

Annabella Crabtree: Hunter

By Nick Creech

Volume II of the Annabella trilogy



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Set in Times New Roman

*For my family.
Some of whom have actually read this one too,
and particularly for
Deborah.*

*Historical note:
Within the bounds of conflicting and imprecise sources I have
attempted to be scrupulously accurate in all matters of what
might be considered fact.*

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ALSO BY NICK CREECH

Annabella Crabtree, Volume 1: Hunted

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Beekle Henry

A Way with Dragons

The Blob, the Frog, the Dog and the Girl

Three-P

Galiconia

THE AUTHOR

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Chapter 1

The hands, strangely miniature, were now just shrieking nerve ends, vessels of pain beyond imagining. Nevertheless, they groped their way onwards, ever onwards through the boiling, glutinous mud, compulsively sifting, sieving, searching. It was a hopeless quest, utterly futile, a quest doomed to eternal failure, a quest sparked by that one, faint tremor at the surface so long ago, the significance of which had taken years to penetrate his layers of agony. Yet, however vain, the quest was purpose and the hands crept on, fanatical, implacable, alert for the slightest anomaly...

A finger touched something solid, searing, scarifying, but instead of jerking away from this amplified agony, the hand closed convulsively on what was a heavy, gold chain. Threaded on the chain was a massive ring, also of gold. It bore a curious device, a six-pointed star formed of interlocking triangles. Each of the smaller triangles so created was inset with a tiny triangular ruby...

Annabella and Vivienne came to a nervous stop at the entrance to the administrative offices. As Annabella had once remarked rather bitterly, when girls travelled in pairs there always seemed to be an attractive one and a companion whose modest attributes, well, none really, merely served to emphasise the other's looks. And even in her school uniform, it had to be said that Vivienne, with her gamin blonde hair and blossoming figure, was middling spectacular, all sweet sixteen and ripe to be kissed. Annabella, on the other hand, was easy to dismiss as just another stick-skinny schoolgirl, secretly despairing of ever developing; easy to dismiss, that is unless one took the trouble to notice her brilliant blue eyes were informed with remarkable inner fire.

"What do you think she wants?" Vivienne said for the third time. They had been summoned to an interview with the headmistress, Mrs Gordon, known not entirely affectionately as the Gorgon. For the most part she was a quiet and rational woman but with the capacity, at need, to become totally terrifying, as over the years many a wayward young lady had discovered to her cost.

Annabella shrugged. Her conscience was reasonably clear for once and she felt no particular need to be apprehensive. Another year, another school and there really hadn't been time for them to curry any particular disfavour at this new establishment. Last year's school had not been a success – Vivienne had been bullied, as usual, and Annabella had gone to war as a result – and Flintlock College before that had been a complete disaster for both of them.

"Guess we'll soon find out," Annabella said pushing through the swing doors and holding them open for Vivienne. Vivienne's eyes, she noticed, were suddenly very large and round, a response to alarm that Annabella had not seen for some considerable time.

Mrs Gordon peered at them over the top of her spectacles and motioned them to sit. She looked rather more concerned than angry, Annabella thought, and wondered why.

There were four neat stacks of paper spread across Mrs Gordon's handsome inlaid desk. She tapped one of the piles.

"I have here your exam and test papers for Latin and French going back to when you started at the school at the beginning of term," she said in a neutral voice. "Would you care to explain...? Let me rephrase that. I require you to explain how it can possibly be that both of you have scored 100 per cent on every occasion."

The charge, for charge it was, was so unexpected that Annabella was surprised into an indiscretion.

"Natural talent," she said reflexively, wondering at the same time how she could possibly explain that she and Vivienne had both been blessed with the gift of tongues, to the point where to pass the time in class when everybody else but Vivienne had been concerned with hic, haec, hoc, she had ploughed her way through Caesar's Gallic Wars, *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*, in the original from beginning to end.

Annabella was also unhappily certain that any mention of the word djinni would be met with total disbelief.

"I would really prefer you not to be impertinent," Mrs Gordon said sharply.

"You're accusing us of cheating, and I resent that," Annabella responded, equally sharply.

"And have you not been?" Mrs Gordon's voice was now on the harsh side of severe.

"No we haven't," Annabella said. "It just so happens that we are both very good at languages." Mrs Gordon reared back. It was not so much what Annabella had said that startled her, but the fact that Annabella was now speaking in fluent, idiomatic Latin.

"I beg your pardon," she said. Latin was not a subject that Mrs Gordon had ever taught.

Annabella tried her in French with the same result. Mrs Gordon's field happened to be chemistry with a dash of physics.

"And just exactly what does that mean?" she demanded.

"It means," Annabella said slowly, wondering whether she was making a huge mistake. "It means that we can speak any language at any time."

Mrs Gordon stared at them both for a long, considering minute.

At last she broke the silence. "I don't believe you," she said flatly. "How could I possibly believe you?"

"Test us," Annabella said equally flatly. "You think we're cheats. You have to let us prove we're not."

Again Mrs Gordon stared at them and then evidently came to an abrupt decision.

"All right," she said. "Have you ever been to Africa?"

Both girls shook their heads.

"I have a friend at an embassy who speaks several African languages," Mrs Gordon continued. "I'm going to get him on the phone." And she was greatly surprised when neither girl made any attempt to forestall her.

The voice coming over the conference call was deep and pleasantly modulated, though it was apparent that the headmistress had not the least idea of what it might be saying.

"Evangelina has asked me to address you in Kiswahili," the man said. "For some strange reason of her own she wants to see if you can understand me. Do you?"

"Ndiyo, bwana," Vivienne said.

"Hakuna matata," Annabella added. They looked sideways at each other. Who would have thought that Mrs Gordon could possibly possess such an exotic first name?

The man on the telephone then proceeded to draw them expertly into a round of the sort of conversation you might hear at any embassy cocktail party, except twice he changed languages. After some 10 minutes, he switched to English.

"Evangelina?"

"Yes?" The headmistress said.

"Well I can tell you that both these young ladies are perfectly fluent in Swahili, Shona and Arabic, quite remarkably so... If ever they should need a job..."

"Thank you for your help, Mr Ambassador," Mrs Gordon managed to say and, though deeply discombobulated, brought the call to a courteous end.

She sat unmoving at her desk, staring into the middle distance between them.

"I am still not convinced," she said at last. "Come with me."

She rose, took her coat and bag, then strode from the office, Vivienne and Annabella trailing in her wake.

"I'll be back in half an hour or so," she threw over her shoulder to her secretary.

Outside, she marched the girls through to the car park discreetly hidden from view behind the main school building, ushered them into her sensible sedan and drove into town. It was still well before the lunchtime rush and she had no trouble getting a park outside her favourite restaurant. The front door was not yet open so she led them down an alley and back up the lane. At that moment, a smallish man emerged dragging a large waste bin.

"Wait here," Mrs Gordon commanded the girls. They stopped and watched as Mrs Gordon approached the man, who broke into a warm smile. They spoke for some minutes and then she beckoned Vivienne and Annabella forward.

"Mr Tran is Vietnamese," she said to them.

"Ban co khoe khong?" he said, bowing slightly.

"Cam on ban toi khoe," the girls replied politely in unison.

They talked on for some minutes. It turned out that Mr Tran had a daughter much the same age and he was interested to compare notes. Mrs Gordon, on the other hand, looked more and more distressed the longer they chatted, and eventually she interrupted.

"I'm afraid we must go, Mr Tran," she said, speaking somewhat distractedly.

"Thank you so much for your help..." She turned on her heel and walked off, leaving Vivienne and Annabella to deal with the pressing invitation from Mr Tran to stay to

lunch. He was disappointed to see them go so soon as it was seldom he had the chance to speak to anyone other than his family and one or two friends in his own language.

The girls were again seated in Mrs Gordon's office. Mrs Gordon, herself, was standing with her back to them, staring out the window. Abruptly, she swung round.

"And would you care to suggest exactly what I am to do with you?" she demanded. There was a long silence. Eventually Annabella spoke.

"Why must you do anything?" she said carefully. Mrs Gordon spluttered.

"It's unheard of, that's why," she managed to say at last. "It's... It's..."

"Magic," Annabella supplied.

Mrs Gordon stared at her.

"Are you serious?" she demanded.

"Yes," Annabella said. "Yes I am. But that's no reason you have to *do* anything about us, is there? I mean, if it bothers you we could start making mistakes. Would that help?"

"Magic!" Mrs Gordon exclaimed.

"Put it this way," Annabella said. "There are 6,909 spoken languages in the world..."

"Give or take," Vivienne interrupted. "We looked it up..."

"And so far, we haven't found one that we can't speak," Annabella continued. "So that seems pretty magical to us."

Mrs Gordon moved slowly to her chair and sank down. She put her hands flat on the desk as though seeking stability.

"Six thousand, nine hundred!" she said helplessly.

"And nine," Vivienne added helpfully and repeated: "Give or take..."

"If anyone finds out..." Mrs Gordon said, speaking more to herself than anything. "The press! Television! My god..."

"Then you would want us to start making mistakes?" Annabella asked gently.

"I want... I don't know what I want." Mrs Gordon took a deep breath. "Annabelle, Vivienne..."

"Annabella!" Annabella said with automatic vexation. Mrs Gordon ignored her completely.

"How can this be?" she went on. "It's just not possible. It must be some sort of trick. Explain yourselves. I demand you explain yourselves."

The girls looked at each other. Vivienne's eyes, Annabella saw, were suddenly growing very large again. She made an abrupt decision.

"Our great-uncle has a spooky old manor house in the country," she began, inventing freely. "We were staying there in the holidays and one night we both had the same dream. We dreamed we found a big, old jar in the attic and trapped inside was a djinni. We let him out and in return he gave us the gift of tongues..."

"That's impossible," Mrs Gordon interrupted.

"I didn't say it was possible," Annabella replied. "I said it was a dream. But a dream that came true."

"And that's all you have to say?" Annabella shrugged.

"I can't explain it," she said. "But we can definitely speak all these languages."

Two days had passed in an excess of nervous anticipation – particularly for Vivienne – and now they had been summoned again, to present themselves for judgement.

"Maybe we should take a mirror," Annabella had remarked facetiously on the way.

"What?" Vivienne said.

"So we can watch her reflection and not be petrified."

"What?" Vivienne said again, quite uncomprehending.

"Joke," Annabella said, sighing slightly. "Never mind."

"I don't get it."

"Gorgon..." Annabella said patiently. "Perseus... His shield..."

"What?"

But Annabella was saved from further explanation by their arrival. The PA looked up as they pushed their way diffidently through the swing doors.

"I'm to take you straight in," she said, getting up from behind her desk.

Mrs Gordon was again standing at the window, lost in contemplation of the school grounds, spread invitingly before her. She swung round as the girls entered.

"Sit down, please," she said. Her voice was neutral and her face gave nothing away.

"I have spoken with your parents..." Vivienne made a small, unconscious movement. "I mean to say in your case, Vivienne, your adoptive parents..." Mrs Gordon hesitated and then went to sit behind her desk.

"We spoke for hours," she went on, her face taking on an abstracted look. "At first they asked me just to let it go, to accept... your gift for what it is. But how could I possibly do that? I have a responsibility, after all, to you, indeed to them. So then they tried to explain, a little, enough to... shut me up..." A rueful smile, just a hint, flitted across Mrs Gordon's face.

"Of course, one thing inevitably led to another so I heard the whole story, incredible as it is." She paused. "... Just mind-boggling. Totally mind-boggling." She paused again.

"I don't suppose you'd like to tell me that's all it is, a story? An invention? Fiction? A novel you're writing?"

Annabella and Vivienne gazed stolidly back at her.

"Oh well," Mrs Gordon said after a moment with another rueful quirk of her lips. "It was worth a try..." She stopped again, then suddenly burst out:

"How can you, your parents, expect me to believe that you really went back to the 12th Century?"

Still the girls gazed back at her expressionlessly.

"Time travel is totally impossible," Mrs Gordon asserted.

"Quite possible," Annabella dared to contradict her. "We've done it." A memory of the passing explanation Basil had once made came to her. "Time is not linear," she went on. "And anyway it all depends on your event horizon, Einstein said... Or something..." She tailed off at the expression overtaking Mrs Gordon's face.

"Do not," she said in an icy voice. "I entreat you, do not compound your mendacity by presuming to invoke the name of Einstein, or indeed, the name of science. I take that as a personal insult."

"I'm sorry," Annabella mumbled, but then rallied. "We're not lying," she insisted. "My parents... us... we're not lying. I don't care how impossible you think it is, we're not lying..."

"Assassins?" Mrs Gordon said on a rising note. "Hassan-i Sabbāh? The seal of Solomon? Basil? You really expect me to believe that? I can't possibly believe it! I don't know what you and your parents are trying to prove, telling me all this... codswallop..."

Annabella found herself floored that their parents could ever have thought that Mrs Gordon, a modern, rational woman, might actually be brought to believe such a fantastical tale. Offering her the truth, Annabella realised, was clearly a mistake but given the situation, there was probably little else her mother and father could have done. She wondered what more she could possibly say and was relieved when Mrs Gordon pre-empted her.

"Well," she remarked, slightly less frigidly. "As, eventually, I was forced to say to your parents: be all that as it may, plainly it is quite pointless to have you doing any sort of language classes..." This time, the expression that flickered across her face was sardonic. "We have agreed: more maths, instead. More science..."

The girls groaned.

"We can't have you wasting your time now, can we? And as for the rest of it..." Mrs Gordon shrugged. "I would suggest that you and your parents never mention any of it ever again... Unless you all want to be bundled off somewhere by men in white coats."

Long afterwards, Annabella would wonder whether it was all just coincidence or whether Mrs Gordon's concerns had again inspired the inner wheels of the universe to mesh so that inexorably the impossible became the inevitable.

The first acute pain of parting with Basil had eventually eased to a dull ache and Annabella no longer found herself automatically speaking to him telepathically and then breaking off halfway through when she remembered with a wrench of the heart that he was no longer there to listen. Nor was she subconsciously ever on the alert to spot the wisp of smoke which was his usual manifestation. Nevertheless, his absence was a constant presence however much she might tell herself that it was all just a childish crush and that in time she would grow out of it. She hadn't yet, showed no sign of it, and deep down knew she never would, never could. As a result, whenever she was less than fully occupied, the future loomed long and lonely, a lifetime of endless heartache. Accordingly, she continued to make a point of filling her time as completely as possible.

Mrs Gordon's questioning of the wondrous gift of tongues that Basil had conferred upon her and Vivienne had brought the past back to the forefront of her mind and Annabella was forced again to deal with a wound that was still raw and bleeding if ever the scab were disturbed. Put simply, she missed Basil more than she ever could have thought possible, so when the words sounded in her head, she all but screamed aloud.

Lady Bright... Lady Mine...

The voice was instantly recognisable. Poncey, plummy. Infinitely dear.

Basil? Annabella shrieked within. *Basil?*

Automatically, she swept her eyes around the room searching for the oh-so-familiar tendril of smoke. Ms Wilkins continued to write an equation on the whiteboard, her marker squeaking slightly. A girl two rows over from Annabella, slumped at her desk chin in hand, suddenly sat up straight and pointed. As Miss Wilkins added each new polynomial, so one back at the beginning was being erased. Others were beginning to notice. Somebody stifled a giggle.

Basil! Annabella said sharply. *Please! You stop that right now!* Vivienne, she saw, was staring at her with wild surmise.

Madam mistress, shining pearl, Basil said. *To hear is to jolly well obey.*

Abruptly, much to the puzzlement of those drawn into watching, the characters that had been rubbed out reconstituted themselves. Ms Wilkins remained oblivious.

Don't you dare call me that, Annabella said, vexed despite her joy, and then: *It's so good to see you... Except I can't...* The faintest wisp of smoke suddenly materialised on the corner of her desk.

Likewise, Lady Mine, Basil said. *Jolly likewise. Except you still don't have any jolly front... You sure you wouldn't like me to...*

Basil! Annabella said warningly.

I must speak as I jolly well find, Basil said unrepentantly. *Easiest thing in the world. Remember what my cousin did for jolly old Cleopatra...*

You leave my front out of it... Annabella said crossly, but amused despite herself. *What on earth are you doing here?* she went on. *I've missed you so much... I've tried to call you so many times...*

And I missed you, Basil said, the lack of embellishment giving his words powerful emphasis. *I missed you.*

A small ball of paper landed on Annabella's desk and she trapped it with her hand. She checked to see that Ms Wilkins was still occupied with the whiteboard and then smoothed it out.

"Basil?" she read. She nodded happily and Vivienne grinned back. However, delighted as Annabella was at this totally unlooked for apparition, she also realised on the instant that it could only mean one thing. Trouble was about to descend upon them.

But missing me is not why you're here, is it? she said shrewdly. Basil prevaricated.

Is it? Annabella insisted.

Well... Not exactly, Basil was forced to admit.

Another ball of paper landed on Annabella's desk. Vivienne had been watching the abstracted look on her face. "No fair," the note read. "I want to hear, too."

Annabella nodded again.

Wait till we get out of here, she said to Basil. *Tell us both together.*

The girls had discovered a small sunny alcove where the gymnasium abutted the school hall, which they had made their own by force majeure and which they had subsequently defended vigorously against all-comers. Once they were ensconced on the grass, Basil allowed himself to thicken slightly and came to perch on Annabella's knee.

"It's so good to see you," Annabella said yet again. *Really, really good.*

"Me too," Vivienne said. "I mean... You know what I mean. But the language thing... It got us into so much trouble."

"Well, excuse me," Basil said. "I can jolly well take it back if you want."

"Don't you dare," Annabella said. "But what's gone wrong? Why are you here? What's happening?"

"Iblis," Basil said.

"Iblis?" the girls repeated in unison, recoiling.

"Has been summoned."

"Summoned!" the girls exclaimed again.

"By the ring."

"The seal?" Annabella said. "The Seal of Solomon?"

The implications were horrifying.

"But that's impossible," Vivienne blurted. "Annabella threw it in the volcano. You saw it go in, you saw it hit the surface... How could anyone...?"

"Hassan-i Sabbāh," Annabella whispered. "That's what you're saying, isn't it, Basil? That somehow he found the ring? That he's made Iblis get him out?"

"We're afraid so," Basil said soberly. By we, he meant he and his father, Sheikh Harun al Yazid. Vivienne squirmed a little. She and the Sheikh had had a somewhat chequered relationship.

"I don't believe it," Vivienne said. "It's impossible. How can it be possible? Annabella said that mud volcano was huge, hundreds of yards high, never mind how far down it must go. How could anyone possibly find anything in all that muck?"

"How long has passed?" Annabella asked thoughtfully.

"Sixty years, give or jolly take," Basil said.

"But that's ridiculous," Vivienne objected. "We haven't lived anything like 60 years."

"You know that means nothing," Annabella said. "Time now is quite different to time back then. Isn't it Basil?"

"Abso-jolly-lutely," Basil said.

"Even so," Vivienne said. "It's got nothing to do with us, surely. What can it possibly have to do with us?" There was a rising note to her voice. Annabella looked at her.

"Revenge," she said. She turned to Basil. "Vengeance. That's it, isn't it? You think he'll be coming after me?"

"Us," Vivienne said before Basil could reply. "Always us." And such loyalty despite a mild tendency to hysteria was why Annabella could forgive the fact that Vivienne was altogether too good-looking with far too much front for anyone's comfort, particularly hers. Nor, classical allusions aside, was Vivienne, blonde and all, even slightly dumb, which Annabella considered downright unfair. A thought struck her.

"Come to think of it," Annabella said. "It probably is 'us' whether we like it or not. I'll bet you're not one of Hassan-i Sabbāh's favourite people either."

Chapter 2

Rashid ad-Din Sinan, the new Old Man of the Mountain, froze in shocked disbelief. It was not possible. At least, it shouldn't have been possible, but there it was. On the floor of his personal chamber. The inner sanctum of Castle Masyaf. The holy of holies. There on the exquisite, glazed tiles. A footprint.

Sinan opened his mouth to shout indignantly for a servant, to excoriate, to mortify, when something, some intimation, some premonition, stopped him. With difficulty, he bent his portly figure to examine the offending blemish more closely. The crusted blood was still moist.

And then Sinan finally thought to ask himself the obvious question. A footprint in the middle of his spotless floor? A bloody footprint? One? Only one? How did it get there? How could it possibly have come to be there? Just one?

For long seconds he remained doubled over, his belly uncomfortably constricted, until at last he straightened, his mouth opening again, but this time to shout for his guards.

"Silence," a voice breathed behind him. At the same time, the foulest of stench permeated the chamber.

Sinan despite appearances was not actually a fool. He had served his time as an Assassin operative, surviving to rise through the ranks to both his present pre-eminent position and equally imposing girth, which he thought of as a just reward, indeed a badge of office. But while no fool, he was, unfortunately, most unfortunately, presently unarmed. There was a time when newly, and shakily, installed as head of the order he would never have been caught dead, so to speak, without a weapon. But, as the years had passed and the threats about him had eased, so he had relaxed to the point of his present unforgivable laxity.

Cursing himself, he turned to confront whoever it was tormenting him, shrieked, and collapsed to the floor.

True to his deep, early training, Sinan played possum. With rigid discipline he held even his eyeballs still, lest the fluttering behind his eyelids betray him, maintaining the while the ragged rhythm of his breathing. Meantime, frantically, his brain skittered along the precipice of panic, desperately seeking some sort of rational explanation for this horrific apparition standing there on a carpet, hovering well above the floor of his room.

At last he cracked an eyelid, the merest sliver, hoping, praying that the terrifying presence had disappeared, had never been, that it was merely some hallucination manufactured by his overtaxed brain. He had, after all, been working so hard lately...

It was still there... Of course, it was still there, glowering down at him, its face and body...

Sinan couldn't bring himself to frame the necessary words.

"Who...?" he eventually managed, with his eyes again closed. "What...?"

"Hassan-i Sabbāh," the voice breathed, releasing another gust of noxious halitosis. However, it was not the stink that made Sinan's guts clench with a convulsive spasm.

"But you're..." He gulped and tried again. "You're dead. You died. Sixty years ago."

"I did not die," the voice said in the same, hoarse, sibilant whisper. "I am not dead. I will never die. I am immortal. Stand! You are held to account!"

For long seconds, Sinan quite failed to react, frozen by the implications of the voice's words, then scrabbling at the floor like some gross insect marooned on the slippery tiles, he struggled to his feet. He kept his eyes down, desperate to avoid the spectacle before him.

"Lord..." he began.

"Silence!"

Sinan whimpered. To his eternal shame, he actually whimpered.

The thing... Hassan-i Sabbāh, if it really was Hassan-i Sabbāh... let Sinan's fear double then redouble until literally he was a quivering mass, a quivering mess.

"You have prostituted my Order," the voice accused at last.

"Lord..."

"You have allowed my fida'is to become subservient to Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn Yūsuf ibn Ayyūb."

"An alliance, Lord..."

"Subservience." The whisper was even lower yet slashed at Sinan like the edge of a scimitar.

"No Lord. I swear, Lord." The reek of his own fear was now so thick about him that Sinan could no longer smell Hassan-i Sabbāh. In desperation he was moved to open denial: "Saladin sued for peace," he said beseechingly. "He was besieging Castle Masyaf and we were in dire peril of massacre, yet he sued for peace." His words sank into a silence as deep and forbidding as a grave, his grave. Sinan gulped.

"I, myself..." he hurried on, frantic to fill the void with something other than his corpse. "I, myself, stole from the castle. I slipped as a shadow through his sentries and guards to his camp. I penetrated to the very sleeping chamber of his tent and there I left the sacred cakes, there I impaled his pillow with a poisoned dagger, even as he slumbered. He saw the scones, read the note I left, understood the deeper message, that we could reach him in any place at any time, and he sued for peace."

"Poltroon!" the voice whispered.

"L-lord..." Sinan beseeched, now shaking so violently that his teeth were chattering.

"To have Saladin at the point of your knife and not to kill... Unpardonable..."

Sinan bent his head until his chin and his chest were a single mass of fatty flesh, then bowed low as he was able. Ten years ago he had been slender, well thinner, and he had indeed invaded Saladin's tent. And ten years ago, he had judged that the offer of truce under pain of death would prove far more politically effective than the unthinking, raging thirst for vengeance of Saladin's followers that would inevitably erupt to engulf both him and the Order, should Saladin be found murdered in his bed. Now, despite that feat, he was certain his last moment had come. The only question was how appalling would be the fate to be visited upon him.

"Henceforward," the voice continued. "You will do exactly as you are told and only as you are told. Find Darius al Halabi, son of Aswad al Halabi. I have use for him. And here, a list of items I require."

Gingerly, trying not to breathe and most of all, desperate not to look, Sinan stepped forward to receive the proffered scroll. Fastidiously, attempting not to touch the encrustations of blood, he unrolled it and read, his heart sinking.

"Lord," he dared to wail. "How may I find such rare, such impossible objects...?"

"Send to Castle Alamut," the voice dismissed him.

"What happened to Darius?" Vivienne asked casually, changing the subject completely and deceiving neither Annabella nor Basil for a moment.

"Are you sure you want to know?" Annabella said with concern, before Basil could answer.

"Of course," Vivienne said. "Don't you?"

"He wasn't my boyfriend," Annabella retorted, a little more tartly than she meant.

"And he wasn't mine either," Vivienne said. "Not really. Not properly."

"Could have jolly well fooled me," Basil said.

"Anyway, easy come easy go," Vivienne said dismissively.

"All right for some," Annabella muttered.

Front? Basil murmured enticingly.

"Well... What did happen to Darius?" Vivienne demanded.

"He's still alive..." Basil began only to be instantly interrupted.

"That's impossible," Vivienne said.

"At the time we're jolly well talking about, he is definitely still alive... Middle seventies with three wives, fourteen children and thirty-five grandchildren."

"Gross!" Vivienne exclaimed.

"Obviously pining for you," Annabella said wickedly.

"And he also jolly well happens to be the pre-eminent physician of the day," Basil added.

"So he did become a doctor?" Annabella said. "Good for him..." She stopped mid-sentence with her mouth open. Vivienne raised her eyebrows.

"What?" she said.

"If Darius is still alive," Annabella said slowly. "Hassan-i Sabbāh will be after him too, won't he Basil?"

"Um..."

"So what are we going to do about him?"

"Do about who?" Vivienne said.

"Hassan-i Sabbāh." Annabella had, in fact, already made up her mind but was still working out the details.

"What do you mean, do about him?" Vivienne said.

"Well... We can either wait for him to come after us, or we can go after him..."

"You're joking," Vivienne squeaked. "Tell me you're joking."

"Isn't that right, Basil?" Annabella said.

"Um..."

"Isn't it?" she insisted.

"Well... Yes. Now that you jolly well mention it."

"And we're not talking any sort of bait here, are we?" Annabella asked, suddenly shrewd. Early in their acquaintance bait was exactly what Annabella had been to Basil.

"No, no," Basil said earnestly. "Promise – cross my heart and spit."

"Can a djinni spit?" Vivienne wanted to know, but Annabella over-rode her.

"And we can't wait for Hassan-i Sabbāh to come after us," Annabella went on. "Too many hostages... Far too many people we care about to get hurt."

"Annabella! You're not serious...?"

"And we have to warn Darius."

"Annabella!"

"I am right, aren't I Basil?"

"Um..."

"But you really don't have to come if you don't want to," Annabella added to Vivienne, squeezing her hand again to rob the words of any possible offence.

"Of course I'm coming," Vivienne protested vehemently.

"Oh good," Annabella said. "I knew I could count on you." There was a disbelieving silence.

"How did that happen?" Vivienne asked, at last. "Annabella, you are joking?" she said again after a moment.

"No," Annabella said. "I'm not. Apart from anything else, we owe it to Darius."

"But Darius is dead," Vivienne protested. "He must have been dead for hundreds of years."

"But he's not dead now, or rather then," Annabella said. "Which means Hassan-i Sabbāh can still get to him."

"But Basil said he's an old man..."

"That won't stop Hassan-i Sabbāh." Vivienne frowned, a frown that Annabella had no difficulty interpreting. For Vivienne to meet Darius in grandfather mode would be off-the-scale weird.

"Don't worry," Annabella said. "He probably won't even remember you..."

You think, Lady Bright? Basil scoffed. *After all that happened...?*

"So that's settled," Annabella went on hurriedly. "When do we leave? Now would be good..."

"Annabella!" Vivienne protested again. "We can't just disappear."

"Why not?"

"It wouldn't be fair. Our..." Vivienne, who would never be completely comfortable with the phrase, hesitated. "The parents will be worried to death. The school... And remember last time. The police thought great-uncle Warwick had murdered us..."

"Um... We could leave a note?"

"Not good enough," Vivienne said firmly. "We have to tell someone. Mrs Gordon... We could tell Mrs Gordon and she can talk to... them... explain why we have to go... explain properly..."

"Oh, V..."

"... Or I won't come."

She is right, you know, Basil said unexpectedly.

"And another thing," Vivienne went on determinedly. "It's all very well saying we have to rush off and deal with Hassan-i Sabbāh, but how exactly? You told me he's immortal..."

"Good point," Basil said. "A damn good point..."

Whose side are you on? Annabella demanded. Aloud she said:

"I'll think of something... Or Basil will."

"Wishes," Basil said. "Remember? Djinn do wishes. Not so much on jolly old ideas..."

"Whoa," Annabella said. "What sort of a cop-out is that?"

"A jolly good one, I thought," Basil said innocently.

"Enough already," Vivienne cut them off. "Basil's been back for half an hour and already you're fighting like fishwives."

"Sorry," Annabella said sheepishly, adding: *But I've missed that so much.*

"Me too," Basil said equally sheepishly, adding in his turn: *Me too, me too.*

"And I think you're just bored, Annabella," Vivienne went on. "You want us to go rushing off because you're bored..."

"Well, aren't you?" Annabella said defensively.

"Not that bored, not bored enough to go whisking off who knows where, who knows when, chasing some sort of evil monster who just happens to be immortal."

"Is he? Is he really?" Annabella asked Basil.

"We think so," Basil said, suddenly grave. "I'm afraid we jolly well think so. If he survived the volcano..."

"And you've got no idea how to... get rid of him?"

"No, we jolly well don't..."

"Well that settles it," Vivienne cut him off. "We're staying right here..."

"... And wait for him to turn up? Good plan," Annabella said. "Except he'll still be immortal. And there'll be people around we care about."

"But we can't go after him, Annabella. How can we? If we don't know how to stop him?"

"Don't come then. But I have to go."

"Why do you have to? That's crazy. Why do you have to?"

"Because V, don't you see...? He hates me so much, he won't rest until he finds me. I know it. You know it. Basil and the Sheikh know it. That's why Basil is here... Yes?... Yes... And better, much better, he finds me back then. Not now."

"Annabella!" Vivienne wailed.

Lady Bright! Basil was equally upset even though it was his intelligence Annabella was reacting to.

Why do you always have to be so jolly noble? Basil fumed.

The girls had got through the rest of the day somehow, not speaking much, lost in thought with nothing resolved. Just as they were climbing into their adjoining beds in the dormitory, Vivienne had been moved to give Annabella a sudden hug which had not gone unnoticed by a dozen pairs of prying eyes. The girls were far too self-contained for the rest of the school to feel comfortable with them and there tended to be endless speculation of a more or less scandalous variety.

Don't you start, Annabella snapped back. *It's not my fault. If anyone's to blame, it's you.*

Me!

Who broke the code? Who gave him the secret? Who made Hassan-i Sabbāh immortal? Annabella was referring to the cipher which had revealed the final vital ingredient for eternal life.

I might have jolly well broken the code, Basil cavilled, aggrieved. *But as I recollect, you were the one who actually gave it to him...*

If only I'd killed him when I had the chance, Annabella said. She was referring to the moment when she had stood behind Hassan-i Sabbāh, dagger poised but at the last had found herself quite unable to bring it plunging down.

If you had, Basil said, *it would have been the end for us.* At the time he had been adamantly opposed to Annabella's intention and determined to sever all connection if she actually brought herself to do cold-blooded murder, though justifiable execution was probably a fairer way of putting it. Evidently, he still felt the same.

Well never mind all that, Annabella said rather less aggressively. *The question is, what are we going to do about him?*

And a jolly good question it is.

Is that all you have to say? Annabella found that despite herself, she was instantly cranking up again. Basil understood.

I'm frightened, too, he said. *Very frightened. If anything happens to you...* The fact that he spoke plainly for once made his words particularly poignant. There was a long silence.

Even frontless...? Annabella joked, trying to lighten Basil's sudden seriousness. However, he declined to respond.

What can we do? Annabella said at last. *How can we fight him?*

I don't know, Basil said after another pause so lengthy that Annabella felt her eyes closing.

There must be a way, she said sleepily. *And we have to find it before he finds me.*

The morning matched their spirits, grey and drizzly.

"Annabella," Vivienne said, through a mouthful of toothpaste. "What are we going to do? Seriously?"

"Same thing as yesterday," Annabella said with crisp irritation. "I have to go back... I can't let him come here... And Darius has to be warned."

"We," Vivienne said equally irritated. "I told you, we..." She peered around over her shoulder.

"Yuk," Annabella said. "But thank you..." Vivienne rinsed and spat.

"So that means," she said, mopping her mouth, "that we have to go and tell Mrs Gordon."

"Must we?" Annabella said.

Yes, Basil cut in.

What are you doing in here? Annabella protested. *Get out...*

Nothing I haven't seen before... Basil was referring to a period when enslaved to Annabella, he had been bound never to leave her side.

"Yes," Vivienne said, an unconscious echo. "There was so much trouble last time when we just disappeared, you know there was... Police and everything. We can't do that to people again."

"But she doesn't believe any of it," Annabella protested. "You heard her..."

"So get Basil to convince her."

Oh goody, Basil said. *Jolly japes...*

Mrs Gordon looked up from her desk as they walked in. Her expression, Annabella thought, could only be described as wary.

"You've asked to see me?" Mrs Gordon said. The girls looked at each other uncertainly, neither sure how to begin.

"Allow me," Basil said at last when the pause had stretched to breaking point. Mrs Gordon started at the unexpected voice, a male voice, a voice redolent with exaggerated mannerism.

"What! Who said that?" Mrs Gordon demanded.

"I jolly well did," Basil said.

"Who did?" Mrs Gordon reared back, astounded by the voice apparently emanating from thin air.

"Basil," Annabella said, feeling that matters were instantly getting out of hand. "The djinni you don't think exists... Basil al Yazid..." *Give her something to look at,* she added. *Don't make this harder than it already is.*

Basil allowed himself to thicken into his familiar tendril of smoke and moved from Annabella's shoulder to perch on the corner of the desk. Mrs Gordon pushed her chair back in alarm.

"I don't believe this!" she whispered.

"Oh dear," Basil said. "That's a shame."

"Convince her," Annabella said.

"How? Not so much on the jolly old ideas, remember? Wishes. Djinn do wishes..."

"Cinderella," Annabella said, seizing on the first thing that came into her head.

You're more the ugly sister type...

Oh, thank you very much...

And you still don't have the front for it.

Not me, Annabella said crossly. Vivienne...

And before Mrs Gordon's bulging eyes, Vivienne was suddenly transformed into a fairy-tale princess complete with glass slippers and a wispy tiara.

"Hey," Vivienne said, inspecting the elaborate organza ball gown in which she suddenly found herself. "Cool. Can I keep it?"

"And if you like to come outside," Annabella said, addressing Mrs Gordon. "Basil will do a pumpkin coach to match." She gestured. "Not really enough room in here but..."

"Don't you dare," Mrs Gordon squeaked. She suddenly regained the power of movement, leapt to her feet and rushed across the room to stand arms braced, barring the door. "Don't move! You stay right here. Don't you dare move!"

Vivienne suddenly stood and twirled about. "Wish I had a mirror," she said. "Can I have a mirror, please Basil?" On the instant, a large mahogany three sided full-length dressing mirror materialised in front of her and Vivienne began to preen with patent satisfaction. Mrs Gordon gasped.

"Enough?" Annabella inquired gently. There was a long silence.

Enough, Annabella said silently and Vivienne suddenly found herself posturing in her school uniform.

"Hey," she complained. A moment later, the mirror also vanished.

"So, you see," Annabella said to Mrs Gordon, still speaking gently and slowly, as though to a child. "Basil really does exist, and Basil really is a djinni."

"What do you want?" Mrs Gordon asked in a low voice. She was again seated behind her desk, hunched defensively, clutching at her elbows. Annabella hesitated.

"We have to go away," she said at last. "And we didn't want just to vanish, leaving another mystery. It causes too much upset."

"Last time," Vivienne amplified. "There was so much trouble..."

"Go away where?" Mrs Gordon said. "Why...? Why do you have to go away?"

"Hassan-i Sabbāh," Annabella said. "He escaped from the volcano."

"Hassan-i Sabbāh?" Mrs Gordon said blankly.

"The Old Man of the Mountain... my parents told you about him... the one you don't believe in. We think he'll be coming after me," Annabella said. "And you wouldn't want him coming after me here, would you? So, we need to go there."

"I can't allow it," Mrs Gordon said. It was an automatic response. "I can't possibly allow it," she added a moment later, her voice firming. "You must see that."

"Well," Annabella said. "I don't want to be rude but there's not really any way you can stop us." Vivienne shook her head in confirmation.

"I could... I could... have you locked up..."

The key, Annabella said. And instantly, Basil caused Mrs Gordon's door to lock with a loud click. A moment later, he unlocked it, equally loudly. Annabella said nothing. The point needed no emphasising.

Adults, in Annabella's estimation, would be greatly improved were they prohibited from using the words "no" and "but" more than once a month. Mrs Gordon started with the "no's" and went on to the "buts" using both with tedious, not to say wearying, profusion. At last, she seemed to run dry. There was a long pause.

"Let me see if I understand this correctly," she said finally. "You're asking my permission to go back a thousand odd years in time with a purported djinni..."

"I say!" Basil interjected but Mrs Gordon was not to be diverted and went on remorselessly.

"... To hunt for some supernatural villain who may or may not be hunting you, is that correct?"

I am not purported, Basil muttered discontentedly. Cogito jolly ergo sum, ergo I jolly well can't be purported...

"No," Annabella said patiently. "It's not correct. We're not asking your permission. We're telling you that's what we have to do. Trust me. The last thing you want is Hassan-i Sabbāh rampaging around the school. Which is why we have to find him before he finds us."

Mrs Gordon stared at her for a long moment, then she rose, drew herself up to her full height and marched purposefully to the door, where she again turned, barring all exit.

"I categorically, absolutely, definitively forbid it," she said in an awful voice.

Annabella sighed and looked at Vivienne, who shrugged.

Do we go to your tower for starters? Or do we go to your father's beach? Annabella asked.

I think we should consult the Sheikh, may he live forever, Basil replied. *I fear we're going to need all the jolly help we can get.*

Vivienne won't be pleased.

Vivienne will jolly well just have to be on her best behaviour, for a change...

Then, before Mrs Gordon's astounded gaze – indeed, her eyes ached for days afterwards with astonishment – the two girls and the wisp of smoke all vanished.

Chapter 3

The Sheikh's beach, which Vivienne in an flippant mood had christened Concert Corner, was exactly as they remembered. Even the breezy beach hut Basil had created for their stay last time was still there, unchanged. The same azure sky provided the same soft light to skip and dance across the emerald waters bathing the coral reefs. The same cheerful wavelets nibbled at the same sweeping white sand of the beach. The same brooding cliffs stood guard at either end, the northernmost incidentally providing the location for the Sheikh's magnificent cavern, and the same wheeling seabirds brought life and vitality to a scene so beautiful that without them it would have been mere sterile perfection. Only the weather had undergone a marked change from their last visit. It was now high summer and baking hot, yet still quite tolerable, thanks to a delicious sea breeze.

One other thing was different. A carpet was parked at the back of the hut in a stationary hover. But while Annabella and Vivienne, now relieved of their school uniforms and dressed in robes more appropriate to the circumstances, were quite accustomed to djinn notions of desirable transport, this particular conveyance set them first smiling then grinning, then giggling helplessly. At the sound, a wisp of grey smoke holding a spanner shot out from underneath. Vivienne couldn't help herself. Her mirth changed instantly to accusation.

"That hasn't been invented yet," she complained.

The wisp of grey smoke somehow gave the impression of smiling with benevolent welcome.

