated himself on their curiosity, he continued.

“Fedayeen, last night Sayyiduna was gracious and opened the gates of paradise to us.”

They looked at each other. Nobody said a word.

Suddenly Obeida burst out in a loud guffaw. Then all the others became convulsed in laughter too. Only the three nocturnal travelers remained serious.

“They’ve made a plot to pull the wool over our eyes,” Abdur Ahman said.

“Suleiman’s making a fool of us as he always has,” Naim added.

“Let’s leave them alone,” ibn Vakas suggested haughtily. “They got drunk last night and then had to sleep it off in a barn somewhere. You can see it in their faces. They’re ashamed now and they’re trying to turn it all into a joke.”

“I knew it would be this way,” Suleiman growled angrily. “Ibn Tahir, you tell them. They’re most likely to believe you.”

“Enough of this game already,” Obeida said, growing angry. “I want to know if you had a chance to see Sayyiduna.”

Now it was ibn Tahir’s turn.

“Friends, it’s hard to talk about such incredible things as the three of us experienced last night. I understand you completely if you laugh at us. But everything Suleiman said is the absolute truth. So please, be patient and listen. He’ll continue now.”

His face was utterly serious. There was no trace of humor in his voice. Even so, the fedayeen wondered if the threesome might not be playing some practical joke.

“I’d accuse my own father of lying,” Jafar said, “if he made claims like that. But it seems strange to me that you, ibn Tahir, would join in this kind of nonsense. Go ahead and speak, Suleiman. At least we’ll hear what you were planning to tell us.”

Suleiman sat up on his bed. He looked around menacingly, then he began to speak.

He started at the very beginning, with their ascent of the tower, their encounter with the mace-bearing giants, and Abu Ali ushering them in to meet Sayyiduna. Whenever he missed a detail, Yusuf jumped in to supply it. In this way they described the supreme commander and their strange conversation with him in detail.

The fedayeen followed their narrative with mounting suspense. Yusuf’s interruptions were the best involuntary confirmation of the accuracy of their unusual report.

When Suleiman reached the point where Sayyiduna ordered the three of them to enter the cell containing the three cots, his listeners held their breath. Their eyes were glued to his lips.

Even ibn Tahir listened to him carefully. Instinctively he fingered his chest where Miriam’s tooth marks remained. Now, when he was back in the midst of his everyday life, he became seized by a horror at the memory of that inexplicable nighttime event. For the first time he felt moved by true faith, the kind of faith that experience and reason deny.

Then Suleiman told them how Sayyiduna had given them miraculous pellets that gave them the sense of flying through unknown landscapes. He told them what he had dreamed then, until he had completely lost consciousness.

He reached the point where he woke up in paradise. The faces of the fedayeen glowed and their eyes shone feverishly. They shifted restlessly on their seats. He told them what he had first seen around him. He described the pavilion precisely, without leaving a single detail out. Then he came to a description of the girls.

“Maybe you just dreamt all of this.”

Obeida was trying to relax his extremely taut nerves.

The others were also finding this intense strain on their imaginations to be unbearable. They exchanged glances, breathing heavily. Naim crouched at the head of ibn Tahir’s bed, hunched over and pale with delectable horror. He was getting shivers down his spine in broad

daylight, as though he were listening to gruesome ghost stories.

“I’m sure that everything I saw in that place was just as real as you are, sitting around me,” Suleiman continued. “You couldn’t imagine a more beautiful hall. Everything gold and silver. The couches are covered with rugs that are softer than moss. Strewn with pillows that you just sink into. As many choice foods as you could want. Sweet wine that cheers you up and doesn’t rob you of your reason. Everything exactly as it’s written in the Koran. And guys, the houris! Skin like milk and satin. Big, clear eyes. And their breasts, O Allah! Just thinking about them, I start to feel like there’s fire inside of me.”

He described his amorous adventures in detail.

“Oh, if only I could have been there”—the words came from the bottom of Obeida’s heart.

“If you’d so much as touched one of them, I would have ripped your guts out with my bare hands.”

Suleiman’s eyes flashed like a madman’s.

Obeida instinctively drew away.

He had known Suleiman long enough. There really was no joking with him. But he had never seen him as he was at this moment. Something told him that he had changed last night in some dangerous way.

“Those houris are mine! Do you understand? They’re mine now and for all eternity. I’m not giving up a single one of them, not for anything. Oh, my sweet little gazelles! Source of my joy! Spring of my happiness! None of you has any right to want any of them. Allah made them for me. I can’t wait for the day when I’ll be with them forever.”

Each of them sensed this: that Suleiman had become a completely different person overnight. They looked at him distrustfully and almost with fear.

Perhaps Yusuf was the only one who didn’t notice this change, or rather, for whom the change seemed only natural. He understood it instinctively, because a similar transformation had taken place in him.

Suleiman continued describing his experiences with the girls of paradise.

Suddenly Yusuf lost his temper.

“You’re not trying to make us think that you made all nine of the houris your wives in just one night?”

“Why should I have to make you think anything? Didn’t you?”

Yusuf scoffed angrily.

“A serious thing like this, and Suleiman can’t help exaggerating.”

Suleiman bored through him with his eyes.

“Hold your tongue! I’m not exaggerating any more than the Koran does.”

“Then the Koran exaggerates.”

The fedayeen laughed.

Suleiman bit his lip.

“My wives composed a song about my love. Are you going to tell me that the houris lie?”

“Recite it.”

He tried to collect his memory of it, but soon he got stuck.

Yusuf burst out in a loud guffaw and slapped his knees, laughing.

The others laughed with him.

At that point Suleiman went flying like an arrow over ibn Tahir’s bed. He slugged Yusuf in the face with all his might.

Yusuf instinctively reached for the injured area. He stood up slowly, looking stunned. The blood had rushed to his face.

“What? That grasshopper is going to hit me in the face?”

Lightning-fast he lunged and pinned Suleiman to the opposite wall. The sabers hanging on it rattled. Suleiman drew one of them and fixed Yusuf with malevolent eyes.

“Son of a dog! This time it’s to the death.”

Yusuf went white. In an instant all his anger was gone.

But before Suleiman could do anything else, ibn Tahir leapt at him, grabbing the arm that held the saber. Jafar, ibn Vakas and others came to his aid and pried the weapon out of the madman’s hand.

“Are you out of your mind? Last night in paradise by the grace of Sayyiduna, today a massacre among your friends!”

With a firm hand, ibn Tahir sat him back down on his bed.

“And you, Yusuf, what’s the idea of interrupting him while he’s talking? We’re not all made of the same stuff. Each of us lives his life in his own way.”

“You’re right, ibn Tahir,” Jafar said. “Let’s have Suleiman tell his story to the end, then you and Yusuf will have your turns.”

Now they all begged Suleiman to go on. Yusuf stubbornly crossed his arms on his chest and stared at the ceiling. Suleiman cast a scornful look

at him, then proceeded to tell the rest of his story.

No one doubted any longer that the threesome had actually been in paradise. They took an interest in the details, and soon each of them became intimately familiar with the place and the girls that Suleiman had visited. Soon they began privately daydreaming about the beautiful hours, and some fell in love with one or the other of them against his will.

“So you woke up in that same dark cell you’d fallen asleep in?”

Naim asked questions like a child.

“That’s right. Everything was just like it had been the night before. Except that when I patted my robe, I felt the bracelet that Halima had given to me in paradise.”

“Why did Sayyiduna take it away from you?”

“Maybe he was afraid I might lose it. But he promised he’d return it to me the next time he sends me to paradise.”

“When are you going back?”

“I don’t know. Allah willing, as soon as possible.”

Now it was Yusuf’s turn to tell about his experiences. They already knew the beginning and the ending. He had to focus on his time in paradise. He described the girls’ singing and dancing. He grew particularly passionate when he came to speak about Zuleika. He described her beauty, her skill as a dancer, and her virtues, and as he did so, he realized how tremendously in love with her he was. Now he felt sorry that he had tried to cheat on her with Jada. Without realizing that it hadn’t exactly been so, he told them how faithful he had been to Zuleika.

“She’s my only real wife,” he said. “All the others are just her slaves, put there to serve us. Because even though they’re all amazingly attractive, none of them compares with her in beauty.”

But Suleiman had already achieved the greatest possible suspense by telling his story first. Yusuf’s account didn’t seem half as interesting to them. Only once did it manage to take the fedayeen’s breath away: when he described his stroll through the mysteriously illuminated gardens. Suleiman hadn’t experienced that. Now he silently regretted letting himself be so awestruck by the sumptuousness of the pavilion that it didn’t even occur to him to look outside.

Ibn Tahir’s account was the most laconic of all. He told them that he

had been welcomed in paradise by Miriam. That she led him through the gardens and showed him the wall of al-Araf. That a shadow had moved atop it, probably that of a hero who had fallen while fighting for Islam against the will of his parents. Ibn Tahir said of Miriam that she was wiser than dai Ibrahim. He also described how he had attacked her in a moment of doubt, and how some huge cat named Ahriman had knocked him to the ground. This animal, al-Araf and the shadow on top of it were the things that intrigued the fedayeen most. They would have gladly learned about more details, but ibn Tahir wasn't especially talkative.

"Give us a chance to rest up," he said. "Eventually you'll get to hear anything you want to know."

And so they turned instead to Yusuf and Suleiman, who were more generous with their descriptions. All three of them grew in their eyes into powerful Pahlavans, practically on the scale of true demigods.

All night long Apama had been unable to close her eyes. The past had risen up out of the darkness, the grand days of her youth and the heavenly nights. She remembered everything with a fearful precision. She suffered infernal torments. It is unbearable to know that you were once first, and then to have to observe your fall, little by little, straight to the bottom. Now others reigned in the kingdom of love.

She got up when the sun's first rays began to gild the peaks of the Elburz. Gray, disheveled and sunken-cheeked, she looked out from beneath the bushy branches that spread over the entrance to her house. Up ahead was Alamut, which blocked her return to the world forever. But what would she do there, anyway, now that she was old and shriveled? Praise be to Allah that Hasan had rescued her from poverty and oblivion! Here she had her kingdom. True, it was a bitter kingdom, since it continually reminded her of days past. But the bitter greatness of a fallen angel was better than vanishing on a garbage heap.

During the long nights she wondered what Hasan meant to her. Once, many years ago, a youthful lover, part enthusiast, part prophet, he had been almost completely erased from memory by time and many far more excellent men. She might even have forgotten his name, if she hadn't heard it from time to time in connection with various plots and religious disputes. Then, not quite two years ago, when she had hit rock bottom, a

stranger suddenly brought her a letter from him. He wrote that he was master of a large fortress, and that he wanted her to join him, because he needed her. She had nothing to lose. She decided instantly. Against her will, dim, pale hopes crept into her heart. Now she saw Hasan in all his power. Once it had been her role to grant and deny. Now it was Hasan's. Did she love him? She didn't know. All she knew was how bitter it was to be near someone who once loved you with all his ardor, but who now cared so little about you that he didn't even bother to hide his passion for another.

She stepped out of the house. Birds were chirping in the bushes. Dew glistened on the grass, the leaves, and on the heads of flowers. It was such a magnificent summer morning that she felt sick at heart.

She shook off her melancholy thoughts. She washed her face from a bucket of water and arranged her disheveled hair. She took pains to conceal the traces of a sleepless night. Then she set out for the building that stood opposite.

This was where the eunuchs slept. Their loud snoring was audible through the door, which had been left slightly open. This peaceful, carefree sleep of theirs made her furious. She shrieked into the house that it was morning and time to work.

“Oh, you damned witch!”

Mustafa was livid with rage.

Adi laughed.

“Loathsome witch, not worth a stitch.”

Incensed, she threw the door wide open. A sandal came zipping through the air and smacked her on the head.

She swiftly retreated.

“Just wait, you curs! Sayyiduna is going to make belt straps out of your backs.”

A mighty wave of laughter came thundering out of the house.

“Down to the boats, you animals! Get the girls home, so that Sayyiduna doesn't take them by surprise.”

They stood up, yawning, and put on their colored robes. Sloppily dressed, they came out of the house at a crawl. They made a point of not looking at the old woman, to make their disrespect clear. Neither side knew why it hated the other. They went to the canal and washed there. Then they sat down in the boats and reached for the oars.

Apama sat next to Adi. The eunuchs made sure they handled the oars clumsily, splashing water on her.

“Just you wait, you riff-raff!” said Apama. “We’ll see who laughs last. O Allah knew what he was doing when he let them clip off your manhood.”

Adi began rocking the boat dangerously, singing:

“You’d better close that upper slit,
Or I’ll turn you into a Christian yet.”

The eunuchs laughed, seeing Apama clutch on to the sides of the boat to avoid a real baptism.

They reached the island where Fatima and her companions were asleep. Apama left the boat and walked up a path toward the pavilion.

All of nature was awakened. The illuminated band on the mountainside grew broader and broader.

She looked through the glass into the hall. The girls lay in disarray, fast asleep among the pillows.

Furious, she leapt through the entrance and grabbed the mallet. The gong echoed wildly throughout the pavilion.

Frightened, the girls jumped to their feet.

“You whores! So you’ve been rutting all night, and now you sleep half the day away. Into the boats and home with you, now! I’m not letting Sayyiduna find you like this!”

They covered themselves in their coats and hurried off toward the canal. They hadn’t even managed to wake up completely. Their heads ached from the incessant banging on the gong that woke them up and from the previous night’s drunkenness. They sat down in the boats, bleary-eyed, unkempt and totally disheveled.

On the central island Miriam came out to meet them. She was already made up. But despite the color on her cheeks and lips, they noticed that she must have slept poorly. She and Apama exchanged glances. Both had a sudden sense that they understood each other. It was perhaps the first time they had felt close.

Soon the girls in that pavilion were also on their feet. Apama and the eunuchs left to fetch the girls from the third garden.

Miriam accompanied her to the water’s edge.

“Didn’t you sleep at all?” Apama asked her.

“No. And you?”

“Me neither.”

“Yes, yes, it’s a strange life we have.”

She had wanted to say “terrible,” but Apama had understood her even so.

Soon Zuleika and her companions arrived back home. They ran to dress themselves and get rid of the last traces of the night. By the time of the third prayer everything was back to normal. Their everyday life had resumed.

In mid-afternoon Hasan arrived unannounced, accompanied by four mace-bearing guards. Once again, the girls assembled in a semicircle. He wanted to hear details of the previous night. They answered him with trembling voices.

He pulled the gold bracelet out from under his robe. He showed it to the girls and asked them, “Whose is this jewelry?”

Halima recognized her property immediately. She practically dropped to the ground in fright. She was unable to utter a single word.

The others were frightened too. Miriam looked from one face to the next. When she came to Halima, she immediately understood everything. She looked at Hasan imploringly. The mischievous smile on his face put her at ease.

“So this bracelet doesn’t belong to any of you? Then that means the feday lied to me.”

He gazed at Halima intently.

Tears came welling up out of her eyes. She was shaking so badly that her teeth chattered as she cried. In her mind’s eye she could already see herself setting her head down on the block, the axe rising above her.

“A fine thing, Halima. Do you realize I should have you beheaded? And I would do it remorselessly, if this thing had betrayed our secret to the boy. This time I’ll grant you your life. But if it happens again, your head will not escape the axe.”

He put the bracelet back under his robe.

Miriam nodded to Halima, who ran up to Hasan, overjoyed, and fell to her knees before him. She wanted to thank him, but she couldn’t produce a single word. She just kissed his hand.

“I want you all to try harder next time,” he said, bidding them

farewell. "Last night you gained some experience which should be useful to you in the future. Be ready at any time, day or night."

He nodded to them and called for Miriam to accompany him.

"Expect me tonight. I have a lot to talk to you about."

"As you say," she replied. For the first time the prospect of meeting with him didn't cheer her in the slightest.

Toward evening the girls gathered around the pond and chatted about the previous night. They shared their impressions from the various gardens. Halima sat off to one side, wordlessly listening. For the first time she felt a real desire to be alone. She bore a great secret in her heart. Nobody knew about it, and she wouldn't have dared to reveal it to anyone. She loved Suleiman. She loved him to distraction. An ominous question had been weighing down on her spirit. For a long time she didn't dare ask it. At last she turned to Fatima.

"I didn't quite understand. Are the same visitors going to come next time?"

Fatima looked at her. She understood everything at once. She felt sorry for her to the bottom of her heart.

"Nobody knows, dear child."

Halima stared at her with curious eyes. She sensed that Fatima was evading her. Was she really not going to see Suleiman ever again? Doubts had plagued her all night. She hadn't been able to sleep. Now she had her own grown-up worries. She had ceased being a child.

On that same day news spread throughout the fortress that Hasan had opened the gates to paradise for three fedayeen, and that they had spent the night there. Abu Soraka came to see if Suleiman, Yusuf and ibn Tahir had come back. He found them asleep, but their comrades told him what they had learned from them.

Abu Soraka broke out in a sweat. He immediately reported to Abu Ali, telling him what the fedayeen were saying.

A mischievous smile crossed Abu Ali's face.

"If that's what they're saying, then that's what must have happened. Why should we try to hide the truth?"

Abu Soraka bowed in fright. He sought out the doctor and told him the news.

“I think Hasan invented this as a trick to intimidate us,” he said. “But I wonder how he bribed those boys to start lying so baldly, since they’ve always been so dedicated to the truth until now?”

“I’m afraid there’s something far more dangerous lurking behind this,” the Greek suggested. “Do you remember our conversation about the harems behind the castle? What if he created them for these boys?”

“But why hasn’t he confided in us? He must know that the less we’re informed, the more we’re bound to speculate.”

“Would you like to hear some wise advice, my dear dai? Drop the speculations and forget what you’ve heard. Otherwise I’m not sure your head will be worth very much. Because it’s not in him to trifle with the commanders, much less with those crazy, young fanatics. I’ve seen a few things in my lifetime. But there’s something in ibn Sabbah that surpasses my understanding and my experience.”

Agitated, Abu Soraka left to attend to his business. However much he resisted, in his thoughts he constantly came back to the three boys’ strange nocturnal tale.

Dai Ibrahim’s reaction to the news was entirely different. At first he was also taken by surprise. Then he clarified everything in his mind. “Sayyiduna knows what he’s doing,” he said. “We serve him, and if he chose not to share his plan with us, then I’m sure he has good reasons.”

Discussion of the matter was all the more animated in the barracks. The sergeants and some of the men who served meals to the fedayeen overheard them talking and returned with news of this unprecedented miracle. Because no one who believed what the fedayeen said had any doubt that the threesome’s visit to the gardens of paradise had been a miracle.

“Our Master must be a great prophet if Allah gave him so much power,” they said.

“But what if the fedayeen invented the whole thing?” a doubter worried.

“Out of the question,” insisted one of the men who had listened to the fedayeen. “They’re all still obsessed with what the three had to say.”

“Then that’s the best proof that only Ismailism is the true faith. Only a criminal dog would still doubt in Sayyiduna’s mission after miracles like

that.”

“From now on I give no leeway to infidels. I’ll hack in two anybody who refuses to recognize Sayyiduna as a great prophet.”

“Now it’s going to be a real pleasure to fight those infidel dogs. Let them all perish by our sabers.”

Emir Manuchehr walked in. For a time he listened to the conversations without speaking. Then he had them tell him everything from the beginning.

The soldiers watched him attentively. But not a muscle on his face moved. When he saw they expected a statement from him, he spoke.

“If the fedayeen claim that they were in paradise by the grace of the supreme commander, and he doesn’t contradict that, then it’s our duty to believe and act accordingly.”

But when he returned to his rooms, his brow was deeply furrowed. He also wondered why the commander hadn’t informed him of his plans. He was even more disturbed by the wild fanaticism that he had observed among his men. He didn’t doubt there was some deception lurking at the bottom of this, but he couldn’t quite imagine what that might be. He could just feel that his old, experienced soldiers were turning into herds of wild fanatics who no longer looked to him as their most immediate commander, but were instead falling more and more under the invisible influence of the leader of the faith. There didn’t appear to be any alternative but for him to adapt to this new trend himself. Hasan had named him emir, but this was more of a religious distinction than a military one. Now the inexorably functioning machine that Hasan controlled had absorbed him entirely. He had become a part of it, one of the cogs in Hasan’s institution.

All day and all evening until late in the night the fedayeen talked about their three comrades’ visit to paradise. They discussed every fine point and kept asking questions about this or that detail.

“So the animal that leapt at you was called Ahriman?” Naim asked. “Then it must have been one of the tamed demons. It has to serve your houris as punishment.”

“Possibly. I’m sorry I wasn’t able to find out more about it. But there were so many unusual things that there wasn’t time for all of them.”

That night none of them could fall asleep for a long time. It was humid and hot. The fedayeen tossed and turned in their beds, their thoughts revolving around paradise, and their imaginations portraying in vivid colors the delights awaiting the chosen ones there. They saw half-naked girls singing and dancing around them. They imagined they could feel their warm breath, that they were lying beside them on pillows and that they were there to serve them. There were sounds of muffled moaning and teeth being gritted.

Soon after midnight the moon peered into the room through a window. Ibn Tahir looked to his right and his left. Suleiman and Yusuf were fast asleep. *They're doing all right*, he thought. He felt anxious, though. Agonizing doubts assailed him. Could everything he had experienced the night before have just been a dream? But could he doubt that Miriam, whom he loved with all his soul, was real?

It was almost morning when he made a decision and got up. Carefully he crept over to Naim's bed.

"Are you asleep, Naim?" he asked quietly.

"No, I can't sleep. What is it?"

He sat up in bed and looked warily at ibn Tahir.

"Can you keep a secret?"

Naim almost got frightened.

"Don't worry. There's no danger in it for you. I just want to tell you something."

"I won't tell, you can count on me."

"Swear by the holy name of Ali?"

"I swear, ibn Tahir."

"Good. Come to the window with me."

At the window ibn Tahir showed him Miriam's tooth marks.

"Do you see it?"

"Yes. It looks like someone bit you."

"Look closer."

"O Allah! What a small mouth!"

"Those are her tooth marks, Naim."

"Miriam's?"

An icy chill ran down his spine.

"Yes, that's what she left me as a keepsake. Before long it will fade away. Take a piece of candle and soften the wax. You're going to help

me make an impression.”

“Glad to help, Avani.”

Soon the wax was ready. Ibn Tahir kneaded a sheet out of it, and when it was soft enough, Naim pressed it onto his chest. Then he slowly pulled it back off. On its surface the imprint of Miriam’s teeth appeared like a gentle breath.

“O Allah!” ibn Tahir exclaimed. He was beside himself with happiness. “As of today, this is my most precious treasure. I’ll guard it like the relics of the Prophet himself.”

Then he embraced Naim.

“Thanks, friend. You’re the only person who knows my secret. I’m depending on you.”

“You’re lucky,” Naim sighed. “I’d like to have a love like that too.”

“Maybe it’s best that you haven’t had those feelings. This love is heaven and hell all at the same time.”

They parted and each lay back in his own bed.

“You’re a horrible master,” Miriam said when Hasan came on his nocturnal visit. “You command over the lives and deaths of all of us. What are you going to do with yesterday’s visitors?”

Hasan looked at her pensively.

“I don’t know. Circumstances will decide.”

He noticed her sunken cheeks.

“It looks like last night was strenuous for you,” he said, with barely concealed mockery.

“You force me to think too much, ibn Sabbah.”

“When a woman starts thinking, she becomes dangerous.”

“I wish I were, now.”

“And what would you do?”

“I’d shout to the fedayeen to watch out for you.”

“Then it’s a good thing my tower separates you from them.”

“I don’t know about good. But that’s how it is. And I’m powerless.”

“Oh, woman, woman. You’re wonderful with words, but when it comes to action, you get the shakes. Once I thought we were so close. It made me so happy. Now I’m alone again.”

“I can’t help it. Your actions terrify me.”

They were silent for a long time.

Then she asked, "What will you do with the girls if there are any results from last night?"

"Apama knows substances and herbs that can take care of that. If that doesn't work, we can just let nature take its course. We can always use fresh blood."

"Poor children, without any fathers!"

"They won't be the only ones, dear Miriam."

He cast a stern look at her.

"I sense you'd like to ask me something," he said, smiling.

"I don't want you to take this wrong."

"Go ahead, speak."

"How is ibn Tahir?"

The blood rushed to his face.

"Do you care for him that much? I think he's daydreaming and suffering from heartsickness."

"You're cruel."

"Cruel? All I did was answer your question as precisely as I could."

"Do something for me."

Hasan looked at her. He said nothing, just nodded for her to speak.

"Please be merciful to him for my sake."

"Merciful? What do you mean by that? I'm neither cruel nor merciful. I'm just carrying out my plan."

"I understand. All I ask is that when you decide about ibn Tahir in connection with your plan, you keep my request in mind."

"You're asking too much. What would be the point of these two decades' worth of preparations?"

"Look. I've always obeyed you and I always will. Just promise me this."

"I can't promise you anything. It's beyond my powers."

"And what would you do if, for instance, he figured things out on his own?"

He cast her a distrustful look.

"How do you mean?"

"Don't worry. I didn't give anything away, even though it might have been best that way."

"If he figured things out on his own? What you mean is, if he's already

half-grasped my plan? Then he'd understand me. He'd be a son of my own spirit in that case. No. No. He'd see me as a fraud. He'd proclaim to the whole world that I'm a cheat. How could he understand at his age what it's taken me a whole lifetime to see?"

"Still, what if he did?"

"You ask too many questions. We're both tired. It's late."

He got up. His face was gloomy.

Tears glistened in her eyes.

"But he's still just a child!"

Wordlessly he went toward the water's edge, where Adi was waiting for him with the boat.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The results of the defeat of the sultan's vanguard outside of Alamut became evident almost immediately. Reports on the evolving state of affairs began streaming into the fortress from all sides. On the day after the battle, Abdul Malik set out with twenty horsemen for the fortress of Rudbar. That evening they waited at a reasonable distance. Their scouts reported that there were no more than a hundred Turks. At dawn he gave the order to attack. Hawk-like, they raced down the hillside and cut down almost half of the enemy in the first assault. The rest fled to all sides.

Abdul Malik then dispatched his scouts to intercept the sultan's army, and with his own detachment, he set out at a swift gallop toward Qazvin and beyond, to Rai. From there he returned to Alamut, bringing along some thirty prisoners that he had captured on his campaign. In all, he was on the road for four days.

There was ferment throughout the entire region of Rudbar. The people, who for ages had quietly been worshipping Ali and hated the sultan just as much as they hated the caliph of Baghdad, celebrated the Ismaili victory as their own. In the first days following the battle, new believers began arriving at the castle to enter the service of the supreme commander. Abu Ali had his hands full dealing with them. He selected the youngest and strongest for the school for fedayeen. Manuchehr used the others to form new units. Many of the older soldiers who had distinguished themselves in the battle were promoted to sergeant. Former sergeants and corporals advanced to still higher grades. Barely ten days after the victory, the army had been augmented by three new units of a hundred men each.

"We're going to have to rework the whole system from scratch and issue new rules," Hasan told his two grand dais, "so that these disorderly mobs turn into a unified army that recognizes a single doctrine and just

one common leader. Mohammed was right to forbid wine to the faithful. We'd be stupid not to follow his example in this regard. Because we need hardened units and outstanding, decisive individuals more than we need huge masses, our commandments need to be as strict and precise as possible. And we have to make sure that they're carried out, at all costs."

And so on the day when the three new units were sworn in, instead of the noisy celebration that everyone expected, Abu Ali read aloud a series of new laws and regulations.

"The death penalty applies to anyone who opposes an officer; to anyone who fails to carry out an order, unless prevented from so doing by a higher power; to anyone who kills another Ismaili premeditatedly or in a fit of passion; to anyone who speaks disrespectfully of the supreme commander or criticizes him; to anyone who drinks wine or any other intoxicating drink; to anyone who indulges in debauchery."

Strict corporal and moral punishments were also decreed for those who indulged in worldly entertainments; who produced or listened to fine music; who danced or enjoyed the dancing of others; who read corrupting books or listened to others reading from them.

New ranks were introduced into the hierarchy itself. Regional dais were established between dais and grand dais. Every able-bodied believer was automatically a soldier. A special school was established for the refiqs who were to educate them. A new curriculum was devised for all of the men. In addition to military arts, they would be required to study dogma and Ismaili history.

Henceforth the fedayeen received independent assignments that corresponded to each individual's abilities. Jafar became the regular express messenger between Alamut and Muzaffar in Rai. Naim taught the new recruits dogma, ibn Tahir taught them history and geography, and Yusuf and Suleiman trained fedayeen novices in the military arts. Every morning they led them out of the castle to the plateau, as Manuchehr had once done. Cunning Obeida became the leader of a small unit of scouts and kept track of the movements of the sultan's army with their help. Abdur Ahman, ibn Vakas, Abdallah and Halfa were assigned to him as assistants, and soon they knew every footpath between Qazvin, Rai and Alamut. Within no time they guessed the intentions of Emir Arslan Tash, who had split his forces between Qazvin and Rai in order to cut Alamut off from the rest of the world completely and trap it in the

foothills of the Elburz Mountains, across which there was no escaping.

The captured Turks, nearly all of them heavily wounded, were treated well, to their considerable surprise. Under the skilled hands of the doctor and his assistants, their wounds healed quickly. They spent the days in their quarters, but in the evenings they came out to take in the cool air in a caged area behind one of the barracks.

The medics and the soldiers who brought them food and water came to engage them in conversation more and more often. The prisoners listened wide-eyed to tales about the fedayeen who had spent a night in paradise, and about the unprecedented power that Allah had given to Sayyiduna. They were amazed by the Ismailis' unwavering faith in victory. They asked them about the evidence and causes of that confidence. The answer was always the same: that Sayyiduna was a great prophet who would come to rule over the Islamic world.

Occasionally this or that dai, or even Abu Ali himself, visited the prisoners. He would ask them about particulars of the sultan's army, but also about their education and religious convictions. He would explain Ismaili doctrine, with the help of which their commander was going to establish the rule of justice and truth on earth. This, but even more the candor and good treatment, had the effect of shaking their convictions and creating fertile ground in them for the acceptance of Ismaili teachings.

Hasan ordered the release of those prisoners who, because of wounds, had had to have an arm or a leg amputated or were otherwise severely crippled. He wanted them to tell their comrades in the sultan's army about Alamut and the Ismaili faith and thus imperceptibly undermine their resolve. They prepared litters for them on camels, and an armed guard escorted them to Qazvin, where they were given free passage.

Although Suleiman and Yusuf had slept well the first night after their visit to the gardens, toward evening on the following day they began to feel unusually anxious. They were both irritable, they felt as though something were missing, and they couldn't go to sleep. Each of them took a separate walk through the trenches and eventually met there.

"I'm thirsty," Yusuf said.

"There's enough water in Shah Rud."

“You’re welcome to drink that.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve gotten addicted to wine.”

Suleiman sneered at him, and Yusuf glowered back.

“The trumpet has already sounded lights out.”

“Why are you telling me that? You go ahead.”

They sat down on the battlements and listened to the roar of the river for a while without speaking.

“I sense that you want to tell me something.”

Suleiman asked the question half mockingly, half out of curiosity.

Yusuf kept testing the waters.

“Don’t you miss anything?”

“Talk plainly. What’s bothering you?”

“I feel like I’ve got embers moving through my guts. My head aches. I’m unbearably thirsty.”

“So why won’t you drink some water?”

“I do, over and over, and it’s like I’m drinking air. I’m still thirsty.”

“I know. It’s those damned pellets. If I could have one now, I’d calm down again.”

“Do you think Sayyiduna is going to send us back to paradise soon?”

“How should I know? When I think of that night, I get so feverish I could melt.”

A guard walked past carrying a torch. They crouched behind a battlement.

“Let’s go. We can’t let them catch us here,” Suleiman said.

Cautiously they crept into their sleeping quarters.

Their comrades were already asleep. Only ibn Tahir was half-upright in bed. He appeared to be listening in on something. He gave a start when he noticed the two coming in.

“Not asleep yet?” Suleiman asked.

“Same as the two of you.”

The latecomers undressed and lay down in their beds. It was stuffy and hot in the room, and they were infernally thirsty.

“Phew, damned sorcery,” Suleiman muttered and turned over on his other side with a sigh.

“Too many memories to sleep?” ibn Tahir asked.

“I could use some wine now.”

“Are the two of you not planning to sleep at all tonight?”

Yusuf's voice sounded gruff.

"Maybe you think you are?"

Suleiman taunted him angrily. He felt ready to jump out of his skin.

The next morning they all felt as though they had lead weights on their arms and legs.

Abu Soraka assigned each of the fedayeen his own area of responsibility. Within a few days they moved to new quarters at the base of one of the two front towers. New recruits were billeted in their former quarters.

Now they were sleeping two and three to a room. Yusuf shared a room with Obeida and ibn Vakas, ibn Tahir shared one with Jafar, and Suleiman was with Naim.

Every morning ibn Tahir set out for school with profound melancholy in his heart. He looked at the novices—hadn't he been one of them himself just yesterday?—and it pained him to think that all of that was so far behind him and that he could never again be like them. An insurmountable wall rose up now between him and them. He would listen to their carefree chatter with a sad smile.

The sleepless nights eventually drained the freshness out of his cheeks. His face became sunken and his eyes gazed out absently and gloomily.

