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TheAssassin

CHAPTER ONE

By the beard of the Prophet! I'll have their asses for taking so damn long!

Mamud ibn Said, slaver, had run out of patience with his Mamelukes, the hand-picked slave soldiers of the Faoud Pasha. They had ridden far on this raid into Circassia, and up until now everything had gone smoothly.

But at the moment a scruffy little handful of Cir-cassian warriors, positioned in a nest of large, smooth granite boulders, had them pinned down. A simple little raid for slaves had developed into a full-scale fight.

Why?

Mamud intended to find out.

Only his eyes showed from the carefully-placed fold of his turban, set so it protected his mouth and nostrils from the dust stirred up by his horsemen. They were dark brown, almost black eyes, and they flickered now with the fire of his impatience, a sure sign there was going to be hell to pay for his Mamelukes.

He kicked his horse in the flanks and rode to where he could get a better view of what was going on. True, some delay was to be expected when one wanted captives, not kills. But this was taking entirely too long. His men outnumbered the men in the rocks five-to-one. And they were better armed. Better trained. The rocks should have been over-run and the captives hooked up into the slave coffle and on the trail for the markets at Baghdad on the banks of the Tigris over an hour ago.

It did not occur to Mamud to expect treachery from his Mamelukes. True, this raid was against their fel-low countrymen, the Circassians. But that made no difference. What was the saying: Set a thief to catch a thief? Then set a Circassian to catch a Circassian. Once they were properly broken in and trained, Cir-cassians made excellent and loyal slaves, few of whom would take their freedom if offered it. Not if it meant they had to return to their old lifestyle, which was not much above that of the animals they preyed on. No, something other than treachery was holding up this operation. Mamud had ridden far with his "bought ones" on this raid, and he did not intend for things to get screwed up now. A slave raid was too profitable for that. There was always a market for fighting men to fill the ranks of the Emirs, Pashas, and Sultans who followed in the way of the Prophet Mohammed--Blessed be His Name!

So why the delay?

Suddenly Mamud got his answer.

Damn!

A light lance with a reed shaft and brass head suddenly whistled so close to his own face that his eyes blinked from the breeze it made in passing.

Always the professional, danger or no danger, Mamud noted the details of the weapon that had just missed killing him. In appearance it was much the same as the *jirads* of his own men, though not as well-made, naturally.

More important, the man who had thrown it obviously knew what the hell he was doing. So Mamud tried to spot him in the rocks.

There he was, in the process of heaving another of his shafts. This time his target was a Mameluke light archer astride a bay gelding. Mamud had to grant the barbarian spearman grudging admiration for the throw. It was nearly a hundred cubits, yet the lance hit with such force that it pinned the Mameluke archer's right leg to the side of the horse, killing the animal.

Mamud thought sardonically, *Indeed, a fine, strong cast. Also expensive.* After all, a trained warhorse cost almost as much as a Mameluke.

Damn!

Instantly Mamud regretted his wool-gathering thoughts.

One of the defenders in the rocks had handed the spearman another javelin, and this time the target was Mamud himself.

The throw was so fast, the aim so accurate, that Mamud had to throw his body toward the back of his horse and lie in a less-than-dignified position to avoid the streaking dart, which passed through empty air where only a split second before his chest had been.

"This has to stop!" he bellowed.

Crying out to one of his squad leaders, Mamud pointed to the spearman. "Get me that man! The one with the scar on his face. I want him alive. Do you hear? He owes me much, and I will not be cheated of my dues. Take him, and the rest will lose heart."

The Mameluke notched an arrow capped with a blunt, rounded tip designed to stun rather than to kill. He pulled back on the bow, sighted on the scar-faced man, and fired.

* * *

Casca rolled off the boulder to avoid the stun arrow, cursing himself under his breath for ever returning to within even a hundred leagues of the borders of Persia. These lands had never brought him anything but trouble.

He landed in an open space between two smaller boulders, but as he did, two horsemen attempted to run him down. Scrambling crab fashion, Casca barely avoided the iron-shod hooves.

Damn!

He whipped around to catch the rear horseman by his long, green-bordered tunic. He jerked the Mameluke out of the saddle and beat his face in against the nearest granite rock.

The lead horseman had trouble turning his animal. Just as Casca whirled toward him, a rock twice the size of a large man's fist flew from one of the defending Circassians and hit the Mameluke squarely between the shoulder blades. Casca could hear clearly the brittle crunch of a spine breaking. A five-pound rock, thrown downhill at a distance of less than twenty feet, is a deadly instrument.

Time to get out of here! To Hades with the Circassians! There wasn't much more he could do now than try to save his own ass.

Casca grabbed the light, curved scimitar of the Mameluke whose face he had just crushed and leaped on the back of the dead man's horse.

Dodging a flight of barbed shafts from the Ma-melukes who apparently had momentarily forgotten they were to capture him, not kill him, Casca slapped the horse across the rump with the flat of the scimitar and tried to break for open ground. There he could at least get a running start, hoping the slave hunters would content themselves with the men still in the boulders, thinking them to be easier and more profitable game than the one fleeing man who had done such damage in his escape.

After all, six Mamelukes did lie dead or severely wounded thanks to "the scar-faced one with the gray-blue eyes and square body." Most of the Mamelukes would have been well-content to have seen the last of him.

Not Mamud.

Casca tried to run him down.

* * *

It was a close thing. Mamud had to hit the ground, rolling quickly to get protection behind a sun-baked boulder to avoid the hooves of the scarred one's horse.

Indignity upon indignity!

Mamud fumed. Not only had the barbarian killed many of his men--not only had he, Mamud, been nearly punctured by the scarred one's lance--but as he got to his feet and brushed himself off he discovered that there was now a large hole in his robe that would be difficult to mend.

That was the last straw!

Mamud's robes had been fashioned from the rare and costly silk of Chin. A gift of honor from Nizam al Mulk, Grand Vizier of Baghdad and advisor to the new Caliph, Malik Shah.

Intolerable!

"Get me that man!" Mamud cried to his captain, his voice roaring like a whirlwind. "Get me that man, or you will take his place on the block!"

Bu Ali, the captain, had no desire to lose his favored position and return to the status of a field slave... or, even worse, to be sent to the copper mines of Khorramshahr. He took five men with him and raced after the would-be escapee.

Across the plains they galloped, spreading out to keep the scar-faced one from being able to turn to the north and reach the ranges of the Caucasus Mountains.

* * *

Casca urged his mount on. The men behind him were gaining. He couldn't seem to get any more speed out of the horse. Instead, it was slowing down. Red flecks of foam blew back to stain Casca's legs. Bloody bubbles blew from the flared nostrils.

Damn!

Looking down, first to the right side of his mount, then to the left, Casca knew he wasn't going to make it. The feathered end of an arrow protruded from over the horse's left shoulder.

The animal was lung-shot and dying.

Got to find shelter. Quick.

But everywhere Casca looked there was no shelter.

He was in the open with no place to hide.

The horse stumbled. Nearly fell. Regained its balance for a moment. Tried to run. Then fell head over tail, its forelegs collapsing under a weight it no longer had the strength to carry. Casca flew free from the saddle, scraping off a broad patch of skin as he rolled into a clump of thorn bush. Rising to his feet, he hefted his sword, though he knew it was not likely that it would do him much good against the mounted archers. They could simply stay out of range and fill him with arrows.

Bu Ali signaled his men to circle their doomed prey. The Mamelukes started to notch war arrows onto their strings, but Bu Ali ordered them to use the blunt-headed shafts instead. Mamud wanted this man alive, and that was the way he would get him.

All five Mamelukes took turns firing their bows. All were accomplished archers, and the target they shot at presented no challenge to their skills.

Casca tried to dodge and duck, but every time he avoided one shaft two more hit him. Had the arrows been tipped with points the force of the compound blows would have driven the missiles completely through his body. As it was, he felt two ribs crack under their impact.

Bu Ali took his own shot. The target was growing weary and was hurt. Drawing the bow string back to his ear, Bu Ali sighted carefully, waiting until the scar-faced one's attention was elsewhere. Then when his target turned to avoid another shaft, he let fly.

The blunt-tipped missile flew straight to its target, striking the man square on the skull, tearing open a flap of skin, and dropping him as if he had been pole-axed.

That did it!

Bu Ali motioned for his men to get on with the job and secure their captive. They dismounted, taking strips of rawhide with them to bind their prize. Running to the prone figure, they started to turn him over on his back so they could tie his hands.

Three men got to him first. And just as they began their task, Casca's hands came up, each taking the throat of a Mameluke into its grasp. There was no attempt at finesse or refinement. Casca squeezed with all his strength. His thick, strong, warrior's fingers crushed throats and vertebrae. And he was coming off the ground, going for the third Mameluke, when two more blunt-tipped arrows hit him in the head, finishing off what Bu Ali had thought was a knockout from his shaft.

Bu Ali shook his head in a combination of awe and anger. *The man must have a skull as thick as a camel's.* His shot should have rendered the scar-faced one unconscious for at least an hour. He watched his men cautiously approach, then securely bind the downed Casca. Well, this time they had done it.

When he got back to Mamud the other barbarians in the rocks were kneeling at the feet of their new master. With Casca gone they had realized the futility of their struggle and given up.

Mamud himself was back where he belonged, on his horse where he could better survey those he had taken prisoner. It was not with pleasure that he added up his profit and loss for the afternoon's work. He had eleven prisoners; but he had lost seven men and three war horses. Disgusting! If it hadn't been for some successful raids earlier he doubted if he would have shown a profit at all to compensate him for all his efforts and time.

Seeing the returning Bu Ali, Mamud spurred his horse over to meet his captain and inspect the prisoner. In a fit of pique he lashed Casca's back with his riding crop of rhinoceros hide, instantly regretting the act -- which spoiled his image as the commander above human frailties. He excused his action by explaining to himself that it had been a bad day.

"Put him in line with the others," he ordered Bu Ali. "But keep an eye on him. He is a troublemaker, but I don't want him killed or crippled. I think that this one, when properly trained, could bring enough gold for most of our losses. Nizam al Mulk has need of strong fighters."

This last he regretted saying almost as soon as the words were out of his mouth--he hadn't intended to be so familiar with his captain, to take this underling into his confidence. By the Prophet! It was definitely not his best day.

Camp was made on the spot. Fires were lit and meat set out to cook--horsemeat from the Mameluke's own dead animals. The slaves were not to be fed, nor would they be for three more days. And, until the third day, they would receive only enough water to keep them going. By the third day of hunger and thirst they would be much easier to handle. This also gave Mamud an opportunity to size up his catch. Hunger

and thirst would show him who were the strong ones and who were the weak ones. Efficiency! That's what made for a profit.

Mamud's tent was prepared for him, and he performed his evening ablutions, regretting that he was down to the last of his rosewater with which to freshen his face and hands.

He checked the sky.

It was time for the faithful to be called to prayer.

Placing his prayer rug to face toward Mecca, he and his men--except those on guard--knelt and bowed their heads to the earth as Mamud cried out:

"Allah bismillah Mohammed. Allah u Akhbar!" Al-lah is God, the only God, and Mohammed is His Prophet. "In shallah." His will be done...

Once he was changed into fresh robes and sitting on civilized cushions where he could at least have a decent view of the sunset, he permitted Bu Ali to serve him his meal... a simple warrior's dish of stewed lamb with a touch of sage rubbed into the tender flesh, set on a plate with curried rice and cakes of wheat touched with just a breath of honey from Syria....Ah!

His men dined on the fare he considered best-suited to their less sensitive palates: curds and horsemeat washed down with water.

The taste of the cakes was sweet in his throat as he lay back on the cushions. Back to Baghdad! It was with no sense of regret that he was at last going to be able to leave these wild, inhospitable lands for the refined environment of a civilized city. These rugged, barren lands were not even fit for the uncouth Franks--as were called all ignorant and ill-mannered men of the West, whether they came from the Rhine or from Italy, whether they came as merchants or as pilgrims to Jerusalem. Franks ... They had no part in the future destiny of a simple slave trader. Or did they?

Mamud's beard itched from the bite of sandfleas, and he took it as an omen--one of the lesser blessings of the Most High to let all know that, no matter what their station in life, the greatest of His creations

could be hurt by the least.... Ah! Yes . . .

By Allah! It would be good to have a bath and a massage to rub away the miles he had traveled on a saddle fit only for a Kurdish tribesman. It would take weeks to rid his buttocks of the thick pad of calluses that had attached themselves to his flesh.

Through the open flap of his tent he could see his Mamelukes guarding his slaves. It was a good harvest of strong men who would bring fine prices. The thought of the fine prices warmed Mamud's heart; but the reason for the high prices bothered him.

Of late there had been an ever-increasing demand for men who were not of Persian or Arabian descent to be used as bodyguards. It was all due to those accursed fanatics of Hassan ibn Hassad, the Sheikh al Jebal. Hemp-eaters. Assassins.

Assassins. One never knew when they would strike, and there was nothing that could be done to scare them off. Indeed, when captured they went to their deaths eagerly, joyfully. How can one deal with men who do not fear death? What was the power the Old Man of the Mountain had over his followers that they obeyed his every wish without consideration of their own lives?

Mamud warmed his tea from a brass pot and sipped, luxuriating in the small comfort it gave him. At any rate, the Assassins were good for his business. Newly captured slaves such as he sold, being not only foreigners but infidels as well, were not likely to be followers of Hassan al Sabah, and so they made good guards. And, since the Assassins of Hassan al Sabah might be one's own body slave--or even men of noble birth--no wonder there was such a market for men pure of the unclean contamination of the Assas-sins who had, to Mamud's knowledge, never failed to make their kill, usually after warning the victim in advance with a gold-handed dagger....

Thinking of the scar-faced one he had lashed ear-lier, Mamud looked again to his catch. It was as he turned his head that in the corner of his vision he saw the flash of light in the now-darkened western sky.

A shooting star? An omen from Allah?

Thinking as he was at the moment of profit and the new slave, Mamud chose to consider it an omen of good fortune. The scar-faced one was very strong. Mamud would take him to Baghdad and offer him up to Nizam al Mulk. The Vizier was known to be a connoisseur of fine fighting men. He would pay well for

one such as this.

Ah!

Calling to Bu Ali to make certain that all the slaves' bonds were secured and the sentries alert, Mamud closed the flap of his tent and retired. He was at peace with himself, even though there were still many leagues to travel before he could indulge himself once more in those refined pleasures which made life worth liv-ing....

* * *

Casca was not at peace with himself. He too had seen the shooting star, a thinscratch of light ending beyond the distant mountains, so minor that neither the guards nor the other slaves had noticed. But to Casca it was an omen, one more thing to feed the uneasy feeling that had been building in him all day, even before the fight in the rocks.

I never should have come back to Persia. Some-thing damned unpleasant is about to happen to me. I can feel it. I should have kept my ass away . . .

It was not just being a slave. He had been that before. It was not the pain of his broken ribs ... or anything like that.

No, it was something new.

He was staring at the line of mountains, black against the starlit sky.

Shit!

CHAPTER TWO

Hassan ibn Hassad, Hassan al Sabah, the Sheikh al Jebal, the Old Man of the Mountain, the leader of the Assassins leaned over the battlements of Castle Alamut in the region of Dayam, set high as an eagle's perch in the Elburz Mountains, and surveyed the valley six thousand feet below. In the darkening twilight he looked with approval at his domain. His eyes were sharp and burning, set in deep sockets over a proud, hooked nose and thin, humorless mouth. He had eagle features. He *was* the eagle of this Eagle's Nest.

It had taken long for him to find and secure just the right place from which he could launch his program of terror upon the world. Now he had it. Here he had total control. *Control which Nizam never dreamed of*, he thought with satisfaction. Control such as few in the course of history had ever tasted.

Hassad stroked his beard, now turning gray with time but still tough and strong, like his eyes, youthful. For they were as clear as those of a twenty-year-old man and burned in their dark brown depths with an intensity and fire that only one who knows he has a mission in life can possess. A mission. And a passion.

Passion.

In Hassad's chest beat passions that the loveliest houri dwelling in Paradise could never sate. Their earthly counterparts were only receptacles for his seed by which he would pass on his heritage to those who came after him.

But even the flesh of his own flesh was not immune to his wrath if they angered him or failed in their duty to him and the Holy Mission. They would then pay the same price that the lowliest-born infidel would. Tolerance and forgiveness lead only to weakness. Hassad was not one who would ever be weak. He could not. His was a great calling, passed on to him from centuries past, and he would not fail.

His word was never broken.

That was one of the secrets of his power.

To all the world his word was always kept--for good or ill. Those that he marked for death always died. He was the Sheikh al Jebal and he was not to be denied. When he cast a sentence of death on one who refused him his price, the doomed one knew the shadow of the dark angel was over him and a

gold-handled dagger would end his term on earth. And now even the most powerful man in Persia, the Vizier--and in actuality the regent--to the youthful Caliph of Baghdad was to receive the gold-handled dagger.

It was with no regret that Hassad was now ready to order the death of his once-good-friend and coun-selor, Nizam al Mulk, Vizier to the Caliph of Bagh-dad. Nizam had been offered a chance to be one with Hassan, and thus live. *But he chose the way of personal aggrandizement and power, Hassan said to his inner soul. He did not keep his word to me. He has not been faithful to the oath spoken twenty years ago when we were both young men.* Hassad recalled the oath as though it had been yesterday, the oath witnessed by the strange one, the friend of both, Omar. Oaths such as that could not be broken with impunity, therefore Nizam had to die and by his death bring the world to know the awesome power that a few men can hold when they use their intelligence--and the minds of others--as their weapons. *For everything is an illusion except death.*

Death, of course, was the one thing that both princes and paupers understood, and he, Hassan ibn Hassad, was the Grand Master of Death. Only those who served him were without fear of the Dark Angel, for he had already shown them their reward and had briefly opened up the gates of Paradise to them.

Paradise. Before him lay the parable. Twilight had already darkened the bottom of the valley, but up there it was the time of the sunset, and Hassan gloried in the view before him. The red rays of the evening sun speared through a layer of low-lying clouds that brought with them the rare promise of rain. Hassan thought of himself as one who had prepared the soil of his fields for planting and had sown the first row of seeds. In the rain of time, when the earth had been properly enriched with the blood of his enemies, the seeds would sprout and grow and reseed themselves until he--and those few who knew the real reason for the Brotherhood's existence--would have prepared the way for the coming of the Master.

He looked down into the black depths of his valley, the sun painting his eagle's face the red of blood.

"Master?"

It was Sulman, approaching him reverently even though Sulman wore the robes of his rank which showed him to be one of the favored three who always had access to Hassan's ear, any time of the day or night. Through Sulman and his two peers in the high-est rank of Dai al Kirbal Hassan's orders were passed down to the other ranks of the Brotherhood. From the Dais and the Fidais, who were the swords of the Broth-erhood, they traveled down to the lowest order, the Lasiks, who served the others, performing the thou-sand daily tasks required to keep the castle in order. All was not forever fixed, however. The Lasiks, though servants and Novices now, might, if they progressed well enough, be permitted to have a sample of Par-adise before their deaths, and could even advance up through the

ranks to where they would be entrusted with the high honor of the gold-handled dagger, symbol of the Brotherhood, instrument of retribution, and the path which led to power.

"Master?" Sulman repeated diffidently.

Hassan gave him his orders, the command that Bu Tahir Arrani, one of the first of the Fidais and now serving the slaver Mamud ibn Said under the name of Bu Ali, was to be given the glory of being permitted to strike the death blow to the Vizier, Nizam al Mulk.

But, Hassan continued, there would be some time yet before the Golden Dagger would strike. First, Nizam had to be informed that he was going to die. And the world would have to be made aware of the sentence of death that all might always believe in the word of the Sheikh al Jebal.

Sulman bowed his way out of the presence of his master to do as he was bid.

Hassan, too, left the battlements.

For it was the Time ...

He went to the entrance. There he made the signs of blessing to the fully-armed and most loyal Fidai who guarded the entrance, and started down the long flight of stairs cut through five-hundred feet of the living rock of the mountain and leading down to its very heart. Only Hassan and the chosen few who were privy to the truth were permitted to enter a chamber there more sacred than the Kaaba or the city of Jerusalem.

At the bottom of the flight of stairs the door had the emblem of the fish upon it. Hassan knelt and removed his sandals. Reverently he pushed open the door, the only barrier now between him and that which he worshiped most on earth, and entered.

Closing the door behind him, he crawled forward on his knees. His figure was lit by the copper glow of lamps burning with the purest of oils. The light guided Hassan into the great hall cut from the rock so that hundreds might gather here inside the bowels of the mountain and worship the "Holy of Holies," the object set in a golden bracket at the end of the hall.

The spear of Casca Longinus, the assassin who had killed Jesus.

Hassan kissed the stone floor and looked upward at the spear in worship and in awe, memories burning in his brain.

Long had been the years before he rose to the leadership of the Brotherhood of the Lamb. But now the spear that had slain Jesus was in his trust. The sect of Ismaili Muslims which formed the basis of his power was only a tool to be used and then, if broken, cast away. The Ismailis were exactly what he had needed. Shunned by the dominant Shiite faction, the Ismailis were ill-treated, if not persecuted. Thus they gave Hassan a foundation of thousands of men and women with grievances against the existing power base reigned over by the Seljuk Turks and their lackeys.

Hassan touched his head to the stone floor, then again raised his eyes in reverence to the spear and prayed for guidance in his Holy Mission, the one Nizam had rejected.

Chaos.

They, the Chosen Ones, would create the conditions necessary for the return of the Lord--they would create chaos. Chaos must rule, and Armageddon be at hand. Those Hassan had gathered to him were only a small part of the plan the Brotherhood had to bring chaotic conditions about. It might take centuries, but all over the known world the Faithful waited. Some were men of great power. Others worked the fields. A few even wore the robes of the high priests of the Christians or the Imams of Mohammed. But all knew they were chosen above all others on the earth for their sacred task. And if that task was not completed in their lifetimes, then their sacred duties would be passed on to those who came after them, who were equally worthy and would be permitted to enter the sacred order of the Brotherhood of the Lamb. For they all had one thing in common....

They were patient, for time was their great ally. Through the teachings of the founder of their order, Izram, the 13th Disciple, who had witnessed the death of Jesus at the hands of the scar-faced Roman, only they knew the path that Jesus had left for them to follow:

Find Casca Longinus, and he would lead them to Jesus on the day of the Lord's Return.

For Jesus had cursed the Roman to wander the earth until the Second Coming, saying that Longinus would only be granted the peace of death on the day of the Second Coming when they would meet again.

Hassan continued to gaze at the spear. There had been a time when the Brotherhood had known where Longinus was, perhaps known his every movement. But then there had been a time of confusion. And, unfortunately, in Hassan's rise to power there had been certain unavoidable... ah... removal of certain personages who might have known of the Roman's whereabouts, so that now the Brotherhood had lost track of him completely.

Hassan sighed.

If only I had the Roman in my power . . .

* * *

"On your feet, you over-muscled lump of camel shit!"

The knot of braided leather lay open a half-inch strip on Casca's back. He had stumbled and fallen face first on the burning earth, and the other captives in the slave coffle would have cursed him for jerking them to a halt--if they'd had the extra strength to waste on a curse. All of their breath was needed for the miles yet remaining until they reached the slave pens of Baghdad where they would be put on the auction block.

Casca was assisted to his feet by a boot to his rib cage followed by a strong jerk on his leash. If his hands hadn't been tied, he would have seriously considered breaking the guard's neck. As it was, he contented himself with wondering why Arabs and Turks always made insults with references to camels and goats.

Well, different countries, different people. The men guarding him were the property of the Seljuk Turks, the newest of the many masters who had ruled over Persia. But those in the slave line with him were from the mountains of the Caucasus, light-haired and fair-skinned men who would bring high prices at the slave markets. They were even more valuable than their women for whom the Seljuks and the Persians had a great passion.

Casca considered that oddity, but not for very long. He still had the feeling that something strange was about to happen to him. Only, now it was beginning to piss him off. Even more than his treatment in the slave coffle. After all, he had been a slave before.

But there was something new, unknown.

Whatever it is, by Mithra, let's get it over with!

* * *

Mamud gave the order for camp to be made once more. Two more days and they would be in Baghdad. Mamud was reasonably pleased; the return journey had been for the most part uneventful. Only six of his captives had died on the trail: two from wounds they had received during their capture; one by suicide--biting his own tongue in two and bleeding to death during the night; one by execution for attempting to escape; the other two just lay down and quit.

Mamud had seen the last happen before. It was as if they had just given up their will to live. Very strange, but not uncommon when dealing with savages.