"How nice," he said. "Two of my favourite people. Well, Annabella certainly..."

"Pater," Basil interrupted. "What have you done? What have you jolly well done to your carpet?"

"Do you like it?" the Sheikh inquired with proprietorial pride. "Groovy, I think..."

Annabella and Vivienne glanced at each other with very wide eyes.

"You've jolly well been hanging out in New York again, haven't you?" Basil accused. "At the clubs...?"

"True dat... I mean, I may have visited one or two..."

"But the carpet," Basil insisted. "What have you jolly well done to your carpet?"

"You know the phrase, 'Dude, pimp my ride'..."

"I most certainly jolly well do not..." Basil interrupted.

"Well, I've pimped my ride."

They all turned to stare at what had once been a particularly fine example of Persian carpet making, but now the gorgeous Bakhtiari rug was sullied by a number of curious objects, not the least of which were four large armchairs covered in fur dyed a shade of fluorescent green that fought horribly with the red ground of the carpet.

"Bucket seats," the Sheikh said proudly, seeing the direction of their gaze, "With three-point lap-sash safety belts, though you have to tie them, unfortunately I couldn't manage proper buckles." He moved towards his creation and indicated something

mounted between them. "And here," he said. "Look at this... Stick shift, four on the floor." He waved the spanner. "I was just adjusting the linkage..."

"A pity you don't have wheels," Vivienne said archly. "Then you could have white-wall tyres... But what's that?" she added, pointing to something fluttering above them at the end of a length of bamboo.

"A foxtail, of course," the Sheikh said. "You can't have an aerial without a foxtail."

"Silly me," Vivienne said.

"But did it jolly well have to be purple?" Basil demanded in horror. It was of a hue that somehow managed to clash with everything.

"Natch..."

"But how can you have a spanner?" Annabella asked. "They really haven't been invented."

"Same as the piano, I suppose," Vivienne informed her, realising the truth. "I bet he made it himself." By piano, she was referring to the concert grand she had discovered in the Sheikh's cavern on a previous occasion, an instrument she had indeed played herself.

"Gaga," Basil said morosely. "The jolly old pater has jolly gone gaga. I knew this jolly old obsession with jolly old America would jolly well lead to no jolly good, abso-jolly-lutely no good at all."

"Obsession with America?" the Sheikh said, offended. "From a bird-watching, skirt-chasing..." At which, Annabella's eyebrows shot up. "... Would-be English toff with a severely limited turn of phrase... That's rich."

"At least we, the English I mean, are jolly well civilised..."

"Decadent, you mean... And what's this *we*...?"

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," Annabella intervened. The two wisps of smoke, one white and the other grey and somehow giving the impression of wrinkles, were confronting each other in mid-air, hands on hips as it were. There was a prickly pause until the Sheikh finally broke the silence:

"Yes, well..." he said and added, as though suddenly recalling his manners: "Please. Let's go up. Refreshments... something to eat, something to drink... Nine hundred odd years is such a long time to travel, don't you find...?"

The cavern, high in the sheer face of the cliff and totally inaccessible to mere mortals, was also just as they remembered. The dancing reflections from the water outside still transformed the walls and ceiling into a kaleidoscope of ever-shifting patterns. The white sand of the floor was immaculate, not a grain out of place, and the grand piano still magisterially dominated what was otherwise a splendidly empty space with a stunning acoustic. The Sheikh brought his hot-rod carpet to a hover and the girls stepped down, as always reluctant to mar the immaculate expanse before them.

"Now," the Sheikh said. "What can I offer you?"

"Some lunch would be good," Vivienne said. "I'm starved."

"Nothing changes," the Sheikh remarked with what might have been a sigh but a moment later a rug and cushions materialised and the girls were able to sit down to what proved to be a very acceptable repast.

"Darius?" Annabella said at last, dabbing at her mouth with a napkin. "Do we know where he is?"

"Certainly," the Sheikh said. "He's in Dimashq. At the bimaristan..."

"At the what? At the where?" Vivienne said, rather rudely, temporarily forgetting that her Arabic was at least as good as anybody else's.

"The hospital in Damascus," Basil put in. "He succeeded Abu al-Majd ibn Abi al-Hakam and is now the jolly old chief physician."

"Wow!" Vivienne exclaimed, switching to sarcasm.

"And you should show some respect, young lady," the Sheikh said. "Darius is now a great man."

"And so he jolly well should be," Basil said. "... After all that education we jolly well lavished on him."

"What education exactly?" Annabella asked curiously.

"We sent him to Andalusia," Basil said. "He studied dissection and autopsy with Ibn Tufail in Seville..."

"Yuk," Vivienne said, sotto voce.

"... Ophthalmology with Muhammad ibn Aslam Al-Ghafiqi, surgery with Ibn Zuhr, pharmacology with..."

"Enough, Basil," the Sheikh said. "They get the picture."

"I didn't know there were hospitals now," Annabella said.

"So ignorant," the Sheikh said sadly. "Very good hospitals, as it happens. And furthermore, the physicians even have to be licensed..."

"Enough, pater," Basil retaliated. "Spare us a jolly old disquisition on the glories of the Arab golden age..." The Sheikh sniffed loudly.

"So we need to go to Damascus, then?" Annabella said at last into the lengthening silence.

"Certainly," the Sheikh said. "If you wish to see Darius..."

"We need to warn him," Annabella said.

"But first let me warn you," the Sheikh said. "You too, Basil... particularly you... It is probable, very likely, almost certain that Hassan-i Sabbāh now has greater powers than when you last had anything to do with him."

"Pater! What do you mean?" Basil demanded. "How?"

"Iblis," the Sheikh said succinctly. He was referring to his counterpart on the Dark Side of the Other World, the most powerful of 'ifrīts whom Annabella, in particular, had reason to fear and to loathe. Indeed, she couldn't help a tremor at the mention of his name.

"What's Iblis jolly well got to do with it?" Basil said with angry concern.

"If I were Iblis, I would bargain..." the Sheikh said.

"Pater! Are you going to tell us or jolly well not?" Basil almost shouted.

"I would bargain conferring a power or two on Hassan-i Sabbāh against constant control by the ring, the Seal of Solomon. Hassan-i Sabbāh is in a vengeful mood. Even Iblis would want to avoid him as much as possible, so..."

"What powers?"

"Who can say? And there's something else," the Sheikh said, speaking in a low worried voice. "Iblis won't have forgotten Annabella. The only human, the only being, ever to escape from Waq Waq... Of course, he won't have forgotten her. And if he ever discovers that Hassan-i Sabbāh is on her trail... Even with out protection... The risk is there..."

There was a long, long silence as his words resonated. Nobody could find anything to say.

"What I don't understand..." Vivienne said at last, changing the subject. "What I've never understood is how Hassan-i Sabbāh could possibly survive the volcano. All that mud... Even with al iksir, why wouldn't he just drown?" Annabella looked at her sharply. It was a good question.

"Um..." Basil began, then said to his father: "You tell them."

"Al iksir..." the Sheikh said reluctantly. "The true al iksir renders life self-sustaining. Whatever happens to the body, however much the body is made to suffer, the flame of life will burn on. Forever."

The Sheikh's words were deeply disturbing. It seemed they were faced with an insoluble conundrum. How could they kill something, someone, who couldn't be killed? Never mind that in the background lurked an even greater threat. Eventually, Basil spoke.

"Pater, how can we stop him?" His voice was the merest whisper. It was the crucial question.

"I don't know," the Sheikh said helplessly. "I don't know..."

There was another long, long, aching silence as the Sheikh's audience grappled with the import of his words. In that she had been fundamentally responsible for Hassan-i Sabbāh's downfall and subsequent torment in the boiling mud of the Baluchistan volcano, Annabella was in no doubt that for her there could be no hope of escape, that Hassan-i Sabbāh would not rest until he had squared accounts. As a human Hassan-i Sabbāh had been evil incarnate, now that he was evidently immortal, never mind that he might also be endowed with extra powers, a future that had promised grim was suddenly downright black. Another, rather vital question finally occurred to her.

"Where is he?" she asked. "Castle Alamut?"

"Possibly," the Sheik said. "But I think more likely, Castle Masyaf. The centre of Assassin power has shifted since Hassan-i Sabbāh was last grandmaster."

"Where's that? Castle Masyaf?" Annabella asked.

"North of Tripoli, which is north of Damascus..."

"So," Vivienne said brightly, but deceiving no one. "Damascus first. How will we get there?"

"Carpet," Basil said. His voice was unusually subdued.

"Not flash, bang, wallop?" Vivienne complained. "Carpets are sooo uncomfortable." She had vivid memories of their winter journey through central Asia and the associated misery of sitting cross-legged and totally unprotected for hours at a time exposed to the freezing elements.

"As you jolly well know, or should know..." Basil began with some heat, glad to find an outlet for his feelings. "Aetheralating with passengers generates heaps of aetheric noise. There's no hiding it..."

"Aetheric what?" Vivienne said incredulously.

"Like breaking the sound barrier," the Sheikh murmured helpfully.

"Only worse! Just peachy if you want everyone in the other world to know exactly where you are..." Basil was really starting to crank up. He was diverted by Annabella.

"And he can only flash, bang two at a time anyway, and we might need passenger capacity," she interrupted quickly.

"... Sooo uncomfortable..." Vivienne grumbled.

"Well then," the Sheikh said with ulterior magnanimity. "You must take mine..." He had, in fact, been dying for an excuse to see it in action.

"If you jolly well think I'd jolly well be seen jolly well dead..." Basil began, still clearly upset, but again he was interrupted.

"Can we?" Vivienne asked eagerly.

"Of course, my dear," the Sheikh said largely.

"Abso-jolly-lutely not," Basil said. "I am not driving that thing. I'm jolly well not going anywhere near it."

"That's all right," the Sheikh said. "Then I'll drive."

Stop sulking, Annabella told Basil. *It's not as though anyone can see you*. She and Vivienne were ensconced in the two front armchairs on the Sheikh's carpet, chairs which despite their lurid colour were proving extremely comfortable.

The word will get out, Basil said, twisting round from where he had taken up position on Annabella's knee. *It always does. You jolly well watch. My reputation will be ruined*. He sniffed. *Centuries of social climbing down the drain*.

Annabella laughed aloud, drawing a look from Vivienne.

"I wish you wouldn't do that," she snapped. "All these private conversations... all these private jokes... Not fair..."

"Sorry," Annabella said, perfunctorily and not the least bit repentant. Her telepathic exchanges with Basil were the great joy of her life. Once over a certain initial diffidence at their reunion, she and Basil had slipped straight back into an intimacy so deep that it would have been frightening, had Annabella ever stopped to remember how stricken she had been last time they were separated.

"So share," Vivienne demanded.

"It's nothing," Annabella said. "Basil's embarrassed that's all. He's frightened someone will see him."

In the end, they had left the Sheikh behind. Basil confronted with the choice of being under his father's thumb for the duration or flying his father's carpet himself had chosen the lesser of two evils and the Sheikh, forcefully reminded that he had, in fact, retired, was obliged to rest content, watching his creation sail off into the darkening sky. By way of mild reprisal, he had quite neglected to mention what might happen if someone did something to certain lever.

From Concert Corner at the tip of the Sinai Peninsula to Damascus was something over a hundred leagues and they had not covered more than a quarter of the distance when for Vivienne the magic of again flying on a magic carpet, albeit one with luxurious seating, began to pall. She could tell from Annabella's slightly abstracted look that she must be deep in conversation with Basil, and she shifted resentfully in her chair. Her eye caught the Sheikh's stick shift.

"Does that thing actually do anything?" she wondered aloud. And without stopping to think that perhaps she ought not to fiddle, that perhaps there might be consequences, and before anybody else could object, she rammed it all the way forward. Immediately, the carpet reared up and in an instant was somewhere close to tripling its speed. The girls were pressed deep into their seats by the acceleration, their heads snapping back against the head rests, the wind suddenly howling and tearing at them. Vivienne squeaked with alarm and her eyes grew very round.

"What have you done?" Basil shrieked, clinging to Annabella's knee for grim death. "What have you jolly well done? I can't control it. We're out of control..."

After some seconds of stunned surprise, Annabella made a shrewd surmise. She struggled mightily against the pull of the acceleration and eventually managed to lean forward enough to ease the stick shift back to its original position. The carpet slowed as she did so and after a moment, was again cruising along at a civilised speed.

"What happened?" Vivienne said shakily, her face looming pale in the moonlight.

"You happened," Annabella admonished.

"Me?" Vivienne said, all innocence. "I didn't do anything..."

"You pushed the lever, didn't you?"

"Well... I might have touched it... Accidentally..."

"Idiot."

"It wasn't my fault. Anyway, who would have thought the stick thingy actually does something... What does it do?"

"Turbocharger, I suppose," Annabella said. "Or something like it."

"A turbocharger!" Basil exclaimed. "That rotten old stinker, may he live forever..."

"Basil!" Annabella laughed, also somewhat shocked. "You can't call your father a rotten old stinker."

"I jolly well can, and I jolly well will. I know him. He deliberately didn't warn us. One of his jolly japes. We might jolly well all have been killed." Annabella laughed again.

"Serves you right," she said.

"Might come in handy, though, don't you think?" Vivienne said thoughtfully. "For getaways and such..."

"Getaways," Annabella said, still chuckling. "Are you planning to rob a bank?"

"I might be," Vivienne said.

"Except there aren't any – don't be jolly ridiculous," Basil objected, his sense of humour still in crisis.

"I'll tell you what this carpet really needs..." Vivienne said, keen to change the subject.

"I'll bite," Annabella said indulgently. "What does this carpet really need?"

"A hostie," Vivienne said. "A hostess with a trolley. The seats are first class, but the service..."

"You're not hungry again?" Basil demanded accusingly.

"Well, yes. I can't help it if I'm a growing girl."

"Not so much growing as jolly well busting out..."

Annabella began to laugh so immoderately, she choked.

"Basil," she said gasping, when she could speak. "That was very rude."

"Oh, I don't know," Vivienne said, throwing her shoulders back. "Just accurate, I would have thought..."

The girls were asleep, curled up in their chairs, when Basil brought the carpet gently side-slipping down to land in an almond grove, part of the Ghouta oasis area to the east of Damascus. Instantly, even deep into the night, the heat became oppressive, no longer mitigated even slightly by their wind of passage.

The first birdsong with the dawn brought them awake and they stared blearily about in the half-light. It was quickly apparent that they were still well outside the city.

"Why is it?" Vivienne said, mostly to herself, "That whenever we go anywhere by carpet we always end up walking for miles." Her voice firmed. "Basil, it's so hot. Can't we fly closer?"

"That's jolly well why we can't go closer," Basil said. "They'll all be sleeping on the roofs of their jolly old houses."

"Would it really matter if anyone saw us?"

"Sorcery," Annabella said. "Have you forgotten when they tried to stone us in Baghdad?"

"Oh... But..."

"No buts. I'm not risking that again. No way."

"Well then, breakfast," Vivienne said sulkily. "I'm not walking anywhere without breakfast."

"Certainly madam," Basil intoned. And a moment later the girls were greeted by a cloth spread beneath a tree, loaded with yoghurt, fresh fruit, flat bread seemingly straight from the oven and rose petal jam.

As it turned out, the walk to the city was not nearly as unpleasant as Vivienne might have feared. Their way lead through fertile country watered by springs fed by the Barada River, branches and canals of which trickled through and around the City of Jasmine itself. After a couple of hours, with the heat growing steadily fiercer as the

sun rose in the sky, they came to the Bab Sharqi, the old Roman gate on the eastern side of the walls.

The girls sidled their way as unobtrusively as possible beneath one of the lesser arches set either side of the great arch, their hijabs high about their faces, and stopped short at the sight that confronted them. Stretching away before them and disappearing into the distance was one of the longest and straightest streets they could remember seeing. It was a good bit wider than a cricket pitch is long and lined on both sides by a crumbling colonnade, which here and there had collapsed completely. Within the shadowy arches there was a motley collection of shops, their wares hung up on display, interspersed with an excrescence of stalls and market booths encroaching on to the paving of the roadway.

"How old is this place?" Vivienne asked.

"Very old," Basil said. He was whispering in deference to the crowds jostling past. "Very jolly very old. This is the oldest city still jolly functioning. And you're looking at Straight Street," he added expectantly. As usual, he was disappointed. Vivienne and Annabella turned to each other blankly, and shrugged.

"The Bible," Basil sighed. "St Paul... Via Recta... Never mind. Not that any of that lot had much to recommend them, if you ask me."

"So where do we go?" Annabella said. "How do we find the hospital?"

"Follow your jolly nose," Basil whispered. "It's down by the citadel. We turn off at the road to the mosque."

The girls set off, determinedly weaving their way through the jostling crowds, dodging carts and donkeys and seeking to be as unobtrusive as possible. The crush was so dense that it was slow going, but at last they came to an ancient triumphal arch also built by the Romans. Some distance further on there was a crossroads and peering through the crowds they could make out the great bulk of the Umayyad Mosque looming in the distance. They turned towards it. At the second cross street, Basil directed them to the left and suddenly they were free of the pressing throng.

The bimaristan was a large, blank-faced building standing isolated. The gates at the main entrance stood open and were unguarded. The girls hesitated and stopped.

"I guess we just go in," Annabella said after a moment.

"Do you think we should?" Vivienne said. "Won't we get into trouble?"

"I don't see why. It's a public hospital, isn't it Basil?"

"Abso-jolly-lutely," Basil said, for the moment able to speak normally.

"So..." Annabella said, and without more ado marched forward past the gates and into the shadowed tunnel beyond, Vivienne following behind somewhat reluctantly. They emerged into a tree-shaded courtyard bordered on all four sides by yet more colonnades, two stories high. Through the arches they caught glimpses of what for all the world looked like regular hospital wards from another time. The light within was dim and cool and thoroughly inviting.

Annabella stopped uncertainly and then moved further into the courtyard.

What happens now? she asked Basil.

Over there, behind you, he said. *It looks like a reception area sort of thing.*

Annabella turned and made her way towards it, Vivienne trailing behind. A man was walking down the colonnade towards them. He came on unhurriedly.

"May I be of assistance?" he inquired in a mild voice.

"Yes please," Annabella said. "We're looking for Darius, Darius al Halabi." The man inspected them silently for a moment then gestured to some shade.

"If you care to wait here, I'll send someone to find him," he said. "I dare say he'll be in the stables. He's usually to be found there between classes."

What? Annabella said. *Darius usually in the stables... Between classes? What's he talking about? Is he teaching...?*

Search me, Basil said. Vivienne, too, was surprised and had turned to her with a questioning expression. The man disappeared into the reception chamber and a moment later a small figure emerged to go scurrying off across the courtyard.

They waited what seemed a long time until at last they made out somebody striding towards them. Somebody tall, who moved with lithe grace, somebody who seemed strangely familiar, somebody whose features, the closer he came, were more and more recognisably gorgeous. Unconsciously the two girls stepped towards him, and then hearts racing, they were both running. It was Darius. But not Darius, the old man, they were expecting, it was Darius, the beautiful youth as they had known him.

Chapter 4

Sinan wrinkled his nose with distaste. The stink of his own body wafted about him. He had always found it difficult to remain inoffensive in the heat of high summer but now that he lived in constant terror of Hassan-i Sabbāh, it proved totally impossible however much he might drench himself in essences and attars. In fact, the perfumes if anything merely served to accentuate the underlying stench. He could now feel positive rivers of sweat coursing down the rolls of fat beneath his robes as he stood before the door to what had once been his own personal quarters. He took a deep breath and knocked, so hesitantly there was no response. He tried again and waited, unwilling to risk further importunity.

"Enter," the voice hissed eventually.

Sinan tentatively eased the door open and sidled his bulk through the narrowest possible gap. Instantly the odour of his own body was subsumed by the powerful stench within. He kept his eyes fixed firmly on the floor. He had no wish to lay them on his master ever again. He had seen him once and that was once too often. It was a sight that would haunt him for the rest of his life.

"The physician has gone," the voice hissed venomously. Hassan-i Sabbāh having made the effort to investigate the lead personally was particularly aggravated at his failure to track down his quarry, a failure caused by intolerable human frailty, frailty that would have to be taken into account in future. "Find the physician. I will have him, and through him the girl. And when you do find the physician, you will accompany me. Be ready. Find him! Find him again or I shall reach down your throat and rend your bowels."

Sinan clenched his teeth tight shut and fought to suppress an alarming tremor, deep within his belly. What girl, he wondered, despite himself? Why should... the voice be concerned with a girl?

In fact, a girl with intense blue eyes. A girl sought not only by Hassan-i Sabbāh, but also, less urgently but all the more determinedly for that, by a force far more terrible and quite beyond Sinan's understanding. Nor could Sinan know that should this Prince of Darkness ever become aware of Hassan-i Sabbāh's true purpose, things might be very different, ring or no ring.

Hassan-i Sabbāh himself knew, or guessed, how Iblis might regard the one person in all time who had engineered an escape from Waq Waq and except when roused to overt passion, was careful to conceal his intent.

The explanation for the appearance of Darius, still gorgeous, still youthful, turned out to be simple enough. He was indeed Darius al Halabi, but the grandson of their Darius and his spitting image. Intuitively he realised who the girls must be and after a long moment of stunned surprise his welcome was effusive to the point of embarrassment. However, curiously, his attention was almost exclusively directed to Annabella. Vivienne, the stunner, got little more than a passing glance and so little acknowledgement that she felt herself downright insulted. The role of second fiddle in

male company was something entirely new to her, something entirely unexpected, and she found herself resenting it a very great deal.

After the first, confused exchanges, Darius ushered the girls to a cool, quiet chamber that turned out to be part of his grandfather's personal domain.

"So," Darius said after pouring goblets of sharbat that he had caused to be brought. "The celebrated, the renowned Annabella Crabtree..." There was no hint of mockery in his tone; on the contrary it was deeply respectful, almost reverent. "I never thought to meet you," he went on. "I never thought to be so fortunate..." Annabella felt herself blushing. Praise, sincere praise, was something to which she was quite unaccustomed.

Don't let it go to your head, Basil butted in waspishly. *What does this boy know about any-jolly-thing?*

He seems very intelligent to me, Annabella responded equally tartly.

Ooooooh, Basil said with rather more edge than Annabella thought warranted.

"My grandfather's told me all about you, of course," Darius gushed on. "How you fought the Emir of Evil and Iblis, the terrible, single-handed, how you survived the ordeal with Lilis, how you rescued your parents from Waq Waq, how you..."

Single-handed! Basil snarled. *As I jolly well recall, you had a little help, just here and there, just now and then... Hero worship is so unattractive, I always think. Jolly demeaning, if you ask me.*

"I'm embarrassed," Annabella laughed, holding up a hand to Darius and ignoring Basil completely, all the while wondering with part of her mind why the djinni suddenly seemed so hostile. Her concern lasted only for a moment, however. Truth to tell, she was thoroughly enjoying some frank male admiration. For Annabella it was a new experience, and beguiling. She felt herself beginning to glow and couldn't help glancing at Vivienne with a touch of triumph. The look of sour lemons she got in return, Annabella found extremely gratifying.

"But you shouldn't be embarrassed," Darius said. "I can't believe I'm actually talking to you. You're just as I imagined..."

"Really?" Annabella said.

"You're exactly the way my grandfather described you. The eyes, so blue. The hair... And slender, but so strong..." Annabella laughed again.

"You mean skinny," she said. "And now, I'm really embarrassed. Enough..."

"I'm sorry," Darius said with a slight blush. "You've been such a heroine of mine for such a long time..." Basil sniffed, loudly and quite audibly. It went unnoticed.

"But what are you doing here?" Darius continued, oblivious in his excitement. "Such good fortune that you are here, but why? And is Basil with you?"

"To see your grandfather," Annabella said, sidestepping the mention of Basil. "We're here to see your grandfather. We have to warn him."

"Warn him?"

"Hassan-i Sabbāh," Annabella said, suddenly serious. "He escaped from the volcano."

"Escaped?"

"We think he must have recovered the Seal of Solomon and forced Iblis to release him."

"And...?"

"Vengeance," Annabella said. "He will demand vengeance. I know he will. So we're here to warn your grandfather."

The new Darius, like his grandfather before him, really was an intelligent young man and it took him only a moment to assimilate the news and to understand the implications.

"I should tell you this, then," he said gravely. "This morning, we found one of the night nurses lying dead in a corridor. There was no mark, no sign of what caused his death, except his face was frozen in a mask of terror. And there was one other thing. There was a footprint on the floor. Just one. A bloody footprint."

There was a long silence.

Hassan-i Sabbāh? Annabella asked. There was no answer. Impatiently, she spoke again: *What's wrong with you?*

Nothing, Basil snapped.

Well, do you think it is Hassan-i Sabbāh? Again there was no answer. Annabella had a sudden flash.

Are you jealous? she demanded. Given their long-standing and very close intimacy, it seemed impossible to Annabella that Basil should doubt her, yet here he was suddenly behaving very oddly. Again she waited, but still Basil refused to speak.

"Where is Darius?" Annabella asked eventually. "I mean grandfather Darius."

"With Saladin," Darius said. "With the army. Grandfather is also Saladin's personal physician and head of the field hospital."

"And where is the army?" Darius shrugged.

"Who knows?" he said. "Fighting the Franks?" A thought struck Annabella.

"Would this nurse, the one who died, would he have known grandfather Darius is with the army?"

"I suppose so," Darius said. "Everyone does, pretty much. It's not a secret..."

"So," Annabella said slowly. "If it was Hassan-i Sabbāh who killed him, he now probably knows too."

"If the nurse spoke," Darius said. "But from the look on his face..."

"You think he died first? Of terror?"

Darius shrugged. The question was unanswerable but nevertheless, either way, the imperative to warn grandfather Darius was suddenly greatly more urgent.

How long are you going to go on being stupid? Annabella demanded. She found that she was unaccountably cross with Basil, far more angry than the situation actually warranted. Why shouldn't she enjoy a boy admiring her, she fumed? What business was it of Basil's anyway? What right did he have to be so upset? It wasn't as though they were married.

As long as I jolly well choose, Basil said after a moment. His voice sounded cold, remote.

Well, what do you think we should do? Annabella matched him tone for tone.

Whatever you jolly well like. Abruptly Annabella gave up. She turned to Vivienne who gazed back, an indefinable blankness suffusing her face.

"What do *you* think we should do, then?" Annabella said with an emphasis she was sure Vivienne would understand.

"You tell me," Vivienne replied, her voice bubbling with sarcasm. "You're the great Annabella Crabtree... Sorry. I've got that wrong. The celebrated, the renowned... Is that how it went?"

Darius watched the two girls curiously, switching his gaze from face to face.

"I'm sorry," he ventured after a moment. "Have I said something wrong?"

"No," Annabella said firmly. "Not at all. It's not your fault if certain people get their knickers in a twist over nothing." She paused. "We have to find grandfather Darius as quickly as we can and I don't think the carpet is a good idea. We need daylight to search and we can only fly at night."

"So Basil is with you?" Darius said. "Will you introduce me? Please introduce me..."

"I would," Annabella said. "Except Basil is being difficult. Basil is being downright objectionable and he can go take a flying jump at the moon for all I care."

"Oh," Darius said, politely trying to disguise his disappointment.

"So how can we travel?" Annabella asked, returning to the main point at issue.

"Can you ride?" Darius asked.

"We can learn," Annabella said determinedly, wondering as she did so whether she was being quite wise.

"Then we have to go to the stables," Darius said. He and Annabella turned as one. A moment later Annabella stopped.

"Are you coming?" she threw over her shoulder and then followed Darius out of the chamber without waiting for an answer and at that moment not caring in the least whether Basil and Vivienne followed her or not.

Darius, playing shamelessly on the fact that he was the favoured grandson of the head of the hospital and himself a star student, eventually prevailed and managed to procure two of the most docile mares the stables had to offer for the girls, to go with his own high-bred Arabian, Leila. Annabella, assuming that Basil might recover from his ridiculous loss of temper in time to provide whatever necessities they might need on the way, in turn prevailed on Darius to leave immediately with the barest of provisions.

The horses were led into the mounting yard at the rear of the hospital and the girls helped into the saddle. Darius ushered them out into the lane and then headed south through backstreets away from the citadel and the mosque towards the Bab al-Saghir, the Small Gate. They came again to Straight Street and ducked across. The narrowness of the way on the other side forced the horses close together and Darius and

Annabella, in front, found themselves riding knee to knee. Annabella was very conscious of it. She was also conscious of the waves of disapproval washing over her. She tossed her head. She was enjoying herself and Basil and Vivienne would just have to lump it.

Once through the gate, they headed off to the south-west, travelling fast – and in Annabella's and Vivienne's case, most uncomfortably – across an arid, stony plain that made a stark contrast to the fertile lands to the east of the city. To the north the country was even harsher. The land was so bare and eroded that the ridges stood out like the ribs on a skeleton picked clean by the desert wind. Their best information was that Saladin and the army had advanced in the direction of the Jordan river, possibly with the intention of laying siege to the town of Tiberias on the other side of Lake Tiberias, sometimes known as the Sea of Galilee, in which case their quickest route lay to the north of the lake.

"God, my bum is so sore," Annabella remarked to Vivienne. The girls, for the moment were alone as Darius had gone off to picket the horses in a patch of spindly grass. Vivienne snorted.

"Well I'm sure Darius would love to soothe it for you with some salve or something," she said in her bitchiest voice. They had been riding all day and the last hours had been a severe trial for both of them. Vivienne's temper, foul to start with, had grown progressively worse. Basil had been conspicuous by his silence and Annabella, more and more irritated with him, had determined that she would not be the first to break the impasse.

"So are you going to ask Basil for a tent or something?" Vivienne said.

"You ask him," Annabella said. Vivienne stared at her. She was well accustomed to the constant bickering between the two – in her own mind, she thought of it as a fighting marriage – but this was something new, and very different. She opened her mouth to speak and then thought better of it.

"Basil," she said at last. "Could we have a camp, please. You know, tents, bedding, food..."

"And food and water for the horses," Darius added jocularly, coming up behind her and quite sure that Vivienne was merely indulging in a touch of wishful thinking. "They need to drink and that grass has no nourishment."

The girls had no idea what might happen as Basil still disdained to speak but a procession of necessary items began to appear. The expression on Darius's face became more and more disbelieving. Because of Basil's towering snit, this was the first concrete evidence for Darius that the djinni actually did exist. Eventually, Darius shouldered the nosebags, the sack of grain and the water skin that had been deposited in front of him and went off.

Vivienne and Annabella looked at each other. It was very noticeable that instead of the communal tent that Basil had always provided for them in the past, there were now three small and separate bivouacs, set well apart.

Again Vivienne opened her mouth to speak. Again she thought better of it and said nothing.

The longer the silence went between Basil and Annabella, the more difficult it became for either of them to end it. Close as they had been in the past – and they had been very close indeed – their previous intimacy merely served to accentuate the chasm that so suddenly and for utterly spurious reasons yawned between them. It should have been the easiest thing in the world for either or both of them to reach across the gulf, but neither could bring themselves to make the first move, however slight. Annabella was adamant in her own mind that she had given Basil no cause to behave with such stupid, male arrogance and as far as she was concerned it was up to him to get over it himself, or not. Tired out and increasingly miserable, she went to bed early, hoping that sleep might improve the situation. The others lingered at the fire only a moment before also seeking their separate shelters.

A scream rent the night. Darius was still awake. Despite the long, hard ride, his head was so full of the amazing events of the day that he was quite unable to sleep. On the instant, he seized his scimitar and raced outside. Annabella was standing there, shaking. He dropped his sword and automatically drew her to him.

"What is it?" he said. "What's happened? What's wrong?" For another long moment, Annabella was quite unable to speak.

"A snake," she mumbled at last into Darius's shoulder. "It was sliding across my face..."

"Did it bite you?" Darius demanded anxiously. "Vipers are dangerous."

"No," Annabella said. "I don't think so..."

There was a snort from behind them. Vivienne was standing there in the moonlight, a very strange look on her face.

"A snake?" she said scornfully. "An oldie but a goodie. Works every time."

"Shameful," another voice said, a disembodied voice, a fell voice. "Just shameful."

Annabella stood a moment longer in Darius's arms, then stepped back.

"I don't know what you're suggesting," she said coldly, embracing both Vivienne and the invisible Basil. "But whatever it is, you're quite wrong." She turned abruptly on her heel and marched back to her shelter.

"Wait," Darius said, caught by surprise. "Let me check first." He hurried to catch up.

"So jolly gallant," the disembodied voice said. Vivienne snorted again and went back to her own shelter.

Slut! Annabella stopped short, so suddenly that Darius nearly ran into her. He moved around her thinking she was just nervous.

What? Annabella demanded. *What did you say?*

Slut! I said, slut! That you of all people should behave like this... Incredible! Just incredible. Astonished as she was by the accusation, Annabella was even more disconcerted that this was one of those rare occasions on which Basil chose to speak in plain language, unvarnished, unadorned. She suddenly found herself completely disoriented. She groped for something to say.

I don't know what you mean... she managed to repeat at last. It was pathetic. She knew it was pathetic. It just made her sound guilty of whatever it was Basil thought she had done.

You know exactly what I mean, Basil shot back. *And so blatant! You rub my nose in it and then spit in my face. If you think...*

If I think what? Annabella found her own temper bubbling up and on the verge of boiling over.

If you think I'm going to stay around and put up with this sort of behaviour then you've got another think coming.

You put up with me...! Annabella shouted. *If that's how you feel, get lost! Go! Get out!*

That's exactly how I feel, Basil spat back. *And don't expect me ever to come back... Expect you to come back... You arrogant, conceited... djinni. After this, why would you think I would ever want you to come back...?*

Right then! Basil said and abruptly there was a vast echoing silence inside Annabella's head. She felt tears wanting to come but grimly forced them back. She was damned if she would give Basil the satisfaction of seeing her cry even if she did suddenly feel as lonely and empty as the last human alive on the planet.

Whatever faint cooling the night had brought vanished instantly with the sun. Vivienne attempted to negotiate with Basil about breakfast and striking the camp but when she addressed him, there was no answer and no matter how loudly she shouted, he quite failed to present himself. Eventually she turned to Annabella, who was standing a little way off.

"Now you've done it," Vivienne said. Annabella regarded her stonily.

"I haven't done anything," she said.

"Well Basil thinks you have. So you'd better beg him to come back and sort it out."

"I haven't done anything," Annabella repeated. "And I'm not begging anyone. Basil can please himself. If he wants to take himself off in a huge huff... Well, good."

There was some food left from the night before and the three ate sparingly, not knowing how long it might have to last. Darius mumbled something into the frosty silence and went off to saddle the horses. Vivienne made a move to dismantle one of the shelters but Annabella stopped her.

"Leave it," she said shortly. "There's too much to carry."

"We might need it," Vivienne said.

"If Basil doesn't decide to come back, it's not going to help."

"Annabella! You have to ask him. He'll hear you, wherever he is. You know he will."

"No."

"Stop being so stubborn."

"I am not being stubborn," Annabella shouted. "And I haven't done anything wrong."

Both the girls were so stiff and sore they could hardly move and dreaded the thought of again committing their most tender parts to the working of the hard, unforgiving saddles. However, mount they did and the little cavalcade set off, backs to the rising sun, to pick its way down the Golan Heights from the plain of Damascus to the lowlands bordering the sea. Distantly, to their left, they could see the flicker of light reflecting on water.

They spoke to the people they passed, working in the terraces and fields, none of whom had seen or heard anything of the Saracen army.

"They must have gone south of the lake," Darius said at one point. He pointed to the glinting water. "We should stay to the north and go down the other side." He led them on and in due course they came to a narrow valley crossing their path, in places steep enough to be called a ravine and in others flattening out so that it almost disappeared. A muddy, turgid stream wound its way along the bottom.

"Nahr al-urdun," Darius said dismissively. The Jordan River.

By mid-afternoon, Annabella and Vivienne had just about reached their limit. Neither had ever ridden more than a donkey along a beach before and were certainly not fit for long hours in the saddle. Darius's patient instruction could teach them enough to handle their gentle mounts, but he couldn't do anything for their aching bodies. He took to glancing behind him more and more frequently, his concern showing openly. Annabella swaying slightly in the saddle decided him. He called a halt.

"Why are we stopping?" Annabella asked, the fatigue showing through the dust coating her face.

"You..." Darius began then changed his mind. "The horses must rest," he said. They dismounted in the sparse shade of a desiccated tree and passed the water skin back and forth.

"We have to keep on," Annabella said. "We have to find your grandfather. There's not a minute to lose."

"The... horses must rest," Darius repeated. "They can't..."

"Shsh," Vivienne said lifting a hand. "What's that noise?" Instantly, they fell silent. A harness jingled again.

"Riders!" Darius said. He spun round and peering through the foliage he caught a glimpse of a red cross on a white surcoat. "Crusaders!" He said, dropping his voice. "Quick! Run!"

They remounted and with Darius holding the reins of the two mares on either side, one lot in each hand, and with the girls clinging to their saddles, he set Leila to the gallop and burst away from the tree.

A shout rang out behind them and they heard the sounds of instant pursuit. Unencumbered, Leila would have had no difficulty in outrunning the Templar patrol, but as it was, dragging along her two reluctant stable mates, she had no chance. It took only minutes for riders to sweep past them on either side, then turn inwards, forcing them to stop. A moment later, they found themselves facing a semicircle of glittering lance points.

The knight in charge, a dark, burly man, his face scarlet with the heat of the afternoon and the weight of his armour, inspected them slowly. There was a strange noise mixed in among the stamp of horses' feet and the jingle of harness, a constant ding, ding, ding. Annabella realised eventually that it was the knight's mailed forefinger tapping at the helm hanging from his saddle bow.

His gaze moved unhurriedly from face to face, then dropped to examine their horses, lingering for long, appreciative seconds on Leila. He lifted his head again to confront Darius.

"Who are you?" he demanded. Darius looked blank, failing to comprehend the archaic French.

"Who are you?" the knight repeated, this time in pigeon Arabic, his irritation mounting.

"Travellers, just travellers," Annabella said in French. The knight's head swung towards her. He allowed his surprise to show, both that she should be the one to speak and that she should choose to speak in French.

"Where do you travel from?" he said. "Where do you travel to?" Annabella hesitated. She had judged that the knight's own language might receive a better reception but she was suddenly aware of the trap looming in front of her. Her fatigue had betrayed her.

"Where from?" he repeated impatiently. Still Annabella hesitated, desperately seeking an escape. She was unfamiliar with the area to the point that the only name she knew that might have some relevance was Jerusalem and as they were heading towards it when captured, they could hardly be coming from there.

"Jerusalem," Annabella said trying to disguise her incipient panic. "We travel to Jerusalem." The knight's brows drew together and his face darkened.

"For the last time," he said. "Where from?" Annabella was left with no alternative...

"Damascus," she was forced to say in the end. The knight regarded her speculatively, and then the trap sprung shut.

"Damascus," he said at last. "You say you come from Saladin's capital, Damascus. You flee from us. And you speak French. Why should I not think that you come as spies?"

Very quickly, the girls were past all caring. At a terse word of command, the patrol surrounded them, their reins were seized, and they found themselves moving rapidly south over the low brown hills, following the shoreline of Lake Tiberias some distance to their left. It was all Annabella and Vivienne could do to cling to their saddles and pray not to fall, to be trampled to death by the many hooves pounding along about them. Unnoticed, the low, dun-coloured buildings of the town of Tiberias began to distinguish themselves from the background, and then they were clattering through the streets to the fortress.

The gates were standing open and they passed through to find the interior in a ferment with people rushing hither and yon bearing indeterminate burdens. A tall, bulky woman of a certain age was standing on a mounting block, her hands crossed on the hilt of a great sword in front of her, apparently directing the chaos. The Templar

knight who had captured them thrust his horse brutally through the throng towards her. Annabella could see them speaking but whatever they might have been saying was drowned by the surrounding hubbub.

The knight turned and beckoned. In turn, Annabella, Vivienne and Darius found their horses being forced through the crowd until they were arrayed before the woman, their heads at about the same level.

"Who are you?" the woman demanded with only passing interest. Her eyes had examined them for a brief moment and immediately switched back to monitoring the surrounding activity.