"Ibn Tahir, one of the ones who were in paradise," the soldiers would whisper to each other if they caught sight of him. Yesterday an inconspicuous student, today a powerful hero whose name caused young hearts to race. Once he had wished he could be this famous. Now he didn't care. Sometimes the admiring glances even bothered him. He wanted to get away from everybody, he wanted to escape into solitude, where he could be alone with his thoughts, and with Miriam.

Yes, Miriam was the great secret that separated him from all of these novices and even from his comrades. How many times had he dreamed of her, when he was fortunate enough to be able to fall asleep. He had the feeling she was ever-present, and because of this all company bothered him. Sometimes, when he was all alone, he would close his eyes. He would be back in the pavilion as he'd been that night, with Miriam bending over him. He saw her so vividly and registered all the details around her so precisely, that it was hellish torture not to be able

to touch her. Indeed, he suffered no less than the unfortunate Farhad, separated from Shirin by Khosrow Parviz. Frequently he was afraid he might go mad ...

By day Suleiman and Yusuf took some comfort in their fame. The first thing in the morning they would ride out of the castle at the head of their unit, and faces full of admiration would watch as they passed by.

But the irritability caused by their sleepless nights found its outlet precisely in the novices. Yusuf would roar like a lion when things weren't going as he wanted them to. But the novices soon found out that Suleiman's sharp, suppressed outbursts were far more dangerous. He often derided them for their mistakes. His laughter had the effect of a whiplash. Yusuf was generous with his explanations. He liked to be asked questions and then be able to answer them. All he needed was for them to show fear and respect when they approached him. But asking Suleiman a question was as good as risking a terrible slap in the face.

That is how they were by day. But as evening approached, they fell victim to fear and anxiety. They knew they were going to have to face another sleepless night.

Once Suleiman said to Yusuf and ibn Tahir, "I can't take this any longer. I'm going to go see Sayyiduna."

"Are you out of your mind?"

Yusuf was terrified.

"It doesn't work that way, Suleiman," ibn Tahir replied. "You've just got to bear with it, the same as us."

Suleiman flew into a rage.

"But I'm not made out of wood! I'm going to go see him and tell him everything. Either he'll give me some assignment that takes me back to paradise, or I'll strangle myself with my own hands!"

His eyes flashed like an animal's. He rolled them so that their whites showed and he gnashed his teeth furiously.

The next morning he asked Abu Soraka to permit him to go see Abu Ali.

"What's your business with him?"

"I've got to talk to him."

"What about? Some sort of complaint, maybe?"

"No. I want to ask him to give me an assignment."

"You'll get your assignment when the time comes, not by asking for

it.”

“But I have to speak to Abu Ali.”

Abu Soraka noticed the crazed glint in his eyes.

Let them have a taste of their own cooking, he thought to himself.

“Since you’re so insistent about this, I’ll refer your request to the grand dai.”

Abu Ali sensed something unpleasant when he heard that Suleiman wanted to speak with him.

“Wait,” he ordered Abu Soraka.

He went to Hasan and asked his advice.

“Talk to him,” Hasan said. “Then report back to me. We may learn something really interesting.”

Abu Ali waited for Suleiman in the great assembly hall. They were alone in the huge room.

“What’s on your mind, my dear Suleiman, that you wish to speak to me?”

Suleiman lowered his eyes.

“I wanted to ask you, reverend grand dai, to take me to see Sayyiduna.” Abu Ali was clearly nonplussed.

“Of all the things to ask for! Sayyiduna labors from morning to night for our well-being. Do you want to steal time away from him? I’m his deputy. Everything you wanted to tell him you can tell me now.”

“It’s difficult ... He’s the only one who has the cure I need.”

“Speak up. I’ll relay everything to him.”

“I can’t stand it anymore. I want an assignment that will open the gates of paradise to me again.”

Abu Ali reflexively took a step backward. For a moment he caught Suleiman’s eyes. They were burning like fire.

“You’re mad, Suleiman. Do you realize that what you’re asking is practically rebellion? And that rebellion is punishable by death?”

“Better to die than suffer like this.”

Suleiman had murmured these words, but Abu Ali understood him.

“Go now. I’ll give this some thought. There may be help waiting for you sooner than you think.”

When Abu Ali returned, Hasan looked at him inquiringly.

“He wants you to give him an assignment so he can go back to paradise. He says he can’t bear it anymore.”

Hasan smiled.

“I wasn’t mistaken,” he said. “The poison and the gardens are having their effect. Soon it will be time for the final experiment.”

One night the incessant frustration eclipsed Suleiman’s mind. He got up, went over to Naim’s bed and sat down on it. Naim woke up and caught sight of the figure sitting at his feet. By its outline he recognized it as Suleiman. Instinctively he felt afraid.

“What’s wrong, Suleiman?”

Suleiman didn’t answer him. He stared at him motionlessly. His pale, sunken face shone through the semidarkness. Gradually Naim made out its expression and was terrified.

With a sudden movement Suleiman yanked the blanket off of him.

“Show me your breasts!”

Naim was petrified with fear. Suleiman grabbed him by the chest.

“Oh, Halima, Halima!” he moaned.

“Help me!”

Naim’s shout echoed madly through the night.

Guards’ footsteps could be heard coming down the hallway.

Suleiman started awake.

“By Allah! I’ll strangle you if you give me away. You were dreaming!”

He quickly disappeared back into his bed.

A guard walked in.

“Did you call out, Naim?”

“Yes. I had a terrible dream.”

The guard went away.

Naim got up and pulled the blanket off his bed.

“Why are you leaving?”

Suleiman gave him a piercing look.

“I’m afraid of you, Suleiman.”

“Idiot! Get back into your bed this instant and go to sleep. I’m sleepy too.”

The next morning Naim asked Abu Soraka to assign him to different quarters. He’d prefer not to sleep in the same room as Suleiman.

“Why not?”

Naim shrugged. His face was pale and diminutive.

Abu Soraka didn't press the issue. *It's best I know as little as possible about these things*, he thought. He granted his request and sent Abdur Ahman to room with Suleiman.

A competition developed among the other fedayeen to see who could do the best job of performing his assigned duties. Obeida returned from Rudbar, where he had been sent to deliver an order to Buzurg Ummid's deputy ibn Ismail, the military commander of the fortress, whom Hasan had since named regional dai. He brought with him detailed reports on the movements of Emir Arslan Tash's army, which was camped outside of Qazvin and Rai. From Qazvin, ibn Vakas was in steady contact with the emir's soldiers, while Halfa did the same from Rai. Many Ismailis on the outside reported to them on the slightest details of the enemy's units.

To all appearances the emir was in no particular hurry to reach Alamut. The handsome Persian had brought along a whole harem of wives. He invited the local grandees to attend festive banquets, or had himself invited to theirs. He drank with his officers, enjoying his veritable swarm of songstresses and dancers. The army adjusted to this slow pace. The noncommissioned officers and the men instigated their own excursions in all directions. They seized and extorted everything they saw. The people cursed them along with the sultan and the grand vizier for sending them.

From his next exploit Obeida brought back encouraging news. The released captives had been telling the emir's men about the wondrous life of the Ismailis at the castle of Alamut, and about their omnipotent commander with the power to send his believers to paradise. The soldiers, long since tired of being idle, listened to them with relish. In the evenings they would discuss these things. Many of them were becoming enthusiastic about the Ismaili teachings and didn't even bother to hide it. Now only their curiosity still drove them to get to Alamut, which was ruled by the "commander of the mountain," or the "old man of the mountain." And now the Ismaili scouts could openly circulate among the emir's forces. They discussed religious and political issues with them, providing passionate proofs that only their commander taught the one true faith. Even the ones who didn't believe them, or even scoffed at them, let them come and go freely. What could a little

fortress with five hundred men do against an army of thirty thousand, sent against it by the master of all Iran? And so the scouts reported back to Alamut that the emir's encircling forces were completely undermined and that the enemy army was close to collapsing.

When Abu Ali brought this news to Hasan, the latter said, "The disarray of the enemy's army is the result of two factors, to wit, the defeat of the Turkish cavalry and our successful experiment with paradise. The former forced the emir to be more cautious and consolidate his campaign, which is now dependent on slow-moving quartermaster wagons. But while its effect diminishes from day to day—and that kind of defeat practically demands to be forgotten—the news of our miracle is spreading among the simple soldiery by evident and not so evident means. Really, this sort of fairy tale is the best fuel for the people's imagination."

After the visit of the fedayeen, life in the gardens changed considerably too. Those girls who had previously lived in harems saw their old memories awakened. They compared them with the most recent ones, with those girls who had gotten short shrift during the youths' visit making a great deal of their earlier experiences. The rest praised this most recent night of love. Fights and arguments resulted, and they all felt a certain irritability. Now almost all they did was weave, sew, and do other handicrafts, so the conversations stretched from morning to evening.

They spent a lot of time speculating about whether the same visitors would come back next time. Many of them didn't care, or even preferred a change, to the extent they hadn't received enough attention from the lovers on the last visit. They hoped they wouldn't be overlooked next time. Most of them thought Hasan would send new people. Even Zuleika, who had spent the first few days crying relentlessly for Yusuf, gradually accepted this thought. Only Halima couldn't and wouldn't understand that she and Suleiman would probably never see each other again.

Her state caused Miriam a great deal of concern. In a few days the flourishing color of her little face faded. Her eyes grew red from sleeplessness and crying. Dark circles appeared around them. She

comforted her as best she could.

But Miriam's heart was unsettled too. She constantly worried about ibn Tahir's fate. She waited for Hasan to summon her for a conversation again. But it was as though he had become deliberately absent. She felt an almost maternal concern for ibn Tahir. It was as if she were personally responsible for his and Halima's fate.

A month after the victory over the sultan's vanguard, a division of Muzaffar's men brought back to Alamut a messenger sent to Hasan by the new grand vizier and secretary to the sultana, Taj al-Mulk.

Hasan received him immediately. The messenger told him that news of the defeat of the emir's vanguard had reached the sultan on the road to Baghdad, in the vicinity of Nehavend. The deposed grand vizier arrived immediately after this news. The sultan had become violently angry. He had already given the order deposing Arslan Tash as emir and requiring him to appear before him to defend himself. But Nizam al-Mulk persuaded the sultan that the new grand vizier was at fault for everything, since he and the sultana were secretly allied to the Ismailis. They came to an agreement and the sultan once again named Nizam al-Mulk as his vizier. But the sultana was insisting that Taj al-Mulk retain that office. Nizam was now encamped near Nehavend and was assembling forces to strike against Isfahan, depose his rival, and restore the sultan's and his own prestige. He had sent emir Arslan Tash an order to take and destroy Alamut within a month at the latest. Otherwise he would indict him for high treason. He issued a similar order to Kizil Sarik, who still had the fortress of Gonbadan in Khuzestan under siege. The sultana and her vizier sent him this message under oath and asked him to provide them with help and support in this crisis.

Hasan replied to the messenger immediately.

"First of all, give my greetings to your masters. Then tell them that I was quite surprised when they recently broke their promise to me. Now they're in need and appealing to me again. And despite the fact that they broke their word, I'll jump to their aid once again. But tell them to think carefully next time before disappointing me again. Let what is about to happen to their enemy and mine serve as a warning to them."

Hasan dismissed him and ordered Muzaffar's adjutants to dine him

royally and shower him with gifts.

“This is the decisive moment,” he told the two grand dais. He appeared to be exceptionally calm—calm as only a person who has just made an irreversible decision can be.

“So Nizam al-Mulk is back at the helm. That means he’s going to be ruthless toward us and do everything he can to crush and destroy us. So we need to hurry our course of action along.”

The grand dais looked at him inquisitively.

“What do you plan to do?”

“Destroy my mortal enemy once and for all.”

During these days ibn Tahir channeled his anxiety, his longing, and all the alienation of his soul into poems. He wrote them on fragments of parchment that he carefully concealed from all other eyes. He found at least a shred of consolation for all the travails and torments of his heart in constantly revising each individual line. Under the pretext that he was preparing an assignment for his students, he would retreat to his room and write verses there, or yield to his loneliness and daydreams.

Some of his poems went like this:

It used to be my soul
Was full of holy teachings of the Prophet,
Of Sayyiduna, of Ali and Ismail,
The forerunner of what would come.
Now only your face, Miriam,
Rules my heart and fills my soul.
Your charming voice and magic smile,
The scent of your red lips, the fairness of your breasts,
Your slender hands, your perfect build,
Wise spirit, knowing mind, so unlike other women,
And your eyes! Those lovely, dusky eyes
Like mountain lakes, deep beyond imagination,
That glint beneath your brow, a marble cliff.
I see myself in them and
All the world! Where is there room
For Ali, Ismail and the Prophet now?!

You are my Ali, Ismail and Prophet,
My longing, faith, my Allah,
Commanding spirit, mind and heart.
You are my world, my paradise, my Allah.

§

When my mind's eye, Miriam, sees your face,
Strange doubts creep into my heart.
Are you really flesh and blood like me and others like me,
Who thinks and feels and wants like us, God's creatures?
The mark beneath my heart, is that the proof?
Or are you just a phantom lacking flesh and bones,
Which Our Master's secret art conjured?
If so, then how can I escape this guile,
That I'm in love with air, a gust of wind, a poisoned wisp?
How dare I blaspheme! A holy man a fraud?
Who can dispel these troubling mysteries?

§

Oh, what a wretched Farhad I've become, parted from
My dearest Shirin. What sort of powerful master is it
Who's set a boundary between her and me?
Is this the Mahdi, Prophet, perhaps Allah?
Insane with love, am I to hew her image
Out of rock? Or, mad from longing, plant
A hatchet in my heart?
Who gave you the power, Sayyiduna,
To let the living into heaven?
Do you perhaps have access too?
Do you know Miriam? (I'm wildly jealous!)
Do you perhaps have secret knowledge
Of the mysteries our ancestors' priests performed,
The ones the Prophet banished to endure
Hell's torments inside Demavend?
If that's true, then Miriam, my beloved moonbeam,
Would be nothing but a loathsome brew

Of some black substance and your magic.
No, that can't be. The Dævas still sleep
In the mountain undisturbed. It would take a villain
To deny your miracle's sweet and perfect truth.

§

Why won't you show the way that leads me
Back to Miriam, O Sayyiduna,
Kind uniter, cruel divider?
If it takes death to buy my passage back
To join her, say the word,
And I'll leap from the highest rock.
My smile will testify how much I love her.
Or do I need to shove a knife into my heart
To live beside my Miriam forever?
Command! Perhaps I need to leap through fire
And join the Dævas? Just no more waiting,
No more pangs of separation,
Splitting me from paradise like Adam!
Send me back to Miriam! Take me to her
Before cruel longing rips my heart in two.

In the evening Hasan had ibn Tahir summoned to him.

"Is your faith solid now?"

"It is, Sayyiduna."

"Do you believe I can open to gates to paradise for you whenever I want?"

"I do, Sayyiduna."

They were alone in the room. Hasan inspected ibn Tahir closely. What a change since that evening when he sent him to the gardens! He had grown thinner, his cheeks had sunken, and his eyes were deep set. A feverish, doleful fire shone in them. He could see it: his machine worked with a fearsome dependability.

"Do you want to earn eternal joy for yourself?"

Ibn Tahir trembled. He looked at Hasan brightly, imploringly.

"Oh, ... Sayyiduna!"

Hasan lowered his eyes. He could almost feel his heart drop. Now he realized why he had always been reluctant to get to know the fedayeen better.

“It wasn’t for nothing that I opened the gates of paradise to you. I wanted your faith to be firm. I wanted you to be aware always of what awaits you once you carry out your assignment ... Do you know who al-Ghazali is?”

“Surely you mean the Sufi, Sayyiduna?”

“Yes. The one who attacked our faith so meanly in the book *On the Mustansirites*. Over a year ago the grand vizier appointed him as a teacher at the university in Baghdad. Your assignment is to pretend to be his student. Here is a copy of his work ‘O, Child!’ It’s short. You have a quick mind and can read and absorb it in one night. Come visit me again tomorrow. You’re in my personal service now. Not a word to anyone about this. Do you understand?”

“I understand, Sayyiduna.”

He dismissed him. Agitated and half-crazy with happiness, ibn Tahir left the room.

On the stairway ibn Tahir ran into Abu Ali and Buzurg Ummid, who, out of breath and flushed with agitation, were dragging a man behind them. By his appearance, he must have just completed a difficult and strenuous journey. He was covered in dirt from head to foot. Streams of sweat sluiced long passages down his mud-caked face. He was gasping heavily. Ibn Tahir pressed up against the wall and let the three of them pass. Something told him that great and difficult days were approaching for Alamut.

A guard uncovered the doorway to let the man and the grand dais in to see Hasan.

“A messenger from Khuzestan,” Abu Ali forced out amid gasps.

“What happened?”

Hasan gained control over himself. From the faces of his visitors he immediately sensed bad news.

The messenger fell to his knees before him.

“O master! Husein Alkeini is dead. Murdered!”

Hasan went as pale as a corpse.

“Who is the perpetrator?”

“Forgive me, Sayyiduna! Hosein, your son.”

Hasan shuddered as though struck by an arrow. His arms waved as though grabbing for someone invisible. He wavered, turned in a half-circle, and crashed to the floor like a felled tree.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The son of the supreme commander had murdered the dai of Khuzestan! The next day all of Alamut was talking about it. No one quite knew how the news had spread. The messenger had first entrusted it to the grand dais, who immediately took him to see Hasan. Perhaps one of the dais standing nearby had caught wind of it, or perhaps the grand dais themselves had let it slip to someone. Everyone knew about it, and it would have been pointless to try to hide it in any way from the faithful.

Ibn Tahir had to wait a long time for Hasan to receive him. The supreme commander wanted to know all the details of the murder, so he questioned the messenger in detail.

“The carrier pigeon brought your order to Gonbadan, Sayyiduna. Kizil Sarik had us under siege for ten days at that point. He had destroyed all the lesser fortresses and then encamped outside of ours with his twenty thousand men. He offered us safe passage, but the grand dai refused. But Hosein, your son, insisted that he surrender the castle. That’s when Alkeini asked for your instructions as to what to do with him. You ordered him clapped into chains. Alkeini relayed this to him and insisted that he give himself up. Hosein went wild with rage. ‘You’ve betrayed me to my father, you dog!’ he shrieked at him. He drew his saber and cut down our commander.”

“What did you do with the murderer?”

“We put him in chains and locked him in a cellar. Sheik Abdul Malik ibn Atash assumed command of the fortress.”

“What’s the situation there?”

“Difficult, master. There’s not much water, and soon the faithful will run out of food too. There’s more than three thousand of them in the fortress. The entire population of Khuzestan is with us. But that damned Kizil Sarik is cruel, and they’re afraid of him. We can’t count on much help from them.”

Hasan dismissed him.

Now he was steady and focused again.

“What do you plan to do with your son, ibn Sabbah?” Buzurg Ummid asked him.

“We’ll judge him according to our laws.”

He dismissed the grand dais and had ibn Tahir summoned.

“How is it coming with al-Ghazali?”

“I spent practically the whole night with it, Sayyiduna.”

“Good. Have you heard what has happened in Khuzestan?”

Ibn Tahir looked at him. He saw new furrows in his face.

“I have, Sayyiduna.”

“What would you do if you were in my place?”

Ibn Tahir looked at him with clear, bright eyes.

“I would do what the law commands.”

“And you’re right ... Do you know who Iblis is?”

“Iblis is the evil spirit that tempted the first human beings.”

“Iblis is more than that. Iblis is a traitor to his own master, his sworn enemy.”

Ibn Tahir nodded.

“Whoever is a traitor to the true faith and becomes its enemy is related to Iblis. Because the true faith is Allah’s faith. And only one faith is true.”

“Yes. The Ismaili faith.”

“Correct. Do you know anyone who has betrayed our faith and become its sworn enemy?”

Ibn Tahir looked in his eyes, trying to guess what he was thinking.

“Perhaps you mean the grand vizier?”

“Yes, the same man who murdered your grandfather for professing our faith. He is our Iblis, our evil spirit. You be our archangel and your grandfather’s avenger. Get your sword ready.”

Ibn Tahir clenched his fists. He stood before Hasan as straight as a cypress.

“My sword is ready, Sayyiduna.”

“Do you know the road from Rai to Baghdad?”

“I do. I’m from the town of Sava, which lies on that road.”

“Then listen. You’re to set out along that road. You’ll go to Rai and from there through Sava and Hamadan to Nehavend. But avoid your

father's home! The whole time you have to be thinking about one thing—how to reach your goal. Be on the lookout everywhere and find out where the grand vizier is and what he's planning to do. I've received a report that he's assembling a large army in Nehavend that he plans to lead against us and his rival in Isfahan, Taj al-Mulk. Are you following all of this? Al-Ghazali is his friend. From now on you're going to be al-Ghazali's student Othman, bringing him a message from your teacher. So take his book along with you. Here's the black garb of a Sunni seminarian for you, here's a coin purse with money for the road, and here's a letter for the grand vizier. The seal you see on it will clear the way for you."

Ibn Tahir took the black clothing from him and examined it with a kind of happy excitement. He fixed the coin purse to his belt and put the envelope under his robe.

"You've learned from Hakim how to behave in the presence of the grand vizier. When you ride out from Alamut, you'll take along everything I've given you in a bag. Once you're away from the fortress you'll find a concealed place to change clothes in and get rid of anything that might give you away. I know Nizam al-Mulk. When he hears that al-Ghazali has sent you, he'll welcome you with open arms. Now listen carefully! There is a long, sharp dagger hidden in that sealed letter. Before you hand the envelope to the vizier, secretly take the dagger out of it. While the vizier is opening the letter, you thrust it hard into his neck. If you notice just a drop of blood, you can know that you've succeeded. But be careful not to injure yourself with it first—the tip of the dagger has been tempered in a terrible poison. If you even graze yourself with it, you won't be able to complete your task and the paradise you want so much will be lost to you forever."

Pale, but with eyes shining, ibn Tahir listened to him.

"And ... what do I do then?"

Hasan gave him an abrupt glance.

"Then ... then commend yourself to Allah. The gate to your paradise will be open to you. No one will be able to take that away from you at that point. The soft pillows are already spread out over the carpets. Miriam is waiting for you on them, surrounded by her and your servants. If you fall, you'll go flying straight into her embrace. Do you understand me?"

“I understand, Sayyiduna.”

He bowed and quickly kissed Hasan’s hand.

Hasan shuddered. Ibn Tahir was too preoccupied with himself to notice this. Then the commander uncovered a shelf and took down from it the gold chest that Ibn Tahir already knew. He opened it and shook several pellets out of it onto a linen cloth.

“One for each evening. They’ll bring you closer and closer to paradise. But be sure to save the last one for just before your audience with the grand vizier. Take good care of them, because they’re the key that will unlock the gates to paradise for you.”

He put his arm around his shoulders.

“Now off with you, my son.”

Dazed, pale, proud and strangely moved, Ibn Tahir left him. Hasan watched until he disappeared behind the curtain. Then he grabbed at his heart. He needed air. He rushed to the top of the tower, where he took deep breaths.

“There’s still time,” he told himself.

It would be good to die now, he thought. Just one firm decision to throw himself over the battlements, and everything would be over. But God knows where he would awaken after that.

The night before, when he had learned about the murder of Alkeini, he had been unbelievably close to this state. It took the grand dais a long time to bring him back to consciousness. When he came to, his first thought was that he had died and was now in some different world. A crazed fear overcame him. “So there is something after death,” he told himself. He felt horrified by his whole life. He was conscious that he had done everything as though there were just a great nothing waiting after death. It was only the voices of his two friends that had summoned him back to reality.

Within a moment he had felt steady again. Praise be to Allah, the weakness had passed. He dismissed the grand dais. Husein Alkeini, his right hand, dead, murdered by his own son! He would execute the law mercilessly. Ibn Tahir would have to set out on his mission. He wrote a few words of a letter and sealed it. He took a sharp, awl-like dagger that looked just like a writing instrument and dipped it in poison. He let it dry. Then he threw himself on his bed and slept the sleep of the dead.

The dais and other commanders discussed the murder in Khuzestan passionately. What was Hasan going to do? Would he really observe the law? Would he sign his own son's death warrant?

"Ibn Sabbah is in a difficult place," Abdul Malik observed. "Husein Alkeini was his best associate, but the murderer is his own son."

"The law is above everything," Ibrahim said.

"Go on! One crow doesn't attack the other."

The Greek laughed. Ibrahim cast an ill-tempered glance at him.

"He has no small responsibility."

"I know, dai Ibrahim. But it's hard for me to imagine a father leading his son to the block."

"Hosein is a member of the Ismaili brotherhood."

"It's true," Abu Soraka commented. "He wrote the law and now he's caught in it himself."

"It's easy for us to talk," Manuchehr said. "But he's facing the moment when he'll have to pass sentence on his son."

"It's easier to pronounce them over other men's sons," the Greek muttered.

"It's easy to mete out justice to others," Abu Soraka added.

"I wouldn't want to be in the commander's skin," Abdul Malik said. "Alkeini was more than a son to him. He owes half his success to him."

"Fathers aren't always responsible for the actions of their sons," Ibrahim said.

"But if he condemns his son, people will say, 'What a cruel father!' He has the power to change the law, and he hasn't used it."

So spoke Abu Soraka.

The Greek added, "Strangers are going to laugh at him. Idiot! they'll say. Could he really not find a way to sidestep the law?"

Ibrahim took a turn. "The faithful would rebel if the law weren't carried out to the letter. The purpose of every law is to have universal applicability."

"It's true, our commander is in a mean vice," the Greek suggested. "He's lost his most trusted shield-bearer at the most critical moment. Who's going to collect taxes for him in Khuzestan now? Who's going to ambush and plunder infidel caravans? He may very well not have any option but to carry out the full measure of the law."

Yusuf and Suleiman had returned from their morning maneuvers with the novices. The sun bore down on the courtyard relentlessly. They lay on their beds lazily and inertly, chewing on dried fruit and exchanging a few words now and then.

The passions awakened in them, but no longer satisfied, had utterly crippled them. Their heads felt heavy and their eyes were sunken and swollen with blood.

Suddenly Naim burst in on them.

“Ibn Tahir has been to see Sayyiduna. He’s going on a trip.”

This news was like an explosion.

“Where to?”

“Who told you that?”

“I saw him as he was leaving the tower. He didn’t even notice me. It was like he’d gone strange in the head. He looked lost and he was smiling to himself. Then he ordered a soldier to saddle up a horse for him.”

“Is he going to paradise?”

Suleiman jumped off his bed.

“Let’s go see him, Yusuf!”

In the meantime ibn Tahir had cleared out all his possessions. He destroyed the wax cast of Miriam’s bite. He wrapped up his poems in an envelope. When Jafar came, he gave them to him.

“Keep this envelope for me until I return. If I don’t come back within a month, give it to Sayyiduna.”

Jafar promised to do this.

Suleiman and Yusuf rushed into the room. Naim lingered at the door. “You’ve been to see Sayyiduna!”

Suleiman grabbed ibn Tahir by the shoulders and gazed searchingly into his eyes.

“You know?”

“Sure. Naim told us.”

“Then you also know what my duty is.”

He shook loose of his grip. He picked up the bag holding the items Hasan had given him.

Yusuf and Suleiman looked at him woefully.

Jafar nodded to Naim. The two of them withdrew from the room.

“It’s hard, but I have to keep silent,” ibn Tahir said when they were

alone.

“At least tell us if we’re going back to paradise.”

Suleiman’s voice was imploring and helpless.

“Be patient. Do everything Sayyiduna orders you to do. He’s looking out for all of us.”

He said goodbye to them both.

“We’re fedayeen,” he added, “the ones who sacrifice themselves. We’ve seen the reward, so we’re not afraid of death.”

He would have liked to embrace them one more time. But he mastered himself, waved to them in farewell, and hurried off toward his horse. He leapt up onto it and ordered the bridge lowered. He said the password and the guard let him leave the fortress. From the canyon he turned around to take one last look. Just as he had several months ago, now he saw the two imposing towers that ruled over their surroundings. That was Alamut, the eagle’s nest, where miracles took place and the fate of the world was forged. Would he see it again? A strange melancholy came over him. At this farewell he felt as though he could cry.

He found a concealed location and changed clothes there. He put everything he didn’t plan to take with him in the bag, which he placed in a hollow and covered with stones.

He had a look at himself. Yes, there was no way he could still be the old ibn Tahir. He was Othman, a student at the university in Baghdad, al-Ghazali’s student. Black trousers, a black jacket, black headgear. This was the color of the Sunnis, infidels, enemies of the Ismaili faith. He carried the book and the letter with the dagger in his billowing sleeves. Over his hip he carried a water bag and a satchel with provisions.

He set out toward the south. He rode the whole day and half the night until the moon came out. Then he found a place to bed down amid some rocks. The next morning from atop a ridge he noticed a large encampment in the valley—the vanguard of the sultan’s army. He steered clear of them and by evening arrived in Rai.

In the tavern where he was planning to spend the night, he learned that emir Arslan Tash was finally getting ready to attack Alamut after all, and that the whole army was marching toward the mountains—this at the sultan’s order, to avenge the shameful defeat of the Turkish cavalry. About the grand vizier he learned nothing.

He could barely wait to go to sleep. With trembling hands he untied

the bundle and took out of it the first of the pellets that Hasan had given him for the journey. He swallowed it and waited for it to take effect.

Once again the mysterious power appeared. This time he no longer felt the same weakness as he did the first time. He thought about Miriam, but completely different images drew his attention. Before him he saw gigantic square buildings with tall towers. They glinted in their blinding whiteness. Then they began to melt, as though an unseen hand were crushing them into their components. New cities emerged and round cupolas shone in vivid colors. He felt as though he were the omnipotent ruler in control of it all. The climax came, followed by fatigue and sleep. He woke up late the next morning, feeling as though his arms and legs had been crushed. Oh, why hadn't he awoken like the first time?

"I have to get going. Fast!" he told himself.

He took a detour around his native town. He was afraid of the memories. His head felt heavy and the sun was beating down hopelessly. His thoughts were dull, only his destination and everything connected with it were clearly visible ahead of him. He had just one wish: to find a place to spend the night as quickly as possible, stretch out, swallow a pellet and yield to its miraculous power.

Outside of Hamadan he caught up with a detachment of armed horsemen. He joined their quartermaster wagons.

"Where are you coming from, Pahlavan?" a sergeant asked him.

"Isfahan. Actually, I've been sent from Baghdad with a request for the grand vizier. But in Isfahan I learned that he's set out down this road after the sultan."

"You're looking for His Excellency Nizam al-Mulk?"

The sergeant immediately began to show more respect.

"Yes. I have a request for him. There are other men in Isfahan."

"Then come with us! His Excellency is in Nehavend, where there's a military camp now. They're assembling units there. Word is he's going to march on Isfahan itself."

"In the capital I almost fell into the hands of that other one. Completely by accident I learned in a tavern that His Excellency had left for somewhere else. Isn't there some conflict involving some infidels?"

"Do you mean the Ismailis? They aren't dangerous. Emirs Arslan Tash and Kizil Sarik will take care of them. There are more important things

at stake.”

Ibn Tahir maneuvered his horse right up to the sergeant's.

“I don't know what more important things you mean.”

“The rumor is there's a bitter battle going on over the succession. Nizam al-Mulk wants the first-born, Barkiarok, to be designated the sultan's heir. But the sultana has been pressuring His Highness to promise the succession to her son Mohammed. The army and the people are for Barkiarok. I once saw him. There's a real man for you. A soldier from head to foot. What Mohammed will be like, no one can know. He's barely out of the cradle.”

Before they reached Hamadan, ibn Tahir had found out everything that the people and soldiers were saying about intrigues at the court. In the city he heard that the sultan had already left Nehavend heading for Baghdad. He left the sergeant and the quartermaster wagons, spent the night once again at an inn, and then changed horses and rode farther on toward Nehavend.

From the four corners of the realm, units were arriving at the military camp near Nehavend. Several thousand tents had been pitched on the broad, sun-scorched plain. The horses, mules, and camels chomped on dry grass, chased each other around the camp in herds, dug into the earth, and fled from guards on horseback. Thousands of head of cattle, goats and sheep were being kept in huge pens. In the mornings, shepherds would drive the herds into the hills, where pastures remained green. Detachments of soldiers rode from village to village collecting and plundering fodder for the livestock and anything that was in the least bit edible.

There was a large empty space in the middle of the camp. That was where the sultan's tents had stood just a few days before. The trampled ground and the large beds of ashes left over from the campfires that the emperor's escort had lit and tended testified to that.

Only one tent was left. A large, sumptuously green tent, the dwelling of the grand vizier.

These last months since falling out of his master's favor, Nizam al-Mulk had aged considerably. Although he was already past seventy, he had still been exceptionally healthy and robust right up to the end.