Again his method of dealing with new captives by depriving them of food and water had more than proved its value. Under the influence of thirst and hunger he was able to separate those who were going to be the easiest to condition and train from those more recalcitrant who still showed signs of defiance. These latter he had to watch, for they were the ones who would either attempt to escape or attack his guards if given the opportunity. To preclude this they were placed in shackles of iron and kept under the watch of his best men. Actually these recalcitrant ones were the men he valued the most. Once they accepted their condition they would make the best bodyguards for their new masters. And such men were usually the most loyal.

The strangest one of these men, though, was the selfsame troublemaker who had torn his robe. This scar-faced one was not like the other captives from the Caucasus or Armenia and had little intercourse with them. He kept to himself. Now, why? *This one*, Mamud mused, *if he has any intelligence, could be worth a small fortune.*

Mamud walked across the camp to where the ones in iron were kept, his right hand resting on the silver-chased hilt of his dagger.

"Bu Ali!" he called.

The captain of his Mamelukes responded with alacrity to his master's voice.

"Yes, lord? What is it you wish of me?"

"Bring me the scar-faced slave, the one who bandied the throw of his *jirad* with such skill it nearly took me to Paradise."

"To hear is to obey, my master," Bu Ali replied, his voice so silkily subservient that it irritated Mamud, though he certainly did not want the opposite out of the captain of his Mamelukes.

Mamud resisted the temptation to add: "And you better not forget it!" He watched as Bu Ali moved toward the prisoners, for the thousandth time wondering what it was about the man that from time to time brought forth just a shadow of doubt from the back of his mind. True, Bu Ali did have one unfortunate--well, almost a deformity. His hips were as big as a woman's, and his butt swelled out even more, which was why the men under him had given him the nickname Big Ass. Not to his face, of course. And not to his knowledge. Mamud prided himself on his commander's ability to know what his men were thinking and saying, to know it even better than his subordinates.

But that tiny distrust of Bu Ali bothered him. No reason for it. Bu Ali was the most loyal captain he had ever had. And the most efficient. Maybe it was just the man's big ass. *By the Prophet! I must look at what he does and not at his ass.* The man had done an excellent job on the raid. *I'll have to think of some reward for him in Baghdad.*

Casca was brought to him in chains, escorted by two Mamelukes with bared swords. They would take no chances on this one acting up again. They had not forgotten the fate of two of their number who had ventured too close to those strong, scarred hands.

Forced to his knees by Bu Ali, Casca waited for Mamud to acknowledge him.

"Raise your face to me, barbarian, that I may look upon you."

Bu Ali's sword point sped up Casca's response.

Mamud waved away a bothersome fly as he very carefully examined the face of this one. *Rather square in structure . . .* Gray-blue eyes with an odd -- dis-tant? -- look to them . . . as if all that is happening to him is no more than a single moment of minor dis-comfort that will soon pass

Most odd! I have never seen that look in a man's eyes before! At least not in one who fought with such ferocity. Why does he have the look to him that is most often seen in the eyes of poets and dreamers for whom the present reality of their stations is often less important than their dreams of what might come to pass? Yet the man is obviously designed more for battle than for verse as shown by the great bands of muscles knotted around his sunburned neck and shoul-ders.

"Talk to me, barbarian. It is obvious that you are not a member of the others' tribes. From whence do you come? Who are your people?"

Locking Mamud's eyes with his own, Casca growled out through dry vocal cords: "I have no peo-ple and claim no land as my own."

He was going to add, "But, if you must know, I was born in Italy." Before he could say that, though, Bu Ali had struck him across the back with the flat of his sword to teach him more respect when address-ing his betters. Mamud gave a small grin of approval. Reward and punishment were always the best tools for teaching men and animals their place. This was not being cruel, for Mamud considered himself to be a most gentle and enlightened person. Rather, he knew that this method saved both slave and master many hours of unpleasantness in the long run. One must always start off on the right foot.

Casca knew all this, too. But he could also play the game. If Mamud wanted to know where he was from, let him ask again. *Shit!* The Persian son of a bitch probably didn't know where Italy was anyway.

Mamud motioned for one of the guards to bring a stool from his tent. He sat where he could better see

the object of his interest.

And the man was interesting! The slap across his back from Bu Ali's blade did no more than cause a momentary spark in the light-colored eyes. *Good!* The beast had some sense in that square head of his. He didn't overreact to circumstances beyond his control. *Very, very good!* Mamud was pleased with himself once more that here was proof he was correct in his judgment that this one had merit.

He decided to test his judgment a bit further.

"Remove his chains and bring him a stool that he may speak in more comfort. Also bring tea and meat."

Bu Ali obeyed, but with just the slightest hesitation as though he was terribly concerned with his master's welfare, and Mamud noted this with approval.

What Mamud didn't know, of course, was the touch of wishful thinking that slipped momentarily through Bu Ali's mind: the strange one had strength enough to kill Mamud in the blinking of an eye.

Casca was curious. An unusual act on the part of a man who considered one to be property. So he accepted the offer of hospitality and sat upon the low stool, but cautious of what might take place. The nobles of the East were noted for their volcanic changes in temperament.

As courteous as if he were in the palace of the Caliph, Mamud poured tea and offered Casca his selection from a tray of meats. Casca had been a prisoner too many times to refuse food and drink when it was offered. He ate and drank, watching... waiting ... for Mamud to make his next move.

That is, if indeed he was playing one of the games that Persians loved so.

* * *

Mamud was in an expansive mood. He waited for his "guest" to drink a bit and eat a few pieces of meat. Stroking his beard, he watched Casca, his dark eyes sparkling with anticipation, for, like all of his race,

Mamud loved a good story and, by the Prophet! there had to be a good story in this strange one. He knew from the scars crisscrossing this one's body that he must have a history of extraordinary dimensions to relate.

Primarily because he was still alive!

"My dear sir-" Mamud refrained from reminding Casca of his current station in life. "-let us for a few minutes forget our differences and merely visit with each other, as men of good will do when they meet. And, I assure you, I am a man of good will, though I can understand why you might harbor some less-than-friendly feelings toward me. Yet, if I can put away my part for a time, can you not do the same? It may prove to be to both of our advantages before this night is through. I have a feeling that I am not going to see the last of you in this life, and if that is the case, I would prefer that your feelings toward me be not those of dark thoughts of vengeance. If you accept my terms, then we shall sit here and speak of the things men know and dream of... and by this we shall be the wiser. Do you agree?"

Casca looked closely at the smooth, tanned, but bearded face leaning toward him with such intent.

Intent, yes. But the intensity was not that of one with a devious nature, or one who threatened. Casca thought he understood: the Persian son of a bitch suffered from the malady. *That could be to my advantage . . .*

"Yes, Lord Mamud. I will speak to you this night and tell you, if not all of my story, then some of it." He slid easily into the flowery cadences, the Persian tongue in which he spoke helping him. "For I have traveled to many corners of this world of ours and seen people and things that were wondrous to behold."
"

"Yes, Lord Mamud, I will speak to you. But blame me not if what I say smacks of the dreams of those who eat the lotus!"

CHAPTER THREE

Casca accepted Mamud's offer of hospitality and settled down on the stool near the campfire, his face reddened by the charcoal glow. With his gray-blue eyes locked on the dark brown ones of his new owner, he began. He spoke in low tones that added much to the credibility of his stories.

He told of the Dragon Throne of distant Chin where the bolts of precious silk (such as that in Mamud's robes which he had damaged) came from. He told of the Wall that Runs Forever, built hundreds of years before to keep out the barbarians who lusted after the riches of Chin with greedy eyes.

The stars overhead turned in their eternal courses as Casca took Mamud with him to the frozen lands of the North where stark gray *holds* stood as sentinels over craggy valleys and fjords. Mamud's eyes spar-kled when Casca spoke of the beauty of the women of the Northlands; Mamud's desert warrior heart pumped faster as he listened to his captive speak of the Roman arena and the men who fought and died there for the amusement of the Caesars and the Roman mob.

Mamud, like all of his race, loved a good story--true or not. But there was something about the manner in which his muscled and fierce-looking "guest" spoke that made the head of Mamud ibn Said swim in confusion. There was just absolutely nothing in the man's voice that Mamud could detect that indicated he was telling a lie or a fable. No, there were too many things, as when Casca's hands trembled and the thick bands of muscles quivered on his back while he told of the arena and of killing the giant prince of Numidia, Ju-bala, for what Jubala had done to one of Casca's friends. There were too many things that said it was all for real, that the anger in the man's voice and the hate as he told of killing Jubala were real, real anger, real hate. Mamud had never doubted before his own ability to judge the truth from a man's words. But now... Surely no man could have experienced all that this one spoke of. *By the Prophet! How odd!*

Casca noticed his host's consternation and smiled thinly. He knew there was no way he could make Mamud believe him. Only one gone mad, or touched by the hand of Allah, would believe such stories. So with dark humor in his own mind Casca continued, deliberately telling Mamud the whole story of his journey over the face of the earth.

All that night Casca wove his tale. Once begun, he found it difficult to stop, and it was only when the stars began to sink below the Persian horizon that, dry-voiced, he came to the close of his saga. Yet even then he saw the regret in Mamud's eyes that the night was coming to an end.

Casca got to his feet and stretched. Even he had enjoyed hearing himself tell his own story. The mood of depression, the sense of something strange about to happen to him, was gone. *Shit! After what's already happened to me, what else can?* Yeah, he could handle it.

Mamud beckoned to Bu Ali, and the Mameluke captain came and took Casca by the arm to return him to the slave coffle. The pair had taken only about three steps when Mamud suddenly called them to a halt, walked over to Casca, and looked him long in the face and eyes.

"If you give me your word not to try and escape during our return to Baghdad, then I will not put you back in the line, nor chain you. I have the feeling that our fates are now intertwined in some manner, though I know not how. Such is in the hands of Allah, His Name be praised."

That shook Bu Ali. He looked from his master to Casca, wondering what had transpired during this long night. Never had Mamud released a slave before he was properly sold on the block!

Casca gave his word. "I promise that I shall give you no trouble while on the road."

He found that he liked the Arab slaver who, after all, was just a businessman trying to turn a profit on a commodity for which there was a great demand. This Casca understood and didn't take personally. He had been a slave before.

To Bu Ali, Mamud ordered, "Leave him free. He will not go anywhere." Turning to Casca, he said, "Find yourself a place in the caravan. We will talk again."

Casca started to leave, but Mamud again stopped him.

"By the way, what is your name?"

"Cas-"

"No! By the Prophet, may you no longer be the barbarian I captured, but one new! If Allah wills that our destinies be intertwined--even as master and slave--then from this moment on, I name you anew. The Franks have such ugly words. I will not have a barbarian name called in my presence. From now on you will be known as Kasim al Jirad after the manner in which you nearly took me to Paradise!"

Mamud beamed with self-satisfaction. Like all of his race he had the necessity for ending things on a dominant note. All night long he had been cast in the passive role of the one who listened.

Casca didn't care. If the Persian wanted to rename him "Kasim the Spear" it was all right with him. He had used other names over the centuries. One was as good as another.

For that matter, maybe it was a good thing. It had been a long time since he had had any dealings with the Brotherhood of the Lamb. Might be a good idea not to speak of Casca Rufio Longinus. But, why bother? He smiled inwardly as he looked at Bu Ali, old Big Ass. With people like that around there were not likely to be any Brotherhood of the Lamb fanatics running loose.

Bu Ali walked with Casca back to where the slaves were kept under guard. "You know, Kasim, my master has taken a strange liking to you. It is a sign of his favor that he has chosen to give you a new name. If you do not offend him, he could arrange it so that you are placed with an owner who will treat you well."

* * *

The camp was beginning to stir. Before the sun had fully risen they would be on their way. Two more days to Baghdad, then Casca would have a better idea of what his present destiny in Persia would hold for him. He hoped that it would not be as bad as when he had served in the armies of the Sassanid King of Kings, Shapur the Great.

Even the land was changing for the worst.

During the trek from the mountains of the Caucasus Casca had seen such changes. Even in Shapur's time Shapur had been concerned with the loss of arable fields to the desert, and now it was easy to see that he had been right. They had passed fields and villages that prospered, yes, but not as many as before. Now, in fields where grain was once grown as far as the eye could see, there was only vacant land, its poor condition shown by the sparse flocks of sheep and goats that picked among the visible rocks searching for tufts of yellow grass. Where once there were cities and orchards, now there was sand, barren rock, and the animals of the desert. *Desert*. Why were there oases in the desert, green spots that flourished around pools of water that bubbled up from the ground, seem-ing to come from nowhere? Casca recalled the half-forgotten words of wise men at the court of Shapur. They believed that there must be invisible rivers of water hidden far underground (*qanats*, they called them), which occasionally reached up to the surface. "Looking for the face of God," the priests at the court had said. The religious part Casca was sure he could do without. So far, religion had only brought him trouble. *Underground rivers*. A strange idea, but then there were strange things in this world. Like the pools of bitumen, oil, and tar. Where did they come from?

The smell of cooking fires preparing the morning meal for both slave and Mameluke came to his nostrils, but it stirred no hunger in him. What he had eaten at Mamud's fire was enough. He noticed that the Mamelukes cast wondering eyes on him when he wasn't put back into the slave line. This was stopped when Bu Ali told them of Mamud's order concerning "the one now known as Kasim al Jirad."

With the rise of the sun over the plains, the faithful were called to prayer. Facing toward Mecca, they proclaimed their belief in Allah and His Prophet, Mohammed. Neither Casca nor the other slaves participated in this five-times-daily ritual, Casca for a very different reason. He had known Mohammed. Having heard in Jerusalem that a new "messiah" had come, he had gone to see if it was Jesus returned to free him of his curse of life. Another disappointment. Though in many ways he had liked Mohammed, the Arab definitely was not the Jew from Galilee.

Now, watching the Faithful kneel in prayer, Casca smiled thinly to himself, wondering what Mamud and others of the Faith would think or do if they knew that he, Casca--their Kasim al Jirad--had ridden at the side of their prophet at the very beginning of their religion's birth. *Either make me a saint . . . or stone me . . .*

Damn!

Suddenly he had a problem. One not nearly so lofty as gods and prophets. *Damn!*

* * *

Unknown to Casca, he also had another problem.

Beyond the camp of Mamud's party there was a brush-covered mound.

And behind that mound, dark eyes focused on the back of one of Mamud's Mamelukes standing guard as the others prayed. Similar eyes were likewise on the other five guards set out around the campsite.

The eyes of the men of Yousef the outlaw.

Driven from their tribal lands by the Seljuk Turks, this band of outlaws from a dozen tribes had come together for a career in banditry. Now, instead of raising goats and sheep, they survived by raiding caravans. What had begun as a necessity for survival had turned to a life they would not have changed if they could. The years of preying on others had made them what they were now--animals little better than those of the wild. Now it made no difference to them what the cargo was, or to whom it belonged, so long as it could be sold or traded to their profit. They could kill turks or members of their own tribes with equal relish. And, as for right now ...

The slaves under the guard of the Mamelukes were worth much gold.

So they were going for it.

There were sixty bandits. The leader, known only as Yousef, was a small, wiry man with eyes that showed a touch of the Orient in them. Right now he was thinking himself especially clever for daring to raid this deep into the heartland of the Seljuk empire, almost on the doorstep of Baghdad itself. He had gambled on the guards becoming less alert as they approached nearer to what they thought were secure lands.

He had set twenty archers on the high grounds around the camp, arrows notched, target on the guards. The rest of his men were out of sight, just beyond the mound, waiting for the first flight of arrows. Then they would attack.

They had followed the Mameluke caravan for two days, waiting for the right place and moment to attack. Now, with most of Mamud's men immobilized in prayer, the time was right.

* * *

Casca's sudden problem was purely biological; he had to piss. And he knew enough about religious people, especially Muslims, that he had better wait until after prayers were over. Mamud would take a very dim view of any act that might "profane" the sanctity of this moment.

The urge, though, for Casca was abnormally strong. Whether it was the tea he had drunk during the

night, some trick of his mind, or all the time he had spent wool-gathering, or musing when he should have been "performing his morning ablutions," he didn't know. All he knew was that he had to piss--and badly.

And, of all mornings, this had to be the one when Mamud, never before an innovator in anything religious, chose to extend the ritual.

Shit! One of the things that could be said for the Muslims was that they had things down so simple. Just a handful of memorized words and a few acts, and that was it. But now Mamud, inspired no doubt by the night of stories, felt called upon to recite a couple of Suras from the Koran and to explain to Allah--in long and flowery sentences--just how good He had been to His servant Mamud during this raid.

And all the time Casca was needing more and more to relieve himself.

Hell! He never should have remembered the wise men speaking of the *qanats*. The idea of all those underground rivers flowing was overpowering.

Would Mamud never finish?

Frantic for help--any kind of help--Casca lifted his eyes toward the high ground outside camp.

That was when he saw Yusef's archers.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ambush!

And a damn good one.

Something not quite right on the hillside had caught Casca's eye--the glint of metal in the morning sun, the

unnaturally straight line of a bowstring, the wrong kind of shadow on the naked rocks. Not much. But from Casca's earliest days of soldiering in barbarian lands he had learned to use his eyes if there were hostiles around, which could be damn near anytime.

Looking closer, he was certain of the archers being there, but he couldn't tell how many or who they might be. But if there were archers, then on the other side of the rise there were probably horsemen.

Damn! Mamud's Mamelukes were probably going to have their hands full. Particularly if Casca let nature take its course, which he thought about doing. Hell, it was not his fight. And if the strange hostiles jumped the Mamelukes, well, he might just be able to get his ass out of there.

On the other hand... he knew what Mamud was like. He had no idea who the commander of the hos-tiles might be, but if the son of a bitch had chutzpah enough to attack Mamud this close to Baghdad, then he was probably a pretty tough bastard.

Still...

Shit! I'll split it down the middle. Warn the Ma-melukes, but just watch the battle. So he yelled, pointing toward the rise.

One thing could be said for the Muslims: they could quit praying and go to fighting fast enough even to satisfy Casca. He watched in approval as they sprang for their weapons (and smiled to himself, wondering how many battles had been affected by some soldier wanting to piss.... Oddly, now he had lost the urge.)

But the archers had been sighted almost too late. In fact, probably the reason Casca had seen them was that they were preparing to fire. Now the volley came.

Scrawny little bastards, Casca thought. *Bandits. Probably from the hills.*

But he had to admit their aim was deadly. And they were fast. They were getting off a second volley by the time the horsemen, yelling like a legion from Hades, topped the rise and swept toward the camp. They would-

Damn!

Casca had been standing watching the battle, his legs spread a little with one foot on a small rock, when one of the bandit arrows whished between his legs, not the width of a single *alif* from the family jewels.

That was too much!

It was bad enough having to live for centuries wait-ing for the Jew to return.

But to wait castrated...

Without the solace of women...

Casca was damned if he was going to stand for that.

Roaring like a bull who sees his herd being taken away from him, Casca grabbed the *jirad* of a Ma-meluke downed beside him and hurled it at the archer who had shot at him. All Casca's rage was behind the throw, and the weapon smashed through the bandit's guts as fast as through thin air.

"Kasim!"

Casca turned.

A grinning Mamud threw him a scimitar.

Then the horsemen were upon them.

To meet a shower of *jirads* from the Mamelukes.

Casca's warning had been almost too late, but not totally so. A few Mamelukes even had time to draw their bows. The whistling arrows and raining *jirads* knocked enough of the bandits from the saddle to break the charge just as it was ready to overrun the camp. Most of the battle was joined on foot.

A downed bandit, dirty, yelling, came at Casca, the short sword in his hand not unlike a gladius. Casca swung the scimitar. The curved blade, red in the morning sun, sliced down through the bandit's suddenly upthrown left arm almost as though there were no bone there, only flesh, and landed solidly in the bend of the bandit's sword arm, neatly cutting the forearm away and spraying red blood into the morning light, the bandit's sword tip coming within a hand's breath of Casca's face before falling away. Casca's scimitar glistened as he pulled it back on the follow-through stroke, blood and morning sun now indistinguishable on the damascened steel.

Damn fine weapon . . .

But there was a horseman coming at him from the left.

Casca whirled.

No need.

There was Mamud beside him, grinning, scimitar flashing--and when a *jirad* from behind them downed the bandit, Mamud made short work of the hostile.

"Allah be praised, Kasim! Great sport, eh? Glo-rious work!" He swung the scimitar and grinned from ear to ear as it sliced into the belly of a particularly ugly bandit.

The bastard really enjoys fighting. Casca could see that Mamud was one of those rare commanders who are happiest when they themselves are in the thick of the battle.

He could see something else, too.

The Arab slaver was a pretty good tactician. He had Casca on his right; Bu Ali on his left, in a kind of arrowhead formation with himself as the point. And when Casca risked a glance backward he saw that all the Mamelukes had taken up the same rough "arrow-head" groups, the points facing out toward the incoming bandits. They had probably kept the idea from the Greek Sassanids of Persia, who continued the phalanx formation for centuries after the death of Alexander. In some cases it was pretty effective.

A big, hairy, tough, ragged-clothed bandit who looked as if he had a large amount of northern blood in his veins was coming after him. Casca ducked and swung. But the bandit surprisingly parried his cut.

The son of a bitch!

They met again each holding the other's sword wrist in a strong grip. Fetid breath from the bandit's green mossy teeth and gums nearly made him gag. But the man was strong. Casca knew he couldn't take much time wrestling with him. As they pushed against each other he raised his right foot and suddenly stomped down with a callused heel on the man's arch. Bones broke. In agony the outlaw released his grip on Casca's wrist as he tried to run away on one foot like a child playing a one legged game. Casca ended the man's agony with a clean slice across the esophagus.

One minute the bandits were bearing down on them and all was in doubt. The next, the momentum had shifted. Momentarily without an opponent, Casca looked across an open space of ground, and his eyes locked on to those of a small, wiry man who had an Oriental look to him, the same man Casca had caught glimpses of during the hottest part of the battle, but always the wiry man was just out of reach of danger.

Must be their leader, Casca thought. *Odd. A bandit leader scared for his own ass ...* He could see the look in the man's eyes. Pure hate. *Guess he knows I'm the one who warned the camp.*

As he watched, the bandit leader called in his men, and they made haste to get away.

Bu Ali wanted to go after them.

"No," Mamud decided. "Too much trouble. Not worth the effort." He beamed. "Ah, Kasim. Glorious, what?" He looked toward the east. "We were inter-rupted in our prayers. We must thank Allah again. Come, Kasim, you are an Arab now. I make you one. You will join in our prayers. Bu Ali, call the men together, and when they are prepared, we will have prayer."

This time Casca made sure he pissed *before* Mamud started praying.

* * *

There were two things that Casca did not know.

When he was miles away from the unsuccessful raid, Yousef, the bandit, reined in his horse and looked back.

The scar-faced one, he told himself, *I'll cut out his heart and eat it . . .*

And Bu Ali-

He lined the men up for prayer all right.

But a curse, not a prayer, was in his own heart.

A curse of jealousy for Kasim al Jirad the inter-loper, the man he was afraid might take his place in the esteem of Mamud.

We'll see about that . . .

* * *

Casca had mixed feelings as Baghdad appeared up ahead. It was a blur on the horizon of the plain. *How long has it been?* he asked himself, searching back in his memory and trying to recall what the city had been like then ... and what women he had associated with it.

But his memory would bring him neither Baghdad nor women ... only Ctesiphon.

Ctesiphon.

Less than a day's journey from Baghdad.

Ctesiphon.

Where he had fought in that first great battle after the Jew had damned him to live until His Return.

"You are thoughtful, Kasim."

It was Mamud, pulling up to ride beside him. For, since the battle with the bandits Casca had been given a horse and treated now more like a veteran Mameluke than a newly-captured slave destined for the block at Baghdad.

Casca frowned, then smiled. *Shit! Mamud meant well. Might as well play along with him.* "Yes, lord."

"Ah...!" The dark brown eyes of Mamud burned with an inner knowledge.

Obviously he wanted a response from Casca.

"What is it, lord?"

"I know you Franks. I know what's on your mind. And you can get it in Baghdad."

"What, lord?" *Shit! Not many hours ago he made me a Muslim. Now I'm a Frank again.* But Casca was not really angry, just amused. He had come to like the slaver, particularly after seeing him fight. In Casca's code any man who was very good at what he did was a friend. And Mamud was a damn good fighter.

"At the Cafe of the Infidels."

Seeing the complete puzzlement in Casca's eyes, Mamud laughed. "Ah...! You have not been to Baghdad before."

"Well..."

"It is a great city. And it is a Muslim city. The Prophet is honored--as well he should be."

What the hell is he getting at? Casca always got nervous when religion became the topic. Too many damn unhappy memories.