"Who are you?" Annabella demanded hotly before either of the others could speak. "And how dare you treat us like this?" The woman's gaze swung back and all at once she was giving Annabella her undivided attention.

"I am Eschiva of Bures, Princess of Galilee, wife to Raymond, Count of Tripoli," she said coldly and with menace. The sword she was holding obviously belonged to her husband. After a threatening moment, she continued: "You are being treated like this that I may decide whether to have you tortured first or merely strangled immediately and thrown to the dogs. Sir Robert caught you spying on my lands. Your lives are forfeit."

"We are not spies!" Annabella shouted. "That's just ridiculous. We're too young to be spies."

"On the contrary," Eschiva snapped. "The Saracens often use children. They have no shame. The children have no shame. I ask one last time, who are you?" Annabella hesitated.

"Our names will mean nothing," she said.

"Nevertheless..."

"Annabella Crabtree," Annabella said quickly. She gestured. "Vivienne Walker and..."

"No..." Darius tried to stop her, but he was too late.

"Darius al Halabi." There was a sudden, crashing silence. The busy din of the crowd carried on unabated but it seemed that Annabella, Vivienne, Darius, their interlocutor and the Templar knight had been sealed on the instant into some noiseless bubble. Had she glanced to her right, Annabella would have noticed that Sir Robert's scarlet face had quickly creased into an anticipatory grin. He could now rightly expect a handsome reward, never mind a certain inconvenient vow of poverty.

Eschiva said nothing more, merely gestured to an inner courtyard. The three captives, still bound to their saddles were led away, efficiently decanted and in what seemed an indecently short space of time, locked in a cell.

"I don't understand," Annabella said when they were alone. "What did I say? What happened? What's going on?"

"We're hostages," Darius said slowly. "I tried to stop you... My name..." Annabella turned a stricken face towards him.

"What...?"

"My grandfather is famous. And he's Saladin's physician. That makes us valuable. Ransom..."

There was a long silence.

"You, maybe," Annabella said at last. "But I don't think anybody would give two cents for us."

Darius had no understanding of the expression, but the meaning was clear enough.

Chapter 5

"Well," Annabella said with false brightness. "Being, as I am, an expert on dungeons, I have to say that this one could be a lot worse." The cell they had been taken to was, in fact, pleasantly cool after the blaring heat of the courtyard and the countryside beyond. It was dry and there was even some straw on the floor, though best not to inquire too closely as to what it might conceal, Annabella thought to herself. Vivienne glared at her through the gloom.

"Very funny," she said. "When are you going to call Basil?" Annabella said nothing.

"Call Basil?" Darius ventured.

"And you shut up," Vivienne flared. "It's all your fault."

"V," Annabella said sharply. "It's not, and you know it. You can't blame Darius."

"Blame me for what, exactly?" Darius demanded. For the first time since they had met him, there was an edge to his voice.

"Smarming all over Annabella," Vivienne snapped.

"Oh V, do stop it," Annabella said tiredly. "Just grow up." The adrenaline of the confrontation with Eschiva in the courtyard was rapidly dissipating and the fatigue of the long journey was bearing Annabella down. She went and sat herself in a corner, wearily leaning her head against the rough stone of the wall and trying to ease the stiffness of her muscles. Vivienne stood regarding her for a long moment, hands on hips, and then she too went to sit, in the corner diametrically opposite Annabella's, as far away as she could get.

Darius looked from one to the other. He opened his mouth to speak and wisely decided not to.

They were brought water and food, some sort of rough bread. Obviously their commercial value, Darius's at least, made them worth a minimum of trouble. They ate and drank in silence, the atmosphere thick and inimical.

Vivienne was right, Annabella supposed. She really should swallow her pride and summon Basil, have it out with him, seek his forgiveness if that's what it took, not that she had anything for which she felt she needed to be forgiven. So, call him? Assuming, always assuming that if she did, he would come. What if he didn't? And it was this possibility that stopped Annabella cold. She was damned if she would leave herself open to that sort of rejection. Basil was the one who was being totally irrational. It was Basil who for absolutely no good reason was apparently insane with jealousy. He had abandoned her. Let him beg to come back.

What if he didn't? What if he really had abandoned her, in quite the wrong century, at the mercy of a bunch of grasping crusaders with a supernatural monster of particularly unlovely habits in hot pursuit? What then?

But deep inside, Annabella couldn't believe that Basil, her Basil, Basil whom she loved with all her heart, Basil whom she was certain loved her equally, Basil whose life she had saved, who had saved hers, Basil who was her light and her joy... She

could never believe he would never return. Why he was evidently so upset over matters so seemingly trivial she couldn't begin to understand, but nor could she accept that he had gone for good.

So, call him...! No! Never!

The door to the cell crashed open. The flame of a torch flared redly.

"Get up!" a voice said. Annabella, mazed and confused, lifted her head from her arm. It was dead and throbbing uncomfortably with returning circulation. How long had she been sleeping on it? She had no idea.

"Get up!" the voice said again. It was Sir Robert.

"What?" Annabella said. "Why?"

"We're leaving," Sir Robert said. "Now."

"Why?" Annabella demanded again. She was fully awake now and sensing danger.

"Don't ask questions. Get up." A sword hissed from its scabbard and Annabella felt a sharp prod in her posterior. She scrambled hastily to her feet. Something was very odd. The knight was alone in the cells in the dead of night. Why were there no other guards? Where was he taking them? Abruptly she made up her mind.

"I'm not going anywhere," she said. "I'll scream." Sir Robert planted his torch in a sconce, took two long strides and seized Vivienne from where she was crouching defensively in a corner.

"Make a sound, and I'll cut her throat," he said with menace. "Make another sound and I'll cut your throat. The boy is worth gold. You? Maybe. But you're certainly not worth trouble..." Annabella had time to notice that Vivienne's eyes were suddenly huge and then there came a scrabbling sound. All at once Darius was flying across the room in a gallant but totally foolhardy attack. The point of his jaw met the knight's mailed fist, doubly lethal with the added weight of the sword it was grasping, and he crashed to the floor totally unconscious. Sir Robert regarded him dispassionately.

"Stupid!" he spat. He considered for a moment and then spoke again. "You have a choice. You can carry the boy, silently, or I can kill you so I can carry the boy myself. Which?" He pushed Vivienne into the centre of the cell. Annabella came hesitantly forward.

"Carry him where?" she asked.

"To the stables."

"Why?"

"You ask too many questions," Sir Robert growled. "We're leaving."

"Why?" Annabella insisted, despite Vivienne putting out a restraining hand.

"Saladin approaches," Sir Robert said and lifted his sword threateningly. A number of things suddenly clicked into place for Annabella. It explained why the fortress had been buzzing like an overturned hive when they arrived. It explained why Eschiva, symbolically armed with one of her husband's two-handed swords, had been standing there in the courtyard directing operations. And most of all it explained this midnight visit from the venal Templar. If Saladin took the fortress, all hope of extorting a ransom for Darius would evaporate, quite apart from the fact that Sir Robert himself

could expect an untimely and no doubt gruesome end. On the instant, she made up her mind.

"Come on," she said to Vivienne and moved towards Darius.

"I'm still not talking to you," Vivienne said meaningly.

"You can help carry him," Annabella said quietly. "Or we can both die. Your choice."

"Annabella!" Vivienne began, but was cut off by the flat of Sir Robert's sword smacking her sharply on the bottom. She yelped. A moment later she was pushing Annabella away from Darius's shoulders.

"Take his legs," she said through gritted teeth. "I'm stronger."

It was no great distance to the stables but even so the girls were struggling quite badly by the time they arrived. Darius was tall and a well-built young man. Annabella had come to the conclusion that Sir Robert was acting freelance and quite without authorisation. She had made up her mind that if they met anyone or at the slightest opportunity, she would raise the alarm. Unfortunately the fortress seemed deserted, as though everyone had hunkered down and was husbanding their strength against the arrival of Saladin.

Four horses, already saddled and bridled, were waiting quietly, hitched to a rail. It was beyond the girls' strength to hoist Darius on to Leila. They stood there helplessly, wondering what to do. A moment later, with a quick heave, Sir Robert had him arched face-down over the saddle. He threw a strip of leather to Annabella.

"Tie his hands and feet to the girth," he muttered. "And make sure you do it tightly. A fall will probably kill him, and if he dies, you die."

Annabella fiddled and faddled about as long as she dared, hoping that someone might appear, but the mounting yard remained obstinately deserted. All too soon there was nothing she could do but climb aboard her patient mare, aware that in the meantime Sir Robert had mounted his own destrier and had Vivienne slumped across the horse's withers in front of him, knife blade glittering in his left hand. The message was succinct and very much to the point. Leading Leila and the other mare, he made Annabella precede him until they came to a postern gate. A sentry stepped out of the shadows.

"Despatches for King Guy," Sir Robert said in a low voice. The guard said nothing but Annabella could have sworn he gave a broad wink and that there was a clink as a purse changed hands. A moment later the gate had been eased open sufficiently for them to pass through and they were out into the streets of Tiberias. Annabella still hoped for outside intervention but it seemed all the inhabitants of Tiberias had either retreated to the fortress, scuttled into hiding, or had fled to the countryside in the face of Saladin's imminent arrival. A few minutes later they were clear of the town and out in the open. Sir Robert stopped, pushed Vivienne to the ground and told her to mount her own horse.

"But I'd much rather ride with you," Vivienne said. Standing there in the moonlight, her hair suddenly and unaccountably bared to gleam silver and gold, she

made a most appealing picture. There was also a definite hint of coquettishness in her voice. Annabella stared.

"Vivienne!" she exclaimed after a moment, in English. "What do you think you're doing?"

"In the first place," Vivienne said coldly, also in English. "I told you, I'm not talking to you. And in the second place, your not talking to Basil has just made things worse and worse. Leave me alone." Switching back to archaic French, she turned again to Sir Robert.

"Please," she said, winningly. "I really would like to ride with you."

"No," the knight said, but what was that change in his voice, Annabella wondered? "You must ride your own horse. Mine has enough to carry and we have far to go." Yes, Annabella thought. Sir Robert was definitely making an effort to soften his habitual manner.

"Where?" Vivienne said, mounting her mare obediently. "Where are we going?" She sidled her horse up alongside Sir Robert's until their legs were touching. Wicked, Annabella thought. She's being totally wicked. And she continued to watch open-mouthed as Vivienne got properly into her stride, the horses beginning to move forward, suddenly synchronised.

"We go to Acre," Sir Robert said, to Annabella beginning to sound positively indulgent. "King Guy is there, mustering the Crusader army."

"An army?" Vivienne said. "How exciting. A real army?"

"Twenty thousand knights and men-at-arms."

"Mon dieu," Vivienne exclaimed. "So many men..." Her voice suddenly sounded positively breathless. Sir Robert shifted in his saddle as though remembering, and hastily discarding, another inconvenient vow.

"And why are we going to Acre?" Vivienne asked.

"Saladin will attack Tiberias at dawn..."

"And you're saving us," Vivienne said with a little sob of gratitude. "My hero..."

Too much, Annabella thought, both soured and fascinated at the same time. Way, way too much. But she knew little about the average male's excruciating appetite for outrageous flattery, whereas Vivienne had been born with the knowledge, and though repelled, Annabella had to admit that she was grateful for the information Vivienne was managing to elicit.

"And Saladin," Vivienne went on after a moment. "How big is his army?"

"Thirty thousand," Sir Robert said and continued boastfully: "But don't you worry your pretty little head. One Crusader is worth twenty Saracens. There's no danger."

"And what will happen to us at Acre?"

But what Sir Robert might have in mind, Vivienne never discovered. There was a groan from Darius.

"Stop!" Annabella said instantly. "We have to stop..." Without waiting for permission she slipped to the ground and began to struggle with the bonds tying Darius to his saddle. A moment later, Sir Robert was beside her, again waving his

knife. He sliced through the leather thong and they helped Darius down. He groaned again, and vomited. Sir Robert spat scornfully.

"Water," Annabella said. "He needs water." Sir Robert considered a moment and then reached down a water skin hanging from his saddle.

"A little," he said. "Only a little. It is all we have. There is no more until we get to Turan, and the day will be hot."

Which was really something to look forward to, Annabella thought absently, as she helped Darius to drink. The heat of the night about them was quite bad enough.

Darius, the lump on his chin swelling quickly, looked white and desperately ill, Annabella thought, trying to marshal what little she knew of the effects of concussion. Sir Robert, however, had no such concerns. After allowing Darius only a few minutes, Sir Robert hobbled him by the elbows and heaved him back astride Leila.

A gleam of light cracked the horizon behind them, and then impossibly fast, the sun was rising redly, forcing them to trample their shadows as they laboured on through the flaring heat to the west. It was as though some malevolent deity had opened the door to a furnace, yet still they plodded on, heads down and faces covered against the dust. The water skin lasted only to mid-morning and very quickly after that, thirst became their most pressing concern. Sir Robert, accustomed to campaigning, felt it least but even he was more than grateful when the seemingly endless plain revealed a hollow nestled among gently mounded hills to the north of their path, a hollow which concealed a marshy spring. The horses and riders drank until they were full, and then drank some more.

Sir Robert gave them half an hour to rest before forcing them to remount. They emerged from the hollow and turned again to the west, squinting, as the sun slid down the sky before them, seeming to burn ever more intensely.

"How far must we go?" Vivienne demanded querulously. She was far past any lingering coquettishness.

"To Sephoria," Sir Robert grunted. "There is water there. We will camp for the night." Despite his own fatigue, he wondered if perhaps rest and food might restore the girl to her earlier complaisance.

But in the event, it was not the prospect of dalliance that greeted him when Sephoria came into view sometime after dusk, but a carpet of twinkling fires. It was the Crusader army, he realised. Evidently, it had sallied forth from Acre to meet Saladin in the field.

Annabella and Vivienne regarded the encampment with bewilderment. Darius, smitten with a blinding headache, was only interested in grimly trying to keep his seat on Leila.

"What is it?" Vivienne asked. "What's happening?"

"The army," Sir Robert said angrily. "It's the army." Annabella wondered why he should be so clearly put out at the sight of the huddling mass of crude tents and rough shelters disappearing indistinctly into the gathering night. After a moment's thought, it came to her that he probably feared official interference in his promising little foray

into private enterprise. No doubt he was having sudden visions of Darius disappearing into the king's dungeon and Darius's ransom, when it came, disappearing into the privy purse. After a long minute of silent cursing, he motioned them forward.

Soon afterwards they came to an outlying picket and were waved through, the red cross on Sir Robert's surcoat gaining them automatic passage. However, at the perimeter they were stopped by a guard detail.

"Where from, sir?" the leader demanded with only perfunctory respect. He was also a Templar but wearing the black surcoat and red cross of a sergeant. Annabella gained the impression that Sir Robert was known to him, unfavourably.

"Tiberias," Sir Robert said incautiously. He was now so thoroughly out of temper that he gave no thought to evasion. Not only was the prospect of large amounts of gold receding rapidly, but he could also kiss goodbye to any chance of kissing that little blonde piece beside him. And he had had rather more than just kissing in mind. Her blandishments had been downright provocative and a little rough entertainment would have made a soothing counterpoint to the excessive heat of the day – excessive even for this time of year.

"Tiberias? Then I must ask you to come with me, sir," the sergeant said.

"Out of the question," Sir Robert said shortly. "Perhaps later, but first I must have the horses tended to... And these people," he added as a belated afterthought.

"I have orders," the sergeant said woodenly, the "sir" conspicuous by its sudden absence. "Anyone from Tiberias must report straight to the king." Several of his men fanned out and their pikes assumed a rather more horizontal angle. Sir Robert contemplated the situation for some moments and then surrendered to the inevitable.

"Very well," he said with extremely bad grace.

They were taken to an enclave of rather more sumptuous tents and pavilions with its own ring of guards. There they were made to dismount and with Sir Robert attempting unsuccessfully to look unruffled, they were herded towards a pavilion at least twice the size of the others. Another sentry held the door cloth aside and they were ushered within to find a large, open space lit by flaring cressets. The ground was carpeted and the walls hung with silk. A man was seated at a table, a thin circlet of gold about his brow, holding his long, lank locks away from his face. It was impossible to say whether he was simply unshaven or sporting an early example of designer stubble. Either way, Annabella thought, a full beard would have been a marked improvement on the weak chin in evidence. A number of other men were grouped around him. He looked up from a map spread before him on the table as they entered.

"What?" he demanded with no attempt to conceal his ill-humour.

"Your Majesty," Sir Robert said, sinking to one knee.

"What?" Guy de Lusignan, King of Jerusalem, repeated, his voice rising.

"I come from Tiberias," Sir Robert said.

"And?"

"Saladin, sire." There was silence. Annabella found herself admiring the deft imprecision of Sir Robert's statement. You couldn't call it a lie, but nor could you call it the truth. She coughed to cover a wayward snort.

"It merely confirms what we already know," one of the men grouped around the king said. "Saladin has taken the town, and possibly the fortress, but not the citadel. And I guarantee my wife will hold firm." Which meant he must be Raymond, Count of Tripoli, Annabella surmised, and that couriers had bypassed them on the road.

"Guarantee!" another of the men scoffed. He, like Sir Robert, was wearing a Templar surcoat. "How can you possibly guarantee that? A woman against Saladin...?"

"Eschiva against Saladin," Raymond snarled.

"Poor man!" somebody else said in an undertone not meant to be heard. Unfortunately, the remark fell into one of those moments of crystalline silence. Men struggled to control their expressions while Raymond glared about, seeking the perpetrator. He settled on Raynald de Châtillon, a long-time troublemaker who had done much to bring about the present state of war with Saladin. Raynald had determined that plundering Saracen caravans, injudicious enough to believe that they really were protected by the ostensible truce between the two sides, was much too nice a little earner for the temptation to be resisted. He was now openly smirking and Raymond, bristling, half drew his sword.

"Put up!" Guy said petulantly. "Put up man! What are you thinking?" Raymond seized the moment.

"What am I thinking?" he asked rhetorically and with great force, slamming his sword home for added effect. "I'm thinking it's as plain as a pikestaff to anyone but an idiot... In taking Tiberias, Saladin seeks to lure us out into the open, away from water. I am thinking that to march to relieve Tiberias is thus madness. And I remind you, sire, that Tiberias is part of my fief. I remind you that Eschiva is my wife and that my children are also there. I remind you that I have by far the most to lose in this. Yet even should Eschiva fail to hold the citadel, then better to lose that and for me to lose my family, than to lose the entire kingdom. We must rest here at Sephoria, sire, where we have water, where we can force Saladin to come to us, exposed on the plain... where there is no water."

It seemed then that Raymond might carry the day. His speech was greeted with respectful silence by all but Raynald, who clicked his tongue and allowed his face to twist with scorn. One other evidently shared his opinion. Knight Templar, Gerard de Ridefort, recently-elected Grand Master of the order, stepped forward.

Annabella couldn't know it but Gerard was that most dangerous of men, one whose confidence was exceeded only by his lack of judgment. Neither could she know that Gerard loathed Raymond. Tall and well-favoured, the second son of a Flanders lord, Gerard had originally come to Outremer to make his fortune and had believed that with Raymond's promise of an advantageous marriage to an heiress, he was set fair to do just that. In the end, however, Raymond had been unable to resist a much more tempting opportunity. He had sold the woman in question and her property to a merchant in exchange for her weight in gold. Seared both by the insult and the injury and more or less penniless to boot, Gerard had been forced to join the Templars.

Remarkably, and a testament to the general lack of calibre within Crusader ranks, he had then managed to ascend to the pinnacle of the order, during which time he had neither forgotten nor forgiven.

He regarded Raymond now with open contempt.

"This is the counsel of weakness," he said. His voice was firm, the voice of command, the voice of a man who had risen high and who was accustomed to unquestioning obedience. "Indeed, sire, it is the counsel of cowardice..." There was a sharp intake of breath from the men about the table. Gerard allowed the moment to gather weight and then continued: "We have not forgotten, sire, what was said about you on a previous occasion when you adopted exactly this strategy of avoiding battle..." The king swept angrily to his feet, knocking over his chair in the process.

"You dare?" Guy was beside himself and Annabella was certain that in the light of the flaring cressets she could see what there was of his chin begin to quiver.

"Dare?" Gerard was apparently quite unconcerned. "It was not I who dared, sire, but those who would bring you down." Again, there was a crashing silence as people absorbed the import of his statement. As a piece of political manipulation it was as astute as it was brazen, quite in keeping with the Templars' reputation for intrigue. Slowly both Guy and the rest of the gathering absorbed the implications which, they realised eventually, resolved into a simple equation. The king must now march forth to seek battle with Saladin or stand guilty as charged of both past and present cowardice. And anyone who continued to counsel against marching forth would henceforth stand guilty as charged of plotting treason against the king.

The other men in the chamber stirred uneasily. They were aware that a tectonic shift in the balance of power within the kingdom was taking place before their eyes. There were possibly ten seconds remaining in which to challenge the change, after which it would be complete, set in stone. They looked to Raymond. He said nothing and the moment passed.

Abruptly, Guy swung on his heel and disappeared into the nether reaches of the pavilion.

"See to it," he flung over his shoulder.

Gerard de Ridefort turned from the departing king to regard Sir Robert with undisguised disapprobation. He shrugged off a congratulatory clap on the back from Raynald and spoke into the wary silence.

"Report," he barked brusquely to cover his inward satisfaction at the marked deference now surrounding him.

"Ah..." Sir Robert hesitated. "Um..."

"Who are these people?" Gerard indicated the girls and Darius with his eyes.

"Hostages, my lord," Sir Robert was forced to admit. "The boy is an al Halabi."

Gerard raised an eyebrow. Saladin's affection for and reliance on his personal physician was well known. The boy, if he were indeed an al Halabi, would command a good price and Sir Robert, for once, would have done quite well, however improbable that might seem. One hirondelle, however, did not an été make, nowhere near.

"You may go," Gerard told the knight curtly.

Twice, Sir Robert's mouth opened and closed. Twice he quite failed to find anything to say. He turned, infinitely deflated, and left. Annabella found she was a little bit sorry to see him leave. At least, he was some sort of known in an increasingly strange and confusing world. Though Vivienne, she reflected, should be grateful. There was now no longer any question of payment being exacted on the musky promise she had been incautiously trailing behind her for much of the day.

Gerard still stood regarding them. Questions remained. The boy might indeed be an al Halabi but who were these two girls, and what were they doing that they had fallen into the hands of that fool Robert Guiscard, who had none of the brains of his famous forbear? But time was pressing if they were to march on the morrow, and this was a matter, undoubtedly trivial, that could wait. After a moment more, he waved them away.

They were taken to another tent, some distance off, given food and drink and then left alone. There was a guard outside the door and while they might have thought of trying to slip beneath the sides, the prospect of escape through the entire Crusader encampment was so remote as to be effectively impossible. Besides, they were simply too tired and Darius remained deeply unwell into the bargain. There was nothing for it but to make themselves as comfortable as possible on the bare ground, try to sleep and see what the morrow might bring.

Chapter 6

Annabella came slowly awake from the sleep of exhaustion as a faint breath of air played cool on the sweat on her forehead. It was pleasant, remarkably pleasant, but it shouldn't have been there. The tent should still be sealed up tight and never mind the discomfort to the occupants. It was pitch black and there was no sound, yet something was amiss, badly wrong, she could sense it. Then there came the rumour of suppressed struggle and a breath, sharply inhaled.

All at once, she guessed and leapt to her feet, screaming. A great many things happened simultaneously. Darius also leapt to his feet, blundered into her and brought them both down. As she fell, Annabella's out-flung arm struck something metallic, something hard and extremely painful. Armour. There was an oath. Then the door curtain was swept aside, the guard thrust a torch within and the scene revealed a sequential logic of its own.

There was a slit in the wall of the tent. Sir Robert was straddling Vivienne. His hand, the black hairs individually frozen in the flaring light, was covering the lower half of her face. Her clothing was disarranged. Her eyes were the size of bathtubs.

No one was in any doubt as to what it all meant.

Sir Robert took his hand away from Vivienne's mouth, bleeding where she had managed to bite it, and she began to scream, piercingly, dementedly. More heads appeared in the doorway. Somebody stepped inside and with the flat of his sword smashed Sir Robert across the back, knocking him clear of Vivienne. Annabella struggled to her knees and crawled across, her hand aching where it had struck Sir Robert's back. A moment later, Vivienne's head was buried in her shoulder and Annabella was hugging her tight, muffling her sobs, soothing her horror.

Gerard, fully dressed but minus his armour strode through the entrance. He contemplated the scene for a moment and then turned to Sir Robert, now gripped by two of the guards with his arms twisted up behind his back.

"You dishonour your vows," he said in a cold, disinterested voice. "Worse, you dishonour the order. Tomorrow you will ride to battle in the front rank. Unarmed. You should spend what remains of this night in vigil, praying you may die on the field. Take him away."

Sir Robert, his face expressionless, was marched out, his long fall from grace seemingly complete. Gerard stood a moment contemplating the prisoners before sweeping off to more pressing matters.

Still Annabella held Vivienne tight; gentle, loving, slowly bringing her to something approaching calm. And all the while, she was troubled by a vagrant thought. The breath of air that had woken her, the breeze, where was it now? The slash in the tent wall was still open but there was no draft coming through it, none. Why hadn't it come again? Why had it chosen just that instant and only that instant to brush her face? And all at once, Annabella came to believe that she knew the answer.

The faint light of predawn revealed Vivienne's face, white and strained, looming through the gloom. Her eyes were unnaturally fixed. Annabella eased her arm clear and sat up.

"Don't say anything," Vivienne said in a low, pleading voice. "Please don't say anything."

"I wasn't going to," Annabella replied with the sort of brisk tone a nurse might use to a fractious patient. Darius, who had lifted his head as they stirred, hastily shut his mouth.

"Basil...?" Vivienne ventured, at last.

"No," Annabella said.

"Please," Vivienne whispered. "Please, Annabella. I'm really, really, really scared..."

"No," Annabella repeated. "Anyway, there's not much he can do..."

"He could have stopped that man," Vivienne interrupted, her voice rising. "That rapist. He could have frozen him... Like Cordelia..." She was referring to one of Basil's more useful tricks. "And he could get us out of here," Vivienne's voice was now a squeak. "Annabella, there's going to be a war. There's going to be a war..."

"I don't care," Annabella said adamantly. "I'm not asking Basil for anything ever again." Vivienne was too upset to notice that it seemed that Annabella was addressing the chamber at large. "We'll be all right," Annabella continued rather more gently. "Darius is valuable so the Crusaders won't hurt us. And if we're lucky we'll be captured by his people anyway."

"But anything could happen..." Vivienne began.

"We'll be all right," Annabella insisted. A moment later, she turned to Darius.

"Are you feeling any better?" she asked.

"I'm fine," Darius said.

"Your face? The lump... You don't look..."

"I'm fine," he interrupted. Annabella shrugged. She couldn't really blame Darius, she realised, if he had come to develop reservations about her. He now seemed closed and distinctly wary, certainly no longer admiring.

Dawn breaking signalled the camp breaking. Suddenly all was noise and bustle as twenty thousand men went about the business of reducing order to chaos to order again. Their tent disappeared from over their heads and they were constrained to sit on the ground breathing the choking dust instantly raised by the multitude of trampling feet. They peered about them, trying to discern what might be happening through the haze but could see little. Eventually, Leila and the two mares were brought across from the horse lines and they were bidden to mount. Then they sat for another hour, waiting. At last, it seemed that the army might be ready to march and a shiver of anticipation ran down the assembled ranks. They shuffled forward for a step or two then stopped, to wait again, interminably.

Finally, they really did begin to move. The vanguard emerged on to the barren plain they would have to cross to reach Tiberias and prepared to do battle with the sun, already blazing and by far the most powerful of Saladin's forces.

Saladin himself was encamped on the outskirts of Tiberias, where a detachment of his main army was busily finishing off the sacking of the town and intensifying the siege of the last holdout defenders in the citadel. In desperation, Eschiva made a second attempt to buy Saladin off but again he refused contemptuously. This time it amused him to send the emissary back minus his hands to illustrate the folly of presuming a Muslim sultan would be given to the same sort of grasping avarice as the Frankish barons who had destroyed the peace in the first place by breaking the truce and attacking his caravans.

Word of Guy's advance reached him in timely fashion later that morning. He reacted unhurriedly and with due deliberation. A premature attack would simply see the Franks retreat back to Sephoria, and the water.

Messengers were dispatched and in due course, Saladin with a strong escort cantered off to join the main body of his force which had been camped at Kafr Sabt. Out on the plain, he noted with great satisfaction that the day was extremely hot which meant it was also divinely suited to his purpose. Now that the bait had been taken, it remained only to set the hook.

At Castle Masyaf, Sinan smoothed the scrap of parchment brought by pigeon and allowed himself a small, a very small, sigh of satisfaction. At last, something vaguely positive to report. A spy in Damascus had chanced on the information that the physician had departed with Saladin's army, which, all things considered, should not be too difficult to locate. He hoped this might go some way to countering his other tidings.

The implements, devices and other bizarre requirements demanded by the voice had indeed been located at Castle Alamut, sealed up in a mysterious chamber deep within the bowels of the fortress, a chamber which had remained untouched since the disappearance and presumed death of Hassan-i Sabbāh at the – Sinan hesitated to use the word but could think of no alternative – hands of a demon many years before. Nevertheless, the contents of this chamber were still very much on the wrong side of the Syrian Desert. There was no telling when the shipment might arrive.

With what in a short space of time had become a remarkably well-developed sense of self-pity, Sinan knew in his bones that physical impossibilities would not be considered any sort of excuse. He hoped that locating the physician might provide him something in the way of a shield from the voice's wrath, but at the same time he fatalistically resigned himself to inevitable disappointment.

Buried in the centre of the Crusader army, Annabella, Vivienne and Darius were effectively blind – the pall of dust was so thick they could barely see their horses' ears in front of them. They were also effectively deaf – the noise of the army's passage was so great that conversation was impossible and shouting barely to be heard. All the

three could do was to keep grimly on, each locked in their own individual cocoon of misery, trying not to obsess over which was the more unbearable – the heat, the dust or their thirst. Accordingly, they were quite unaware of the first nuisance skirmishes around the fringes as Saracen detachments darted in, fought briefly and melted away.

Gradually the attacks began to intensify and the progress of the army became slower and slower, now frequently halting altogether. In the pauses, when the noise of passage necessarily ceased, Annabella could make out shouted orders, the whicker of arrows and the clash of weapons. Once, there came the death scream of a horse and she and Vivienne turned to each other automatically, seeking reassurance. Vivienne's eyes again were huge.

In the pauses the dust diminished sufficiently for the blurred disk of the sun to produce vague, amorphous shadows on the ground. These grew shorter and shorter, disappeared altogether and then started to lengthen in the opposite direction. It was with a general sense of overwhelming relief, then, that the army finally fought its way to the spring at Turan and halted in a defensive lager.

Small rations of water began to be passed around. Brackish and fouled as it was, the mouthful or two they were allowed was as sweet as sharbat cooled with snow.

"What happens now, do you think?" Vivienne asked.

"I don't know," Annabella said. She looked to Darius and raised her eyebrows.

"They have to stop," Darius said after a moment. "There's no more water between here and the lake and at this rate they'll never make it by nightfall."

"Is there really no more water?" Annabella asked, more out of curiosity than anything. Darius shrugged.

"There might be a well somewhere, but not nearly enough for this lot." He swept out his arm, embracing the huddling masses of men and horses. "No. They have to stop here till morning. They can't camp out on the plain with no water at all and it will take at least a full day to fight all the way to the lake..."

But Darius was wrong, not in his reading of the situation but in his reading of how the high command of the army, particularly Gerard, would react to it. After the briefest possible pause to give the men and the horses what water was readily available, the order came to resume the advance. Swearing, grumbling, and protesting in their various ways, men and beasts wearily turned their faces again to the glaring plain.

"It must be that Templar," Darius said angrily. Quite why Darius should be so upset eluded Annabella; probably just the prospect of having to march on into the heat, she thought, but she did him an injustice. He already had the mind-set of a doctor and when armies marched to battle all he could see were gaping wounds, pain and suffering, particularly when his own people were to be involved.

"What do you mean? It must be the Templar...?" Annabella asked curiously as they began to move forward.

"You heard him with the King last night," Darius said. "He's a fanatic. He just wants to kill us, kill Saracens." He spat. "They're all fanatics, Templars..."

"Not that Sir Robert," Annabella said with a grimace, but her words were drowned in the gathering noise of the march.

Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn Yūsuf ibn Ayyūb was a man of immense rectitude which had somehow escaped degenerating into mere self-righteousness. It was this moral certainty leavened with a genuine brilliance for both politics and warfare that had enabled him to rise quickly through the ranks during the Egyptian campaigns of his uncle, ultimately to succeed him on his death. From there, still a young man, he had patiently set out to unite the Muslim territories of the Near East until at last he had amassed an army that could hope to wage jihad successfully against the infidel Franks and hurl them back into the sea. The long struggle had waxed and waned through truce, treachery and defeat but now he sensed the stars were finally coming into alignment.

On arriving from Tiberias, he set up a command post on a slight rise and settled down to wait events. His stallion, a horse of breeding and magnificence to match his own, fidgeted beneath him, but Saladin barely noticed. At last, it was with the greatest possible satisfaction that he watched the Frankish army eventually issue forth from the hollow at Turan back on to the plain. He never could have dared to imagine that they would be so... stupid was the only possible word. The stars had indeed come to simultaneous apogee. Allah was truly beneficent.

He bided his time and at the critical moment divided his cavalry into two wings to send them circling round behind the Franks, cutting them off from both the water at Turan and at Sefhoria. Guy's only choice now was to attempt to fight his way through to Lake Tiberias, something Saladin was determined to prevent.

Gradually all through that long, appallingly hot afternoon, Saladin committed more and more of his reserves until finally beneath a low hill with twin rocky peaks known as the Horns of Hattin, completely exhausted, the Frankish army was fought to an absolute standstill.

Contentedly, Saladin turned to an aide. "Arrows," he ordered. "Arrows by the mule load, by the cart load. And fuel..."

"We can't be stopping here," Darius cried out in amazement. But, indeed, it appeared they were. Knights were dismounting and the infantry were busy setting up defensive positions and the rudiments of a camp. They could see the king's pavilion in the process of being raised a little way off.

"Madness!" Darius said. "Absolute madness!"

"Maybe they don't have a choice," Annabella said quietly. Throughout the afternoon, surrounded on all sides by thousands of men, they had been safe enough, but nevertheless, it had all been deeply, deeply disturbing. The sounds of battle around them had been incessant, the screams of men, fighting and dying hideously, impossible to ignore. More than once they had been forced to witness sights straight out of the goriest of nightmares. Add in the scarifying heat, bone-deep fatigue and, most of all, the disabling thirst and Annabella could well believe the army was incapable of forcing its way another step forward. She wondered how Vivienne was coping and glanced towards her. Earlier she had been distraught but now seemed to have passed into a state of more or less suspended animation.

They were bidden to dismount from their distressed horses but after that nobody seemed to have the slightest interest in them. Darius was stroking Leila as she nuzzled his chest, desperate for water. Annabella caught the expression on his face at his horse's suffering and had to turn away, feeling extremely guilty.

"What are we supposed to do now?" Vivienne asked petulantly, suddenly coming to life. All about was confusion and conflict, with people shouting orders only to have them promptly countermanded by somebody else. Still the sun burned down, though the shadows were at last beginning to lengthen as the afternoon drew on.

"No idea," Annabella said.

"You know what I'm going to say, don't you?" Vivienne said.

"So don't."

"You'd rather we die of thirst? This has gone past ridiculous, Annabella. You're crazy. You're totally insane. Call Basil. Call him now."

Annabella said nothing. Vivienne reached out and seized her arm.

"Call him!" she demanded, her voice shrill. "You have to."

"I haven't done anything wrong," Annabella said in a voice soft but absolutely adamant. The noise of the camp swirling about them all but drowned her words but her expression was clear to read. Vivienne slumped down on the ground.

"Why are you being so stubborn?" she wailed. "I don't understand. It doesn't make sense."

"I haven't done anything wrong," Annabella repeated. "And Basil knows it. If he won't come back of his own accord there's nothing I can do about it."

Vivienne began to cry. Darius dropped to his haunches beside her and made to reach out, before thinking better of it. He switched his gaze to Annabella.

"I don't know if this djinni actually exists..." he began.

"You know he does..." Vivienne sobbed.

"But if he does," Darius continued. "Now would be a really good time for him to prove it."

Annabella shrugged. How could she tell Darius that whatever the twisted logic involved, he was the fundamental reason that Basil had disappeared in the first place and that she was certain Basil would never reappear so long as Darius remained in any way involved with them. Even so, was it not her... duty to make an appeal to Basil regardless, if only for Leila's sake, never mind Vivienne's?

Mentally she began to form his name... And then despairingly she abandoned it. He wouldn't come. She knew that. She was absolutely convinced of it and suddenly she was damned if she was going to demean herself by begging, futile begging anyway.

She sat down beside Vivienne, who jerked angrily away.

"V," Annabella said. "I don't understand either, but I do know I haven't done anything wrong. And after the way you were carrying on with that Sir Robert... person, you've got no right to suggest I have..."

"I was not carrying on..." Vivienne said hotly. "And that is so sexist, Annabella."

"Don't you call me sexist," Annabella exploded, her frustration coming to a head. "Don't you dare! Ever! This is the 12th Century, you great idiot, not the 21st. This world *is* totally sexist. What on earth did you expect to happen...?"

Vivienne's face crumpled again.

"I was just trying to make him... friendly, sympathetic..." she muttered. Annabella's anger evaporated as quickly as it had flared. She smiled through the grime and dust coating her face.

"Well, that worked really well..." she said. Vivienne glanced at her and a moment later the two girls were laughing in each other's arms with Darius watching on rather bemusedly.

"I never said thank you, did I?" Vivienne said when they had quietened. "What woke you up? I tried to fight but he was so heavy... so strong..."

"I don't know," Annabella said. But she was sure she did. And it made their present predicament all the more difficult to accept. If Basil was deliberately setting out to punish her he was succeeding to perfection, inflicting physical discomfort on the three of them, and guilt on her because of it.

The sun had finally deigned to slip below the horizon and the commotion of the camp was beginning to assume some sort of rudimentary order when a squad of Templar men-at-arms shoved their way through the throng towards them.

"You're to come with us," the sergeant said roughly.

"Where?" Darius demanded, receiving a clip over the ear for his pains.

"There," sergeant said indicating the king's pavilion with a jerk of his head. A moment later they had all been yanked to their feet and were being marched off, their horses being brought along behind.

"Sit there," the Sergeant said when they reached the tent, pointing to a spot just beside the entrance and against the wall. "You," he added to the guard on the door. "Keep an eye on them. They are now part of the household. Valuable. Understand?"

"Yes sir," the sentry said, not understanding at all.

"Meaning don't let them slip away, disappear, or otherwise escape. Or it'll be your hide..."

"What's happening?" Annabella asked Darius when the squad had gone. "What household? Why are we part of it?"

"The king's household," Darius said.

"But why?" Vivienne said.

"I don't know," Darius said, and then added slowly: "Insurance, I suppose. They must know they're in a hopeless position."

"And what...?" Vivienne said.

"They'll use us to bargain with, if they have to."

"They'll use Darius to bargain with," Annabella said.

"As if Saladin cares anything about me," Darius said scornfully.

"But he cares about your grandfather, doesn't he?" Annabella said.

Darius made no reply.

"Have you met him?" Vivienne said. "Saladin, I mean."

"Of course," Darius said.

"What's he like?" Annabella asked curiously, happy for some distraction from her raging thirst.

"You saw this king? Guy? Well, Saladin's the complete opposite. He's as different to this Crusader scum as you can imagine. He's brave. He's chivalrous. He's noble..."

"You like him then?" Vivienne said with a touch of mockery. Darius looked hurt and suddenly clammed up.

"Don't mind her," Annabella said placatingly, but Darius was not to be mollified. They sank into silence. Gloomy silence.

Night fell, drawing a decent veil about the exhausted men and clustered animals, all crammed into a space far too small for them. As yet there was no moon and what starlight there was quite failed to penetrate the blackness overhanging the bivouac, a blackness only accentuated by the odd spark of light here and there and the glow through the walls of the king's pavilion.