Everyone admired how firmly in the saddle he still remained. He had held the reins of state in his hands for more than thirty years. The current ruler's father, sultan Alp Arslan Shah, had named him vizier and never regretted it. As he was dying, he recommended the vizier to his son and heir. One of the titles the latter conferred on him was *ata beg*, or "king's father." The vizier established peace at the borders, criss-crossed the country with roads, built cities, mosques and schools, regulated taxes, and raised the level of safety and well-being in the country to an unprecedented degree. He enjoyed the ruler's unqualified trust, until he quarreled with the young sultana about the succession to the throne. Even before then his rivals and detractors had tried to blacken his name with the emperor. But the sultan didn't listen to them. He granted his vizier the wealth he had accumulated in his service. He also let Nizam al-Mulk place his twelve sons in the highest positions in the land. But Turkan Khatun eventually succeeded in demonstrating to the sultan how capricious the vizier's actions had been, how he had treated him, his master, like a schoolboy, and how ruthlessly he abused his power. The most obvious instance of this willfulness of the vizier's was seen in a certain action taken by his eldest son, Muad-u-dolah. The sultan had advised him to accept a certain Adil into an area of his service. The vizier's son refused, claiming the man was not suitable for the position. "Am I really such a complete zero in my own country?!" the sultan exclaimed. He immediately ordered the vizier's son deposed and appointed in his place the very same Adil whom the son had rejected. This behavior offended the vizier deeply. He let slip some bitter words about the thanklessness of rulers. These words were brought to the sultan's attention and made him even angrier. He threatened to take away Nizam's quiver, pen, ink and brush—the symbols of the vizier's rank. "I'll be glad to hand over my quiver and brush to the sultan," the vizier said bitterly. "The peace and prosperity of this country are my doing. While the sea was still stormy, His Highness honored me with his trust. Now that the waves have been calmed and the sky is clear, he listens to my critics. But he stands to realize very soon how closely the quiver and brush in my hands are connected with his crown." These words put the sultan in an even worse humor, until the vizier's own admission that he had misrepresented Hasan's abilities so wounded the sultan's pride that he deposed the vizier in a fit of extreme anger.

Now that they had made peace again in the face of the danger threatening the state, he was gradually becoming his old self again. He set two goals for himself: toppling his rival Taj al-Mulk and destroying the latter's ally, his own mortal enemy Hasan. If he could achieve those two goals, he would once again be the unlimited master of all Iran.

The first steps had not been bad. He had portrayed the defeat of the Turkish vanguard outside of Alamut—that insignificant scratch against the cavalry—in such a way that he undermined the sultan's faith in Taj al-Mulk. The sultan remembered all too well how much the sultana and her secretary had tried to keep him from taking any action against the Ismailis. Now the vizier persuaded him that he had to move decisively against those apostates if he wanted to keep the respect of his own citizens. And so the ruler gave the vizier the authority to deal with Alamut once and for all. Nizam felt it was high time for this. Legends of miracles in the castle, of fanatics who said that Hasan had shown them paradise, were reaching his ears too. Even though he viewed all these reports as pure nonsense, he didn't underestimate their potential effect on the masses. He knew too well that they were not just gullible, but took a particular delight in hearing and succumbing to tales of miracles.

Now the military camp near Nehavend became a kind of provisional chancellery for him. People came to him from all directions with requests and complaints. While he had been grand vizier instead of Nizam, Taj al-Mulk had fired a large number of old bureaucrats and appointed his own people to replace them. When the former bureaucrats learned that the sultan had reinstated his old vizier, they either came rushing to see him or sent their confidants with the request to accept them back into service, seeing as how they had lost their positions on account of their loyalty to him. Nizam al-Mulk received his petitioners and made promises. At the same time he was assembling an army to force his rival, protected by the sultana, to step down.

One morning his master of ceremonies announced that a certain Othman, a student of al-Ghazali, was requesting an audience. Apparently his teacher had sent him from the Nizamiyah in Baghdad with a petition that he would like to present to him.

The grand vizier was reclining on a heap of pillows. Beside him was a

gilt platter of raisins, sweetened nuts and other delicacies. Now and then he reached over and picked up this or that morsel to savor. He would pour himself some mead into a cup from a copper decanter and slowly sip it. He had already dealt with a large number of petitions and visits, and his two assistants, who sat to either side of him, writing, had their hands full.

“What’s that? Al-Ghazali’s student, did you say? Bring him in! Bring him in!”

It was much easier to get to the grand vizier than to the Ismaili supreme commander. That day ibn Tahir found this out for himself. He had come across a guard outside the encampment. He showed the commanding officer the sealed letter from the university in Baghdad and explained he had brought it for the grand vizier. He was allowed to pass. They showed him Nizam’s green tent.

He was remarkably calm and focused. He didn’t stutter when he said what he had come for. He couldn’t feel any effects from the pellet yet. He remembered paradise and Miriam and smiled a childlike smile. He hadn’t been thinking of her particularly at all these past days. Now suddenly he became aware that she was waiting for him as a reward for his action, so he would have to summon all his might to carry it out successfully.

A guard drew back a curtain, revealing yet another room. In fact, the vizier’s tent was a veritable edifice. He bravely passed through the opening to find himself once again standing before some armed men. One of them, carrying a silver mace over his shoulder, was especially well dressed in a jacket woven with silver and gold, broad red trousers, and a brightly colored turban sporting a long bird’s feather. This was the vizier’s master of ceremonies. He sized up the newcomer sharply and asked him what he wanted.

Ibn Tahir bowed deeply. In a clear voice he explained who had sent him. He showed him the letter and the seal on it. The master of ceremonies nodded to a soldier, who frisked the newcomer. All he found was al-Ghazali’s book and the coin purse.

“This is our custom,” the master of ceremonies said apologetically. Then he stepped around a curtain to announce the visitor to the vizier.

Those were the most tense moments of all for ibn Tahir. The poison in his body had begun to take effect. He began to hear voices and tried to

make them out. An eerie feeling down his spine caused him to shudder. He thought he could hear Miriam's voice.

"O Allah!" he said to himself. "Sayyiduna was right. I can already hear the murmur of paradise around me."

The master of ceremonies had to call his name twice before he heard and came through the entrance, where a soldier had drawn the curtain aside. He caught sight of a splendid old man sitting among his pillows. Everything about him bespoke benevolent majesty. Ibn Tahir had the impression he had said something to him, but the voice seemed to be coming from a great distance away.

He bowed deeply. When he stood back up, everything around him was changed. "The pavilion in paradise!" he exclaimed to himself.

"Calm down, my boy," a deep male voice said. "So you come to me from al-Ghazali?"

Now he saw the grand vizier before him again, smiling at him kindly to put him at ease, since he took his strange behavior to be mere awkwardness.

Ibn Tahir instantly became clear about everything. *The effect of the pellet*, he thought.

"Yes, I come from al-Ghazali, Your Excellency, with this letter."

He held the letter out toward the old man, while calmly drawing the sharpened writing instrument out of it. He did this so naturally that none of those present was aware of the action.

The vizier unsealed the envelope and unfolded the letter.

"What is my learned friend up to in Baghdad?" he asked.

Ibn Tahir suddenly leaned forward and shoved the dagger into his throat beneath the chin. The vizier was so startled that for the first few moments he didn't feel any pain. He just opened his eyes up wide. Then he scanned the only line of the letter one more time and grasped everything. He called for help.

Ibn Tahir remained standing there, as though body and soul had been paralyzed. The objects in the room merged with mirages. He remembered Miriam and wanted to be with her. His limbs felt heavy with fatigue. More than anything, he would have liked to lie down and let the drug do its work. But the men had already wrestled him to the ground. Others rushed into the room and attacked him. Instinctively he began to defend himself. He thrashed around and bit whatever he could

reach. They beat him with their fists and their weapons, kicked him, and tore the clothes off of him.

Suddenly he recalled that it had actually been his intention to die after completing his assignment. He became quite still and waited for the fatal blow. He glimpsed Miriam's beautiful face through the blood that was streaming over his eyes.

The vizier's weakened voice reached him.

"Don't kill him! Take him alive!"

The kicking and slugging stopped. Now he could feel them cinching up knots around his hands and feet. The blood poured down his face so he could see nothing.

Gigantic arms lifted him up off the floor. A fearsome voice asked him, "Who are you, murderer?"

"Kill me. I'm the sacrificial animal of Our Master."

In the meanwhile attendants had cleaned and bound the vizier's wound. Others ran for a doctor.

When the vizier heard ibn Tahir's answer, he moaned, "Oh, the idiot! He listened to the scoundrel!"

The commander of the vizier's bodyguard bent over to pick the letter up. He read it and silently handed it to the master of ceremonies, who shuddered. It read, "Till we meet in hell. Ibn Sabbah."

The vizier's personal physician arrived and inspected the wound.

"Is it bad?" the vizier said in a trembling, questioning voice. "I can tell it's bad."

The doctor whispered to the commander of the bodyguard, "I'm afraid the implement was poisoned."

"The master of Alamut sent the murderer," the commander replied in a subdued voice.

Word traveled from mouth to mouth throughout the tent that the master of the Ismailis had sent a killer against the vizier.

"What, the old man of the mountain?"

"The same Hasan that the vizier made look ridiculous years ago at the court in Isfahan?"

"Yes. This is his revenge."

Ibn Tahir's boldness filled them with an even greater terror and seemed even more incomprehensible.

"He just walks into the camp and out of the blue, right in the middle

of it, stabs the commander. He isn't at all afraid of the death that has to await him."

"It's the height of religious delusion!"

"No, it's madness."

The oldest men couldn't recall an action of such boldness. Some of them found themselves quietly admiring despite themselves.

"He truly wasn't afraid of death."

"He despised it."

"Or he even wanted it."

The drums rolled and the trumpets sounded. The men fell in at assembly, weapons in hand. The announcement came: The grand vizier has been critically wounded. The master of the Ismailis, the old man of the mountain, had sent a murderer to kill him.

Noisy anger and waving wildly were the response. If an order had come now to attack the Ismailis, they all would have enthusiastically raced into battle.

Despite the fact that the doctor had managed to stanch the flow of blood, the victim was weakening visibly. His veins had swollen. Something was clawing horribly at his brain.

"The dagger must have been poisoned," he said in a trembling voice. He looked at the doctor like a helpless child. "Can nothing be done?"

The doctor was evasive.

"I'll consult with my colleagues."

A council of all the doctors they had so far been able to summon was assembled in an antechamber. Most of them favored burning the wound out.

Then they approached the patient. He appeared to be very weak.

"We would need to burn the wound out," the vizier's personal physical said.

The victim shuddered. Cold sweat broke out on his forehead.

"Will it hurt very much?"

His voice was plaintive and timid.

"There is no other way," the doctor replied dryly.

"Allah, have mercy on me!"

The doctors prepared their instruments. An assistant brought a dish

with glowing embers. The dull ring of metal implements could be heard.

The vizier could feel the poison coursing through his whole body. It became clear to him that nothing could be done.

“No burning,” he said exhausted, but at peace. “I’m going to die.”

The physicians exchanged glances. They felt relieved. They knew that any attempt would have been useless.

“Have you informed the sultan?”

“A messenger is on his way to His Highness already.”

“Write, scribe,” he ordered in a frail voice.

Then he dictated:

“Great king and emperor! I have devoted a large part of my life to eradicating injustice from your state. Your authority has supported me in this. Now I am leaving to account for my actions in this world to the all-powerful King of All Kings. I shall submit to him the proofs of my loyalty to you for the entire time I have been in your service. A murderer’s dagger point has struck me in my seventy-third year. I implore you, do not forget who sent it. As long as the criminal remains alive and well at Alamut, neither you nor your kingdom will be safe. Forgive me if I have ever offended you, as I forgive you. Do not forget my sons, who are devoted to Your Highness body and soul.”

The speaking exhausted him. He was breathing heavily. The doctor placed a cold cloth on his forehead. Then he dictated a brief farewell to his sons.

A short while later he asked, “What have they done with the criminal?”

“They’re torturing him,” the scribe replied. “They want him to tell everything he knows.”

“Bring him to me!”

They shoved ibn Tahir, bloody and in tatters, into the vizier’s presence. He could barely stand upright.

The vizier looked into his face and shuddered.

“But he’s just a child!” he whispered to himself.

“Why did you want to kill me?”

Ibn Tahir tried to stand up straight. But his voice was weak when he spoke.

“I was carrying out Sayyiduna’s order.”

“But didn’t you know that death would await you?”

“Yes, I knew.”

“And you weren’t afraid?”

“For a feday, death in the course of fulfilling his duty means happiness.”

“What madness!” the vizier moaned.

Then he was seized with anger.

“You’ve been duped. You don’t know what you’re doing. Do you know the governing principle of the Ismailis?”

“I do. Carry out your commander’s orders.”

“Idiot! Fanatical fool! Don’t you know that even I know your master’s doctrine?”

“Of course. You’re an apostate. A traitor.”

The vizier smiled indulgently.

“Listen to me, boy. The supreme principle of the Ismailis is this: Nothing is true, everything is permitted.”

“That’s a lie!”

Ibn Tahir shook with indignation.

“You don’t know who Sayyiduna is,” he said. “Sayyiduna is the most brilliant and powerful of all people. Allah gave him the power to open the gates of paradise to his faithful.”

“O Allah, forgive him. He doesn’t know what he’s saying.”

“You think I don’t know what I’m saying? I was one of ones he sent to paradise.”

The grand vizier held his breath. With difficulty he raised himself up on one elbow. He looked ibn Tahir intently in the eye. He knew he wasn’t lying. He shook his head incredulously.

Then he recalled the legends about Alamut. About the youths who claimed they had spent a night in paradise. Things began to dawn on him.

“So you say you were in paradise?”

“I saw it with my own eyes, felt it with my own hands.”

“And you’ll go back there when you die?”

“Yes, death will take me back there.”

The vizier collapsed back onto his pillows.

“Allah! Allah!” he groaned in a frail voice. “What a sin! So that’s why he needed so many beautiful slaves! That’s why he bought so many of them at the bazaars!”

Ibn Tahir listened closely. His whole face was taut in attention.

The vizier asked him, "Has it never occurred to you that you've been caught in a deception? That you were in a paradise of Hasan's making? That you never left Alamut?"

"There aren't any gardens like that at Alamut. The gardens I was in are exactly like the ones described in the Koran."

One of those present, a senior officer who knew practically all of the fortresses in Iran, interrupted.

"Those could be the gardens of the kings of Daylam, who built them behind the castle for their entertainment. I've heard tell about them."

Ibn Tahir's eyes widened. Childlike fear showed in them.

"You're making that up ..."

The officer flushed red with anger.

"Hold your tongue, murderer! Anyone who served in the north of the country years ago will tell you that there are beautiful gardens behind Alamut, designed by the kings of Daylam."

Everything started dancing before ibn Tahir's eyes. He tried to grab onto one last straw.

"I saw a leopard in the gardens that was as tame as a lamb and followed its mistress around like a dog."

The men all laughed.

"Princes and grandees have as many of those tamed leopards as you could want. Hunters use them instead of hounds."

"And the dark-eyed houris who served me?"

"Dark-eyed houris?" The grand vizier gave a painful laugh. "Hasan's slaves and concubines, bought at all the markets of Iran. My offices have precise records of all of those purchases."

It was as though a veil fell from ibn Tahir's eyes. Suddenly everything became clear to him. Miriam—Hasan's slave and concubine. He, ibn Tahir, the helpless victim of their intrigue, their deception. He felt like his head was about to explode.

His knees weakened. He dropped to the floor and cried.

"O Allah, forgive me!"

The grand vizier lost consciousness from the strain. His throat emitted heavy gasps. The scribe dropped to his knees beside him.

"He's dying," he whispered. Tears welled up in his eyes.

The physicians hurried to the victim's aid. They brought him back to

consciousness with water and incense.

“What a crime!” he whispered.

He saw ibn Tahir on his knees before him.

“Do you see through it now?” he asked him.

Ibn Tahir only nodded, unable to produce a single word. His life’s edifice had crumbled within him.

“I’m dying because of your blindness.”

“O Allah! Allah! What have I done!”

“Are you repentant?”

“I am, Excellency.”

“You’re a brave boy. Do you have the courage to make amends for your crime?”

“If only I could.”

“You can. Go back to Alamut and rescue Iran from that Ismaili Satan.”

Ibn Tahir couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He smiled through his tears childishly and looked around. He saw nothing but grim, hateful faces.

“Are you afraid?”

“No, I’m not afraid. I just don’t know what you’re going to do with me.”

“We’re going to let you go back to Alamut.”

The men present protested. The criminal had to accept his punishment! They couldn’t let him go.

The vizier gave an exhausted wave of his hand.

“I know people,” he said. “If anyone can deal with Hasan, this boy can.”

“But it’s unheard of to give a criminal free passage. What will His Highness say?”

“Don’t worry about that. I’m still alive and I take the responsibility. Scribe, write!”

He dictated an order.

The men present exchanged glances, shaking their heads.

“This youth who stabbed me is a greater victim of the henchman of Alamut than I am. He has seen the truth. Now he will avenge both himself and me. Have a detachment of men take him to the castle. Have him go in. There he will do what he feels to be his duty.”

“I’ll plant a dagger in his guts.”

Ibn Tahir got up, his eyes glinting with hatred.

“I swear I won’t rest until I’ve either gotten revenge or died.”

“Did you hear? That’s as it should be ... Now wash him and bandage his wounds. Give him some new clothes ... I’m tired.”

He closed his eyes. The blood in his veins scorched him as though it were embers. He began to shake.

“The end is near,” the doctor whispered.

He gave a signal and everyone left the room. Ibn Tahir’s guards led him away to a separate tent. They washed him, bound his wounds and dressed him, and then tied him to a stake.

What a nightmare life was! The man venerated by all his followers as a saint was in fact the basest of frauds. He toyed with people’s happiness and lives like a child with pebbles. He abused their trust. He calmly encouraged them to see him as a prophet and an emissary of Allah. Was this even possible? He had to go to Alamut! To make sure he wasn’t mistaken. If he wasn’t, then it would be the greatest pleasure to shove the poisoned blade into his body. His life was played out anyway. Allah’s will would be done.

The vizier spent the night with a severe fever. He remained almost continually unconscious. If he came to now and then, horrible visions tormented him. He moaned and called for Allah to help him.

Toward morning his strength had been almost completely sapped. He wasn’t aware of anything. Toward noon his heart stopped beating.

Messengers carried the news to the far corners of the world: “Nizam al-Mulk, Governor of the Empire and the world, Jelal-u-dulah-al-dinh, the honor of the Empire and the faith, the grand vizier of Sultan Alp Arslan Shah and his son Malik, the greatest ruler of Iran, has fallen victim to the master of Alamut!”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The day after ibn Tahir rode out from Alamut, one of the scouts came racing into the castle and announced that units of the emir Arslan Tash were on the march and approaching quickly. The drums beat and the trumpets sounded. With tremendous speed the men assumed their positions at the battlements. The guard outside the canyon received the order to hold out until the first horsemen appeared on the horizon. Then they were to withdraw, leaving previously prepared obstacles in the canyon behind them as they went.

From then on, scouts returned one after the other almost every hour and reported on the movements of the enemy army. As dawn came on the following day, Hasan and his grand dais came out on the platform of his tower. There they waited for the enemy to appear on the horizon.

“Did you foresee all of this?” Abu Ali asked, casting a wary look at Hasan.

“Everything is taking place as I expected. For every blow I’ve prepared a counterblow.”

“Did you send ibn Tahir to Nehavend, by any chance?”

Buzurg Ummid was shocked by his own boldness.

Hasan furrowed his brow. His eyes sought something out on the horizon, as though he’d not heard the question.

“Everything I’ve done,” he said after a while, “I’ve done for the victory of our common cause.”

The grand dais exchanged brief glances. They had a good idea of the counterblow that Hasan had prepared. They shuddered. And on top of everything, success or failure was dependent on a thousand small coincidences. There had to be something wrong with him, that he relied on his calculations so stubbornly.

“Let’s suppose,” Buzurg Ummid ventured again, “that the emir’s army stays outside of Alamut until winter.”

“You can’t be thinking we’ll die of thirst?” Hasan laughed. “Our defense is sturdy and we have enough provisions to last a year.”

“This army could be replaced by another, and that one by yet another. What then?”

“I really don’t know, old boy. I’m only used to thinking in terms of longer or shorter periods of time.”

“It’s damned tricky,” Abu Ali commented, “that we don’t have a way out on any side.”

“Over the mountains, old boy. I’d herd you all up over the mountains.”

Hasan laughed softly. Then, as if to offer them some consolation, he said, “I don’t give this siege much staying power.”

Then Buzurg Ummid pointed at the flag over the guardhouse outside the canyon. It fluttered and then disappeared.

“The guard is withdrawing,” he said, holding his breath. “The enemy is approaching.”

Soon a whirlwind of horsemen appeared on the horizon, with black flags fluttering in the wind. The riders galloped up the hill where the guardhouse stood. Momentarily, an enormous black Sunni flag unfurled above it.

New units were constantly arriving. The entire plateau outside of the canyon was covered with tents, which began spreading into the surrounding hills as well.

Toward evening, military vehicles with siege equipment and assault ladders came speeding into the camp. There were about a hundred of them. The three commanders watched them from the top of the tower.

“They’re not joking about this,” Abu Ali said.

“A serious victory needs a serious opponent,” Hasan replied.

“They could be finished with their preparations in two or three days,” Buzurg Ummid observed. “Then they’ll attack.”

“They won’t approach us from the canyon,” Abu Ali said. “It’s such a confined space that we’d pick them off one by one before any of them even managed to reach our walls. They’re more likely to occupy the surrounding heights and climb down the rock faces to get at the castle. But that won’t be much of a threat either, as long as we stay on our guard.”

“Their leader would have to be an incredibly inventive strategist,”

Hasan observed, “if he plans to take the fortress any other way than by starving us out. But someone like that would be famous throughout the world, not just in Iran, and so far I haven’t heard of anybody like that.”

“Time is their greatest ally,” Buzurg Ummid said.

“Ours is my paradise,” Hasan replied, smiling.

The castle was as busy as a beehive. The two forward towers and the walls around them were thick with soldiers. Winches pulled up rocks and heavy logs. Everywhere there were cauldrons for boiling lead, pitch and oil suspended over simple stone fireplaces. The equipment for pouring the white-hot liquids onto the enemy was set up in short order. Commanders in battle helmets and light chain mail ran from one installation to the next, making sure the equipment was ready. Manuchehr and two aides on horseback oversaw all this activity. An almost horrible feeling came over the men. They knew they were surrounded by a huge army, but no one in the castle could see it. Only the three commanders somewhere on the backmost tower had a view of the entire battlefield.

Their faces pale, the novices who were now in the school for fedayeen waited for further orders. Instruction had been temporarily suspended. Suleiman and Yusuf were assigned as their leaders. Over and over, they told them the story of the battle with the Turkish cavalry in all its detail. Their broad gestures encouraged them and filled them with trust. They were already sufficiently trained to offer a picture of exemplary discipline. The greater their fear, the more they longed for the laurels of battle. They were conscious of being an elite unit, and they behaved in accordance with that knowledge.

In the afternoon the order came for them to take up positions on top of the tower where the dovecotes were located. They were armed with bows and spears. A unit of six soldiers who had set up the pitch and oil cauldrons was assigned to them.

After the third prayer the novices brought Suleiman and Yusuf their lunch. They were sitting apart from the others on top of a battlement. Their battle helmets were unfastened at the chin, so they wouldn’t swelter in the humidity. Even so, sweat poured down their faces. Anyone who had seen them six months before would scarcely have recognized the bright youths from then. Their features were hard, almost harsh—testimony to the determination that filled their students—and others—

with fear.

“We’ve let ourselves get trapped in the castle like a mouse in its hole,” Suleiman said. “It was different the first time. Hit the enemy on the head with your naked sword! That’s more to my taste.”

“Let’s wait. Maybe Sayyiduna has something really special up his sleeve. Apparently there are more than thirty thousand of the infidels.”

“The numbers don’t make any difference. If he gave me the order now, I’d run out there this minute. Are we going to have to put up with this donothing hell forever?”

“I agree with you completely. Now we could really show the infidel dogs!”

“You know what’s been going through my mind all day? Just don’t tell anyone. I’m going to suggest to Sayyiduna that I sneak into the enemy’s camp and cut down that dog Arslan Tash.”

“He won’t let you. We’ve given our oath and now we have to wait for our orders.”

“Damn this waiting! I’m telling you, it won’t take much for me to lose my mind. Sometimes my head feels strange as it is. Listen. A couple of days ago between the fourth and fifth prayers everything suddenly went bloody before my eyes. I don’t know how it happened, but in a second I was squeezing onto the handle of a dagger. I was on top of the upper wall, and three novices were walking below me. They were talking and coming closer to me. The blood boiled through my veins. I had an irresistible urge to attack them, to stab them, to feel my knife plunging into their guts. They were walking right beneath me. I leapt down right in the middle of them, and they shrieked like frightened women. I raised my dagger and came to at that very instant. I was so exhausted I could barely stay upright. I mustered all of my strength to smile at them. ‘Phew, some heroes you are,’ I said to them. ‘I meant to test your courage, but I see you’re not prepared.’ Then, like some Abdul Malik, I gave them a sermon about how an Ismaili, and especially a feday, has to be constantly on his guard, and how shameful it is for him to let anything scare him. I managed to get out of that fix. But since then I’ve been tormented by a fear of losing my mind and going on a rampage if Sayyiduna doesn’t deliver us soon.”

Yusuf instinctively drew back from him a few inches. He was afraid.

“That pellet of Sayyiduna’s must be to blame,” he said. “He used it to

send us to paradise and now we're constantly tormented by the desire to return."

"Who wouldn't give anything to return to paradise once he's had a taste of it?! O Allah, Allah! Why this endless ordeal?"

Two days passed like this in feverish preparation and ominous silence. The anticipation strained each man's nerves to the utmost.

From their tower, Hasan and the grand dais observed the enemy's movements. They could sense they were getting ready for something, but the incline above the canyon blocked their view of whatever it was the enemy was doing. Through Abu Ali, Hasan ordered Obeida to use his scouts to establish contact with the sultan's army.

Eventually the enemy managed to remove the obstacles from the canyon. From their tower, the three men watched the emir's men exploring the canyon and studying the surroundings.

Halfa and ibn Vakas were ordered to climb over Alamut's walls at first light, ford the stream, and then scale the canyon's cliffs.

Practically the entire garrison of Alamut watched their perilous feat. The old soldiers held their breath as the two fedayeen climbed up the wall opposite. Ibn Vakas was the first to climb. When he reached a secure spot, he dropped a rope and pulled Halfa up. The sun was already high over the mountains as they approached the top. Forked tree trunks jutted out of the earth there. They took hold of them and cautiously climbed the final stretch.

The spectators in Alamut watched them suddenly disappear. The archers drew their bows to defend them should some danger materialize. Agile as monkeys, the climbers descended from one forked trunk to the next. They tied a rope around a mighty trunk and slid down it to the river bed. They forded the stream, and the men pulled them safely up the wall.

"The enemy has scaled the walls around Alamut and set up catapults for throwing rocks and fire!"

This shout immediately spread throughout the castle.

And indeed! The climbers had barely completed their report when a heavy, spherical rock came flying over the stream and crashed into the base of the cliff beneath Alamut. And soon after there came more,

raining down at regular intervals in groups of ten or twenty. Their impact with the strata of rock drowned out the roar of Shah Rud. Some of the projectiles struck the fortress walls. The men standing on them felt the earth shake beneath them. Their faces pale, they waited for the enemy to appear.

Suddenly an enormous boulder came rolling down the opposite wall. It collided first with one outcrop of the cliff and then another, caroming between them in huge bounds and finally crashing into Shah Rud, crushing everything in its path. Then came more, each one tied to heavy logs. The river's current carried some of them away, while those that landed in the river's shallows remained. There they gradually accumulated and formed a veritable dam, against which the river's waters foamed and splashed.

Now the men of Alamut began to notice movement on the heights opposite. They could make out men dragging equipment behind them. Manuchehr gave a command, and a swarm of arrows flew toward them, but the distance was too great for them to inflict any serious damage.

A flaming projectile came soaring toward Alamut and slammed into its walls. Others followed. A swarm of arrows poured down on the besieged castle. One of the soldiers was wounded.

Manuchehr went rushing to where the soldier was.

"Idiots! Don't expose yourselves to them! Take cover!"

He was gasping loudly with excitement and rage.

Though pale, the soldiers grinned at each other. They were helpless against this way of fighting.

"It's all just a lot of show," Manuchehr roared. "It's a bluff and doesn't pose the slightest danger."

But the hail of stones and fiery projectiles had an effect on the men. They knew they had nowhere to retreat to from the castle. Each of them would rather have faced off with the enemy in the open.

"If Sayyiduna would just give the word, I'd scale that wall with my fedayeen and cut down everyone up there," Abdul Malik said, gritting his teeth in helpless rage.

Yusuf and Suleiman also had their fists clenched in anger. They would have been the first to volunteer for a slaughter like that. But apparently Sayyiduna was strolling around on top of his tower, discussing sacred matters with the grand dais. Suleiman could barely control his

impatience anymore.

Abu Ali came to review the situation on the walls and then returned to Hasan.

“The men really are a bit upset,” he said, laughing.

“That’s precisely what Arslan Tash was after,” Hasan replied. “He wanted to make an impression on us, soften us up, frighten us. But if he plans to benefit from this mood, he’d better do it fast. Because in two or three days our soldiers will be so used to this hullabaloo that they’ll be throwing lassos at the missiles for fun.”

“So do you think they’re going to try an assault with ladders soon?”

“No, they’re not going to do that. But they might let us know something that’s weighing down on them.”

At the third prayer the emir’s barrage stopped abruptly. An ominous quiet ensued. The sense in the castle was that the morning’s bombardment had been just the prelude to something greater that was yet to come.

The three men atop the tower were the first to notice the three horsemen who came galloping into the canyon. Soon the adversary came to a halt on the far side of the bridge before Alamut and gave the sign of peace.

“This could be some kind of trick,” an officer said to Manuchehr.

“We won’t lower the bridge until we get the order from the supreme commander,” the commander of the fortress replied.

The order soon came. The iron chains clanked and the three emissaries of the enemy army proudly, if cautiously, rode over the bridge into the castle. Manuchehr welcomed them with impeccable courtesy.

In the meantime, at Hasan’s order the entire army, with the exception of a few essential lookouts atop the walls, assembled with lightning speed on the lower and middle terraces. Here the fedayeen and novices stood on one side, the archers on the other, while on the lower level the light and heavy cavalry stood in perfect formation.

Manuchehr and a contingent of officers escorted the emissaries to the middle terrace. There they came to a halt and waited for further instructions.

“This morning they tried to impress us,” Hasan said. “Now it’s my turn to make an impression on them that will last till judgment day.”

Once again his voice and face were projecting something that gave the

grand dais an eerie feeling. There was something mysterious to him, as there had been that night when he sent the fedayeen into the gardens.

“Are you planning to cut them down and set their heads out on stakes?” Abu Ali asked.

“I’d have to be very stupid to do anything like that,” Hasan replied. “The emir’s army would be overcome with such a fury that they’d lose any vestige of fear they might have. But it’s that sense of fear that we have to magnify if we’re going to come out of this the victors.”

“The army is assembled and the emissaries are waiting,” Buzurg Ummid said, looking out over the battlements.

“Let them wait. They tried to soften us up with their bombardment, so we’ll soften them up with anticipation.”

The emissary of Arslan Tash, the cavalry captain Abu Jafar, was standing midway between the fedayeen and the archers. He rested one hand lightly on the handle of his saber and looked at the enemy army with feigned indifference and disdain. His two escorts stood tall to each side of him. They held on firmly to the hafts of their sabers, looking fiercely and grimly to all sides. All three of them summoned great self-mastery to subdue their growing impatience and fear for their fate.

Manuchehr and the officers stood some ten paces away from them. He looked provocatively at the emissaries, now and then exchanging a few whispered words with his aides-de-camp and stealing glances up in the direction of the supreme command.

But no sign of any decision was coming from there, as though Hasan had forgotten that the whole army and three enemy emissaries were waiting down here for his nod.

The sun bore down mercilessly on the men and the animals. Yet no one showed the least sign of impatience. They watched indifferently as the enemy messengers began to show signs of unease.

Finally Abu Jafar grew tired of the long wait. He turned to Manuchehr and asked him with mock courtesy, “Is it your custom to leave your visitors waiting outside in the baking sun?”

“We have just one custom here, and that’s to obey the orders of our supreme commander.”

“Then I have no choice but to report this delay to His Excellency, my master Arslan Tash, as part of your master’s answer.”

“As your lordship wishes.”

They fell silent again. Furious, Abu Jafar kept looking up at the sky, wiping the sweat from his face. He began to grow uncertain. Why had they put him in the midst of their army? What was this waiting about? What did their supreme commander have in store for him? His imagination got the best of him, and he was again plagued with fear.

Meanwhile, the commanders had put on their ceremonial white robes. They pulled billowing white coats on over their shoulders. They left the building, accompanied by bodyguards.

This would be the first time Hasan had appeared before his believers since he had seized Alamut. He knew what this would mean for them. Despite himself, he was also feeling agitated.

A trumpet announced his approach. All eyes turned toward the upper terrace. Three men appeared there dressed in dazzling white and surrounded by half-naked, black, mace-bearing guards. The men held their breath. One of the three was unfamiliar. They guessed it was Sayyiduna.

Yusuf and Suleiman's eyes widened.

"Sayyiduna!" they whispered.

The word spread from man to man.

Sayyiduna had appeared! Something extraordinary was going to happen. The unease that had seized the men passed to the animals too. They started and became impatient.

The three emissaries also sensed the unusual tension. When they caught sight of the three commanders in their ceremonial clothing, they instinctively stood at attention. The blood drained from their faces.

Hasan and his entourage reached the edge of the upper level. It was unusually silent. The only sound was the muffled roar of Shah Rud, the perpetual companion of all life at Alamut.

Hasan raised his arm as a sign that he was about to speak. Then, in a clear voice, he asked Abu Jafar, "Who are you, stranger? And what have you come to Alamut for?"