"But," Mamud continued, "there is an understand-ing. Until you Franks follow the Prophet there is some provision for you. Hence the Cafe of the Infidels."

"The Cafe of the Infidels?"

"Ah, yes. Wine. And women. Particularly for you, Kasim, since you carry the air of a warrior--Miriam."

"Miriam?"

"A red-headed Jewess. Most unusual. I am told she is quite beautiful. And very good in bed."

"Yeah, but ..."

"Oh, that. Do not worry, Kasim. Tonight you are free to come and go as you please. Tomorrow? Why, yes, tomorrow you must bring me a profit. I am not in business for my health. Tomorrow I sell you. But I tell you, Kasim, I am certain you will go to the Nizam al Mulk. A very fine master for you; a very good profit for me."

They were just topping a rise. Baghdad was closer now, the spires of minarets beginning to dance like lance points in the sky over the city's blur. And there was something else in the depression just ahead of them.

What in Hades is that?

Mamud laughed at the look on Casca's face. "The caravan of the Sheikh Faisal ibn Said? Ah, yes. *It is a little unusual.*"

That, thought Casca, was an understatement. Ahead of them were half a dozen scruffy-looking but enormous covered carts pulled by teamed mules. And on the side of each cart, lettered with pigment that had once been red but now was faded, was the identical quatrain from the 55th Sura of the Koran: "Which of His manifold blessings dost thou so ungratefully deny?" The calligraphy was excellent, but everything else about the caravan from the apparently-aged leader and the raggedly-clothed drivers to the rough-looking mules and creaking axles said poverty.

Mamud lowered his voice. "The Sheikh Faisal--I doubt if he is really a sheikh--has been blessed by Allah." He touched his forehead to indicate that Faisal wasn't playing with a full set of dice. "But his men are great artists. They can carve a verse from the Koran in less time than it takes to make a lance."

Apparently assuming Casca could not read Arabic, he made no comment concerning the writing on the side of the carts.

"He had his harem with him. They must be a sorry lot."

The poverty of the ragtag caravan was depressing to Casca. But only for a moment.

After all, it said he was back in a world where eccentrics were accepted--the world of peacetime.

That meant no more killing.

Maybe I will go to the Cafe of the Infidels . . .

Bu Ali rode by him, turned and smiled.

It was an odd smile.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Cafe of the Infidels was like every grogshop Casca had ever been in. Settled on a long bench before a rough table in the smoky semidarkness and sipping the trade wine, which certainly wasn't to be compared to Falernian!--he reflected that, no matter what the country or the century, wine shops did what the Jew had damned him to do: they stayed as they were.

Mamud had kept his word. After they had arrived in Baghdad and settled the other slaves in the com-pound (done the housekeeping) he had told Casca he had the night to enjoy, had even sent Bu Ali with Casca to point out the Cafe of the Infidels.

As if I couldn't find my way aroundMomentarily the thought had flickered in Casca's mind--familiar

as he was with the devious intrigue of Persians as a whole--that maybe Mamud had some ulterior motive in dwelling on this one particular place. On the other hand, there probably weren't all that many places in Baghdad a non-Muslim could go to have himself a time. Still...

The cafe was, of course, in the meanest section of town, not far from the Tigris, and it was not much to look at. Bu Ali pointed it out, and Casca offered to buy him a drink though he knew that Bu Ali, Ma-meluke or no, was ostensibly a Muslim. He wanted to see how Bu Ali took it.

Bu Ali's voice constricted a bit as he forced a polite response from it. "No, Kasim. It is not permitted by the Prophet. But for you, until you follow the True Way..." Bu Ali left the sentence unfinished.

So Casca now found himself alone at a table in a dark corner of the small, crowded room, his back against a wall, a cup cradled in his hands, and his thoughts guttering lazily in his mind like the slowly smoking lamps.

He checked out the patrons. There was the usual crowd of losers one would find anywhere, men whose faces one never remembered. But there was more than the usual number of quiet men, tough men. They made the cafe seem more of a club... like wineshops he had remembered from his early days in the legion where most of the patrons were legionnaires. There was no sign of the woman Miriam. Maybe he had to ask for her. And, oddly, there were no "characters," exotics, the odd men you expected to find.

No, that wasn't right.

At a table to his left sat a young, fresh-faced boy, obviously drunk, very drunk. And just as obviously an Arab. Not only the facial structure, but even in the dim, smoky light the dark brown eyes. Casca couldn't quite put his finger on what it was that made the kid unusual. Something, though. The memory of other young men in other wineshops across the years rose in his mind, and he moved irritably, puzzled at why tonight he should be so sunk in memories.

Then he saw the big Circassian, the bearded man who looked like a bear, the bully.

Casca hadn't noticed him before; the big man must have been sullenly drinking. Now he was baiting the fresh-faced Arab kid. He had pulled out a dagger and slammed it point down into the table. Right now he was working on the kid verbally--the usual remarks about his ancestry. What he was really doing was setting the kid up, and the boy apparently didn't have enough experience, or was too drunk, to know that

the big Circassian intended to cut him up.

Circassian? Shit! He looked more like he was from one of the tribes of barbarians far to the north. Casca searched his memory....The ones called Rh'shans?

More to the point, what dumb bastard of an owner let a brute like this loose with a dagger nearly half as big as a gladius?

But, hell! It was none of his business.

That was when Miriam appeared.

On a cleared-off tabletop back against the wall, more or less well lit by a couple of extra lamps. Apparently she was a dancer. And apparently she was also going to do the dance of the veils.

Casca smiled, then sipped on his wine. If the trade wine weren't Falernian, neither were the veils the costly stuff Salome had used on Herod. There had been a lot of wear and tear on this fabric, and it had been cheap to begin with. And as for Miriam, she was no Salome. Momentarily Casca's face darkened as he recalled the time, long ago now, when a young woman had danced this same dance of the veils for him personally. *Damn all memories* . . . This Miriam was no young girl. She had been around.

And yet...

There was something oddly appealing about Mir-iam, something that seemed intended to draw him to her, something more than her looks. Mamud was right though, she was red-headed, and she was beautiful, and she had a damn fine well-built body. Maybe it was because she was a Jewess. Casca felt an affinity for the people of Abraham despite his experience with the Jew. Maybe it was because she was no longer a young girl, but, like him, knew her way around. Maybe-

A small, pearl-handled dagger slid across the table in front of Casca at the same time as the noise of the struggle behind him. He had forgotten the Rh'shan bully and the young boy. He turned.

Apparently the Rh'shan had finally prodded the boy to attack him, had kicked the kid's pearl-handled dagger from his fingers, and now was standing over the fallen Arab youngster loudly describing what he intended to do with the dagger he held in his own big ham of a hand.

He never finished.

Something happened to him. Something quick, odd, and Oriental. (When the lamps guttered, was the shade of Shiu Tze momentarily in the room? And did the shade of Shiu Tze smile approvingly at what his "big-nosed barbarian" protege had just done?) The Rh'shan found himself turned completely around, his weapon gone, the point of the pearl-handled dagger digging into his throat, icy gray-blue eyes looking into his, and a voice as cold as a death wind from the steppes saying:

"Get your ass out of here, or you'll never live to draw another breath."

The Rh'shan did not argue the point. There was something in the cold eyes, something in the flat, matter-of-fact voice, that told him the scar-faced man would kill him instantly if he so much as even opened his mouth. The icy-eyed one was Death himself; he needed no big dagger, nor to be big himself. Whoever he was, whatever he was, this was one who could be neither bullied nor bluffed. The Rh'shan backed away. And when he got to the door, he turned and ran.

The sound of his footsteps echoed in the street and sounded even in the cafe.

Because it had gotten very, very quiet in there.

Casca tossed the dagger back to the young Arab and regained his own seat and waited for Miriam to begin her dance.

* * *

It was not nearly so quiet in the palace of the Sultan where Bu Ali stood, his throat dry with fear as he looked into the brutal and suspicious eyes of the ruler. Bu Ali was afraid that he had gotten himself in over his head, that he was about to slip off a very narrow path of duplicity and intrigue. Yet, because of

the man Kasim, what choice did he have?

"You say the Grand Vizier will buy this slave Ka-sim as his bodyguard?"

"Yes, my lord."

"So? What is that to me?" The Sultan's snake-black eyes were probing deep into Bu Ali's.

Sweat formed on Bu Ali's upper lip. They both knew what it was to the Sultan. Nizam al Mulk, Grand Vizier, was not only the foremost supporter of the Seljuk Turk conquerors, he had been to all intents and purposes the regent for this Sultan during his child-hood years, and even now probably held as much power if not more than the Sultan. Bu Ali knew this, knew that Nizam had antagonized the Sultan's favor-ite, Taj al Mulk, and made an enemy of the Sultan's wife, Turkon Khatun. It was the thought of the Sul-tan's wife that brought the sweat to Bu Ali's entire body.

Because he feared that it was she who was on the other side of the screened wall behind him.

Certainly someone was there, someone who smelled of jasmine, and, oddly, of the smoke of Paradise Bu Ali knew so well from Hassan's Eagle's Nest. It had to be a woman, for the faint sound of music and laughter from the seraglio came through the ornate lattice.

A woman. It unnerved Bu Ali to think that the Sultan would allow a woman to listen to what they were planning. He was beginning to regret that he had taken it upon himself to plot this concerning Kasim.

"What is that to me?" the Sultan repered. "The bodyguards of the Vizier are not my concern. Unless, of course, you are suggesting that I take this slave for my own bodyguard?"

This time there was a faint, muffled laugh from behind the screen.

Oddly, it restored Bu Ali's courage. If the Sultan could be swayed by a wife or concubine then he was no more to be feared than other men.

"My lord, I have it from the Vizier's slaves them-selves that this night he found the Golden Dagger in his bed."

"Ah...!" the Sultan's eyes gleamed a bit brighter. Then the suspicious look returned. "This night, you say? But what has this to do with the *ferengi* you said was named Kasim by Mamud the slaver?"

Bu Ali tried to pick his words carefully. "I can only say lord that there is something strange about the man. And as you know Mamud has been the good friend of Nizam al Mulk for many years. Perhaps they have special plans for one such as this Kasim? Never before had Mamud granted such liberties to a slave and they did spend long hours alone in deep talk. Perhaps they have come to an understanding which is not to my lord's benefit."

The Sultan considered the many possibilities. The hundreds of tenuous spiderwebs of intrigue that dom-inated palace life. "But what has this to do with the dagger of Hassan al Sabah?"

Bu Ali moved closer on his knees. "Lord, is it not known that the Old Man of the Mountain always de-mands a price for the continuance of life, and that that price is not always gold. It can sometimes be paid in the form of a service. Perhaps this stranger is to be the tool of that service?"

The Sultan's eyes grew narrow with suspicion. It was true there had been much bad blood between him and the Grand Vizier, whose personal power grew with each passing day.

From behind the curtain the woman spoke for the first time, voice deep and husky. "Listen to him. If he is right and the Vizier has made a pact with Hassan al Sabah, his once good friend, to take your life then you must act first. If he has not then what is the value of one more slave. You will lose nothing by taking precautions."

He waved the woman to be silent. To Bu Ali he spoke. "What do you suggest? That the slave Kasim be killed?"

Bu Ali looked at the Sultan. The room they were in was rich with ornaments and bright with many lamps. By the glow of these lamps he spun out his plot....

When he had finished, the Sultan nodded in approval. "That is better than killing him. And if he was indeed to be an assassin's tool it would just warn them. By this plan there could be no true suspicion that we suspected him of anything at all. You please me Ma-meluke. You shall be rewarded of course... if all goes well."

Then from behind the screen the woman spoke once more, and added darkly, "And if you fail, or speak of this night, then for your reward you shall be given to the women of the harem for their pleasure."

Bu Ali shuddered; he was not a coward as had been proven in battle many times. But he understood all too well what was meant by pleasure for the women of the seraglio.

* * *

Casca, meanwhile, was enjoying a pleasure of a different sort. The affair of the Rh'shan had shocked the young Arab into a near-sober state. He had joined Casca after finding out his rescuer's name, bringing with him a small amphora of a drink he insisted Casca sample. The cafe was back to normal, and Miriam was beginning her dance. Eyes on her, Casca lifted the amphora.

"What in Hades is this?" In his time he had drunk some pretty weird concoctions, but this was like nothing he had ever tasted. Strong. Like a dozen wines all rolled into one.

The young Arab laughed, enjoying the look on Casca's face. "You like it?"

"Like it? Hell, it burns like fire. What is it?"

"Wine."

"Wine? Not like any I've ever drunk."

"Well, it's been, shall we say, improved."

"Improved?"

"Run through an alembic. The weak part left behind. We're drinking only the strong."

Alembic? Casca didn't know what that was. But whatever it was it sure made for the most potent wine he had ever consumed. He lost most of his interest in Miriam's dance and settled down to do a little serious drinking.

Alone. The young Arab was not even halfway through his own amphora before he passed out....

* * *

Casca fully intended to make arrangements for bedding Miriam after she finished her dance, but the strange wine of the young Arab did odd things to him. He decided he needed a walk in the night air to clear his head before he came back to bed the exotic dancer.

He had just turned into an alley to throw up when, from both sides, heavy ropes snared him and something big and hard smashed into his skull. Just before he lost consciousness he was aware that a thick leather bag was being lowered roughly over his head.

CHAPTER SIX

Faint music.

Distant laughter.

The smell of perfume... women's perfume.

Damn! I've died and gone to Paradise.

Casca opened his eyes.

Bright lights. Beautifully carved walls. *Well, damn.* The Muslims had it right after all. Somehow he had died and gone to Paradise, and here he was in the Muslim Paradise, because this was obviously a very, very fancy heavenly whorehouse.

Then reality kicked him in the butt.

Wherever he was, and he had no idea where nor how he had gotten here, it sure as hell wasn't Paradise.

He was stripped buck naked and tied to a marble column in what he recognized now as the anteroom in somebody's very fancy palace, an anteroom apparently very close to the seraglio. Standing around him were half a dozen armed eunuch guards, a snake-eyed son of a bitch in very rich robes of China (obviously somebody of very big importance), Bu Ali, and Mamud.

"... tried to get into the seraglio," Snake-Eyes was saying. "Mamud, such discipline is deplorable."

"My lord--"

Snake-Eyes raised his hand. "Spare me your excuses or apologies. Yesterday was a holy day, and Allah--Blessed be His Name--has filled my soul with mercy and compassion. Even for a Frankish dog. Had this happened tomorrow, when such excess of mercy would have left my soul, I would have taken the utmost pleasure in seeing that the death of this dog be arranged so that the pain would match the severity of the crime. But tonight... ah... tonight ...A simple little beheading." Snake-Eyes smiled. "As a matter of fact..." The smile became even greasier, the eyes even more cunning.

The damn fag is crazy, Casca thought.

"As a matter of fact, perhaps not even a beheading. My mercy is great this night. And besides, I do admire the nerve of the Frankish dog. Yet I would not want to encourage another to try the same thing. Killing him is too public a matter. Disappearance, I think. Ah, yes. Disappearance. We will send him to the copper mines of Khorramshahr. There he will be of value to us. And there no one will believe any fantastic story he may tell of trying to slip naked into the Sul-tan's seraglio."

Sultan! So that's who old Snake-Eyes was.

"My lord-

Again the Sultan raised his jeweled hand to interrupt Mamud. "I know, Mamud. You have an investment in this piece of Frankish offal. It is not just that you should suffer loss. Therefore, here." He tossed the slaver a small leather purse taken from the folds of his garments. "I am sure this will more than cover the value of this slave."

"You are most generous, my lord."

"Yes. I am, am I not? And you will remember that when you serve us in the future, as you have so well in the past. Now I am bored. Guards! See that the Frankish dog is taken immediately to wherever such slave dogs go."

He turned and walked out of the room.

While the eunuchs were untying him, Casca caught one glimpse of the bemused look in Mamud's eyes.

He smells a rat. Wonder what in Hades this is all about . . .

* * *

Mamud bowed his way out of the Sultan's presence, wondering what game was being played and whether he should report this odd circumstance to Nizam al Mulk. There was definitely something most odd about the whole arrangement. Of course, he did not believe for an instant that Casca had ever even been close to the seraglio.

* * *

He never reached the slave barracks, of course. Outside the Sultan's palace Bu Ali had three of his Mamelukes, and they took custody of Casca from the eunuchs. At one point Mamud apparently started to say something to Casca but thought better of it. He had liked Kasim, but he knew it was much too risky and foolhardy to interfere in the plans of the Sultan. After all, Kasim was only a slave, a good one, but a slave nonetheless. He left, going alone down the street in the opposite direction to that taken by Bu Ali, the Mamelukes, and Casca.

Now, what . . .

Bu Ali had halted the group at the entrance to a dark alley. He motioned, and one of the Mamelukes took a sack from his shoulders and approached Casca.

"Kasim..." Bu Ali's voice was low. "Put on this clothing."

The other two Mamelukes untied him, apparently not caring whether he tried to escape or not. They merely stood silently while Casca dressed in the dark-ness of the alley entrance.

"Wait," Bu Ali ordered.

Some minutes later a cart pulled by a single mule came slowly down the street and stopped by the group. Bu Ali came close to Casca and said, his voice low: "Kasim, they will wrap you in a carpet, and you will go on a journey. No, it is not to the copper mines of Khorramshahr. It is to a higher destiny that Allah calls you. There will be a caravan. Go in peace. Do not let yourself be discovered."

Suddenly he embraced Casca, holding both arms around him. "*Nu salam aleikom* --Peace be with

you." Then he added softly, "Brother."

* * *

It was not the most comfortable journey even though just before they rolled him into the carpet one of the Mamelukes had handed Casca a small pot of gum-mylike substance and said, "Eat this. It will still the pain."

Like thickened honey. Bittersweet. Odd. Casca had eaten this stuff, not really wanting to know what the hell it was. He had a strange feeling of not really giving a damn about anything. His head, which should have hurt, if not from the blow on it earlier, at least from the hangover the young Arab's "wine" had brought on, had no feeling whatsoever. In fact, he felt light all over, like he was slipping in and out of dreams. Somewhere in the back of his brain was the leftover crumbs of a dream where this same bitter-sweet "candy" had been forced into his mouth. A dream? Or a memory? Somehow it did not matter. There were a lot of things that didn't matter. Like, had he ever gotten to bed Miriam or not? And the Sultan's palace. Shit! He couldn't have been stoned enough to try that. And the Sultan himself. Was that little queer really Malik Shah, third, and so far the greatest of the Seljuk rulers? But if he was a fag, what the hell was he doing with a harem? These thoughts and others like them bubbled through Casca's mind. And in between them he slept. Rolled up in the dark-ness of the carpet, he really didn't know what was happening to him, where he was being taken, how long it would take. When he was awake it was like a dream. When he slept there was only a silent dark-ness, peaceful as the death forbidden to him.

* * *

Hassan al Sabah came personally to inspect this unexpected "Novice." He had not yet decided how he would react to Bu Ali taking matters into his own hands. Such a thing was not to be tolerated. Yet... an intuitive sense of opportunity smoldered in the back of his brain. Like all who are touched by the dream of personal greatness, he felt in his heart that the Destiny which had such great things in store for him might bring those things in strange and unusual ways.

Besides, the message from Bu Ali was that this Kasim was "a scar-faced Frank."

A Frank with a scar on his face? Casca Rufio Longinus, the Roman of the Lance, had been scar-faced. What if . . . ?He stared thoughtfully at the rolled-up carpet.

"Unroll him," he ordered.

* * *

Casca awoke to see an eagle-beaked old Arab staring into his eyes. Yet he saw the old Arab as kindly, fatherly almost. Immediately Casca liked him. Somewhere in the back of his mind there was a reason for the liking. For a moment the images of old men he had known flickered in his brain... Glam... Shiu Tze... others... He closed his eyes.

* * *

Hassan al Sabah was disappointed. No, this could not be Longinus. Scar-faced? There was only a thin one, running the length of a lady's little finger from the side of his right eye to just above his mouth. It gave this Kasim a slightly sinister look... *that would probably turn on some seemingly reluctant maid, the Franks being what they are*, Hassan thought. He regretted now that he did not know more about Longinus, but certainly if he had been remembered as "the scar-faced one" his scar would have to be much more prominent than this. No, the man on the carpet was not Longinus.

However...

If he could be trained...

Perhaps the time might come when he could be put forward as Longinus...

At the moment Hassan had no full-blown use for such an impostor in his mind. But, on the theory that it might be useful to have such a one on hand, he decided not to have Kasim thrown from the parapet of Castle Alamut into the Bottomless Pit on the west side, which was what he had originally planned to do. After all, if this Kasim was as good a fighter as Bu Ali's message said he was he might prove very, very useful.

* * *

Casca stirred, and his eyes opened again.

"Welcome," Hassan said in his most fatherly voice. "Welcome to Castle Alamut, my son."

* * *

Bu Ali had called him "brother." Now this eagle-faced one called him "son." *Shit!* Casca thought, *I don't know whether I'm ready for this family business or not*

CHAPTER SEVEN

The manner in which Casca entered into the ranks of the Assassins was the way things usually happened to him. *It seems that I have no control over what happens to me.* He wasn't complaining, though. Life at the Castle Alamut these last few weeks had been very easy indeed. Maybe too easy, but what the hell, he would enjoy it while he could.

The indoctrination had been handled very smoothly. Besides the Koran those with special gifts were instructed in many manners of disguise and on techniques by which they could gain access into places that were normally denied the ordinary man. Threats of violence were seldom used. All of the Novices were made to feel as though they were well loved brothers who were part of a large family. And Hassan al Sabah was the father figure, the wise and caring patriarch who, it was known without the words being said, would dispense reward and punishment without favor.

He was drawn to the eagle-faced Arab now just as much, if not more, than at their first meeting. There was a quiet sincerity to the man that he had seldom found before. He even considered telling Hassan of his life but quickly decided against it. Persia had been good for him, the few moments which he enjoyed like now. But he had an instinctive distrust of any cult. In spite of that, he looked forward to the many hours he spent with the tireless leader of the Alamut who never seemed to need rest and had never once shown any sign of distress or anger. Even when he had two of his Novices thrown from the battlements for treason his face only showed great sadness as though their betrayal of him had been due to some failing of his own.

He would talk with each of his disciples when he had the time of the greatness of their plan and what it would mean to the world. Of course not all understood the philosophy he expounded and to these he

would direct the more simple truths. "Obey and gain Paradise, which will release you from this life of sorrows to sit at the foot of Allah and be among the Blessed." His quiet confidence and burning eyes inspired all who sat or walked with him along battlements during the evenings when the night winds came out of the desert and sang among the towers and crags of the eternal mountains.

It was on the narrow walks of the parapets that Casca preferred to speak and listen to him. Usually these talks were in the late evening, or at twilight. A time and a place that seemed to appeal particularly to Hassan. Of late Hassan had spent more time than normal with the new scar-faced Novice, but if the other Novices resented the special attention paid to Casca they did not say anything. Discipline in the Castle was practically perfect, much better than anything Casca had seen in any formal army. Odd. He had heard stories about the Assassins--about the evil they worked--but after these few weeks he was convinced it was all wrong. Hassan felt he had a mission in the world, to clean it up, to limit the power of the few to do as they pleased with impunity. The Hashassin were to be a balance to those who claimed the right to rule the world.

Casca could agree with much of that thinking. And that really had been what most of Hassan's conversations with him had been about. He had not tried to pry into Casca's past, and Casca had volunteered no information. Hassan was grooming Casca. He could sense that in this man's strong knotted body there was a potential, which if brought out and developed would be of great value. Perhaps the *ferengi* would one day enter the ranks of the Dais and be given the real truth of their mission on earth. Hassan needed men of special gifts and loyalties to carry on his work. One of the Dais would succeed him after his death. It was vital that he have only the best material from which to pick his successor.

Casca was sent for at the hour when the night was at its darkest and the stars the most distant in the heavens. With the other Novices he was taken in silence to the place of waiting and meditation.

They lined up in two silent ranks of ten men each and kneeled. Expectancy hung on the air as did the scent of rich oils from the brass lamps which lined the walls cut from living stone. The other Novices were eager. And awed. But Casca had been around a bit longer.

Their group leader, one of the Dais, came into the room and began the rites of acceptance into the Brotherhood of the Hashassin. Signaling them to rise he led them in a single line across the room where there was a raised block, almost an altar, of rough stone.

Brass basins of water. At the group leader's command they stripped to loincloths and submitted to a symbolic rite of purification, the group leader sprinkling each on the forehead with one of those odd little string-looking things priests in every religion Casca had known had used, and for which he could not remember the name.

Not that it mattered.

Then something got his attention.

The line ahead of him was disappearing.

As each Novice got his forehead sprinkled, he was led behind the altar... and disappeared.