Like everybody else, Annabella, Vivienne and Darius were tired beyond reason and gratefully surrendered to sleep, if for no reason other than that it overrode their plaguing thirst and the secondary pangs of hunger. Darius was still upright, his arms crossed over his knees and his head on his arms. Annabella and Vivienne were curled together. They came suddenly awake at the sound of angry voices through the wall of the tent behind them.

"We never should have stopped," someone was shouting. It was Raymond. "We never should have been out here in the first place, but once we were, we never should have stopped. We had to go on. We had to go on to the lake. All night, if necessary, but we had to go on."

"So you have said," Gerard stated coldly. "Repeatedly."

"And I'll say it again..."

"Enough!" The peevish voice could only be Guy's. "The men could go no further."

"Untrue!" Raymond roared and then said more quietly: "The truth is you, you could go no further. You're soft, you're not fit..."

"Shut your mouth," Guy said malevolently. "That is treason, my lord count. I will have you..."

"You will have me nothing," Raymond interrupted rudely. "You need me and you know it."

"When this is over..." Guy began but again was cut off.

"When this is over, sire," Raymond said with marked sarcasm. "You will likely be in hell and I will likely be in heaven..."

"So what do you suggest?" Gerard said, cutting through the squabbling. "You're the self-proclaimed expert on Saracen warfare, what do you suggest we do?"

"Pity you never thought to seek counsel before Cresson," Raymond said venomously. "An even greater pity you refused my counsel last night. And it won't just be 147 knights you lose this time, it will be the whole kingdom." Raymond was

referring to an earlier battle when Gerard, most ill-advisedly, had led a company of 150 knights to charge a force of five thousand Saracens. Only three of the knights, one of whom was Gerard, had survived.

"You, sir," Raymond continued, "Are an intemperate fool."

"And you, my lord..." Gerard shouted, stung to the quick. "You have forgotten that it is our sacred duty to kill Saracens wherever and whenever we find them, whatever the odds we may encounter. And in that regard, my lord, my conscience is entirely clear which is something, I fear, you may not say yourself."

There was a lengthy silence and Annabella could imagine the protagonists breathing deeply, struggling to regain control.

"There is only one thing that can be done," Raymond said at last in a more moderate voice. "When the time is right, I will take the vanguard and charge the Saracen line. It will break. They have never yet been able to resist our heavy cavalry. You must be ready and when the line does break you must follow with the army on the instant. You will have one chance and one chance only."

Again there was silence as Raymond's words were digested.

"Very good," Gerard said finally. "But with one change. I will lead the charge."

"You will not, my lord," Raymond said rancorously. "This is my county and by right the vanguard therefore is mine. If you persist, I will surrender my force to Saladin right now."

Raymond took a long moment to stare down the other two and strode from the pavilion, angrily slashing at his armoured thigh with a mailed gauntlet, the clangour emphatically punctuating his passage. There was an interval as Guy and Gerard waited to be sure that Raymond was out of earshot then their voices began again, pitched lower and more difficult to hear. Annabella had to strain to make them out.

"Is he right?" Guy said. "Are we doomed?" There was a definite tinge of fear in his tone.

"Raymond has been in Outremer too long," Gerard said dismissively. "And he has forgotten, if he ever knew, that our holy duty is to war on the Saracen, come what may. If it should happen, sire, that tomorrow we should die then it will only be to find eternal rest and eternal reward."

"And you, sir, have forgotten, if you ever knew, that it is our holy duty to war on the Saracen successfully." Guy snarled. He was suddenly beside himself. "You have led me to disaster. I see it now."

"Nay, sire," Gerard said, suddenly concerned to be placatory. "We still have the Halabi boy. He will surely buy passage to Saladin, and Saladin will surely refrain from harming a fellow sovereign."

Chapter 7

It was the faintest smell of smoke that brought Annabella awake. If there was one fear she was quite unable to control, it was her dread of fire, wild fire. As a child she had been trapped in a burning house, which was terrifying enough, but recently she had been forced to relive the experience, magnified a thousand-fold, and had all but been destroyed for the second time. As a result, her subconscious was acutely tuned to register any possible threat of repetition.

Yet, as she opened her eyes, it was her swollen tongue that dominated her awareness. She swallowed painfully, and again, but could work up not the slightest drop of saliva. Dawn, she saw, was quickening fast, then another faint whiff of smoke came drifting across the camp. She sat up. She could make out sentries here and there, dotted around the perimeter. The men they were guarding were beginning to stir. Sergeants roused themselves and stamped about, kicking at a posterior here, prodding with the butt of a pikestaff there.

Suddenly there was a cry and men were pointing, then groaning with frustration and despair. Annabella stood up, straining to see.

"What's happening?"

"What is it?"

It was Vivienne and Darius rousing simultaneously and looking up at her. Again, Annabella swallowed painfully and had to put violence upon herself not to start running. Others were less disciplined, less strong, and all at once, one sergeant, then another, then a score of them were beating men back with the flats of their swords.

"What is it?" Vivienne said again, a note of panic in her voice. Already her eyes were widening. Save some for later, Annabella thought inconsequentially, sure the day could only get progressively worse.

"It's the Saracens," Annabella said. "At least I think it's the Saracens. They're out there with big jars, pouring water on the ground."

"Oh," Vivienne said uncomprehendingly. "Why?" Nevertheless, she was swallowing as she spoke.

"Psychological warfare, I suppose," Annabella said.

"What is psychological?" Darius asked distractedly. Like Vivienne, his throat had convulsed painfully at the mention of water.

"Trying to send us mad," Annabella said. Both Vivienne and Darius were now standing beside her.

"Well they're succeeding," Darius said and pointed off to the right. A man-at-arms had managed to break past his sergeant and was now racing across no man's land towards the Saracens. As they watched, a fighter stepped forward and offered the Crusader a glazed, earthenware flask. The wretched Frank seized it and without thought or caution, convinced in his desperation that it could only contain water, began to gulp the contents. A moment later, his agonised screams, clear in the early morning stillness, were battering at their nerves. A Saracen pulled his scimitar and belaboured the man back towards them. He collapsed halfway, still screaming. Then

the noise suddenly stopped, leaving the man to flop soundlessly on the ground like a dying fish, clutching at his throat.

The whole camp – all of them had been holding their breath – seemed to inhale simultaneously and a great sigh went up.

"What is it?" Annabella whispered. "What did they do to him?"

"I don't know," Darius said in a low voice. "But I can guess."

"What?" Vivienne said. Like Annabella, she was deeply shaken.

"Vitriol," Darius said. "They gave him oil of vitriol and he drank it, thinking it was water."

"Vitriol?" Vivienne queried.

"Sulphuric acid," Annabella supplied.

"But do they have that?" Vivienne asked. "Sulphuric acid...? Vitriol...? Has it been invented?"

"We use it for medicine, sometimes," Darius said. "Avicenna wrote about it. Others. Many others. It has been well known... forever."

"But that's awful," Annabella said.

"War is," Darius said. "And the Crusaders brought it."

"You think that man deserved it?"

"Don't you?"

"No," Annabella said firmly. "I do not. Nobody deserves that."

The victim had stopped moving and it appeared that mercifully, he had died, the acid having destroyed his oesophagus, then his larynx, effectively suffocating him.

The sun had now risen above the horizon and with it, a faint breeze was beginning to develop. The smell of smoke was stronger now and a haze was becoming discernible, moving towards them.

"What's happening now?" Vivienne asked, wrinkling her nose. "Why is there smoke?"

"They've started bonfires," Darius said. "And they've fired the scrub, I think."

"But why?"

"The smoke will make everything worse," Annabella said. "The heat, the dust, the thirst..."

"And for cover," Darius added quietly. "They'll use it for cover, to get close."

As they watched, the smoke from the burning brush thickened rapidly and began to roll down on them in great billows. Soon the Crusader army was coughing and spluttering, winding cloth about their faces, and effectively blind. Then the arrows began to fly and the import of Darius's words became all too apparent.

They came down in a deadly rain, indiscriminately seeking out men and horses, particularly the horses which had no armour, no protection at all.

"Get down," Darius told them, pushing both the girls into a crouch and glancing wildly about for shelter, something, anything... Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a knight fall, an arrow sticking from his eye. Without stopping to think, he raced away from the illusory protection of the king's tent, wrenched the great shield from the dead

knight's arm and ran back with it to the girls. He swung it upside down, ramming the top into the ground with the apex, the narrowest part, pointing to the sky.

"Quick," he ordered. "Get behind this." And he shoved them down into cover, crouching over the top of them. Still the arrows hissed and whickered. Still men fell, for the most part silently, but the horses screamed and plunged as they went down, lashing out with their hooves and infecting those still uninjured with panic.

Arrows thudded into their shield, one splitting the wood and almost passing clean through. Annabella touched the point as it quivered only inches from her face and shuddered. She had been shot once before and still bore the scar where Darius's grandfather had excised the arrow from her chest, saving her life. The shield, she suddenly realised, was actually too small to provide complete protection for all three of them. Bits of Darius, in particular, were sticking out, yet he escaped being hit, arrows striking only the shield. It might have been purest good fortune, Annabella supposed, but the longer the barrage went on, the more convinced she became that it wasn't. And if it was Basil exercising some sort of influence, why should he also be concerned to protect Darius, Darius his rival? A shadowy thought flitted around the edges of her mind but stubbornly it refused to crystallise.

At last, slowly, as the Saracen archers ran low on the ammunition Saladin had caused to be brought up overnight, the lethal storm began to abate. Thick smoke still rolled over the camp hiding most of the carnage, but men began to look up from the ground into which they had been desperate to dissolve and realise the calamitous straits to which they had been reduced. Dead and wounded, man and beast, littered the ground, in places heaped in drifts. A situation which had been dire was now disastrous.

Gerard, standing at the entrance to Guy's pavilion, retched and had to struggle to hold his gorge as the true dimensions of the catastrophe, a catastrophe for which he was substantially responsible, finally began to make itself apparent to him. He went back within and slammed his gauntlet down on the king's solid wooden table. A white face peered out anxiously from underneath.

"Is it safe, now? Is it safe to come out...?" the face inquired. Gerard resisted the temptation to spit and contented himself with open contempt.

"Yes sire," he sneered. "It's safe." There was a commotion outside and Raynald, Raymond and a number of other senior officers who had survived the hail of death pushed their way through the door in time to witness the spectacle of their king crawling out from under a table. They stopped short, their expressions reflecting their feelings. Guy was oblivious.

"We must surrender," he muttered as he stood up and then his voice grew stronger and took on a frantic edge. "We must surrender! We must surrender now!" Inside the tent there was a deathly silence as any lingering respect there might have been for Guy de Lusignan perished, mourned only by the moans of the wounded without.

Eventually, Gerard stepped forward and retrieved his gauntlet. Where once, indeed until very recently, he had been concerned to placate and manipulate the king to his own ends, it was now plain he had repudiated him completely. Turning until he was almost nose to nose with Guy, Gerard spoke with barely contained violence:

"No, sire," he hissed. "We will not surrender. We will attack." And again he smashed his gauntlet down on the table, the sharp crack of emphasis bringing a murmur of approbation from the others.

"I am your king," Guy began. "I command..."

"You may have been king these past years," Gerard spat. "But king in name only. A king only ever crowned by his wife, not by right. Go command Sybilla, if she is still so foolish as to entertain you. You do not command us. You do not command here."

He turned away to gather the other knights with his eyes. Guy, his face mottled white and red with emotion, made an ineffectual move to his sword and then his hand fell away, as Gerard had known it would.

"Get the men formed up," Gerard said tersely and they broke from the tent, shouting orders, leaving Guy desperately trying not to weep.

A new energy took hold of the camp. The commanders striding forth from the king's pavilion rallied and cajoled until they had the infantry formed up in battle order and the horses that remained distributed amongst Raymond's vanguard. The smoke had dissipated and it seemed that the Saracens, uncertain of the true state of affairs within the Crusader army, had pulled back, waiting to see what might develop.

"Saladin has made a mistake," Annabella heard Raymond say. "He is being too cautious. He believes us still strong. He should have pressed on while he could and finished..." He was interrupted by an outbreak of shouting and Annabella, craning to see, could make out a group of horsemen spurring away from the Crusader lines. The man in the lead was definitely Sir Robert. He was being followed by four others who might or might not have been pursuing him. Surely, if in pursuit, they would turn back before reaching the enemy, but a way was opened and all five disappeared within the Saracen ranks.

Gerard and Raymond watched wordlessly. At last Raymond spoke:

"Well if Saladin didn't know how weak we really are, he does now. You should have dealt with that Sir Robert of yours on the spot. Cowards..."

"... And traitors," Gerard finished. "I pray that Robert Guiscard and I will meet again. And the others."

"Mayhap, my Lord. But there will need to be a deal of fighting first."

"We advance?"

"We advance before he has time to reset his attack."

In the event, however, any faint hope the Crusaders might have had of taking Saladin unawares was utterly vain.

Annabella, Vivienne and Darius, along with the abject Guy, found themselves corralled in the midst of Gerard's immediate bodyguard on a slight rise and had a fine view of the disintegration and slaughter of the Crusader army of Outremer as it unfolded before them.

Disregarding or confused by any orders they might have received to the contrary, the infantry, apparently driven by thirst, then panic, immediately began a ragged and

uncoordinated attempt to force a path towards Lake Tiberias. This advance, however, was quickly, inevitably, halted. With retreat towards Turan or Sephoria already blocked, first singly, then in groups, then in companies, the men-at-arms began to slide sideways, taking up a slightly more defensible position on the Horns of Hattin, there to make a last stand.

"Desertion," Gerard growled. "Rank desertion." And he sent a message to Raymond: "Now or never".

After a short delay there was a long blast on a trumpet and Raymond's vanguard charged towards the Saracens. However, in their greatly weakened condition the horses seemed to be moving in slow motion and despite Raymond's earlier boast, failed to penetrate far into the Saracen ranks. There was a savage melee before the trumpet sounded again and the surviving Crusaders withdrew to regroup. Again, Raymond led them gallantly to the charge, but this time the Saracens parted before them, swallowed the thrust and closed behind it, engulfing the knights in a deadly embrace.

The fighting went on for what seemed an endless time and when the swirls and eddies, as though made by some ravaging shark, finally ceased, Raymond and perhaps a dozen of his knights had won through the press only to be marooned on the far side of the Saracen army. The remainder of his men lay there, dead on the field and Raymond was left with no alternative but to flee.

"What will happen now?" Annabella asked Darius. Her face was white and shocked at the slaughter they had just witnessed.

"I don't know," Darius said. Even though it was his side that was winning, he appeared only a little less distressed than Annabella. The next move was not long in coming. With the Crusader infantry confined to the hilltop, Saracen archers were now able to creep forward into range, with the specific mission of picking off the remaining horses which would force Gerard's Templars to fight on foot, so drastically reducing their effectiveness. Meanwhile, the Saracen cavalry began to mass.

Raynald trotted up.

"My Lord," he shouted to Gerard as he approached, gesturing at Guy's pavilion which was still standing. "The tents. We must pitch more tents. They will break the charge..."

To Annabella, it seemed a forlorn hope that flimsy tents could act as any sort of a barrier, nevertheless companies of unhorsed knights began to slash at the baggage packs, helped by their foot attendants, and to struggle with pegs and guy-ropes. They were still enveloped in great swathes of heavy, unwieldy material when, with a ululating howl, the Saracens launched a massed assault.

Gerard took one look at the bloody chaos developing before him, turned and led his escort up the Horns of Hattin at a smart trot. At the crest of the higher of the two summits he stopped, surrounded by what remained of the Crusader infantry. Guy pushed his way between Annabella and Vivienne to confront him.

"Congratulations, my lord," he told an ashen-faced Gerard. "You have just destroyed my army and you have lost Christendom the Holy Land."

In fact, Guy was premature, but only slightly. Staring certain defeat in the face, worn down by heat and the weight of their armour, plagued with thirst, battle-weary and with minimal support from the infantry, nevertheless the remaining knights fought like berserkers. Twice, they charged down the hill on foot and twice they all but broke the Saracen line. But twice they were eventually repelled with grievous losses and in the end their courage only served to delay the inevitable. In the end, Guy's pavilion, the last symbol of his rule over the kingdom of Jerusalem, was submerged beneath an irresistible tide of Saracens. In the end, there was nothing left for the knights to do but surrender. And die.

Gerard survived, again. Raynald survived. Guy survived, his sword at the throat of a youth recognised as Darius al Halabi, grandson of Saladin's personal physician. Two girls were standing on either side of the boy, glaring at the man with the sword, the man who had been king. The emir summoned to deal with this unprecedented situation commanded them all to be taken to Saladin forthwith.

The strange little procession picked its way down the hillside, past the heaps of steaming corpses, skirting the rivers of blood rapidly soaking into the ground and coagulating into sticky pools in the sunlight. It was a scene such as Annabella and Vivienne could never imagine, not even in their worst nightmares. They walked glassy eyed, trying not to see, to register the holocaust that had been wrought by the victorious, the merciless Saracens. All about was like some vast butcher's yard reeking of death.

"The vultures will eat well," Darius muttered at one point. Accustomed to injury and wounds at the hospital, indeed to dead and dying, he was less affected than the two girls, but he too found the expression of Saladin's triumph, the aftermath, deeply shocking.

At last they left the execution squads behind them and then cleared the limits of the battlefield. Suddenly, the air was clean and no longer pulsed with the cloying stink of blood and voided bowels. For Annabella and Vivienne the relief was exquisite. They entered the Saracen camp, busily under construction, and came to a grand pavilion already erected and settled. It could only be Saladin's.

The entrance curtains were pulled back to give the effect of a proscenium arch and a number of grave men were seated on a dais, as though on a stage. The procession was brought to a halt in front of them and Annabella correctly divined that the powerful looking man seated a little in front of the others must be Saladin. Darius was right, she thought. He did indeed look noble. His fine-drawn features, bequeathed him by his Kurdish ancestors, effortlessly bestowed on him the sort of kingly air to which Guy could never aspire. Guy, for his part, was visibly trembling.

Saladin rose and beckoned to an attendant, who brought forward a ewer and a goblet on a tray. The servant filled the goblet with ice water and then passed it to Saladin who stepped down from the dais and proffered it to Guy, erstwhile King of Jerusalem.

Guy looked longingly at the liquid but then performed the most chivalrous, perhaps the only chivalrous, act of his life. He turned to Raynald and passed him the goblet, and as Saladin's face darkened, Raynald drank.

Annabella and Vivienne glanced at each other, mystified. What did this mean? They could not know that Guy was actually trying to protect Raynald. Then Saladin spoke, addressing Guy.

"Lord king," he said, his voice deep and resonant. "In offering you the goblet, I offered hospitality to you, not to your general, the oath-breaker. To him I have offered no hospitality. He is not my guest. He is still my enemy. Seize him!"

Two of Saladin's men took Raynald by the arms and forced him to his knees. Before any of the prisoners could realise what was happening, Saladin stepped forward, drew his scimitar and raised it on high.

Mercifully, Annabella and Vivienne found their view blocked but a moment later there was a squelching sort of thud and they realised that Raynald had been beheaded.

Guy swayed and Gerard was forced to support him lest he fall. Then Guy thrust the Templar away and fell to his knees in supplication. Saladin handed his scimitar to another attendant to be cleaned and turned to Guy with a hint of contempt.

"Fear not," he said. "Kings do not kill kings, only miscreant brigands. This man transgressed all bounds, and therefore did I treat him thus." He motioned to the leader of their escort. "Take them away, guard them well..." he began before, for the first time, catching sight of Darius and the girls, more or less obscured until then in the second rank.

"Leave the boy," he added, but Darius took both Annabella and Vivienne firmly by the hand and insisted on keeping them with him.

"So?" Saladin said when Guy and Gerard had been marched off. "The delights of Damascus have palled for you, Darius, son of Aswad, grandson of Darius? You have come to seek adventure, your fortune?"

"No, lord," Darius said in a low voice, his eyes cast down. "We have an urgent message for my grandfather and we were searching for him when we were captured by the Franks."

"Indeed? And you were with them all through the battle?"

"Yes, lord," Darius said, daring now to look Saladin full in the face.

"Then you have been most fortunate to survive," Saladin said thoughtfully. "Your grandfather is at the field hospital we have set up near Tiberias. You will be given food and drink and horses." Whereupon Saladin turned away, his attention already consumed by far weightier matters than the affairs of three wayward young people.

They were treated with good-natured casualness and as Saladin had ordered, they were fed, watered and even allowed to rest. Then in the cool of the evening, accompanied by a solitary guide with a blazing torch, they set off for Tiberias, now a relatively short distance away. For the first time, they felt free to talk.

"I'm so sorry about Leila," Annabella said to Darius. "I suppose we'll never find out what happened to her. Do you think she'll be all right?"

"If she survived," Darius said, unhappily. "If she survived, I hope someone will love her."

"She's beautiful," Vivienne said. "I'm sure she'll be all right. Someone will look after her. She's too valuable..." But catching sight of Darius's face, she tailed off.

"What will happen to King Guy?" Annabella asked.

"Oh he'll be all right," Darius said scornfully. "He'll be ransomed. Kings always are. Be sorry for the people who get taxed to pay for it... So what are you going to tell my grandfather?" he went on after an appreciable pause.

"The truth, of course," Annabella said, startled. "Why ever not?"

"I didn't mean it like that," Darius said. "I meant, have you worked out what we can do about Hassan-i Sabbāh?"

There was another long silence. Annabella had indeed been racking her brains every spare moment, trying to find some sort of approach, a method of attack, a solution to the riddle. What can we do, she kept asking herself? How can we kill someone who's immortal? Who survived the mud volcano? Who probably has powers, unknown powers? And prompted by Darius, she asked herself again: how can we eliminate him?

The hospital had been set up down by the lake shore and some way away from the malign influences of the town. As they came down the path they were greeted by pavilions in orderly rows, glowing cheerfully in the night air. Down by the water, as they were, there was even an illusion of coolness.

Their guide took them to what was evidently the headquarters tent and led them inside. A man looked up from where he was preparing some sort of concoction over a small brazier.

"Darius?" he said uncertainly. "What on earth are you doing here?"

"We're looking for my grandfather," Darius said to the orderly. "Do you know where we can find him, please?"

"He is resting. He has had no sleep for a day and a half. We made him go to his tent. It would be... cruel to wake him."

Darius looked at Annabella. "What do you think?" he asked. "Can we let him sleep for a while? He's not very strong any more..."

Annabella shrugged. "I suppose so," she said. "Now that we're here..."

The orderly looked up from his mixture.

"I have to take this to one of the doctors," he said. "You can stay here until the Physician wakes." And he pointed to some cushions in a corner.

The two girls were exhausted and Darius not much better, despite the rest they had had at Saladin's camp. No sooner had they made themselves comfortable than they were fast asleep. The orderly came and went several times and finally set to work, pounding medicinal roots with a pestle and mortar. He smiled to himself when even his thumping failed to disturb them.

Activity about the encampment began to die away until at last the tents were quiet and silent, except for the moaning of a wounded patient who, unfortunately for him, had too much pain for even the poppy to bring respite.

Darius woke with the dawn. In the half-light he could see the orderly tent was now deserted. He rose and went to the door. Already the relentless heat of the sun was becoming oppressive. As the light strengthened he was able to make out the details of the camp. A tent in the centre of the middle row was showing a green banner, hanging limp in the still air. With a glance over his shoulder at the still sleeping girls, Darius made his way towards it.

At the entrance he hesitated, and then parted the cloth. The tent appeared to be empty. Darius called out, went inside questing and stopped short. Leaping out at him from the carpet spread on the ground was a crusted, bloody footprint. A moment later he was racing back the way he had come.

"Wake up!" he shouted as he burst back into the orderly tent. "Wake up!" he repeated, dropping to his knees next to Annabella. He shook her shoulder remorselessly until she began to struggle back to consciousness.

"What?" she said at last.

"He's gone. My grandfather is gone," Darius said, making a supreme effort to control his voice. "Hassan-i Sabbāh has taken him."

"How do you know?" Annabella demanded, alarm bringing her fully awake on the instant.

"There's a footprint," Darius said, his voice now rising. "Just one. Like at the bimaristan... Bloody..."

Without another word, Annabella rose and left the tent. Outraged, Darius made to go after her but was stopped by Vivienne.

"Wait," she said. "Just wait."

Chapter 8

Basil, Annabella said. She had moved down to the water's edge, partly to gain time to gather her thoughts, partly to get away from the bustle of the hospital.

Basil, she repeated. *I think you're here. I think you never left. We have to talk. This is not about you and me any more. I'm not asking for myself. I'm asking for Darius, grandfather Darius, our Darius. I'm asking for a truce.*

Annabella held her mental breath. What if she were wrong? What if Basil had truly abandoned them? She waited.

Basil, she said again, when she could bear it no longer.

What? Basil's voice was extremely brusque, nevertheless Annabella thrilled to it. She felt tears threatening to overwhelm her and angrily brushed at her eyes.

You know what, she said, managing to speak in carefully neutral tones. *We have to rescue Darius. You know we do. We can't abandon him to Hassan-i Sabbāh.*

Beeswax! You jolly well should, you know. Darius is bait... to catch you.

Maybe...

No jolly maybe about it, Basil said sharply. *You know it.*

Even so...

There you jolly well go again.

What?

Damn well being all noble. Honourable. Don't you ever jolly well stop?

I'm not being anything, Annabella said crossly, what little control she had vanishing. *Darius saved my life. Darius is a friend. Of course, I can't leave him...*

And just what exactly do you jolly well think you can do?

I don't know, Annabella said, suddenly downcast. *I just know I have to try. Something... Somehow...* Darius's capture was forcing her to face for the first time the true dimensions of the trial that had been imposed upon her. She felt so small, so tiny, so powerless. Again, despite herself, she had to brush at her eyes.

I don't remember ever seeing you cry, Basil said out of the blue. There was an odd tone to his voice.

I'm not crying, Annabella said angrily.

All right, Basil said after a moment.

All right what?

All right, truce. I'll help. I'll do what I can.

Annabella felt herself go wobbly and for some seconds had to concentrate on not showing just how relieved she was that Basil was again on the team, however reluctantly. At last she turned and some distance off made out Vivienne and Darius, waiting for her outside the tent. She waved her arm and they started towards her.

"Does it mean what I think it means?" Vivienne said.

"It means Hassan-i Sabbāh is jolly well using Darius major..." Basil started.

"Major?" Annabella interrupted.

"Grandfather Darius... as bait," Basil finished.

"It's all my fault," Darius minor said wretchedly. "If I hadn't made us wait last night... If we'd gone straight to him..." Nobody said anything. The truth of Darius's words was self-evident and undeniable. He was sitting a little apart. Having finally been introduced to Basil, he was shy and uncertain as well as distressed. The djinni, in his usual manifestation as a wisp of smoke, which both girls took for granted as something so ordinary as to be unremarkable, was for Darius quite the strangest thing he had ever encountered.

A thought occurred to Annabella.

"If we had gone to Darius last night," she said, rather shocked by her own words, "Hassan-i Sabbāh would have got us, too..." There was a lengthy silence as they all chewed that one over.

"When you say bait," Vivienne said at last. "You mean he wants us to follow?" Annabella shrugged.

"Of course," she said.

"How?" Darius asked in a low voice.

"Good question," Vivienne said. "How are we supposed to know where he's gone?"

"Castle Alamut?" Annabella said. She shuddered. Her memories of events there were unpleasant in the extreme.

"Castle Masyaf," Basil said. "Remember? Pater said Castle Masyaf was more likely." Darius stiffened.

"Assassins!" he said, but without waiting for an answer went on: "Saladin tried to capture Castle Masyaf and burn them out. But he had to give up. It was too difficult. They threatened to assassinate him. They say Rashid ad-Din Sinan penetrated all the way into his tent and left a message pinned with a poisoned dagger."

"Where is Castle Masyaf exactly?" Annabella said, ignoring him. "How far away...?"

"About fifty leagues north," Basil said.

"What's that in real money?" Vivienne asked. "I've never understood leagues."

"About 150 miles," Annabella said absently.

"How do you know?" Vivienne demanded suspiciously.

"I looked it up, of course, yonks ago." Annabella paused, a puzzled expression on her face. "Why do you think there was only one footprint? Here. And in Damascus."

"A calling card?" Vivienne said.

"Yes, but why only one? How could there only be one?"

"He must be suspended somehow," Darius said after a lengthy silence. "Flying..."

"On a carpet?" Annabella said. "Basil, could he have a carpet?"

"Jolly likely," Basil said slowly. "Now that I think about it, almost certain."

"Your father warned us he might have powers... What other powers?" Basil gave the impression of shrugging.

Pater told me before we left that he can probably hear when we jolly well talk like this, he said privately. Annabella was thunderstruck.

You're not serious? All the time? Everything?

Not everything, at least I jolly well don't think so. Only when we're in range. Like jolly old Luqman, remember? Basil was referring to a seer whom Annabella had once had occasion to consult.

What sort of range? Annabella demanded, unconsciously lowering her internal voice. The thought that Hassan-i Sabbāh might be able to listen in was both deeply offensive and deeply worrying.

Basil paused and then continued, his tone foreboding. *And I'm jolly sure I'll never be able to freeze him again. He'll have immunity...* Basil was referring to an earlier encounter when Annabella had managed to gain a temporary advantage, long enough for Basil to immobilise Hassan-i Sabbāh completely and render him a prisoner.

One thing, though, Basil added. *One thing that might be in our jolly favour...*

What?

If he has to jolly well use a carpet all the time, it might mean...

What? Annabella repeated impatiently.

That he can't actually walk.

Can't walk?

The volcano, Basil said slowly. *Who knows what that might jolly well have done to him...*

Darius was watching the changing expressions on Annabella's face with a quizzical look.

"They do it all the time," Vivienne said to him, wearily.

"Do what?"

"Talk to each other. Telepathically..."

"Telewhatly?"

"Mentally."

"How can they do that? That's not possible."

"Is a djinni possible?"

Annabella's eyes suddenly focused. "Sorry," she said.

"Oh, don't mind us," Vivienne said in a snarky voice. "We'll just chat amongst ourselves..."

"Which leaves the biggest problem of all," Annabella went on, ignoring her. "We still don't know how we can fight Hassan-i Sabbāh. Do we?"

Basil said nothing.

"So we have to go to Castle Masyaf," Annabella said at last.

"But..." Vivienne began.

"We'll think of something on the way," Annabella cut her off with false confidence. "First things first... We have to get there before we can do anything about Darius's grandfather."

"He'll be expecting us, though, won't he?" Darius said. "Hassan-i Sabbāh. That's why he took grandfather. To make us follow..."

"So you should stay here," Annabella said. "This is not really anything to do with you..."

"You're not serious?" Darius burst out. "Of course I have to come. He's my grandfather... And it's my fault he was taken..."

"But it's very dangerous..." Annabella tried to say.

"Do you think I care? Do you think I'm afraid?"

"You jolly well should be," Basil interposed.

"And there's no need for you to be involved," Annabella said.

"I'm coming," Darius insisted. The mixture of powerful emotions working on him sought a safety valve. "He's my grandfather!" he proclaimed forcefully, his voice rising sharply. "And I'm coming. That's all there is to it." The sound carried to the camp and people turned to stare curiously.

"Shsh," Annabella said, stretching out a hand but withdrawing it before she actually touched him.

Thank you, Basil said casually, with much less emphasis than Annabella might have anticipated. She had a sudden intimation but was forced to file it away for later inspection.

"I'm coming!" Darius repeated vehemently, his face working with passion.

"All right," Annabella said with some irritation. "All right, already."

"But you'll be sorry," Vivienne put in.

"And you don't have to come either," Annabella said, still vexed.

"Don't start that again," Vivienne said and added after a moment: "So how are we going to get there? And I don't care if I never see another horse for the rest of my life..."

"Me neither," Annabella said with a rueful grimace. "Can we fly, Basil? I don't think it matters if we're seen now and we need to get there as fast as possible. Who knows what Hassan-i Sabbāh will do..." Annabella suddenly stopped as she glimpsed the expression on Darius's face.

Despite his worry and his guilt, Darius was fascinated when Basil produced the carpet and made it hover before them. At any other time he would have been beside himself with excitement. As Annabella went about strapping him into the left-hand front armchair, people moving around the hospital tents began to point and stare.

"What's this belt thing for?" Darius asked.

"In case Vivienne hits the turbocharger lever again," Annabella said. She pointed to the stick shift. "This thing here. It's some sort of power boost Basil's father fitted..."

"Hurry up," Vivienne said, tying herself in. "People are coming." And they were, some even beginning to run as they realised what they were looking at. Annabella scrambled into her own seat and without worrying about the belt said:

"Let's go, please Basil. Let's get out of here before something happens." And without more ado, the carpet rose up before the astonished gaze of the rapidly growing audience, described a climbing turn to the right and settled on course to the north.

Annabella glanced across at Darius and was struck by the rapt expression on his face. Flight was something that he had never even dreamed might be possible, yet here he was with the wind in his hair, staring down at the ground rushing past. For the moment, everything but the magic of flying was forgotten.

Vivienne was the first to speak. "Do you think the hostie might be coming round soon?" she asked rather plaintively and altogether predictably. "We didn't get any breakfast and dinner was yesterday..."

Basil, Annabella said thoughtfully. I shouldn't be asking you to go anywhere near Hassan-i Sabbāh. What if he uses the ring on you? For a long moment Basil said nothing. When he did finally answer, again there was the odd tone in his voice that Annabella couldn't define.

A djinni has to do what a djinni jolly well has to do, he said, sententiously.

Now who's being disgustingly noble?

Lady Bright...

Don't you Lady Bright me. I want you to promise that you won't go anywhere near Hassan-i Sabbāh. Come on, promise! So intent were they on the conversation that neither of them noticed that they had automatically slipped back into speaking with their familiar, endearing abrasiveness.

I won't go near him if I can jolly well avoid it. How's that?

Not good enough, Annabella said firmly. *I can't possibly let you anywhere near him, ever. He mustn't know you're helping me.*

Of course he knows, Basil said. *You think this jolly stupid carpet of pater's hasn't been marked? Every 'ifrit and ghul within a thousand leagues will know about it by now, and every djinni for that matter, which means my reputation is jolly well ruined... And if they all know, Hassan-i Sabbāh probably does too. Besides, if I'm not helping you, how are you supposed to have jolly well come back in time..."* The argument was more or less unanswerable, Annabella realised.

Another thing, she said after a bit and changing the subject. *You need to practise flying this carpet when the booster's on.*

I have abso-jolly-lutely no jolly intention of ever jolly well using that stupid jolly booster ever again. Pater should be ashamed for even thinking of it...

But we might need it, Annabella insisted.

After prolonged bickering, which both of them thoroughly enjoyed without being able to admit it, Basil reluctantly agreed at least to try. Darius – to distract him from thinking about his grandfather, and much to his gratification – was appointed co-pilot in charge of thrust. After kangarooing all over the sky for what seemed like hours he and Basil eventually began to achieve some coordination and even to enjoy themselves. Annabella and Vivienne looked on with, had they known it, exactly the same patient yet world-weary expressions of mothers watching boy children disporting themselves in a puddle.

At first their route took them along the Jordan River, then the corridor between the mountains of Lebanon to the east and the sea to the west, and finally as the afternoon was drawing into evening they entered a lush valley. In the distance where the valley flattened out, the last rays of the sun picked out a great castle sitting on a massive raised platform, elevated the height of five or six men above the surrounding plain. As the sun disappeared below the horizon, the light stone of the curtain walls and turrets rapidly darkened to become grim and forbidding. It was a most formidable stronghold and it was not surprising that even Saladin had failed to conquer it.

"So what's the plan?" Vivienne said with faux bravado. "Rock up and knock on the front door?"

"Abso-jolly-lutely," Annabella said.

"Annabella! You are joking? I do hope you're joking..."

"Have you got a better idea?"

"Annabella!"

"Look!" Darius suddenly said. He had been ignoring the conversation about him in favour of scanning the castle. Like his grandfather before him, he had remarkably good eyes. "Look!" he repeated. "See that...?"

The girls followed the direction of his pointing finger. High enough still to be in the light, there seemed to be a beam, or something similar, sticking out from the top of the southernmost turret. There appeared to be something dangling from it.

"That's obscene," Darius said with all the outrage he could muster.

"What's obscene?" Annabella demanded. "What is it? What can you see?"

"It's a cage," Basil said.

"And that's grandfather inside it," Darius whispered.

"But why?" Vivienne questioned.

"It's a trap," Basil said with totally atypical brevity.

"Quick," Annabella ordered. "Take us down more. As much as you can... Before we're spotted."

"Why?" Vivienne repeated rather stupidly.

"Now," Annabella said urgently. They were already flying very low down, but Basil put them into a shallow dive until they were literally skimming the ground, weaving around obstacles at much reduced speed.

"I need to think," Annabella added for Vivienne's benefit. But as the plan had sprung fully formed into her mind, it was not so much a matter of thinking, but of finding arguments to convince the others. And a long and difficult struggle it proved, though eventually she managed to wear down their objections – Basil's the most vociferous of all – for the simple reason that no one had a better idea. No one else had any ideas at all.

Chapter 9

They had retreated from the castle for fear of discovery and were holed up in a clearing they had found in pinewood off to the south-west. They had eaten, courtesy of Basil, and were reclining around a small campfire, waiting for the moon to rise.

"I've been thinking," Annabella said into the silence. "One other thing... If it all goes wrong..."

"Which it will," Vivienne said. "This is just crazy, Annabella. We can't let you do it."

"V, not again. We've been over it and over it. There's no other way... So, what to do if it does go wrong...? You should go back to our time. I think you'll be safer there, at least in the short term..."

"We should go to the Sheikh's," Vivienne interrupted. "He could protect us."

"Basil?" Annabella asked.

"Maybe," Basil said reluctantly. "Pater's not the djinni he used to be..."

"So Basil," Annabella went on. "If you hear me say bollocks..."

"Bollocks?" Vivienne interrupted again. "Annabella!"

"It's not a word I'd ever use by accident," Annabella said impatiently. "Basil, take them back to the school. Hide them there. I don't think Hassan-i Sabbāh will go after them, not if he has me, not until... But if he does, he could trace our parents... He knows them. He did it before... So V and Darius will be safer at the school... Yes?"

Basil made no reply.

"Yes?" Annabella repeated. Basil finally made a sign of acquiescence. They all fell silent again.

For Annabella, the waiting dragged agonisingly slowly and she found it increasingly difficult to control her emotions. While maintaining some sort of confident veneer for the benefit of Vivienne and Darius, nevertheless, she was deeply fearful of the task she had set herself. At the same time, her earlier exchanges with Basil, while seemingly back to normal, in reality merely emphasised the huge gulf still between them. She was more miserable and more lonely, she was forced to admit, than she could possibly bear.

Basil, she said at last, determined to have it out. There was no reply as though Basil had divined her intention and was equally determined to avoid her. His silence merely served to intensify her pain.

Basil, she said again insistently.

Still there was no reply. All at once, the intimation there had been no time to examine that morning returned and crystallised, and with it the thought she had failed to grasp while cowering from the Saracen arrows behind the dead knight's shield. It was all there on the instant, laid out for her, clear, simple, devastating.

Basil, she whispered. *I understand what's wrong. I've worked it out. I understand. You're not jealous of Darius. You're jealous of what he is... In a way you can't be. Because I flirted with him – I didn't really, but you thought I did...*

You rubbed my nose in it. You're human. He's human... I'm not...

The voice was electrifying. Bare murmur that it was, it went through Annabella like a lightning bolt. She began to weep. Vivienne and Darius stared at her in astonishment. Annabella struggled to her feet and walked blindly into the trees. Darius made to follow, but Vivienne put a hand on his arm.

Annabella found her feet taking her ever deeper into the forest. She finally stopped when she could no longer see the fire. The darkness and the silence about her was deep, impenetrable, any sound stifled by the clinging blanket of pine needles, both living and dead.

I didn't mean to hurt you, she said at last. Of course, I didn't mean to hurt you. I...

What? Basil's voice was still barely audible. Annabella finally found the courage to bare her soul and to lay it before him, the only offering she could make.

I'm in love with you, she said. I love you. I love you...

She had to wrench the declaration from herself with brutal force because it was a thing she had fiercely hidden, refused to acknowledge, ever since feeling the truth of it so long ago in Iram. Her great, never articulated fear was that once out in the open, such a declaration must destroy whatever there was between them.