"Sir! I am Captain Abu Jafar, son of Abu Bakr. I come on the orders of my master, His Excellency the emir Arslan Tash, who has been sent by His Majesty, the Glory and Grace of the state, the omnipotent sultan Malik Shah, to wrest back from you the fortress of Alamut, which you seized by dishonest means. His Majesty views you as his subject. He orders you to turn the castle over to his general, the emir Arslan Tash,

within three days. My master guarantees safe passage for you and your men ... However, if you do not fulfill this order, His Excellency will view you as an enemy of the state. My master will pursue you relentlessly until he utterly destroys you. For the grand vizier himself, His Excellency Nizam al-Mulk, is approaching Alamut with a great army, and he will show no mercy toward the Ismailis. This is what my master has commanded me to tell you.”

At these final threats his voice shook slightly.

Hasan jeered at him. In his response he mocked the other’s solemn delivery.

“Abu Jafar, son of Abu Bakr! Tell your master, His Excellency the emir Arslan Tash, this: Alamut is well prepared to receive him. However, we are in no way his enemies. Still, if he keeps clattering around these parts with his weapons, the same thing could happen to him as happened to the commander of his vanguard. His head will be stuck on a stake and planted on that tower over there.”

Abu Jafar’s face flushed red. He came forward a step and reached for his sword.

“You dare shame my master? Impostor! Egyptian hireling! Do you know there are thirty thousand of us outside this castle?”

The Ismailis who heard this answer started rattling their weapons. A wave of indignation spread through their ranks.

Hasan remained totally cool and asked, “Is it the custom among the sultan’s men to offend foreign leaders?”

“No. Our custom is to take an eye for an eye.”

“You said something about there being thirty thousand men outside the castle. Tell me, have these men come to catch butterflies or to hear the new prophet?”

“If the Ismailis are butterflies, then they’ve come to catch butterflies. If there’s some new prophet close by here, it’s news to me.”

“So you haven’t heard anything about Hasan ibn Sabbah, the master of heaven and earth? Whom Allah has given the power to open the gates of paradise to the living?”

“I’ve heard about some Hasan ibn Sabbah who is an infidel leader. If my senses don’t deceive me, I’m standing in front of him now. But I don’t know anything about his being master of heaven and earth, or about Allah giving him that kind of power.”

Hasan sought out Suleiman and Yusuf with his eyes. He called to them. They left their positions within the ranks and went toward the steps that led to the upper terrace. He asked them, "Can the two of you swear by all the prophets and martyrs that you have been in paradise, alive, whole, and fully conscious?"

"We can, Sayyiduna."

"Swear it."

They so swore, clearly and distinctly.

Abu Jafar was tempted to laugh. But such firm faith and sincere conviction showed in their voices that a shiver went down his spine. He looked at his two aides and could tell from their faces they were happy not to be in his shoes. Clearly he had let things take a wrong turn. Now he spoke with much less firmness than before.

"Sir, I haven't come here to engage in religious disputes with you. I have brought you the order of His Excellency, my master the emir Arslan Tash, and I await your response."

"Why are you being evasive, friend? Don't you care whether you're fighting for a true prophet or not?"

"I'm not fighting for any prophet. I simply serve His Majesty."

"Those are exactly the words of the men who fought in the service of other rulers against the Prophet. Which is why they met with destruction."

Abu Jafar stubbornly looked at the ground. He remained silent.

Hasan turned toward Yusuf and Suleiman. They stood as if bolted to the foot of the steps, gazing at him with gleaming eyes. He descended partway down the steps toward them, reached inside his cloak, and pulled out a bracelet.

"Do you recognize this bracelet, Suleiman?"

Suleiman went as white as a sheet. Froth gathered at the corners of his mouth. In a voice quavering with mindless bliss, he murmured, "I do, master."

"Go and return it to its owner."

Suleiman's knees went weak. Hasan reached inside his cloak again. This time he brought forth a pellet, which he handed Suleiman.

"Swallow it," he ordered.

Then he turned to Yusuf.

"Would you be happy, Yusuf, if I sent you along with Suleiman?"

“Oh ... Sayyiduna.”

Yusuf's eyes shone with happiness. Hasan handed him a pellet too.

The emir's emissaries watched this scene with growing trepidation. Soon they noticed both youths getting a remote, absent look in their eyes, as though they were looking at a completely foreign world that was invisible to the others.

Abu Jafar asked timidly, “What does all this mean, sir?”

“You'll see. I'm telling you, open your eyes. Because what is about to happen has never before happened in the history of mankind.”

Then he solemnly straightened up and spoke in a deep voice.

“Yusuf! Zuleika is waiting for you in paradise. Do you see that tower? Run to the top of it and jump off. You'll fall into her embrace.”

Yusuf's face shone with happiness. From the moment he swallowed the pellet, he was at peace again as he had not been for a long time. A marvelous, blissful peace. Everything was exactly as it had been when he and his two friends had originally set out for paradise. As soon as he registered Hasan's command, he turned on his heels and raced toward the tower with the doves.

Then, amidst a tomblike silence, Hasan turned to face Suleiman.

“Do you have your dagger with you, Suleiman?”

“Here it is, Sayyiduna.”

The three emissaries instinctively reached for their sabers. But Hasan shook his head and smiled at them.

“Take the bracelet! Thrust the dagger into your heart, and in just a moment you'll be able to return it to its owner.”

Suleiman clutched with wild joy at the bracelet. He held it to his chest, while with the other hand he plunged the dagger into his heart. Still radiant with happiness, with a sigh of relief he collapsed to the ground at the foot of the steps.

The three emissaries and everyone else who was standing close by froze in horror.

Pale and with a tired smile, Hasan pointed toward the body.

“Go take a close look,” he told the emissaries.

After some hesitation, they obeyed. The dagger was planted up to the hilt in the youth's body. A thin stream of blood soaked his white clothing. Even in death his face was still radiant with bliss.

Abu Jafar drew his hand across his eyes.

“O all-merciful Allah!” he moaned.

Hasan nodded to a eunuch to spread a coat over the body. Then he turned and pointed toward the tower.

“Look up there!”

Out of breath, Yusuf had just then reached the top of the tower. His heart was pounding in his chest. Dumbfounded, the guards on the tower platform remained motionless. He raced up onto the battlements. Below he saw a sea of palaces, towers and cupolas, all in the most vivid colors.

“I’m an eagle. At last, I’m an eagle again,” he whispered.

He waved his arms and actually felt that he’d grown wings. With a powerful leap he soared into the abyss.

His heavy body crashed to the ground with a dull thud.

The horses standing nearby neighed wildly and backed off. They jostled with each other and caused disorder in the ranks. Their riders had a hard time calming them down.

“Go on over and have a look at the body,” Hasan told the emissaries.

“We’ve seen enough,” Abu Jafar replied. His voice was still as faint as before.

“Well then, Abu Jafar. Report what you’ve seen here as my response to your master. And be sure to tell him this: though your army may number thirty thousand men, no two of them are the equal of these. As for the threat of the grand vizier, tell him I know something very important about him that he’ll only find out six or possibly even twelve days from now. When that happens, make sure he remembers me and my message ... Farewell!”

He ordered the emissaries’ horses brought out. Abu Jafar and his aides bowed low. Hasan dismissed the assembled troops. His guards carried off the bodies. Then, with his entourage, he returned to his tower.

Overwhelmed by this horrible spectacle, the men returned to their duties. For quite a while no one found words to express his thoughts and feelings. Only gradually did the Ismailis’ tongues loosen.

“It’s true! Sayyiduna is master over life and death for his subjects. He has the power to send whomever he wants to paradise.”

“If he ordered you, would you stab yourself?”

“I’d do it.”

Their eyes gleamed feverishly with a horrible fear and a passion to prove themselves to Sayyiduna, to the other Ismailis and the whole world.

“Did you see how their emissaries went pale? How timid Abu Jafar suddenly got?”

“There isn’t a ruler who’s a match for Sayyiduna.”

“Did you hear him refer to himself as the new prophet?”

“Didn’t we know that already?”

“But in that case how can he serve the Egyptian caliph?”

“Maybe it’s the other way around.”

The fedayeen instinctively gathered in their usual place atop the wall. They stared at each other, pale-faced, none of them daring to speak first.

Finally Obeida broke the silence.

“Suleiman and Yusuf are lost to us now,” he said. “We’ll never see them in this world again.”

Naim’s eyes teared up.

“Do you know that for sure?”

“Didn’t you see the eunuchs carry their bodies away?”

“Are they in paradise now?”

Obeida gave a cautious smirk.

“They sure seemed to be convinced of it.”

“And you aren’t?” ibn Vakas asked.

“Sayyiduna said so. I can’t doubt it.”

“It would be a crime to doubt,” Jafar added seriously.

“It feels like everything is empty now that we’ve lost them,” ibn Vakas said disconsolately. “First ibn Tahir left us, and now them.”

“What’s happened to ibn Tahir? What’s keeping him? Is he in paradise now too?” Naim asked.

“Only Allah and Sayyiduna can say,” ibn Vakas replied.

“It would be so good to see him again,” Naim said.

“I’m afraid he’s taken the same path as his traveling companions,” Obeida suggested.

“The strangest thing, Your Excellency,” Captain Abu Jafar told the emir Arslan Tash on returning from Alamut to camp, “is not that the youths carried out their master’s order so quickly. After all, what other choice

did they have with such a cruel commander? What amazed us most—horrified us, even—was the unthinking joy with which they leapt at death. If Your Excellency could have seen how blissfully their eyes shone when he announced they would be going straight to paradise when they died! Not even the shadow of a doubt could have troubled their hearts. Their faith that they would return to the paradise they had already been in once before must have been more solid than the cliffs beneath Alamut. My aides can confirm all of this for you.”

Lost in thought, the emir Arslan Tash paced back and forth inside his tent. He was a tall, handsome man. It was evident from his carefully groomed appearance that he loved the joys of life and its comforts. His features expressed concern. He wasn't the slightest bit pleased with Hasan's answer. One after the other, he looked each of his three emissaries in the eye. He asked them, “Are you sure you weren't the victims of some trick?”

“We're positive,” Abu Jafar replied. “Suleiman stabbed himself barely five or six paces away from us. And all of Alamut saw Yusuf jump from the parapets.”

Arslan Tash shook his head.

“I just can't believe it. I've heard of sorcerers in India who appear to make miraculous things happen. They throw a rope up in the air, for instance, and the rope remains suspended. Then the sorcerer's assistant starts climbing up the rope. When he's climbed up quite high, the sorcerer gives a command. The rope drops and the assistant comes crashing to the ground. The sorcerer sets a basket over the corpse. He recites a few prayers and then, when he lifts the cover, the assistant pokes his head out, hale, hardy and smiling. The whole episode turns out to have been an illusion.”

“There was no such sorcery at Alamut. The knife was buried up to its hilt in Suleiman's heart. His clothing was spattered with blood.”

The emir fell silent again and pondered. All of this seemed more than mysterious to him.

Then he spoke.

“Whatever the case, I order you to keep as silent as a tomb about everything you saw and heard at Alamut. The men could resist or mutiny if they found out what kind of enemy they're facing. The grand vizier is on the march, and he's not going to be amused if we fail to

carry out his orders.”

Abu Jafar’s aides exchanged worried glances. On their way here they had described their audience at Alamut to several colleagues.

The emir didn’t notice their exchange of glances. He was pacing around the tent, preoccupied.

“What on earth could the Ismaili commander have meant when he hinted that he knew something about the grand vizier that I would only learn about in six or even twelve days?”

“I’ve told Your Excellency everything he said,” Abu Jafar replied.

“Most likely he just meant to scare me. What could he know about the grand vizier that I myself don’t know? That he’s en route to Isfahan? That he’s planning to move on Alamut after that?”

He swung his arm in frustration.

“Just my luck to get the dubious honor of taming these infidels! What kind of honest opponent is this? He hides in fortresses, avoids open battle, poisons ignorant minds with strange fairy tales and turns them into dangerous fools. How am I supposed to get my hands on that?”

“All right, then. You’re dismissed!” he said a short time later. “I’ll take your report into consideration. Just keep it quiet.”

The emissaries bowed and left.

The emir dropped onto some soft pillows, poured himself a full cup of wine, and drank it down in one draught. His face brightened. He clapped. Two beautiful young slave girls came out from behind a curtain. They sat down next to him and embraced him. Soon Alamut and its cruel master were forgotten.

By contrast, his men were all the more animatedly discussing the experience of the three emissaries at Alamut. The news had swept through the entire camp like a cyclone. When Abu Jafar and his aides came back out of the emir’s tent, his friends showered him with questions. He raised a finger to his lips and whispered that the emir had given them strict orders to keep as silent as a tomb about everything. This meant that the officers retired to a separate tent, put a guard out front, and then spent hours discussing in depth everything the emissaries had been able to say.

The enlisted men discussed the Alamut events in their own way.

“The master of Alamut could be a true prophet. He started with only a handful of men, just like Mohammed. Now there are thousands fighting in his ranks.”

“The Ismailis are adherents of the party of Ali. Weren’t our fathers too? Why should we fight with men who remain faithful to the teachings of their fathers and ours?”

“The Prophet wasn’t as powerful as the master of Alamut. Sure, he could travel to paradise. But could he also send others there, alive?”

“They said that both of the youths who killed themselves in our emissaries’ presence had already been in paradise. Otherwise, how could they have gone to their deaths so enthusiastically?”

“As long as I’ve lived, I’ve never heard of anything like this. Does it make any sense for us to fight such a powerful prophet?”

“You’d think the Ismailis were Turks or Chinese for the sultan to declare war on them. They’re Iranians like us, and good Muslims.”

“The grand vizier wants to get back in the sultan’s good graces. That’s why he’s sent us to attack Alamut, so he can look important and needed. We’ve seen this kind of business before. We weren’t born yesterday.”

“It’s a lucky thing that our emir is such a smart man. He isn’t in any hurry. When it gets cold, we’ll just leave for our winter quarters in the south.”

“Of course, it would be stupid for us to fight with an enemy that nobody hates.”

Wordlessly, the grand dais accompanied Hasan to his chambers. The supreme commander was clearly exhausted. He tossed the white coat off his shoulders and lay down on the pillows.

The grand dais remained standing.

“Do you know who I miss having here today?” he said, finally breaking the silence. “Omar Khayyam.”

“Why him of all people?”

“I can’t say exactly. I’d just like to talk to him.”

“Is your conscience bothering you?”

Buzurg Ummid gave him a penetrating look.

Hasan instinctively rose. He looked inquisitively at the grand dais. He didn’t answer the question.

“Do you know that on that night when you went to the gardens where the youths were, I suggested to Abu Ali that we kill you and throw you off the tower into Shah Rud?”

Hasan instinctively grabbed the handle of his saber.

“Yes, I suspected something. Why didn’t you carry out your plan?”

Buzurg Ummid shrugged his shoulders. Abu Ali could only stare at him, dumbstruck.

“Until now I regretted not carrying it out.”

“You see? That’s probably why I started missing Omar Khayyam so much. But don’t think it’s because I’m afraid. I just wish I could have a good talk with somebody.”

“Go ahead, speak. We’ll listen.”

“Let me ask you a question. Is a child’s delight in his colorful playthings real joy?”

“What’s the point of these digressions again, ibn Sabbah?” Buzurg Ummid said with obvious annoyance. “Just tell us straight out what you were planning to say.”

“You said you’d listen to me.”

Hasan’s voice was once again hard and determined.

“My intention was not to justify my actions. I only wanted to explain them to you. Obviously, a child’s delight in his colorful toys is just as genuinely felt as a grown man’s pleasure in money or women. Viewed from the perspective of any individual, every pleasure that he feels is a real, genuine pleasure. Each of us is happy in his own way. So if the prospect of dying means happiness for someone, he’ll delight in death just as much as another delights in money or a woman. There are no regrets after death.”

“Better a live dog than a dead king,” Abu Ali muttered.

“Dog or king, they’ll both have to die. Better to go as a king.”

“Since you’ve assumed that power, you can say that you rule over life and death,” Buzurg Ummid said. “But I’d rather be a dog in the road than die like your two fedayeen did.”

“You haven’t understood me,” Hasan replied. “Has anyone prescribed that sort of death for you? Your situation is infinitely remote from theirs. What was the summit of happiness for them would fill you with sheer horror. And can you be sure that whatever is the ultimate happiness for you wouldn’t be sheer terror for somebody else, or viewed from a

different perspective? None of us can have an overview of our actions from all perspectives. That was the exclusive province of an all-seeing god. So grant me that everyone is happy in his own way!”

“But you intentionally deceived the fedayeen! Where did you get the right to treat people who are devoted to you like this?”

“I take that right from the knowledge that the supreme Ismaili motto is right.”

“And you can speak of an all-seeing god practically in the same breath?”

At this, Hasan straightened up. He seemed to grow by a full head.

“Yes, I did speak of some all-seeing god. Neither Jehovah, nor the Christian God, nor Allah could have created the world we live in. A world in which nothing is superfluous, in which the sun shines just as gently on the tiger and the lamb, the elephant and the fly, the scorpion and the butterfly, the serpent and the dove, the rabbit and the lion, the blossom and the oak, the beggar and the king. Where both the just and the unjust, the strong and the weak, the smart and the stupid fall victim to disease. Where happiness and pain are blindly strewn to the four winds. And where the same ending awaits all living beings—death. Don’t you see? That’s the god whose prophet I am.”

The grand dais instinctively stepped several paces back. So that was the core of this strange man, that was the “madness,” that burning conviction that had unerringly led him to the point where he now stood? So he secretly really did see himself as a prophet? And all his philosophizing was just a decoy for the minds of doubters? And maybe for himself as well? So that in his faith he was closer in spirit to his fedayeen than to the Ismaili leaders?

“So you believe in a god?” Buzurg Ummid asked in an almost timid voice.

“As I have said.”

An enormous abyss opened up between them.

The grand dais bowed in parting.

“Carry out your duties. You are my successors.”

He smiled at them in farewell, as a father smiles at his children.

Once they were out in the corridor, Abu Ali exclaimed, “What material for Firdausi!”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“That brings the fourth act of our tragedy to a close,” Hasan said to himself when he was alone again.

That evening he summoned Obeida, Jafar and Abdur Ahman to see him. Abu Soraka conveyed his order to the three of them.

This occasioned a ferment throughout the quarters of the fedayeen. When Obeida heard what awaited him, his brown face went ashen. He looked around like a wild animal seeking a way to escape from some looming danger.

Abdur Ahman was afraid too.

“Why on earth has Sayyiduna summoned us?” he wondered.

“Most likely he’s planning to send you to paradise, now that Suleiman, Yusuf and ibn Tahir are gone,” ibn Vakas replied.

“Are we going to have to jump off a tower or stab ourselves too?”

“You’ll have to ask Sayyiduna that.”

Jafar received the order with calm obedience.

“Allah is master over our life and death,” he said. “And Sayyiduna is his representative.”

Abu Ali met them in front of the building of the supreme command and led them up the tower to Hasan.

After Abu Soraka informed the fedayeen of their appointment, he anxiously sought out Manuchehr. He found him atop the wall, in the midst of inspecting some pitch vats. He called him aside.

“What do you think, Emir, about the death of the two fedayeen?”

“Sayyiduna is a powerful master, my friend.”

“Do you agree with what he’s doing?”

“That’s something I don’t think about, and I advise you to do the same.”

“But are these methods going to make us a match for the sultan’s army?”

“Only Sayyiduna knows that. All I know is that we couldn’t hold out against them for long with just the forces at hand.”

“All this still makes me shudder.”

“Somebody else may be experiencing the same shudder. Emir Arslan Tash, for instance.”

“So you think Sayyiduna achieved his goal?”

“Something tells me we can put our trust in him. The things we experienced today at Fortress Alamut have never happened before in all of history.”

Abu Soraka left him, shaking his head. He went looking for the doctor to ask his opinion too.

First the Greek looked around to make sure no one was close by. Then he stepped up to Abu Soraka and whispered to him.

“My dear, venerable dai! Today I cursed the moment I was released from a Byzantine jail. Because everything we saw in this castle today with these eyes of ours goes far beyond any Greek tragedian’s most fervid fantasies. The scene that our supreme commander deigned to show us this morning was served up with such exquisite horror that it could be the sincere envy of the Prince of Hell himself. Ice goes down my spine when I think that I could have been the recipient of his heavenly delights on the other side of Alamut’s walls.”

Abu Soraka went pale.

“Do you think he’s going to send us into the gardens behind the castle?”

“How should I know, old friend? In any case, the knowledge that the gates to that paradise of his are open night and day should be cold comfort for any of us who have the honor of living in this fortress.”

“It’s horrible! It’s horrible!” Abu Soraka murmured, wiping the cold sweat from his brow with his sleeve. “The one good thing is that our families are with Muzaffar.”

“Yes, indeed,” the Greek nodded. Abu Soraka didn’t notice him sneering behind his back as he walked away.

In the gardens everything had long since been made ready for a second visit. When the girls heard that this evening had been chosen for it, they grew festive. Yes, now they knew what their purpose was. Love was

their calling, and that didn't at all seem like the worst thing that could happen to them. Far from it.

Their only worry was for Halima. She cherished her memories of Suleiman with true devotion. She saw him as her master, and in private would ask just him for advice in all kinds of matters. She grew solitary. Alone, she could feel his presence and talk to him. Many times the others heard her whispering to herself, and a few times they saw her laugh charmingly or with abandon, as though she were actually having a conversation with someone else. At first they tried to persuade her that Suleiman might not come back. But when they realized that she thought their hints were motivated by meanness or mischievousness, they let her keep believing.

When she learned that youths would be coming that night, she shook like a reed in the wind. The color left her cheeks. She fell to the ground and passed out.

"Good God!" Miriam exclaimed. "What are we going to do with her?"

"Sayyiduna gave you permission not to be with the boys," Zuleika told her. "Ask him to make the same exception for her."

"She'll think we're intentionally trying to separate her from Suleiman," Fatima objected. "Then she'll really do something to herself."

"How could she have gotten it into her head that Suleiman was ever coming back?" Rokaya asked.

"She's in love with him. He said he'd come back and she believes that. In her eyes he's a greater prophet than Sayyiduna."

This was how Fatima replied.

Meanwhile, the girls had managed to bring Halima to. Halima looked at the girls, perplexed. When she remembered the news, a deep blush came to her face. She got up and ran to her room to get ready.

"I'll tell her everything," Miriam said.

"She won't believe you," Zuleika replied. "I know her. She's stubborn, and she'll decide we're keeping Suleiman from her."

"But it will break her heart if she sees someone else in his place."

"Let her get used to it, like we've had to," Sara said.

"Halima is different. I'll ask Sayyiduna."

"No, Miriam," Fatima said. "Let's work with Halima, instead. Maybe she'll adjust."

They went into her bedroom.

Halima was sitting in front of the mirror, adorning herself and smiling. Her brow knit when she noticed her companions. It made her angry that they were interrupting her in the midst of such beautiful thoughts.

Seeing this made Miriam's heart ache.

"You talk to her," she whispered to Fatima.

"Are you looking forward to tonight's visit?"

"Leave me alone. Don't you see I have to get ready?"

"Listen, Halima," Miriam said. "Every visitor comes to our gardens only once. Do you understand that?"

Ahriman came through the doorway and started sniffing around Halima.

"Chase them out of here, Ahriman. They've gotten mean."

"What Miriam is saying is absolutely true," Fatima said.

"Will you get out of here?"

"You're bull-headed," Sara said angrily.

They left her bedroom.

"She doesn't believe it," Zuleika said.

"No. She doesn't believe you, Miriam," Fatima added.

Apama arrived with a strict order from Sayyiduna for each of the girls to change or swap names. None of them could make a mistake this evening.

Miriam and Fatima began assigning the new names.

"Halima! Tonight your name is going to be Safiya instead of Halima. Do you understand? Keep repeating the name to yourself so that you get used to it."

Halima smiled. "Do they really think he's not going to recognize me?" she said to herself.

"Quit that smiling!" Miriam scolded her. "This is a serious matter. The assignments to the gardens are going to be different this time too."

It was only now that Halima got really worried. "What does that mean?" she asked.

"I hope you understand at last what you're facing," Fatima said to her.

Tears welled up in Halima's eyes.

"You've all become so mean to me."

She ran off and hid in an isolated closet.

Sara followed her and pulled her out.

"You don't know yet that Fatima and Zuleika are pregnant," she told

her. "I overheard them confiding in Miriam. So don't tell anyone that I told you."

"Why just the two of them?"

"Well, look at you! Don't tell me you want one too?"

Halima stuck her tongue out at her and turned her back.

Late that afternoon Hasan summoned Miriam to one of the empty gardens. She told him what was happening with Halima and that she was expecting Suleiman to return that night.

Hasan looked at her grimly.

"Your job was to get her drinking wine at the right time, and I'll hold you responsible if anything goes wrong."

"Spare her this disappointment, for my sake."

"Today it's her, tomorrow another one, and yet another girl the day after that. For twenty years while I've been developing my plan, I've never given in to any weakness. And now you want me to buckle under."

Miriam cast him a hateful look.

"At least let me take her place."

Hasan again grew hard and unyielding.

"No, I won't permit it. You've cooked this mess of porridge yourself. Now you're going to have to eat it ... This evening, when the time comes, return to this garden. We'll wait for the outcome together. Have I made myself clear?"

Miriam gritted her teeth and left without saying good-bye.

When she was back with the girls, she immediately looked for Halima.

"Do you understand that Suleiman won't be coming here tonight? Be careful you don't do anything stupid. It could cost you your life."

Halima stubbornly stomped her foot on the floor. Her face was still red from crying. "Why is everyone being so mean to me tonight?"

Obeida had taken careful note of everything the first three fedayeen reported about their visit to paradise. Given his natural skepticism, he had wondered even then what he would have done, had he been in their place. There were many things that hadn't quite made sense, and which raised his doubts.

That evening, when he and his two comrades stepped before the supreme commander, he was consumed by curiosity as much as by fear,

yet he managed to control himself perfectly. He answered Hasan's questions clearly and confidently.

The grand dais were not present this time, nor did Hasan need them. The first and most difficult experiment was already behind him. Now everything functioned like a well-installed block and pulley.

Jafar and Abdul Ahman felt seized with the fear of God when they found themselves alone with Hasan in the same chambers from which he ruled and administered the Ismaili world. No doubts troubled them any longer. They were happy to be able to answer his questions and carry out his commands.

When they heard that he would be sending the three of them to paradise, too, their eyes beamed. They were utterly in his power.

Obeida's face turned slightly blue. He decided to observe carefully everything that was going to happen to him, without giving himself away.

Hasan led them into the lift and showed them their cots. He gave them wine to drink and placed a pellet in each one's mouth. Jafar and Abdur Ahman swallowed them eagerly, but Obeida let his inconspicuously roll out at the corner of his thick lips and drop into his upturned palm, then hid it under his cloak. He watched through a slit between his eyelids as his comrades moaned and thrashed, and then he imitated everything they did.

Abdur Ahman was the first to lose consciousness. For a while Jafar resisted. Finally he too succumbed, rolled over on his other side, and fell asleep, groaning.

Obeida became anxious and barely dared squint through his eyelids at what was happening around him. Hasan stood motionless, holding up the doorway curtain and letting the light stream in from his room. Apparently he was waiting for all three of them to pass out. But what would he do then?

Obeida groaned and turned over onto his other side, as he'd watched both his comrades do. Then he began to breathe evenly. It became totally dark. He could feel Hasan throwing a sheet over him.

A gong was struck.

Suddenly the room swayed and began to drop. It was all Obeida could do to keep from shouting out in fear. He clutched onto the sides of his cot and waited in terror for what was to come.

His brain was working furiously. His senses were on alert. Then he sensed they had come to a stop. A chill air wafted around him. Through the sheet he could make out the flicker of torchlight.

“Is everything ready?” he heard Hasan’s voice ask.

“Everything is ready, Sayyiduna.”

“Be ready, the same as last time.”

Hands clutched onto and lifted his cot. He could feel them carry him over a small bridge. Then they set him, still in the cot, into a boat which rowed off. When they landed, they carried him into some room, from which he could hear music and girls’ voices coming as they brought him in. Then they took him by the ankles and shoulders and lay him down on the soft floor. Then they left.

So this is Our Master’s paradise? he thought. *And it was so they could get back here that Yusuf and Suleiman killed themselves this morning?*

An unspeakable revulsion came over him. *What a fraud!* he thought. *And Abdur Ahman and Jafar don’t suspect a thing! What would become of them all?* He couldn’t give himself away. What could he do if Sayyiduna ordered him to stab himself, like Suleiman? If he resisted, he would meet an even more terrible fate. “Horrible! Unbelievably horrible!” he gasped to himself.

Quick footsteps approached his cot. Now he would have to pretend to be waking up in paradise. Someone took the sheet off of him. For a split second he opened his eyes. It was enough time for him to imprint the image in his memory. He was surrounded by the most beautiful girls he’d ever seen, all of whom were staring at him with a mixture of curiosity and timidity. He suddenly felt an immense, insane desire. He would have liked to have jumped up among them and given full rein to his passions. But he didn’t dare, not yet. What was it Suleiman had said about waking up here? He pretended he was still fast asleep, but he listened intently. He could hear that something completely unexpected was going to happen ...

No matter how many times they told Halima that Suleiman wouldn’t be coming back, it was no help. Her silly little heart was immovably obstinate in believing he would come. Once again, Fatima was her group’s leader, and Sara her companion, as they had been the first time.

But Zainab and several others were elsewhere. The location was different this time too. They had been assembled in the central garden, where Miriam had been leader the first time.

Once the eunuchs had brought in the litter with the sleeping youth, she trembled over her whole body. She hid behind Sara's back and waited fearfully for Fatima to uncover their guest. When that happened, instead of handsome Suleiman, Obeida's Moorish face was revealed.

Halima felt thunderstruck. Her entire wonderful world collapsed. Her eyes opened wide and she couldn't make a sound. She put her hand in her mouth and bit into it in pain. Gradually she realized that Suleiman was lost to her forever.

Suddenly she darted toward the doorway like an arrow in flight. Now everybody could laugh at her for refusing to believe them. She ran down the corridor, and before her companions could collect themselves, she was racing down the path toward the rocks where the lizards sunned themselves by day.

"Rokaya! Sara! Go after her!" Fatima ordered in a subdued voice. They both flew into the gardens after her. They didn't even notice when Ahriman joined them. They ran straight toward the edge of the stream.

They caught sight of Halima standing on top of the rocks. Her arms flailed, and she went pitching into the waves. There was a desperate scream and a splash, and the current was carrying her off.

Ahriman leapt into the water after her. He caught up with her, grabbed her hair in his teeth and tried to drag her to shore. But the current was too strong. In mortal fear Halima clutched onto his neck. They came closer and closer to the cliff under Alamut. Used to the darkness, his eyes could make out the nearby shore. He tried to reach it with all his might, but his efforts were all in vain. He gave a labored snort and shook off his load. The lock of her arms was released and her body vanished in the waves. But now he was trapped between high cliffs on both sides. He reached them, but his claws slipped against the smooth rock surface. He tried to swim against the current, back to the gentler banks of the gardens, but his strength was gone. A whirlpool caught him and dragged him into its depths.

Sara and Rokaya went back with horror in their eyes. Zofana met them at the entrance and they broke out in tears.

"She's gone. She jumped into the water. Into the rapids."

“O Allah, Allah! But keep quiet about it. The boy has woken up and he’s behaving strangely. He doesn’t seem to believe that we’re houris at all. What is Sayyiduna going to say!”

They wiped the tears off their cheeks and followed Zofana.

Obeida was sitting on pillows, confidently embracing first Fatima, then Jovaira, and smiling disdainfully through it all. They tried in vain to get him drunk, but he barely moistened his lips in the wine.

Then, with a knowing smile, he began to tell the girls about life at Alamut, and he kept a careful look on their faces as he did. He noticed some of them exchange glances when he mentioned Suleiman’s and Yusuf’s names. With an almost fiendish delight he described their departure for paradise that morning. He saw them blanch and try in vain to conceal their emotions. This gave him a certain satisfaction. It bothered him that those two had enjoyed the delights of these beauties sitting before him.

Then he caught sight of Sara and was taken aback. “So that’s black Sara that Suleiman talked about, although her name is different now,” he said to himself. The blood of his ancestors stirred in him. This is what the slaves of their grandees must have looked like.

He reached out, seized her by the wrist, and drew her toward him. His nostrils flared. He tore the pink veil off of her. He embraced her so hard that they both felt their bones crunch. Then he groaned like a rutting cat and threw himself at her in total abandon. Sara even forgot about what had happened to Halima.

Now it became easy to get him drunk. Powerless and devoid of will, he accepted everything they offered him. The fatigue was so great that he soon dozed off.

“Rokaya! Go get Miriam fast! Tell her everything! That Halima jumped into the river and that Obeida doesn’t believe.”

A boat was moored to the bank of the canal with Moad sitting in it. Rokaya jumped in.

“Take me to Miriam! Now!”

“Miriam is with Sayyiduna.”

“Even better.”

The boat set out gliding across the water’s surface.

Along the way they encountered Mustafa, who was ferrying Apama back from another garden.

“Halima has drowned in the river!” Rokaya called out to her.

“What are you saying?”

Rokaya repeated it. The old woman and the two eunuchs were aghast.

“Show me the place! Maybe we can still save her.”

“It’s too late. The river’s long since carried her off past the castle.”

“Allah, Allah! What is the point of it all?”