Wonder how they do that?

When his own turn came he found out. Behind the altar was an absolutely black shadow, and when he stepped into it, there was nothing underfoot. He fell in the darkness, landing on some kind of soft surface that gave. *Stretched leather*, he thought, *but there would have to be a lot of skins sewed together*. As soon as he landed, hands found him in the darkness, and he was pulled over the edge to the group.

All this in silence, except for the feeling that some-where far away there were drums beating very faintly, drums in the heart of the solid rock.

When the last of his group had landed, they were led into a narrow, twisting passageway in the rock (Casca could feel the rough stone on either side), and after the passageway they made two sharp right angle turns in opposite directions, into what looked like a huge cavern room, lit by great smoking, flaring torches. Directly in front of them, dominating their attention, was a great round stone, a wheel twice as tall as a man and nearly two cubits thick, that rolled in a track of the same stone as itself and was now rolled back uncovering a huge tomb in the rock.

Casca had seen many of these before, but never inside the heart of a mountain. As a matter of fact, hadn't the body of the Jew been put into a similar tomb? Only, that had been in a garden.

Garden.

For the first time he noticed the faint smell in the air...like flowers? He couldn't tell. Besides it was dominated by the heavy smoke scent of the torches. Yet there was definitely an odd fragrance in the air...

"...know ye that for him who follows the Way of the Hashishi death is but the opening portal into Paradise, a foretaste of what will be yours on the other side of the tomb. And that ye may know the saying is true, put on now the robes of resurrection before you enter this tomb; drink now the elixir that promises Paradise before you enter the darkness. Come now, Hashishi!"

Casca watched. Each Novice in turn was given a white robe which he put on. Then he was given some drink from a golden chalice, after which he walked through the opening into the darkness of the tomb beyond and stood, a gray-white figure in the shadows. When it came his time, he went through the same procedure. He had a rather futile hope the "elixir" might be wine, otherwise forbidden to the Faithful. No such luck. Water and honey, with some kind of flavoring substance he could not identify.

When they were all inside the tomb, the leader gave a signal and the figures on the torchlit side began rolling the huge door shut. When it closed the darkness in the tomb was absolute. That didn't sit too well with Casca. Too many memories...

Silence.

Except for the sound of their breathing.

Then the faraway drums began again, only this time they seemed to move closer. And that heavy, sweet odor...

Suddenly there was light!

Not the light of lamps or torches, but the bright golden light of the sun coming from nowhere to reflect off the smooth polished roof of the tomb. The Novices gasped, except for Casca. It was the light of the sun all right, appearing here in the heart of the mountain, but Casca was pretty sure he knew how this was done. A renegade Egyptian priest had once told him how the Egyptians painted scenes inside their "Pyramids." Mirrors of polished brass (sometimes gold or silver) reflected the sunlight down chimneys cut

in the stone. Turn the mirror, and the light disappeared. Casca had to admit, though, that it was effective. Even he began to get caught up in the sense of awe as the leader led them into the room beyond.

The doorway he stepped through was small, square-cut, and simple. The room beyond, though, was not. Casca's first thought was, *They must have hired themselves a whore to decorate this hall.* The thought came into his mind like the words of a song--and indeed there was music, heavy with drums, coming through a latticed wall to the right--but it fitted the room pretty accurately. The room was filled with rich, heavy wall hangings; thick carpets; cushioned divans for every Novice, big enough to screw on, but obviously intended for smoking since there was a hookah (water pipe) at each divan.

The divans were in a rough semicircle facing one wall, which had a curtained opening of some kind about halfway up and in the center. On the wall itself hung a scarlet carpet upon which was embroidered in gold thread parts of verses from the Koran:

"Verily, the pious shall be in... pleasure, enjoying what their Lord has given them... reclining on couches in rows; and we will wed them to large-eyed maids."

The other Novices did not share Casca's mood of mockery. They gawked at their surroundings as they were led to their couches and handed the mouthpieces of their hookahs.

Then it was Casca's turn.

Suddenly he remembered the taste of the contents in the cup he had been given... *Zinjadil?* . . . the Arabic word for Ginger . . . No, but something like that . . . given to the Faithful when they entered Par-adise.

Only what he had tasted had not been straight gin-ger. *I've been drugged* . . . Lightness was seeping into his head, that and a strange relaxed feeling of peace and goodwill. Even before the mouthpiece was be-tween his lips the mockery was gone from his mind. And gone also was any critical sense. Like the other Novices, Casca leaned back on his divan and drew deep into his lungs the sweet, heavy smoke of the dried flowers of the hemp plant.

There was a salty taste in his mouth, but the sweet smoke blended with it. Everything felt good. The cushions of the divan caressed his body like the cloth of Chin; the smell of the air was as warm as the kiss of a maiden.

And the music...

Yes, the music beat in the room like a throbbing heart, the drums seemingly in perfect step with his own heartbeat, the wailing of the flutes like the soft wish of blood through his own brain, for he could feel his own blood coursing like a frolicking brook through his body. Then...

Time slowed.

Ceased to exist.

Forever became now, and now became forever. Someone came and filled the bowl of the hookah. Came maybe more than once. Who knew? Who cared? Casca closed his eyes, still drawing the smoke deep into his lungs. Dancing, kaleidoscopic arabesques appeared before his closed eyes. Then a purple fernlike structure, a plant glowing against a velvet dark background, grew from his mind and towered out into all space. It was still there when he opened his eyes. He was suspended from one glowing branch. He was no longer Casca--or Kasim.

He was part of everything, and everything was part of him, and a great wave of happiness caught him up. Each of his senses was heightened. He heard as though with a sounding box. He saw as though he were looking through twin prisms cut from beautiful jewels. The taste of the smoke multiplied a thousandfold. Everything was intense. Color deepened. Yet everything was at the same time transparent. It was as though he could see through the world and there was nothing but a sweet vibration in resonance with the beat of the music from beyond the veil, and all that was somehow within his own brain.

There were visions.

The air crackled silently. He felt himself pushed by some transparent current of light into a slowly turning whirlpool of naked bodies, all female except his, and he dived in and was engulfed.

The light in the room changed, softened, tinted gold, then whispered away leaving only a lingering taste upon the curtain, then grew... like the erection in a dream...

The light on the curtain turned silver, burned. The curtain moved apart. A balcony was revealed. And upon it, coming out of lilac shadows, a woman clad in the flimsiest of orange veils, dancing, dancing, dancing. The beat of the music. Slowing. Rising. Slowing. Rising. Like intercourse. The woman began to pull off the veils. One by one. To the beat. The insistent, rising beat of the music, the heavy drums, the wailing flutes...

Completely naked, she danced on the very edge of the balcony, belly thrusting forward, thrusting... and the light was such that it was as though she were suspended in space, dancing in thin air, and Casca could no longer tell whether he was seeing a woman... or simply dreaming a fantasy.

At the very moment of climax the light was abruptly gone, the room completely dark except for the faint glow--as from tiny, red, luminous worms--of the hashish coals in the hookah tops.

Abruptly the music ceased.

The light came back, but this time it was only a faint golden wash in which robed figures moved, bringing flagons of some sweet, cool liquid which, once drunk, brought sleep and dreams, dreams for-gotten as soon as they were dreamed, leaving only the teasing memory of some great ecstasy....

* * *

Afterwards, when he was back in the barracks with the other Novices, Casca became aware of the Change.

He was no longer Casca. He was no longer the Kasim he had been. He was a new Kasim, some new and purified creature who existed for only one pur-pose:

He was now an Assassin.

Some days later Hassan sent for one of his lieu-tenants, receiving him as usual on the parapet of the

castle in the blood-red rays of the dying sun.

"The Frankish Novice, Kasim?"

"Ready, my lord."

"Then give him a golden dagger and send him to Jerusalem."

"Against whom, my lord?"

"The Frankish monk, Friar Dilorenzi, the infidel beast who eats the flesh of the followers of the Prophet--and boasts about it."

CHAPTER EIGHT

It was not known how the Friar Dilorenzi acquired his liking for human flesh. Certainly it was true that he hated the Turks. But so did most Christian pilgrims to the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, if for no other reason than that the Turks were infidels. But no Christian had eaten a Turk--until Dilorenzi.

Not only eaten one but bragged about "the sweet taste of the Turk," a phrase which soon got back to Europe and caused something of a seven-day sensation.

Friar Dilorenzi, however, was not the sensational type. Mostly he was a tub-of-lard bastard, a big, fat, greasy, dirty son of a bitch who was no credit either to Italy or to the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem, the order to which he belonged. The order had been formed a couple of dozen years earlier "to succor and protect Christian pilgrims visiting the Holy Sepulcher." At the moment Friar Dilorenzi was neither succoring nor protecting. He was getting ready to feed his face.

It happened to be a fairly dirty face, but so was the rest of the Friar Dilorenzi. The only thing close to being attractive about this wonderful representative of the Church was his habit--his clothes. He wore the dress of the order: a black robe and cowl with a white cross of eight points on the left breast. This

particular uniform was brand-new. Friar Dilorenzi had worn it less than an hour. It was about to endure its first meal, after which the white cross would no doubt no longer be white.

Suddenly there was a shriek from the kitchen, from Friar Dilorenzi's young Greek slave. (Nothing in Church law permitted him to have slaves, but then if the Pope had known how Dilorenzi was going to turn out at the time of his conception, there might have been at least one exception to the Church's stand against birth control.)

At the second shriek, louder than the first, Dilo-renzi waddled into the kitchen, his pudgy face red with anger.

The young Greek was standing as far away from the larder as possible, pointing at it, and babbling incoherently. Friar Dilorenzi looked in the open door. There was his haunch of Turk, which he had intended to eat tonight (particularly tasty since it was from a young one). And stuck into it was a gold-handled dagger.

"What...?"

Behind him came the voice of the cook: "The As-sassins. The *Hashishi*. They have marked you. You are a dead man."

Friar Dilorenzi laughed. *Stupid natives. Silly su-perstitions . . .*

* * *

Casca's disguise was that of a Sufi. He knew little of this sect of Islam other than that the Whirling Der-vishes might be Sufis, that Sufis were sometimes great poets, and that Sufis usually wore wool. The first two of these things meant nothing to him. The third did. The rough wool clothing of the Sufi made an excellent disguise. Hunkered down in the shadows of an alley in Jerusalem, watching the living quarters of Friar Dilorenzi in the twilight, he was as inconspicuous as it was possible to be.

It had been easy to plant the dagger. Now he was supposed to wait until such time as he thought it proper to kill Dilorenzi. Casca did not intend for there to be much of a delay. Cannibalism brought back

memories of Jubala, the very thought of whom was enough to make the blood vessels stand out on Casca's neck and cause his hands to clench. Even though the Change had made Casca calm and outwardly mild, he no longer used the language of a Roman legionnaire. He could not ignore the memory of Jubala and transferred the hatred he had for him to Dilorenzi. In fact, in his mind he was killing Jubala all over again in the killing of Dilorenzi, and he looked forward to it with pleasure.

Now in the alley watching Dilorenzi's living quarters, he was ready. As the twilight turned the street red he made one last check of his objective. A second floor was being added to the building where Dilorenzi lived, and there was a heavy scaffolding covering the front. *Good*. There was even a ship's block fastened on a beam not far from the door. Unfortunately there was no rope in the sheave, but the bag beside Casca would take care of that. Fortunately, though, the friar's household servants were slovenly. All kinds of lumber lay piled up against the walls and the scaffolding, and since the kitchen was being added to, some of the stores were outside, in particular two big amphorae of oil. Casca could see their shapes, dark against the stone wall of the building, and he fingered the two small objects he had hidden under his robe--the jar and the vial of seawater a renegade Greek had sold him in the thieves' market that afternoon. Casca had his doubts about this Greek Fire, but if it didn't work, there would probably still be coals banked in the kitchen fire. Lazy as Dilorenzi's cook appeared to be, he was not likely to start a fresh fire each morning. Anyway, Casca didn't worry. For that matter, he hadn't worried about anything since the Change....

He waited patiently until the street was dark. Night finally came and Jerusalem slept. Then, in the silence, he climbed the low courtyard wall, pulling his bag over with him, and made his preparations. Climbing the scaffold and threading the rope through the block was easy. It was a little farther from the door than he would have liked, but he made the loop just the same. It would show, of course, in bright light, but in the morning... The oil was a different matter. It had a rancid smell. Casca debated the matter, wrinkling his nose to sample the odors coming from inside. *No, they won't be able to tell the difference*. He emptied the oil where he had planned, then went back to his place in the alley.

Casca slept. His dreams, as they had been ever since the Change, were delicious, though the details he knew would be gone when he awakened....

The Change. It meant he had gone through the rites to become the perfect Assassin. And as the perfect Assassin he automatically had the right to Paradise. Becoming an Assassin definitely had its good points...

Casca was awake before Jerusalem, but he waited until the city stirred, until long after "the phantom of false morning died"--as one Persian poet said--and true dawn was bloodying the stones of the ancient city. When he was certain Dilorenzi's household was awake, he climbed the courtyard wall and went to the oil-soaked timbers piled by the scaffolding. He took from under his woolen robe the purchase from the Greek soldier, and broke the jar on the oil as he had been instructed, but when he tried to take the stopper from the vial of seawater, the resin that made it water-proof resisted. He was pulling on it when

the surprised face of the cook appeared in the kitchen window. The cook yelled in alarm.

Giving up on the stopper, Casca picked up a rock and held the vial over the Greek fire mixture. When he broke the vial, and the water hit the mixture, flames exploded, and one piece of broken glass drove itself upward, narrowly missing his face. But the oil caught fire as planned, and the flames roared up the scaffolding. Casca ran to the side of the doorway.

The young Greek slave was first out. Casca felled him with a single blow of his fist and pulled him clear of the rope loop. The big cook was next. Casca used a timber on him, hitting the dirty head with enough force to topple the cook forward. His left foot, though, was still on the rope loop, and at that moment Dilo-renzi, naked, eyes bleary with sleep, appeared in the doorway.

Casca did not have time to move the cook. He grabbed the rope and heaved, hoping the loop would clear or the cook would move, and yelled at the top of his lungs.

The ruse worked. The cook jerked his foot at the yell, and Dilorenzi was transfixed. The loop caught him around the ankles and tightened. Immediately Casca dropped the rope, moved to the friar, felled the fat monk with a blow behind the ear, ran back to the rope, and heaved. The monk was heavy. Casca threw his weight into it. The naked Dilorenzi rose, head down, hanging by the heels. Casca pulled him up, secured the rope to the scaffold, drew the butcher's knife from under his robe, and moved toward the dangling friar.

By now the young Greek slave had come to and the cook was trying to rise to his feet. Most of the scaffolding was in flames, but not yet near the doorway. An uproar was beginning in the streets, and men were running, hoping to peer over the courtyard wall.

Casca slit Dilorenzi's throat. Blood gushed out, a red fountain now in the bright sunlight. The fat monk, dying, hung like a side of meat from his own doorway.

He had considered his Turkish victims fit only for slaughter, so Casca paid him back in his own coin--slaughter.

Then Casca headed toward the courtyard wall, bloody knife still in his hand.

Nobody tried to stop him.

* * *

Bu Ali had completed his assignment. Dressed as a Sufi like Casca had been, he assassinated Nizam al Mulk with a dagger while Nizam was traveling with the court between Isfahan and Baghdad, in the Frank-ish reckoning October 14, 1092.

Bu Ali got clean away and returned to Castle Ala-mut expecting high praise from Hassan al Sabah for a job excellently done.

He arrived an hour after word of Kasim's much more gaudy execution of Friar Dilorenzi had come, electrifying the castle.

Kasim...

Jealousy burned in Bu Ali's heart.

One of these days . . .

* * *

Hassan al Sabah's eagle eyes gleamed. This Kasim was a find. One must make better use of his talents. There was, for example, the matter of the Emir of Apnea. The Emir had already been given the Golden Dagger, and Bu Ali had been given the assignment since it was recognized at Castle Alamut that Bu Ali was the best. Now Hassan called for Bu Ali.

Bu Ali was with Casca at the time, both heading for their "trip to Paradise," the reward for their deeds. Bu Ali looked forward to this, and there was need for haste since he had to get back to Baghdad and Mamud. The slaver must not discover that the captain of his Mamelukes was an Assassin and the

cock-and-bull story of a visit to a sick uncle a bald lie. Therefore it pained Bu Ali to watch Kasim go ahead of him, and it pained him even more when he had to wait for Hassan. The leader of the Assassins was in one of his meditative moods, and by the time he had Bu Ali in his presence it was already too late for the Mameluke's "trip to Paradise." *But perhaps he has some special reward for me*

"The matter of the Emir of Apnea..."

"Yes, my lord?"

"I have changed my mind. Kasim will get that assignment."

"Kasim?"

"Yes." For a moment Hassan saw an odd look in Bu Ali's eyes, and the thought occurred to him that perhaps Bu Ali might know of Kasim's past.

But there was no need to pump the Mameluke. Kasim himself would supply any answers needed. He had already seemed eager to talk. Up to now it had not seemed important to Hassan. Now he began to consider more and more the possibility of using Kasim as an impostor for Longinus. The matter of the scarred face could be taken care of. After all, one could put on a man's face as many scars as one wished....

* * *

Unknown to Hassan, the Assassin spy in the Emir's household, the man who had planted the dagger, had been caught and taken to the Emir's torture chamber. Before he died he had told his torturers the only pieces of information which he had--the date, the place, and the method of the Emir's assassination. Unlike most such matters, this Hassan had revealed the details of his victim's demise. Now the Emir knew these details--but not who the Assassin would be.

He also knew the place.

And the method...

Ah...!

* * *

Yousef the bandit did not know of Casca's role as an Assassin. But the image of the scar-faced man had been branded in his brain. Yousef had fallen upon hard times ever since the ill-fated raid, and he blamed his bad luck upon the scar-faced one. It was he who spotted Yousef and his bandits up in the high ground just before Mamud and his slave caravan would arrive safely in Baghdad. He had alerted the slave master at the moment when his archers were about to release their arrows. It was a brilliant ambush, but the scar-faced one had ruined it. Everything had gone wrong since that time. Even now, as Hassan gave the assignment to Casca, Yousef was standing in an alley in the Emir of Apnea's city, having gone there for temporary refuge and reduced to the status of a petty criminal who stole from those unwary enough to go out into the streets alone at night.

The scar-faced one . . .

If Yousef ever saw him again he would make him pay dearly.

One of these days . . .

CHAPTER NINE

Hassan gave Casca his orders as he showed him a map of Apnea and the route the Emir would take on the day of his death. He even had a selection of good sites from which Casca could pick the one that suited the moment. Oft-times it amused the Old Man of the Mountain to advise his victim of the manner of his death. This he did with the Emir of Apnea. It would be by spear. That of course did nothing to relieve the Emir's anxieties for he had spearmen by the thousands under his command. Any one of them could be the instrument of his death.

Taking a good solid horse from the stables of Castle Alamut, Casca rode off across the high valleys

toward Apnea. The journey would take some days, but he had to arrive in the city in time for the ceremony which marked the eighth anniversary of the Emir's rise to the throne. For the journey Casca affected the look of a wandering mercenary. There were no short-ages of these usually lone men who traversed the deserts and valleys of Central Asia and Persia. Casca had been riding on his journey six days when he first spied the spires of the minarets that stood like sentinels over the walls of the city of Apnea. As he did time and again, he waited for the busiest hours of the day before entering. Once the Golden Dagger had been found in the Emir's bedchambers the sentries had been placed on special alert for any strangers who came into the city. By mixing with the camel and donkey drivers who brought the day's goods to market, Casca looked like just one more of those lonely, hard-faced men who crossed the face of the world in search of plunder or death. The guards gave him a curious but cursory inspection. He was obviously not of Persian or Arabic or even Turkish blood. Therefore it was unlikely that he could have belonged to the Shiite faction of which the Assassins were members.

Still he was taken into consideration and upon questioning, the name of the inn at which he was to take quarters was duly noted and, with the changing of the guard, passed on to higher authority for consideration. To them the name and description meant nothing. He was only another of the wandering infidels who sought employment for their swords. And perhaps might even one day be brought into the ranks of the guard the Emir was forming of men who were born outside of the boundaries of the Seljuk Turks' Empire. There was even a name for them. *Janissary*. Most would come from the ranks of young slaves who had never known any other life and who served their masters as loyal beasts to the death. Though they were technically *ferengi* they would have privileged status and be made to feel that they were part of a new elite in the world and be totally devoted to serving the interests of their masters.

Casca did not know or care about the new idea of using units comprised totally of foreigners as a fighting force. He just moved easily through the crowded streets ignoring the outstretched hands of the beggars who cried plaintively and piteously for alms, and cast pleading eyes on him as he approached, then cursed him as he passed. For a fleeting second he thought about the beggars of the world and how at one time an edict had been passed stating that thieves would no longer lose their right hands or have a leg chopped off for running away from the authorities. In protest the beggars had banded together in their thousands in the streets of Baghdad and demanded that the punishments be reinstated. If the populace did not feel pity for their mutilated limbs then the thieves would either starve or have to go to work. The state relented and gave in. The old time punishments for transgressions were reinstated.

* * *

High on Castle Alamut, Hassan al Sabah held conference with a man who had once opposed him. This man had been part of the former inner council but had not been killed during the purge by which Hassan took control of the Brotherhood of the Lamb. This man, Hakim ben Souk, had fled, not to be found till this time. It was with the understanding that he had no choice but to cooperate or go over the parapets to the distant valley below, that he gave to Hassan the information which the master of the mountain had been lacking concerning the physical description of the one who had slain the Lamb. All this Hassan knew, till Hakim mentioned the scar, which like a bracelet circled Casca's left wrist.

Maybe? Could it be? He had seen such a scar on the left wrist of Kasim and he was a *ferengi*. It seemed impossible that he should have been that close to the "damned one." Yet he had to know. To Bu Ali, who had returned to his duties with the slave master Mamud, he sent word that it was to be arranged for him to go to Apnea and to observe the actions of Kasim and to make certain the scarred one was returned to Castle Alamut with all dispatch, even if it meant that Bu Ali took over the job which Kasim was sent to do. He had to have the scarred one back. There were too many questions he had to ask. He knew that Kasim had not taken to the Shiite faith with any sincerity and that did not bother him. One used such tools as were at hand or could be molded. He had long known that Kasim was not one to be readily molded, and that presented Hassan with the challenge of finding out what would bind Kasim to him as much as blind faith bound the rest of the Hashassin.

* * *

Casca never checked into the inn figuring it was wiser to keep mobile. He went over the events of the past months in his mind. He thought that the Old Man of the Mountain might be a little bit mad, but then who in this country wasn't? He had to admit, though, that he still admired old Hassan al Sabah. He was intelligent but not given to wild flights of fancy. As for the selective removal of those he considered un-desirable, as far as Casca could tell, Hassan hadn't had anybody liquidated that didn't need liquidating. Nizam al Mulk? Well, that one might be a mistake, but on the other hand, maybe there was something about him Casca didn't know. *Give Hassan the benefit of the doubt*. Certainly he had been right about Friar Dilorenzi. Casca smiled to himself. He had been tempted to give Dilorenzi the *shegita* treatment--kosher slaughtering. But that might have been too much. Hassan might not have had a sense of humor when it came to mixing religions. Most people who took re-ligion seriously did not.

His thoughts broke away from Hassan to the more pressing needs of the moment. There would be a thieves' market--there always was. He might even locate a little wine somewhere, not having had a drink now since that night in the Cafe of the Infidels, and his throat was getting dry.

* * *

"To Apnea?" Bu Ali repeated Mamud's words as though he had not heard right.

"Yes. I have just received a purchase order on these three men" --he pointed at the slaves with a horsetail fly whisk--"with the request that they be put in your charge and delivered to a dealer there most expeditiously. For a fee, of course." Mamud was in one of his "efficient businessman" moods, and he didn't notice the lack of surprise on Bu Ali's face.

Times and distances were going around in Bu Ali's mind. They were two days' travel from the Emir's city. That meant he, Bu Ali, would be present at the time when Kasim was to assassinate the Emir.

What if Kasim were not successful escaping?

Ah...!

Temptation.

However his orders from the Master were quite clear. He would return Kasim even at the cost of his own life, for the failure to do as he was ordered would bring about his death without his just reward. But if he did die following the Master's commands was he not guaranteed a place in Paradise? He would obey.

* * *

"What's your name?"

"Yousef, lord."

"Get your ass out of my sight. Do you think I'm fool enough to give alms to a filthy beggar who has all of his parts and eyes, and is therefore capable of being able to work for a living?"

The captain of the Emir's bodyguard aimed a kick at the scruffy little man in front of him, but Yousef scurried out of reach and headed down the nearest alley.