There was a silence, a silence that seemed to last from the birth of the universe to its ultimate demise. Annabella waited, not breathing.

You mustn't love me, Basil said at last. I can't let you. I won't let you. Annabella felt the essence of her soul being sucked from her as though she had finally fallen into the clutches of Lilis in the Taklamakan Desert. All at once, she was empty. Dead.

Why? she said dully, suddenly uncaring, drained, hollow.

I can't love you back, Basil said. I can't. You're human. You'll die. You'll grow old and die. Human life is so short. In just a handful of years, you'll die. It's inevitable. You'll leave me... And I couldn't stand it. I couldn't stand that...

Abruptly, Annabella found herself on the ground. She must have fainted, blacked out, however briefly. She stayed there, a long time, trying not to think, above all trying not to feel. It was all far worse, far more difficult than ever she had thought so naively just minutes before. At last, she struggled to her feet and returned to the others, who were waiting anxiously. Vivienne, who knew her best of anyone in the world, took one look at her face in the flickering firelight, put her arms around her and held her tight.

Annabella picked her way towards the castle, darting from shadow to shadow. It was possible, she discovered, still to think, still to move, to act as she had planned. A concrete task actually helped and she found that once she started she was able to anaesthetise her acute distress and set it to one side.

They had been extremely fortunate not to have been spotted earlier, she realised, and she had no intention of giving the game away now. She imagined that the reason they had escaped detection before was that they had been approaching the castle so low to the ground they had been invisible in the deepening shadows as dusk fell. Now it was full night, but a bright moon had risen making her advance to the great mass of

stone rearing up before her fraught with danger. At last she worked her way close enough to be able to see. Her pressing need was to find a way into the fortress.

The cage was still there, hanging from the tower nearest her, silhouetted against the night sky. She could see a humped shape that was presumably Darius. She followed the walls of the turret down to the bottom and stiffened. Set into the angle of the wall, where it could readily be defended from above, she could just make out a small postern. She couldn't tell whether the door was open or closed, whether or not it was guarded, but there was a flight of stairs leading down from edge of the platform to the ground proper.

"There's a door there," Annabella said, whispering aloud for fear that Hassan-i Sabbāh would overhear her thoughts. "Can you scout?" With an effort, she managed to keep her voice bland, remote.

"Immediately, if not jolly sooner," Basil said, also whispering aloud. Annabella could tell he was not fooled for a moment by her ordinary tone but was concerned to help her maintain the facade. He flitted away and was gone for some little time.

"All clear," came the whisper at last. "Two guards, who won't jolly well be bothering anyone any time soon, and the way is open to the top. I checked."

Annabella gulped and as an excuse to delay, made a show of checking the bundle on her back. It was all very well proposing to invade the enemy's lair but now that the moment was here, her limbs felt leaden, paralysed.

"Thank you," she managed to answer.

"Are you really going to do this?" Basil, this time, was unable to disguise the deep concern in his voice.

"Unless you can think of a better alternative...?" Annabella paused, not so much waiting for Basil to reply as trying to find the will to force herself forward. She moved out from behind a bush she was using as cover and, crouching, began to move towards the staircase.

"Annabella..." Basil hissed. She stopped short. It was only the third time she could remember that Basil had ever used her actual name.

"What?" she whispered. There was silence for a long moment.

"Nothing," Basil murmured at last.

"I'll see you in a while," Annabella breathed. "And remember, under no circumstances... If anything happens... If I don't... You're not to come charging in, trying to rescue me. Please, Basil. There's no point Hassan-i Sabbāh getting both of us."

"But..."

"No. I can't let you. I couldn't stand it. I told you why. You know my secret now. And Hassan-i Sabbāh's crazy. You know he's crazy. Stark staring bonkers. Insane. Abso-jolly-lutely, certifiably insane. You must stay as far away from him as you can. Please. You know I wouldn't ask you to be involved at all, but I can't think of any other way to get Darius out of that cage."

It was a long speech for Annabella and the whispered intensity with which she spoke brought all her pain back to the surface.

"Annabella..." Basil said for the fourth time in their chequered acquaintance.

"No," Annabella said firmly and shaking her head. "I'm going now. Stick to the plan. Please..."

She began again to pick her way towards the castle, not looking back and concentrating on making it to the steps unseen. It seemed to take for ever and she was certain that there must come a cry of alarm, that a guard would spot her. However, eventually, trembling with nervous apprehension, she found herself pressing into the wall by the staircase, undiscovered.

After a moment to gather herself, she began to creep upwards. She came to the open postern and the bodies of the two sentries, lying deeply unconscious in an alcove where Basil had disposed of them. There was another door on the other side of the turret, which obviously led to the castle proper, and a broad, squared-off spiral staircase. Annabella put her ear to the internal door for some seconds, but hearing nothing went back to the outside door and pushed it closed, leaving it just a fraction ajar. Then she took a deep breath, gulped, and mostly by feel began to climb.

She stopped to listen as she came to each embrasure in the outside wall but as Basil had promised, she seemed to have the tower to herself. Little of the moonlight outside penetrated to the stairwell, and the dark seemed to vibrate with danger. At last she sensed she was near the top and stopped to raise her head above the level of the floor of the chamber above.

There was more light here, slanting in through a large port in the wall, and Annabella breathed a faint sigh of relief as she confirmed the room was indeed deserted. A shadow moved on the floor and she started, only to relax when she realised it was caused by the cage dangling outside, swaying slightly. She could see the great beam that supported it passing through slotted timbers in the roof and there was some sort of windlass mechanism on the wall for bringing the cage in and out. It seemed well-oiled and much used. The Assassins found no shortage of victims, Annabella supposed.

She resisted the temptation to call out to Darius, however quietly, for fear that he would stir and alert the guards undoubtedly watching for just such a movement. She also forced herself to resist the temptation of cueing Basil telepathically to the fact that she was now in position. The danger that Hassan-i Sabbāh might overhear was just too great. All she could do now was to wait, hoping that no one would discover the fallen guards and come to investigate. Time dragged unconscionably and there was nothing to do but worry about the great, gaping hole in her plan, the huge gamble she was taking to save Darius at the risk of the lives of Basil, Vivienne and his grandson, not to mention her own. She was betting that Hassan-i Sabbāh wanted her alive so much that he would forbear to use the Seal of Solomon on Basil.

Her eyes fixed on the sky outside, beyond the cage, Annabella was caught by surprise. One second, she could see nothing, the next, a strange, humped shape was sliding noiselessly into view, very close to the wall. Too noiselessly, Annabella thought. The whole point was for the carpet to be detected. She was caught in two minds. Should she wait in hiding, or should she do something to attract attention. But a moment later, with the carpet almost in reach of the cage, a great cry was raised from the battlements above, a trumpet blared and an oil-soaked bonfire blazed into

life, adding its flickering light to that of the moon. On the instant, a dark shape came swooping down from high above. Basil delayed a fraction of a second longer and then put the Sheikh's carpet to headlong flight.

Annabella rushed to the edge of the port and peered out. The carpets were now just black shapes in the moonlight and she allowed herself a gust of silent relief. It seemed she had guessed right. It seemed Hassan-i Sabbāh would indeed refrain from using the ring on Basil for fear of the carpet crashing and destroying his quarry before he was ready. She then found herself devoutly praying that the Sheikh's booster, however it worked, would be sufficient to keep Basil clear of Hassan-i Sabbāh. She watched a moment longer and it seemed that the carpet behind was gaining. It was part of the plan that it be allowed to get close, but frightening, all the same. Turning her head she gazed upwards, but could see nothing. It would have been less than human – she hoped – for the guards not to have rushed to the far end of the castle to follow the chase.

She glanced back at the cage and could see Darius, kneeling on the floor, gripping the bars and staring at her silently. She put a finger to her lips, turned to the winding mechanism and began to struggle with the heavy windlass.

Basil made the cloak, artfully arranged to simulate Annabella, turn and apparently stare backwards. He knew that the light was not nearly good enough for even such as Hassan-i Sabbāh to make out that the cloak was, in fact, empty. He let the pursuing carpet gain perceptibly to make sure they had Hassan-i Sabbāh on the hook then, when he judged they were still close enough to the castle to be seen by the guards, he spoke to Darius.

"Lady Bright was right," he said. "Hassan-i Sabbāh's not going to use the ring. He doesn't want us to crash and burn. Now," he added with some glee. "Let's have some jolly fun. Let's put on a show."

Darius, nothing loath, increased the power boost while Basil put the carpet through a series of queasy-making evolutions and manoeuvres that would have done credit to an aerobatics pilot. At last, when he calculated the guards had been distracted for a sufficient length of time, he took the carpet almost down to ground level to lead Hassan-i Sabbāh a merry chase, far from the castle, up hill and down dale, over, around and even through obstacles as they presented themselves.

Pretty soon, Darius had given up whooping with excitement in favour of strained silence, while Vivienne had closed her eyes and was gripping the arms of her chair with whitened knuckles.

The latch to the door of the cage was fashioned so that any prisoner inside dangling in the breeze would be quite unable to open it and seek a premature end to his suffering on the rocks below. It took what seemed an age for Annabella to work it free, but at last it was done. Darius stepped out and embraced her.

"I knew you would come," he whispered.

"Quick," Annabella said. "We have to get the cage back out. Before they notice." She stripped the bundle of cloth from her back and together she and Darius heaped

and humped it as much as possible to look as though there was still a body on the floor. Darius closed the door and then helped her to wind the cage back out. Still there was no cry or commotion from above and Annabella began to hope that the rescue had gone unnoticed. Putting a finger to her lips she led Darius to the stairwell.

Outside, far in the distance in the moonlight, it appeared two giant bats were in mortal combat. Annabella glanced up but could see no sign of anybody looking in their direction. Keeping close to the platform, creeping along in its shadow, she headed in the opposite direction to the aerial show with Darius close behind her.

It was only some time after the battling carpets had finally disappeared from view that Sinan bethought himself of the prisoner. It had been forcefully enjoined upon him that whatever happened, come what may, the prisoner must not be rescued. The spectacle of his master in full flight on his magical carpet pursuing a second magical carpet had been irresistible, however. Besides, as carefully planned, the girl and her djinni had obviously been foiled in their attempt to free the prisoner, so there was no need for concern.

When he was quite sure that the carpets were gone for good, Sinan turned and began to waddle back along the battlements towards the turret at the other end of the castle, where hung the cage. In due course, he gazed down and was reassured to see, as far as one could tell, gazing down through the top, that the prisoner was indeed still there, slumped dejectedly on the floor, clearly now in despair at the failure of his friends to rescue him.

It was only at the change of watch, when the two, still unconscious guards were discovered that Sinan began to sweat. Rivers. Pungent torrents. Instantly, he raced – a relative term – to the chamber at the top of the tower, and gasping with the strain of heaving his bulk up all those stairs, he stared out the port at the cage. The crumpled form was still there, lying on the bottom and as soon as the word crumpled crossed his mind, Sinan this time realised the truth, and panicked.

Annabella could hear the breathing behind her growing more and more laboured and distressed. At last, Darius spoke, his words anguished.

"Annabella... I'm... sorry. I have... to stop. Just for a... minute..."

Annabella halted her headlong rush away from the castle and turned. For the first time, she could get a proper look at her old friend. Old, she saw, was the crucial word. Darius was now well over seventy and while apparently still healthy, his strength was greatly diminished. He stood, bent over and gasping wretchedly.

"I'm sorry..." he panted again.

"It's all right," Annabella said. "Here. Come and sit down. Come on, rest." She led him into the deeper shadow of a bush and helped him to sit. His breathing began to slow.

"I knew you would come," he said again when he could trust himself to speak somewhat normally. "As soon as I realised it was Hassan-i Sabbāh... I knew you would come. How did he get out of the volcano?"

"The ring," Annabella said. "We think he must have found the ring and then made Iblis release him."

"I see," Darius said and then, speaking formally: "When I say, I knew you would come, that doesn't mean I wanted you to. I'm old. I've lived my life. You still have much of yours in front of you, of which I would not wish to deprive you."

"Don't be ridiculous," Annabella said with some asperity. "You might be old enough now to be my grandfather but you're still Darius... The Darius who saved my life... The Darius who came with me all the way to the Taklamakan Desert... The Darius who fought Lilis with a water skin for me... Who fancied my best friend. She's my sister now..."

"And how is Vivienne?" Darius interrupted.

"Just the same," Annabella said. "No, that's a lie. She's more beautiful than ever."

"I nearly asked her to stay... last time..." he said somewhat wistfully.

"I know," Annabella said. "She nearly wanted you to." She paused a moment longer. "Can you go on now?" she asked. "As soon as they realise you're gone, they'll be after us..."

"Where are we going?" Annabella pointed to the south-west.

"Over there," she said. "There's a forest. Cover. We have to meet Basil there. He has a carpet and Vivienne. And..." She hesitated.

"And what?"

"And Darius," she said apologetically. "Darius, your grandson. Can you move now, do you think? We have to get to the forest, or we'll miss Basil and then..."

Darius, the grandson, had long since ceased to enjoy the battle and was now seriously frightened. The booster lever was as far forward as it would go, Basil was cutting things finer and finer, yet still Hassan-i Sabbāh clung grimly to their tail, evidently determined, whatever the cost, to close and capture them. Slowly, even through the wildest gyrations, he inched closer and closer. Darius turned again to stare back over his shoulder and immediately wished he hadn't. This time Hassan-i Sabbāh was near enough for Darius to make him out somewhat.

The sight confronting him in the bright moonlight was petrifying and his fright ratcheted straight up the scale to terror. A vagrant part of his mind now understood how it was that at least one person confronted with Hassan-i Sabbāh had come to die of fear on the spot. He found himself shouting over and over again:

"Faster. We have to go faster..."

Sinan sawed brutally at the mouth of the big horse – the largest in the stables and commandeered along with some provisions hastily gathered from the kitchens and crammed into the saddlebags he habitually kept ready for just such an emergency. Instinctively he turned to the south-west and headed for the cover of the pine forest. He had only one frantic thought in his mind, to put as much distance as possible between himself and Hassan-i Sabbāh. The thought of the retribution to be brought down on his head for allowing the prisoner to escape reduced him to quaking jelly.

Annabella chafed at their slow progress. Try as he might, Darius was taking longer and longer between steps. Annabella had her arm round his waist and was helping to support him. At last, they reached the first trees. The path here was only wide enough for single file. She had moved ahead, intending to scout, when Darius collapsed completely. He gave no warning. One second Annabella was aware of his tortured gasping behind her, the next it had stopped. She turned to find him face-down on the trail. When she had made the rescue plan, she had taken no account of Darius the old man; instead he had appeared in her mind's eye still the gilded youth she had known, and able to do whatever should be necessary physically. It was turning out to be a critical miscalculation.

She rushed back and struggled to turn him over. He was still breathing but stertorously and at ragged intervals. In the moonlight, he looked grey and sick, haggard, on the point of death. The dust now coating his face might well have been the first soil covering his corpse in the grave.

Annabella got her hands under his shoulders and managed to drag him clear of the path a little, but more she could not do. Even thin and wasted with age, he was too heavy for her. She sat back on her heels and contemplated the situation. She had just about made up her mind that the only possible course of action left was to go to the clearing, hope Basil and the others would turn up in due course and then bring them back to help Darius, when she heard a horse, moving fast.

Instinctively she crouched, her first thought: pursuit. The Assassins were after them. She wasted time trying to drag Darius further from the path, then realised it was pointless as there was no cover on the bare floor of the wood. She stood up indecisively and stared through the tree trunks. A moment later, she could make out that there was only one rider, a very fat man, then the horse slowed as it approached the trees. One rider and very fat... scarcely threatening. Annabella made up her mind to ask for help. Perhaps he would let Darius ride his horse as far as the clearing...

She stepped out into the path.

Sinan couldn't believe his eyes, or his good fortune. Here was his salvation, standing meekly on the path before him, as though yoghurt wouldn't melt in her mouth. This could only be the girl his master was so intent on possessing, here in the forest, alone, unprotected, his for the taking. As he drew the horse to a halt, his salvation even presumed to address him.

"Please, sir," Annabella said in a firm voice. "My friend needs help..."

With difficulty and an involuntary grunt, Sinan dismounted. Annabella turned to indicate Darius, prone by the path, and instantly felt an arm snaking round her throat from behind in a classic sleeper hold straight from Assassin unarmed combat 101. She had no chance to react and could feel herself fading rapidly as her brain was deprived of oxygen.

Bollocks! she screamed desperately. Then the world went black.

Basil reacted instantly. In truth, he had been anticipating just this. He let the fake Annabella, the dummy cloak, whip away from the chair and fly off behind, where briefly, it actually wrapped itself around Hassan-i Sabbāh. It took a moment for the significance to penetrate, then on the instant Hassan-i Sabbāh abandoned the chase, swung about 180 degrees and was spearing back towards Castle Masyaf.

Basil waited only long enough to be sure that Hassan-i Sabbāh had truly lost all interest in them, at least for the moment, and then with the heaviest of hearts did as Annabella had requested.

Anyone who chanced to be watching and who surely would have been amazed to see a flying carpet would then have been vastly relieved when, with no sign or warning, it vanished. Clearly, it could only have been a momentary hallucination of no particular consequence.

Chapter 10

The corporal at the radar monitor was taken completely by surprise. One moment, it was just a routine silent-hours watch drawing to an end, the next, there, slap bang in the middle of his scope, a blip was winking at him accusingly, a blip that had popped up from nowhere – he couldn't have missed it, surely – a blip that had no right to be there, a blip that was not only slap bang in the middle of his screen, but slap bang in the middle of prohibited airspace. Urgently, he summoned the watch leader. Urgently, the officer scrambled the alert fighters.

It took an agonising two minutes and 23 seconds for the interceptors to get airborne and another one minute and 12 seconds for them to reach the target, quite time enough for who knew what to happen. Meanwhile, the intruder, now christened Bogey 3141, had maintained a steady course and speed, though losing altitude slowly, which could very well be the prelude to the sort of attack that had devastated New York City. At last, the lead pilot of the two fighter jets reported in.

"This is Sierra Foxtrot Tango Leader," came the disembodied voice over the speaker. "Reporting visual contact with Tally 3141. We are making a pass..." Abruptly, the voice ceased.

The radar operator glanced at his CO, who nodded.

"Sierra Foxtrot Tango Leader, confirm Tally 3141," the operator said.

"This is Sierra Foxtrot Tango Leader. 3141 appears to be... No. I'm not going to say that."

The watch leader picked up a spare microphone.

"Sierra Foxtrot Tango Leader. What is the nature of Tally 3141?" The pilot recognised the new voice.

"Sir, I like my job... If I tell you what I'm seeing, you'll ground me."

"Sierra Foxtrot Tango Leader, don't be ridiculous. Report!"

"Sir, it's some sort of... unidentified flying object. There are people on board. Two. They are wearing robes." A frisson of extra tension ran through the radar room. The watch leader suddenly felt very lonely. During the interval, the target had changed course about 30 degrees and was no longer heading towards built-up areas. It was also dropping faster now. The watch leader moved across to a second display, studied it for a moment and pointed.

"What's that place?" he demanded. "Where it's heading. What is it?"

"It's a school, sir," someone said. "Railbury Hall."

"A school?" The watch leader repeated, desperately playing for time. "You say it's a school?"

"Yes sir. A boarding school." The room froze. A boarding school. Totally undefended. Full of students. A perfect focus for a terror attack. Everyone there was now viscerally aware of the choice confronting the watch leader. Everyone there, eyes averted, rejoiced it was not their decision. Everyone there held their breath.

"Adjust for intercept positioning," the watch leader said, managing to disguise a gulp.

It took Vivienne quite some time to get her bearings. She was not used to looking down on the landscape and the lights were confusing. She had just about worked it out when there was a great roar as two fighter jets went rocketing past on either side and peeled away into a climb. The carpet was left bucking wildly in their slipstream.

"What was that?" Basil and Darius shouted simultaneously.

"Planes," Vivienne said. "Jets. I don't think they like us. I don't think we should be here." She pointed. "Over there," she said. "The school's over there... I think we should hurry..."

They could see – and hear – the jets circling overhead. Basil swung the carpet round and headed directly for a cluster of lights coming from an isolated group of buildings. Without waiting to be told, Darius eased the boost lever forward a little.

Still the jets circled.

"What are 'planes'?" Darius asked.

"Later," Vivienne said. Abruptly she stiffened. One of the jets had left the circle and was sweeping round in a wide curve, the logical extension of which would put it behind them and pointing directly at their carpet.

"Basil," Vivienne said urgently. "I think he's going to attack us."

"More boost, Darius," Basil said immediately. "Full boost." The carpet suddenly shot forward as Darius shoved the Sheikh's lever all the way home.

Watching on the radar, the watch leader breathed a huge sigh of relief as the UFO, whatever it was, suddenly accelerated to four or five times its original speed. There now could be no doubt now that he was making the correct decision.

"Tally 3141 now Hostile 3141," he said into his microphone. "Weapons free, Sierra Foxtrot Tango. Repeat weapons free. Take 3141. Repeat take 3141."

"Fox 3," the pilot said.

The room again held its collective breath.

Staring back over her shoulder, Vivienne saw the sudden blossom of flame as the missiles ignited.

"Basil!" she screamed. Almost at the same moment, the carpet rolled sideways and the two deadly rockets when scything past. What saved them was that the carpet had no heat signature for the missiles to home on. They went spearing off into the far distance to explode harmlessly as they automatically self-destructed.

Basil put the carpet into what was almost a vertical dive and only levelled off so close to the ground that Vivienne and Darius were sure they must crash. Darius hauled back on the lever, slowing the carpet to a manageable speed. They found the highway and followed it, just above the traffic, until they reached the turn-off to the school.

Overhead, further missile or cannon attacks thwarted by the proximity of civilians, the two fighter jets still circled, directing the police helicopter that had just arrived at the map coordinates on to the UFO's trail. Meanwhile, three SWAT teams had been

activated and were racing to the scene, delighted to be responding to what was evidently a genuine terrorist emergency.

Already, along with the wop-wop of the helicopter, they could hear sirens.

"Don't ask," Vivienne said seeing Darius begin to open his mouth. "I'll explain everything later. Come on. We have to hurry." They baled off the carpet, which promptly disappeared, and Vivienne led Darius at the run towards a block of classrooms.

"Where are we going?" he demanded.

"In there," Vivienne said. "We can hide. I know where there's a way in." Which indeed she did. A window in the second classroom on the ground floor, third from the left, had a broken catch which, if she hadn't actually broken and concealed it herself, she had certainly never brought to anyone's attention, partly from laziness, partly for fear of being blamed, partly from the vague notion that someday the knowledge might come in useful. What Vivienne didn't know was that their every move was clearly visible in shades of green and grey on the helicopter's infra-red scanner.

"What do we do now?" Darius asked, once they were safely inside and the window closed behind them.

Vivienne, however, didn't answer. She was watching a convoy of lights turning through the distant school gates and racing up the drive.

"Basil," she said. "We need proper clothes. Please... If they find us in this stuff, who knows what they'll think?" Almost as she spoke, she found herself dressed again in the familiar school uniform. Darius, on the other hand, was greatly astonished to discover himself suddenly wearing T-shirt, jeans and trainers. Wonderingly, he fingered the strange garments only to be diverted as a dozen police cars screamed to a halt outside, directing their headlights on high beam at the building's windows. Instinctively, he and Vivienne ducked below the level of the window sills.

Another cautious glance a minute or so later showed Vivienne that the cars had been followed in short order by a number of closed vans out of which were pouring teams of heavily armed men, dressed in black.

"Oh boy," Vivienne muttered. "Are we in trouble... Basil, can you get us out of this, please...?"

"Um..." Basil began. "Wishes. I do wishes. Not so much on the ideas..."

"Useless!" Vivienne snapped. "Totally useless... If only Annabella were here..." She risked another glance over the sill and although now all but completely dazzled by the car headlights, she could make out shapes moving towards the doors. She had wasted quite enough time with populist video over the years to be in no doubt as to what would happen next.

"We're trapped here," she said, half to herself, and all at once she was seized by a glorious idea which, if it worked, would get them out of the clutches of the police and into the presence of Mrs Gordon. And if Vivienne was not exactly sanguine about facing the Gorgon, it was still by far the best option.

"Come on," she said to Darius. "Quickly..." She darted across the room with Darius close behind her and down the corridor to the stairs at the end. They had just reached

the next floor when there was a great crash and the main doors folded inwards under the influence of a battering ram.

"In here," Vivienne said. It was a staff room. "And take off your shirt..."

"What?" Darius gasped, totally confused.

"Your shirt..." She said, tearing at it. She could hear footsteps pounding on the stairs. Desperately, she reefed Darius's T-shirt over his head, pushed him on the couch and jumped on him, simultaneously tearing at the buttons of her own blouse.

The door burst open behind them and a powerful torch beam pinned them, helpless, for all the world caught absolutely in flagrante delicta.

Poor Darius, suddenly marooned in a foreign time, in a foreign land with a foreign language, had very little notion of what was happening and passed through succeeding events in a haze of incomprehension. For Vivienne, however, the resulting perp walk was one of the highlights of an already eventful life.

Naturally, heads had magically appeared at every conceivable vantage point and the volume of excited chatter and comment rose to a most gratifying level as Vivienne, her clothes in splendid disarray, accompanied by a half-naked boy – a gorgeous half-naked boy – was escorted into the open. The wolf whistles, cat-calls and envious applause were quite deafening. However, Vivienne's enjoyment of the occasion abruptly ceased when Mrs Gordon, wearing an overcoat over her night clothes, strode into view. Indeed, Vivienne, for the first time, gained a proper appreciation for the headmistress's nickname. The look on Mrs Gordon's face would turn anyone to stone.

It was hours later. They were waiting silently in Mrs Gordon's office. Darius, again decently clothed, was in deep culture shock and Vivienne was fully occupied in preparing speeches for every variation of the trouble she knew was about to crash down on her head. Basil, though no one could tell, fidgeted ceaselessly, beside himself with anxiety for Annabella.

The police, angry and mystified, had insisted on searching the whole school and the grounds from top to bottom and inside out. Of course, they found no terrorists and nothing particularly incriminating if you didn't count the surprising amount of educational porn and the three reefers that someone had been too slow to flush down the toilet. (Needless to say, this was more than enough contraband from Mrs Gordon's and the Board of Governors' point of view and the whole school would find itself collectively walking on eggshells for a considerable time to come.) Eventually, however, the police and the disappointed SWAT teams had been forced to pack up and decamp and Mrs Gordon was finally free to address the matter of her prodigal pupil.

They could hear her heels approaching on the parquet floor of the corridor outside. Each staccato snap was like a gunshot. Darius came out of his funk, stared about wildly and then gazed pleadingly at Vivienne. He really was remarkably beautiful, she had time to think, then the door opened with restrained violence and Mrs Gordon, at her most formidable, stalked into the room. Vivienne and Darius hastily got to their

feet. Mrs Gordon stood there for a long minute, surveying the two of them, then an arm lashed out.

"Who exactly are you?" she demanded, pointing at Darius. The effect was greatly spoiled by the fact that Darius could only stare back with blank incomprehension.

"Well?" Mrs Gordon insisted.

"He doesn't understand..." Vivienne ventured, greatly daring.

"Speak when you're spoken to," Mrs Gordon said coldly.

"But, Mrs Gordon..."

"Be quiet!"

"She's jolly well right, you know," Basil intervened, at the same time allowing himself to become visible. Mrs Gordon staggered.

"Oh no..." she said, her voice suddenly weary and defeated. "This is too much." Moving slowly, she went round behind her desk and sat down.

"Basil," Vivienne said softly. "Do you think another gift of tongues might be in order...?"

"Of course," Basil said. "I should have jolly well thought of it before." Darius's eyes had suddenly gone wide in disbelief as Basil was speaking.

"Mrs Gordon wants to know who you are," Vivienne said to him, still using English. Darius shook his head wonderingly as though unable to believe his ears.

"It's all right," Vivienne added. "Gift of tongues. You'll be able to speak any language there is from now on."

"I don't believe this," Mrs Gordon said, putting a hand to her eyes.

"I don't think I do, either," Darius said in hesitant English. Mrs Gordon started.

"Why are you here, Vivienne?" she said in a low voice. "Why have you come? Where is Annabella?"

"Which is my jolly cue to leave," Basil announced. "You'll be all right now..."

"Leave!" Vivienne and Darius echoed simultaneously, aghast at the thought of being abandoned.

"Annabella," Basil said. "I have to save her."

"But you can't go into the castle," Vivienne protested. "You know you can't. Hassan-i Sabbāh will be waiting for you. You know he will."

"And you know I have to go," Basil said. "You know that too." The fact that this was one of the rare occasions when he spoke without embellishment made his statement particularly powerful.

"But you can't go into the castle," Vivienne repeated, her voice rising. "Promise me you won't go into the castle. It won't help Annabella if Hassan-i Sabbāh gets you too, like he did before... when she had to rescue you. Promise me. You have to promise me..."

"I can't," Basil said slowly.

"You must," Vivienne said. "You know what Annabella would say. You must promise me for her sake."

There was a long silence, an aching silence, Annabella's absence an acute presence.

"Promise!" Vivienne demanded. " Promise me for Annabella."

"All right," Basil said finally.

"No. You have to say it." All at once Basil capitulated.

"I promise," he said in a voice barely audible. Then the wisp of smoke winked out and was gone.

It took some little time for them to accept that Basil really had left them, then the inquisition began. Vivienne's carefully prepared speech quickly disintegrated and they were left to go through a long process of question-and-evasion, half-finished sentences, misunderstandings and elliptical digression. At last, with dawn breaking, Mrs Gordon was satisfied she had heard everything they had to tell her, totally incredible as it all was.

"So," she said finally. "The question remains: what to do with you? Your parents must..."

"No," Vivienne interrupted. "Please..."

"Vivienne," Mrs Gordon said sharply.

"But that's why we came here," Vivienne protested. "Hassan-i Sabbāh knows them..."

"If you would let me finish..." Mrs Gordon said. "I was going to say: obviously, your parents must be warned."

"Oh," Vivienne said.

"They may think they should go away somewhere. And take you two with them. That would be good. Because one thing is certain. You can't stay here."

"But I thought..."

"What? That the rest of the school would really enjoy having your friend to play with? This is a girls' school, Vivienne. Or had you forgotten?"

"But can't he be a... gardener, or something?"

It was then that another convoy of cars entered the school drive and Vivienne never would get an answer to her question.

Nobody believed the video taken from the cameras on the interceptor jets. It appeared that Hostile 3141 was a flying carpet, with armchairs. The chief analyst – which was why he was the chief analyst – found an acceptable formulation. Clearly, Hostile 3141 involved some new principle of flight that had been cunningly camouflaged. Further, it was clear from the footage taken by the helicopter allied to the subsequent failed search of the premises – a most comprehensive search – that the two people who had gone into the classroom block dressed as terrorists, must have subsequently emerged disguised with devilish cunning as school pupil and boyfriend. Minutes after this realisation and with a complete abrogation of anything approaching proper channels, the urgent order was issued that it was imperative these two people be taken into immediate, high level custody. Correction, highest level, and no nonsense about civil rights and legal representation. Clearly, they were most

resourceful and dangerous enemies with access to a new weapon of unimaginable consequence.

They saw the lights of cars racing up the drive for the second time but because of the hour and the fact that everyone else had finally gone back to bed, Mrs Gordon was forced to answer the pounding at the front door herself. The glow through the bay window of her study would be clearly visible to anybody outside and it was no good pretending that the building was deserted.

She slid back the bolts to find herself confronted by a posse of bulky men suited up for the occasion in cheap worsted.

"Where are they?" the leader demanded urgently.

"Where are who?" Mrs Gordon said coldly.

"The terrorists..." The man all but shouted. However, he could see light from an open door shining into the corridor and didn't bother waiting for an answer. "Down there," he hallooed. And brushing Mrs Gordon roughly aside, he led his team at the charge to the headmistress's study, only, on crashing through the door, to find himself confronting an open window.

Automatically, he swung round back to the door, promptly colliding with his own men tumbling after him into the room. A number of them went down and there was a great deal of bad language. It also took precious seconds to sort themselves out.

The second mobile invasion had given Vivienne a very bad feeling. There was only one possible explanation for such a dawn raid: them, which would inevitably mean a barrage of questions quite impossible to answer in any believable fashion, with who could say what consequences. For the greater part of her life Vivienne had been a rebellious ward of the state and if she had learned one thing it was that officialdom should be avoided at all costs. She made an instinctive decision and as soon as Mrs Gordon had left the room she was at the window, fiddling with the catch.

"Come on," she hissed at Darius. "We have to go..."

"Why...?" Darius began, but as Vivienne was already swinging a leg over the low windowsill, he really had no choice but to follow.

They landed in the gardener's prize petunias – he took particular pride in the display outside the headmistress's study – and hesitated. The entrance portico, to their right, was fortunately screened by a bank of camellias. They could hear voices but were themselves invisible. The one word, "terrorists", came to them clearly, instantly confirming Vivienne in her decision to flee.

"This way," Vivienne whispered and set off at a dead run, Darius somewhat reluctantly close behind.

The posse never had a chance. Vivienne was well familiar with the school grounds and was able to lead Darius quite undetected to a particular spot in the farthest corner. There, an oak tree offered a convenient branch spanning the wall. The two had dropped down on the far side and disappeared into the wood beyond while the posse was still careering round in disorganised circles. Eventually the team leader gave up,

called for reinforcements and subjected the school to its second major search in six hours. This time the principal casualty was the stash of vodka discovered in a third former's gym locker. During the subsequent inquisition it emerged that she had been selling it by the nip at about 200 per cent profit. Mrs Gordon commended her for admirable enterprise before expelling her.

Vivienne was aware her school uniform would be conspicuous at that hour of the morning and after negotiating the wood to arrive at the back end of town kept them slinking along side streets.

"Where are we going?" Darius asked. It was a good question to which Vivienne had no good answer. The only possibility she could think of was her parents, her adoptive parents, but no doubt the first thing the police would do would be to put a watch on them, never mind the fact that as Annabella had pointed out, Hassan-i Sabbāh might be equally interested. Also, there was a slight matter of how to get home with no money, no change of clothes and no Basil. Hitchhiking was obviously out of the question.

"I don't know," Vivienne was forced to say.

"And we are being chased?"

"Yes."

"By whom?" A car went past and Darius couldn't help turning his head to follow it. It was his first proper look at an automobile. Nevertheless, he was not to be diverted for long. "By whom?" he repeated with splendid grammar when the car had disappeared round a corner.

"The police, I think," Vivienne said reluctantly.

"Who are police?"

"The government... Like Saladin's guards."

"And why are we running from them? Why don't we just... surrender?" Vivienne stopped. Some way ahead she could see the town centre which was a place best avoided. She turned into a lane suddenly feeling extremely tired and increasingly desperate. How could she explain to Darius the depth of difficulty engulfing them – for instance, the fact that officially Darius didn't even exist, that at best he was an illegal immigrant and stateless to boot? How could she explain the ruthlessness of the treatment handed out to suspected terrorists, and she was sure that's what they were? How could she explain her visceral distrust and loathing of all things bureaucratic?

"We can't give ourselves up," she said. "Trust me. We just can't." She let herself lean against the wall of the lane and stared at a row of rubbish bins. That's what her existence was, she reflected. Until Annabella had come on the scene, her life had been rubbish, and without Annabella, it was rubbish again. She wanted to burst into tears but with Darius watching on narrowly, she managed to hold herself together. The sound of a flock of sirens howling in the distance suddenly infused a new urgency into a situation that was already sufficiently difficult. They had to get off the streets or it could only be a matter of time before they were picked up in the dragnet that was obviously being established.

Vivienne kicked angrily at one of the bins and stubbed her toe. The pain sparked a memory, the last time she had seen a bin like this. The memory gave her an idea. It was something, at least... A chance...

"This way," she said to Darius, heading further down the lane. He hesitated and then followed. As before, he really had no choice.

Five minutes later they were standing in another lane, looking at another waste bin. Behind it was a solid brick wall, high and blocked with a large roller shutter. There was also a door with a bell push, a private entrance giving access to the accommodation above the restaurant. Taking a deep breath, Vivienne pressed the button and waited for what seemed like hours. Eventually a voice called from the other side of the door, a young voice.

"Chào buổi sáng," Vivienne said and then still in Vietnamese: "I really need to see Mr Tran... If he's available." There was a pause and eventually the sound of the door being unlocked. It opened to reveal a girl about Vivienne's age, Mr Tran's daughter. Like Vivienne, she was beautiful, but a complete contrast, dark and fragile.

"Who are you?" she asked, also speaking Vietnamese. Vivienne was about to launch into some sort of explanation when another voice saved her.

"What is it Kim-Ly? Who is it?" It was Mr Tran. A moment later, he appeared behind his daughter and his face broke into a smile. Vivienne felt herself sagging with relief.

The Tran's living quarters were modest but comfortable. Mrs Tran, like her husband enchanted with two young westerners talking fluent Vietnamese, was equally welcoming. The family had been at breakfast when interrupted and Mrs Tran insisted that Vivienne and Darius sit down. Seemingly instantly they were tucking into bowls of delicious, sticky rice with peanuts. From Vivienne's point of view it was the best thing that had happened for a long time. At last she could eat no more and could no longer postpone the moment of explanation, though the Trans would never be so discourteous as to question a guest. Vivienne wondered how she could possibly begin, then her eye fixed on a small television set sitting on a sideboard.

"Would you mind if I turn that on, please?" she asked. Mr Tran made an expansive gesture. Vivienne jumped to her feet, flicked to a news channel and was in luck. A fresh bulletin was just beginning and leading the bulletin, as she had hoped, was the terrorist attack on Railbury Hall. The Trans watched with increasing comprehension, and increasing gravity, only exclaiming when a headshot of Vivienne, taken from the school files, flashed on the screen. Darius, for his part, was beyond astonishment. When the newsreader moved on to another story, Vivienne went back to the TV and turned it off.

"Except we're not terrorists," she said, facing about. "We're just caught in a situation and I don't know how to get out of it, because they'll never believe the real story. Nobody will."

Mr Tran regarded her with compassion. As a former refugee, he knew a great deal about callous officialdom and unreasoning bureaucracy. He also well knew the distorted chains of specious fact that could be forged from misconstrued circumstance.

"Why don't you see if we can believe it?" he said.

Chapter 11

Annabella had no idea how long she might have been unconscious – seconds, minutes, hours...? She came to, slumped on the ground, struggling to focus her eyes. The first thing that swam into view was a large hairy leg, a horse's leg. It shifted restlessly and hastily Annabella rolled further away. The action brought a fat man into view, the fat man she had stopped to ask for help, the fat man who had seized her from behind. He, too, was lying slumped on the ground. Woozily, Annabella struggled to her knees. Darius was watching her. He was propped on one elbow, his other hand holding a rock. There was something dark on the rock – blood. Hypothesis: the fat man had bent down to check Darius's condition; Darius, groping, had found the rock to hand and had swung his arm up, connecting with the fat man's temple.

"Are you all right?" Darius asked.

"Sort of," Annabella said. "Are you?"

"Sort of," Darius repeated, ruefully. "Better..."

"You hit him...?" Annabella said, indicating the fat man.

"As hard as I could. Is he dead?"

"I don't think so." Annabella could see saliva bubbling faintly on his lips as the man breathed. She struggled to her feet. A memory came to her. *Bollocks*. She had cried: *Bollocks*.

"We have to go," she said urgently. "Hassan-i Sabbāh will be coming after us... Can you walk?"

"I can ride," Darius said pointing. Annabella turned. The horse behind her was very big but seemed docile. It was waiting patiently, his reins trailing on the ground, making no attempt to move.

Getting them both on to the animal's back was a struggle but they managed, with the help of a fallen tree.

"What about him?" Darius said indicating Sinan.

"Finish him off? Is that what you mean?" Annabella said. "I couldn't. And Basil couldn't even if he were here. So it would have to be you."

"Why couldn't Basil?" Darius objected. "Do it, I mean..."

"Because of the CODE," Annabella said.

"The what...?"

"The Charter of Djinni Ethics... His father... He can't kill humans..."

"But I've seen him," Darius said, astonished. "When they attacked us in the cave, when you were wounded..."