Mustafa dropped the oars and buried his face in his hands.

For a long time Hasan and Miriam sat silently in the small hut. Finally he broke the silence.

“This will be news to you,” he said. “That night when I sent the fedayeen to paradise, my grand dais plotted to throw me off the tower into Shah Rud.”

Miriam looked at him in surprise.

“And why was that?”

“Because they couldn’t grasp that a man has an obligation to himself to complete what he’s begun.”

“Which is to say, they were horrified by what you’re doing. What have you done with them?”

“Done with them? They’re still roaming around the castle grounds, as they did before. We are all full of evil wishes, so I don’t resent them. What could they do to me anyway? We all depend for our salvation on my machine functioning properly. I just hope it also succeeds in destroying our bitterest sworn enemy.”

He chuckled almost inaudibly.

“Which is to say, my old arch rival, my bosom foe, my mortal enemy.”

“I know who you mean,” she muttered.

Again there was a long silence. He knew what was weighing down on Miriam’s soul. But he avoided touching on this delicate subject himself, and she was reluctant to bring it up. Only after a long time had passed did she ask.

“Tell me, what have you done with the three boys who were in the gardens?”

“This morning Yusuf and Suleiman helped to fray the nerves of the sultan’s army that’s got us surrounded.”

She looked at him as though she were trying to read his innermost

thoughts.

“Did you kill them?”

“No, they killed themselves. And they were happy to do it.”

“You’re a cruel beast. What happened?”

He related the story. She listened to him with a mixture of horror and disbelief.

“And you didn’t feel a thing when you sacrificed two human beings who were utterly devoted to you?”

She could see that this was difficult for him and that he was on the defensive.

“You wouldn’t understand. What I’ve begun, I have to finish. But when I gave the fedayeen the command, I had to shudder. Something inside me said, ‘If there’s a power above us, it won’t permit this. Either the sun will go out or the earth will shake. The fortress will collapse and bury you and your whole army ...’ I’m telling you, I was trembling in my heart, like a child trembles before ghosts. I expected at least some little sign. It’s the truth, if just the slightest thing had stirred, if just then a cloud, for instance, had suddenly blocked out the sun, or if there had been a gust of wind, I would have reconsidered. Even after it was over, I was expecting a blow. But the sun continued to shine down all the same on me, on Alamut, and on the two dead bodies lying before of me. And this is what I thought: either there is no power above us, or else it’s supremely indifferent to everything that happens down here. Or, it’s favorably inclined toward what I’m doing. It was then I realized that somewhere secretly I still believed in a divinity. But that divinity bore no resemblance to the one of my youth. It was like the world itself, evolving in thousands of contradictions, yet firmly fettered to three dimensions. Limitless within its limits. Vast chaos inside a glass beaker. A terrible, grimacing dragon. And I knew at once that I had been serving it all my life.”

He looked past her with his eyes wide open, as though he were looking at indescribable wonders.

Insane devil, Miriam thought at that moment.

“Where is ibn Tahir?”

Hasan lowered his eyes.

“Did you send him to your ‘bosom foe’?”

Now he fixed his eyes on her, his gaze taking her in completely.

“Didn’t you once say that you didn’t believe in anything in the world and that you were afraid of nothing? Where is your strength, now that you have to endure the actions whose weight I bear? You have a heart for the small things, but sometimes you need one for the big things too.”

Just then Moad put his boat in at the waterfront. Rokaya hurried to Miriam. She was still trembling all over. She didn’t turn to look at Hasan as she exclaimed, “Halima has jumped into the river!”

Miriam clutched at her heart. She looked at Hasan, as though she wanted to say to him, “This is your doing!”

Hasan was also startled. He asked for the details.

“So when she saw that they’d brought in Obeida instead of Suleiman, she ran away? And you say that Obeida doesn’t believe he’s in paradise?”

He looked at Miriam, who had buried her face in her hands and was crying.

He stood up.

“See to it that everything goes as it should from now on!”

He went to the waterfront, where Adi was waiting for him in the boat.

“Back to the castle!” he ordered.

“I want you to strangle the one in the middle garden,” he told the eunuchs, “once you’re alone with him. Search him and bring me everything you find on him. Then bury him alongside the other two from this morning at the far end of the gardens, at the foot of the mountains. Send the pair from the other two gardens up to me.”

Stern and gloomy, he had himself hoisted up into his tower. Once at the top, he gave the sign that the time had come to leave the gardens. He was glad that neither Abu Ali nor Buzurg Ummid was with him. What did he have left to talk about with them? He would have to leave the world an explanation and apology for his actions. For the faithful, he would need to write a compilation of his philosophy, simply and in metaphors. To his heirs he would need to reveal the final mysteries. There was a great deal of work still ahead of him. But life was short and he was already old.

Exhausted to death, he returned to his room. He collapsed onto his bed and tried to go to sleep, but he couldn’t. By day he was afraid of

nothing. Now he saw Suleiman's face, down to the tiniest details. Yes, he had seemed to be happy. And yet, in the next instant the life was extinguished within him. Great God! What a horrible experiment!

Beads of sweat broke out on his forehead. Now he saw ibn Tahir riding toward Nehavend, obsessed with a single thought. Yes, that's where his mortal enemy was staying. His "opposite principle," the grand vizier Nizam al-Mulk, that brilliant and illustrious mind who professed everything that mankind saw as great and good. And yet, somewhere beneath it all there was a huge lie in him. He bowed down to mankind and its beliefs against the better convictions that Hasan knew he had. He had won the hearts of the masses and become powerful. He had achieved this through kindness, through generosity, and through more than a few concessions to precious human desires. Was there even room for another who was equal to him? Nizam al-Mulk had beat him at everything. He was more than ten years his senior. What option did he have, but to resort to the "opposite path"? *He, smiling, I, grim. He the forgiving one, I the unyielding. He the gentle one, I the terrifying one.* And yet he knew that the vizier was also capable of being ruthless and merciless. Even more than he. *If I can force him to yield, I'll be the sole ruler of Iran.*

"If only this night would end!" he sighed. He put his coat on and went back to the tower's upper platform.

He looked down into the gardens. The eunuchs had just turned the lamps down. Then he turned toward the foot of the mountains. Lights were shining there. He shivered. "They're burying the dead," he said to himself. A terrifying shudder came over him at the thought that one day he was going to vanish into nothingness.

We know nothing for certain, he thought. *The stars above us are silent. We've been abandoned to our hunches, and we give in to illusions. The god who rules us is terrible.*

He returned to his chambers and looked into the lift. Jafar and Abdur Ahman were fast asleep. He took the sheet off of them. The light from his room dimly illuminated their tired faces. He looked at them for a long time.

"It's true, man is the strangest creature on earth," he whispered. "He wants to fly like an eagle, but he lacks its wings. He wants to be as strong as a lion, but he lacks its paws. How horribly imperfect you've created him, Lord! And as punishment you've given him intellect and the

power to recognize his own helplessness.”

He lay back down and tried to go to sleep. But he only managed to drop off as morning broke.

“Ibn Sabbah is a real prophet. He does believe in some god,” Abu Ali said to Buzurg Ummid that evening. He looked at him with bright, almost childlike eyes. Then he continued to confide in him.

“You see, I wasn’t mistaken about him. No matter how godlessly he may have spoken, I always believed that only he could be leader of the Ismailis. Because only he has the greatness of heart that’s needed. Praise be to Allah! We have a prophet!”

“A terrible prophet, indeed,” Buzurg Ummid muttered.

“Mohammed was no less terrible. He sent thousands to their deaths. And yet they all believed in him. Now they’re waiting for the Mahdi.”

“Don’t tell me you’re waiting for him too?”

Abu Ali gave a cunning smile and replied.

“The masses have never waited for someone in vain. Believe me. History bears it out. Whether good or terrible, he’ll come, because the wishes of thousands and thousands of hearts will demand it. That’s the great secret of mankind. You don’t know when or where he’ll come from. All of a sudden, he’ll be here.”

“It looks like a form of madness is getting the better of you too. You believe! Even though you know that mankind lives on delusions.”

“If he believes, why shouldn’t I believe too?”

“I’m beginning to think that’s what all of you have always wanted.”

“The dais don’t trust us, because they think we’re the commander’s men. He has the key to the fedayeen. We have to go back to him.”

“All this shifting back and forth doesn’t feel right to me one bit. But you have a point. The dais have nothing to offer us. We don’t have our own people. So, then, our place is with the commander.”

At that moment, back in their residence, the girls were crying disconsolately for Halima. They assembled around the pool, and like a hawk attacking a flock of doves, Fatima told them how everything had happened. They timidly hung their heads and mourned their lost

companion. The girls from the two far gardens also returned that night. The horrible news made them feel as though they were all one family.

“Halima was the best of all of us.”

“It’s going to be lonely and sad in the gardens without her.”

“It’ll be awfully boring.”

“How are we going to get by without her?”

Miriam sat alone to one side. She listened to what the others were saying and felt twice as bad. She realized that she was powerless and that nothing bound her to life anymore. Why should she even bother? As dawn approached, she told the girls to go to bed. She went to find a sharp blade, entered her bath, undressed, and lay down in the basin. Then she opened the veins in her wrists.

Now she felt calm as the water gradually began to turn red. As her blood flowed out, so did her life. An enormous exhaustion overcame her. “Time to sleep,” she said to herself. She closed her eyes and sank into the water.

The next morning, when Fatima came to her bath to look for her, she found her pale and dead in the water, red from her blood. Her scream reverberated through the entire building, and then she fainted.

At about the same time, a soldier of the sultan’s army came to the river to water some horses and donkeys. Caught among tree branches in a small inlet he saw the naked body of a young girl. He pulled it to shore and couldn’t help exclaiming, “What a beauty!”

Then, somewhat farther down, he noticed the body of a large animal. *Some kind of leopard*, he thought. He managed to get it to shore too.

The animals neighed in fright.

“Easy now ... I’ll go report this to my commander.”

The emir’s men came to the river bank in large numbers to look at the strange find. An old soldier said, “This is a bad sign. A leopard and a maiden in the embrace of death.”

A captain ordered them buried side by side.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Over the following days the emir's army continued to bombard Alamut steadily. The Ismailis grew inured to the crash and rumbling of projectiles against the castle's walls. Hasan's prediction turned out to have been right on target. The soldiers posted atop the walls would watch the incoming projectiles and ebulliently evaluate each one of them, laughing and jeering wildly at the bad ones, or loudly exclaiming their admiration for the good ones. None of them were the slightest bit fearful anymore. They used signals to communicate with the enemy. Ibn Vakas, who had taken the late Obeida's place as leader of the scouts, soon found in these good relations a convenient opportunity to reestablish direct contact with the emir's army. He sent out one of his own men together with one of the prisoners. The prisoner related that his fellow prisoners back at the castle were doing well and that the Ismailis treated them with respect. The Ismaili asked the emir's men whether they were interested in trading with Alamut. There was plenty of money in the fortress, and overnight a thriving black market came into being that linked the men on both sides.

The news that ibn Vakas intercepted through this conduit was invaluable for the besieged castle. First of all he learned that the emir's army no longer amounted to thirty thousand men, but barely half that number. Then, that even those remaining were short of provisions and that, as a result, the men were constantly grumbling and pressing for them to withdraw. Emir Arslan Tash would have liked to send another five thousand men back to Rai or Qazvin, but given the reports of the Ismailis' fanatical determination and skill, he was afraid of losing his advantage and meeting with the same fate as the commander of his vanguard.

Little more than a week had passed when a messenger came rushing into the emir's camp and reported the horrific news that some Ismaili

had stabbed the grand vizier in the midst of his own army at Nehavend. Arslan Tash was thunderstruck. In an instant his imagination conjured a disguised murderer trying to get at him. Cold sweat broke out on his forehead.

“Call Abu Jafar here!” he ordered.

The captain arrived.

“Have you heard?” he asked him worriedly.

“I’ve heard, Excellency. Nizam al-Mulk has been murdered.”

“What was it the master of Alamut said?”

“That he knew something about the grand vizier that Your Excellency would only find out about in six or even twelve days. And that when that happened, Your Excellency should remember him and his message.”

“O Allah, Allah! He knew everything already. It was he who sent the murderer to Nehavend. But what did he mean by saying I should remember him?”

“Nothing good for you, I’m afraid.”

The emir drew one hand across his eyes. Then he leapt toward the entrance like a deer.

“Commander of the guards! Quick! I want you to increase your forces tenfold. No man should ever be without his weapon. Put guards everywhere. Don’t let anyone through, except for my officers and individuals whom I’ve summoned personally!”

Then he rejoined Abu Jafar.

“Assemble the drummers! Get all of the men battle-ready. Anyone who has the slightest contact with Alamut will be beheaded on the spot.”

Even before Abu Jafar had a chance to carry out this order, an officer came dashing into the tent.

“Mutiny! The catapult teams have saddled their horses and mules and fled south. The sergeants who opposed them were beaten and bound.”

Arslan Tash clutched at his head.

“Oh, you dog! You son of a dog! How could you let this happen?”

The officer angrily stared at the ground.

“They’re hungry. They don’t want to fight against a powerful prophet.”

“Well, what do you advise me to do?”

Abu Jafar replied dispassionately. “The grand vizier, the mortal enemy of the Ismailis, is dead. Taj al-Mulk is in power. He’s sympathetic to the

master of Alamut.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“The men who know how to operate the siege equipment have fled. What purpose is there in continuing to surround Alamut?”

Arslan Tash relaxed visibly. Out of duty, more than for any other reason, he shouted, “So you recommend that I run shamefully?”

“No, Your Excellency. It’s just that the situation has changed significantly with the vizier’s death. We have to wait for orders from the sultan and the new grand vizier.”

“Well, that’s different.”

He called an assembly of the officers. Most of them favored retreat. The men were opposed to fighting the Ismailis.

“Fine,” he said. “Let’s strike camp and have the whole army get ready to withdraw in absolute silence.”

The next morning the sun shone down on an empty and desolate plateau. Only the trampled ground and the ashen beds of countless campfires remained as evidence of a huge army’s presence there just the day before.

Ibn Vakas’s sources had immediately let him know about the death of the grand vizier.

“An Ismaili has murdered the grand vizier right in the middle of his own camp! The sultan’s army outside of Alamut is disintegrating!”

The news traveled through the entire fortress in an instant. Ibn Vakas reported the news to Abu Ali, who went looking for Buzurg Ummid.

“Ibn Tahir has carried the order out. Nizam al-Mulk is dead!”

They both went to see Hasan and let him know.

From the moment the supreme commander learned that Miriam had slashed her wrists in her bath, he had withdrawn even farther into himself. His machine may have worked according to his plan, but in the process its claws were also devouring people for whom it wasn’t meant. One victim led to another, which led to yet another. He could feel that it was no longer entirely under his control, that it was reaching past and above him, and that it was beginning to destroy people who were dear to him and whom he needed.

Here he was now, alone and frightening even to his own people. He

perceived Miriam's suicide as the loss of the last person to whom he could reveal his true self. If only he had Omar Khayyam with him now! What would he have made of his actions? He wouldn't have approved of them, for sure, but he would have understood them. And that's what he needed most of all.

The grand dais entered his chambers. From the solemnity of their behavior he could tell they were bringing him important news.

"The emir's army is running high-tail. Your Ismaili has killed the grand vizier."

Hasan shuddered. The first of the threesome that had once pledged to their mutual cause was no more. The road was clear now.

"At last," he whispered. "The death of that devil is the beginning of good fortune."

The three of them remained silent for a time. Then he asked, "Have you heard what happened to the one who did it?"

Buzurg Ummid shrugged.

"We haven't heard. What other possibility could there be, but one?"

Hasan looked them in the eyes, trying to read their thoughts. Abu Ali's face showed loyalty and trust. Buzurg Ummid's expressed approval verging on admiration.

He relaxed.

"Tell the Ismailis that from this day forward they're to revere Ibn Tahir as our most illustrious martyr. In addition to his name, they should also mention Suleiman's and Yusuf's in their prayers. This is my order. From here on, our path leads relentlessly upwards. All of the besieged castles will be liberated. Send a messenger to Gonbadan immediately. Husein Alkeini must be avenged. As soon as Kizil Sarik retreats from the fortress, have them send a caravan with my son in it here to Alamut."

He dismissed them and went to the top of his tower, where he watched the emir's forces retreating.

The next morning messengers were dispatched at a gallop to all the Ismaili fortresses. Ibn Vakas's assignment was to reestablish contact with Rudbar.

As the day began to incline toward evening, a breathless Abu Ali came running in to see the supreme commander.

"Something incredible has happened," he said when he was still a long way off. "Ibn Tahir has returned to the castle."

The night after his attack on the grand vizier was the most horrible night in ibn Tahir's life. Beaten and battered, his arms and legs bound, he lay chained to the tent's middle pole. Desperate thoughts gnawed at him. He thought he could hear the mocking guffaws of the old man of Alamut. How could he have been so blinded that he didn't see through the deception from the very start? Allah, Allah! How could he have ever guessed that a religious leader, whose devoted followers all thought he served justice and truth, could be such a vile fraud! Such a cold-blooded, calculating cheat! And that Miriam, that creature of angelic beauty, could be his helper, ten times more despicable than he, because she exploited love for her vile purposes. How limitlessly he despised her now!

The night dragged on to infinity. The excruciating pain refused to pass and sleep refused to come. Was Miriam that horrible old man's lover? Did the two of them laugh at his childish gullibility together? He, ibn Tahir, had written poems to her. He had dreamed about her, longed for her, expired for her. And all that time that vile old man had probably been using her as his plaything, slaking his lust on her, glutting himself on wine and her charms, while those who believed in him, who revered and loved him, got sent to their deaths. Allah, Allah, what a horrible revelation this was!

But how had all this been possible? Was there no one above us to punish such a crime? No one to set limits on such revolting behavior?

Miriam, a whore! This was the most intolerable thought of all. Her beauty, her intelligence, her kindness—all just decoys for the idiot he had been! He couldn't live after a humiliation like this. This is why he had to go to Alamut and settle things with the old man. He had to, and this would earn him death too. What did he have to be afraid of?

Ah, but still! Hadn't Miriam's beauty been the most delightful miracle? What a powerful fire she had ignited! She had triggered a hundred new and unknown powers in him. And now, finally, this realization. Oh, if only he could press her close again. And in a moment of delight crush her, strangle her!

The next day they told him that the grand vizier had died. They held off sending him to Alamut and waited for what the sultan would do.

Sultan Malik Shah, who was already halfway to Baghdad, immediately interrupted his trip when he heard that Nizam al-Mulk had been

murdered. Within two days he was back at Nehavend.

On a mighty platform, beneath a sky-blue canopy, and amid countless banners, wreaths and decorations, the vizier's body lay, perfumed, anointed, and preliminarily embalmed, dressed in scarlet and adorned with a magnificent turban. A black fez and quiver with ink and pen, the symbols of the vizier's station, were laid out at his feet. His waxen face, framed by its handsome white beard, expressed nobility and peaceful dignity.

One after the other, his sons arrived from all corners of the realm, riding the swiftest horses. They kneeled down before their dead father and kissed his cold, stiffened fingers. Moans and wails echoed around the funeral bier.

When the sultan saw the dead body of his vizier, he broke into tears like a child. For thirty years the deceased had served his country! "The king's father"—*ata beg*—how that title suited him! Now he bitterly regretted his harsh treatment of him over the past year. Why had he let a woman meddle with affairs of state?! He ought to have kept her locked up in a harem like all the others.

At the camp he learned the details of the horrible murder. So this was Hasan's true face! The murderer could just as easily have found him out instead of the vizier! He shuddered. No, he wasn't going to let this criminality spread. He had to get rid of Hasan! And all the Ismailis with him. His castles would all have to be razed to the ground.

He permitted the vizier's sons to transport their father's body to Isfahan and hold the burial ceremony there. As for the murderer, the general sense was to have him carry out the dying vizier's last command. "He'll die at Alamut one way or the other," they said. And so the sultan ordered ibn Tahir brought before him.

They shoved him into the tent, bound and still swollen from his beating and bloody from his wounds. The sultan was amazed when he saw him. In all the many years of his rule he had learned to judge people quickly. There was nothing at all murderous about this Ismaili.

"How were you able to commit such a terrible crime?"

Ibn Tahir gradually confessed. There was nothing invented or distorted in his words. The sultan broke into a cold sweat. He knew history well, but this was the most frightening tale he had ever heard.

"Do you see now that you were just a pawn in the hands of the vile

old man of the mountain?” he asked him at the end of his story.

“My only desire is to atone for my crime and save the world from the monster of Alamut.”

“I trust you and will let you go. Thirty men will escort you to Alamut. Make sure you don’t give yourself away too soon. Rein in your anger until they let you see the leader. You’re a determined and bright young man. Your plan has to succeed.”

When he had taken care of everything, the sultan continued his journey to Baghdad.

The thirty men escorting ibn Tahir traveled with remarkable speed. Even so, news of the vizier’s death preceded them by a full day. Between Rai and Qazvin they came across whole bands of soldiers returning from the siege of Alamut. From them they heard how the news had affected the emir and his army. There was some risk that they might fall into the hands of some troop of Ismailis.

Ibn Tahir spoke up.

“I know a secret path on the far side of Shah Rud. That would be the safest route for us to travel.”

He led them to a shallows where they could easily ford the river. They came to a path at the base of the mountains which wended uphill amid gravel and scrub alongside the riverbed. They rode toward Alamut, until the lead rider announced that a horseman was approaching from the opposite direction. They hid in the bushes on both sides of the path and prepared their ambush.

Then ibn Tahir caught sight of the horseman approaching them and recognized ibn Vakas. He felt strangely anxious. *Sayyiduna must be sending him to Rudbar*, he thought. As much as he reproached himself for it, something in him still wanted the feday to escape from the trap set for him. “It’s not his fault, after all,” he reassured himself. “He’s just as much a victim of the deceitful old man as I was.” Moreover, he still felt some odd connection to the world of Alamut.

Ibn Vakas rode in among them. Instantaneously he was surrounded on all sides. He was too close to be able to use his lance. He threw it on the ground and drew his saber.

“Come, al-Mahdi!”

With this cry he threw himself at his attackers. The closest retreated, frightened by so much intensity. Ibn Tahir went pale and everything in him shrank. He recalled the first battle outside the castle, the time he had seized the Turks' flag from them. In his mind he saw Suleiman throwing himself to the ground and howling in fury, because Abu Soraka wouldn't let him fight. He could see the rising might and extent of the Ismailis. The sultan's army of thousands had just scattered outside Alamut. A new prophet had spoken to Iran. A great and terrible prophet. ... He lay his head down on his horse's neck and quietly began to cry.

In the meantime, ibn Vakas had almost forced his way out with his boldness. His saber blows hailed down on the shields and helmets of his attackers. Then one of them jumped off his horse, picked up the feday's lance and shoved it into his horse's belly. The horse rose up on its hind legs and then collapsed, burying its rider beneath it. Ibn Vakas quickly managed to dig his way back out. But just then a mace blow to his head knocked him to the ground. The men tied him up while he was still unconscious. Then they washed his wound and brought him to with water.

When he opened his eyes he saw ibn Tahir before him. He remembered that he had just been proclaimed a saint the day before and he was horrified.

"Am I dead?" he asked timidly.

When the commander of the enemy detachment approached him, ibn Vakas's eyes widened. Then he was overcome by exhaustion again, and he fell back unconscious.

Ibn Tahir shook him by the shoulder.

"Wake up, ibn Vakas. Don't you recognize me anymore?"

They brought the wounded youth water, which he drank greedily.

"You're ibn Tahir? And you're not dead? What are you doing with them?"

He pointed toward the enemy officer.

"I'm coming back to Alamut to kill the greatest liar and fraud of all time. Hasan ibn Sabbah isn't a prophet, he's just a cheap fraud. The paradise he sent us to is on the far side of the castle, in the gardens of the former kings of Daylam."

Ibn Vakas listened carefully. Then he contorted his face in a dismissive sneer.

“Traitor!”

Ibn Tahir’s face flushed red.

“You don’t believe me?”

“All I believe in is the oath I’ve sworn to Sayyiduna.”

“But he’s deceived us! How can an oath like that be binding?”

“It’s helped us beat the sultan’s army. All our enemies tremble in fear of us now.”

“You have us to thank for that. I killed the grand vizier.”

“That’s what they say. And that’s why the supreme leader proclaimed you a martyr. And now you’re coming back to murder him too?”

“If I had known before what I know now, I would have killed only him.”

“Killed him?! At his order and in front of all of us, Suleiman stabbed himself and Yusuf jumped off the top of the tower. And both of their faces looked blissful when they were dead.”

“Oh, that heartless murderer! Let’s go, quickly! The sooner I drive a knife into his guts, the sooner the world will be spared his horrors!”

They continued on. About a half parasang from Alamut, they stopped.

“You go into the fortress now,” the unit commander told him. “We’ll take the prisoner with us as a hostage. Good luck with your revenge, and may Allah give you an easy death.”

Ibn Tahir forded the river on his horse. Once on the other side, he looked for the place where he had hidden his clothing when he left the castle. He changed into it and then rode toward the canyon. The eyes of his escorts followed him until he was no longer visible. Then the commander ordered them to return to Rai.

The guard atop the tower outside the canyon entrance recognized him and let him through. The fortress bridge was let down for him. When the soldiers caught sight of him, they stared at him as though he had returned from the other world.

“I have to speak with Sayyiduna. Immediately!” he said to the officer on duty. “I bring very important news from the sultan’s camp.” The officer rushed the news to Abu Ali, who took it to Hasan.

Ibn Tahir waited, grim and determined. His desire to settle accounts with the impostor was stronger than his fear. Instinctively he felt the short sword he was carrying under his cloak. He had a dagger hidden under his belt, and in his sleeve he had the poisoned writing implement

with which he had stabbed the grand vizier.

At the news that ibn Tahir had returned, Hasan was speechless. He stared at Abu Ali and forgot he was standing there. Like a mouse looking for a way out of a trap, his thoughts darted among all the possibilities, trying to understand this extraordinary event.

“Go. Have ibn Tahir come see me. Order the guard to let him through unhindered.”

He had five of his eunuchs hide behind the curtain in his antechamber. He ordered them to seize the man when he walked in, disarm him, and tie him up.

Then he waited.

When ibn Tahir heard that the supreme commander had summoned him and that he had free access to him, he instantly pulled himself together. “I have to complete my mission,” he said to himself, “and Allah help me.” He remembered their lessons with Abdul Malik. He reckoned with the possibility that Hasan was setting a trap for him. All he needed was to get to his room!

Pale and determined, he entered the commander’s tower. With one hand he touched the handle of the sword beneath his cloak, while he kept the other ready to grab for the dagger quickly. His pace barely lagged as he walked past the Moorish guards. They stood motionless at all the doorways and at the head of each corridor. He forced himself not to look back, and so his pace accelerated.

He climbed the staircase to the top. Even the terrible mace-bearing guard at the end of it didn’t seem to notice him. Now he had to act with all decisiveness, whatever might happen. He crossed the length of the corridor swiftly. A guard was standing outside the leader’s antechamber. He drew back the curtain and motioned to him to proceed.

An icy chill ran down his spine. *Quickly, quickly!* he thought, *and get it over with.* Cautiously, decisively, his lips pressed tight, he walked in.

Suddenly a barrage of fists descended on him. They tried to seize him by the wrist, but he managed to wrench himself free and draw his sword. A blow to the back of his head knocked him to the floor. Several of the giants jumped on him and bound his hands and legs.

“What an idiot!” he howled. He gritted his teeth in fear and powerless

rage.

Hasan came out of his room.

“As you ordered, Sayyiduna.”

“Good. Go wait in the corridor.”

He looked at ibn Tahir, who lay bound on the floor in front of him, and gave him a peculiar smile.

“Criminal! Murderer of innocents! Haven’t you had enough blood yet?”

As though he hadn’t heard these rebukes, Hasan asked him, ““Did you carry out my order?”

“Why do you bother to ask, you fake? You know perfectly well you tricked me.”

“All right. How did you manage to come back?”

Ibn Tahir grimaced painfully.

“What do you care? What matters is I’m here ... to shove a dagger into your guts.”

“Not so easily done, hero.”

“So I see. So I was twice an idiot.”

“Why? As a feday you were committed to dying. We even proclaimed you a martyr. And now you come back trying to frighten us. Now we’re going to have to make sure you go to paradise.”

“I know. Liar! You took us to the gardens of the kings of Daylam and then, like some cheap huckster, you fooled us into believing you’d opened up the gates to paradise. And because of that I went and stabbed a decent man, who in the hour of his death did me the kindness of opening my eyes. What a nightmare!”

“Calm down, ibn Tahir. Nearly all of mankind suffers from just this sort of ignorance.”

“How could it not? When they’re abused by the people they trust most?! Oh, how I believed in you! I would sooner have believed anything about you, whom half of Islam called a prophet, than that you were an impostor and a fraud. That you intentionally deceived your loyal subjects. That you abused their faith to accomplish your criminal goals.”

“Do you have any other wishes?”

“Damn you!”

Hasan smiled.

“Words like that don’t worry me very much.”

Ibn Tahir’s energy flagged. He managed to calm down.

“There’s something I want to ask you before you kill me.”

“Go ahead.”

“How were you able to come up with such a dirty scheme for us, when we’d pledged ourselves to you body and soul?”

“Do you want to hear a serious answer?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Then listen ... and I’ll grant you your last wish ... I’ve always told my followers that my background is Arab. My enemies have tried to prove that it isn’t. And they’re right. I had to do this, because you Iranians are ashamed of your heritage. Because you think that anyone who comes from the lands of the Prophet is nobler, even if it’s the most abject beggar. Because you’ve forgotten that you’re the descendants of Rostam and Suhrab, of Manuchehr and Feridun, that you’re the heirs to the glory of the kings of Iran, the Khosrows, the Farhads and the Parthian princes. You’ve forgotten that your language, that beautiful Pahlavi, is the language of Firdausi, Ansari and countless other poets. First you adopted your faith and spiritual leadership from the Arabs. And now you’ve submitted to the Turks, these horse thieves from Turkestan! For half a century you, the proud sons of Zarathustra, have let these Seljuk dogs rule you! When I was young, the grand vizier, whom you killed, Omar Khayyam and I pledged that we would do everything in our power to overthrow the Seljuk usurpers. We agreed that we would try to advance ourselves as much as possible, in order to maximize our influence, and that we would help each other along the way. I sought my weapon among the Shia, who were opposed to Baghdad and consequently the Seljuks as well. The vizier entered the Seljuks’ service. At first I thought that was the means he had chosen to fulfill our pledge. But lo and behold, when I called him to account, he laughed at me and was surprised I was still clinging to those ‘childish games.’ He obliged me only by finding me a position at the court. But soon he would see that I had remained faithful to our old pledge. He plotted against me and had me banished from the court. But when he saw that my influence was growing, he decided to destroy me. He put a reward of ten thousand gold pieces on my head! And that was the end of our youthful dream. The vizier was sitting at the trough, toadying up to foreigners. Omar was

drinking wine, making love to women, bemoaning our lost freedom, and making fun of the whole world. I was persistent. But that experience and others opened my eyes once and for all. I realized that the people are slothful and lax, and that it's not worth it to sacrifice yourself for them. I had tried to exhort and rouse them to no avail. Do you think the overwhelming majority of people care about the truth? Far from it! They want to be left alone, and they want fairy tales to feed their hungry imaginations. But what about justice? They couldn't care less, as long as you meet their personal needs. I didn't want to fool myself anymore. If this is what humankind is like, then exploit its weaknesses to achieve your higher goals, which will benefit them too, even though they don't understand that. I appealed to the stupidity and gullibility of people. To their passion for pleasure, their selfish desires. The doors were wide open to me now. I became the people's prophet, the one you came to know. The masses are assembled behind me now. All my bridges have been burned down. I have to move forward. Forward, until the Seljuk empire collapses. Don't you see? Am I not making sense? ... Or am I?"

Ibn Tahir listened to him wide-eyed. He would have expected anything, except for Hasan to defend himself, and like this!

"You said that the faith of you fedayeen was firm. Hardly! I have lived all of my sixty years in perpetual mortal danger. And if I could have known that my death would liberate the glorious throne of Iran from foreign despots, I would have thrown myself into it without any expectation of some heavenly reward! Back then, at least. I looked around and realized that if I deposed one of them, another would replace him. Because there wouldn't have been anyone who would know how to make use of my death. So I had to look for others who would be willing to take aim at those highly placed heads. Nobody would have agreed to go voluntarily, because nobody was so acutely aware of his calling, or so proud that he could sacrifice himself for a cause. I had to find other means. Those means ... those means were the artificial paradise beyond the castle, the gardens of the kings of Daylam, as you've so accurately said already. Where does deception begin and where does truth end in life? It's hard to say. You're still too young to understand. But if you were my age! Then you'd understand that the paradise a person sees as paradise really is paradise for him. And that his pleasures there are real pleasures. If you hadn't seen through it, you would have died happy in

that knowledge, just as Suleiman and Yusuf did ... Am I making some sense now?"

Ibn Tahir shook his head in amazement.

"I think I'm beginning to understand, and it's terrible."

"Do you know what al-Araf is?"

"I do, Sayyiduna. It's the wall that separates paradise and hell."