The captain forgot him immediately, his mind on a more important subject, the corner before him where the attack on the Emir was to take place. His practiced eye took in all the possible places from which an assassin could throw a lance. He had already prepared his men for just these places. Observers had been

placed strategically so they would be able to observe any who visited these places. Some were housewives and fishmongers, others soldiers in mufti. All had been ordered to use their eyes very carefully or they would lose them. It was all taken care of. This final trip was to see if he had missed anything.

He hadn't.

The trap was set.

The captain smiled. He liked the torture sessions. He wondered what kind of man they would have this time. The tough ones were always the best. The torture lasted longer with them. Like the last one. The source of their information had been one of the Emir's own body servants. An Assassin. Of course they had to torture all the rest of the Emir's servants to get to the right one. But that was a small price to pay and slaves were easy to replace. The now-dead body servant had tried to take his own life when they took him to the dungeons below the palace. Only the captain's sharp awareness had prevented the man from hanging himself before questioning. Stroking his forked beard in pleasure the captain gave a short laugh at the memory of the servant's balls being lowered gently into a pot of boiling water and the exquisite look of agony in the man's eyes. It was positively delicious. Next, the threat of telling the man they were going to make him eat his own cooked oysters had done the trick. He broke. Telling everything in the hope of an easier death. Now they knew the date of the attempt and the general location. The slave was to have accompanied the Emir on his pilgrimage to the mosque. He had been given orders to kill the Emir if the spearman failed. Of course the fool's hope for an easy death was a futile thing. Even now he was hanging from a meat hook in the dungeon, the hook strategically placed between his shoulder blades so it would take some days for him to die. Normally his head would have been placed above the gates leading to the city but that would have warned the accursed eaters of Hashish that their plans were known.

Twilight reddened the dome of the mosque. It re-minded the captain again of torture. He turned to go back to the palace. A caravan was coming down the street. Idly, the captain glanced at it.

Nothing remarkable. One man who dodged between the line animals caught his attention for a moment. A foreigner, perhaps a Rh'shan or a Frank. He had the look of a soldier about him. But as with the guards at the gate, he gave him no more than a curious look.

Well, it takes all kinds, the captain thought tolerantly.

* * *

At last finding a tavern which catered to the foreign element, Casca settled in to wait a while, taking a tankard of crude wine cut with water to ease the dryness in his throat. He then called for an Arab hookah, which apparently wasn't on the Emir's forbidden list since every cafe--and there were plenty of these and plenty of coffee--was full of the Faithful puffing away. After the second pipeful he was feeling very happy, content with a life which had no problems. He felt as though he was floating high up, and that was why he was now out on the street juggling two happy decisions in his mind: whether to look for better wine, or to look for a woman.

That was when Yousef made the mistake of trying to rob him.

Casca saw this scrawny little beggar standing at the dark entrance to the inevitable alley--Arab towns had more alleys per square foot than anywhere else--and he would probably have given him "alms" if the little bastard had asked. Casca was feeling very gen-erous. He loved everybody in the whole damned world.

But Yousef made the mistake of trying to take him.

Laughing, Casca mildly applied one of the simpler blows Shiu Tze had taught him a long time ago.

"Now, why did you try that, little fellow?" Casca asked. He was floating twentypaces high over the fallen assailant, and some little genie in the back of his mind whispered: "Look there! Somebody trying to assassinate an Assassin!" Casca roared with laugh-ter. He thought it was a marvelous joke.

Ah...! Suddenly it occurred to Casca that not only did he love everybody, everybody in the world loved him. He looked down at the fallen Yousef who by now had the look of a man who had caught the wrong tiger by the tail.

"Mu salam aleikom --Peace be with you!" he said benignly. "Now get the hell out of here before I bust your balls." He raised his foot to kick, but had a little trouble deciding whether he wanted to use his right foot or his left.

Yousef scrambled away.

However...

There was one moment there when the combination of the dim moonlight, the lamp from an open window, and Yousef's sharp eyes brought recognition to the mind of the ex-bandit.

The gray-blue-eyed Circassian with the scar on his face. The one who had warned the Mamelukes at the raid. The bad luck man. The one Allah had allowed to cause his, Yousef's, problems.

By all the djins of the dark!

Somehow he would get revenge before this one passed out of his sight again and he was reduced once more to disguising himself as a beggar in order to scout out houses. Since their fortune had changed the men remaining in his band were forced to rob or to find a few purses to cut. He, Yousef, who planned one day to be Yousef the Great was reduced to this.

He would not stand for it!

There were still remnants of his followers en-camped outside the city.

This one would pay....

As for Casca, he, too, had recognized Yousef--but in a different way. Waiting to cross the street that afternoon, he had seen Yousef being booted by the Emir's captain, and the beggar had seemed mildly familiar, someone he had seen before. But Casca had seen many people before, and it just wasn't important to him. Now, tonight, he had a vague feeling about it--but everything was lost in the euphoria of the hookah. At the moment he just didn't give a damn about anything. And that was his downfall....

* * *

He found the woman first, a small-breasted, hard titted young Turkish whore. Casca was never quite sure what took up the next day and night. He was supposed to meet Hassan's spy--a slave in the Emir's household who had planted the Golden Dagger--but something went wrong with that. Casca was fuzzy about the details because sometime in the two-day spread he had gotten his hands on a couple of amphorae of trade wine. The wine and the hashish turned his wait into a very satisfying interlude, but unfortunately he was still a little drunk when it came time to make his appointment with the Emir. He still hadn't gotten in touch with the spy, but he figured that didn't make all that much difference. On his first evening in town he had passed, with a caravan, the place he was to lie in wait for the Emir, and it took only a quick glance to see that there were really only two places he could pick, both of which were adequate. He had good cover in both spots, and, unless the Emir knew where he was to be, the target would never know he was there, even after the lance was in his guts.

Piece of cake . . .

He got to his ambush site--a gnarled and twisted old olive tree that stood near three different buildings, which would provide him with a choice of routes by which to make his escape. He arrived there hours early, of course, since he went in darkness. His *jirad*, which had a joint in the center, was carried under a cloak to be assembled later. Since it was going to be a long wait he also carried, in his left hand, a leather bag which held a stoppered jug containing the last of the trade wine. Might as well go first class...

The mood of happiness had not left him. Every-thing took on the appearance of an omen of success. Casca took the stopper out of the jug....

* * *

Yousef the bandit looked at the eight men he had left out of his original band, a sour expression on his face. "There're going to be large crowds at the ceremony today, so I don't think anyone will pay much attention to us if we're careful. It is said that Hassan al Sabah has sent the Emir the Golden Dagger, so don't make any sudden moves close to the Emir. That bodyguard of his will cut us to pieces. If the Assassins want to kill the Emir, let them. What I want is that scar-faced bastard. I am not going to be happy until he's out of the way. So if you can take him alive, fine. It will be a pleasure to kill him myself. To take him out some place and really work on him, make him suffer for the bad luck he has caused us. Perhaps if we can get him alive we'll be able to sell him for enough to get started again. There are sure to be many who would pay well for one with his strength. That would of course be after we removed his manhood to make him into a more docile beast of burden." You-sef's face screwed itself up into a grimace of pleasure at the thought. "I have watched him and know he has taste for the grape and pipe. He will be somewhere on the streets today as all of the public houses are closed by the Emir's order. Keep your eyes open and we will find him."

* * *

Bu Ali, too, intended to look for Casca--only he knew where to look. But at the moment he had a problem; he couldn't get away from the man who had bought the three slaves. He had already drunk enough coffee to piss the Tigris over its banks, but here came the damn stuff around again.

The host droned on and on.

The hour of the parade was fast approaching....

Bu Ali made a silent prayer to Allah to intercede and release him from this long-winded ass. But if the finger of Allah had been in the deal, it apparently wasn't around this morning. The host droned on and on. The hour of the parade was fast approaching. . . .

* * *

By the time the streets had filled with people wait-ing for the parade, Casca had polished off the last of the trade wine and was feeling no pain. No pain what-soever. Now from the distance came the sound of the advancing parade. In fact, from up in his olive tree, Casca could see the tops of the banners over the roofs of the intervening houses.

Time to go to work

Clumsily, he twisted around from his cramped perch in a fork of the olive tree branches and was joining the two halves of the *jirad* together when something sharp poked him in the ass. Simultaneously there was an identical punch just above his butt, and two more on either side of him--not what one might reasonably expect from an olive tree branch.

He looked down at his rear.

Steel. Very sharp Damascus steel. The heavy blade of what looked like an Oriental version of a halberd was getting ready to jab him again.

Casca looked up into the no-nonsense eyes of the captain of the Emir's bodyguard standing on the roof-top just above him. Soldiers on either side held bows drawn taut. The captain stroked his forked beard and smiled almost with sympathy at what was going to happen to the fool in the tree. There was no point in his trying to get away.

Casca groaned. Once more his luck in Persia had turned sour. They had him.

CHAPTER TEN

"Hmm..."

The Emir of Apnea prided himself on his "creative" and "imaginative" approach to torture. Not for him the humdrum and obvious. For such a pleasant hobby one must think of a pleasant approach, must not one? So he studied the rather forlorn and obviously drunk Casca carefully with four of his soldiers holding him, two at each side. *Symmetry*, the Emir thought idly.

The parade had halted. And, though the street was filled with the procession and lined with the crowd, there was relative silence now that the Emir had dis-mounted from his horse and waddled over to the olive tree to personally inspect the stupid dog who had had the temerity to try to assassinate him. The Emir waddled because he was a short, fat, roly-poly little man with a big butt. He was wearing his ornate robes of state, and the net result was that he looked like a very, very fancy big duck. The crowd was quiet because they knew they'd damn well better be. Casca had his mouth shut because he didn't have anything to say right now.

"Hmm..." Again the Emir grunted. He was con-sidering possibilities. Like most men of his race he let his mind work on several levels at the same time, delighting most in the devious passageways to his objective. *This Assassin, now . . . why not use him to make a laughing stock out of old Eagle-Face Hassan?*"Hmm..." Hassan's minion had gotten drunk and bungled the job. Hardly a credit to an "invincible" Hassan. So why not--for the crowd's sake (and Has-san's reputation)--turn it into one big joke?

But how?

Inspiration came to the Emir, and he smiled, his small pig's eyes glittering. He called one of his aides to him, pointed at the metalworker's shop down the street, and whispered instructions in the man's ear. The secrecy was not necessary, but the Emir thought it a nice theatrical touch for the crowd.

He turned his attention to Casca. This luckless one wore the five-day beard of the two-day drunk; he was pretty shaggy.

"So... Hassan al Sabah sends me a hairy dog. I must repay him in opposite fashion. It is symmetry. It is Allah's law of opposites." Then to the soldiers: "Strip him!"

They pulled the Sufi robes from him, and had Casca down to his loincloth.

"That, too."

What the hell has the little bastard in mind? Casca thought. He was getting sober fast. He was also getting ready to try to get the hell away from here.

"Now, tie his right hand to that branch."

That was when Casca started his kick. His legs were still free, so-

Unfortunately, while the captain of the Emir's guard did not know the fighting methods Shiu Tze had taught Casca, he did know prisoners, and before Casca could get started, the broad shaft of a *jirad* was between his legs.

"Now, the other hand to that branch." The Emir pointed. Then, "Left leg there. And right leg there." He turned to his aides. "You will notice, gentlemen, that this hairy dog is now suspended between the heavens and the hells and that his feet are pointing toward Mecca."

This was a fairly accurate description, assuming the religious part be accepted on the Emir's terms. The naked Casca did indeed lie flat on his back on nothing, suspended by arms and legs from four branches of the olive tree. It was not a dignified position. The crowd had begun to sense that the Emir was making fun of Hassan's man, so a small wave of low laughter was now rolling around the olive tree, and a few more necks were craning up to see this absurd object. *Shit!* Casca had been in trouble before--lots of times. But at least there had been a little dignity to it. And whoever had been after him had taken him seriously, which was as it should be: torture and killing were fairly serious matters. To make it a fun thing --now that was cutting it too fine. Who the Hades was this Emir of Apnea anyway? At the moment Casca decided he wanted the Emir dead about ten times more than Hassan, and he wanted to do the job himself. The only trouble was, he didn't know how he was going to get loose from the olive tree. That was the trouble with getting slung up; there just wasn't any way to get loose. At least not as far as he could see...

"So... What do you gentlemen suggest I send to Hassan in return for this hairy dog?"

Naturally there was no response. The Emir's aides held their positions of honor partly because they knew when to keep their mouths shut. But, on the other hand, the Emir was now beginning to frown because he had not gotten an answer. So the captain of the guard offered him:

"Lord, it is written upon thy face that thou hast already determined the perfect answer to this impertinence."

"Ah...!" The Emir beamed. "Yes. He sends me a hairy dog. I return him a plucked chicken."

Chicken? What the hell . . .

The aide who had been sent to the metalworker's shop was holding two long iron objects that Casca now saw were tweezer-pointed. The Emir took one, put the tweezer point against Casca's hairy chest, and pulled a hair. "Observe. This is the middle of this hairy dog whose feet point toward Mecca. You-" he Emir selected one of the more intelligent-looking of the peasant bystanders "- start here and move toward the head." He tossed the peasant the tweezer-pointed tongs. "You-" He selected an old crone. "Start here in the middle and move toward Mecca."

The Emir stepped back and admired his handiwork. "Now..."

He raised his hand, the symbol of a curt order to his guard.

"Now, we will resume the parade and leave the chicken-plucking to our people... for the time being."

The crowd gave him a laugh for that, which was what he wanted. The look on the captain of the guard's face was just a little more than odd, though. Yet he joined the parade, but not before personally testing the ropes that held Casca to the olive tree.

The procession moved on down toward the mosque. There were now no soldiers guarding Casca, but that didn't help him one bit. The peasants had crowded in, gleefully watching the two with tweezers pull the hairs from his chest, one by one. There were a few gaming souls, and they began to make bets as to which would be reached first: Casca's eyebrows ... or the family jewels.

As for Casca, he was not too sure he could get out of this by himself--but there sure as hell wasn't any-body to help him.

There was one possibility. Over his left big toe he could see that the limb that held his left foot had a sharp bend in it. It was tough wood, but... He began jerking his body with each pull of the tweezers, covertly putting the force on the left leg. The crowd loved that, thinking it was a pain reaction.

How did I let myself get into all this But it could have been worse.

* * *

Both Yousef and his men, and Bu Ali and his Mame-lukes were now aware of Casca's predicament. For Bu Ali it was a problem he couldn't solve. For Yousef it was a great deal simpler: he immediately dispatched an archer to the roof of the building across the street.

Bu Ali had not gotten to be the captain of Mamud's Mamelukes by keeping his head in his ass. Nor had he risen from the rank of Novice in the Brotherhood of the Hashishi by being stupid. He was a damn

good soldier. Standing now in the shadows of a building fifty feet up from the mosque, and with a clear view of Casca's olive tree and the crowd around it, he was now the typical tactical commander with the usual impossible situation to solve. Well, what did a commander usually do when he had no solution to the problem? Yeah... Send in the enlisted men. Bu Ali thought about that, turning to look at his available "army." Standing behind him were three men, scimitars scabbarded at their sides, bows unstrung and strapped with arrows to their backs. The fourth man guarded the tied-down horses. A couple of the town peasants mingled with them, not paying them any attention since the religious procession had brought all kinds of people to town. Beyond the horse line, on the next street, some rather ragged-looking shepherds were holding a highly restless flock of sheep, keeping them from coming down this alleyway into the mainstreet in front of the mosque until the procession was over. Apparently the sheep were without water, which was one reason they were milling around and bleating. But next to them there was also a flock of goats in the same predicament. Separating the two flocks was a fanner astride an ass that was hitched to a small cart piled high with hay. The procession had sure screwed up farm traffic this morning.

Sheep... Goats... Hay...

Bu Ali thought about that.

He looked back at the olive tree. He could see the branches swinging. Not much chance of Casca getting loose, though. And by now the Emir had been in the mosque a pretty long time. The rites would be over any minute, and once the Emir's bodyguard had Casca, there would be no chance whatever to free him.

Not that there was any chance now. The look in the eyes of his men underscored the point. They were watching him, Bu Ali, with the same cynical stare enlisted men the world over have from time immemorial given a commander they don't think can hack it. Knowing his men--he had trained them and knew their abilities--Bu Ali respected their judgment. He couldn't hack it.

Yet...

Sheep. Goats. Hay. Bu Ali looked back at the livestock, something in the back of his mind telling him to. The farmer had gotten down from his ass and was walking over to the window of the nearest house where an enterprising cook was selling cakes from an open window, cooking them on a small charcoal brazier placed on the windowsill. The glowing red of the burning charcoal seemed to wink at Bu Ali.

Several things came together in the Mameluke captain's mind at the same time. His first reaction was to

shy away from the idea that formed. Too fantastic. Bu Ali had been trained as a conventional soldier. Never try anything new. But a Mameluke who had enough chutzpah to suggest intrigue to the great Sul-tan, Malik Shah, was capable of anything--if he had to be.

But first he rechecked the street.

Unfortunately, it was a wide street, as befitted the approach to the mosque. But, fortunately, the sun was up pretty high now, and the heat had driven most of the crowd from the other side of the street over to Bu Ali's side. And there was an almost unbroken wall of houses and courtyard stone fences up to the olive tree where Casca was held captive. So there was a relatively narrow passage to the olive tree, and beyond that a lot of wide open space and a single alley. Oddly enough, there were mounted men on horses in this alley. Bu Ali counted at least six, and it bothered him. But they were scruffy-looking and didn't look like they could be the Emir's men. The way the sun was throwing shadows Bu Ali had difficulty seeing their faces, though the momentary turning of one man did reveal a face.

Bu Ali thought he recognized the man. The leader of the bandits they had fought. And certainly these scruffy-looking men could be bandits.

But there was no reason for such bandits being here. Must be his imagination. Bu Ali could accept one odd idea, but not two on the same morning. Besides, the more he searched his memory the more he found justification for what he was about to try. He remembered a story told around a long-forgotten campfire by a Jewish slave. Only that one was about foxes... Samson and foxes...

Well, he would just have to make do with what he had in mind. He called his men in close and gave them their instructions. Their first reaction told him that they thought he had gone mad. But then the humor of the situation got to them and they smiled.

* * *

The damn branch won't break. Casca was discovering how tough a tree can be. And by now the hair pulling, which at first he had thought simply humiliating and embarrassing, was getting to him. *Shit!* It was always the simple tortures that got you down.

* * *

Yousef's archer was in place, but he had a problem. The gnarled limbs of the olive tree formed a kind of twisted lattice shield. Although he could see Casca, he had an uncertain target. He waited.

* * *

Speed. A hell of a lot of speed. And no mistakes. That's what Bu Ali's plan required in order to succeed.

"Now!" he said.

They jumped to it. The shepherds and the goatherds were knocked on the head--not enough to take them out permanently, because their running after the flocks might be an extra help, but enough to keep them from interfering as the two men assigned that job freed the flimsily penned-in animals and stampeded them toward the broad street. The hay cart was stripped from its ass, turned around, and headed backward toward the street of the mosque, with a mounted Mameluke horseman on either side holding the shafts as though they were spears. Bu Ali himself grabbed the burning brazier from the open window and lit the hay. It was very dry hay. It smoldered for a moment, flickered, then roared up into flame. Meanwhile the goats and sheep were herded forward, the Mamelukes behind them yelling, the goatherds and shepherds chasing behind, cursing. The animals surged forward, then were in front of the burning hay cart. The dismounted Mamelukes swung into their saddles, drew scimitars, and jerked the ropes that held the pack horses. The charge was on.

By now half the crowd was yelling, and those that weren't would soon be. And for once Bu Ali was in luck. Just at that moment the Emir's trumpeters came out the door of the mosque and blasted out on their horn, presumably to announce the coming of the Emir.

To the sheep and goats, though, it was more like the end of the world.

As for the crowd at the olive tree, well...

They looked up to see a river of frantic goats and sheep bearing down on them, urged on by a moving pillar of fire that had no apparent source; yelling horse-men brandishing scimitars that flashed in the sun; and the mosque itself trumpeting.

Under such circumstances men have been known to decide that other territory is more desirable to be on. Those in this crowd not only came to such a conclusion instantly, they also acted on it.

They got the hell out of there.

Bu Ali and one Mameluke reached Casca first. Both used a single scimitar swing to free him, Bu Ali slicing through the two ropes that held his hands, the Mameluke through the two that held his feet. Casca was free. Of course, he fell on his ass, but considering his circumstances at the moment he was in no mood to complain.

Before he could pick himself up, the Mameluke leading the spare horse pulled up, dismounted, helped boot Casca up on the spare horse, got back on his own horse, and got them going in less time than it took the Emir, appearing now in the open door of the mosque, to think: *What the hell . . .*

With Casca safely en route, the Mamelukes pushing the burning hay cart dropped the shafts, and all the party swung into position behind Bu Ali and headed for open country.

They got away, heading down a narrow wadi outside the Emir's city and turning up a broader but deeper cleft in the rocky landscape some minutes beyond.

At the first oasis--a small clump of trees and a stagnant pool--Bu Ali signaled a halt and watched as one of the Mamelukes took clothing from a pack horse and handed it to Casca who dressed. The scene in the alley in Baghdad was being repeated, although this time closer to high noon. When Casca was dressed, Bu Ali dismounted and walked over to him.

"Ah, Kasim! It seems we have done this before." He was smiling.

Casca thought, *Now, why did I dislike him?*

Still smiling, Bu Ali suddenly brought one big hammy fist up and smashed Casca full in the face. At the

same time, on cue, the Mameluke beside him struck him a tremendous blow on the back of the neck with the blunt edge of his scimitar.

Casca was out before he hit the ground.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Yousef the bandit thought he had seen just about everything, but the trick with the sheep, goats, and fire wagon was certainly new. He still wanted Casca and now he was getting away. Not aware of it he kicked his horse in the flanks and took off after Bu Ali and his party, following through the narrow cob-bled streets and hunkering low to avoid arrows from the startled guards at the gates of the city.

During the escape the captain of the Emir's guard had been at the side of his master on the prayer rugs in the mosque. Hearing the clamor coming from out-side he took his leave of his master and rushed to the door of the mosque in time to see the tail end of Yousef's raggedy band leaving the scene of the rescue. Naturally, he thought the bandits were Casca's rescuers and ordered immediate pursuit. The captain's men raced to find their mounts slapping the local inhabitants out of their way with the flats of their swords. Once clear of the city gates all three parties headed straight for the desert.

* * *

From the door of the mosque the Emir shook his head at all the disturbance, turning to his nephew, a smooth-cheeked boy of sixteen, to whom he had given the post of standard-bearer. The boy would be at his uncle's side during official ceremonies and hold the Seljuk standard of horsetails tied to a silver blade. The Emir had given the boy the prestigious post in order to honor his sister.

"Ah, Sulman, son of my sister, do you not see how the life of one who rules is one of endless problems. I wonder what will happen next?"

Sulman smiled sweetly with understanding at his uncle and replied easily, "That is easy to foretell, my uncle. What will happen next is your death." Sulman drove the silver point of the standard deep into the Emir's soft belly and twisted the blade severing his intestines and stomach. Before the remaining attendants and guards could respond, Sulman stepped over the fallen body of his uncle and removed the Golden Dagger from his sequined jacket. Crying out to the heavens, "AllahuAkhbar" he slit his own throat with the dagger of the Assassins. Hassan al Sabah was never one to risk failure, and he always

kept his word. The Emir of Apnea had died by the lance.

Neither Bu Ali nor the Emir's captain had any idea of what had transpired at the mosque. The captain's attention was on overtaking the fleeing men in front of him. His horses, being of better quality than those of the bandits, were quickly gaining on Yousef's group. Yousef was faced with a dilemma. He couldn't catch the Mamelukes in a straight chase and looking behind him at the Emir's guards coming up fast, he knew he had to break off his chase and head for the rougher ground where, knowing the terrain intimately, he'd have a chance of losing his pursuers. Leading the way into a twisting labyrinth of wadis and dry streambeds, it took an hour to shake loose the captain and his men.

Resting his panting horse just under the top of a rocky rise, he was joined by the toughest of his men. A bearded ruffian with enormously muscled arms and hunched shoulders, the legacy of a childhood spent at a blacksmith's forge, he was Yousef's de facto second in command.

This man, Shojan, spat--away from the wind--and asked his dusty leader, "Now what?"

"They are probably resting their horses at some water hole in the wadis to the west. But they will leave a dust trail when they start out again. We will stay to the high ground and watch for signs of movement then try to cut them off. While they're resting we move. I want all the men to get off their horses and lead them. This way we will have a chance of catching up if we rest our animals on the move."