"He was my slave then. He had to protect me, so he was... sanctioned. He's not my slave any more. You know he's not. You were there. So he couldn't, not now... You'll have to..."

"I'm a doctor," Darius said, somewhat shocked and rather overlooking the point that he had, in fact, just attempted to smash the man's head in.

"So..." Annabella shrugged indifferently and pointed to the trees. "We should stay off the trail. Our tracks won't show so much on the pine needles. Please, Darius. We must go. They'll be searching..."

Obediently, Darius turned the horse's head to the forest, keeping low to the animal's neck to avoid the whipping branches, Annabella crouching behind him. Within seconds, they were lost to view.

Sinan was still unconscious when discovered by questing Assassins. Every last man in the castle had been turned out to search for the prisoner who had escaped from the cage, and more particularly his liberator. Hassan-i Sabbāh had been concerned to inform Sinan's deputy that he was incandescent with rage. The deputy, by name Bakri Touma, had accordingly been concerned to inspire his men with the extreme gravity and intense urgency of the task. He had also promised himself that, in due course, Sinan would pay for putting him in this most invidious position. Touma had all but died of terror on the spot when summoned to the presence from which, hitherto, he had been shielded.

As it happened, the deputy was leading the band that discovered Sinan lying prone beside the trail and strongly reminiscent of a beached whale – had Touma ever seen a whale. Touma regarded him thoughtfully. It was clear to him that Sinan had been attempting to flee – as who wouldn't be in the circumstances – when fate had somehow come to intervene. Nevertheless, Sinan's present predicament did nothing to mitigate his culpability for cravenly abandoning his responsibility to his deputy. Touma dismounted and overcame with outrage at the horror Sinan had brought down upon him kicked him sharply in the posterior, never mind that Sinan was his titular commander.

"Rise, you shameless glutton," Touma said, confident that Sinan was still safely unconscious. He was somewhat alarmed when there was a groan from the recumbent form. Hastily, he dropped to his knees.

"Sir, are you all right?" he asked, reverting to his customary obsequiousness. There was another groan and Sinan stirred slightly. Touma allowed himself a small sigh of relief. Clearly, his indiscretions would go unmarked. He hastened to roll Sinan over.

"Sir, your head is bleeding," Touma said, struggling to hide his gratification at the still copious flow of blood.

"Where are they?" Sinan said groggily as Touma, heaving mightily at an arm, managed to help him sit up.

"Where are who?"

"The girl. The girl and the physician..." Sinan's piggy eyes widened in fear at the realisation that yet again he had lost the one person in the world that his lord and master was determined to capture above all others.

"Find them!" Sinan said with undisguised hysteria. "Hunt them down! They can't have got far..." But even as he said it, he knew it was pious hope rather than rational expectation.

After Sinan, the big horse was scarcely troubled by the weight of one much reduced old man and one still distressingly skinny female. Eventually, the trees had thinned out and Darius and Annabella had encountered another trail, heading south, along which they made rapid progress, the big horse perfectly content to maintain a ground-eating canter, hour after hour. Darius, much to Annabella's relief, endured the ride rather better than he had their headlong flight from the castle. At last, as dawn was breaking, they came to another thick forest and disappeared, deep within. They stopped at last by a small pool they found, fed by a spring and screened by thick scrub. Investigation of Sinan's saddlebags revealed a provident supply of dates, olives, two sorts of cheese and plentiful unleavened bread – after all, however terrified, a man on the run still needs must eat.

"So," Darius said between mouthfuls. "I gather Basil has deserted you?"

"Only because I told him to," Annabella said defensively. "We had a signal in case it all went wrong. And it did go wrong, so I gave him the signal... How are you feeling, now?"

"Better," Darius said. "The food helps. I've had nothing since..." He shrugged. "So where is Basil now? I ask because we could really use his help."

"I don't know. We agreed that he should take Vivienne and your grandson back to our time. The future, I mean..."

"Quite," Darius said.

"But what he'll do, what he can do after that, I've got no idea." Annabella hesitated.

"You're thinking you should call him?" Darius guessed.

"Except Hassan-i Sabbāh might hear too. Basil said he probably has the power, now. He'll be after us... If he's close..."

"I see," Darius said thoughtfully. "A risk, a risk indeed... But if you don't call him, Basil has even less chance of finding us than Hassan-i Sabbāh?"

"Yes," Annabella said reluctantly. "I don't see how he can." They fell silent, digesting their situation along with the food.

"Did you see him?" Annabella asked at last.

"Hassan-i Sabbāh?" Annabella nodded. "No. I was asleep. Someone... something hit me, I think. There's a cut on my head... Then I was blindfolded till they put me in that cage... But I heard him... Why do you ask?"

"People have been frightened to death, just..."

"Literally...? Just looking at him? So he blindfolded me in case I should die too?"

"I suppose so," Annabella said and again they fell silent.

This time, it was Darius who spoke first.

"It seems to me..." he began. "It seems to me that the best thing we can do is head back to my part of the world."

"Damascus?"

"Or Saladin. He has an army, after all..."

"Not that it did much good last time..."

"But that was just my hospital," Darius said. "Just the wounded. Nowhere near the real army..."

"Do you really think the army could stop Hassan-i Sabbāh?"

"I don't know. But it must be better than nothing... And that's all we've got at the moment. Nothing"

"But how can we get there? Wherever there is? This food won't last long and it might take weeks."

"Do you have a better idea?" Darius asked gently. Annabella frowned and eventually was forced to shake her head.

"Have another look in the saddlebags," Darius suggested. "A man on the run who takes this much thought to his stomach..."

Annabella got up and fetched the bags. There was nothing else there other than food but when she threw them down in disgust, there was a suspicious clink. Also, it came to her that although ostensibly empty, they still seemed unduly weighty.

"False bottoms," Darius said. "Gold for the journey... Our man likes his comforts."

They took it in turns to sleep and watch. Gallantly, Darius insisted on taking the first watch. He roused Annabella towards mid-morning and when he was sure that she was awake, he stretched out, shielding his eyes from the sun with a fold of his keffiyeh. Annabella got up and moved around trying to ease her stiffness.

The horse was cropping placidly by the pool where Darius had tethered him. Despite his evident good nature, he was an ugly-looking animal and Annabella decided that the only possible name for him was Brutus. Somewhat warily, she patted his neck. He gave her a friendly nudge in return and Annabella found herself resting her head against him. It was comforting, particularly as she was feeling middling awful. If anything, she was more drained now than when they had stopped. Her muscles, still unaccustomed to long hours on horseback, had seized up and two or three hours sleep had accentuated rather than eased her fatigue.

She sat down again and tried to concentrate her thoughts. There was, after all, much to consider, but beyond wondering vaguely what might have happened to Vivienne and Darius minor, she was quite unable to order her thinking. "Darius minor" brought Basil to mind. Only Basil could find English boarding school argot of another age at all appropriate. The thought of him, a thought that her mind had been unconsciously resisting, was raw and bleeding and made her want to cry. Where was he? Still with Vivienne and DM, she hoped. She didn't want him anywhere near Hassan-i Sabbāh. She could try to protect him that much at least.

The brimming tears had set her eyes aching with unrequited sleep. It was a physical pain to the point where she felt that if she couldn't close them, she would die, and she didn't much care which came first. Nevertheless, she forced them to stay open...

She was woken by someone directing a sharp kick at the sole of her foot. She screamed. It was an Assassin, standing there, looking down at her with an expression of satisfied triumph. A second man was standing over Darius with the point of a scimitar weaving a little pattern about his throat. A third man was stretching for Brutus's reins. He never reached them. Instead, he suddenly subsided to the ground as

though seized by an urgent desire to forsake the mundane cares of the workaday world.

Attracted by the peripheral movement, the other two Assassins turned to stare. A moment later, they too had collapsed to the ground. All three were collected up, bound hand and foot and then comprehensively lashed back to back to each other.

Annabella laughed aloud with relief. With love. For a moment she was euphoric, then the blank desolation of her irreconcilable estrangement from Basil clamped back down round her heart.

Darius rose and picked up the scimitar which had fallen unregarded from the Assassin's hand. The sun had already set yet, exhausted, both he and Annabella had slept on. He took a moment to berate himself for allowing himself to surrender so completely to his fatigue, for not realising how far gone Annabella was and leaving her to fall asleep again herself, then he spoke.

"Basil, I presume?" he said to Annabella, and more largely: "Well met, sir."

"Darius. Lady Bright," a voice said, speaking formally.

"Well, you took your time, I must say," Annabella replied, desperately striving for some sort of normality, particularly in front of Darius.

"So sorry humble servant so slow," Basil retorted, but with a definite reserve, sufficient to make Darius look at Annabella with a quizzical expression.

"You followed the Assassins?" she asked. "I didn't dare call. I thought Hassan-i Sabbāh might be searching too, might be near..."

"Wise," Basil said. "He's jolly well flitting about here, there and everywhere. You're jolly lucky it was only this lot that found you."

"How did you know to follow these particularly?" Darius asked curiously. "Assassins must be spread all over the countryside by now."

"Oh, they are. They jolly well are... These three seemed to be following definite tracks, so I jolly well followed them..."

"And here you are," Annabella said, unable quite to disguise the emptiness inside her.

"So what are we going to do?" Darius asked to cut short a silence growing uncomfortable. "Flash bang wallop our way out of here? There are only two of us." Despite his present age, Annabella thought inconsequentially, Darius's memory was still fine. He had only ever once had the flash-bang experience to her knowledge. Or perhaps it was more a case of the event being so powerful that it was unforgettable.

"No," she said tiredly. "We can't do that."

"Why ever jolly not?" Basil demanded with some heat.

"You'll be cross with me," Annabella said. "Crosser..."

"Why not?" Darius said mildly. "It's the obvious thing to do, surely?"

"If we just disappear," Annabella said. "Hassan-i Sabbāh won't stop looking for me. And if we disappear, then there's only one place he can look. Back in my time. Vivienne is there. My parents are there. Darius is there. Darius your grandson..."

"Oh," Darius said.

"So unless we allow ourselves to be captured – which is something that certainly doesn't appeal to me..." Annabella went on. She looked inquiringly at Darius who shook his head with feeling.

"... Then we have to leave a trail. Hassan-i Sabbāh has to have something to follow."

"You're impossible..." Basil said angrily.

"I told you you'd be cross."

"Abso-jolly-lutely impossible. It must be a disease. A jolly incurable disease."

"A disease?" Darius, the doctor, said, intrigued.

"Being honourable," Basil spat. "Honourable and self-sacrificing and noble and jolly well impossible..."

"Sorry," Annabella whispered.

"You shouldn't be," Darius said, coming to her defence. "It's the thing I remember best about you and the thing I most admire about you." There was a long silence which Darius eventually felt obliged to break.

"So what are we going to do?" he asked. "Do you have a carpet, can we fly?"

"I do," Basil said. "But we can't. We'll be seen. Jolly well guaranteed. Even if we wait for nightfall. Too much moon. Too many people watching."

"And it doesn't leave a trail..." Annabella dared to say

"What then?" Darius asked.

"Wishes," Basil said. "I do wishes." Automatically falling into old patterns, Darius turned to Annabella with an inquiring look.

"We need to lose ourselves somewhere," she said hesitantly.

"The desert?" Darius said. "It's just over there, to the east, not far. Maybe ten leagues... Though they wouldn't think we'd dare with just that ugly horse..."

"Brutus is not ugly," Annabella tried to protest, but her heart wasn't really in it.

"... Not without supplies and guides," Darius went on. "Far too dangerous."

"But Hassan-i Sabbāh will know we have a djinni with us," Annabella said, thinking it through. She gestured at the captive Assassins. "And if there's a trail as well..." Darius nodded slowly.

"All right," Annabella said with decision. "We should go."

"Are you sure about this?" Basil demanded but Annabella made no reply and simply turned towards Brutus.

"Here," Annabella said. "This looks a good place." The trail in front of them had reached a flinty, stony stretch where only a very accomplished tracker would pick up sign of their passing. Without hesitation, Darius urged Brutus off to the left. The ground remained hard and stony for some considerable distance and they noted with satisfaction that they left very little trace.

"It will take them hours to realise we've left the trail, come back and pick up our tracks again," Darius said. "And when we get to the desert and there's no doubt about where we've gone, it would be good for Basil to brush them out altogether, for them to vanish..."

"As long as Hassan-i Sabbāh doesn't think we've gone back to the future..."

"It should be all right," Darius said. "They'll just think it's the wind, or something..."

Sinan was prostrate on the cold tiled floor of what had once been his personal chamber, uncertainly balanced on his belly. He was also abject with terror. The intricate pattern of the mosaic swam before his eyes. His hands were clammy and he could feel sweat trickling down his ribs to puddle around his naval. His great hams were quivering uncontrollably no matter how much he might clench them. Nevertheless, he managed to cling to a thread of hope, a shred of calculation, sufficient for him to stick obdurately to his story, a variation with just enough of the truth to save his expansive hide, if only he could sustain it...

... Unlike the rest of Castle Masyaf, he had watched the aerial battle only for the merest minute before returning to guard the prisoner, as presciently charged by his lord in his wisdom. Even so, he had only just been in time to see despicable captive and vile rescuer disappearing into the distance. Not waiting to summon help, to rush all the way back to the far end of the castle and so risk losing the two criminals altogether, instead, not wasting a second, he had raced to the stables and set off in hot pursuit. At the edge of the forest he had indeed come up with them but while judging the old man harmless and choosing instead to subdue the little minx, his lord's principal concern, he had laid himself open to a grievous blow to the head. Bakri Touma would bear him out. So grievous had been the blow that he was still unconscious and bleeding nigh unto death when at last discovered by others from the castle...

... He had failed his master shamefully. This he could not deny. He could only grovel for forgiveness and plead that he had done his poor best to safeguard the true interests of his lord. He had risked life and limb. He had suffered injury, severe injury. The fact that three of the castle's best operatives had themselves similarly been struck down testified to the unbounded cunning and ruthlessness of the quarry. The subsequent loss of the trail on the edge of the desert was further testament to this undeniable truth. He, Sinan, humble Sinan, knew not what more he could have done. His faults were many and manifest, but always he had sought, sought tirelessly, to act only as he conceived his grandmaster – dare he say, his beloved grandmaster – would wish...

Sinan's cringing was cut short with a wordless explosion and he was summarily ejected from the presence with the command "Find them!" resounding in his ears.

Outside, Sinan allowed himself a quavering sigh of deliverance. And find them indeed he would, he promised himself, even if he had to sift every grain of sand in Syria. Apart from anything else, there was the matter of the substantial sum of gold in his saddle bags purloined along with the horse and some particularly well-matured cheese.

Brutus hated the sand and Annabella could not find it in her heart to blame him. She hated it too. Night after night they had been slogging their way up dune and down

dale. The only way Brutus could be made to proceed at all was for Annabella to dismount and to lead him, cajoling and entreating every time he balked.

Both Basil and Darius had grown intensely irritated by the horse's reluctant progress, but perversely, the more they complained about him the more Annabella defended him. That moment by the pool when he had nudged her companionably had seeded a growing affection between them.

"Can't we use a carpet now?" Darius demanded rather petulantly at one point. The question made Annabella stop to consider.

They had decided early on that even with Basil back on the strength, Darius was in no physical condition to participate in the campaign against Hassan-i Sabbāh. That being the case, his best protection still lay with Saladin's army. Accordingly, the course they were following was a wide arc first to the south-east, then south and finally to the south-west, where they hoped they would emerge from the desert somewhere in the vicinity of whichever neighbourhood Saladin might then be inhabiting.

However, Annabella now realised that lost to the world in the desert, they were as safe as they were ever likely to be. As soon as they reached their notional destination, they – more particularly she – would again be vulnerable to detection. It might be weak, it might be downright cowardly, but the thought of having to face Hassan-i Sabbāh still with no way to combat him made her want to throw up with fear. It was a reckoning to be delayed absolutely as long as possible.

"No," she said almost involuntarily. "No carpet." Darius made to remonstrate, but something of what must lie behind Annabella's refusal came to him first. He subsided and so they continued to struggle along on foot. At least with Basil present there was no shortage of water, food and shelter.

The rigours of desert travel meant that Darius and Annabella had little spare energy for conversation while Basil, for his own reasons, was determinedly silent. All things considered, it was a thoroughly dour and unpleasant journey they were making, haunted the whole time by the one, unanswerable question: How could Annabella fight Hassan-i Sabbāh, how could she possibly destroy him? In addition, Annabella was constantly tormented by the unresolvable rupture between her and Basil. To feel as she did, knowing Basil felt as he did, was the most exquisite and refined of tortures.

In what had already become a fixed routine, Annabella emerged from the tent Basil had provided at dawn. She was still sleep-sodden and had eyes only for the ground at her feet as she headed for Brutus to give him his morning feed. Abruptly, there was a snick that rang sharp in the still, baking air. She stopped. It was the sort of sound that might be a sword hilt hitting home in its scabbard. Whatever it was, she shouldn't have heard it. There shouldn't have been anything to make it...

She raised her eyes and after a shocked moment realised their campsite was ringed by robed tribesmen, all mounted on finely sculpted Arabian steeds. They were Bedu, but Bedouin of the edge, not the deep desert where only camels could endure.

"Darius!" Annabella called, a panicky note in her voice. She and the tribesman stayed in frozen tableau until Darius, frowsty and irritated, poked his head out. A moment later, he was standing beside Annabella.

One of the Bedouin, indistinguishable from the others except for the fact that his horse was frankly magnificent, edged forward and stared them coldly up and down.

What do you think? Annabella asked Basil. Until now she had succeeded in resisting the temptation of speaking with him telepathically.

Could be jolly useful, Basil said after a hesitation.

How do you mean?

More camouflage... Lost in the crowd...

But how do I handle this... levitation? Annabella said, referring to a technique of persuasion that she and Basil had employed with great success in the past.

Best not if you can jolly well think of something else... Word travels fast and rumours of magic will jolly well race back to Hassan-i Sabbāh... Try them on hospitality. Bedouin are supposed to feed and lodge a stranger for three and a third days...

The bayt, the leader, finished his inspection and fixed his gaze on Darius.

"You trespass on my territory," he said coldly.

"Unknowingly," Annabella said. The bayt turned to her with an expression of contempt.

"I do not speak with children," he said dismissively. "Silence...! You trespass on my territory," he then repeated, which left Darius in a quandary. He was quite aware that Annabella, and thus Basil, were best fitted to deal with the situation but it seemed the bayt was determined to exclude Annabella from the conversation. Inspiration struck. He pointed to his mouth and shook his head. Annabella seized on the cue.

"I'm not a child," she said with automatic irritation, stepping forward. "And I have to do the talking." There was a long silence only broken by the occasional stamp of a horse's foot.

"Very well," the bayt said at last. "Yet it remains that you trespass on my territory. I against my brother, my brothers and I against my cousins, my cousins and I against strangers. It is the law. You are strangers."

"And as strangers we are entitled to hospitality for three and one third days," Annabella said firmly. The bayt paused. What the child said was true but on the other hand, times were hard, food was short, there was even less to spare than usual.

"You are strangers, yes," the bayt said, splitting hairs. "But not Bedouin strangers."

"Then leave us alone," Annabella said. "We touch nothing but the ground. We take nothing." The sheikh pointed at Brutus.

"That... animal... I will not call him a horse. That revolting animal must drink water. Our water. You must drink water. Our water. Else you could not be here."

Annabella's mind was racing desperately. How could she solve the conundrum of explaining that they provided their own supplies without exposing Basil? She thought Basil's wish to remain unsuspected overly cautious but with all the estrangement there was between them she had no intention of overriding his advice if she could avoid it.

However, there seemed no alternative. On the point of invoking him, her mind forming the words, she was suddenly seized by an idea.

"You insult my horse," she said. "My horse is worth two of yours..."

A murmur of incredulity went round the ring of tribesman. There were smiles of disbelief and some laughter.

"My horse drinks the wind," the bayt said. "Yours but breaks wind." There was delighted laughter at the sally from the rest of the men.

"He's worth two of yours," Annabella repeated doggedly, raising her voice to be heard. The bayt opened his mouth to reply but Annabella forestalled him.

"Put it to the proof," she said and, praying she was not making a huge mistake, added: "Harness them. My horse will pull two of yours backwards."

There was a roar of derision.

"You're afraid," Annabella said at the psychological moment, cutting through the noise.

"What will you wager?" the bayt was eventually forced to snarl.

"My horse against your horse," Annabella said.

"I would not take your horse if it were the last animal left alive in the world," the bayt said. "It shall be my horse against your lives." Annabella stopped short and could feel Darius boring holes in her back with his eyes. Yet, she thought, with a push from Basil Brutus could scarcely lose, and even if he did they would still be reasonably safe. She would still be able to deploy Basil, albeit against his wishes, but it would be a case of needs must.

"I accept," she said and added: *You can help Brutus can't you, if he needs it?*

Help? came the voice in her head.

Push...

Me? Push? Me push a horse? That horse?

Annabella hesitated. Why Basil should object to pushing a horse, she had no idea. She only knew that she was utterly miserable, overwhelmed by an array of forces all conspiring to destroy her, physically and emotionally.

Chapter 12

It took time to contrive a suitable harness and Annabella stood the while whispering in Brutus's ear. He had lowered his unfortunate, great head and was pressing it into Annabella's chest.

"At least, you're nice," she told him. At that moment, she felt Brutus was the one sympathetic being in the whole of the universe. "I don't know why Basil is so snarky," she went on. "I don't know if he'll help you or not." A thought struck her. "Maybe he just wants to get rid of me. Maybe he thinks that if you lose this it's an easy way out, that the Bedouin will tidy everything up for him..."

It was a measure of how desperately low Annabella's spirits had sunk that she could actually contemplate something that at any other time she would dismiss with impatient scorn. The strain of the past days, of being with Basil when it was plain that the last thing Basil wanted was to be with her, had reduced her to a shadow of her normal self-sufficient strength.

Darius watched less with concern than interest. He automatically assumed that however the situation played out Basil would provide whatever trump card was necessary, and after his initial disquiet at a wager involving their lives he had become a somewhat uninvolved spectator.

Eventually the preparations were completed and a tribesman came to lead Brutus to an arena formed by his fellows. Brutus, however, refused to cooperate. He planted his four feet immovably and it was only when Annabella reclaimed his reins and rubbed his nose that he would consent to come forward.

His competition, Annabella noted, were the two largest Arabians that the Bedouin could muster. She also noted that the bayt had declined to involve his own mount. Did that mean, Annabella wondered, that he was so contemptuous of the competition that he would not condescend to use his own horse? Or could it be that he actually had doubts and had no wish to damage his own stallion's reputation should things turn out badly?

Annabella stood at Brutus's head, soothing and gentling him as the three animals were teamed in opposition to each other. Then it was done. The three horses, connected by an improvised harness, were standing there, tense and uncertain, separated by three or four lengths, a line drawn in the sand halfway between them. The two Arabians had tucked in close to each other, as though for mutual support, their hindquarters presented to Brutus's. The two Bedouin handlers stepped back to the full extent of the reins. Annabella wondered whether she should do the same and then decided not to. Deliberately, she reached up and looped Brutus's reins over the saddle. She went back round in front of him, pulled his head down and following some instinct, put her nose against his, letting Brutus breathe her breath.

Impatiently, the bayt drew his scimitar and raised the sword aloft. Annabella stepped back a pace or two. There was silence, the complete, empty silence of the desert, devoid for the moment of all traces of man and beast. It seemed to last an eternity, then the sword fell.

A great roar went up from the ring of tribesman and the handlers hauled on the reins urging, their charges on. The two Arabians plunged forward. Automatically, as he felt the strain, Brutus locked his legs in resistance. For long seconds, the three animals were evenly poised then the sandy ground beneath Brutus's hooves began to crumble and give way. Slowly, inch by inch, Brutus was being drawn backwards towards the fateful line in the sand.

"Come on, Brutus" Annabella said quietly as she had done a thousand times over the past days. "Come on Brutus. Come to me..."

A tremor passed through his body and the huge muscles of his hindquarters bunched. Where before his legs had merely been locked, now he was actively exerting his great strength. He leaned forward into the harness, his skin quivering with the strain. Little by little, the seemingly inexorable slide slowed. Finally, just before Brutus's back feet obliterated the line, it stopped altogether, and held.

"Come on, Brutus," Annabella said in the same, quiet voice, that somehow penetrated the continuing roar of the spectators. "You can do it. Come to me."

Stressed as he was, Brutus still managed to lift his head towards her, again gathered his resources and with raw power, he began to do just that, determined to reach the small female person standing just in front of him, the only human who had ever been kind to him, who had ever treated him as more than just a machine.

All at once, it was over. The two Arabians suddenly lost all traction and with their balance failing, were forced back on their haunches, incidentally erasing the line. There was instant, shocked silence.

Did you do that? Annabella demanded.

Never jolly well touched him, Basil said. *I hate horses...* There was what might have been a puzzled tone to his voice.

She stood gently kneading Brutus's neck. "You really are a good horse," she said into his ear. "The best horse..."

Darius came to join her. He too was surprised.

"I could see Basil had nothing to do with that," he said wonderingly and paused. "You really do have a remarkable capacity to inspire love," he observed, speaking more to himself than to Annabella.

"You're supposed to be a mute," Annabella said, as much to divert him as anything.

"I don't think it matters," Darius said. "Not now." He turned to look at the bay, whose expression of blank astonishment was rapidly fading to one of dark anger at the realisation that under the terms of the wager his stallion was now forfeit.

"What you going to do?" Darius asked Annabella.

"What do you think I should do?" she said.

"Oh no. You don't get me like that. Whatever you decide will be fine by me."

Annabella gave Brutus one last stroke and stepped forward to face the bay.

"I think you owe me a horse," she said into the continuing silence, which had now changed subtly. There was a distinct hint of menace again in the air. "And I think you

think that rather than hand him over, it would be better just to cut our throats and leave us here..."

There was a shifting in the crowd and the air of menace changed to one of violence barely contained.

"But that..." Annabella continued. "That would not be honourable. That would not befit a warrior, or a leader. That would be cheating."

"You say," the bayt said.

"I do."

"Then you are more foolhardy than you are wise. I will not give my horse to a child."

"I am not a child," Annabella said vehemently. "And the horse is mine."

Lady Bright, I would advise some jolly caution, Basil intervened worriedly. It was a warning, however, that was scarcely necessary. The bayt had again ostentatiously unsheathed his sword.

"But..." Annabella went on. She was seemingly unconcerned but quaking internally. Even with the knowledge that Basil was on hand, facing down a desert chieftain in her depleted state was calling on all her nerve.

"But what?" the bayt was forced to ask in the end.

"I might consider an alternative."

"Which would be what?"

"That in exchange for keeping your horse, you allow us to travel with your tribe... We will pay..." she added, again at the psychological moment.

The Bedouin way of life was not one that Annabella over succeeding days could come to find appealing: on the one hand, the customs and courtesies were richly textured; on the other, basic existence was extremely primitive and subject to continual hardship.

The camp that she and Darius were taken to was a motley collection of some 15 buyuuts grouped around a small soak of dirty, semi-permanent water protected by overhanging rocks at the bottom of a dry wadi. The ground about the wadi was absolutely bare, picked clean of any suggestion of pasture by the tribe's herd of scrawny goats and pack camels.

She and Darius were shown a place a little apart where they might set up their own tent, which, with Basil still incognito, they had to do themselves, thoroughly ineptly. Annabella was conscious of a wave of contemptuous disapproval from the group of women and children who had assembled to inspect the new arrivals. At last, one of them could stand it no longer and came across. She was perhaps five or six years older than Annabella.

"I am Noora," she said with brisk disdain. "Let me show you." Annabella felt her hackles rising at the woman's tone, but then surrendered gratefully.

"Thank you," she said. "My... grandfather and I are new to the desert." Darius found himself suppressing a smile at Annabella promoting him to her grandfather. It kept things simple, he supposed.

"There," Noora said after bustling about. "That will do for now. We are leaving in the morning. The pasture here is exhausted. We must find food for the animals."

"Where will we go?" Annabella asked.

"That way," Noora said pointing vaguely south. "Our lands follow the edge of the desert."

Annabella and Darius glanced at each other. South was where they would have to go if they still intended to find Saladin's army. Finally, something seemed to be falling their way.

However, it was an opinion that Annabella quickly came to revise. Having sorted out the tent, Noora appointed herself tutor to Annabella in all things Bedouin, specifically the ways of Bedouin womanhood, with the unstated but clearly apparent goal of bringing her up to speed in the shortest possible time.

Goats and camels, for instance. Goats and camels had to be milked. Goats and camels had to be milked by the women. Annabella was a woman, well, sort of, possibly, maybe sometime in the future if Allah should prove sufficiently beneficent, though frankly – Annabella didn't mind if Noora spoke frankly? – Noora couldn't see any particular reason why Allah should choose to be at all beneficent in Annabella's particular case. Nevertheless, the animals still needed milking and Annabella was required to help.

It was not a success. The knack of squeezing the teat with thumb and forefinger to close it off from the udder and then rolling her fingers down it to expel the milk quite eluded her. Instead, she managed to tug painfully and the goat, in this case an already unwilling victim, not unnaturally objected, strenuously. Annabella didn't really think the amount of milk spilt all that significant in the larger scheme of things but from the vociferousness of the disapprobation heaped upon her by the ring of female spectators, it was clearly a disaster of the first magnitude.

Then Noora grinned and Annabella realised she was suffering yet another rite of initiation. Another school, another hazing. They began again and this time Annabella did manage to produce a few pathetic squirts to ironic applause. However, Annabella flatly refused even to attempt to milk a camel.

And try as she might, Annabella could only find the ceremony of the evening meal unfair to the point of being totally incomprehensible. The bayt and the three other most senior men would sit down on the ground to the food. When they had dined sufficient, their places would be taken by the four next in rank, and so on down the line until all the men had eaten. Whatever was left, whatever little was left, was then taken across to the women and children.

The first time she witnessed it, it was all Annabella could do not to explode with righteous indignation. She was only held in check by Darius planting a heavy foot on her own.

Bread was another impenetrable mystery. With food scarce to begin with and difficult to preserve, the Bedouin diet was extremely limited – bad luck if it happened that you didn't care for dried dates – and bread, as a result, was invested with great significance. However, no matter how scrupulous and careful she tried to be,

Annabella could never produce fetir batter at quite the right consistency and her attempts at actually cooking the flat rounds were universally awful. Even Basil was moved to comment.

Let's hope you find a jolly rich husband with lots of jolly servants, he remarked with unwitting cruelty.

Annabella had to fight not to burst into tears.

They travelled at the pace of the most recalcitrant goat and seemed to spend a great deal of time standing around. At one point, they encountered three strangers, Bedouin. They stayed for the evening meal, which meant there was even less for the women and children. Word filtered down along with what little food remained that Saladin had marched on Jerusalem and was determined to tear down the kingdom of the infidel Crusaders once and for all.

Discussing it, Darius and Annabella found they still had no better plan than to seek what protection the army might offer, and for which they were still headed approximately in the right direction.

For Annabella, however, the incident raised another question and she nerved herself to open a conversation with Basil. It was something she still would much prefer to avoid. They had said nothing to each other since the incident of the bread making and talking telepathically, intimately, loomed more and more an impossibility the longer their liaison languished.

I'm sorry to bother you, Annabella began formally. *But I need to ask something.*

No bother, Basil said. *Jolly well ask away.* To Annabella he sounded distant, a thousand miles distant, and totally indifferent.

You said word travels fast. Those people who were here last night... You haven't had to do any magic but a Bedouin tribe taking in two strangers, an old man and a girl and a very big horse... won't that... won't they...?

Yes.

How long?

Who can say?

That's not very helpful.

Best I can jolly well do.

So it's only a matter of time?

That's about the jolly size of it.

What am I going to do?

We, Lady Bright. We. But to Annabella, despite his words Basil sounded as disengaged as it was possible to be. She supposed she ought to consider them leaving the tribe, striking out on their own again, even chancing the carpet, but it was so difficult to summon the energy required. She felt herself clamped tight in a vice of apathy, quite unable to break free, unable even to want to. And as Darius now seemed content to maintain the status quo, in the end she did nothing.

The country they were passing through had changed character to hard, bare, stony ground with here and there a thicket of thorn bush and the odd tuft of grass. It was harsh country, unforgiving, unrelenting, uncaring, pitiless. To Annabella, it seemed perfectly matched to her interior desolation. She walked, she did chores, she ate minimally, she slept as circumstances dictated, but in a trance, divorced from reality, waiting. Waiting for the day Hassan-i Sabbāh should come for her again. She had no notion of what she could possibly do to prevent it, how she could possibly fight. In her own mind, if she hadn't actually surrendered to the inevitable, she was within a hair's breadth of it.

They passed a forlorn little heap of clothes, neatly folded lying between two stones, set apart about the height of a man.

"It's a grave," Annabella heard Noora tell Darius. "The clothes belonged to the dead man. They are left for any who might need them."

Annabella found herself envying such a simple fate. A clean death in the desert with some little good perhaps to come of it afterwards.

A child fell ill. At first it was a headache, then a fever. Darius was summoned, his status as a doctor having become known by some subtle alchemy. As he pulled aside the door flap to enter the tent, the child flinched from the sudden flare of light and cried out in pain. Swiftly, Darius knelt at the boy's side and with gentle fingers probed his neck. The tell-tale rigidity of the muscles meant only one diagnosis was possible.

"What is it?" Annabella asked. She had come with him to act as nurse if necessary. Darius hesitated, not willing to be specific before the audience of concerned women.

"What is it?" Annabella repeated, this time in English.

"A sickness of the brain," Darius said in the same language. "Avicenna has described it... In one of his books... The same symptoms..."

"Can you do anything?" Annabella asked.

"I will try," Darius said but his lack of conviction somehow communicated itself and one of the women, the boy's mother, first moaned and then set up a wail.

"I want you to go outside," Darius said, speaking again in the local dialect. "All of you," he added embracing the women with a glance. "This disease can pass from person to person..."

"So what about you...?" Annabella demanded.

"I am a doctor," Darius said quietly but in a tone that allowed no argument. "Now, out! All of you."

The bayt was standing at the entrance as they emerged.

"The boy is my son," he said, addressing Annabella.

"I'm sorry," Annabella said. "My grandfather will do what he can..."

"Can he drive out the evil spirit?"

Annabella was about to try to explain the difference between demons and disease, then shrugged. "I don't know," she said but the conversation, such as it was, had started a train of thought.

The boy died quickly and was buried before sunset as custom demanded. There was grief on the part of his mother and ritualised mourning, but contained, almost half-hearted. Life was cheap. In the desert, the life of a child was so cheap it weighed in the scales but a grain or two of sand. The tribe moved on in the morning, leaving behind a few rags lying between two stones placed pathetically close together.

Darius was clearly unwell. He sat slumped on Brutus, holding his head at an unnatural angle trying to ease his neck. It seemed the light was hurting his eyes.

"You've caught it, haven't you?" Annabella demanded.

"I'm all right," Darius said, but his teeth were chattering with fever.

He began to topple and Annabella was only just in time to break his fall and slide him with a rush to the ground. Until she took his weight, she hadn't realised how frail he had become with the hardship of the desert. She cried out but the front of the column kept moving at the same steady pace, while those coming behind simply divided in two and passed them by on either side, leaving a wide berth. Annabella saw Noora hesitate and then another woman grasp her firmly by the elbow, forcing her on. The message could not have been plainer.

As soon as the last of the column was hidden by the dust of its passing, Annabella put aside her own feelings and for the first time since joining the tribe began to function something like her old self.

"Basil," she said. "Please. This is an emergency. First, I need shelter for Darius. We must get him out of the sun. Then, I need help. I need Vivienne and Darius minor. You must go back and get them. Will you do that, please?"

"What has Darius got?" Basil demanded. "What if you get it? What if the others get it?"

"I don't know what it is," Annabella said impatiently. "I'm not a doctor. It might be meningitis. They were always warning us about stiff necks at school..."

"And if it is meningitis?"

"Then we'll have to be careful... The tent... Please, Basil... I need the tent... And vinegar for disinfectant..." Another idea came to her.

"Basil, tell Darius to research meningitis and to get whatever drugs we need. Tell him to break into a pharmacy if he has to. He can bring the drugs back with him, can't he? Even if they haven't been invented here yet...?" She paused. "Well?"

"I never jolly well thought of that," Basil said, an unreadable tone in his voice.

"So, please Basil... Speed. It has to be fast. If it is meningitis, I know there's not much time. I know that much at least. And you saw how quickly the boy died."

Chapter 13

For Darius, Darius minor, life in the 21st century was a constant, unending parade of bewildering, baffling and bedazzling wonders. Even the simplest things, hot and cold running water at the turn of the tap, for instance, never mind a flushing toilet, were mysterious marvels and, had he had a less inquiring and intelligent mind, Darius might well have been reduced to a permanent state of catatonic confusion. As it was, he was forced to rely on Vivienne for endless explanation. Torches, telephones, television, computers, cameras, karaoke, bikinis, bombs, bicycles... The list went on and on.

For her part, Vivienne was endlessly patient and rather to her own amazement resisted any temptation to flaunt her knowledge. She reminded herself from time to time how she might feel were their situations reversed and found herself enjoying the experience of seeing her world completely afresh. It really was all rather amazing when you came to think about it. And Darius was so gorgeous how could she not relish the task of introducing him to the delights of the modern world.

Darius, himself, understood how easy it would have been for Vivienne to heap condescension on belittlement and what started as gratitude for her forbearance quickly changed to something else. He began to appreciate Vivienne for her own sake, not just as Annabella's more or less inconsequential side-kick. Besides, the clothing of the day did help her stand-out features stand out marvellously well. A man couldn't help the most sincere admiration...

The Trans had never hesitated for a second. Vivienne and Darius would stay with them and it was simply not a matter open to discussion, only the possibility of causing deep offence should they refuse. Vivienne would share Kim-Ly's small room and Darius would sleep on a mattress in the storeroom. There was absolutely no obligation but if they were minded to be helpful Vivienne could help serve in the restaurant and Darius could make himself useful in the kitchen. Which, of course, the two were pleased to do.

When no further details of the mysterious events at Railbury Hall emerged, the media, as the media was constitutionally bound to do, quickly moved on to the next story. Publicly, at least, the hunt for the fugitives also apparently died away, but Vivienne was under no illusions and insisted that she and Darius must not venture outside for the foreseeable future. At first, she was nervous at even appearing in the restaurant and would scuttle in and out, head down and eyes averted. But when, after the first days, nothing untoward had occurred she slowly grew more confident until she was quite at ease and a favourite with the regular clients, particularly the other five or six Vietnamese inhabitants of the town who tended to congregate there. They could never get enough of the sly jokes effortlessly tripping off her tongue in their own language.

Vivienne had forgotten only one thing. Mrs Gordon also happened to be a regular at the restaurant and it was only a matter of time before she should walk through the door. Vivienne panicked on the instant and fled through to the back. She thought she had got away with it but Mrs Gordon had caught a glimpse of crisp, blonde hair and an unmistakable poitrine. For her own reasons, however, she said nothing, either at the

time, or later. The storms caused by Vivienne's dramatic return to the school had more or less calmed and Mrs Gordon found she had no wish to roil the waters anew.

She struggled with her conscience all that night and eventually came to the uneasy, not to say self-serving, conclusion that if Vivienne had successfully managed to evade the clutches of officialdom and to make her own arrangements then it was best both for Vivienne and for the school and perhaps even for the peace of mind of her adoptive parents to let well enough alone. She was aware that John and Maggie Crabtree had been subjected to the most intense of inquisitions and she was able to convince herself that it would be quite wrong to expose them to further anguish if Vivienne herself was still concerned to shield them.

In lieu of not being allowed outside to explore and when not required in the kitchen, Darius became addicted to the television, particularly to the daytime soaps, particularly to the hospital dramas. The glimpses of pseudo-medical treatment fired his imagination to the point of exploding and the odd documentary involving genuine techniques, say, open-heart surgery, sent him into such ecstasies that Vivienne and the Trans quite feared for the balance of his mind. His endless questions about what he had seen, which they could explain only in the vaguest terms, made them fear for the balance of their minds

In the end, Mr Tran was forced to slip some money from the cash register, trot down the street to a nearby bookshop and purchase a medical dictionary, plus anything else on the shelves of a vaguely medical nature.