"Correct. It's said that that wall is the destination of those who have fought for a higher purpose against the will of their parents, and fallen with sword in hand. They can't go to paradise, and they don't deserve hell. It's their lot to look in both directions. To know! Yes, al-Araf is a symbol for those who have their eyes open and who have the courage to act in accordance with their knowledge. Look. When you believed, you were in heaven. Now that you've come to see and deny, you've descended into hell. But on Araf there's no place for either joy or disillusionment. Al-Araf is the balance of good and evil, and the path that leads to it is long and steep. Few have the opportunity to see it. Even fewer dare to tread it, because you're alone on Araf. It's what separates you from other people. To endure up here, you have to steel your heart. Do I make sense now?"

Ibn Tahir moaned.

"It's horrible."

"What strikes you as so horrible?"

"That the realization comes so late. This should have been the beginning of my life."

Hasan took him in with a rapid glance. His face brightened. But there was still a quaver of distrust in his voice when he asked him, "What would you do if your life started now?"

"First I'd want to learn everything that the greatest minds have discovered. I'd study all the sciences, delve into all the secrets of nature and the universe. I'd attend all the most famous schools in the world, explore all the libraries ..."

Hasan smiled.

"What about love? Have you forgotten about that?"

Ibn Tahir's face darkened.

"I'd avoid that evil. Women are shameless."

"Come now, where did you learn that profound truth?"

"You should know ..."

“Is that aimed at Miriam? Then you should know that she pleaded for you. For all of you! She’s gone now. She slit her wrists and bled to death.”

Ibn Tahir fell back onto the floor. His heart ached bitterly. Yes, he was still in love with her.

“Whoever intends to scale al-Araf has to be master over love too.”

“I understand.”

“What do you think of me now?”

Ibn Tahir smiled.

“I feel much closer to you.”

“Now perhaps you also understand what it means to observe the world for forty years with a great plan in your heart. And to spend twenty years searching for the chance to realize a great dream. Such a plan and such a dream are like an order that you’ve received from an unknown commander. The world around you is like an enemy army besieging a fortress. You have to get out of the fortress alive if you want to get your order out through the enemy forces. You have to be brave and yet you have to keep your head on your shoulders. Bold and cautious at the same time ... Is that clear?”

“It’s becoming clear, Sayyiduna.”

“Do you still think I’m a vicious criminal?”

“No. From the perspective that I see you in now, you’re not a criminal.”

“Would you have the courage to climb al-Araf?”

“From now on it will be my only passion.”

Hasan stepped up to him and cut his bonds.

“Get up. You’re free.”

Ibn Tahir looked at him, uncomprehendingly.

“What do you mean? I don’t under—” he stammered.

“You’re free!”

“What? Me? Free? After I came here to murder you?”

“Ibn Tahir is gone. Now you’re just Avani. You’ve begun your ascent of al-Araf. One crow doesn’t peck the other’s eyes out.”

Ibn Tahir burst into tears. He threw himself at his feet.

“Forgive me! Forgive me!”

“Get far away from here, son. Study, get to know the world. Be afraid of nothing. Cast aside all your prejudices. Let nothing be too lofty or too

base for you. Explore everything. Be brave. When nothing remains for you to draw counsel from, come back here. I may not be here anymore. But my people will be. You'll be welcome, I'll see to it. When that happens, you'll be at the summit of Araf."

Ibn Tahir eagerly kissed his hand. Hasan lifted him up and looked deeply into his eyes for a long time. Then he embraced and kissed him.

"My son," he stammered, his eyes glistening. "This old heart is happy for you. I'll give you some money and arrange for you to get anything you might need for your journey ..."

Ibn Tahir was moved.

"May I take one more look at the gardens?"

"Come with me to the top of the tower."

They went out onto the platform and looked down into the gardens. Ibn Tahir sighed. Then he was overcome with emotion. He lay his head down on the rampart and began to cry uncontrollably.

They went back inside and Hasan issued the necessary orders. Ibn Tahir took his things with him, including his poems. They were a precious memento. That same day he rode out from the castle, well armed, supplied with money, and with a pack mule to one side. He looked around himself with wide-open eyes. The whole world seemed reborn and new. He felt as though he had just now opened his eyes. A thousand questions were waiting to be answered. Ibn Tahir the feday had died, and the philosopher Avani had been born.

Hasan returned to his chambers with an unfamiliar, wonderful feeling in his heart. A while later the grand dais rushed in to see him, out of breath.

"What does this mean? Do you know that ibn Tahir has just ridden out of the castle? Everyone saw him."

Hasan laughed lightheartedly.

"You're mistaken. Your eyes have deceived you. Ibn Tahir died as a martyr for the Ismaili cause. That must have been someone else you saw. By the way, something pleasant has happened to me, and I've been meaning to tell you: I have a son." The grand dais looked at each other and shook their heads.

The detachment that had escorted ibn Tahir to Alamut headed back

toward Nehavend with ibn Vakas as its prisoner. Along the way they paid particular attention to the news. They were waiting for reports of the Ismaili leader's murder to spread. But there were no such reports.

In Nehavend, Fahr al-Mulk, the son of the dead grand vizier, ordered that his father's murder be avenged and the escape of the true murderer be covered up by having ibn Vakas beheaded as the vizier's murderer.

By that time ibn Tahir had already crossed the border of Iran and arrived in India.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Express messengers flew with the news of the grand vizier's murder from one country to the next, arousing fear throughout the great Seljuk realm. It triggered innumerable unforeseen consequences and caused widespread uncertainty and confusion.

The fortress of Gonbadan near the city of Girdkuh, the Ismaili stronghold in Khuzestan, which had been out of food and water and on the verge of surrendering, was liberated from its besiegers overnight, just like Alamut. The grand vizier, the Ismailis' mortal enemy, was dead. His successor, Taj al-Mulk, was reputed to be Hasan's friend, so Kizil Sarik's forces abandoned their siege and dispersed even before the commander received any instructions from the sultan or the new vizier. The way to the castle was free to Hasan's messenger, who brought Husein Alkeini's successor, sheik ibn Atash, an order to hand over the murderer of the grand dai. As early as the next day, a large, well-armed caravan transporting Hosein in irons set out for Alamut.

News of the grand vizier's murder finally reached the sultan's eldest son, Barkiarok, who was leading a campaign against rebels on the border with India. He turned over command of part of the army to his brother Sanjar, then, with the remaining units, sped precipitously back to Isfahan to defend his inheritance and thwart any possible designs of his step-mother Turkan Khatun and her vizier, Taj al-Mulk.

In the meantime, in Isfahan Taj al-Mulk had made all preparations to proclaim four-year-old Mohammed the heir to the throne. The chief opponent of this plan was now gone, and the wavering sultan had no one to shore up his will against the demands of his youngest and most determined wife. Just then he was in Baghdad observing some of the greatest celebrations and ceremonies ever held. Besides the caliph, more than a thousand subject kings, princes and grandees from all the corners of his empire were paying tribute to him. He was at the height of his

glory and power. Not even the death of his loyal advisor of many years could spoil his sense of his own majesty. He wanted for nothing. He was thoroughly happy.

The news of the dispersal of the sultan's armies outside of Alamut and Gonbadan alerted the cautious Taj al-Mulk to the danger that threatened the realm from his erstwhile ally Hasan. Now that he had taken Nizam al-Mulk's place as administrator of the great Iranian empire, he felt the full weight of his responsibility for peace and order throughout the realm. The sultan's firm command that he deal ruthlessly with the Ismailis was practically made to order for him. He immediately relieved the emirs Arslan Tash and Kizil Sarik of their posts and appointed two young and forceful Turkish officers in their place. They were to collect and regroup the scattered units and use them to attack Alamut and Gonbadan once again.

"We've had enough excitement lately," Hasan said to his two dais. "We need a rest so we can get ready to continue the fight. Just as importantly, we need to repair the breaches in our edifice. So let's try to reach an honorable peace with the sultan."

A feday named Halfa was assigned to ride to Baghdad with the written terms for the sultan, in which Hasan made the following stipulations: That he return to the Ismailis all of the castles and fortresses they had held before the grand vizier attacked them. The sultan would have to pay reparations for the castles damaged or destroyed. In return, Hasan would pledge not to acquire any new strongholds. At the same time, he would be prepared to defend the entire northern border of the realm against barbarian incursions. The sultan would have to pay him fifty thousand gold pieces per year to maintain that army.

Hasan had to smile as he set his seal on the letter. He sensed full well that his demands were no small provocation. He wondered how the sultan would take them. After all, he was demanding nothing less than that the all-powerful emperor of Iran pay him an annual tax!

Even though Halfa was an authorized messenger, the sultan's henchmen seized him as early as Hamadan and sent him to Baghdad in chains. At the height of the festivities, the commander of the sultan's bodyguard delivered Hasan's letter to his master. The sovereign ripped

the seal off of it and read it eagerly. He grew pale. His lips trembled with rage.

“How dare you bring me a vile thing like this in the middle these celebrations?!” he roared at the commander.

The commander of the bodyguard fell prostrate. He begged for mercy.

“Here, read it!” the sultan shouted.

He dismissed the entire court. Now he was free to give vent to his full rage. He tore the curtains and carpets off the doorways and windows, broke everything that was breakable, then collapsed, breathless and gasping, onto some pillows.

“Bring me the villain!” he ordered in a hoarse voice.

They led Halfa in, bound and terrified.

“Who are you?!”

Halfa answered in a stammer.

“A feday?! So you’re a professional murderer!” the sultan wailed.

He leaped to his feet, shoved Halfa to the ground, jumped on him, and worked himself into a fury. At last he drew his saber and used it to hack the poor messenger to death.

His outburst ended just as suddenly as it had come. He grew sober at the sight of the dead body before him. He asked his personal scribe and the commander of his bodyguard for their advice on how to respond to Hasan’s shameless provocation.

“Your Majesty should hasten all military campaigns against the Ismailis,” the commander of the bodyguard advised.

“But the insult itself must also be returned,” his secretary said. “Permit me to compose a response in Your Majesty’s name.”

They decided to send a messenger to Alamut. In his letter the secretary called Hasan a murderer, a traitor and a mercenary of the caliph of Cairo. He ordered him to vacate immediately all of the castles he had seized unlawfully. Otherwise not one stone would be left atop another, and the Ismailis would be wiped out together with their wives and children. He himself would meet with the ultimate punishment. This was how His Majesty ought to reply to him.

A young officer, a certain Halef of Ghazna, was chosen to be the messenger. He mounted his horse and changed it at every station along the way, and in this way he reached Alamut within six days.

Manuchehr had him detained in his tower while he carried the letter

to Abu Ali, who in turn delivered it to Hasan.

Hasan read it and then showed it coolly to Abu Ali. He also called for Buzurg Ummid. He told them, "The sultan is blinded by his own greatness and is turning his back on the danger that threatens him. He refuses to recognize us. Too bad for him."

He ordered the messenger put in chains and brought before him.

Halef resisted being bound.

"This is a crime!" he shouted. "I'm a messenger from His Highness, the sultan and shah of Iran. If you put me in chains, you insult him."

This was to no avail. He had to appear before the supreme commander in shackles.

"I strongly protest this treatment," he said indignantly when he came into the antechamber where the commanders were waiting for him.

"Where is my messenger?" Hasan asked him coolly.

"First ...," Halef said, trying to resume his indignant protest.

"Where is my messenger?!"

Hasan's eyes bore into the officer. His voice was hard and commanding.

Halef stubbornly lowered his eyes. He was silent.

"Have you been struck dumb? Wait! I'll show you a way to loosen your tongue."

He ordered a eunuch to show in the executioner with his assistants and their equipment. Then he turned toward the grand dais and began to chat with them casually.

Halef suddenly spoke up.

"I come in the name of His Majesty. I'm only carrying out his orders."

Hasan ignored his words. He didn't even look at him.

The executioner and his two assistants arrived. The three of them were real giants. They immediately began to set up a rack. They set a stone urn down on the floor and used a bellows to fan the embers in it. In a separate box there were various implements of torture which rattled unpleasantly when they were set in the corner.

Sweat beaded on Halef's forehead. He began swallowing so much that his mouth was soon dry.

"How should I know what's come of your messenger?" he said, his voice trembling. "I was just given an order and I've carried it out."

Hasan acted as though he were deaf.

When the preparations for torture were complete, the executioner spoke.

“Everything is ready, Sayyiduna.”

“Start with burning.”

The executioner took a sharpened iron poker out of the box and began heating it in the fire.

Halef shouted, “I’ll tell you everything I know.”

Hasan still didn’t move.

The poker had become white-hot. The executioner drew it out of the fire and approached the prisoner, who howled when he saw what was coming.

“Sir! Spare me! The sultan cut down your messenger with his saber.”

Only now did Hasan turn to face Halef. He gave the executioner a sign to withdraw.

“So, you’ve regained the gift of speech after all? And the sultan butchered my emissary with his own hands, you say? Bad, very bad.”

This whole time he was thinking how he might outwit the sultan. Now, as he looked at his messenger, a plan suddenly came into focus in his mind.

“Summon the doctor!” he told a eunuch.

Halef was shaking. He could tell that this new command couldn’t be good news for him.

Hasan signaled to the grand dais to follow him into his room.

“We mustn’t be content with half-measures,” he told them. “We have to wound the enemy to the quick if we want to keep him from outpacing us. Let’s have no illusions. From now on the sultan will commit all of his forces to destroying us.”

But what exactly he was planning, he didn’t tell them.

A eunuch announced the arrival of Hakim.

“Have him come in,” Hasan said.

The Greek walked into the room, bowing deeply.

“Did you get a look at the prisoner?” Hasan asked him.

“Yes, he was waiting outside.”

“Go and take another close look at him.”

The Greek obeyed. He came back in a short while.

“Do you know any of the fedayeen who look like him?”

The doctor looked at him, uncomprehending.

“I don’t know what you mean by that, Sayyiduna,” he said. “His face is a little reminiscent of Obeida, peace be upon him.”

Hasan’s eyes flashed impatiently.

“Or maybe ... his posture is a little bit like Halfa’s, the one you sent somewhere two weeks ago ... Is that wrong too? Or he might resemble Afan? Then I give up ... His legs are bowed like Jafar’s ... Is that what you were thinking?”

The Greek was covered in sweat.

Hasan laughed.

“You’re a doctor and a skillful barber. How would you feel about, let’s say, turning Jafar into that man?”

Hakim’s face brightened.

“That’s an art I know something about. It’s practiced widely where I come from.”

“There you go, now we’re getting somewhere.”

“Ah, you deign to joke, Sayyiduna. The man waiting outside has a short, curly beard, a slightly broken nose and a large scar on his cheek. It’s a face that was made to be transferred to another. But you must allow me to have the model constantly in front of me when I set to work.”

“Fine. But can you assure me that the similarity will be great enough?”

“One egg couldn’t be more like another ... Just give me some time to pull together everything I’m going to need.”

“All right. Go to it.”

The doctor left. Hasan sent for Jafar.

When he arrived, he told him, “I have a remarkable assignment for you. Once you’ve carried it out, the Ismailis will write your name in the stars. Paradise will be wide open to you.”

Jafar remembered ibn Tahir. He was still being celebrated as a martyr, although he had seen him with his own eyes when he returned to Alamut, and then again when he left, his eyes shining with happiness, as he took back the package he had entrusted to him before his departure for Nehavend. One marvelous and impenetrable mystery after the other.

“At your service, Sayyiduna!”

His face shone with pride.

All this time, Halef was enduring fiendish torments of fear and

uncertainty in the antechamber. The executioner stood barely a few steps away from him, his brawny arms crossed on his naked chest. From time to time he cast a mocking glance at the emissary. Now and then his assistants fanned the fire. Otherwise, they played with the rack and provocatively inspected the implements of torture.

The doctor returned with the equipment he needed.

Hasan spoke to Jafar.

“First of all, get a good look at the prisoner in the antechamber. You have to remember exactly his every gesture, the way he speaks and expresses himself, and everything he says about himself while I’m interrogating him. Be careful not to miss a thing! Because you’re going to have to imitate him so well that everyone who comes in contact with you thinks you’re him. In other words, you’re going to become him.”

They followed him into the antechamber. He signaled the executioner to be ready. Then he began questioning the prisoner.

“What is your name and where are you from?”

Halef tried to collect himself again.

“I am a messenger of His Majesty ...”

Hasan flew into a rage.

“Executioner, ready your equipment!... I’ll warn you one last time to answer all my questions precisely. I’ll tell you now that I’m going to keep you at Alamut. If any one bit of information you give us turns out to be wrong, I’ll have you drawn and quartered in the courtyard below. Now you know where you stand. Speak!”

“My name is Halef, son of Omar. My family is from Ghazna. That’s where I was born and spent my youth.”

“Remember this, Jafar!... How old are you and how long have you been in the sultan’s army?”

“I’m twenty-seven years old. I’ve served in the army since I was sixteen.”

“How did you join the army?”

“My uncle Othman, son of Husein, who’s a captain in the bodyguard, recommended me to His Majesty.”

“The names of the places you’ve been stationed?”

“I went directly to the court at Isfahan. Then I accompanied His Majesty as his messenger throughout the realm.”

He named the cities he had traveled through or had spent any length

of time in, then the caravan and military roads they had traveled. As the interrogation continued, he revealed that he had two wives, each of whom had borne him one son. Hasan demanded more and more details. Next came his superior officers, their habits and personal affairs; and then his colleagues, his service and how he spent his time. He described how he got along with one or the other of them, how many times he had spoken to the sultan, and what his relationship to him was like. He told him where his quarters were in Isfahan and Baghdad, and what he had to do if he wanted to be admitted to see His Majesty. He described the precise layout of the sultan's palace in Baghdad and the approaches to it, and he provided a detailed rundown of court ritual.

In this brief time Jafar discovered an entirely new life and tried to imagine himself leading it.

Finally, Hasan ordered the prisoner to describe his journey to Alamut in detail. He had to list all the stations where he had changed horses or stayed overnight. Then he ordered the executioner to remove the prisoner's fetters so he could undress.

Halef shuddered.

"What does this mean, sir?"

"Quickly! No dawdling! Don't force me to use other means. Take off the turban too."

Halef moaned.

"Anything but that, sir! Don't shame me like this!"

At a nod from Hasan, the executioner seized him by the neck with one firm hand. One assistant handed over the white-hot poker, which his master slowly brought close to the prisoner's bare chest. Even before it touched him, the skin sizzled and was scorched.

Halef howled uncontrollably.

"Do whatever you want. Just don't burn me!"

They took all his clothes off and bound his hands behind his back.

Jafar watched all of this without batting an eye. He was in full command of himself. This fact secretly made him very proud.

"Now it's time for your skill, doctor," Hasan said. "Prisoner, how did you get the wounds on your body?"

Still trembling from his recent fright, Halef told about a fight he had had with one of the sultan's eunuchs. In the meantime the Greek set out a number of thin, sharp blades, a long needle, and various liquids and

ointments. Then he told Jafar to bare himself to the waist. He rolled up his sleeves like a true artist. He ordered one of the executioner's assistants to hold a box that was full of all kinds of remedies. Then he set to work.

First he applied an ointment to the corresponding area of Jafar's body, onto which he then drew an outline of the scar and a birthmark. He ordered the other assistant to hold the blades and needle in the fire. Then he used these to etch and pierce the skin.

Jafar pressed his lips tight. His face paled slightly from the pain, but when Hasan looked at him, he smiled back, as though it were nothing.

Now Halef slowly began to realize what Hasan's plan was, and he was horrified. If the transformation was successful, this Ismaili youth would gain unhampered access to the sultan himself! And the murder of the grand vizier was eloquent testimony to what would happen then. *I'll be cursed for having been an accessory to such a crime*, he thought. *Subdue your fear!* something inside him commanded. *Think of your duty to the sultan!*

His feet were unbound. He waited for the instant when the doctor began to make an incision on Jafar's face, then he leapt at him and gave him a powerful kick to the gut.

Under the impact of this blow, the Greek dragged the blade halfway across Jafar's face, which was instantly covered in blood. He himself was thrown to the floor. Halef lost his balance and toppled onto him. His mouth collided with the doctor's elbow, which he instinctively bit into with all his might. The doctor howled with pain.

Instantly Abu Ali, Jafar and the executioner began to pummel and kick Halef mercilessly to get him to release his victim. But it wasn't until one of the assistants set a white-hot poker to the prisoner's back that the latter relented. He howled, writhing on the floor and trying to grab at his injury.

Now Hasan ordered, "Put him on the rack!"

Halef resisted with all his strength, but iron fists soon subdued him. Within a few moments he was bound, spread-eagled, to the rack.

With much groaning, the Greek managed to collect himself in the meantime. He had the wound on his arm washed, treated, and bandaged. Jafar, covered in blood, waited patiently for his transformation to resume.

“The scoundrel has ruined everything,” the Greek moaned when he examined him more closely. “What can I do with this huge wound on his face?”

“Just clean it for now,” Hasan said. “We’ll see what can be done.”

Then he commanded the executioner, “Begin the torture. He’ll be useful again when he’s unconscious.”

The machine started stretching the prisoner’s limbs. His joints popped and his bones creaked. Halef howled in agony.

Hakim was shaken. He himself was a surgeon, but he had never before heard such bestial wailing.

He quickly cleaned Jafar’s wound. Hasan inspected it, then spoke.

“Jafar! You’ll say that the commander of the Ismailis inflicted this wound on you at Alamut as His Majesty’s messenger. That the sultan’s letter enraged him so much that he slashed at you with his saber. Do you understand me?”

“I do, Sayyiduna.”

“Doctor, finish your work.”

All this time Halef had been howling at regular intervals. These became progressively shorter, until the howls merged into a continuous mad roar.

The executioner suddenly stopped the rack. The prisoner had lost consciousness.

“Good,” Hasan said. “Finish your work without us.”

He and the grand dais climbed to the top of the tower.

With a skillful hand the doctor transformed Jafar into Halef, His Majesty’s messenger.

A few hours later, transformed and dressed from head to toe in the prisoner’s clothes, Jafar stepped before the supreme commander. Hasan flinched, the similarity was so great. The same beard, same mustache, the same old scar on his cheek, the same broken nose and even the same birthmark next to his ear. Only the long, fresh wound across his face was different.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Halef, son of Omar. My family comes from Ghazna ...”

“Good. Have you memorized everything else too?”

“I have, Sayyiduna.”

“Now listen well. You’re going to saddle your horse and ride toward

Baghdad along the same road that the sultan's messenger used to come to Alamut. You'll be taking His Majesty a verbal reply from the master of Alamut. You know the stations and the inns along the way. Keep your eyes and ears open. Find out if the sultan has already set out against us. Demand at all costs to be admitted to see him. Do not relent in this! Keep insisting that you can only relay the response to the sultan personally. Tell them how poorly treated you were at Alamut. Do you understand me? Here are a few pellets. Do you recognize them? Take them with you on your journey. Swallow one each night and save the last one for the moment before you're admitted to see the sultan. Here's an awl. Hide it on your person carefully, because the slightest scratch could mean death. When you're standing before the sultan, you know what you have to do to earn paradise for yourself and immortality among the Ismailis in this world. Is everything clear?"

"It is, Sayyiduna."

Jafar's cheeks burned feverishly.

"Is your faith strong?"

"It is, Sayyiduna."

"And your determination?"

"Steadfast."

"I have faith that you won't fail me. Take this coin purse. I give you my blessing for your journey. Bring glory to yourself and the Ismailis."

He dismissed him. Alamut had launched yet another living dagger. Hasan left for the gardens.

Ever since Miriam and Halima had so sadly departed this life, the mood of the garden's inhabitants had been unrelentingly low. Not just the girls, but the eunuchs and even Apama were affected.

Miriam had been buried in a small clearing amid a grove of cypresses. The girls planted tulips, daffodils, violets and primroses on her grave. Out of a piece of rock, Fatima had carved a handsome monument depicting a woman in mourning. But she couldn't bring herself to inscribe it with anything. Next to her grave they had marked off another parcel of land, onto which they set the stone image of a gazelle, also the work of Fatima. All around they planted flowering shrubs. This they did in memory of Halima. Every morning they visited this spot and mourned for their lost friends.

Now Fatima assumed Miriam's position, except that she was in contact

with Hasan only through Apama. There were no feuds between the two of them. Apama had become quite solitary. She was often seen hurrying eagerly down the paths, gesticulating excitedly and talking aloud to some invisible person. Maybe one or two of the girls smiled at her on these occasions. But when they were standing before her, they still felt the same old fear. Her skill at eliminating the consequences of their nighttime visits had only limited success. Zuleika, Leila and Sara could feel the new life growing inside them, and were eagerly impatient. Jada and Safiya were the most excited of all. They couldn't wait for the appearance of a new generation in the gardens.

Hasan sent two new companions to replace the two they had lost. They were both quiet and modest, but at least they brought some change to the eternal monotony.

"It's autumn already and soon winter will be pressing down upon us," Hasan said to Apama. They were strolling through one of the uninhabited gardens. "We have to make the most of the warm evenings left to us. I'll need to send some new youths to the gardens. Because the rains will come, and then the snow and cold after that, and at that point there won't be any time left for heavenly delights."

"What are the girls going to do then?"

"You have plenty of camel and lambs' wool. And silk. Have them weave, knit and sew. Have them practice all their arts. Because Alamut requires everything."

"What about the school?"

"Do you have anything left to teach them?"

"No, except for the art of love, which they're incapable of learning anyway."

Hasan laughed again for the first time in a long while.

"Well, they know plenty for our purposes. You see, I've got the same problem as you. I don't have anyone I can leave my legacy to."

"You have a son."

"Yes. I'm waiting for him to be brought to the castle any day now. I'm planning to shorten him by a head."

Apama looked at him carefully.

"Are you joking?"

"Why should I joke? Does the scoundrel who murdered my brightest right-hand man deserve any better?"

“But he’s your son!”

“My son?! What does that mean? Maybe—maybe, I say, because you know how cautious I am—maybe he’s my physical offspring, but he’s never been my spiritual son. Before I was exaggerating just a bit. Maybe there is somebody after all who will be able to assume my legacy. Except that he’s far away somewhere wandering the world. His name should be familiar to you. It’s ibn Tahir.”

“What did you say? Ibn Tahir? Isn’t he dead? Wasn’t he the one who killed the vizier?”

“Yes, he killed him. But he came back alive and well.”

He told her about his last meeting with him. The story strained her credulity.

“And it was you, Hasan, who released him?”

“Yes, it was me.”

“How is that possible?”

“If you really knew my heart, you’d understand. He had become one of us. My son, my younger brother. Every night I track his progress in my thoughts. And I relive my youth in the process. I worry for him. In my mind I see his eyes being opened, I see him making discoveries, I see his view of the world and his character being formed. Oh, how powerfully I feel with him!”

Apama shook her head. This was a thoroughly new Hasan for her. When he left, she said to herself, “He must be very lonely to have seized onto someone so tightly. Yes, he’s a terrible and a good father.”

The next day the caravan from Gonbadan delivered Hasan’s son Hosein, bound, to Alamut. The whole garrison turned out to see the murderer of the grand dai of Khuzestan with their own eyes.

Shackled in heavy irons, Hosein stared grimly at the ground before him. He was slightly taller than his father, but bore a striking resemblance to him otherwise, except that there was something wild and almost beastly in his eyes. Now and then he cast sidelong glances at the men surrounding him. Each man caught in that glance felt his flesh crawl. It was as though he would have liked to leap at them and tear them into little pieces. Having the chains prevent him from doing that clearly tormented him.

Manuchehr received him as a prisoner.

“Take me to my father now!”

Manuchehr acted as though he didn't hear him.

“Abuna! Take six men and throw this prisoner in the dungeon!”

Hosein frothed at the mouth.

“Didn't you hear what I said?”

Manuchehr turned his back on him.

Hosein gritted his teeth. Even though a chain bound his legs together, he managed to kick Manuchehr from behind.

Manuchehr turned around instantly, his face flushed with rage. He swung his arm and landed a blow to Hosein's face.

Hosein howled with rage.

“Oh, if I were free! I'd rip the guts out of your belly, you dog and son of a dog!”

Abuna and his men seized the prisoner and dragged him off to the dungeon beneath the guard tower, the most notorious one in Alamut. They shoved him roughly into a cell. He staggered and fell on his face.

“You wait! When I get free, I'll slaughter you like mangy dogs!” he shouted as they locked the door on him.

For two full months he had been in chains. He felt like a wild cat that's been caught and put in a cage. He came to hate the whole world. He felt that if he were let free, he would strangle the first person he laid hands on. He felt no remorse for having killed Husein Alkeini, nor did he fret for his fate or his life. Even as a child he had terrorized everyone around him. He had an unbridled and violent temper. His father had left him when he was still a small child. Like Khadija and Fatima, he had been born to Hasan's second wife. He lived with his mother at her parents' home in Firuz Kuh. His grandfather tried to tame him with the rod and strict fasts. But Hosein was relentless. He defied his grandfather and anyone who got in the way of the pursuit of his passions. His grandfather was also the first person to earn Hosein's fatal enmity. Once he waited in ambush for him and killed him with a heavy stone. From that day forward his relatives and the whole neighborhood really came to fear him. He refused to work in the fields or even tend the livestock, preferring to spend his time with soldiers and ride their horses.

When they told him that his father had returned from Egypt to the north of Iran, he immediately decided to go looking for him. He knew

nothing about him at that point. He had merely heard that he had traveled a great deal and lived a tumultuous and unsettled life, so he imagined that the two of them together would have colorful adventures and enjoy a life of aimless, unpressured vagabondage. But barely had the two met, when he realized how far off the mark he had been. His father demanded precisely those things of him that he most detested and despised: study, obedience and diligence. He quickly came to hate him. At first he managed to hide it somewhat. But soon it exploded from him with full force. "Studying is for idiots, and obedience is for your underlings. I'm not interested in either. Studying stinks and I despise obedience!" "Fine," Hasan replied. He ordered him bound to a pillar and lashed in front of the entire garrison. Then he handed him over to Husein Alkeini as a foot soldier, to break his spirit. At Gonbadan he rebelled against the grand dai, and when the latter tried to imprison him at Hasan's order, Hosein killed him.

He hadn't given much thought to whatever punishment might await him for that murder, nor had it been clear to him how great a crime he had committed in the estimation of the Ismailis. The fact that Husein Alkeini had intended to throw him, the supreme commander's son, in chains had struck him as so great an injustice that he couldn't have responded to it in any other way. Moreover, he believed that by dint of his distinguished parentage it went without saying that he was permitted more than others. If only he had been able, he would have done the same thing to sheik ibn Atash, who finally put him in chains. Now he was furious that they had thrown him in this cell instead of immediately taking him to see his father.

Abu Ali notified Hasan that his son had been delivered to the fortress.

"Good. I'll talk to him. Have them send him to me."

Abuna and his men came to get the prisoner.

"Get up! Quick! Sayyiduna will see you."

Hosein grinned wildly, showing all his teeth.

"Praise be to Allah! Soon I'll be lashing all your backs to ribbons."

Outside the building of the supreme command Abuna turned him over to the men of Hasan's bodyguard. A strange, instinctive fear came over him. He could see that since he had left, life at the castle had changed greatly. He could feel a cold, iron discipline everywhere. Everything indicated that the castle was ruled by a firm and powerful hand.

The giant eunuchs in the corridors and at the doorways evoked his distrust. The enormous mace bearer who stood motionless at the top of the stairs, yet whose eyes followed his every movement, struck him as some kind of evil portent for his cause. He would never have thought his father would protect himself so forcefully.

He entered Hasan's room but remained standing stubbornly near the doorway. His father was sitting on a raised divan and was clearly immersed in studying some documents. Only after a while did he look up at his son. He stood up. He nodded for the guards to withdraw. Then he inspected Hosein from head to foot.

"First take these chains off of me!"

Hosein's voice was full of defiance.

"What is a criminal without chains?"

"And when has a son ever had to stand before his father in chains?"

"There's a first time for everything."

"You're afraid of me."

"Even mad dogs have to be tied up until they're put to sleep."

"What a wonderful father!"

"You're right. Now I have to expiate the sin I committed when I begat you."

"So you don't intend to free me?"

"I don't think you have any idea what's waiting for you for your crime. I've established the laws, and I'll be the first to honor them."

"Your threats don't scare me one bit."

"You idiot! You oaf!"

"Call me names. I don't care."

"O heavens! Do you still not realize what sort of crime you've committed?!"

"Nobody puts me in chains and gets away with it."

"So for that you murdered my closest friend and assistant while he was trying to carry out my order?!"

"Does a friend mean more to you than a son?"

"Alas, I'm afraid so."

"All of Iran can be proud of such a unique father! What are you going to do with me?"

"What sort of punishment have I prescribed for the murder of a superior?"

“I haven’t studied your laws.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’ll tell you myself. The law calls for cutting off the culprit’s right hand, then beheading him in front of the faithful.”

Hosein was dumbstruck.

“You don’t mean to say that that’s going to happen to me?”

“Do you think I wrote my laws just for fun?”

“It’s true. The world will shudder at a father like that.”

“You don’t know me.”

“I guess I don’t.”

“You’re still just as insolent as ever.”

“What do you expect? Like father, like son.”

“I don’t have time to waste on your witticisms. Tomorrow you’ll face a trial before the dais. You know what awaits you. You won’t be speaking to me again. What shall I tell your mother?”

“Thank her for giving me such a model father. Any animal would treat its offspring better.”

“Which is why it’s an animal. Human beings have intelligence and strict but just laws. Is there anything else you want to say?”

“What else is there to say? Do you really think I believe you’d do away with your only son and heir? Who would be your successor then?”

Hasan laughed uproariously.