Shojan spat another mouthful of wet dust into the wind, "All right, we've gone this far and I am beginning to think you're right about the *ferengi* being bad luck for us. I just don't know if catching up to him would be good or just more bad."

Yousef hissed, "What else do we have to do? If we can take the Mamelukes we'll have their weapons and animals, which are worth something and any prisoners can be sold. That is still better than skulking like beaten dogs through the streets of Apnea trying to steal coppers from beggars."

Dismounting they began to follow in the direction the Mamelukes had taken. Ahead of them there was a high ridge with great open plains on either side. From there they'd be able to see in any direction for as far as the horizon. If the Mamelukes moved while it was still light they'd be seen. If they waited till dark then there would be no chance to catch up with them. Yousef and his weary band labored on, the tails of their turbans wrapped around their noses and mouths to keep out the dust whipping at their faces.

* * *

Casca had a mouthful of dust and a terrible throbbing pain at the back of his head. Before he managed to get his eyes open he had the strangest feeling of rising and falling, jolts and thumps. And he was paralyzed. Only his mouth had mobility, opening and shutting to the strange thumps and bumps. And every time it did, he got more dust in it. He wished he could fall back into the darkness and end the pain in his chest as well as that damnable throbbing at the back of his skull.

But wishing didn't make the pain go away, so he finally opened his eyes and instantly wished he hadn't.

He was on a horse, his legs tied to the animal's sides by a rope under the animal's belly, his hands lashed together and the rope looped around the horse's thick neck. Ahead of him rode Bu Ali and one of the Mamelukes. Beside him rode a warrior he'd known slightly during his time with Mamud the slaver. He was known as Karzan. Casca's head hurt too much for him to look back, but he could hear the sounds of other horses' hooves behind him, so he was in the middle of a small column heading, where?

"So you are back with us, Kasim?" The voice was that of Karzan, a slow, easy-paced voice almost too soft for the size of the man. The Mameluke was larger than most of the brothers and stood half a head over Casca. His face and coloring along with slightly green eyes showed a mixture of many bloods in his veins. "Yes, you have been out for a long time."

"Where are we?"

"Who knows? Bu Ali is heading for the mountains. I heard the mob saying something about an Assassin being captured. You're not one of them are you?"

Casca shook his head to clear the remaining cob-webs. "That's a dumb question to ask anyone." He left the question unanswered since anything he said might have been the wrong thing. He didn't know if Karzan was a follower of Hassan al Sabah or not.

"Why am I tied down on this horse and why the hell did Bu Ali hit me?"

Karzan shrugged his sloped shoulders. "You're tied to the horse because that is what Bu Ali said to do. I

don't know why he hit you, that is his business and he is in command." That was it. Karzan was content to follow his orders without question. Things he didn't understand, he wasn't meant to.

Casca was given water to drink from a leather skin and then studiously ignored. But Ali looked back at him once from the head of the column to give him a wide grin.

Bu Ali halted his men and rode to a small rise and looked back toward Apnea. He saw no sign of pursuit. Whoever it was that had been after them was no longer in view nor had they been since three hours past. Now he was facing one of the patches of wasteland where not even the creosote could survive. It was dry with fine dust that went ankle deep and stretched for twenty leagues.

Casca looked ahead. There shimmering in the distance and rising above the clear desert air was a range of mountains that would be a five-day ride away. The Elburz. Bu Ali was taking them to Castle Alamut.

The small unit of Mamelukes moved into the end-less dust of the ancient seabed.

* * *

"Dust," Shojan pointed.

"I see it," Yousef said. He looked from the thin plume of dust to the mountains on the horizon, then back again.

"They have a good head start."

"True, but there is but one place they can head and that's toward the mountains. From where we are we can intercept them by going straight, then cutting across. Also we will have a better supply of water from some springs that I know of. The Mamelukes will have to ration theirs. We'll catch them."

"What if they travel all night?"

"It will make no difference for that is what we will be doing. It will only prolong the chase a few more hours, no more. Be patient, Shojan. Be patient. We will have them, this I swear."

* * *

Bu Ali made no camp. They traveled all that night stopping only to water their animals, then to cover more miles before the heat of day turned the seabed into an inferno. With first light they sought what thin shelter they could, using their cloaks to make tents to shield them and their animals from the hammering rays of the demon sun. Three more days and nights passed in this manner till they reached the base of the Elburz Mountains still in darkness. Dawn found them climbing a steep trail on foot, the horses left behind with a single Mameluke to guard them. Casca had one rope noosed around his thick neck, a second tied securely to his waist. The ends of both were in the hands of Karzan, who was quiet for the first two thousand feet. But when the sun warmed their backs in full light, he looked up at the steep climb ahead and muttered to no one, "I hope Bu Ali calls a rest when we get to that level site ahead." Never once had he or the other Mamelukes questioned why Bu Ali was taking them to Elburz instead of back to Baghdad and their Master Mamud. They, like Karzan, left the problem of thinking to others. Their job was only to obey and Bu Ali was in command therefore he must know what he was doing.

Casca also hoped for a rest. His legs were cramped from being tied under the belly of his horse and burned with each labored step up the foot trail. He had never been on this path before and wondered how long it would take them till they reached the summit of Ala-mut, where he would face Hassan and find out why this was being done to him.

Not once in the days of their trek had Bu Ali spoken to him, and after seeing Karzan do so had ordered all the Mamelukes to avoid any conversation with their prisoner at the risk of losing their tongues. Another hundred yards of climbing and Casca could barely make out the parapets of Castle Alamut still two thousand feet above them. He knew of this place. One of the Novices at Alamut had pointed it out to him from the Castle walls and had told him that this was wheremany who had transgressed were sent to their maker.

He looked down. There were jagged rocks below, and to his left, the black cleft that was the opening to the Bottomless Pit, which was, as the Novice had said, the entrance to death for many. Casca grunted knowing that every pit had a bottom. It was only a matter of reaching it.

A jerk on his lead rope and Casca stumbled over a rock to fall on his face. It distracted Karzan's attention and that of the other Mamelukes in front of him and behind him at the very instant that Yousef and his men attacked. They poured out of the rocks circling the level site by the Bottomless Pit.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Casca rose in time to be hit by Shojan's cane spear, its tip made of iron. Karzan dropped his rope in order to defend himself against an attack by two of the bandits. Casca staggered to the edge of the dark hole. The spear had passed through his right side, the head extending two hands breadth out the other side of his body. In his pain he stumbled again at the edge of the Bottomless Pit and tried to regain his balance. For what seemed an infinitely long second he wavered there, body half cast over the brink. Then the earth gave way. He fell far and long, his body bouncing off of boulders and branches that poked out from the sides of the pit. Then he was no more to be seen or heard from.

When Casca fell the fight at the top of the pit came to a quick conclusion. Though Yousef and his men outnumbered the Mamelukes they were by no means their equal in battle and none of the outlaws had a desire to die for such little profit. They fled the scene leaving Bu Ali looking over the edge of the Bottomless Pit wondering how to explain things to Hassan.

Back down the mountain the bandits fled. One had died in the exchange but the others all had minor wounds. Still Yousef gloated. He had accomplished his main purpose and the scar-faced one was finally dead. No one could live through such a fall. Perhaps now their luck would change and he would be able to pursue his dream of being a bandit chieftain.

Bu Ali had no such dreams of glory for he had to stand before the Master and explain his failure. To Karzan he ordered, "There is no need for you to go any further. Take the others and go back to Mamud. Your job here is finished." Karzan saw a look of desolate acceptance of fate on the face of Bu Ali. Yet this was no concern of his. He was to do as he was ordered. He asked no questions but merely nodded his head in agreement, glad to be rid of whatever job it was that Bu Ali had led them on.

They left Bu Ali at the edge of the pit tossing rocks over the side then cocking his head to listen. He never heard any of them hit bottom. Raising his eyes to the mountain above and the Castle Alamut he resigned himself to whatever fate was in store for him at the hands of the Old Man of the Mountain. There was no use trying to fight one's destiny for it had long ago been written by the hand of Allah and what would be would be.

Yousef's troubles were not yet over. The next dawn left him with two of his men gone, one of them Shojan, who had decided that he had seen and tasted enough of Yousef's generalship and would do better on his own. He had made the right decision, for on the following day, Yousef and what remained of his band ran straight into the captain of the Emir's guard and were taken prisoner.

Each of them was carefully skinned alive and staked out on the desert floor to slowly roast under the re-lentless sun of Persia. It was a horrible, torture-filled death. Without their skins to keep in the moisture, in less than a full day their bodies would be dried to rubbery husks which the captain would bring back to Apnea in triumph.

* * *

Casca was just beginning to experience his own kind of torture, torture worse than any he had ever known in the centuries since the Jew had damned him to eternal life.

The first plunge into the blackness of the Bottom-less Pit was of course filled with pain--pain Casca had known. But when his body had hit the jagged rocks, the *jirad* shaft inside him had splintered, the two sawtooth edges raking back and forth inside his burning gut, and that alone would have made him scream. But a rock had smashed into his head and had broken bones, pinched his nerves, and paralyzed the functions of his voice as well. He jerked into and out of consciousness, awake when his falling body smashed into the rocks on the side of the pit so that he knew the full pain of the thousand-foot drop, unconscious as he entered the complete darkness.

He was awake, though, when he hit the water, shockingly cold water that gagged him, suffocated him, drowned him.

Death.

He had often longed for death, longed for the eter-nal sleep that would end the misery of his eternal life. But this was not death as an eternal sleep. It was a gagging, suffocating horror that repeated itself over and over and over. Quite literally, he was dying a thousand deaths, one by one. In one of his conscious moments he surmised that he was in a *qanat*, in one of the underground rivers the wise men had said ex-isted, but he had no way of knowing whether he was being carried along by the river or simply hanging in one spot. He had no sense of time whatever. The recurring horror he was experiencing could've taken hours, days, weeks, or years. He had no idea. At first he wondered how he could return to consciousness, then gag, suffocate, and drown again. Finally he realized that the strange healing powers of his body were working. When he was below water, he was dead, drowned. But apparently there were pockets of air over parts of the river, and when his dead body would rise into such a pocket, the healing would bring him back to life--only to suffer the gagging death again when the waters swept him under.

But was the water carrying him along? Or was it that his body was simply bobbing up and down in the same spot, the same pocket of air? He had no way of knowing. The wise men had said that the *qanats* fed the oases. If that was so, and the river was carrying him along, then he might have some hope of getting out of here. But how long would it take? And would he have gone completely mad by the time it happened?

But what if it was the same spot, over and over and over again?

He was certain of one thing.

He knew time passed because his wounds healed. Sometime during the ordeal he even pulled the two ends of the broken *jirad* from his body. Finally, in the brief moments of waking, he was completely healed. When that happened he found that he could prolong his time of "life" by treading water until the swift current forced him under again. But that in itself told him something. He *was* being carried along. And the air pockets were different. Some were much larger than the others. Maybe there really were underground openings to the oases...

He hit upon a rough way to calculate time. By assuming that he might hit two pockets in a single day, he began to reckon in his mind how long he was under. Using this method, days passed... weeks... months...

Always when he came "alive" he was ravenously hungry and terribly thirsty--for wine--not water.

There was something else he wanted.

Something he wanted even more than all the others put together...

Revenge.

Long before the first "month" was up he had made a promise to himself of what he was going to do if and when he got out. No longer were other people going to be doing things to him. When he got out he was the one who was going to do the doing. And he knew how he was going to start.

Bu Ali.

It was the Mameluke captain who was responsible for all his misery. And it was the Mameluke captain he would make pay. Not the bandit chief and his men. There was nothing personal in their killing him. The Emir? Perhaps. But Bu Ali came first. As the days passed, the weeks, the months, the ways in which Casca imagined killing Bu Ali multiplied. But he never really got confused about method. One way or another, once he was free, he would waste that bastard. Eventually, of course, he tired of keeping track of time. One moment of "life" melted into another. But with its passage the fire within him burned stronger: nobody sure as hell better get in his way...

* * *

As time passed Casca noticed that the air pockets were beginning to get bigger and bigger, and the flow of the river not nearly as swift. Were they approaching an oasis?

Finally...

An underground cavern. Muddy floor, but a floor nevertheless. Casca could walk upright. And up ahead, something strange.

The faintest sliver of light.

He had come to an oasis.

He was alive, healed, ravenously hungry-

And ready to even the score.

Getting out wasn't as easy as he expected. The passage narrowed, and though he got down on his hands and knees, he still couldn't get out. He would have to dig his way through an earthen dam, with only his hands to pull away the mud, earth, and rocks. And when he did it, the built-up pressure of the water would probably grab him and thrust him upwards.

Unless there was a ridge of solid rock within the earthen dam.

In which case he would stay here forever, conscious, the length of his own body away from free-dom ...

And unable to reach it.

He began to dig....

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

In the year 1095 (by the Frankish reckoning) two groups of pilgrims were approaching each other at a certain oasis in Persia. One group was Christian, pilgrims on their way to the holy city of Jerusalem. The other group was Muslim, pilgrims on their way to the holy city of Mecca. Both had armed protectors, though the size of the guard of either was not apparent to the other. Consequently they viewed each other as harm-less and peaceful religious folk on a pilgrimage.

Therefore, as they approached the oasis, each signaled their peaceful intentions to the other.

In actuality each had concealed three-fourths of its soldiers and was planning to do the other in, this oasis being too remote for anybody to interfere.

It never occurred to the leaders of either that the other side might be planning the same thing they were.

So both groups proceeded peacefully toward each other.

It wasn't much of an oasis, but adequate as oases go. It was larger than usual, that is, except for the water. Actually, it covered quite a bit of ground, and there were some fairly large-size trees, but these were in rising ground at least five hundred feet away from the spring. In truth it was a shallow pool of fairly stagnant water surrounded by a very much larger expanse of mud. The underbrush did not really start to get very thick until two or three hundred feet from the pool, and then it shaded rapidly up into heavier growth that completely concealed what might be in the grove of trees on the rising ground. Odd. One would expect the big trees to be where most of the water was.

The two groups of pilgrims paid no attention, however, to this odd geological fact. Nor did they notice that there was a thin, almost invisible, spiral of blue-gray smoke coming from the area of the densest tree cover. (There was also a rather odd odor--definitely not jasmine--emanating from this same area, but considering how they themselves smelled, it was not to be expected that this would come to the pilgrims' attention.) Neither group was close enough to see that the surface of the muddy pool was being periodically disturbed by some force beneath it.

So neither group was prepared for what happened when they were almost within charging distance of each other.

The pool blew up.

The small muddy pool suddenly shot a plume of water high up into the air, high as the mosque at Isfahan, and then almost immediately afterward exploded upward into a great blooming mass of water, mud, and rock, roaring like a lion whose testicles have been caught in thorns.

Before the exploding material had a chance to land on the hapless men of God, from straight out of the ground where the middle of the pool had been and where now there was a huge, spurting fountain of crystal clear water, shot a man--a very dirty, muddy one in ragged clothes that had almost rotted off--a man so filthy that even the clear water propelling him upward could not cleanse him.

There was one other thing about him.

He was as mad as hell.

When he opened his mouth, the roar that came out of it seemed to the startled pilgrims to be ten times

louder than the roar of the waterquake.

Instantly the coming battle was forgotten by both sets of pilgrims. They turned and fled, believing that Casca's roaring body was some sort of bad omen from their respective gods. One fearful monk was in such a rush to be gone from this place of horror that he took off on foot, leaving his bewildered ass behind.

Soon there was little evidence that the pilgrims had even been to this watering hole.

The spring--and Casca--stopped roaring.

Silence.

* * *

Casca's eyes had been in total darkness for several years. So at first all he saw was light, lots and lots of very wonderful light. When his eyes eventually did focus the first thing he saw was the ass the terrified monk had left behind.

Casca grunted. "Fellow, I come out of a hole in the ground, and the first thing I see is an ass." His voice didn't work right. Roaring had been one thing; this trying to say words was another. But the ass didn't seem to mind. He brayed. Then lifted his nose to sniff.

Casca grinned. "Yeah, fellow, I guess I do smell kinda strong." By now his eyes were working fine. He looked around him.

He was standing knee-deep in what was apparently the shallow end of a very large pool of clear, bubbling water. At the other end of the pool there was quite a flow of water over a rocky ledge, a miniature waterfall more than a cubit high. The runoff formed a fast-flowing stream, glistening in the sunlight. It had al-ready begun to cut a channel in the dry soil. All around was evidence of the explosion of water and dammed-up pressure that had brought Casca into the air once he had pierced the underground dam that held back the *qanat*. Casca saw all this, saw also how the green vegetation grew up toward the rise where the trees were. *The green . . . the trees . . . they show where I was,* he thought,

a sense of wonder in his brain.

The ass brayed again.

"All right, fellow." Casca began to strip off the rotted remnants of the clothes he had been wearing when he was thrown into the Bottomless Pit. As he did so he noticed the material that littered the ground on the trail to and from the oasis. *Whoever I frightened away when I came out of the ground must have been in a hell of a hurry.* He even retrieved a vial of scented oil some dandy had lost. Naked, he walked to the miniature waterfall and scrubbed himself thoroughly. He was not yet ready to step into any *deep* water... not for awhile anyway.

The warm sun felt good, and Casca felt good. When he finished washing he rubbed himself down with the perfumed oil and came back to the ass who had now moved a step or two but was still stubbornly holding the territory.

"How do I smell now, fellow?"

Now he needed clothing. But, despite all the litter on the ground, there wasn't any. The ass, though, had a pack on its back, and the animal made no move to shy away when Casca went for the pack.

The pack held clothes. Brand-new, clean clothes. But the clothes were for a fat monk--a black robe and a cowl. It was the habit of the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem.

Like Friar Dilorenzi...

No problem, though. Casca felt too good to worry about the past. He held up the robe to the sunlight. *Never thought I'd make it to the Church. Guess they must be taking all kinds nowadays.*

He didn't really relish wearing the hot robe, not right now anyway. The sun felt too good on his naked flesh. He pawed around in the pack and found a brand-new loincloth which he put on. Standing in the sun-light he flexed his muscles. He felt young. Too bad he was alone...

Suddenly he had the feeling eyes were watching him, and he whipped around, looking toward the un-derbrush and the trees beyond. He saw the thin sliver of smoke in the greenery; then he smelled the odd odor. He shaded his eyes from the sun and finally saw two men in the near cover.

They came out then, two happy drunks--an im-posing-looking noble with slightly-graying temples and wearing rich robes, and a young man whom Casca recognized.

The drunk young Arab from the Cafe of the Infi-dels. The one with the powerful "wine." Only he was several years older now.

Casca waited.

"Ah, Kasim..." the young man was just drunk enough to be happy, still sober enough for his eyes to glitter in amusement. "In the Name of the Prophet I ask you, 'Dost thou always reside in muddy springs?'"

Casca grunted. The ass brayed.

The older man was obviously much drunker than the younger one. He looked at Casca, struck a pose as though he was declaiming--or rather as though he was satirizing the look of someone declaiming--and began to recite poetry:

"'Come fill the cup, and in the fire of spring. Your winter garment of repentance fling.' Ah... I see your winter garment, friend. But where is thine cup? 'Tis not possible to fill thy cup if thou hast no cup."

Casca grinned at the young Arab. "How do you put up with him?"

"He's my father. Here, Kasim, thou must meet him. Father, the seminaked savage before thine eyes is Kasim al Jirad, the one who saved my ass from the Rh'shan. Kasim, my father, the one and only Court Poet *and* the Court Astronomer of Persia, Omar. Or, as he preferreth thou callest him, Omar Khayyam, Omar the Tentmaker."

"He's your father?"

"I am a bastard, Kasim. Nevertheless he is my father."

The older man was not as drunk as he had seemed. There was amusement in his glittering brown eyes--and maybe just a slight cynical glow. But his voice was affectionate, and the hand he put on the young man's shoulder was gentle.

"The young man is a genius, sir. An alchemical genius." He tilted his head up and back toward the trees and wrinkled his nose. "Dost thou smell the paradisiacal odor which cometh from the alembic?"

Ah...!

* * *

Later, much later, the world looked even better to Casca. His belly was full of the roast whatever-it-was --maybe goat, but what the hell--that the young Arab had been cooking over slow coals back under the trees, and in his hands he held a big handleless mug of the young Arab's "improved wine."

The older man really was Omar Khayyam, Court Astronomer and Court Poet of Persia. Why was he out here at what had been up to this time a very insignificant oasis?

"Well, Kasim, thou knowest of course that the Prophet forbiddeth the fruit of the vine short of Par-adise. Well, now if I choose to consider that the Prophet might have spoken poetically here--and who better than I to consider the Prophet a poet?--why, those of a more orthodox view of the matter might have my head. That is, if I shouldst exercise such interpretation of mine own devising of the Holy Writings in Bagh-dad, or Nishapur, or Babylon. But if I shouldst indeed journey into the wilderness to seek the solitude under the stars and thereby perform my duties as Court Astronomer to whomever might be the ruler of Persia at the time, then all will be satisfied. And incidentally while I am alone or with some boon companion such as mine own son, bastard though he might be, or you, sir, I can exercise my particular views of what might be the will of Allah the Merciful, the Compassion-ate--and surely the understander of the blessings of the fruit of the vine, since He hath so graciously prom-ised its said blessings in the glorious environs of Par-adise--Ah...! I do wonder what wast I had to say..."

Casca grinned. "Old man, thou art a hypocrite."

The gleam came back into Omar Khayyam's brown eyes, and he quoted: "'I am myself with yesterday's sev'n thousand years.'"

"All right. I get the picture."

"Besides, O savage Kasim," the young Arab added, "it would not be wise to run wine through the alembic in the heart of Baghdad. One mayest expect that even there where the odors are many the, ah, 'perfume' of the alembic would attract attention."

"So you come out here where you'll be alone to 'improve your wine' and do your drinking?"

"A crude way to put it, sir, a crude way." The more Khayyam talked the more sober he seemed to get. "But thou hast put a small handle on the vessel of truth."

Truth. Something in Casca's mind took him back in time...back to a courtroom scene... Pilate, fat Pilate the Roman judge... *What is truth?* the cynical Pilate had said. The cynicism in Omar Khayyam's eyes was gentler, more civilized... laced with a friendly merriment.

"What is truth?" Casca asked him. This time it was Omar Khayyam who grinned and then quoted gleefully:

"'Myself when young did eagerly frequent, Doctor and saint and heard much argument, About it and about that, but evermore, Came out by the same door by which in I went.'" The young Arab passed the "wine" again.

* * *

All in all a very pleasant way to be welcomed back to the world of the living. Casca found he liked the worldly-wise and civilized "Tentmaker." He was, in-deed, an excellent drinking companion.

And at night, when he showed Casca the stars in the clear skies of Persia, he was obviously a very good astronomer. Much of what he had to say was beyond Casca's understanding--and not much use to the scar-faced one, either. When would he need to recognize Algol and Deneb and Betelgeuse?

The shooting stars, though-

That first night not just one, but three bloomed briefly in the night sky at the same time, and Omar Khayyam laughed at Casca's excitement.

"Not unusual at all. In fact, sometime this month there may even be a 'shower' of them."

"What are they?"

"Ah...! Well, those that hit the earth-"

"Hit the earth?"

"Yes. I have never seen one myself, nor known anyone who has, but the ancient writings speak of a few men who have seen these flame across the sky and land--and where they landed there would be a glowing hot stone no larger than a grape."

"Anybody ever been hit by one of these?"

Omar Khayyam laughed. "There is no record of that ever happening."

"And all the time I thought they were a sign of good luck." Casca remembered the shooting star that

night in Mamud's slave coffle and his feeling that something important was going to happen to him. Somehow that brought to his mind Hassan--because the shooting star had been over the Elburz Mountains. "'Tis said that you were a friend of Hassan al Sabah."

"Yes." In the darkness his face was not visible, but Casca caught an odd, wistful tone in his voice. "And of Nizam al Mulk, too. When we were young men we swore undying allegiance to each other. We were all young, then. The whole world was young."

"And now?"

"Now is yesterday's tomorrow."

"Bu Ali?" Omar Khayyam asked.

It was either the second or the third night that Casca asked about him.

"Yes."

"Ah...! The big Mameluke bodyguard. The fa-vored of the Jasmine Lady."

"Baghdad?"

"Baghdad."

Now Casca knew Bu Ali's whereabouts--and also the significance of the Jasmine Lady.

It was time someone paid for his suffering....