"But," Darius said when presented with half a dozen tomes. "I can't possibly accept these. They are rare beyond belief and of incalculable value. They belong in an emperor's library. They must be worth a fortune."

It took strenuous efforts on the part of Vivienne and Kim-Ly to convince him that, on the contrary, in this world most books were in fact everyday items of no particular value other than for the information they might contain. Even then, Darius could only bring himself to accept them when Mr Tran declared that they were not a gift but payment in lieu of services rendered. Thereafter, Darius could barely be induced to show his nose, he devoured them so voraciously.

Vivienne was happy for him, happy that he could be so consumed as to forget the situation they had left behind them. She, however, could never set aside for more than a few minutes the fact that they had abandoned Annabella to who knew what fate. Time and again, she was on the point of phoning Annabella's parents, her parents. But time and again she would get to the last digit of their number and then stop.

What could she possibly say?

She confided in Darius.

"They're not really my parents, you see," she said to him one morning, sitting in the closed and empty restaurant. "The truth is, I hardly know them. They adopted me for Annabella's sake when we came back the first time." Darius looked surprised.

"I thought you really were sisters," he said. "Even though you look so different. You always gave me that impression."

"No," Vivienne said. "My real parents were killed in a car crash when I was small..."

"I don't have any parents either," Darius said quietly. "Not a car crash exactly... plague. I've been living with grandfather ever since I can remember, in grandfather's house..."

"So, you're an orphan too?" Vivienne asked rhetorically. The two looked at each other with fresh eyes. Given the strangeness of their situation and the happenings of their immediate past, a bond between them had inevitably begun to form. Somehow, all of a sudden, it now seemed significantly deeper. Vivienne reached out a hand on the table and Darius took it gently. Neither was prepared for or knew how to react to the powerful charge that passed between them. They started, literally shocked, and automatically recoiled.

Mrs Gordon had eventually managed to suppress all thought of Vivienne. Apart from anything else, she had convinced herself that she had undoubtedly been mistaken in the first instance. The girl she had seen just couldn't have been Vivienne. Mrs Gordon had caught only the merest glimpse after all, and when you thought about it logically, it was quite impossible for the rapidly disappearing silhouette to have been her prodigal pupil. So, the decision which had caused her such discomfort had actually been no decision at all. If she had not seen Vivienne Walker, then clearly no decision about what to do was required. Therefore, clearly, there could be no moral quandary, no dilemma, no guilt. And if there were still the faintest, niggling itch at the back of her mind, she had succeeded in persuading herself that really, she was quite comfortable with her logic and had rather better things with which to concern herself.

That was until she walked into her office one evening to take care of a last item or two before leaving for the day. She closed the door to be greeted by a voice, a male voice, a poncey, plummy voice.

"And a jolly good night to you, headmistress," the voice said. A wisp of smoke materialised and came to perch on the corner of her desk.

Mrs Gordon reared back.

"Oh no," she said, faintly.

"But yes," Basil said happily. "Jolly spiffing what? Old friends meet again..."

"Why?" she demanded.

"Vivienne," Basil said suddenly serious. "Darius. Where are they?"

"I... I have no idea," Mrs Gordon said.

"Oh dear," Basil said, not deceived for a moment. "Oh jolly dear, indeedy. How sad. For you. I shall have to make further jolly inquiries throughout the whole jolly school. What fun. What jolly japes... For me."

"The restaurant," Mrs Gordon blurted with sudden visions of hundreds of parents, thousands of parents, all descending on the school en masse to rescue their darling daughters from an institution, once of fine repute, which had clearly degenerated into an insane madhouse under her stewardship... All over the television news, as if that wasn't bad enough, and now this! A djinni! The publicity would scar the girls for life, ruin their reputations... Husbands would never be forthcoming...

"What jolly restaurant?" Basil said encouragingly.

"The Vietnamese restaurant in town," Mrs Gordon said, broken, surrendering abjectly. "There is only one. You can't miss it."

Vivienne dumped another pile of dirty plates on the bench beside Darius, who was elbow-deep in washing up. On past experience, he figured he had about another hour of scouring dishes before he could go back to scouring his books. At that particular moment, he was mentally rehearsing the procedure for dealing with a difficult breech birth. He smiled absently at Vivienne who returned a grimace. She found Darius's ability to withdraw into himself distressingly male and increasingly exasperating.

Was it that despite that moment at the table, he really wasn't interested, or was it that he was frightened, Vivienne wondered for the umpteenth time? And either way, what could she do about it? She had always regretted that matters between her and Darius's grandfather had ended so indecisively, and now that here she was being given a second chance, or the next best thing to it – or maybe even better – it all seemed to be slipping away again. Her displeased musing was rudely interrupted:

"Uplifting," Basil said quietly. "That's what it is, jolly uplifting. People happy in their work..."

"Basil?" Darius said, disbelievingly.

"About time!" Vivienne snapped simultaneously, her irritation of the moment and all her long-brewing anxiety together bubbling instantly to the surface. "Where's Annabella? What's happened to Annabella? Is she all right? Is she still alive, even? What am I supposed to tell her parents? Is she hurt? What have you done with her? Tell me..."

"I will, with pleasure," Basil said. "If you'll let me get a jolly word in jolly edge-ways... When I left, Lady Bright was jolly well in the pink. However..."

"What however?" Vivienne interrupted. "What are you not telling me? What's wrong?"

"Perhaps if you let him talk..." Darius said mildly, and most unwisely. Vivienne swung on him and was about to take his head off, when Basil intervened.

"Annabella is fine," he said baldly. "Your grandfather is not," he added to Darius. "He tended to a sick boy and now he is ill himself. Very ill. He will die unless..."

"Unless what?" Vivienne interrupted, quite unable to contain herself.

"Be quiet!" Darius ordered earning a frown from Vivienne. "Unless what?"

"Annabella says that she thinks he has meningitis. She says you must find out what drugs we need to treat it, get them from a pharmacy and take them back with us. There is very little time."

"It's complicated," Darius said. He had rushed off on the instant to return with a book in his hands. He pointed. "Cefo... tax... ime. The book says we need Cefotaxime."

"Whatever that is?" Vivienne said.

"An anti... antibiotic," Darius said, again hesitating over the unaccustomed word. "But it has to be given intravenously and I don't know how to do that..." He looked up and shrugged helplessly.

"There must be something else," Vivienne said. Darius bent his head back to the book.

"Cipro... floxacin," he said finally. "They use Cipro as a prophylactic... It might work..."

"What's a prophylactic?" Vivienne said thoughtlessly.

"Does it matter?" Basil interjected. "Whatever it is, it will jolly well be better than nothing." Vivienne blushed.

"How do we get it?" Darius demanded.

"Normally..." Vivienne said, recovering. "I think, normally you go to a doctor and a doctor decides what's wrong with you and writes a prescription. And you take that to a pharmacy. And the chemist sells it to you and tells you the dose and when to take it."

"The dose?"

"How much and how often," Vivienne said.

"Why does it matter?"

"Some drugs can be poisonous. Or if you don't take enough, they can make things worse."

"How do we find a doctor?" Darius asked. "Go to a hospital?" Despite the seriousness of the situation, he couldn't help a little eagerness creeping into his voice.

"No good," Vivienne said. "A doctor has to see the actual patient. No doctor will give us anything without seeing the patient."

"So we go to a pharmacy?"

"Same thing," Vivienne said. "A pharmacy won't give you anything without a prescription from a doctor."

"So what?" Darius said urgently.

"We'll have to jolly well take it for ourselves," Basil said.

"But the dose," Darius said. "I don't know the correct dose."

"Ring the poisons helpline," Vivienne said, now functioning rather more smoothly in the face of crisis. "Tell them the drug. Say you're worried the pharmacist might have got the prescription label wrong. Ask them what the maximum permissible dose is." Vivienne turned to Mr Tran who had come in on the conversation and was now standing by looking worried.

"May Darius use the telephone, please?" she asked, moving through the swing doors to the front desk as she spoke.

"But certainly," he said. Vivienne rifled through the phone book, punched the number and passed the receiver to Darius. Their hands brushed and again, a current sparked between them. The receiver was dropped in the confusion and the ringing tone came up at them hollowly from the floor. They stared at each other for a moment before Darius quickly bent and Vivienne moved back into the kitchen with Mr Tran following.

"Let me introduce you to Basil," she said to him. "You know, the djinni we told you about." She indicated the wisp of smoke drifting before them. They could hear the murmur of Darius's voice outside.

"And Basil," she continued. "I would really appreciate it if we could do something nice for Mr and Mrs Tran..."

"What would you jolly suggest?" Basil asked, for once disposed to cooperate with Vivienne.

"Well, a dishwasher would be good, a big, industrial one. Over there, say." She pointed to a vacant area near the sink. "With plumbing. Don't worry. It's all been invented already," she added reassuringly. "And they really need a big new range for cooking." She pointed to the much-abused and exceedingly temperamental existing item which was the bane of Mr Tran's life.

"Anything else?" Basil asked, still with his cooperative voice on.

"A walk-in refrigerator?" Vivienne said with an inquiring look at Mr Tran. "Partition the pantry?" Mr Tran nodded enthusiastically. There was a sort of shimmer that continued for some seconds and at the end of it, when their eyes could focus again, they saw the restaurant kitchen had been transformed from something decrepit and barely usable to state-of-the-art. For as well as providing the fine new equipment, Basil had taken it upon himself to replace the worn bench surfaces and fascias with brushed stainless steel and the tired old flooring with new black rubber.

Mrs Tran came in at that moment and stopped short, staggering a little. Mr Tran went over to his brand-new range and stroked it lovingly. His eyes were shining. Mrs Tran turned questioningly to Vivienne.

"A little thank you," Vivienne said. "For being so kind to us. From our friend Basil."

Kim-Ly, who had been seeing out the last of the night's clientele, peered in through the swing doors. She too was astonished.

"Ah," Basil said. "The young lady of the jolly old house, I divine." And without being asked, he drifted towards her. A moment later, Kim-Ly was staring in amazement at the delicate jade bracelet now circling her wrist.

Darius, oblivious to all that had been going on, pushed past Kim-Ly. He had a piece of paper in his hand.

"I think I know what to do," he said. "Where do we find a... pharmacy?"

"A pharmacy?" Mr Tran said. "There's one in the next block. But it will be closed."

"All the better," Vivienne said. "We have to go now. We have to leave. We'll never forget what you've done for us. We'll try to come back and say thank you properly."

Instead of risking the front way, Vivienne and Darius used the back lane and then at about what they thought would be the right point, darted up an alley through to the street. They had guessed correctly. The pharmacy sign blinked at them from a few doors away.

"Can you get us in?" Vivienne asked Basil.

"Can a jolly old fish jolly well swim?" Basil retorted, affronted.

"Well...?" Vivienne said invitingly.

She and Darius waited a minute then slipped along the pavement. At the pharmacy, they paused and then Vivienne pushed at the door. It opened as promised, but Basil had not been nearly as clever as he might have been. At the same instant, the clangour of a burglar alarm rent the air. The two stood rooted in shock.

Vivienne was the first to react.

"Quick," she said. "Inside. We don't have long. The police will be coming."

The pharmacy was a big one with stand after stand of every conceivable item of hygiene from toothpicks to toilet brushes. The prescription drugs were arranged in partitioned shelves along the back wall behind the bulwark of a high counter.

"There," Vivienne said, pointing in the helpful glow provided by Basil. They rushed down the aisles.

"Let's hope it's alphabetical," Vivienne said as they went. "Or we'll never find it in time."

It was. Her hand went straight to it. Cipro. Suddenly, above the continuing racket of the burglar alarms, they could hear sirens, rapidly approaching.

"Take it all," Darius said, stuffing boxes down the front of his shirt.

"We can't just steal," Vivienne said. "We have to leave money. Please, Basil..."

A stack of bills appeared on the counter. They could hear footsteps outside, pounding towards them.

"We have to go," Vivienne said. "Right now..."

When the police burst through the open door, batons at the ready, expecting drug thieves, they found no one. They had been patrolling nearby and had taken less than a minute to arrive. They had seen no one leave, there was no one in the street, the other entrance was still locked and barred, yet the place was empty. They searched the premises diligently several times, every conceivable hiding place. Still there was no one. All they found was an empty partition in the Cs and a stack of money on the counter.

And of the many mysteries sparked by the incident, the most abiding was the fact that the money they found, much to their puzzlement, was totally unfamiliar. Indeed, it was not until next day that they finally managed to identify it as Dong. They were not to know that Basil had been in mischievous Vietnamese mode at the time.

The solitary black tent, a traditional Bedouin buyuut woven from goat and camel hair, was the only feature in the dismal landscape. A hobbled horse standing patiently with his back to the persistent wind raised his head to inspect them with only cursory interest. To Vivienne and Darius the scene was utterly desolate, lonely to the point of desperation. They stood outside the entrance and looked at each other with exactly the same expression: guilty concern. What had they left Annabella to cope with on her own?

"Hello," Vivienne called tentatively. "Anyone there...? Annabella?"

"Vivienne?" came a voice. "Have you got Darius? Have you got the drugs? Quick..."

With another look at each other, Vivienne and Darius pushed their way inside. Darius's grandfather was lying pale and rigid on a pallet, covered with a woven blanket. In the dim light he looked to be dead.

"Can he still swallow?" Darius said urgently. "He has to be able to swallow..." He produced a box of tablets as he spoke. "Two of these..."

"I don't know," Annabella said. "Can we crush them up? To make it easier...?"

Darius looked around wildly for something to use. A moment later he was holding a pestle and mortar. He squatted down and ground up the pills.

"Water..." he said. A cup appeared. Darius carefully spilled the contents until there was only a mouthful left. He added the powder and moved to his grandfather. There was a flicker of recognition but Darius major was quite unable to bend his neck or raise his head. Annabella and Vivienne had to lift and support his torso while Darius poured the medicine into his mouth.

"Did he swallow?" Annabella asked anxiously.

"I think so," Darius said. "But will it work?" He put a hand to his grandfather's forehead. "He's burning up," he added.

"We have to sponge him then," Vivienne said. "It's what he did for Annabella when she was wounded..."

Twenty-four hours later, it seemed that the Cipro was indeed proving effective and that the crisis might have passed. Dari – they had decided that two Dariuses was quite impossible, and that Darius major and Darius minor was so thoroughly unwieldy that Darius minor would have to become Dari – Dari sat back on his heels, passed a hand wearily over his face and spoke quietly, almost to himself:

"I think he's improving. At least, he's stopped getting any worse..."

"You should rest then," Annabella said. She and Vivienne had taken it in turns to snatch an hour or two of sleep – in fact, Vivienne was dozing now – but Dari had refused to leave his grandfather's side.

"I can't," Dari said. "Not while he's like this. He needs proper nursing..."

"Thanks very much," Annabella said, but without any sting.

"I didn't mean that," Dari said tiredly. "You know I didn't mean that. I mean he needs proper nursing like you have in your... world. Like I saw on TV."

"I know," Annabella said, embracing both points. "But where can we get it? We can't go to Damascus... Hassan-i Sabbāh's spies will know directly we get there..."

"Where is Saladin?" Dari said. "We could go to the field hospital. It would be better than this... More chance..."

"Jerusalem, I think," Annabella said, remembering the encounter with the strange Bedouin. There were some people a while back who said he was marching to besiege Jerusalem."

"Would Basil mind checking, do you think?"

"A pleasure, old boy," Basil said while Annabella was still working out how to address him. She felt again the familiar stab of pain.

"There's just one thing," Annabella said. Basil had returned with the news that Saladin was indeed at Jerusalem and they were preparing to depart. "We can't leave Brutus. He'll die..."

"But..." Vivienne began.

"... How can we?" Dari finished.

"Basil...?" Annabella demanded. "I'm not leaving him..."

"What do you jolly well expect me to do?" There was a long silence. Dari shifted impatiently.

"We have to go," he said at last, irritated. "The sooner we get grandfather to hospital the better his chances."

"I'm not leaving without Brutus," Annabella repeated adamantly. "I'm not leaving him to die of thirst in the desert. I'm just not..." Vivienne and Dari looked at each other with exasperation. Why Annabella should be so concerned about an ugly great horse quite eluded them, not when Darius's life hung in the balance.

"Basil," Annabella said, pointing. "That's your father's carpet. It means you must have your own carpet available..."

"What?!" Basil ejaculated.

"A trailer," Annabella said remorselessly. "A horse float..."

"No," Basil moaned. "One syllable, two letters, N jolly O..." Despite the urgency of the situation, Vivienne gave a sudden gurgle of laughter.

"A horse float," she said. "Or in this case a floating horse. Basil how can you resist?"

"Beeswax," Basil said, surrendering to the inevitable. "Beastly, beastly beeswax. And if he makes a mess on my carpet I'll never jolly well forgive you..."

They came over the Judean mountains, flying high in the moonless night. Darius was lying on his pallet, which they had laid in the aisle between the armchairs. He was deeply asleep, comatose, exhausted by the battle that raged within his body. A second carpet was following tight behind, bearing a large, humped shape, Brutus, whom Annabella had induced to lie down, and who was now tightly tethered, with his legs bound and his eyes blindfolded.

"There," Basil said at large. "That ring of watch fires... The jolly old walls of jolly old Jerusalem."

"So that must be Saladin's army," Annabella said, pointing to a haphazard conglomeration of campfires off to one side, flowing down the sides of a valley.

"Where is the hospital?"

"Along the bank of the stream, of course," Basil said, still peeved and upset about the use to which his own personal carpet had been put. "Where else would you jolly well expect?"

They came down well away from prying eyes. Brutus was freed, all unaware that he had just made horse history, and harnessed with a travois provided by Basil. Dari, Vivienne and Annabella gently lifted Darius across. The carpets vanished and they set off for Saladin's camp along the bank of the stream.

After the initial shock and surprise, Darius was smoothly absorbed into his own hospital, Dari going with him bearing supplies of the wondrous drug he had brought and to give instruction on how to administer it. Simultaneously, Brutus was removed to the horse lines by an officious groom. Vivienne and Annabella were left, standing awkwardly alone.

"Well," Vivienne said. "I don't know about you, but I'm starved..."

Annabella laughed and arm in arm, the two girls went off in search of the cook tent, quite unaware that the whole of their unorthodox entrance had been observed with avid interest by someone they had no cause to remember with anything but extreme repugnance.

Tired as they were, Annabella and Vivienne found food energising, and they began to swap stories. Hours later when Dari joined them, they had just about talked themselves out. Dari looked exhausted.

"He's better, a bit," Dari said. "Grandfather, I mean..." The girls smiled indulgently. As if they had been in any doubt... It was good news all the same. Without a word, Vivienne rose and went back to the cooks, busy baking bread for the morning. Again she exercised her charm and returned a few minutes later with another platter of food.

"I don't know what to say," Dari said.

"Thank you will do just fine," Vivienne said.

"I mean about everything. If it hadn't been for you and for Annabella, grandfather would be dead."

"Thank you will do just fine," Vivienne and Annabella repeated in unison, and Vivienne touched Dari briefly on the shoulder. He smiled back shyly.

"Thank you," Dari said, his attention fixed on Vivienne. "Thank you, thank you, thank you..."

Oi, oi, Annabella couldn't help thinking. Not again...

Chapter 14

Guiscard, Sir Robert that was, formerly of the Templars, was lying wakefully on his pallet when he heard the sounds of subdued commotion from further down the row coming through the thin cloth wall of his tent. He paid it no mind. Commotion in the environs of the hospital was not unusual. Then he heard a voice, voices, that sounded familiar. Curious but careful not to rouse any of the other occupants of his ward, he crept to the doorway.

By the light of torches, he could make out someone on a horse stretcher being fussed over by doctors and orderlies. Whoever it might be was eventually transferred to a litter and borne away, leaving two figures standing there, two figures whom Guiscard was almost certain he knew. Then one spoke to the other and her voice carried clearly.

"... I'm starved..." she said, and there could be no doubt. It was that juicy blonde piece, the one who had brought about his downfall. Guiscard was on the point of rushing headlong after them, intent on settling scores, when for once, caution and common sense restrained him. His position, a Crusader renegade in the Saracen camp, was already sufficiently precarious that he could afford no additional scandal.

The valuable intelligence he had ferried across the lines at great peril, news of the dire straits of the Crusader army after the dawn prelude to the Battle of Hattin, had been welcome enough, but he was soon given to understand that he himself was less so. Proven traitors, once their offerings have faded from fickle memory, are never treated with anything but deepest distrust.

The four other renegades who had seized the moment and followed his example had each quickly fallen by the wayside, dead of a variety of causes which, when parsed, all bore an uncanny resemblance to an accidental knife in the ribs. The first had died shortly after Guy, no longer king, had been dispatched in convoy to captivity in Damascus. The second had lasted less than half the march to Jerusalem. The third and fourth had both found surcease during the first abortive attacks on the walls, whereupon Guiscard, taking advice from his well-developed sense of self-preservation, had found it expedient to come down with an attack of diplomatic dysentery and seek refuge in the hospital. And as of this moment, he had absolutely no idea of where he might go next or what he might do, hence his wakefulness.

More for distraction than anything else, he slipped out of his tent and impulsively followed the two girls, keeping to the deepest shadows. They went into the cook tent and Guiscard gliding past the entrance, turned down the side, listening intently. He heard them request food and then, voices lower, settle down to talk. Noiselessly, he crept closer until just an arm's length away and separated from them only by the thin cloth of the tent, he could hear every word. Much of what they said was gibberish beyond comprehension in a language he had never heard before and what little they did say in Arabic was strange beyond belief, but Guiscard was able to glean one essential fact. The two girls, and the boy off somewhere in the bowels of the hospital, were being sought, urgently sought, by the Assassins of Castle Masyaf.

The thought "bowels of the hospital" brought a tremor to Guiscard's own bowels and he suddenly found himself making yet another emergency dash to the latrines. To render his diplomatic dysentery convincing, he had been nibbling at a certain root well known to Crusader men-at-arms inclined to malingering. Seized now with cramps, Guiscard was simultaneously seized with an idea, a brilliant idea. He would cease ingesting the root forthwith, he resolved, and he would take this nugget of information so providentially presented to him by those termagant girls to Castle Masyaf itself, where, mayhap, it might indeed be converted into a real nugget, a golden nugget. As a plan, it had two signal virtues: it would save his presence from inevitable and most untimely termination in the Saracen camp and it promised to go some way at least to repairing his fortunes.

Paying less than scrupulous attention to his personal hygiene, Guiscard made haste to take advantage of what night remained. Slinking his way between the rows of tents, he crept to the horse lines and paused in a patch of deep shadow to take stock. He was in luck. Closest to him, right at the end of the rank, there was a great ugly brute of a gelding that surely no one could be particularly sorry to lose, and better still the horse's saddle had been left lying on the ground beside it. Evidently, it was the animal associated with the recent arrival of the travois, and the groom had delayed a decision about what to do with its tack for the morning.

Taking one last precautionary look, Guiscard hoisted the saddle on to the gelding's back and slipped silently off into the night. His passing went unmourned and completely unremarked.

Some small way to the north, Sinan shifted restlessly on the unyielding ground of his campsite. For one thing, after weeks of hard riding and indifferent rations, he had rather less padding than he was accustomed to – indeed, his figure had sadly diminished from frankly obese to merely corpulent – and for another, at least three of the squad about him were routinely given to shameless snoring.

That Sinan would subject himself to such acute and continuing discomfort spoke volumes for his crippling fear of Hassan-i Sabbāh. While the immediate trail of the two fugitives, the girl and the old man, had faded out at the edge of the desert, Sinan had determined that his only hope of safety lay in continuing the hunt and thus putting as much distance as possible between himself and Hassan-i Sabbāh. Besides, there was the slight matter of his stolen gold. Over Bakri Touma's hysterical protests, he had delegated himself personally to lead the search and had been chasing will o' the wisps up and down the borderlands ever since.

Eventually he had come to the conclusion that the two escapees had undoubtedly perished of thirst, which then posed the question: how could he possibly convey this to his master and not fall victim to what would doubtless be a terrible retribution. In lieu of an answer, he had continued to ride hither and yon in increasing desperation. It was then that he encountered three Bedouin travellers, fresh from the desert, who in exchange for a meal had definite, blessedly concrete news of his quarry. They were travelling south attached to a Bedouin tribe. Sinan, allowing the first ripples of hope to skitter across the dark despond of his mind, immediately turned south himself.

Further news of his quarry, however, there was none and as the sun continued to rise and set remorselessly, Sinan again sank into despair. From time to time, a courier from Castle Masyaf would seek him out, demanding a progress report, and Sinan's replies, of necessity, became more and more inventive and less and less believable. He knew it could only be a matter of time before he was summoned to another accounting, an accounting he could not reasonably expect to survive. Even the fact that the caravan bearing a most particular inventory from Castle Alamut had finally arrived safely would do nothing to mitigate his fate.

Dawn broke and Sinan found himself pondering whether to continue on to Jerusalem in the vain hope of picking up traces of his most elusive prey, or whether simply to accept the inevitable, return to Castle Masyaf and get it over with.

His rather frantic reflection was interrupted by the realisation that the dawn chorus in the grove about had suddenly ceased. Then he picked up the sound of an approaching horse. A moment later, it blundered into the campsite. Sinan shouted and true to their training, his men came instantly alert. Seconds later they had wiry hands on the animal's bridle and swords at the rider's throat.

Sinan rolled to his feet and moved forward to inspect their catch. With a start, he realised that he recognised the horse, more, that he recognised the saddle, and most especially, that he recognised the saddlebags. Without a word, he stepped forward and hefted one. It was still satisfyingly heavy. The beginnings of a smile began to play about Sinan's bulbous lips. At last his luck seemed to be turning, a little at least.

Guiscard, formerly Sir Robert Guiscard, Knight Templar, strained against his bonds and watched with angry disbelief as the fat man, the very fat man, removed a handsome sum in gold from the saddlebags, Guiscard's saddlebags in fact, possession being nine tenths of the law, never mind that he had been quite unaware he had literally been sitting on a fortune. The fat man counted the coin with every sign of intense satisfaction and poured it into a pouch which promptly disappeared within the voluminous robes that swathed his person.

"So," the fat man said amiably. "You will now tell me what you are doing with my horse, my saddle and my gold. And you will tell me where you got them and most importantly who you got them from."

"No," Guiscard said. All that remained to him in the world was his armour, now stripped from him, his sword, now lying discarded on the ground, and the information he had acquired at the hospital, which he was still determined to sell, little realising that his only potential customers were right then preparing to hold a flaming brand to his bared feet.

It was a messy business, one that Sinan found extremely enjoyable, a fine and necessary release from the tensions that had so gripped him these past weeks. For some time – Guiscard for all his faults was a tough and seasoned campaigner – there was only a great deal of very bad language. Then the screaming began. And finally, the talking, the confession. In the end, Guiscard, as Sinan had known he would be, was delighted to tell them everything he knew and was desolate that he didn't know more, quite abject, inconsolable.

Just for the pleasure of it, Sinan signalled for the burning brand to be applied anew while he savoured the symphony of sorrow it produced. At last he drew a finger across his throat and a knife was drawn across Guiscard's. Sir Robert finally found the lonely and shameful death he had sought to avoid so assiduously throughout his life. Sinan, for his part, busied himself composing a message in minute script which he then laboriously copied out all over again. The tiny scraps of parchment were attached to the feet of two carrier pigeons.

He was probably being over-cautious sending the message twice but hawks were very troublesome this time of the year and this was one missive he was determined should arrive safely.

Saladin's siege of Jerusalem had reached a critical juncture. In the first instance weary of bloodshed, Saladin had offered Balian of Ibelin, who by default had succeeded to command of the city, terms of surrender and ransom. These had been rejected as extortionate, whereupon Saladin had invested the city, attacking the Tower of David and the Damascus Gate. It had not gone well, not for the Saracens. Casualties had been heavy while the Crusaders had lost relatively few men.

Saladin had next shifted his point of attack to the walls before the Mount of Olives, walls that had no sally port from which defending forces could emerge to beat back the Saracen engineers. The ramparts were duly mined and duly collapsed but the few Crusader knights remaining in the city defended the resulting breach with such staunch and resolute resistance that the result was stalemate, so long as any of the knights should survive. However, inevitably they were being picked off one by one.

When it was clear that eventually the city must fall when the last of the knights did, Balian took it upon himself to inform Saladin that failing the revision of terms of surrender to a reasonable sum, he was prepared to slay every Muslim hostage in the city, all 5,000 of them, and to destroy every Muslim monument. The haggling then began in earnest.

Unaware of the momentous events that had been taking place in the world, Annabella slept late and woke to a sense of change, of renewal. For a long time, she was content to lie in the corner Dari had found for them, listening to the morning bustle of the hospital and thinking. Her sojourn in the desert had been a long fallow period, a period of apathy, of misery. Enough, she told herself. It can't go on. Clearly, the situation with Basil was untenable – apart from the business with Darius, they had barely spoken for what seemed a lifetime – which left only one alternative.

As she lay there, Annabella realised that her long melancholy had been a necessary prelude, a preparation, for what she must do.

"No time like the present," she murmured aloud. Beside her, Vivienne stirred but didn't wake. Annabella took a deep mental breath

Basil, she said in a quiet, firm voice. *I want you to go. To go away. It's time.*

There was a long silence.

Basil? Annabella said.

What do you mean? Basil said eventually. *Go away?*

Just that. You don't want to be here. And I don't want you here. There was another lengthy pause.

But there's a reason I have to stay, Basil said at last. *Or have you jolly well forgotten?* His voice was unreadable.

No, Annabella said. *I haven't forgotten. That's silly. How could I forget? But there's nothing you can do about Hassan-i Sabbāh. We know there isn't. If you try, you'll just end up a prisoner in a bottle again.*

You want me to go? Basil repeated. He suddenly seemed totally flummoxed.

Yes, Annabella said.

But why, Lady Bright? Why?

Because I can't stand things the way they are, Annabella said. *Not any more. You know how I feel and...*

And what? Now, Basil sounded angry, demanding, barely in control. It was Annabella's turn to fall silent.

And what? Basil insisted.

I can't bear us being like this. I'd rather...

You'd rather what? he shouted.

Die, Annabella said baldly. *I'd rather die.*

And you will. If you do this, you will certainly die. Basil was absolutely beside himself. Had Annabella been less concerned with maintaining her own composure it might have occurred to her to wonder why Basil should be so upset. As it was, she was totally consumed by the need to hold firm.

Go, she said in the smallest of voices. *Just go. Please...*

No! No!

Go. Go now...

Vivienne yawned and rolled over.

"Why are you crying?" she asked. "Annabella, what's wrong?"

"I'm not," Annabella said. "I'm not crying."

"You are," Vivienne said. "I'm not blind. What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"It's Basil, isn't it?" Vivienne said with sudden intuition. "What's he done this time?"

"Nothing," Annabella repeated, struggling to keep control. She failed and began to sob, hugging herself tight. Vivienne folded her into her arms.

"Basil!" she said angrily. "Where are you? I want to talk to you." There was no answer.

"Basil!" Vivienne repeated.

"He's gone," Annabella whispered.

"Gone! Gone! How dare he? Wait till I..."

"I made him go," Annabella said. "I sent him away..."

"But..." Vivienne began and then fell silent as she began to absorb the implications. Annabella, meanwhile, quieted and began to pull herself together.

"Why?" Vivienne asked at last.

"I love him," Annabella said simply.

"And you sent him away...? Annabella, sweetheart, that doesn't make sense..."

"He doesn't love me."

Again there was silence. Twice Vivienne opened her mouth to speak. Twice she closed it again.

"Has he really gone?" she ventured at last.

"Yes," Annabella said.

"Hassan-i Sabbāh...?" Vivienne mouthed more than spoke.

"It makes no difference," Annabella said. "Not to that. Basil doesn't know what to do about him any more than I do, and Basil can't even fight him. Not when Hassan-i Sabbāh has the ring."

"What are we going to do? What are you going to do?"

"Wait," Annabella said. "I'm going to wait here with Darius. But..."

"What but?"

"I want Dari to take you away. Somewhere safe."

"No," Vivienne said without the slightest hesitation.

"Yes," Annabella said. "Don't argue with me V. Darius can't travel and I can't leave him. But Dari can get horses. You can escape. Together."

"But what about you? You and Darius? What's going to happen to you?" Annabella shrugged.

"I have no idea," she said grimly. "Nothing good."

"I can't leave you," Vivienne insisted. "And you were the one who said Hassan-i Sabbāh would want me, too. There's no point in me trying to get away. You said so yourself."

"Maybe not," Annabella said. "But maybe, just maybe, if he has me and Darius to play with, he'll forget about you. It's the best I can think of."

The girls fell silent and were still sitting there, staring into space, when Dari found them. He looked buoyant.

"Grandfather is much better," he said before either could speak. "Thanks to your wonderful antibiotics... Still very weak but the fever has gone. He can speak. His neck is better and he can open his eyes without pain. What's wrong...?" he asked, eventually picking up on the air of deep gloom into which he had walked.

"Can Darius travel?" Annabella asked.

"Of course not," Dari said, surprised. "I told you, he's very, very weak. He nearly died. He won't be able to travel for... I don't know how long. Weeks. Why? Why do you ask?"

"Then I'll stay here with him," Annabella said. "But I want you to take Vivienne somewhere safe."

They argued for hours, back and forth, round and round, but there was no changing the inescapable facts of the situation:

Rightly or wrongly, Basil was gone and even if still present, could do little or nothing to counter Hassan-i Sabbāh.

For his part, Hassan-i Sabbāh had kidnapped Darius from the field hospital once already, therefore they must assume that sooner or later Hassan-i Sabbāh would be informed by whatever means that Darius had returned to the hospital.

Inevitably then, it could only be a matter of time before Hassan-i Sabbāh reappeared.

Darius was unable to travel and would remain totally vulnerable until he recovered sufficiently to allow him to vanish.

He could not be left alone.

Indubitably Annabella was Hassan-i Sabbāh's prime target. It was thus reasonable to assume that if Hassan-i Sabbāh should reappear while Darius was still incapacitated, and that if Darius and Annabella were taken captive, Hassan-i Sabbāh would be sufficiently diverted, at least in the short term, for Dari and Vivienne to have time to flee to some sort of safety.

Therefore, in summation, without prejudice, all things considered, ipso facto and q.e.d., clearly Annabella should stay with Darius while Dari and Vivienne took off for parts unknown. And it would be best, Annabella decreed, that she should have no idea where they might be going for fear that she might be induced to reveal the information.

"Torture?" Vivienne demanded. Annabella shrugged.

"If I don't know where you are, I can't tell anyone..."

"Which is all very well," Vivienne retorted adamantly. "Except I'm not going anywhere."

"Nor me," Darius added.

"I thought you were my friends," Annabella replied quietly. "I thought you were my sister," she added pointedly to Vivienne.

"We are. I am," Vivienne said. "That's what I'm trying to tell you..."

"And yet, you want to heap another ton of guilt on to me," Annabella said, genuine bitterness creeping into her voice. "How do you think I feel? Being the cause of all this? How do you think I feel, knowing what will happen to Darius, what might happen to you? You can't put that on me, too. You just can't, Vivienne."

"But..."

"If you really care for me, if you really want to help, you'll stop arguing and just go. Now. Before it's too late."

Vivienne looked helplessly at Dari. He was the only one of them who had ever seen Hassan-i Sabbāh in his present terrifying incarnation and as yet he had kept silent. There had seemed no point in describing that briefest of glimpses he had caught in the moonlight, rather the reverse. It crossed his mind now to attempt to dissuade Annabella by feeding her fear but the thought died stillborn. He knew Annabella well enough by now to know she could never allow it to influence her, that it could only

add to her burden. He shrugged and after a long moment when nobody spoke, got to his feet.

"I'll go and do some organising," he said. "But Vivienne, there must be some way to change her mind..."

"There isn't," Annabella said. "This is the right thing to do. The one right thing..."

"Annabella," Vivienne said when Dari was out of earshot. "It's all very well for you to tell us to go away, but where? And how are we supposed to live?"

"I don't know where," Annabella said. "And I told you, I don't want to know..." But Vivienne had a fair point. How were they supposed to live? The question sparked a memory. Brutus, or more particularly Brutus's saddle bags. Annabella had been forced to dole out a little of the money to bribe the Bedouin tribe, but the bulk of it remained.

She led Vivienne to the horse lines but Brutus, his saddle and the saddlebags, had all disappeared. The grooms could only spread their hands apologetically. Annabella believed their regret to be genuine but what the theft of Brutus might mean was impossible to speculate.

"Well, someone now has a fair fortune," Annabella said. "I wonder if they realise...?"

"Annabella!" Vivienne said crossly.

"Darius must have money," Annabella said, finally realising the obvious. They turned again to head back the way they had come only to meet a quickly building stir of excitement. People were popping out of tents and gathering in groups. Here and there, there was even the odd outbreak of cheering.

The girls looked at each other in puzzlement but then the news swept over them too, spreading with the magical osmosis that is the way of these things. Terms of surrender had been reached. The city had fallen. Jerusalem was no longer the citadel of the Crusaders.

For a moment, Annabella wondered if she should be feeling something, but she found she was completely indifferent. No doubt it was disastrous for the population of Franks, the majority of whom could expect to be sold off into slavery while even those fortunate enough to be able to pay ransom would lose hearth and home, but Annabella's emotions had been wrung dry. She was empty, drained of everything but fear.

She couldn't begin to imagine what form Hassan-i Sabbāh's vengeance might take, nor did she have any idea how she might find the courage to face it. She only knew that twist and turn as she might there could be no escape, that inevitably, face it she must.

The afternoon was drawing on but Annabella was determined that Dari and Vivienne must leave that day. Even if they only got a little way before nightfall, better they should camp somewhere out of the way than remain exposed in the hospital. Better still, they could lose themselves in the streams of desperate refugees who had managed to escape Jerusalem before the city was completely sealed. To better

camouflage themselves, Annabella had made them abandon the idea of horses in favour of a donkey to carry their few necessary items while they went on foot.

In the end, Annabella's strident urging had reduced Vivienne to tears and Dari to purse-lipped silence. At the last, Vivienne clung to her but Annabella was remote, already withdrawing into herself, and she broke away forcefully enough to send Vivienne into a fresh flood.

When Vivienne turned for one last look, all she could see was Annabella's already retreating back.

Chapter 15

They had sunk far down into the black depths of the night. Annabella was asleep, tossing fitfully on a pallet in the corner. Darius was resting peacefully. He had continued to improve by the hour and earlier, as evening fell, had even been induced to take a little seethed chicken, his first solid food for days. When he had finished, the duty physician had examined the blister pack of antibiotics with deep suspicion. Finally, despite the instructions he had been given, he slid the strange, not to say extremely peculiar, container from view beneath a cloth. Annabella, who so far had had no opportunity for a conversation with Darius and who had been watching with detached interest, found herself forced to intervene.

"Two tablets," she had said. "He must have two tablets." She had retrieved the pack, popped two of the pills and passed them to Darius, who had swallowed them without demur. However, when the doctor had left, thoroughly discontented with all this new-fangled superstitious nonsense, Darius had smiled at her wryly.

"You really are a dreadful tyrant, you know," he had said in a voice soft with what Annabella assumed was frailty. "Vivienne, grandson Darius, and now me..." Despite herself, Annabella had been hurt.

"I'm just trying to look after you all," she had muttered, stuffing the pills into a safe place down the front of her robes and retreating to her pallet in the corner. Darius had made no reply, only regarding her with infinite affection.

Annabella opened her eyes, or at least she thought she did. There was no discernible change in the blackness surrounding her. She felt appalling, sick and feeble. Also confused. The immediate past was as black as her surroundings. Her head was throbbing painfully, centred over her left temple, as though she had been forcibly struck there.

She lay on what evidently was a cold stone floor, trying to muster the will to think. Slowly, she began to recover her memory of immediate past events. Darius... chicken... the doctor... the tablets... thinking she would never be able to fall asleep...

It was possible, some small part of her mind suggested, that even now she was dreaming, that this was nothing to do with Hassan-i Sabbāh, but in her heart she knew that yet again, finally, inevitably, she was being brought to face evil incarnate.

The realisation was numbing, to the point where she actually stopped breathing until finally her subconscious forced her to take a great, whooping breath.