“You, Hosein, my successor? You can’t really think that you could ever lead this institution, which is built on the supremacy of the mind and on pure reason? You, who don’t understand anything except how to bridle a donkey? Since when have eagles begun leaving their lofty kingdoms to calves? Is that why you think you can do anything you want?”

Hosein tore him apart with his eyes.

“Dogs beget dogs, bulls beget calves. Like father, like son.”

“If that were really true, then you’re not my son!”

“Do you mean to shame my mother with that?”

“Not at all. I just wanted to show that your claim may hold for dogs and bulls, but not for human beings. Otherwise kingdoms that fathers found with their intelligence and courage wouldn’t collapse from the stupidity and ineptitude of their sons.”

“All right. But the world has never known a sultan or a shah who has left his kingdom to a stranger when he had a son of his own flesh and blood.”

“I’ll be the first in that respect too. So do you really have nothing more to ask me? No requests for your mother?”

“Only the one I already made.”

“Fine.”

He called for the guards.

“Take the prisoner to the dungeon!”

Hosein gritted his teeth.

“Just try to have your lackeys put me on trial! I’ll shout your disgrace so the whole world hears.”

The next morning the high court of the dais was convoked. Abu Ali was its chair.

“Examine the laws and then judge strictly according to them.” This is what Hasan had ordered.

Once they were all assembled, guards brought Hosein in.

Abu Ali charged him with two counts: first mutiny, and then the murder of his superior. The punishment for both was death.

Abu Ali asked him, “Do you admit your guilt, son of Hasan?”

“I don’t admit any guilt. All I admit is that I did what you accuse me of doing.”

“Fine. Mutiny alone calls for a sentence of death.”

Hosein flew into a rage.

“Don’t forget that I’m the son of the supreme commander!”

“The law knows no exceptions. You were a common foot soldier under Husein Alkeini, and that is how we accuse you.”

“What? You’re trying to tell me that just anyone can put me in chains?”

“As you see, you’re already in them. Do you really have no defense?”

“What kind of defense do you want from me? Alkeini informed on me to my father behind my back, so he could throw me in jail more easily. I refuse to let anyone treat me like that! I’m not just anyone. I am the son of the Ismaili commander!”

“You mutinied against him. The supreme commander ordered him to restrain you as punishment, at which point you murdered him. Is this what happened?”

“Yes, that’s what happened.”

“Fine. Abdul Malik! Read what the law prescribes for the crime of mutiny against a superior and for the murder of a superior.”

Abdul Malik rose to his full height. He opened a heavy, bound book to the place where a marker had been inserted in it, and he reverently touched his forehead to it. Then he began reading in a solemn voice.

“Whoever among the Ismaili faithful opposes his superior or rebels against an order that his superior gives him, or in any other way avoids carrying out an order, unless he be prevented from so doing by a higher power, is to be put to death by beheading. Whoever among the Ismaili faithful attacks his superior or murders him is to be put to death, first by having his right hand severed and then by beheading.”

Abdul Malik closed the book. He bowed to the dais respectfully and then sat back down.

Abu Ali now spoke.

“High court of the dais! You have heard what the law prescribes for the crime of insubordination against an officer and for the murder of an officer. I will now ask you whether the accused is guilty of the crimes with which he has been charged.”

He turned toward Buzurg Ummid and called out his name.

“Guilty,” came the answer.

“Emir Manuchehr?”

“Guilty.”

“Dai Ibrahim?”

“Guilty.”

“Dai Abdul Malik?”

“Guilty.”

“Dai Abu Soraka?”

“Guilty.”

The verdict was unanimous.

Hosein winced at each name. The whole time he hoped secretly that someone would resist, that someone would see that he had been in the right and that he couldn't have acted differently. When the last one had pronounced his “guilty,” Hosein howled, “Criminal dogs!”

Chained though he was, he still tried to leap at them. A guard restrained him in time. He ground his teeth and rolled his eyes in helpless rage.

Abu Ali rose solemnly and spoke.

“Grand court of the dais! You have unanimously recognized that the accused is guilty of the crimes of which he stands accused. Therefore, Hosein, son of Hasan and grandson of Sabbah, is condemned to death, first by having his right hand severed, then by beheading, as the law prescribes. The sentence will be carried out once it is signed by the supreme commander. Do any of the honored members of the court have anything to say?”

Buzurg Ummid rose.

“Grand court of the dais!” he said. “You have heard the sentence that has been pronounced on Hosein, son of Hasan, for the murder of the grand dai of Khuzestan. His guilt has been proven and the criminal himself has admitted it. The punishment meted out to him is therefore lawful, just and strict. Let me point out to the high court of the dais, however, that Hosein’s is the first crime of this kind since the supreme commander issued the more stringent law code. And so I propose that we support an appeal to Sayyiduna for mercy, should the accused choose to submit one.”

The dais murmured their approval.

Abu Ali turned toward Hosein.

“Accused! Do you wish to ask the supreme commander for mercy?”

Hosein shouted, enraged.

“No! Never! I will never ask anything of a father who turns his own son over to his henchmen.”

“Think about it, Hosein.”

Buzurg Ummid pleaded with him good-naturedly.

“No! I won’t do it!”

“Don’t be bullheaded! Ask for it!” Abu Ali admonished him angrily.

“Tell him he’s worse than a dog!”

“Hold your tongue, criminal!”

Ibrahim flushed red with anger.

“Me keep my mouth shut, with that stench coming from yours?”

Buzurg Ummid and Abdul Malik approached the prisoner.

“Think about it, son of Hasan,” the grand dai said. “Just ask, and I’ll try to persuade your father.”

“There’s no shame in asking for mercy,” Abdul Malik offered. “It’s a sign that you’re aware of your sin and you intend to improve in the future.”

“You can do whatever you want, as far as I’m concerned,” Hosein finally half-relented.

Abu Ali, Buzurg Ummid and Abdul Malik went to deliver the high court’s verdict to Hasan.

Hasan listened to them calmly. When Buzurg Ummid presented the plea for mercy, he coolly rejected it.

“I established the laws myself,” he said firmly, “and I intend to be the first to respect them.”

“This is the first time an Ismaili has killed his superior.”

“All the more important for us to set an example.”

“Sometimes mercy is more appropriate than harsh justice.”

“Any other time perhaps, but in this case absolutely not. If I pardon Hosein, the faithful will say, ‘Look, the laws apply to us, but not to his son. We’ve always known one crow doesn’t attack another.’ ”

“But they’ll be horrified if you order the sentence carried out. What kind of father is that!”

Hasan knit his brow.

“I didn’t issue the laws just for sons or just for other than sons. I wrote them to apply to all Ismailis. I am their supreme commander, and I’m responsible for the law. And that’s why I’m signing the death sentence.”

He took the sentence from Abdul Malik’s hands. He read through it carefully. Then he dipped a goose quill in ink and firmly affixed his signature.

“There,” he said. “Abu Ali! You will proclaim the verdict of the high court of the dais to the faithful. Tomorrow morning before the sun comes up the executioner is to perform his duty. Is everything clear?”

“Yes, ibn Sabbah.”

Buzurg Ummid, who had been standing silently off to one side all this time, said, “Perhaps it would be possible to soften the sentence by leaving out its first part?”

“It’s already been signed. Thank you for your work.”

When he was alone again, he said to himself, “My son has been a stumbling block in my edifice. Am I a beast for destroying him? Once begun, the building has to be finished. If your heart is an obstacle, tell it to be silent, because all great things are great in spite of human beings.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Before the sun rose the next morning, the drums sounded the assembly. Word traveled quickly that the supreme commander's son was to be beheaded for murdering the grand dai of Khuzestan.

Abu Ali entered the prisoner's cell along with Manuchehr and Ibrahim. His voice quavered slightly as he read the sentence and announced that the supreme commander had rejected the plea for mercy.

"Let's go, son of Hasan. Justice must be done."

For a moment Hosein stared at his visitors like a startled animal. Then he lunged at them, but his legs got caught on his chains, and he fell.

"Dogs! Damned dogs," he moaned.

They lifted him up. With all his might he struggled against going out to the place of execution. The guards had to drag him out of the dungeon by force.

The army was assembled on the middle and lower terraces. A heavy wooden block had been set up at the center of the middle terrace. The executioner arrived with his assistants. He was bare to the waist and carried an axe over his shoulder. He walked proudly and acted as though he didn't see anyone.

A whisper coursed through the ranks.

"They're bringing him."

Hosein was cursing and pummeling the guards wildly. He snorted and bared his teeth like a wildcat. The men bringing him were already out of breath. They shoved and kicked him coarsely toward the block.

When the condemned man saw the executioner with his axe, he began to shake uncontrollably. He stopped making any noise, realizing what awaited him.

"Sayyiduna's son. The supreme commander's son," the men whispered in the ranks.

Abu Ali, Buzurg Ummid and Manuchehr mounted their horses. The

horn sounded the call to attention. Abu Ali rode forward a few paces from the others. He unrolled a document and read the death sentence aloud in a clear voice. Then he called on the executioner to perform his duty.

For a moment everyone was as silent as a tomb. Only the sound of the mountain stream could be heard.

Suddenly a cry erupted from Hosein's chest.

"People! Didn't you hear? A father is handing his own son over to the executioner!"

A murmur coursed through the ranks. Standing at the head of the fedayeen novices, Abdur Ahman looked at Naim, who was right behind him. His face was as pale as wax.

The assistants seized the prisoner and freed his right hand. Hosein resisted with desperate force. He instinctively strained away from the block, but the two giants managed to push him toward it all the same, forcing him to his knees and holding his right hand over the block. The executioner grabbed onto his wrist with one hand and then swung the axe with the other. The blade shot through the air and sliced through the bone with a grinding sound. Hosein bellowed so loudly that it pierced the men to the marrow. He broke free of the assistants, spraying their faces with the blood that was coursing from his open veins. Then he passed out and collapsed to the ground. The two men lifted him up and set his head on the block. The executioner severed it from his body with a single blow. An assistant handed him a cloak. He threw it over the body, which was swimming in blood.

Then he turned to Abu Ali.

"The executioner has performed his duty," he said dryly.

"Justice has been served," the grand dai responded.

Once again he rode a few paces forward to address the assembled garrison.

"Ismailis! You have just witnessed the strict justice that governs Alamut. Sayyiduna, our supreme commander, knows no exceptions. Whoever commits a crime will be punished strictly according to the law. Neither rank nor lineage will shield any man from the punishment he deserves. So I call on you once more to respect and obey the law. Allah is Allah and Mohammed is his Prophet! Come, al-Mahdi!"

He gave an order and the men dispersed to resume their usual daily

assignments.

Many of them said, "Truly, there is still justice in the world!"

Others said, "Has there ever been a prince or a chieftain who has sacrificed his own son to the law?"

Word about how the Ismaili supreme commander had punished his own son spread like lightning throughout the land and evoked a respect for Hasan verging on awe.

In the meantime Jafar, transformed into the sultan's messenger Halef, had a variety of encounters on his way to Baghdad. Immediately outside of Qazvin he came across a large group of soldiers, some riding and others walking toward the military encampment at Nehavend. They were scattered members of Kizil Sarik's army for the most part, originally from Khorasan and Khuzestan. They respectfully made way for him when they realized he was an officer of the sultan's bodyguard. But they also immediately became quiet.

He was able to change horses at every station. The first night he slept out under the stars, but after that he slept in the caravanserais along the main road. Halfway to the city of Sava he shared a room in some inn with two officers of Kizil Sarik's army. They told him what it had been like outside of Gonbadan and how the news of the grand vizier's murder had affected the troops.

"All the northern territories are Shiite," one of them said. "They see the Ismailis as their coreligionists, and now that Nizam al-Mulk is gone, they don't see any reason to fight the commander of the mountain."

Jafar confided in them that he had just come from Alamut as the sultan's messenger. They looked at him terrified.

"Don't turn us in," they begged him. "Like we said, that's what all the men think now. When the order comes, we'll all be ready to fight again."

He reassured them. They grew curious. He amazed himself. Did his external transformation have this effect on him, or was it the fear of giving himself away that caused him to so completely embody his role? He told them horror stories about Alamut that made their hair stand on end. Even after he had fallen asleep, he kept dreaming about these terrors. But, on waking the next morning and noticing uniforms of the sultan's army hanging on the wall, he still instinctively reached for the handle of his saber. It took a few moments for him to realize where he was and what role he was playing.

He performed his morning prayers quickly, downed a dish of curdled milk and a piece of oat cake, leapt onto his horse, and rode on.

Along the way he encountered a substantial, well-armed troop of Turkish cavalry. Their commander stopped him and asked for his identification.

Jafar showed it to him. He explained that he was the sultan's messenger returning from Alamut.

"Fine. My assignment is to reorganize the units that scattered after the sieges of the infidel fortresses, and to do that at any cost. His Majesty has ordered us to attack the Ismailis again."

Jafar continued his journey. He wondered, *Does Sayyiduna know about this new danger threatening Alamut?* But he had to carry out his order, and nothing could deter him from that.

The military route struck him as one continuous army camp. He was constantly meeting up with new units. To keep from being continually stopped, he would shout from a long distance off that he was a messenger of His Majesty. From time to time tents shone white alongside the road. Countless horses, camels, donkeys, cows and whole flocks of smaller livestock picked off the last stalks of greenery from the fields.

He had to ride around Nehavend, since there was so much military there. But after that the road to Baghdad was virtually clear. There was plenty of room in the serais for him to stay overnight. Now is also when he took the first pellet. He felt overcome with tremendous anxiousness. Now and then as he rode, phantoms would attack him. He seemed to be riding through enormous cities teeming with endless masses of people. Then he dreamed he was in the gardens of paradise, surrounded by dark-eyed houris. Day and night merged into one. He succumbed utterly to a passion for these states. He had swallowed all of the pellets but one. It took the utmost force of will for him to keep from taking it.

Suddenly he seemed to have arrived at the outer gate to a large city. In front of him was a contingent of guards armed to the teeth. He started to ride on, taking this for just another disembodied vision. Six spear points were thrust at his face.

Instantly his stupor evaporated. This was the tenth day since his departure from Alamut; he had at last arrived at the Baghdad city gates.

He quickly found his footing.

"I am a messenger of His Majesty," he said gruffly.

The captain of the guard inspected his identification.

“All right, you can go on,” he said.

He passed through the city walls. All he could do was stare. Palaces of pure marble, one more beautiful than the next, lined the streets. These were interrupted from time to time by mosques with gold and green cupolas. Tall minarets swelled to the sky. Squares and bazaars where everything swarmed like an anthill slowed his progress. He had long since lost his bearings, which his double at Alamut had described to him. He felt minuscule. To bolster his courage, he reminded himself, “Jafar! Places a thousand times more beautiful are waiting for you, once you complete your task.”

He came upon a guard patrol consisting of four men. He pushed his way toward it and asked its leader, “Show me the way to His Majesty’s palace.”

The sergeant gave him an astonished look.

“Well, don’t just gape at me,” Jafar lit into him. “Show me the way to the palace.”

“That’s where we’re headed. Come with us.”

One of the men had his horse by the bridle and was pulling it along behind him. They spent a long time wading through an endless sea of houses and mansions. Finally they reached some magnificently tended gardens, at the far end of which stood an indescribably beautiful, white palace.

“That’s His Majesty’s residence,” the sergeant said.

Jafar recognized it from Halef’s accounts. Men were coming out of barracks constructed along the sides of the gardens. He rode ahead to a great entry gate and called out a password.

The guard on duty looked puzzled.

“That password isn’t valid anymore,” he said.

“I am a messenger of His Majesty!” Jafar shouted. “I’ve been to Alamut, and now I’ve returned with messages from there.”

A sergeant came out and eyed the rider in some perplexity. He was caked in grime from the road and he had a barely healed wound across his cheek. His face was totally sunken.

“Let me call the officer on duty,” he said when he heard what the stranger had asked for.

Jafar began to feel ill. His nerves felt like they had been ground

between two millstones. He saw the officer approaching him. What should he do? Should he act as though they knew each other? What if this was a new man?

The officer came right up to the gate. He studied the stranger carefully. Then he called out to him.

“Aren’t you Halef, son of Omar?”

“Who else? Just tell the commander of the bodyguard that I’m here. I have to see him immediately.”

The officer shook his head.

“Just get off the horse and come with me.”

Both of them were silent as they walked. The officer examined him from the side. Yes, this was Halef of Ghazna, even if slightly changed and obviously exhausted.

The commander of the bodyguard received him in the palace immediately.

“How did your assignment go, Halef?”

“Precisely as you ordered, emir. But I was treated horribly. They tortured me to find out as much as they could about His Majesty’s plans. I have some important news for him.”

“Did you bring a letter?”

“No, just an oral message.”

“Tell it to me.”

“The Ismaili commander meant for it to be delivered to His Majesty directly.”

“Have you forgotten how things work at court?”

“No, emir. But the blow that infidel commander dealt me still burns on my cheek, and even my bones still ache from it. I have no time to lose. I bring terrible news.”

“What is Hasan ibn Sabbah like?”

“He’s a real killer, an animal in human guise. It’s high time we obliterated him and his brood from the face of the earth.”

“And that will happen. Wait here. I’ll go ask His Majesty if he’ll receive you.”

When he had gone, Jafar quickly swallowed the pellet. He was so used to the substance that it took effect immediately. His confidence and courage swelled under its influence. The now familiar visions returned to him. He resisted them with an extreme effort of will.

“I have to focus entirely on my task now,” he told himself.

It was just before noon on the eighteenth day of November of the year one thousand and ninety-two by our calendar. Sultan Malik Shah had just returned from a brief visit to the harems of his sister, who was now the sole wife of the caliph. At last, through a combination of persuasion and threats, he had managed to get the leader of the faith to designate Jafar, his son by the sultan’s sister, as his successor, and to disinherit his first-born son Mustazir. For the sultan, this was the culmination of long and bitter battles with his brother-in-law. Only after he had banished him to Basra did Caliph al Muqtadi relent, though he had negotiated an extra ten days to think about it.

That had been five days ago. During his visit, his sister assured him that the caliph had essentially agreed to the demand. Now the sultan was contentedly rubbing his hands as he sat on a dais amid pillows. He was a man in his prime, quick-witted and healthy. He loved wealth and luxury and was a friend of the sciences and arts. Anything that was creative or exceptional gave him pleasure.

He thought to himself, *Is there anything more I could want? The boundaries of my empire extend farther than ever before. Kings and princes pay me tribute. My cities rise up out of the desert and my roads gleam in the sun. The peoples of my realm are prosperous and honor me. And now I’ve even subdued the leader of the faith. My own flesh and blood will occupy the seat of the Prophet’s regent. I’ve achieved anything I’ve ever aspired to. I really am at the height of my power.*

A scribe announced the commander of the bodyguards. The emir entered and performed the required ceremonial, then spoke.

“Majesty! Halef, son of Omar, has returned from Alamut. He has a wound on his cheek. He says that the Ismaili leader had him tortured to find out your intentions. He has an oral message for you and he humbly requests that Your Majesty receive him.”

The sultan grew pale at first, and then furious.

“What? How dare he torture my messenger? What a vile, inhuman trick! But call Halef in. Let’s hear what he has to say about what he saw at the castle.”

The emir left and soon returned with Jafar.

The feday prostrated himself before the sultan.

“Get up, son of Omar!”

When the sultan saw Jafar's face, he exclaimed, "How are you, Halef? But speak, speak! Tell me how the murderer of the mountain received you. What message did he give you for me?"

Everything was blurring before Jafar's eyes. The objects around him were assuming monstrous shapes. The hashish had him fully in its power. "I have to carry out my order," he told himself. "The houris are waiting for me."

He remembered what Halef had said about how to speak to the sultan.

"Majesty! Glory and joy of the realm!" he stammered. "I have been to Alamut. Their leader attacked me ..."

He felt for the dagger concealed in his sleeve. He let it drop down into his hand, took firm hold of it by the handle, and with a supreme effort of will lunged straight at the sultan.

Instinctively the ruler drew back. He shook all over. An arm swung at him and a sharpened writing implement scratched him behind the ear. Jafar raised his arm again, but at that instant the emir's sword split his head open.

The scribe shrieked.

"Be quiet!" the emir commanded him. He helped the sultan, colorless and still shaking all over, to lie back down on his pillows.

"The man was obviously mad," he said then. He bent down over the dead man and wiped his bloody saber on his clothing.

"He was out of his mind," the sultan observed, his voice shaking. "Everything that comes from Alamut is either criminal or insane."

At the scribe's shriek several guards and courtiers had come into the hall. The sultan drew one sleeve across his sweaty face, then discovered blood stains on it.

"What is this?"

Crazed fear showed in his eyes.

His scribe leapt to his side.

"His Majesty is bleeding! His Majesty is wounded!"

At this point the emir discovered the sharpened writing implement on the floor. He picked it up and inspected it closely. He remembered the murder of the grand vizier and a shudder coursed through his bones. He looked back at the dead man lying in a pool of blood in front of him. The blood had dissolved the glue on his face. The emir pulled at his beard and mustache, which came off into his hand.

“This wasn’t Halef,” he whispered.

The sultan looked at him and understood. An indescribable horror seized at his heart. The murdered vizier came to his mind, and it dawned on him that he would also have to die.

Everyone gathered around the corpse.

“No, this really wasn’t Halef,” they whispered.

They called the sultan’s personal physician. When he arrived, the emir whispered to him, “I’m afraid he’s been wounded with a poisoned weapon. Work fast!”

The physician examined the sultan.

“It’s not a large wound,” he said, trying to comfort him. “But it’s a good idea to burn it out in any case.”

“Are you sure it isn’t fatal?”

The sultan’s voice was as scared as a child’s.

“Let’s hope for the best,” the doctor replied.

He sent for his assistant, who brought him his equipment. Everything was ready quickly.

By then the emir had fully assessed the situation, and he gave an order.

“No one who is in the building may leave, and we will let no one in. We must all keep quiet about everything that has happened here. I am assuming command.”

Guards carried the dead body out of the room. Servants quickly removed the bloodstains.

The doctor heated up a steel blade. As he brought it close to the sultan’s neck, the sultan asked, “Will this hurt very much?”

“Your Majesty should drink several cups of wine. Then it will hurt less.”

A servant quickly brought it to him, and the sultan fell into a stupor.

The doctor touched the wound with the white-hot blade. The sultan howled in pain.

“Patience, Your Majesty,” the doctor pleaded.

“I’ll have your head if you keep torturing me like that.”

“As Your Majesty wishes. But the wound has to be burned out.”

The sultan gained control of himself. The doctor finished his work.

“That hurt a lot,” the sultan sighed. His face was waxen.

Servants carried him into his bedroom on a litter. The doctor offered

him something to help him regain his strength, then he ordered the curtains drawn, and the sultan fell asleep, exhausted.

His entourage withdrew to an antechamber. From time to time the doctor checked in on his patient. Each time he came back out, the worried eyes of those in attendance met him.

“It doesn’t look bad,” he said several times.

Then, suddenly, he came back looking panicked.

“His Majesty has a fever, a very high fever. He’s beginning to rave. I’m afraid the poison has made its way into his circulatory system, despite everything.”

“Allah, what a disaster,” the emir said in a whisper.

The sultan began shouting out loud.

The emir and the doctor rushed into the bedroom. They threw the curtains aside, so that some light shone into the room.

The sultan briefly regained consciousness.

“Save me! Save me!” he moaned. “It feels like I have burning coals running through my veins!”

He slipped back into his delirium. Everyone who had been waiting in the antechamber surrounded his bed. They looked at each other, their faces pale.

The patient began to sing. Everyone present knelt down and touched their foreheads to the floor.

“Terrible, terrible,” they murmured.

The sultan lifted himself up on his pillows. He looked around, confused, and tried to get up.

The doctor restrained him. He nodded for the others to leave.

In the antechamber, the emir said, “When he regains consciousness, we have to ask him who he wants to succeed him. There’s still some time. Mohammed is barely four years old, and there’s no way he can rule over the whole empire at a time like this.”

“Let’s wait a while longer,” an old courtier suggested.

The scribe warned, “It wouldn’t be good for the sultana and Taj al-Mulk to gain power.”

“But we mustn’t let the sultan see that we’re anticipating the worst,” one nobleman said.

“The fate of Iran hangs on it,” the emir replied grimly.

“We should bring his sister here. He doesn’t have any other relatives

close by.”

“We’re not going to let anyone see him who isn’t already in this building,” the emir said firmly. “No one must find out that the sultan has fallen victim to an Ismaili dagger. If it comes to the worst, we’ll announce that he died of a fever. Because if all of Iran finds out that the sultan, like the grand vizier, has fallen victim to another killer from Alamut, then not only will we all have to answer for it, but the people will be so terrified of these murderers that no one will agree to fight them anymore.”

All that night until morning the sultan’s entourage kept watch over him. His fever steadily rose. The emir tried in vain to raise the question of the succession. Eventually the sultan lost consciousness completely. As dawn came, his death throes began and lasted until second prayers. Then the doctor confirmed that his heart had stopped beating. They all burst out crying in despair. Iran had lost its most powerful ruler.

Baghdad—thriving, dynamic Baghdad, which had been in a festive, happy mood until the previous day—suddenly fell silent and sank into mourning. But news of the sultan’s death hadn’t yet reached the furthest outskirts of the city when the courtiers began fighting over the successor to the throne. Express messengers galloped in all directions with the sad news. The commander of the bodyguard sent his men to see Barkiarok, thinking that he was still campaigning on the border with India, and to the sons of the murdered grand vizier. Mohammed’s supporters sent their men to Isfahan, to see the sultan’s widow and Taj al-Mulk. Obedient princes from Syria and other neighboring provinces who had just gathered in Baghdad to honor the sultan raced home at breakneck speed, hoping to exploit the opportunity to shake themselves free of Iranian rule. The caliph himself, who had just decreed a half year’s mourning for the deceased, was secretly pleased at this turn of events. Now he was free to choose a successor as he pleased, and once again he designated his first-born son. The confidants of all the many kings, princes and grandees sent messengers to their masters with the news.

In Baghdad the intrigues began on the very day of the sultan’s death. Suddenly supporters of every possible pretender to the Iranian throne began to sprout up. Nearly each of the dead sultan’s brothers and sons

had his own advocate, all of whom immediately began agitating for their respective candidates and pressuring the poor caliph to lend his support. But with time it became apparent that there were really only two opposing camps: Barkiarok's and Mohammed's. Toward the end the sultan had been leaning toward the latter, and this is precisely why the sultana and Taj al-Mulk now had the advantage. All of the many princes and grandees, high officials and religious leaders who had been overshadowed and hampered by the murdered grand vizier's ruthless and imperious rule now came out in favor of the underaged Mohammed. Soon they managed to win the caliph to their side. The struggle between the two camps grew more and more embittered. Finally, Barkiarok's supporters began to feel threatened in Baghdad. Some of them hid, while others fled the city. Mohammed's supporters waited eagerly for news from the sultana and Taj al-Mulk. They kept doing their utmost to pressure the weak caliph into proclaiming their candidate sultan, thus dealing the other side a mortal blow.

Together with the news of the sultan's death, the units that were gathering around Nehavend and Hamadan and were meant to battle the Ismailis also received an order to abandon their original plan and set out for Isfahan. When they were halfway there, they were met by emissaries of the sultan's widow. The commanders were given extravagant gifts in her name, and the men were promised double their usual pay if they agreed to support her son. Other messengers set out for Baghdad with promises and priceless gifts to win the caliph to their side so he would proclaim Mohammed as sultan and decree that all of Iran should pray the khutba for him. In the meantime, Barkiarok arrived in Isfahan with part of his forces. He had no idea yet that his father had been murdered in the same fashion as the grand vizier. He came upon a scene of utter confusion. Soldiers were streaming into the city from all sides and proclaiming the underaged Mohammed as sultan.

Barkiarok realized he had arrived several days too late. He tried to offer some resistance to the sultan's widow and her vizier. But just then the news hit from Baghdad that the caliph had proclaimed Mohammed the new sultan. He quickly assembled the remainder of his forces and hurried with them to Sava, where, as he expected, he found refuge with

the emir Tekeshtegin, who had been his friend since earliest boyhood.

Now he had to establish contact with his supporters and all those elements that were unhappy with the new sultan. Five of Nizam's sons joined him, and he immediately named one of them his vizier. Suddenly he was in command of a sizable army.

Amid the general chaos the sultana and her vizier had thought of everything, with one exception—their erstwhile ally, Hasan. Emir Tekeshtegin and Muzaffar were good neighbors. Barkiarok now worked through Muzaffar to establish contact with the leader of Alamut and the Ismailis.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

With the Seljuk realm—until yesterday one of the most powerful empires on earth—now in ruins, and with the sons, brothers, uncles and nephews of the murdered sultan battling each other for the throne, and with no one anywhere in Iran quite clear who was in charge, the institution of the Ismailis stood as firm and unshakable as the rock on which Alamut was built.

The news of the death of Sultan Malik Shah was cause for genuine celebration among Hasan's supporters. The lands from Rai, Rudbar and Qazvin to Firuz Kuh, Damagan and all the way to Girdkuh and Gonbadan were now safe, and Ismaili messengers, and even whole divisions, could practically stroll from fortress to fortress. A new wave of believers came streaming into Alamut, seeing it as the best guarantee of their religious freedom and well-being. The fortress itself soon became too small for them. Dai Abu Soraka chose the strongest and most capable of them to keep at the castle. He had the rest swear their allegiance, gave them gifts, and—pledging that they would be fully protected by the supreme leader—he let them return to their homes. After nearly a century, practically the whole north of Iran was at last free to venerate Ali in public and to recognize the caliph of Cairo as its spiritual leader.

Hasan's network of informants was built to an even greater level of perfection than before. He was constantly receiving news about the struggles and battles for the Iranian throne. He learned that the caliph had proclaimed Mohammed as the new sultan and that Barkiarok had returned to Isfahan. He gained a precise sense of how the pillars of Seljuk rule, which he had undermined, were swaying. The dream of his distant youth had been fulfilled.

“All of this is like a fairy tale,” he said to himself. “If I myself weren't the cause of all these convulsions, I wouldn't believe them. It's true, some wishes have a miraculous power. They function as though they had

substance, as though they were a hammer made of actual steel.”

He was conscious of a strange emptiness, as though everything around him had fallen silent all at once. Something huge, terrible and yet beautiful had left him and found its place in the sun outside of him. He felt homesick for his strong, restless days. Now the moment had come for him to inspect his edifice one more time, distinguish it from everything that surrounded it, define the limits of its power, and ensure its survival for that time when he was no longer.

And just as he had half a year ago, at the beginning of winter, reis Abul Fazel Lumbani arrived at the castle from Rai with an important message. He reported that the emir of Sava, Tekeshtegin, had taken Barkiarok in and put all his forces at his disposal. He wanted to use Rai, the old capital of Iran, to proclaim him sultan, so he asked Muzaffar for help and support. Muzaffar advised him to consult with Hasan first and get his approval. And for that purpose he, Abul Fazel, had come to Alamut. As soon as he was proclaimed sultan, Barkiarok would set out with his whole army for Isfahan and depose Mohammed.

Both of the grand dais, Manuchehr and Abul Fazel Lumbani, met with the supreme leader in council.

“This is a moment of crucial importance,” Hasan said. “The caliph and almost all the generals and their forces have sworn allegiance to Mohammed. We mustn’t deceive ourselves. If the sultana’s faction were to win, then we Ismailis would be the first of Taj al-Mulk’s targets. Like any new ruler, he’s going to try to get rid of the shield-bearers who helped him to power—and that’s us. He’s already proven to us that that’s the kind of man he is. Barkiarok will also try to shake us off as soon as he doesn’t need us anymore. But we have to prevent that from the very outset. So our watchword should be: no ruler must ever again attain unlimited power in Iran! I think that for now we can afford to help Barkiarok overthrow Mohammed. Let Tekeshtegin proclaim him sultan in Rai. When he moves against Isfahan, we’ll cover his back. But as the saying goes, let us strike while the iron is hot. Barkiarok has to give us a written commitment that if he’s successful, he will not attack our castles or persecute our followers anywhere in the country. And just so he’s very clear about the extent of our power, we’re going to demand a yearly tax

from him for our support. The time has come when rulers and potentates have to know that their lives are in our hands.”

None of the leaders contradicted him or had any comments to make. They composed a letter to Barkiarok, listing their conditions.

After that, the conversation turned to more pleasant things. A jug of wine passed from hand to hand. Suddenly Hasan turned to reis Lumbani and asked him, smiling, “What came of that cure for my madness, after all? Have you still not brought it along with you?”

Abul Fazel scratched behind his ear.

“You know, ibn Sabbah,” he replied, “I’ve gotten old, and I’m no longer amazed by anything in the world. I’ve seen that something I thought was wise seven years ago has turned out to be stupid, and that apparent madness has proven to be the highest wisdom. There’s nothing I understand anymore, so I’ve given up making judgments. I’ve served my time.”

Hasan laughed again for the first time in ages.

“My dear reis, my dear reis!” he said. “Now you see what brittle legs were supporting the edifice you once thought had been built to last an eternity. All it took was a handful of men whom I could trust unconditionally, and I was able to cut down the Seljuk oak. Let me ask you: is there any other ruler or religious dignitary, prophet or wise man, any kingdom or institution that we here at Alamut ought to be afraid of?”

“No, there’s none, ibn Sabbah. Because your living daggers can reach anyone who crosses you. With weapons like that, who would want to be your enemy?”