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

When Bu Ali had returned to Castle Alamut and stood before the Master his legs turned to water and his bowels threatened to let go of their control. Hassan said nothing for a long, long time. Simply sat upon the cushions behind a low table inlaid with mother of pearl. He too accepted fate for what it was. The loss of Kasim was not the fault of Bu Ali. It would serve him nothing to punish the man. As for Kasim, now it seemed he would never know if he had been close to the truth. If indeed Kasim was the spawn of Satan, then not even the fall into the bowels of the earth would kill him and one day, one year, one century he would return. If he was not the Roman, then there was no loss, only another man dead and of no real importance to his plans. He would continue as would the Brotherhood.

To Bu Ali he said, using the tones only a father would use on a well-loved son who had done his best but failed at an assignment, "Return to Baghdad."

Bu Ali was ready to do anything the Master ordered but said, "Lord, there is the problem of explaining my absence to Mamud the slaver."

Hassan rose to his feet and went to the window and looked out over the high mountains.

"Mamud and the other Mamelukes who were with you will be no more by the time you reach the city. I will have other work for you there."

Bu Ali knew he'd been dismissed and already other more important things were on the mind of the Old Man of the Mountain. He left the presence of Hassan al Sabah feeling like one whose life had hung by the merest thread, as indeed it had. The next morning Hassan had his eldest son strangled to death for failing him in a mission and for the drinking in public of forbidden wine. He could have other sons but the discipline he demanded must be enforced upon every-one equally, for he was a fair man.

* * *

Baghdad. Casca set out for it on the back of the ass that had been left behind. By now the two of them had gotten to know each other very well, and while the back of the ass didn't afford the most comfortable ride, it beat walking. Casca was wearing the oversized robes of the fat monk. He grinned when he thought of what he must look like, and he wondered what kind of reception he would get from

the guards at the gate, but he was dead serious when he thought of what he intended doing to Bu Ali. So, if entering Baghdad as an infidel monk riding on an ass was going to be an act of foolhardiness, why let it. He had been pushed around long enough. Now he was going to strike back--and nothing or nobody was going to get in his way.

He had really enjoyed his "vacation" with Omar Khayyam. Casca was not much for poetry, but he could see how one could hide a message in the fancy verses and say things that one could never get said otherwise.

Khayyam had also brought him up to date--more or less--on what was happening. Hassan al Sabah's power was growing day by day, and the Golden Dagger was feared not only in Islam but in Frankish circles, too. As for the Franks--what the Muslims called all Europeans--they were becoming more aggressive about their right to visit Jerusalem. There were frequent clashes with Muslim groups. Actually there was something close to an undeclared war going on. Omar Khayyam had been particularly dubious about Casca wearing the monk's robes since there was talk that this group, originally set up to aid Frankish pilgrims to and from Jerusalem, was to become a *military* order. Khayyam even knew the intended name: the Hospitallers. But Casca figured he would just take his chances.

Something up ahead bothered him. He was approaching a low rise (one of the many in this terrain) and the other side was hidden to him. Casca hunkered down on the ass, outwardly careless, inwardly alert.

* * *

The two bandits that had left Yousef on what was to be Yousef's last day on earth had joined forces, and having discovered the basic details about each other, found they made a very agreeable twosome. They were not the most successful bandits in Persia, but they did manage to handle their own needs quite successfully. This particular day they had waylaid a rich noble, killed him and his slave, and were gleefully pawing through the late noble's possessions when Casca's ass plodded over the top of the rise.

Neither of the two bandits had recognized Casca, though he had recognized them. One, Shojan, had been the thrower of the *jirad* into Casca's gut. Now all they saw was a harmless Frankish monk who had made the mistake of taking his ass into Muslim country. Naturally they went for him.

It was a nice clear day, and the sun was quite bright. At the moment of closing all three recognized each other. But it was the bandit who had thrown the *jirad* --and now held a dagger--who yelled:

"O holy mother of Mohammed!"

"You got your religions mixed up, fellow," Casca grunted, grabbing the arm with the dagger, twisting the bandit around, then bringing up his knee to form an anvil on which, both hands now on the arm, he broke the arm bones as casually as one would a bundle of reeds. The bandit's high-pitched scream of pain stopped the second one in midstep, but the scream didn't last too long since Casca grabbed him by his chin, bent his head back, and broke his neck.

This made an impression on the second bandit.

He swung the scimitar at Casca with all his considerable strength, having come to the instant conclusion that the quicker this scar-faced man was killed the safer would be Persia, and more importantly, him-self.

The sharp steel sliced through the air like the lightning of Allah. It did not, however, meet any flesh. Unaccountably Casca was not in the place where the scimitar cut. The next thing the bandit felt was the full force of Casca's kick, smashing both his testicles. He bent over in terrific pain. He did not feel anything else because Casca's blow to the back of his head broke his neck, too.

The ass brayed.

"Save the applause, fellow," Casca answered him tolerantly. "Wait till I get Bu Ali."

He surveyed the plunder left by the two dead bandits. The noble they had killed had apparently been only moderately well-off, but there were two extra robes in the pack on the mule the servant had been leading, and the noble was not too far from Casca's height and weight. Maybe a little bigger. *I guess I've got to grow some*, Casca thought. *The world around me seems to be getting bigger*. Come to think of it, it did seem to him that in the centuries since the Jew had damned him to eternal life the men around him had been growing taller and heavier. Odd. It was something that he would have to talk over with Omar Khayyam, if he ever saw the Persian poet again.

Back to business. *I guess I'm just putting it off. Killing men -- even when they come after you -- must do a little something to you that you have to get over.* But that was a foolish thing to think. He looked over at the ass and said out loud: "That right, fellow?"

The mule brayed, and Casca felt better. No sense in having his mind entangled in strange ideas. He had Bu Ali to get.

He shed his clerical garb and put on one of the noble's robes. He looked for a weapon. He had a choice between the noble's scimitar and a very good short sword one of the dead bandits had. Casca really preferred the short sword. It was almost a gladius.

He took the scimitar. Now that he had the chance to enter Baghdad without attracting attention there was no point in taking unnecessary chances. The noble had a pretty fair horse that had now wandered back and was grazing on what little grass there was in the rocky area under the rise. He was easy to catch.

It took Casca only a few minutes to assemble ad-equate gear--including a leather money pouch with more than enough gold and silver coins to finance his expedition into Baghdad. He decided to use the ass as his pack animal. He had grown fond of the beast. *Face reminds me a little of Glam*, he thought, re-membering a barbarian friend, long ago dead. There were times when Casca wished he could be a normal human being, not some immortal freak. The friend-ship of the ass-

Oh, hell! I've got a job to do . . .

* * *

Baghdad. Casca got there when the dying afternoon sun blended all visual details so that, if there were any forgotten indication that he was not what he seemed to be, a travel-weary unimportant noble on a routine visit to the city, the guards at the city gate would not notice it. They did not. He found an inn, had a meal, and rented a room. He was set.

His reconnoitering stroll past the Sultan's palace did produce one incident. A young female slave was being dragged, screaming, back into the seraglio by two huge Nubian eunuchs. The guards at the palace gate were watching, and Casca could hear part of their conversation as he walked past: "That little Ruth is a pain in the ass. Second time this week she's tried to escape."

"Yeah... But if you had for a mistress who she has for a mistress..."

"Well... know what you mean." Pause. "Wonder why she wants to have Jewish slaves."

"Better not wonder where *she* is concerned."

"Yeah..."

It really didn't concern Casca. But he did feel sorry for the slave girl, although he couldn't afford to help her. And he did wonder who the mysterious "mistress" was the guards had referred to. But again, it was not his concern.

* * *

There was one thing that Casca wanted that he didn't think he was going to get.

A woman.

It would be safer not to look for one. The fewer times he risked his Muslim noble disguise the better off he would be.

Well, he might just walk down this street a little ways and see what was going on. It wasn't much of a street. Narrow, crooked. Stone houses built right up to the edge. Not too prosperous-looking, either, though in the darkness of early night that might not be fair to judge. I guess I go by the smell more than anything. It just didn't smell prosperous even though it was only a couple of hundred cubits from the pal-ace-

Bu Ali!

Damn! Here he had been so busy thinking about smells he had almost missed what his eyes saw. There up ahead of him, maybe four or five houses and shops up was Bu Ali. There was no mistaking that big ass, but he was doubly sure when Bu Ali turned to go into a cafe, and the lamplight showed the profile of his face. Bu Ali, all right.

Go in the cafe after him?

Wait until he goes out, then get him?

Check to see if Bu Ali uses this same route and goes to this same cafe each night--and set up an ambush?

Casca had had a woman on his mind; now he had to shift his thinking suddenly to Bu Ali. He turned into the dark alley he was abreast of at the moment, ostensibly to piss, actually to sort out in his mind what he was going to do about Bu Ali.

"Psst!"

Well, damn! Looking for a woman and finding Bu Ali. Thinking about Bu Ali and a woman finding him.

Her face was in shadow. Or veiled. But hell! Whores didn't wear veils. She was a shapeless darkness in the shadows against the opposite house wall. Then she apparently pulled open her robe--or whatever it was she was wearing--and her breasts shone like smoked ivory in what little lamplight and moonlight there was in the alley's mouth.

"You want a little?"

Her voice was husky. Almost familiar. That was no problem for Casca. He had known many, many whores. It had been a whore who put the scar on his face. A whore's voice would be familiar, no matter what the language or country. But-

There was something wrong here.

In Casca's brain all kinds of warnings were suddenly being voiced.

She moved slightly, and the breasts seemed to dance provocatively... like the bellies of two Egyptian dancers seen in a three-quarter view.

Interesting.

Yet the voice in Casca's brain still said: *Stay away from this woman*. He thought he knew why. Though she had only said the one short sentence, and though her voice had the husky sound most whores he had known had, there was just the slightest touch of falsity to it. This woman was no ordinary whore. She either had been "quality"--respectable, prosperous, upper class--or still was. It was the "still was" that set every sensitive nerve alarm in Casca going. He remembered the Roman times of Nero when even that imperial bastard had roamed the midnight streets disguised as a thug.

For a thrill.

Roman matrons, highly respected by day, were said to have done the same thing. Just a handful. Hearsay maybe. But in every time and culture Casca had been in, where there were settled cities there was the rumor of rich, respectable women out on the town.

For a thrill.

And that thrill was for them--not for the dumb bastard who let himself be sucked into a weirdo broad's fantasies. Pure poison. Pure poison anywhere. But in a Muslim country... where the ordinary Muslim idea of a woman was of a sex machine operating solely for the benefit of males... Oh, no! This woman was a fake.

Yet, that might not be so. Societies changed. All he knew of the present Muslim world he had seen from the viewpoint of a slave--and he hadn't been in the cities enough, except on "business," to know what went on there. Maybe walking the streets was the way a whore worked in Baghdad. Still... baring the boobs bothered him. Better check this out. Maybe a little friendly conversation first. A jest or two. So he

said:

"Those skinny little muskmelons you got there, do they have tits on the ends of them?"

He was not prepared for the exploding storm that came out of the darkness at him.

Not prepared for the stream of Arabic profanity that poured from the folds of the veil that hid all her face but the hate-slit eyes. "Her" because she was wearing a black burnoose that gaped open showing that she was totally naked underneath and in the moon-light and lamplight it was obvious that she definitely had the other proper equipment to go with the breasts. "Stream" because the oaths were coming so fast Casca could not keep up with them, particularly the ones he had never heard before, which surprised him to no end since he had not lived the gentlest of lives.

But he was prepared for the pearl-handled dagger. Maybe it was the lesson learned from the whore who had originally carved the scar on his face, but Casca invariably made it his practice when around whores--or ones who might be whores--to watch out for the knife. They came in all shapes and sizes, and women could hide them in the damnedest places. So he caught the striking wrist as soon as the steel glinted in the lamplight.

There was one surprise, though. This woman held the knife in a way he had never seen before, as an almost straight extension of the arm, butt cradled far back in the palm of the hand, almost to the wrist, and two fingers resting on top of and extending out over the top of the blade. Hell of a damn way to hold a knife.

Then he got an even greater surprise and promptly lost all interest whatever in the way this woman held a knife. When he caught the wrist he had pushed it up, and since she was coming at him at the time, that threw her up against him, breasts pressed against his robe, belly touching his clothes also. And that close, he could smell her.

Jasmine!

He suddenly remembered his last conversation with Omar Khayyam. He knew of this woman. She had been present when Bu Ali set him up. And her scent had given her away. Now he knew why his intuition had been so strong. This woman was not simply just poison; she was the ultimate danger. It made no difference whether she was the Sultan's wife or a favored concubine. Hell! This was the Jasmine Lady

who had so much power no one would say her name out loud.

He let go of the wrist, but not until he had twisted the knife out of her grasp. He kept the knife and pushed her away from him.

He said, "You better get your ass back to the palace before you get hurt."

That did it. She told him what she was going to do to him when she had the opportunity.

"You don't say." That made her even more furious, which took some doing since she was already just about as furious as a woman could get. "That is a creative way to do it, but I don't think I'm going to let you." He laughed, waiting to see if she would go completely out of control.

She surprised him. Suddenly she was cool. Regal.

She pulled the burnoose together and tied the sash that held it, her long, slim fingers working with de-liberation. She looked him directly in the eyes and said, "My knife."

"Like hell."

"Very well." She turned her back on him, and without another word or another glance, walked slowly down the dark street in the direction of the palace.

That decided the Bu Ali matter, of course. He would have to take care of it tonight. He found a good alley to watch the cafe, hunkered down in the dark-ness, and waited.

A long time. Casca guessed Bu Ali was smoking hashish in the cafe. Despite the overpowering odor of the town Casca thought he caught an occasional whiff of the delightful stuff.

Sometime toward the end of the first watch--by the Hebrew reckoning--Bu Ali came out of the cafe. He was not alone. There was a young boy with him. Casca was too far from the cafe door to hear what they said to each other, but the young boy went one way down the street, and Bu Ali, after watching the boy go into the darkness, turned and went the other way, toward the palace.

"Bu Ali!"

Casca's scimitar was free of its scabbard, and he had already stepped into the street when he issued the challenge.

Bu Ali turned, saw Casca, was momentarily shocked at what he saw and thought to himself, *The sneaky Frank must have held onto a branch on the side of the Bottomless Pit when he fell in*, then drew his own scimitar, and advanced to meet Casca's attack without saying a word. In fact his return was so swift that it became an attack of its own, and it was Casca who had to parry.

Cut.

Thrust.

Parry.

Thrust.

Cut.

They fought in the dappled darkness of the street where the only light was that of the moon and the only sounds the clash of steel on steel, their labored breathing, and the shuffling of their feet on the ancient stone pavement.

Cut.

Thrust.

Parry.

Casca had fought many a man in the centuries since the Jew had damned him. Never, though, had he met a man quicker with the blade, faster with the footwork, more adept at every usage of the scimitar. Bu Ali seemed to anticipate every thrust, every cut. It was almost as though he could read Casca's mind before Casca could himself. Casca was shocked. He had known the big-assed Mameluke was good, but he had never even considered that he might be this good. The realization was coming to Casca very rapidly that Bu Ali not only was as good as he was--Bu Ali was a damn sight better. Instead of wasting the big Mameluke and getting this over with, it looked like it was going to go the other way. *I don't stand a chance with him in a fair fight.*

A fair fight, though, was not the point. The point was taking out Bu Ali. Casca gave ground, desperately trying to come up with some way to overcome Bu Ali's advantage. By now he was sweating. And by now Bu Ali was forcing him ever closer to the palace grounds. Soon the sound of their swordplay would reach the guards.

Have to do something about this . . . damn quick . . .

The ropes came from nowhere.

Behind him. Beside him. Above him. It was all confused in his mind. All he knew was that he was suddenly entangled, like a fly in a spiderweb, and Bu Ali was readying his scimitar to end it all.

"No!"

Bu Ali stopped in mid-motion as though he were frozen into marble.

"Yes, my lady."

Casca saw her then. This time she was in a dark purple burnoose of cloth of Chin or some similar material. In the moonlight the touch of color was like that of the best steel. And she wore a matching dark purple mask. The jasmine smell was now so strong that he could smell it even from where he was standing.

Bu Ali moved, bowed deeply before her, and on rising said, "My compliments to your guards, my lady. I will now take this dog to-"

"No, you will not. You will be rewarded for this night's work. Richly rewarded. But, as for this one-" She did not finish the sentence, but merely said to the big eunuch beside her: "You know where to take him."

Even if he had wanted to resist, Casca never got the chance. One of the eunuchs calmly brained him with something very hard and very heavy....

He was in the seraglio now, strapped to two tables, stripped naked. One table was at a convenient working height for the women with the knives. His legs were stretched out on this one, feet bound down on either side to spread apart the area of concern. The second table was propped against the wall at an angle, the upper part of his body bound to it. His head was free to move so that he could see what was going on. His mouth was free of any gag--so that he could scream. There was an enormous amount of light in the seraglio, lamps everywhere, even great torches flaming dangerously close to the cloth wall hangings.

Silence. The women--there were no eunuchs present--were waiting for something.

Or someone...

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Silence.

Whoever they were waiting for had to be pretty important. Or... *Are they doing this to make it worse on me? Give me time to imagine the worst?*

But Casca already knew the worst. . . .He remem-bered the Quadii in the northlands... the freed women slaves... and what they had done to the men who had raped them.

But at least those women had a reasonable excuse. He got the idea that the ones that would be going after him would be sick, because there were only three of them at the table with the knives. The rest of the harem was standing back, quite a ways back, and from the look on their faces most of them did not want to be there. They had tightened the muscles around their mouths in that implication of extreme disgust that only a woman can express. And one, the little slave girl, Ruth, whom Casca had seen trying to escape, was being forcibly held by a tough old bitch.

They were all fully-clothed. Except for the three at the table with the knives, there was not the slightest suggestion that this crowd of women existed only as sex machines for the Sultan. Nor did this particular room have sexual overtones. It was a large room, very tastefully decorated. There was much use of skillfully-carved wooden pillars, excellent and expensive wall hangings, a beautiful tile floor, and intricate wooden panels on the ceiling. In comparison with Hassan al Sabah's "Paradise"--which looked like a brothel--this "private brothel" looked more like an anteroom to Paradise itself.

Except, hell! Casca knew it was not going to be Paradise for him, not after the three with the knives came after him. He wondered which of the three was the Jasmine Lady, but he had no way of knowing. These three were clothed differently from the other women. Each wore only a single filmy, gownlike garment woven of such thin threads that the cloth was almost transparent--or maybe seemed so because it clung so closely to their bodies. The curves... the hard tits... the triangular bush... These did shout sex! But it was unpleasant sex, twisted, dark sex, though the gowns themselves were white. *Like priest-esses in some diseased cult*Sweat was beginning to form on Casca's face, and not just from the heat of all the burning lamps and torches, either. There was something perverse and sick going on here. The cloth that covered the table, for instance. White cloth of Chin. Incredibly expensive. For a torture room? And the charcoal braziers that heated the pots of boil-ing oil. One was gold. Another silver. Anyone throw-ing wealth around that way had to have something wrong with him. Casca had lived long enough in this world to know that, when you got right down to it, it was ultimately riches that made a man respectable. A pervert who didn't respect gold ... Shit! He could expect the worst. It must be the Sultan himself they were waiting for.

There were two great, carved wooden doors at the far end of the room. These now opened, swinging back to the other side, and through them walked some-one in a scarlet burnoose, wearing a black mask of cloth of Chin and black leather boots. The person was flanked by two Nubian slave eunuchs who carried no weapons. Their skin was oiled until it shone, and they each wore only a black loincloth. If this one in the scarlet burnoose was the Sultan, he sure as hell had kinky tastes--and the Jasmine Lady Casca had seen in the streets must be very, very close to him; it was his clothing she had copied.

The one in the scarlet burnoose stopped just short of Casca and the three women. The two Nubian eunuchs stepped forward and loosened the burnoose, pulled it back, and slipped it from the shoulders of the one in the mask. The slaves bowed in deep abjection, turned and marched back through the doors which were then closed and barred. The sound of the heavy wooden bar falling in place echoed like very distant thunder in the room, and the one who had just come in now walked to the table, selected a knife, and approached Casca.

It was not, of course, the Sultan, but a perfectly nude woman who smelled of jasmine. She leaned across the bound Casca, the tips of her breasts brushing provocatively against the hair of his chest, and tested the ropes that held him to the table. Then she took the knife, holding it in the odd way she had in the street, and carved a single Arabic letter on the flesh of his forearm.

"So..." she said. "We begin..."

* * *

What they did to him he tried to erase from his mind, and after the pain had become totally unbearable it seemed that he had no mind left. There was only pain. And his screams. All the years of conditioning as a soldier, all the courage to bear pain, all that went for naught. And they deliberately prolonged his agony, working slowly... slowly... slowly.

There came a time when the pain had become so great that it went beyond feeling. He no longer felt it. The nerves had been shocked beyond their endurance ... or... that strange healing power in his body was in balance with what they were doing to him. The four women had overreached themselves. In their desire to make him suffer the greatest length of time they had unwittingly slowed their torture to the point that his healing power was taking over. Besides, it was obvious that the three women in the white gowns were turned on sexually by his suffering, and they were taking every opportunity now to bump into each other, to rub close to each other. They wanted sex with one another.

The Jasmine Lady, though, was not so easy to decipher. It was his body she rubbed her naked flesh against, not the three other women. In fact, she kept a distance between herself and them. From time to time she amused herself by leaning over him and cutting more letters in his bloody forearm. So far he could make out no word that made sense, but each time she leaned across him those pendulous breasts, the nipples puckered and hardened, came closer and closer to him, once even brushing across his lips as he lay screaming.

Now, with the pain no longer blinding his mind, he did not have to scream, but he continued to do so while something formed slowly in his mind. Some-thing--it was not yet a plan. But the healing power was bringing his thinking back into play.

There was no hope that the other women in the harem might help, though most of them plainly found what the gang of four were doing so repulsive that they refused to watch. Early on the young slave, Ruth, had thrown up. Later some of the harem women followed suit.

What was strange was the silence. Except for his screams there was no human sound. When he slowed his screams and made them sound as if he were getting weaker and weaker, he could hear the breathing of the women with the knives, could, it seemed, even hear the faint whisper of sound the burning torches on the wall made.

The Jasmine Lady bent over him again, and suddenly he had the plan...

* * *

Casca waited for his chance. The next time she came over him, breasts hanging mockingly just above his face, the gleaming knife in her right hand catching the light, razor-sharp edge held in that flat, odd way that made the knife seem an extension of her hand--or the single deadly steel claw of a beast--he tried to gauge the angles involved, to time the right moment to act. But the effort was almost more than he could manage. By now the pain, though beyond actual feeling, was in some dark region of his brain affecting his thinking and vision. He felt that he was going mad. He fought the silent storm in his brain, knowing that he might be just seconds from unconsciousness.

Then...

She halted her movement.

To taunt him.

Casca lunged.

Threw his head upward all that he could move.

He had only inches to work with, but that was enough; the end of her pendulous breast was in his wide-stretched mouth. Immediately he bit down, bit with all his strength. She screamed. Blood spurted, momentarily blinding his left eye. This close he had no depth perception with the single eye, so he had to guess for the timing of the strike with his fingers as her wrist with the knife jerked down. He was off. Only by a little, but off. Desperately he curled his fingertips inward, felt the sharp edge of the knife, and, though he cut as much of his own flesh as he did the silk rope when he forced the blade back, he made the slash. He was now free from the forearm to the fingers.

Immediately he swept his arm in the only arc possible to him, hoping that his fingers would reach the burning lamp. They did. With room to spare. The lamp upset. The hot oil it had held flamed up, lighted by the wick, and the burning oil fired the cloth of Chin on the table where he was bound.

Now, if he could only ignite his ropes...

Clawing with his fingers on the returning sweep of his arm, he did manage to grab the burning cloth and jerk it toward him. He did not wait to see if the oil that spilled on the ropes would burn them through.

He had other things to do. Just as his arm made the return arc, he released the bloody bit of her breast and at the same time got her wrist with his fingers. He had correctly guessed that she would jerk back, and with a rolling motion of his finger grip, he broke the knife free from her grasp and had it in his hand.

The oil was burning. Marching fingers of flame were circling his body, and where they touched the ropes, the ropes themselves caught fire.

Though he had the knife, he could not use it to get at the ropes that held his elbows. And at that moment one of the women bending over his penis dropped her knife. The point cut into his scrotum. The temporary numbness in his mind was overthrown, and he screamed with unbearable pain.

Yet he could still use the knife on the other wrist. He swept the blade across his body cutting the wrist

ropes and immediately reached up with both hands, plunging the knife into her unhurt breast. When she grabbed for the breast, with almost a continuation of his movement, he caught both of her wrists and pulled down with all his might.

The leverage was difficult, but her involuntary movement down helped somewhat. He managed to pull her partway across his chest, far enough so that he could force her mask into the fire. The flaming oil caught the black cloth of Chin mask immediately. The face was ablaze. Then her hair. She ran shrieking around the room.

Casca strained at the ropes. They were breaking--but taking, it seemed, an eternity. The flimsy clothing of the three women at the table was now ablaze, and the women were screaming. One rushed toward the window. Another, blinded by the flames, rushed straight into the wall. The collision of her burning body with the wall hangings set that material afire. In seconds the whole room was aflame, and now the women who watched were also screaming.

The screams of the women brought the eunuchs. Casca was not yet free, and he could see the head eunuch coming for him, a huge scimitar in his hands.

But he could also see the set, determined face of the little Jewish slave girl, Ruth. He could see her push over the huge amphora of oil so that it spilled into the path of the eunuch. The eunuch slipped, and the scimitar fell from his grasp and hit the tile floor, its clatter lost in the rising screams of the harem women.

But Casca was now free. He tried to get over the edge of the table, but pain and weakness held him back. He, too, was afire, the ropes that clung to his bloody flesh, the oil spilled on him, both burning.

"Please, help me!"

The little Jewish girl was calling to him for help. The third harem torturer, though dress afire, was head-ing toward her, dagger in hand.

Casca yanked the knife from the breast of the screaming Jasmine Lady and threw it. The blade turned over twice in the air, and then the point buried itself into the back of the neck of the woman, and she pitched forward, falling just short of the young girl.

The effort gave Casca a second burst of strength. He managed to get off the table and get the scimitar. But he was still bent over when the second eunuch was upon him, swinging a sword. Casca pulled the scimitar upward in a sweeping circle, somewhat ragged because of his weakness, and slit the eunuch's throat. Not expertly, but it did the job. Then he slashed the first eunuch across the face and saw blood, and then saw the nose disappear.

He was losing consciousness, and his eyesight was going, coming back only in short, blurred bursts. He had a vague image of eunuchs with swords slipping in the blood and oil and tangling in a burning, twisting heap as the oil caught fire and blazed up, but it may have been only a wish, a dream.

All dreams.

He was gone now.

"Come, stranger. Come. There is a secret way out."

This dream, this voice seeming to sound in his brain, was even stronger than the others. He could even imagine a touch--that he was holding the hand of Ruth the young slave girl.

But, again, he had slipped into darkness.

Still, ragged pieces of dreams, like ravenous birds, bit at his mind. None of them made sense. There were moments when he had images of cold stone walls. Of dampness. A tunnel? None of it mattered. It was only the breaking up of a dying man's brain.

Then there were no dream pieces.

Only blackness.

The strangest dream of all.

No images.

Only words. He heard Ruth call out the name Mir-iam. Then another voice. Miriam the whore? "We'll have to carry him."

Then only the merciful darkness. The silence. The nothingness...

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"You ready to wake up, son?"

Casca opened his eyes.

The face bending over him was that of an old Arab--or was it? The face was fully-bearded, and the beard was gray. The eyes were world-weary but kindly. And the voice was gentle.

If I'm dead, wherever I've gone, the people here sure don't fit the descriptions given out by any of the religions I've known.

He was going to close his eyes again and start this dream all over when he saw beyond the man leaning over him the faces of two women--the grinning, red-headed Miriam, the whore from the Cafe of the Infidels; and the shy, smiling Ruth, the slave girl from the Sultan's seraglio.

"What-" he began, but the old man put gentle fingers on his lips.

"No. There's no point in you asking the questions. It's obvious what you want to know, and it won't take long to tell you. But, first, lie quietly and listen. Your healing still has a long way to go." The old man's voice was soft, but it carried a great deal of authority. Casca's first reaction was that it was a very clear,

rational voice. Then it suddenly dawned on him that what he was thinking must have shown in his face, for the old man smiled slightly and said, "Yes, Latin. I can use Arabic if you wish. Or Aramaic. Or any of half a dozen other languages you prefer, but in your delirium you were crying out in Latin, a language neither of these girls speak, so they called me. If Latin is your native language, why then we will use it, though of course that means the two girls here will not know what we are talking about."

The old man sat down on a stool beside Casca's bed, and it was then that Casca realized that he was in some kind of very narrow bed, in a very, very small room. There was something extremely odd about the room, but he couldn't tell what it was.

What he could tell, though, was that under the soft covers, something bound him to the bed.

Again the old man anticipated him and smiled. "For your protection. To keep you from thrashing about and reopening the wounds. I think the girls can take them off now, but perhaps we shouldn't be in too big a hurry. Agreed?"

Casca nodded. Somehow he trusted this old Arab... though, come to think of it, the man might not be as old as he seemed. And there was something just a little non-Arab about the structure of his face.

This time the man laughed aloud. "You are perceptive, aren't you? All right, then, we'll satisfy your curiosity by starting with me rather than with where you are. I am the Sheikh Faisal ibn Said, a partly-senile, partly-addled old Bedouin who has a small, poor team of the best Arabic calligraphers in all of Islam. Wood, stone, metal, parchment--you name it. If you want the letters of the Koran written with style and flourish--and pious devotion, of course--why, wait until poor old man Faisal shows up in your neighborhood. And, he works cheap."

The glint of amusement in Faisal's eye was as impish as that of a small boy. "So you're liable to see Faisal almost anywhere. Harmless old fellow. Even has a small harem, as any good Muslim should."

Casca grinned. He suddenly remembered what Mamud had told him long ago about the caravan they had passed on their way to Baghdad, the one with the calligraphy on each cart bearing an ancient quotation from the Koran. Faisal again touched his lips.

"No. Now you are anticipating me. And, yes, there is another Faisal--though the name is not Faisal, the race is not Arabic, and the religion is not Islam. I am a Jew. Every drop of blood in my body is Jewish

blood. Religion? The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Occupation? Well, yes, I am a good calligrapher. The best, as a matter of fact. It is true, how-ever, that I also have a sideline, a small personal interest of mine that I have practiced for a number of years now without getting caught once. Well, I prob-ably shouldn't brag about the once part. Once is all it would take. Even suspicion would be enough. My sideline? Why, my Roman friend, very simple. I believe in freedom. Freedom for all men--and women. And dignity. If one's idea of the Deity doesn't make his life richer and fuller, why, my friend, I would say his idea is wrong. But enough of religion since I am what is known as a 'liberal' in these quarters, and who the hell wants to listen to a liberal?"

"Well, now. My sideline. All abstract words. Of course, a calligrapher lives with words, so that shouldn't be considered unusual. But the trouble with abstract ideas is that you can't feel them or touch them or taste them or see them--or do anything construc-tive with them until they are translated into concrete acts or things. So my sideline was long ago translated into one very concrete act. The Arabs have enslaved many a daughter of my people, so, whenever I get the chance--and I get chances, my Roman friend--I steal the daughters of my people from their slavery and take them where they can be free. That's the reason for all the trappings of this caravan. These women are not my harem; most of them are rescued slaves I'm taking to freedom."

"Now, you. The only way I can hide you is to put you here with the women. Even when you're well enough to move about." Faisal smiled. "You see why I wouldn't let you ask questions? I like to talk, my Roman friend. I like to talk. And I cultivate the odd-ities in my personality so that I can continue to seem added to the Arabs. He reached down and smoothed the bedcover under Casca's chin... as a father might an ill child. "I leave you to the women."

* * *

After Faisal's clear Latin, Miriam's Arabic at first sounded stilted in Casca's mind.

"Thou hast suffered much, O one with the scarred face," she said softly as she bent over him to pull back the covers. He could feel her fingers on his wrist unloosing the knots of the cords that held him, but he was studying the profile of her face, so he was not looking at his own body... or clothes.

There was a gentleness in her face that drew him.

Then-

"Damn!"

"What is it, O scarred one?"

The slave girl, Ruth, who had started to help Mir-iam, was also startled. Her brown eyes were wide.

"My clothes! What have you got on me?"

Now both women laughed.

"These look like women's clothes!"

"Ah, yes. But they are."

"Women's clothes?"

"But, of course. How else would one be dressed in the birthing wagon?"

"Birthing wagon?"

"Look, Roman Nose, we had to hide you. The Sultan was wild with rage when he found his palace afire. His men searched every inch of Baghdad. We had what they were looking for--you--bloody, out-of-your-head, raving you. So Faisal said put you in the birthing wagon, strap you down, make it look like you were just about to give birth, but give you some-thing to keep you unconscious. It worked in Baghdad, so we decided to keep it up. And after a couple of days, after you had healed up enough so we could move you a little, we dressed you. Just in case. Good thing, too. Just the other day we were stopped, and one of the Sultan's men even insisted on looking in the birthing wagon. When he saw what you looked like sleeping, he was satisfied. By the way, how do you like your hair?"

"Hair?" Casca jerked his hand up to his scalp. There was still hair there. Plenty of it. What in Hades was she talking about?

Ruth brought him a small brass mirror and stood back, grinning.

"Damn!"

The hair was red--even in one of the silver mirrors favored by Egyptians over the brass ones like the Hebrews liked, it would still be red--the same red as Miriam's had been when he first saw her in the Cafe of the Infidels.

But it wasn't just the hair that shocked Casca.

"By Mithra! What in Hades have you done to my face?"

"Oh, Roman Nose, you didn't really think we women were born with the smooth faces you see, did you? A little something here. A little something there. A little rice flour. A touch of kohl. And a few other things." She smiled impishly. "We're pretty good, aren't we? How do you like your new face, the one that's saved your neck so far?"

Well, she had a point there. He held the mirror up again and liked what he saw even less than he had the first time. They had shaved his face so smooth it was impossible to see where the hairs had been, and they had put something on it halfway between paint and oil, so that even his scar--in which Casca had a certain pride--was no longer visible. He couldn't tell what they had done to his eyebrows--cut them, trimmed them, something--but now they had a thin, even line. His eyelids were darkened. It was no longer his face; it was the face of a woman. Not, however, a beautiful young woman. They had known the limitations of the material they were working with, and they had made him up as a woman a little the worse for wear.

"We women are magicians, are we not?"

Hmpf!

We women . . .where did she get that shit? Sudden fear gripped Casca.

"Er..."

"What is it, Roman Nose?"

"Am I...er..."

"Are you what?"

"The women... did they-"

Miriam laughed uproariously. "No! We got to you just in time. And I've never seen anybody heal as fast as you do. But it was a near thing."

"Then I'm... all right?"

"I hope you are. Because I intend to test you just as soon as you're able... to perform at your best, that is. I've never had a man of my own choosing, one I 'put together myself,' so to speak. No, Roman Nose, I'm betting--and hoping--you'll be as good as new. Now, drink this. It will put you back to sleep again."

* * *

So Casca lived with the women. Even when he was well enough to be up and about, Miriam insisted that he continue the charade. Something about "in-spiration." Casca did not tell her that he had never needed "inspiration" before. To tell the truth, though, he did dread moving back with the men, because he knew, the first smartass who made a crack would get his grinning face smashed in. And that didn't seem quite fair, considering all the risks these men had run for him. Besides, at least three more times the

caravan was stopped by groups of the Sultan's men, and each time it was the disguise as a woman that saved Casca. Miriam and Ruth had it easier. Ruth was dressed as a young boy--the Sultan's men probably thought "eunuch"--and for Miriam, slovenly dress, a smear of dirt on her face, and black hair changed her completely. Casca thought the black hair was probably original, since, when he asked how she got his hair red, she answered, "Henna. From Egypt."

Miriam was unlike any whore Casca had ever known. She did have one failing though, religion. (After his own unfortunate experience with the religious, Casca tended to see danger signals in the piety of others.) Yet he had to admit that Miriam, like Faisal, saw religion as something that made life better rather than the other way around, which was what Casca had so often seen. She delighted in reading to him stories from the religious scrolls Faisal had stored in secret compartments in his own cart. One story in particular she came back to over and over--the story of Rahab the whore who had hidden two Israelites under the cane rush of her roof in order to save them from the king's men. Casca suspected Miriam saw in Rahab the whore a reflection of herself. It seemed that she had helped Faisal often before. There *was* a secret passageway into the seraglio.

"Then I wasn't dreaming?"

"The pain you must have been in, you might have been dreaming. Of death. But, no, we were there. It was the night agreed on for me to come for Ruth."

"Lucky for me."

"Luck? No, Roman Nose. The hand of God."

There was no point in arguing with her. She had this faith in a God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob so deeply ingrained in her that Casca resisted the temptation to kid her about it. Hell, she even gave credit for his rapid healing to her "prayers" for him. *A nice twist*, he thought. *Here's a whore who's more religious than most "respectable" women I have known.* Yet, oddly, her religious feelings weren't obnoxious. Kinda nice, in a strange sort of way.

The primary thing about her was, of course, her body. Somewhere there probably were more beautiful bodies--nothing is ever so good it can't be bettered somewhere else, Casca had to remind himself. But this body here and now was damn, damn good, and increasingly he looked forward to bedding her.

There was one problem, though. This intimacy with women was too much. This eating with them, bathing with them, dressing with them--this living with them constantly did things to a man. Casca wondered if-

"Tonight."

"What?"

Casca had been hunkered down on the hard board seat at the front of the cart, watching the line of mountains ahead toward which they jolted, when Miriam had come up behind him and spoken into his ear in a voice so low it was almost inaudible.

"Tonight," she repeated. "You're well now. We've waited long enough. Tonight I bed you--or you bed me, if your manly pride insists it be that way."

* * *

That night, two things:

One, he was healed completely.

Good as new.

And, two, she was very, very good....

* * *

"Time to go." It was Faisal's voice, rousing Casca out of sleep. When he looked up, his arms still around the nude body of the sleeping Miriam snuggled against his own naked flesh, he saw amused approval in Faisal's eyes.

"Time to go," Faisal repeated. "Before the dawn comes."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Dawn found Casca miles from the caravan, riding an old French warhorse and wearing a secondhand suit of armor but with a brand-new identity. He was now a knight, and he had a rolled-up parchment scroll in a brass case to prove it. "Not that it will do all that much good," Faisal had said. "I've never known a knight yet who could read and write, and the monks are so poor at it--about all they can do is stumble through a little of their Bible--that almost any piece of paper with writing on it will impress them."

So Casca was now Sir Cayce Noire of Ruthmir in Ireland.

"Why Ireland?"

"I don't know. An old man's private whim I suppose. When I was younger--much younger than you--I was a soldier, a mercenary. I soldiered with a lot of men, but one I recall said he came from Ireland."

"Where's that?" I asked.

"He said, 'in the Western sea,' and, frankly, I don't know where that is--or whether such a place actually exists. But he was a damn good soldier. You are, too, so it fits. Besides, it's a good idea to have you from some very unfamiliar place. An Irish mercenary in Norman armor. The 'Noire' is for that black boss on your shield. The 'Ruthmir' I made up from Ruth and Miriam. There again none of the knights you might meet is going to show his ignorance by admitting he never heard of such a place. That's the beauty of dealing with ignorant people, my Roman friend. The one thing they least want known is the depth of their own ignorance."

So Casca had set out in the darkness for a castle in the hills ahead that Faisal knew about. It was on the route the Frankish pilgrims took to Jerusalem and was patrolled by a group of monks antagonistic to the order in Jerusalem. (The order of the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem to which Friar Dilorenzi had belonged.) Casca did not tell Faisal that it was he who had assassinated the friar. These monks were competing for the "honor"--there must be money in it somewhere, Casca interpreted--of aiding the

pil-grims, and they were putting together a military arm.

"A perfect opening for you," Faisal had said. "You can 'consider' joining them, go with the next band of pilgrims heading west, and then when you get to the sea you're on your own." Faisal smiled. He was hold-ing the lamp while Casca mounted the horse, and the amusement of the brown eyes in the bearded face was matched by the amusement in his voice: "It's not exactly healthy for you in Persia right now, and won't be for a hundred years. But, of course, you won't be around then."

Want to bet?Casca thought, but he didn't say it. He had looked down then into Miriam's eyes... Well, life for him had always been, would always be, one farewell after another...

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Now that was all behind him. The dawn had just begun to redden the bottom part of the eastern sky. Everything else was dark, and it had been a moonless night. He could not even see the mass of the mountains ahead. *Guess I'm going in the right direction . . .* Faisal had shown him which group of stars to follow toward the mountains, and he supposed he had done it right. Until the clouds had obscured his view. It had been an odd night, though, up until the clouds appeared. There had been an awful lot of shoot-ing stars. Casca remembered what Omar Khayyam had said about "swarms" of shooting stars. This must be one of the "swarms."

Well, he would never see Khayyam again. Too bad. He had liked the old man.

Someone else that he would never see again was Bu Ali. He had asked Faisal about the big Mameluke and discovered that the night of the palace fire had been almost as disastrous for Bu Ali as for him. The Jasmine Lady had turned her fury on Bu Ali--by some logic known only to Turkish women of her turn of mind--and blamed him. Warned by his own spies, Bu Ali had gotten out just in time. As best Faisal knew he was now back at Castle Alamut with Hassan al Sabah, but that might or might not be true. Anyway, Casca decided, it probably didn't matter. It would be nice to go back and settle the score with Bu Ali--but it wouldn't be too damn smart.

As the clouds cleared another shooting star blazed in the sky, this one very bright indeed. In the darkness, Casca smiled to himself as he remembered the feeling that something unusual and important might happen to him--the feeling that night, years past now, in Mamud's camp. Hell, nothing unusual or important had happened to him--just more of the same old shit. But that was all over now. There sure wouldn't be anything exciting going on with the monks and the knights. If he ever got to the castle. *Hope I'm not lost.*

He did not doubt Faisal's belief that he would be taken for what he said he was. After all, he looked the part. And while his equipment did not make him look prosperous, it was at least serviceable. Body armor was basically the *byrnie* or chain mail. He wore hose of mail and steel knee caps. His *lorica* or cuirass was of pretty tough leather. He was not particularly fond of his *gambeson*, the quilted garment worn under his mail, since it smelled strongly of perfume--one of Faisal's ladies had accidentally broken a vial of rosewater over it. But he knew that monks and knights were usually so dirty that one more smell would make very little difference.

His weapons left a little something to be desired. He had a short, two-edged sword, not as good as a gladius, but better than a *spatha*; a battle-axe that had seen better days; and a lance with a larger-than-usual head and an extra-heavy shaft. It was a little too heavy for throwing, but excellent for the style coming into vogue of using the weight of the charging horse to add to the thrust. Personally Casca felt that this was a passing fancy, but one never knew in warfare. Old ways passed out of favor, were forgotten, then rediscovered, and the cycle would be repeated.

He had a decent shield. Stout wood. Leather-covered. All in all he was in pretty good shape for whatever he was likely to face.

That is, if he was going to face anything, which he doubted.

Two more shooting stars burned in the sky and they seemed even brighter than the last one, so bright that he could see briefly that he was going up a slight rise ahead, and, beyond whatever lay in the dip below--if there was a dip--there was the castle.

Wrong. Now he knew he was lost. *Damn. Persia's been one pain in the ass after another. It's better if I just get my ass out of here now.*

Deciding definitely on that course of action, he was relieved and took off in a direction he felt would take him out of Persia the quickest possible way.

* * *

The armor had gotten hot as the sun climbed in the sky, and he took off the helmet so he could at least breathe. The henna Miriam had originally put on his hair had pretty well worn off by now, and his eye-brows had grown out, but he didn't really expect to see any of the Sultan's men in this particular area. As best he could remember from his days with Shapur, this was poorly-inhabited country with just a few hill tribes. In other words, it wasn't worth bothering with.

Except for Hassan al Sabah. The head of the As-sassins had gotten into a dispute (a religious dispute) with anImamsomewhere around here while Casca was still a Novice. But, of course, that had been a few years ago.

No, the biggest problem was the very perfection of the disguise Faisal had prepared for him. Any car-avan he might meet would be a Muslim caravan, and they would not take kindly to the presence of a lone Frankish knight in their midst.

Just before the sun reached its noon zenith he did spot one such caravan in the distance, and he turned hastily off the trail into rough ground that was covered by coarse shrubbery, a few stunted trees, and up ahead where the narrow path he was following in a deep-ening defile turned right, a fairly respectable-sized tree. The pattern of the under-growth suggested to Casca that there might be water ahead. If not, there ought to be enough cool shade for him to get out of this damn iron clothing and take a nap, letting the caravan he had seen get ahead of him.

But turning into the defile had been a mistake.

Before he got to the tree with the big branches, he was confronting the one man in all of Persia he had thought he was least likely to meet-

Bu Ali.

Bu Ali and two big ex-Mamelukes who had been in the group that had taken Casca back toward Castle Alamut at the time Casca had plunged into the Bot-tomless Pit.

Apparently the affair of theImamhadn't been set-tled years ago, and Bu Ali was over in this area either to settle it, or already had settled it.

Casca was far enough away from the three men--all of them mounted--not to hear their talk, but he was close enough to see the look of astonishment on Bu Ali's face at finding a Frankish knight in this unlikely spot and then the recognition of just who that knight was. *The man must have nine lives*. If Casca had heard what he was thinking, he would have corrected the misinformed Assassin. Bu Ali drew his sword, said something to the two Mamelukes, kicked his horse in the ribs, and charged.

Bu Ali, too, like Casca, was wearing armor, and, also like Casca, he had left off his helmet. But Bu Ali had a big butt, difficult to fit in chain mail--particularly since what he was wearing was probably taken from some dead Frankish knight--so there was a line where the mail did not come all the way down, as the scarlet *gambeson* he was wearing plainly showed. But armor or no armor mattered little. Bu Ali was the better with the blade; Casca knew that in seconds his own head would be rolling along the rocky path.

No time for anything fancy. Casca hefted the lance with the heavy head, aimed it at Bu Ali's scarlet strip of *gambeson*, kicked his own horse in the ribs--not, however, with totally satisfactory results. Casca's horse had had a hard day. But he did get up some speed. Casca held the lance with both hands. They had just passed the tree with the big limbs when the hit came.

Since Bu Ali's horse was traveling faster, the lance was ripped out of Casca's hands, but the lance head had already been buried deep in Bu Ali's gut. When the shaft of the lance dropped from Casca's hands and fell to the rough rocks of the path, because of the shock, the lance shaft-end wedged instantly between two large rocks, and the momentum of Bu Ali's charge tossed him up and over the neck of his horse on the end of the lance being thrown upward. And when he and the lance reached the top of the arc, there was the crook in the branch of the tree to catch his head by the neck and leave him hanging there while the lance, steel head red with blood, dropped. He was dead before he hit the tree, but the broken neck would have taken care of matters had he been living.

Casca, reining in his horse and looking back, saw Bu Ali hanging in the tree and thought of one of the stories Miriam had read him--Absalom, son of David...

But he didn't think about it for long. There were still the two ex-Mamelukes, and all he had was one short sword. He turned to face them.

Neither had yet drawn a weapon, though Casca recognized the biggest one as the second best archer in Mamud's band of slavers. The other man was Kar-zan (the Mameluke who guarded Casca on the ill-fated journey to Castle Alamut).

The two rode slowly up to Casca and stopped just short of him. The big archer spoke first, his voice formal and surprisingly officious as befitted the officer-type that he was:

"Kasim al Jirad, thou hast done what befits a man wronged as you have been wronged. We will make no mention of thy name in our formal report to the lord Hassan al Sabah. Go thou in peace, and may the blessings of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate go with thee."

Karzan spoke up next.

"The Master will know only that a big Frank in an iron suit killed Bu Ali. He kept his helmet on; we never saw his face. Go now and make for yourself a new life."

So once again Casca headed north. In mid-afternoon he came upon the caravan he had avoided, this time having recognized who the two men were.

"Kasim! Kasim! Join us, my son! Join us!" Omar Khayyam was happily drunk. His son, much less so, explained to Casca the reason for the caravan and its destination. The court of Persia was not a particularly pleasant place to be at the moment, so Omar had left for an extended period to "take astronomical obser-vations." Actually they were headed for the Rh'shan country to the north. The big bully Rh'shan Casca had taken off Omar's son several years ago had now become--since the Rh'shans were strange people--the son's fast friend. He had shared with the son some of the cereal wine which the Rh'shans drank. This, put through the alembic and "improved," had become a wonderful nectar, clear as the purest water, which Omar Khayyam's son had named "vd'khan", after the sound in his throat when he first took a drink of it. Now the caravan was on a humanitarian "mission of mercy" to the Rh'shans; they were going to introduce vd'khan to them.

"Mission of mercy?" Casca asked.

"Yes. They need help. The people are all right--but they got the toughest set of rulers you ever saw..."

Casca thought, *What the hell, I've got nothing bet-ter to do, and all the time in the world to do it in*

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