“There are such people, dear friend. But the time will come when even princes on the far side of the world will live in fear of our power. And then we’ll collect tribute from all the emperors, kings and potentates beyond the seas.”

Abul Fazel only shook his head.

“I believe you, because I have to believe. But I don’t understand. How are you able to find youths who are so willing to sacrifice their lives at your command?”

“It’s because they know that death will immediately transport them to a place of heavenly delights.”

“Surely you don’t expect me to believe in your fairy tales about

paradise?”

Hasan winked at him playfully.

“Would you like to convince yourself with your own senses that it exists?”

“Allah forbid I should be so curious!” he exclaimed. “Because you’re capable of anything, and if you finally did convince me that your paradise exists, I’d probably attack some sultan or vizier with a dagger, even despite these old bones and this gray beard.”

The leaders all laughed heartily.

The next morning Abul Fazel left Alamut, heavily laden with gifts and sitting comfortably on a camel’s back.

A week hadn’t yet passed when a messenger brought Hasan a letter from Barkiarok, in which he consented to the conditions. And lo and behold, Tekeshtegin proclaimed Barkiarok sultan in Rai. At that point both of them planned to move against Isfahan with their army, but Taj al-Mulk and his forces had already launched an assault against Sava. At Barugjir, between Hamadan and Harb, the armies collided. Taj al-Mulk was defeated. He was captured, and Barkiarok ordered him beheaded. Now the road to Isfahan was clear. He arrived outside the city at the beginning of the year one thousand and ninety three. Hasan, the second-born of the murdered grand vizier, arrived from Khorasan with his forces and joined him. Barkiarok appointed him to be his secretary. They welcomed a swelling tide of deserters from the camp of the sultan’s widow. Finally she had to negotiate with him and sue for peace. He even defeated and beheaded his uncle, Ismail ibn Yakuti, the regent of Azerbaijan who had sold out to Turkan Khatun. But he had barely done that when Ismail’s half-brother, Tutush of Damascus, rebelled against him. Tutush attacked Antioch and joined forces with the regent of Aleppo, Aksonkor. He occupied Mosul and demanded that the terrified caliph proclaim him sultan.

All of the outlying provinces of Iran were suddenly ablaze with rebellion. One after the other, the subjugated kings and princes proclaimed their sovereignty. Even the regents threw off the central authority of Isfahan, seeking complete independence. The conflicts between individual authorities worsened. An indescribable chaos that no

one had experienced before came to dominate Iran. The poor caliph had to proclaim first one man sultan, then another, depending on the proximity and military might of a given pretender to the throne. Thus, there were months in Baghdad when the khutba had to be prayed for several sultans in a row.

This was the moment for Hasan to issue his final decree and to put the final touches on his edifice.

He assembled the leaders of all his fortresses at Alamut and invited his friends and adherents from far and wide.

It was a splendid winter day. Snow hadn't yet fallen, except on the highest mountains. The chill air was dry and crisp. But as the sun rose over the peaks, it grew pleasantly warmer.

Very early, while it was still pitch dark, the drums had sounded, rousing the men from their sleep. Everyone—soldiers, fedayeen, the faithful and the leaders—dressed in their ceremonial clothes. Word went around that important and far-reaching events would take place at Alamut that very day.

After the first prayer, the leaders and their guests assembled in the great hall. They took their places all around the hall on divans covered with pillows.

Hasan entered with the two grand dais. He was garbed in his white cloak, which reached down to his feet. A splendid white turban covered his head. The leaders and guests all rose. They bowed to him. He went from one person to the next, politely greeting each one. When he got to Muzaffar, he asked, "How are my daughters doing? Are they diligent? Are they earning their bread?"

Muzaffar proceeded to praise them lavishly.

"Fine," Hasan said. "As long as they make themselves useful somehow. Should worthy suitors appear, marry them off."

Muzaffar promised to do so.

Then he caught sight of reis Abul Fazel. He couldn't suppress a smile and greeted him heartily.

"It's a pleasure to see you so often," he said. "How would you feel about staying here at Alamut? I could appoint you keeper of my gardens. There are plenty of beautiful houris in them."

“No, no,” the former reis declined. “Anyway, it won’t be long before I’m knocking at the gates of the real paradise.”

Hasan laughed. Once he had welcomed everyone, he invited all present to be seated. Then he spoke.

“Ismaili friends and leaders! I have invited you here today to talk in clear and unambiguous terms about the essence and goals of our institution. Everything we have undertaken since gaining control of this castle has turned out successfully—a sign that we have laid a solid foundation. We have tested and proven our strength in battle. Despite the unity and precision of our efforts, there are still some things that remain unclear, particularly concerning our relations to the rest of the world. However, this is quite understandable. For the ultimate success of any action is always dependent on its original conception and all those foreseen and unforeseeable factors that impinge on its realization. When we seized this fortified castle from the late sultan, we pointed to the caliph of Egypt as having given us the authority to do so. That was an indispensable necessity, because at that point our prestige was so minimal—or rather, let’s say, nonexistent. But times have changed significantly since then. Our worst enemies are dead. The mighty Seljuk realm is in ruins. Egypt is far away. And we have developed and grown into a force of iron. We have educated and trained a phalanx of believers, the likes of which no other ruler has known. Their fanaticism is legendary. Their determination is unequalled. Their devotion is unprecedented. What is Cairo to them? Nothing. And what is Alamut? Everything.

“Men! I am old, yet there is still much to be done. Our doctrine must be elaborated to the last detail and written down for those yet to come. It must be specially adapted for each of the eight grades. Today I will make my last appearance to the faithful. After that I will withdraw to my tower for good. I would welcome any suggestions about what I’ve just told you.”

His eyes sought out Abu Ali. The grand dai stood up and spoke.

“Supreme leader, Ismaili leaders and friends, I recommend that we break all ties with Cairo and proclaim our complete independence. By doing this, we will on the one hand show the whole world that we’re confident of our power. On the other hand, this will help us win over many of those good Iranians who would have liked to join us but have

been put off by our allegiance to Cairo.”

The Ismaili leaders enthusiastically welcomed this proposal. Muzaffar, however, exchanged a startled glance with Abul Fazel and remarked, “By Allah! Have you given any thought to the response of our many followers who believe that the caliph of Egypt is the true descendant of Ali and Fatima? All of them will turn away from Alamut.”

“Don’t worry, Muzaffar,” Buzurg Ummid countered. “Those followers aren’t much use to us. The ones our power depends on recognize just one battle cry: Alamut!”

“The power of our institution doesn’t depend on the number of followers we have,” Hasan explained, “but rather their quality. And it doesn’t depend on the extent of our holdings, but rather on our fortified castles. And we are the complete masters of those. A split with Cairo would signal our real birth. It would allow us to cut the umbilical cord and free ourselves completely from our mother’s body.”

Muzaffar relented. Then Abu Ali proposed that they solemnly proclaim Hasan as the founder and supreme leader of the new regime, which would continue to have its seat at Alamut. The proposal was adopted unanimously. They composed a formal document in which they proclaimed the complete independence of the Ismaili realm and named Hasan as its leader. Everyone present signed it.

Hasan rose. He thanked them for their confidence in him and named Abu Ali and Buzurg Ummid as his deputies and successors. He entrusted internal control to the former and external control to the latter.

“So,” Hasan began, “now we have clarified the relationship between ourselves and the rest of the world. We still need to think about how to increase and extend our power. Because any institution that intends to stay vital and tough can never rest. It has to remain constantly in motion and flux to preserve its agility. I know of many fine castles which are now in foreign hands but which could serve us as important footholds if we appropriated them. You’re all familiar with the fortress of Lamasar. Truly a strong, solid bastion. But the garrison that’s in it now is weak and tired of the monotony of fortress life. Buzurg Ummid, you will take as many men as you need to seize the castle. You’re to attack it without delay. Abdul Malik, with your courage and youth, you are to set out with a force of our best warriors and attack the magnificent castle of Shahdiz outside of Isfahan, which the sultan built practically to order for

us before he died. You must take the castle. This way we will have any future ruler of Iran in our hands. Abu Ali, I have saved the most difficult but also the most glorious task for you. You are from Syria. There is an impregnable fortress there, Masyaf, a second Alamut, as you yourself have told me. Take as many soldiers and fedayeen as you need. With things in Iran as unstable as they are now, you should be able to fight your way there. Remember, Masyaf must fall into your hands. I want you to establish a school for fedayeen there on the model of Alamut. You will control it as you see fit, keeping me constantly informed of your initiatives. Ibn Atash, I am appointing you grand dai. You are to return to Khuzestan and take back command of Gonbadan. You will fortify the city of Girdkuh. Seize all of the fortresses in the region. If you should need a feday for any particular task, I will send you one ... All of you dais who command individual forts are to be promoted from this day forward to regional dais. You will report directly to the grand dai whose seat is closest to you. This takes care of the external aspect of the hierarchy. Once you return to your castles, you will receive its internal structure in the form of a set of regulations, once those are completed. Now go join the men. Abu Ali, you will explain the action we've taken here and announce my arrival. Today they'll see me for the last time."

The Ismailis cheered enthusiastically at the news that Alamut had become a sovereign state. Abu Ali promised them new military campaigns and new victories. They whooped with joy and battle fervor. They all felt that the fortress of Alamut had long since gotten too small for them.

The supreme leader appeared on the upper terrace. A hush descended. In a voice that reached all the way down to the last horseman on the lower terrace, he proclaimed, "Faithful Ismailis! My grand dai has just announced the decisions that our council of leaders adopted today. We have truly grown powerful. But this power of ours depends completely on you and all of us being obedient. You carry out the orders of your immediate superiors, and they carry out my orders. I, in turn, remain obedient to the direction of the All-Highest who sent me here. Directly or indirectly, all of us fulfill His commands. Now go back to your duties, and quit waiting for the Mahdi. Because al-Mahdi has come!"

He didn't wait for the cheering to subside. He withdrew with the leaders to the assembly hall and bade each of them farewell there. Then

he and the grand dais withdrew to his chambers.

“So, now the fifth and final chapter of our tragedy is over,” he said with an almost melancholy smile. “There’s no one left over us, except for Allah and the unknown heavens. But we know incredibly little about either of them. So we might as well close the book of unsolved riddles once and for all.

“I’ve had enough of the world for the time being. While I wait in this retreat for the solution to the final riddle, I can’t think of a better way to occupy my time than by filling in the last details of the fairy tales for our faithful children. It’s fitting for an old man who knows the world to reveal it to the people in the form of tales and parables. There’s so much work still ahead of me! For the simplest believers I have to invent a thousand and one tales about the origins and beginning of the world, heaven and hell, the prophets, Mohammed, Ali and the Mahdi. The second grade, the fighting faithful, will need more than anything a clear rule book giving them all the commandments and prohibitions. I’ll have to embed the fairy tales into basic principles and provide them with a whole catechism. For the fedayeen I will have to reveal the first great Ismaili mysteries: the Koran is a complicated book and requires a special key to interpret it. Still higher up, those who advance to the level of dais will learn that even the Koran doesn’t contain the ultimate mysteries, and that those are equally distributed among all the different faiths. Those worthy enough to become regional dais will learn the awful supreme Ismaili principle: that nothing is true, and everything is permitted. But those of us who hold all the threads of this mechanism in our hands will save our ultimate thoughts for ourselves.”

“What a pity that you plan to shut yourself off from the world!” Buzurg Ummid exclaimed. “Now, of all times, when you’ve reached the zenith of your life’s path.”

“A man who fulfills a great mission only really comes to life once he’s dead. Especially a prophet. I’ve fulfilled mine and now it’s time to start thinking of myself. I’m going to die to other people so that I can come to life for myself. This way I’ll be able to see what will endure after me. Do you understand?”

They nodded.

“But if you were to ask me what the purpose of all this has been and why it’s been necessary, I wouldn’t be able to answer you,” he continued. “We just grow because there’s strength in us to do that. Like a seed that germinates in the earth and shoots up out of the ground, that blooms and bears fruit. Suddenly we’re here, and suddenly we’ll be gone.”

“Let’s go have a last look at the gardens!” he at last invited them.

They entered the lift and descended to the base of the tower. A eunuch lowered the bridge and Adi ferried them over to the central garden.

The deciduous trees were bare and the flower beds were deserted. There was no fresh greenery, no flowers. Only a cypress grove darkly withstood the winter.

“If you sent somebody to the gardens now,” Abu Ali said, “he’d have a hard time believing he was in paradise.”

“The world consists of color, light and warmth,” Hasan replied. “They are the food for our senses. A ray of light on the landscape, and it’s completely transformed in our eyes! With its transformation our feelings, thoughts and moods are also transformed. This, you see, is the eternally self-renewing miracle of all life.”

Apama joined them.

“How are the girls doing?” Hasan asked.

“They talk a lot, and they work a lot, they laugh a lot and they even cry a lot. They just don’t think very much.”

“That’s for the best. Otherwise they might realize they’re in prison. It can’t be helped. You women are used to harems and prison. A person can spend his whole life between four walls. If he doesn’t think or feel that he’s a prisoner, then he’s not a prisoner. But then there are people for whom the whole planet is a prison, who see the infinite expanse of the universe, the millions of stars and galaxies that remain forever inaccessible to them. And that awareness makes them the greatest prisoners of time and space.”

They walked silently down the deserted paths.

“Is there anything new here?”

“No, except that we’re expecting a few babies.”

“That’s fine. We’ll need them. Make sure that everything goes well.”

Then he turned to his grand dais and said, “Those will be the only creatures in the world who were conceived by their fathers in the firm

belief that their mothers were heavenly maidens, unearthly beings.”

They walked around the pond.

“Spring will come again, and then summer after it,” Hasan continued. “Stay as warm as you can through the winter, so you can experience the luxury of nature renewing itself again in the gardens. And we should withdraw to our chambers too, because the sky has clouded over ominously and it might even snow tomorrow. It’s going to get colder.”

When they returned to the castle, Hasan bade his grand dais farewell with these words:

“The earth has barely made half a circuit around the sun, just half of one of the hundreds and hundreds of thousands it has made until now. And yet we can say that a fair amount has changed on its surface in that time. The empire of Iran no longer exists. Our institution has emerged from the night. What course will it take from here? We call for an answer in vain. The stars above us are silent.”

For the last time he embraced both of his friends. Then he entered the lift. They felt a strange sadness as they watched him ascend.

He locked himself inside his chambers and died to the world.

And legend enfolded him in its wings.

AFTERWORD

AGAINST IDEOLOGIES: VLADIMIR BARTOL AND *ALAMUT*

Vladimir Bartol (1903–1967) wrote *Alamut*, which remains his only book of any significant renown, in the peaceful seclusion of a small, baroque town nestled in the foothills of the Slovenian Alps, over the course of about nine months in 1938. As he worked on an early draft, barely thirty miles to the north Austria was forcibly annexed to Nazi Germany. Fifty miles to the west, just over another border, Italy's Fascists regularly hounded the large ethnic Slovenian minority of the Adriatic seacoast town of Trieste, and were already looking to extend their holdings into the Slovenian and Croatian regions of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. A few hundred miles to the north and east, in the Soviet Union, Stalin's bloodiest purges had reached their high tide, claiming hundreds of thousands of victims, most of whom met their fate in dank cellars with a single bullet to the back of the head. Amidst this turmoil and menace, Slovenia and its parent country of Yugoslavia were, for the time being, an island of relative tranquility. If the book that Bartol wrote in these circumstances proved to be an escape from the mass political movements, charismatic leaders, and manipulative ideologies that were then coming to rule Europe, it was also a profound meditation on them.

Most of all, *Alamut* was and is simply a great read—imaginative, erudite, dynamic and humorous, a well-told tale set in an exotic time and place, yet populated by characters with universally recognizable ambitions, dreams and imperfections. Both at home and abroad, it continues to be perhaps the most popular book that Slovenia has ever produced, with recent translations of *Alamut* having become bestsellers in Germany, France and Spain. But despite its surface appearance as popular literature, *Alamut* is also a finely wrought, undiscovered minor masterpiece which offers the reader a wealth of meticulously planned and executed detail and broad potential for symbolic, intertextual and

philosophical interpretation.

Bartol, himself an ethnic Slovene from Trieste, studied in Paris and Ljubljana, eventually settling in the Slovenian capital to pursue a literary career. During his studies in Paris in 1927, a fellow Slovene who knew of Bartol's ambitions as a writer recommended that he draw on the episode of the "Old Man of the Mountain" from *The Travels of Marco Polo* as material for a short story or novel. This tale, recounted to Marco Polo as he progressed along the Silk Road through Iran, had to do with a powerful local sectarian warlord who supposedly used hashish and a secret bower of kept maidens to dupe young men into believing that he had the power to transport them to paradise and bring them back to earth at will. Thus winning the youths' fanatic loyalty, he was able to dispatch them to any corner of the world on suicidal missions of political assassinations that served to extend his power and influence. Bartol took the subject matter to heart and during the next ten years did extensive research into the broader historical background of the tale while inventing a novelistic plot and structure of his own. Completing the novel became his passion, his reason for being. In his diary he pleaded with the fates to let him live to finish the book and deliver it safely into the printer's hands. After a long gestation of ten years, the novel finally took shape on paper in the course of four successive drafts during those intense, secluded months that Bartol spent in the town of Kamnik. By all accounts, Bartol was radiantly happy during this period, just as we might imagine a person who knows he's creating a masterpiece should be.

Unfortunately, the timing of this masterpiece's appearance in the world was less than perfect. *Alamut's* trajectory was interrupted first by the German and Italian annexation of Slovenia from 1941 to 1945, then by the literary ideologies of Tito-led Communist Yugoslavia, where for some years the book was seen as a threat. What's more, its subject matter and style were completely at variance with the dominant trends in Slovenian literature both before and after World War II. Writers of small, linguistically isolated nations often have an overwhelming need to write about life in that particular small nation, perhaps as a way of helping to validate and reinforce the nation's very existence. Because there was nothing identifiably Slovenian about *Alamut*, except for its language, his fellow writers took to characterizing Bartol as "a mistake in the Slovenian genetic code." Here was an adventure novel set in

northwestern Iran, written in places to resemble *Thousand and One Nights*, and centered around the deep tensions between the indigenous Pahlavi-speaking Shiite Muslim inhabitants of the region and their Seljuk Turkish Sunni Muslim overlords—a thoroughly readable and well-researched novel that used a simple prose style to depict colorful settings and develop a suspenseful plot, rather than the usual tale of tensions among Slovenian peasants, landowners and townspeople. Bartol himself told of being approached on the street years later by one of his old schoolmates, who told him, “I read your translation and really enjoyed it.” “What translation?” Bartol replied. “That fat novel, the one that was written by some English or Indian author,” the man explained. “Do you mean *Alamut*?” Bartol asked. “I wrote that.” The man laughed at this and waved dismissively, “Go on, get out of here. You can’t fool me.” And then he walked away. Ordinary readers found it inconceivable that a Slovenian could develop a story so completely outside of their own historical experience—it had to have been written by a foreigner. Bartol himself saw the guild of Slovenian writers as divided into two categories: the nationalists, who were in the majority and expressed what he called “the anguished lament of their own time,” and the cosmopolitans, who had a broader sense of history but were in the minority. Needless to say, Bartol saw himself in the second, generally misunderstood, group.

One of Bartol’s strengths in *Alamut* is his ability to virtually disappear as a perceptible agent of the novel and let his characters carry the story. There is no authorial voice passing judgment or instructing readers which characters to favor and which to condemn. In fact, readers may find their allegiances shifting in the course of the story, becoming confused and ambivalent. Bartol certainly intended to write an enigmatic book. Literary historians have looked to Bartol’s biography, personality and other work for keys to understanding *Alamut*, but much in the author’s life still remains hidden from view. Its very openness to a variety of interpretations is one of the things that continue to make *Alamut* a rewarding experience.

Perhaps the simplest way to approach *Alamut* is as a broadly historical if highly fictionalized account of eleventh-century Iran under Seljuk rule. A reader encountering the novel from this perspective can appreciate its scrupulously researched historical background, the general absence of historical anachronisms, its account of the origins of the Shiite-Sunni

conflict within Islam, and its exposition of the deep-seated resentments that the indigenous peoples of this area have had against foreign occupiers, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, for over a millennium. The author's gift for populating this setting with sympathetic, complex, and contemporary-seeming personalities, whose aspirations and fears resonate for the reader at a level that transcends the stock expectations of the exotic scenic décor, make this historically focused reading of the novel particularly lifelike and poignant.

A second reading of *Alamut* anchors its meaning firmly in Bartol's own time between the two World Wars, seeing it as an allegorical representation of the rise of totalitarianism in early twentieth-century Europe. In this reading, Hasan ibn Sabbah, the hyper-rationalistic leader of the Ismaili sect, becomes a composite portrait of Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin. In fact, Bartol originally intended to dedicate the first edition of his book "To Benito Mussolini," and when he was dissuaded from doing this, suggested a more generic dedication "To a certain dictator," which was similarly vetoed. Either dedication would almost certainly have been a bold exercise in high irony, but his publisher rightly saw the risks involved at that volatile time: lost readership, irate authorities. Some of the characters appear to have been drawn from real-life models that dominated the newsreels at that time. Abu Ali, Hasan's right-hand man, is depicted delivering inspiring oratory to the men of *Alamut* in a way reminiscent of no one so much as Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels. The ceremonial nighttime lighting of the castle of *Alamut* could pass for an allusion to the floodlit rallies and torchlight parades of the Nazi Party. The strict organizational hierarchies of the Ismailis, the broad similarities between some characters and their corresponding types within the Fascist or National Socialist constellations, and the central role of ideology as a sop for the masses all resonate with the social and power structures then existing in Germany, Italy and Soviet Russia, as do the progressively greater levels of knowledge and critical distance from ideology that are available to Hasan's inner circle.

More recently, yet another interpretation tries to persuade us that *Alamut* is a roman-à-clef representation of what should have been the ideal Slovenian response to the German and Italian totalitarianism then threatening Slovenia and the rest of Europe—in other words, a mirror image of the Hasan-as-Hitler reading. This interpretation looks to

Bartol's origins in the area around Trieste, and his undisputed anger at Italian domination and persecution of the ethnic Slovenes in those regions beginning in the 1920s. Bartol was indeed a close personal friend of the head of a Slovenian terrorist group, the "Tigers," whose members conducted violent attacks on Italian institutions and individuals in the Italian-Slovenian border regions. (The group's Slovenian designation "TIGR" was actually an acronym based on the names of four key disputed areas: Trieste, Istria, Gorizia, and Rijeka [Italian Fiume].) When his friend was captured by the Italians in 1930 and sentenced to twenty years in prison, Bartol made a laconic and ominous note in his diary, "Zorko, I will avenge you." Hasan's positive traits—his rationality, intelligence and wit—together with his revelatory confession late in the novel to his youthful alter ego, ibn Tahir, that his entire life's work has been dedicated to liberating the Pahlavi-speaking population of Iran from foreign domination, would all seem to support this view of the novel as an Aesopian exhortation to oppressed Slovenes, focused around celebrating the charismatic personality and Machiavellian brilliance of the liberation movement's leader, Hasan/Zorko.

But as tempting as this Slovenian nationalist reading of *Alamut* may be, ultimately it rings facile and flat. For one, how can Hasan's nationalism—for which Bartol anachronistically draws on an ideology arising centuries later, out of eighteenth-century European thought—square with Hasan's far more exhaustively articulated nihilism, his rejection of all ideology, his acceptance of power as the ruling force of the universe, and his implacable pursuit of power for its own sake? Moreover, how could any self-respecting human being, Slovene or otherwise, take to heart a manifesto based on the cynical manipulation of human consciousness and human life in furtherance of the manipulator's own goals? Attempts to make *Alamut* work as a veiled treatise on national liberation also run up against Bartol's own paradoxical avowals of authorial indifference to politics. And ultimately they are reductive and self-contradictory, turning what reads and feels like a many-faceted work of literature rich with meaning into a two-dimensional ideological screed.

This brings us to the present day and the reading of *Alamut* that is bound to be particularly tempting, now that America has incurred Hasan-like blows from a nemesis to the east and delivered its own

counterblows of incalculable destructive force in return. This reading will see *Alamut*, if not as a prophetic vision, then at least as an uncanny foreshadowing of the early twenty-first century's fundamental conflict between a nimble, unpredictable upstart relying on a relatively small but close-woven network of self-sacrificing agents on the one hand, and a massive, lumbering empire on the other, put constantly on the defensive and very likely creating new recruits for its adversary with every poorly focused and politically motivated offensive step that it takes. The story of today's conflict between al Qaeda and the West could be a palimpsest unwittingly obscuring the half-obliterated memory of a similar struggle from more than a thousand years ago: injured and humiliated common folk who prove susceptible to the call of a militant and avenging form of their religion; the manipulative radical ideology that promises its recruits an otherworldly reward in exchange for their making the ultimate sacrifice; the arrogant, self-satisfied occupying power whose chief goal is finding ways of extracting new profits from its possession; and the radical leader's ominous prediction that someday "even princes on the far side of the world will live in fear" of his power. But however many parallels we may be able to find here between Bartol's eleventh century and our twenty-first, there is nothing clairvoyant about them. *Alamut* offers no political solutions and no window on the future, other than the clarity of vision that a careful and empathetic rendering of history can provide. There is, admittedly, much for an American readership to learn from a book like *Alamut*, and better late than never: thanks to Bartol's extensive and careful research, a rudimentary education in the historical complexities and continuities of Iraq and Iran, reaching back over a thousand years, is one of the novel's useful by-products.

Any of these readings is possible. But all of them miss the obvious, fundamental fact that *Alamut* is a work of literature, and that as such its chief job is not to convey facts and arguments in a linear way but to do what only literature can do: provide attentive readers, in a tapestry as complex and ambiguous as life itself, with the means of discovering deeper and more universal truths about humanity, about how we conceive of ourselves and the world, and how our conceptions shape the world around us—essentially, to know ourselves. Bartol does not overtly intervene in the narrative to guide our understanding of it in the way he

wants. Instead, he sets his scenes with subtle clues and more than a few false decoys—much the way real life does—and then leaves it to us sort out truth from delusion. The most blinkered reading of *Alamut* might reinforce some stereotypical notions of the Middle East as the exclusive home of fanatics and unquestioning fundamentalists. (What, then, to make of the armies of black-shirted and leather-jacketed thugs that Europe spawned just sixty years ago?) A really perverted reading might actually find in it an apology for terrorism. That risk is there. But careful readers should come away from *Alamut* with something very different.

First and foremost, *Alamut* offers a thorough deconstruction of ideology—extending to all dogmatic ideologies that defy common sense and promise the kingdom of God in exchange for one’s life or one’s freedom to judge and make choices. Of course, there are Hasan’s long, enlightened diatribes against Islamic doctrine and the religious alternatives to it, which he organizes around the retelling of his own life experience, his search for truth as a young man, and his successive disillusionments. He tells of how he transcended his personal crisis by devoting himself exclusively to experience, science, and what can be perceived by the senses. But this positivism develops into a hyper-rationalism that, by excluding the emotional aspects of human experience as irrational and invalid, itself becomes dogmatic. At its extreme, Hasan’s rationalism proclaims the absence of absolute moral restraints, the supremacy of power as the ruling force of the world, and the imperative of manipulating lesser human beings to achieve maximum power and further his own ends—formally articulated in his sect’s supreme maxim: “Nothing is true, everything is permitted.”

Yet Bartol lets us see more of the complexities and weaknesses of this character than Hasan himself would probably admit to. We are given momentary glimpses of his visceral hatred for his lifelong rival, Nizam al-Mulk, who figures in the novel as his primary nemesis and object of revenge. Twice we see his terror at suddenly feeling alone and vulnerable in the universe. Near the novel’s climax, he makes the contradictory revelation that his life’s greatest driving force has been a fierce hatred of his country’s Seljuk overlords. And repeatedly, wordlessly, but unmistakably we see him reject opportunities for emotional and physical connectedness, even though deep down he just as unmistakably wants them. All of these irrational impulses threaten his

rationalist ideology and so have to be suppressed, but in suppressing them Hasan obliterates facets of his personality. The result is an emotionally deformed, if intellectually brilliant human being—who is all the more tragic for the great power that he wields.

Throughout the last half of the novel, Hasan refers to each of various interconnected events that he has engineered as “the next act of our tragedy,” and it seems unclear just whose tragedy he is referring to. In the book’s final chapter, as Hasan looks ahead to the future, he refers to “those of us who hold in our hands the threads of this mechanism,” meaning the fearful mechanism of the sect of assassins. Aside from conjuring the image of Hasan as master puppeteer (which he is), these figurative threads and mechanisms also reverberate with the pulley-and-rope-operated lift that his eunuch servants regularly use to hoist him up to his tower chambers. Considering that Hasan is also shown feeling vulnerable in that rudimentary lift, wondering what would happen if the eunuchs suddenly became aware of their degraded state and decided to cut the rope and send him crashing to his death, this final image of Hasan as master ideologue and manipulator becomes a highly ambiguous one. His apotheosis in the book’s last sentences, as he is hoisted up to his tower, where he will spend the rest of his life codifying Ismaili law and dogma, never again to emerge, is the ultimate ironic ending. What Hasan’s character doesn’t fully realize is that, in dispatching himself to the ultimate extreme of rationality, by willingly separating himself from human society in the name of this rationality, and by submitting himself to the “threads” of his own “mechanism,” he makes himself the tragedy’s most prominent victim.

So many of the novel’s emotional sparks are generated not discursively through narration or dialogue, which is dominated by reason, but in the unspoken, subtle interstices of the spoken exchanges between some of the main characters. It is the fleeting, sometimes apparently throw-away depictions of their emotional affect—involuntary facial expressions, glances, blushes, body language, suppressed wellings-up of emotion—that express far more of the truth of their being than their words can do. These affective communications are generally left incomplete, partly because they represent ineffable moments, and partly because supposedly higher circumstances (ideology in the case of the fedayeen; duty in the case of the girls; “reason” in the case of Hasan) invariably

manage to crush them before they can fully express themselves. Yet they are some of the novel's most pronounced and revelatory moments of truth.

The personalist philosophers who were so influential between the World Wars would have seen these highly charged moments of honesty and vulnerability in human relationships as the primary medium in which the divine force manifests itself. In reaction to dogmatic religion and similarly reductive tendencies in the social sciences (at that time, notably, Freudian psychology and Marxism), personalism granted equal importance to a wide range of facets in the human personality, from the biological, social and historical to the psychological, ethical and spiritual. Bartol studied in Paris at the same time as a number of his young countrymen who would later become influential personalist intellectuals, including the psychologist Anton Trstenjak and the poet Edvard Kocbek. Although Freud and Nietzsche are most frequently mentioned as early influences on Bartol—and certainly Hasan embodies their lessons to perfection—the importance that *Alamut* ultimately places on the development of the integrated human being suggests that if any ideology still counted for Bartol, it must have been something akin to personalism.

In this light, the book's dual mottos, apparently in conflict with each other and the source of a fair amount of frustration for commentators over the years, begin to make sense. If “Nothing is true, everything is permitted” stands as a symbol of the license granted to the Ismaili elite, then the unrelated subsidiary motto “*Omnia in numero et mensura*” acquires an ultimately cautionary significance. All things within measure, nothing too much. In other words, skepticism and rationality are important assets, but overdependence on them at the expense of compassion leads to the tragedy that engulfs Hasan as much as it does his witting and unwitting victims.

Bartol incorporated many of his own qualities and personal interests into his portraits of Hasan and the novel's other characters. He was an avid student of philosophy, history, mathematics, and the natural sciences. He was an amateur entomologist and (like another Vladimir, four years his senior and the author of a book called *Lolita*) an avid lepidopterist. In a country of mountain climbers, Bartol literally climbed with the very best of them. Like a famous French writer three years his

senior, he was an enthusiastic and skilled small aircraft pilot—and all of this just as a prelude to his career as a writer. An individual who is that inquisitive and that eager for experience is either driven and obsessed, or in love with life. In his private life, Bartol was an example of the latter personality type, but in his novel he chose to portray an extreme version of the former.

In a commentary on *Alamut* published on the occasion of a 1957 edition of the novel, an older Bartol, now more overtly solicitous of his readers, wrote:

The reader of *Alamut* will certainly have noticed one thing. No matter how terrible, inhuman and despicable the methods are that Hasan uses, the people subjected to him never lose their most noble human values. The sense of solidarity among the fedayeen never dies, and friendship flourishes among them, just as it does among the girls in the gardens. Ibn Tahir and his comrades are eager to know truth, and when Ibn Tahir finds out that he has been deceived by the man he had most trusted and believed in, he is no less shaken than when he learns that Miriam's love for him was a deception. And finally, in all his grim knowledge, Hasan is unhappy and alone in the universe. And if somebody wanted to find out from the author what he meant by writing *Alamut*, what his underlying feeling was as he went through the process of writing it, I'd tell him, "Friend! Brother! Let me ask you, is there anything that makes a person braver than friendship? Is there anything more touching than love? And is there anything more exalted than the truth?"

(Michael Biggins — August, 2004)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

VLADIMIR BARTOL (1903–1967) was one of Yugoslavia's leading intellectuals and the author of plays, short stories and theater reviews. After studying at the Sorbonne in Paris, Bartol spent much of his life in Trieste. He died in Ljubljana with most of his work out of print and virtually unknown among his countrymen.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

MICHAEL BIGGINS has translated works by a number of Slovenia's leading contemporary writers. He currently curates the library collections for Russian and East European studies and teaches in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, both at the University of Washington in Seattle.