"Annabella?" came a whisper.

"Darius?" she said.

"Are you all right?"

"Sort of," she said shakily. "What about you?"

"Still alive," Darius said.

"Probably better if we weren't."

"What do you mean?" There was a hint of shock in Darius's voice.

"He's got us," Annabella said, her voice rising uncontrollably with fear. "Hassan-i Sabbāh has got us." She heard a faint rustle coming nearer and then sensed Darius groping towards her. She reached out a hand and touched his. Moments later he was clasping her tight.

"I'm so frightened," she sobbed over and over again into his shoulder. "I'm so frightened."

Darius gently eased himself away.

"I'm sorry," Annabella said. "I shouldn't be pressing on you like this..." She cocked her head at the puzzling echo. She felt better, a little anyway. Nothing like a good cry for clearing the sinuses.

"Quite all right," Darius said. "I know exactly how you feel..."

"What happened?"

"I'm not really sure. Someone came into the tent. Big, I think... That's really all I remember."

"They hit you, too?"

"My head hurts, if that's what you mean?" A vagrant memory came to Annabella.

"You said, big. Big fat...? That man on the horse? The one you hit?"

"I don't know," Darius said. "Possible, I suppose. But it really doesn't make any difference."

"But how could he sneak right into the camp? Through all the guards?" Darius shrugged, a gesture unseen in the darkness.

"Assassins can do that," he said. "Or maybe he was with Hassan-i Sabbāh..."

"On his carpet?" Darius shrugged invisibly again and said nothing.

"How do you feel?" Annabella asked after a minute. "You should still be in bed..."

"I'm all right," Darius said.

"Are you sure? Let me feel your forehead..." He chuckled.

"So you're the doctor now...? But I do have to thank you – I haven't had a chance – for your diagnosis, your excellent diagnosis, and for thinking to send to the future for the drugs. What do you call them...?"

"Antibiotics," Annabella said. "Do you remember when Vivienne saved my life with the mouldy bread, the arrow you cut out, the wound that went bad...?"

"I most certainly do," Darius said. "How could I forget? Indeed, I often use the method myself." He chuckled. "It has a lot to do with my reputation as a miracle worker..."

"This is the same thing," Annabella said. "Just better. More powerful." She took the packet from her robes. "You should have more tablets," she added, popping two pills into the palm of her hand and holding them out into the blackness towards Darius. She felt his hand brush hers away.

"I'm really all right," he said. "Much better..."

"No," Annabella said firmly. "You have to take them. You have to finish the course. I know that much. To make sure the infection doesn't build up resistance." Obediently, Darius found her hand again and took the tablets. She heard him swallow

and she pressed the rest of the packet on him. "You should keep these. Take two every four hours..." Darius chuckled again.

"And how am I supposed to know when four hours has passed?"

How indeed? Annabella wondered, but the small exchange of mundane conversation had eased her immediate fear somewhat. Impulsively, she got to her feet.

"What are you doing?" Darius said, responding to the noise.

"Exploring," Annabella said. "Might as well try to find out where we are, what sort of hole we're in..."

"But be careful," Darius said anxiously. "Be very careful. There's no telling what traps there might be."

Annabella paused. A story she had once read came to mind, something about a pit. Cautiously, feeling the ground in front of her before every move, she began to creep forward, arms outstretched...

Vivienne stopped. Someone coming behind bumped into her. There was an angry exclamation and she moved off the track. Ahead, Dari glanced back and drew the donkey to one side.

"What?" he said. Vivienne went up to him and put her hand on his arm.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Don't be angry. But we have to go back. We never should have left them..."

"No," Dari said. "I know. I've been thinking exactly the same thing." He looked about him helplessly, however, gesturing to the stream of anxious people filling what passed for the road to Tyre. It would be impossible to try to travel against the stream.

"We'll have to wait somewhere... Till they thin out," Vivienne said. Dari nodded. It was time to stop anyway. They had walked well into the night, borne along by the current of humanity swirling about them, frantic to escape the Saracens, each locked into their own thoughts, thoughts which evidently had been exactly the same.

"I'm glad you said that," Dari said. "I should have..."

How long they were to be forced to endure the utter blackness, the complete sensory deprivation of the dungeon or whatever it was in which they found themselves, neither Annabella nor Darius had any idea. Annabella's exploration had been brought up short after only a step or two by a rough stone wall. Hand trailing she had then traced its path but had found no door or any other aperture. Nor had she encountered anything that felt like a corner. She gave up worrying about the possibility of falling into a pit. Apparently, they were already in one, which explained the echo, she supposed.

She went back and helped Darius to move so that he could lean his back against the wall. She could feel from his movements that, despite his brave words, he was still very weak. The blow to his head must have taken an additional toll. Her own head still ached abominably.

Time passed, or did it? There was no way to tell. Apart from the stone they could feel and the faint rasp of each other's breath, they might have been suspended in

limbo, a lightless, soundless limbo, numb to everything but their increasing discomfort.

At one point, Annabella did think wanly that Hassan-i Sabbāh had miscalculated, that if he wanted her crazy then he should have separated them. She was quite sure that without Darius's support and comfort she would quickly have succumbed to insanity. That too, she realised grimly, might well be a preferable option.

Hunger began to dominate her thoughts only to give way to thirst, thirst that quickly intensified to the point where it reminded her strongly of the deprivation preceding the Crusaders' last battle at the Horns of Hattin.

Forcing their way back to Saladin's hospital outside Jerusalem had taken Vivienne and Dari the better part of the day. The crush of fleeing refugees had finally started to thin, but even so the road had been crowded and they had made themselves extremely unpopular. But at last, they were able to divert down to the valley and the camp.

They stopped outside Darius's tent and were immediately aware that something was seriously wrong. The entrance was sealed and it was obvious there was no one within. The tent had that indefinable air of being unoccupied. They looked at each other with consternation. Dari unfastened one of the flaps and poked his head inside. He withdrew it and looked at Vivienne with stricken eyes.

"We never should have left," Vivienne repeated for possibly the fiftieth time. Again, Dari could only agree.

"Basil," Vivienne said in a raised voice. "Basil, if you can hear me please answer..."

They waited but the ether about them was as empty as the tent.

"Well that's just wonderful," Vivienne said at last. "Annabella and your grandfather kidnapped, and no sign of Basil..." She made the mistake of allowing the other thought hovering at the edge of her mind to take shape and form. "And I'm marooned in the wrong place at the wrong time, with nothing..." She couldn't help a catch in her voice. "I don't know what I'm going to do. I don't know what I can do. I'm so alone..."

"No more than I was in your time," Dari said. "When you looked after me..." He left the rest of the sentence unspoken, not at all sure what it was that he wanted to say.

"Annabella...?" Darius murmured.

"What?" she tried to say. Nothing came. She worked her dry mouth trying to summon a little moisture.

"What?" she managed eventually.

"I'm old. I don't matter, not any more. But I'm very frightened for you. What will he do?"

"I have no idea," Annabella said slowly. "I can't imagine. I don't want to imagine."

"I'm sorry," Darius said. "Maybe I shouldn't have brought it up, but there is an alternative. I have to say it. There could be an alternative."

"An alternative? I don't understand."

"Life, if well lived, is long enough. A philosopher... a Roman... Seneca, said that." Darius paused. "I think he was right, and I can't think of a life better lived than yours."

"You mean...?"

"I do. It would spare you. I could make it painless. Absolutely painless."

Annabella gave it due consideration. There was a temptation. There was no denying there was a temptation. The more she thought about it, the more urgent and pressing it became.

"No," she said. "Thank you. I know it must have been a very hard thing to offer. But no." Darius sighed.

"I never really thought you would," he said quietly. "But tell me why?"

Annabella hesitated. She was about to say that if Darius did kill her then he would be left to face Hassan-i Sabbāh, and doubtless his crazed wrath, alone. Instead, unwilling to deal with more accusations of nobility and self-sacrifice, she resorted to generalisation.

"Because it would mean I had surrendered. That he had beaten me completely. That evil had won without even a fight." Annabella hesitated again, then added, speaking more to herself than Darius: "Basil told me once that if you don't keep fighting evil then soon enough, there will be nothing but evil."

Annabella's casual mention of Basil brought them both up short.

"Where is Basil?" Darius said after a moment. "May I ask that?"

"I don't know," Annabella said carefully. "But even if I did, there's nothing he can do, not while Hassan-i Sabbāh has the Seal of Solomon."

"No," Darius said. "I don't suppose there is. But it would be nice to know that he was somewhere around, even so..."

Sinan was pleased with himself. As with the first time they had kidnapped the old man near Tiberius, a trifle of expert skulking, two carefully calibrated taps to the head – rather harder for the old man, he had to admit; there was some payback to be exacted there, after all – the lifting of two slight bodies on to the grandmaster's carpet keeping his gaze prudently averted, a helter-skelter carom back to Castle Masyaf, his eyes tight shut, and here he was, again more or less in good odour. Sinan wrinkled his nose. Well, figuratively anyway.

The old man and the girl had been deposited at the bottom of the old cistern and the heavy studded cover dragged over the top, high above them, there to await the grandmaster's pleasure. It was a measure of Sinan's increasing confidence that he was now able to think of Hassan-i Sabbāh as more than just "the voice".

There was, for instance, the matter of the white powder when Sinan had been required to act as the grandmaster's right hand, indeed both hands. Alone with Hassan-i Sabbāh in what was more usually the castle's torture chamber, he had been instructed to assemble some sort of strange scaffold. It turned out to be a tetrahedron, the height of a man. Sinan was not to know that it was actually formed from ancient copper pipe, hand beaten and joined by plumbers of the last age or that it had been stolen from a pharaoh's tomb where it had been intended to ease his eternal ablutions in the afterlife. When finally complete, each of the three corners of the base of the scaffold rested on a circular channel that had been graved into the stone of the floor during the time spent waiting for the arrival of the shipment from Castle Alamut.

From the apex of the scaffold, Sinan had then suspended a much smaller tetrahedron on a golden chain to produce a pyramid within a pyramid within a circle. The lesser pyramid was the size of a man's heart and cast from solid gold, inducing a wave of avarice to well up within him, a wave difficult to conceal but that would clearly be fatal if allowed any sort of expression.

Next, Sinan had been instructed to half fill the channel in the floor with water. Finally, he had been ordered to take a clay amphora, bearing the device of the Byzantine Empire, and dribble some of the contents on to the surface of the water, allowing it to flow evenly around the circle.

With Sinan cowering in a corner and shielding himself as best he might behind a pillar, the grandmaster himself, as always mounted on his carpet, had managed somehow to hold a yard-long taper sufficiently steady to light it and then to touch it to the Greek fire ringling the tetrahedrons. Even protected as he was, Sinan had felt the resulting heat flare so intensely that he feared his fat was melting. The grandmaster, however, had barely flinched even though flames from the mouth of hell were blazing before him almost within touching distance.

When the tetrahedrons had cooled sufficiently for him to be able to approach, Sinan, working with greatest care, had then scraped the white powder that had exuded from the heart of gold into a golden basin.

The final step had been to set a pot of water on the forge used to heat the instruments of torture and when finally it boiled, to drain the condensation from beneath the lid into the golden basin. The resulting mixture had swirled with a life of its own, eventually resolving into a few globular white drops, glowing, lustrous, strangely seductive.

Quite what they might represent was beyond his understanding. Nevertheless, Sinan, the sorcerer's apprentice, now felt himself an initiate into one of the great mysteries of life, so much so that in placing the golden basin before the form of his master on the carpet, Sinan had almost dared again to lift his gaze towards him. It was only at the last instant that he had quailed and dropped his eyes.

The hospital was in a state of turmoil and disorganisation. The final capture of Jerusalem had brought about a sudden influx of patients, a tidal wave of wounded, injured and sick hostages released from the thrall of the Crusaders. Given Darius's status as head of the hospital, the staff, harried and run off their feet as they were, tried to be sympathetic to Darius's grandson but were quite unable to shed any light on the mysterious disappearance of his grandfather and the girl who had been keeping him company. The duty physician from the night before muttered something about the consequences of unnatural superstition but was adamant that nothing had been amiss when he had left them for the night. In the morning, the tent had been found empty. There was nothing suspicious, no explanation. Possibly Darius and the girl had taken it into their heads to wander off somewhere, to visit the city perhaps now that it had surrendered, never mind the fact that Darius had been seriously ill and that such a rapid convalescence rather stretched the bounds of credulity. Meanwhile, his grandson and his companion were welcome to await their return in the same tent as long as they liked. Now, he really must go. People were crying out for him. Urgently.

Glumly, Vivienne and Dari were left to install themselves, and worry...

"There must be something we can do," Vivienne said for the umpteenth time. With saintly patience, Dari resisted the temptation to snap at her.

"I don't know what," he said. "I don't think there is anything..." He rose and began to pace.

"We should go to that castle, where Darius was..."

"And do what?"

"I don't know... Break in... Something... Annabella did..."

"Vivienne," Dari said quietly. "Annabella had Basil helping her... Anyway, it would take us at least a week, much longer probably, to get there by ourselves. Even if we could do anything, it would be too late. You know it would be."

"What you mean is, you don't care," Vivienne accused, her voice rising.

"And that is really, really unfair," Dari said, hurt despite himself.

"Sorry..." Vivienne mumbled. She looked at him, her eyes red. A moment later, she was across and clinging to him. At first, Dari put his arms around her but after a long minute, allowed them to drop to his sides, standing woodenly. Vivienne remained there some seconds longer, but in the end there was nothing for her to do but step back.

"What?" she said, thoroughly disconcerted.

"Nothing."

"What?" Vivienne insisted.

"My... grandfather..."

"Hassan-i Sabbāh... We know..."

"Not that," Darius said. He paused uncomfortably. "Last time... Last time, you were with him... Together..." Vivienne took another step backwards, totally unprepared for what amounted to an accusation and astonished that Dari should choose that moment to make it. For a moment she tried to be calm, rational, but then the emotional overload of past hours got the better of her and she lost her temper good and proper.

"What are you implying?" she demanded coldly, her voice rising. "Whatever it is, I won't have it. I was never 'with' your grandfather, whatever you mean by that. I liked Darius. He liked me. That was all. And I can tell you Darius never had your dirty mind. He was always a gentleman." Vivienne turned sharply about and flung out of the tent, leaving Dari hapless, just another male fish-out-of-water flapping about on the bank of an ill-advised stream of consciousness. It took at least a minute, before he thought to close his mouth.

Sinan supervised Bakri Touma supervising a squad of Assassins. Deep into the graveyard watch, the studded lid was drawn scraping back across the mouth of the cistern and a flaring torch thrust into the yawning gap. The prisoners were lying huddled at the bottom of the shaft. The girl raised her head a little and hastily covered her eyes against the light. The old man looked dead. Sinan felt a tremor of fear. His instructions had been specific. They were to be stressed but not to the point where they were unusable.

"Water," he told Touma. "Give the old man water."

Touma made a sign and two of his men dropped a rope ladder down the shaft and disappeared over the edge.

Annabella, squinting painfully, watched as Darius's head was raised and a flask held to his lips. She saw him swallow and felt her own throat convulse. It was all she could do not to hurl herself across and seize the water from him.

"Enough!" a disembodied voice said from above. "Bring them up."

Darius was unable to stand unaided. Two of the Assassins took him by the elbows and marched him along the dank passage, feet trailing. Annabella, with a sharp push in the back, was induced to follow. They passed a flight of stairs, ascending presumably to the upper levels of the castle, traversed a long passage and finally rounded a corner to come to a barred iron door, standing open. The chamber beyond was large, disappearing into the shadows beyond the flare of the torches. The roof was supported by thick pillars reminding Annabella of the cavern at Castle Alamut, a place she could only think of with extreme aversion. Reinforcing the memory was a curious triangular scaffold which she was certain she had seen before in similar circumstances.

There was also a low trestle. Struggling wildly but totally ineffectually, Annabella was forced down to it on her back while her wrists and ankles were strapped so that she was held splayed and rigid. Darius was deposited on the floor and manacled to a chain linked to a heavy staple in one of the pillars. There was clearly no thought that he might be considered a source of resistance or danger. Assuming he was capable of moving at all, the chain would allow him to reach as far as Annabella. Twisting her head frantically, she was able to make out that he might also be able to reach an array of ugly instruments displayed on another pillar and illuminated by a torch in a sconce. There were two amphorae sitting in a rack at the base. There was also a forge off to one side, glowing cherry red and sending out waves of heat. What Annabella couldn't see was the pair of pincers with chisel edges thrust deep into the coals.

All at once, Annabella was swamped by a nauseating wave of panic, stark terror such as she had never known before, and extreme fear was something to which she was unhappily well accustomed. Her stomach heaved and even with a raging thirst and dehydrated as she was, sweat pricked her armpits, her forehead. In a sudden paroxysm of hysteria, she strained at the leather binding her, arching her back, thrashing her head from side to side. It was quite futile. There was not the slightest give in any of the straps. The heavy oak on which she was lying gave not the slightest tremor of possible weakness.

Sinan, Touma and the squad watched her dispassionately for some little time to make sure she could not possibly slip free, then at a signal from Sinan, Touma and the rest of the Assassins departed the chamber, leaving him alone with the prisoners and their fate, a fate nobody cared to contemplate. Somebody laughed in passing, but it was the nervous cackle of a man in severe fright.

Annabella, head wrenched round to the limit, stared after their departing backs, her mouth working. Somehow, she managed to keep her pleas silent, unarticulated, but

she was begging them all the same: Don't go... don't leave me... you can't... you mustn't... take me... save me... kill me... at least, kill me...

Her eye caught Darius. He had offered to kill her. It had seemed so wrong then, but now... He was watching her intently with such sadness, such compassion that he gave her something to cling to, something with which to pull herself back from the accelerating spiral down into madness. It was so little he could offer, but it was enough. She stilled, and slowly her breathing returned to normal. At last, she smiled faintly – a grimace, at least – and he spoke, uncaring of any audience.

"You are the bravest person I have ever known," he murmured. The words were quiet, said with utmost sincerity.

Someone else had once said that to her, Annabella realised bitterly, or something like it. Basil. But what good was courage if all it did was get you into worse trouble?

For his part, Sinan, despite a carapace of pitilessness laid down layer by layer over a lifetime of brutality – pitilessness for anyone but himself, that is – found himself curiously moved.

Chapter 16

The wait was interminable. Sinan stood motionless, allowing his bulk to dampen the temptation to fidget...

Darius sat hunched on the floor, attempting to recruit whatever resources remained him and gazing speculatively about the chamber. The amphorae caught his attention, each bearing the stamp of Byzantium, then the tetrahedron, the corners aligned with a circular channel on the floor. Curious, Darius thought. And those black stains on the edges of the channel, they looked like burn marks...

Annabella lay motionless on the trestle, desperately striving for equilibrium, letting the fear wash through her, seeking to cleanse her mind, to find emptiness. If she had learned one thing while surviving previous outrages, it was that the anticipation, if not worse than the actuality, certainly meant investing that actuality with more power than it should rightly command. She worked on her breathing, attempting to fix her undivided attention on each breath, following it all the way in, all the way out...

Darius saw Sinan stiffen then drop his eyes to the floor. Submission? Fear? Or both? Darius was still wondering when he too stiffened. The border of a carpet, a carpet floating some way above the floor, appeared in the doorway. It paused and then smoothly bore its occupant around the corner and into the chamber.

Darius cried out. It was quite involuntary, impossible to resist. Sinan was certainly afflicted with fear, but more, much more was working on him, Darius was now forced to realise. Horror. Terror. Loathing.

Annabella had caught the same flicker of movement from Sinan out of the corner of her eye and had felt a draft as something swept into the chamber. She was not completely unprepared for Darius's wordless cry of revulsion, nevertheless, its stark intensity shook her to the core. Her courage failed completely, evaporating on the instant to leave her bereft and abandoned. Quite without volition, the muscles of her body simultaneously locked in rigid spasm. Her breathing stopped. Her heart stopped. She was dying, or so she fervently prayed.

No. She lived. She still lived. She had rejected Darius's offer, now no such simple release was to be gifted her. She closed her eyes and tried to kill herself, by willpower alone. She failed. She tried to swallow her tongue. She had heard somewhere you could choke on it and die if you were sufficiently resolute or desperate. It was a myth. It was impossible to do, physically impossible, no matter how hard she strained.

"Look at me," a voice rasped in a sibilant whisper somewhere to her left. It was a new voice one she had never heard before. Except she knew she had. A gust of rancid stench swept across her.

"You will look at me," the voice said. "You will look at me or I will take your eyelids." Another stinking wave engulfed her. It was foul, vile, redolent of all that was unspeakable. She gagged. Repugnance squirmed in her belly. Disgust. Honest disgust. It was something to build on. Disgust could be strength.

"Look at me!"

Anger. She was angry. How dare he? How dare he do this to her? If her courage had gone, then let there be anger. Hatred.

She took a deep breath and turned her head. Then all at once without allowing time to think, she did it. She forced her eyes to open. More, she was suddenly determined to keep silent whatever might confront her. Unlike everyone else who had ever looked upon this incarnation of Hassan-i Sabbāh for the first time, she would not cry out. It was the one form of resistance that remained to her. She would not show her fear, paralysing though it might be. She would not. However horrific the sight of Hassan-i Sabbāh, she would not react.

Or so in a flash of defiance, she had resolved.

Her guts heaved. She felt the acid bile burning her throat. She felt her lungs contracting, the shriek being forced up from her diaphragm. She clenched her teeth, her jaw muscles cramping with the strain, yet still the scream came erupting up from deep within her, overpowering, irresistible, demanding expression lest it blow her mind to shards and fragments.

Somehow, she refused it, denied it, beat it down. Somehow, she held her mouth closed. Somehow, she prevented any sound from emerging. Of all the trials of will she had survived in the past, this was the most impossible thing she had ever done.

Hassan-i Sabbāh fixed her gaze for long, long minutes. An age. An aeon. An eternity, forcing her to look, to examine, to understand.

At last he spoke.

"This you have wrought," he whispered.

Watching transfixed, Darius was overwhelmed with emotion at again witnessing the raw, indomitable guts of this slip of a girl, once his dear friend and now as like his dearest daughter. She was the embodiment of everything brave and good in the world, everything brave and good facing purest essence of horror.

Hassan-i Sabbāh recalled to Darius nothing so much as the cadavers he had once flayed and dissected as a student in Seville. The creature's skin had been boiled from his body by the scalding mud of the volcano in Baluchistan, leaving the flesh completely exposed, the layers of muscle, the fibres, the sinews, the tendons, the organs, the veins, the yellow seams of fat; he was now just weeping, suppurating, bleeding meat. And here and there in places, the flesh had been eaten so far down as to reveal the glinting white of exposed bone. Inconsequentially, a vagrant part of Darius's mind wondered how Hassan-i Sabbāh could possibly stand the touch of the golden chain about his neck, the weight of the massive ring bearing down on the unprotected nerves.

Darius could not begin to conceive of the pain, the screaming, excoriating, excruciating pain with which Hassan-i Sabbāh must live every second of every day, a sentence that would prevail till the end of time. The price Hassan-i Sabbāh had finally paid for immortality was beyond comprehension. The revenge he would exact on Annabella was beyond imagining.

Darius resolved then that what ever it might cost him personally, he would do everything, anything, he could to spare her.

"You make no sound," Hassan-i Sabbāh rasped. "You will. I will hear you scream. I will hear you screaming till the end of days. You will beg. I will hear you beg. I will hear you beg to die, to die however unbearably, if only to die. But for you, as for me... There will be no death."

Hassan-i Sabbāh turned his head slightly and spoke to Sinan.

"Do it," he said.

Sinan paced forward, his eyes fixed firmly on the floor. He stopped before the carpet and took up the golden bowl resting there between Hassan-i Sabbāh's raw, skinless feet. He turned to Annabella, now watching him with stricken eyes.

"You will swallow this," Sinan said, gesturing slightly with the bowl.

"No!" Darius burst out, frantic. He struggled to his feet and dragging the heavy chain behind him, a burden doubling the weight of his years, weaved towards Sinan. The fat man allowed him to approach, to raise a weak fist, and then contemptuously placed a hand on his chest and shoved. Darius crashed heavily back to the floor. Sinan turned again to Annabella.

She fought to find her voice.

"What...?" she began. Nothing came out. She swallowed and tried again. "What is it?" Her voice was weak, frail, frightened. It angered her. Again she was angry. At herself. But anger, any anger, was good. Strength.

"What is it?" she demanded.

Neither Hassan-i Sabbāh nor Sinan deigned to answer.

Sinan took the two steps that brought him to the side of the trestle. With the hand that he had used to demean Darius, he clamped Annabella's head immovably to the rough boards beneath and with thumb and forefinger closed her nose. She tried to hold her breath, to the point of death if it would come, but her body betrayed her. She did lose consciousness momentarily but eventually, inevitably, her mouth opened and she drew in a great, gasping breath. Sinan waited a second so that she shouldn't choke and then emptied the contents of the bowl down her throat.

Annabella tried to hold the tasteless substance in her mouth, to spit it out, but Sinan dropped the bowl and clamped her jaws shut. Inexorably, there came a point where she could resist no longer. She swallowed. The potion slid down her throat like the smoothest silk over the softest skin and a feeling of wonderful beneficence began to radiate through her body. As it did, came the realisation of what it was she had been forced to ingest.

Al iksir.

The white drops.

Liquid gold.

The elixir of life.

Immortality.

"Why?" she asked. "Why have you done this?" She knew why.

"So that there will never be an end to your suffering," Hassan-i Sabbāh rasped. She tried to turn her head away from the stench wafting over her, now the least of torments but still unbearable.

"So that you may suffer more than I," Hassan-i Sabbāh continued. She knew that too.

"In the volcano." She even knew that.

"Before you become my consort for eternity." She didn't know that.

"My helpless consort." Or that, whatever he might mean by it.

"The finger," Hassan-i Sabbāh commanded Sinan.

Again Darius tried to rise, to intervene, as Sinan moved across to the forge. Again he was crushed helpless to the floor. Sinan donned heavy leather gloves and picked up the pair of pincers buried in the coals. They glowed white, the air about shimmering from the waves of heat they released.

Again, at the last extremis of hysterical panic, Annabella thrashed her head from side to side, trying to twist away, but her arms and legs were fixed immovably. Sinan separated the fingers of Annabella's left hand and then with the chisel ends of the pincers delicately clamped down hard on the last joint of her little finger, amputating and cauterising simultaneously.

The shrieking of outraged nerve ends threatened instant insanity then mercifully, Annabella blacked out.

She was roused by a bucket of water thrown in her face. Her left hand felt as though it had been plunged into the sun. It drove unendurable waves of heat and pain, coursing throughout her whole being.

"Exquisite..." Hassan-i Sabbāh rasped at her. "For my consort, a fate most exquisite. Unique. We shall continue, day by day, joint by joint, limb by limb, until there remains only the head and the body. That is all I require of a consort, the body.

"And for your minion cowering there, his punishment shall be to watch and to attend you. The need for his services will grow as you... diminish. And then the volcano... for both of you. For him, a fitting end. For you, a fitting beginning..."

Hassan-i Sabbāh turned to Sinan whose eyes were still religiously fixed to the floor.

"Take them away."

This time, they found themselves in a conventional cell – bare stone, damp, noisome – but there was some little light coming through the iron grille of the door from the corridor outside. There was also water and there was bread.

Darius, raging internally at his complete powerlessness, eased Annabella to a sitting position against the wall, fetched the pitcher and helped her to drink. She wanted only a mouthful. Her one concern was to protect her mutilated hand from accidentally touching anything. Darius could only wonder how far gone she was, whether any spark of sanity still remained. He turned away to fetch the bread.

"I'm all right," Annabella whispered. "You should look after yourself."

Darius stopped and stood stock still, his back to her, tears suddenly coursing down his face.

"I can't bear it," he said at last. "I can't bear what that monster is planning, what he's done..."

"I made him what he is..." Annabella began. Darius instantly swung round, infuriated.

"You did not make him," he stormed, quite unable to control himself. "You fought him, but what happened was his own fault, his own doing, not yours, Iblis's doing, not yours. I won't have that. Never. You cannot think that. You must not think that. You did not make him..." Darius subsided and then gestured helplessly.

"Drink," Annabella murmured. "You must drink. It will help."

"You need it more..."

"No," Annabella interrupted, her voice somewhat firmer. "I don't need it. At all. Not any more."

Abruptly, Darius slumped to the floor, his head in his hands, overwhelmed by the enormity, the horrendous enormity, of what had been done, what was going to be done to Annabella.

"I should have let you kill me when we had the chance," Annabella said. It was probably the poorest attempt at a joke she had ever made, but it worked. Darius lifted his head and gazed at her.

"Don't you ever weaken?" he asked at last, rhetorically. Annabella grimaced.

"You know I do," she said, a catch in her voice. "I'm petrified, Darius. Terrified out of my mind. How could I not be? But..."

"But..." Darius repeated with a depth of wonder. He could only marvel at this small, seemingly insignificant person, who burned with the brightest of flames. The association of ideas suddenly bothered him, set off an itch in his mind. "What can we do?" he said, setting it aside.

"Nothing," Annabella said. "There is nothing. Nothing I can think of."

"You still won't call Basil? Surely, there must be something he can do?"

"Hassan-i Sabbāh has the ring," Annabella said. "You saw it..." The mention of Basil was deeply disturbing to her, Basil and the implications of the elixir that had been forced upon her. She fell silent. Again the waves of pain from her butchered hand swamped her. This time, however, she welcomed the agony. It was preferable to thinking. She could hear Darius speaking but his words failed to register. She sank into some sort of trance.

Darius watched the succeeding expressions sweep across her face and then the blessed stillness. The worst aspect of his helplessness was that he had nothing with which to ease Annabella's suffering. He was a doctor, a skilled and compassionate doctor, and yet he was quite unable to bring to her any of the benefits of his many years of practice. The frustration was excruciating... Darius checked himself angrily. Annabella's pain was what was truly excruciating and it could only get worse. Besides that, his impotence was the smallest of irritations.

Moving with the greatest care not to disturb her, to rouse her from whatever insensibility she had managed to find, he did drink and then eat some of the bread. The

itch returned, the itch that had been triggered by the idea of Annabella as the brightest of flames. There was something, something important, to be winkled out of his brain but the harder he tried to pin it down, the more elusive it became. At last, exhausted by the emotional distress of the past hours, he too fell into some sort of suspended state.

In the absence of anything else to do but wait, Dari had been brooding ever since Vivienne had slapped his ego around. He couldn't help it. And the more he brooded the more angry and confused he became. On the one hand, with all that had happened he had developed a strong attraction to the girl. She was everything a man could want, bright, clever enough but not too clever, amusing, beautiful and... stacked. There was no other word for it. She was indubitably stacked. Why a nice pair of breasts should create such powerful magnetism was a mystery to him, just as it was to every other male who had ever looked at a shapely woman, but there was no denying its existence.

On the other hand, the thought of Vivienne with his grandfather was more than he could bear. It was fundamentally indecent, repellent. Yes, he and Vivienne had grown close during their time together in the Trans' restaurant, but the closer they had become the more unsettling the pictures in Dari's brain. And at that moment when Vivienne had clung to him for comfort, all his misgivings had crystallised and he had been quite unable to prevent himself blurting out his disquiet.

That Vivienne had then handled him so roughly he thought unforgivable and the more he thought about it, the more he resented it, quite failing to make any allowance for her distress at the time and his own insensitivity. He chewed away at it all until what had started as a reasonably fixable misunderstanding had degenerated into the sorriest mess of self-justification.

A day passed and neither he nor Vivienne had a word to say to each other. The longer the silence lasted, the more upset Dari became. He felt it was entirely up to Vivienne to make the first move, to seek forgiveness, at least to say sorry, however perfunctorily, but she maintained an impenetrable wall of self-sufficiency about herself. She appeared as though she considered that nothing untoward had even occurred, which meant that in Dari's eyes she was behaving absolutely inexcusably. The fact was, however, that Vivienne was consumed by worry for Annabella.

It was becoming starkly apparent that something very bad must have happened. To start with, Vivienne had been able to hope that Annabella and Darius would reappear, that perhaps they had been in hiding somewhere, however improbable the idea might be. But as the hours passed and there was still no sign of them, Vivienne became more and more despondent.

She would dearly have loved to seek some reassurance from Dari, to share her fears – surely, he must be equally concerned for his grandfather, if not Annabella – but the boy had retreated into a fit of monumental sulks which Vivienne did not have the heart to deal with.

At last, Dari had goaded himself to the point where any right-thinking man would refuse to tolerate Vivienne's intransigence a second longer. In a fever of self-righteous indignation, he marched out of the tent and down to the river bank where Vivienne was trying to distract herself washing clothes. She had prevailed on one of the

orderlies to find her a change of linen and she was taking the opportunity to do something about her original and now rather disgraceful garments.

She looked up at the sound of Dari's approach. She could tell by the stiffness of his movements that he was looking for trouble. A row was the last thing she wanted but then her own unhappiness overrode any restraint. She turned and allowed a little smile to play about her lips. Born with the knowledge of how to vamp an old roué, so she needed no instruction on how to handle an angry young man altogether up himself. Dari came to an abrupt and noisy halt in front of her.

"Yes?" she asked in a neutral voice. "Was there something?"

Dari hesitated, then cleared his throat. Vivienne smiled again, this time to herself.

"I want to say..." Dari eventually managed to begin. He got no further.

"Your grandfather never so much as touched me," Vivienne interrupted him. She stood up. "No, I tell a lie. He once dared to put his fingertip on my shoulder... And the reason he never touched me was because he was far too frightened of what might happen..." Vivienne paused, allowing her words to sink in and enjoying Dari's mortified expression. Then she delivered the coup de grace, the matador's *paso de la muerte*.

"Just like you," she said, sword thrusting with delicate precision. "Like grandfather, like grandson. You're just another hopeless coward afraid of what might happen."

Dari stumbled forward, his face working. All at once, his arms were around her. Vivienne staggered backwards and then, before either could regain their balance, they found themselves spread-eagled, full length in the shallow water.

And if Dari had been fearful before, he now found the sight of Vivienne, her light robe wet and clinging, quite terrifying in an absolutely electrifying way.

Darius woke knowing exactly what he must do. The mark of Byzantium stamped into the clay amphorae, the charring on the floor, taken together could mean only one thing: the jars must contain Greek fire, that most deadly of incendiaries used in both naval and siege warfare.

A state secret of the Byzantine empire, the recipe was the most closely guarded of formulae and the substance itself difficult to obtain. The amphorae in Hassan-i Sabbāh's torture chamber, when procured some seventy years before, had cost a fortune on the black market and the lives of five men. Now with the decline of the empire, it was more readily obtainable, but as Darius knew, still just as fearsome. Deadly of itself, the more alarming fact about Greek fire was that it would burn with greatly magnified intensity if ever it came into contact with water. Due to its chemical composition, sand, vinegar or aged urine were the only known agents that might extinguish it once ignited.

Darius, refining and rehearsing his plan, could find only one area of doubt. How much of the chemical remained in the amphorae? It was impossible to know, but after careful thought he came to the conclusion that one of the two jars must certainly still be full and that the other could only be partially empty. It seemed to him extremely unlikely that any empty jar would be left lying around. Hassan-i Sabbāh would be far too fastidious to tolerate litter, or so he had to hope.

He saw Annabella watching him. Her eyes were huge and shadowed with pain, and with something more, deeper, the visceral knowledge of the unbearable agony to come. Darius took a considered breath and embarked on the trickiest part of his whole plan, the necessary preliminary.

"How bad is it?" he asked. Annabella regarded him for a long moment.

"I'll live," she said with a bitter undertone. Darius grimaced. That, he could do absolutely nothing about, he might, however, be able to change the manner of her living.

"I need you to do something for me," he said softly.

"Of course," Annabella said. "If I can."

"Not 'if I can'. You have to promise."

"You expect me to promise when I don't know what it is you want me to do?"

"Yes," Darius said with a touch of bite. "I do. To make an old man happy... For everything we've been to each other in the past... Promise!"

Annabella frowned. She knew she was being manipulated somehow but in the circumstances couldn't imagine what Darius might have on his mind. And it was so difficult to think. The throbbing of her left hand had scarcely diminished at all from the first cascade of fire. The pain kept pulsing up her arm to explode in her brain with metronomic regularity.

"All right," she said at last, unable to muster further resistance. "If that's what you want, I promise. What?"

"When I say 'now', you are to run. As far and as fast as you can. Do you understand? Run and call Basil."

"Run? How can I run? We're locked in... The guards..."

"Not now," Darius said carefully. "When they take us to Hassan-i Sabbāh."

"But I'll be strapped to that table thing..." Annabella protested and struggled to blank her mind of the picture her words evoked, of the knowledge of what was to come. Again. And again. And again... Until only her head and torso would be left.

"You've promised," Darius said adamantly. "And you must hold to that promise come what may. You must. Swear to me. Swear you'll keep your promise come what may."

Annabella hesitated. It was all wrong. She knew it was all wrong but beyond that, she couldn't think.

"Swear!" Darius insisted. "Swear to me!"

Annabella gave in.

"I swear," she said.

"Come what may..."

"Why, Darius? What are you going to do?"

"Swear! Come what may...!"

Again Annabella hesitated and without warning, burst into tears. Suddenly Darius's insistence on top of the pain, on top of this living nightmare in which she was embroiled, was just too much. Darius, however was implacable.

"Swear," he repeated. "Swear! Come what may!"

"I swear," Annabella wept. "Come what may..."

A shocked glance at Vivienne more or less revealed was all Dari could allow himself before he dropped his eyes, though he very much wanted to gaze and gaze.

Vivienne, flat on her back in the stream, laughed, a genuine laugh. "Now you've done it," she said.

"I-I'm sorry," Dari stammered.

"It's all right. It was an accident."

"I mean about the other thing," Dari managed. "I was being an idiot..."

"Yes," Vivienne said. "You were. But rather a gorgeous idiot."

Dari lifted his eyes, sudden hope surging, and this time he allowed himself a long, lingering look.

"Not as gorgeous as you," he murmured.

"Yes, well..." Vivienne said. "You'd better go and get me a cloak or something. I can't walk back through the camp like this."

"Dari," Vivienne said. "We can't stay here." They were back in the tent and, backs firmly presented to each other, had rather awkwardly changed into dry clothes.

"What do you mean?" Dari said.

"Annabella and Darius have been taken. They're not hiding. They're not coming back..." Dari nodded. He had reached the same conclusion.

"But that doesn't mean we should leave," he said.

"Well, I have to go. I can't stay."

"Why? Why not?"

"Hassan-i Sabbāh," Vivienne said in a low voice, tinged with fear. "If he's got Annabella, he'll come looking for me too. At least, I think so. Annabella always said he would. And Basil did too. And when Hassan-i Sabbāh starts looking for me, it would make sense for him to start here... So I have to go."

"Are you sure about this?" Dari demanded. "V, are you sure?"

"I'm not sure about anything," Vivienne said rather forlornly.

"Well, I am," Dari said. "If you're going, I'm coming with you."

"Dari, you don't have to. You should stay here in case Darius does come back."

"No," he said. "I'm coming with you... I want to. I want to come with you." He went across and put his arms around her. She resisted slightly for a moment and then gratefully let her head rest on his shoulder.

"I couldn't let you go off on your own," he whispered. "I'd be worried to death."

The first time Vivienne and Dari had fled Jerusalem, they had sought the cover of the rush of refugees who had managed to escape the city before Saladin's army had sealed all the exits. The second time, they joined one of the three official columns of hostages allowed to leave on payment of ransom. One column departed under the aegis of the Knights Templar, the second under the Knights Hospitaller, the third was

led by Balian, to the end of which they attached themselves. They were headed north, in the general direction of the County of Tripoli, more particularly, again towards Tyre.

Chapter 17

Again, they came for Annabella and Darius in the dark heart of the night, the fat man and his squad of Assassins. The two were unceremoniously hauled to their feet and frogmarched down the corridor to the torture chamber. Annabella's mangled hand was banged against the wall in the process. She shrieked. She couldn't help it.

"Ah," Sinan remarked. "In good voice, already. Save some for later. You have much singing to do." It was said with a brutal callousness but only Sinan knew that he was using it to mask his own, deep fear. His men were more openly unnerved and handled Annabella with exaggerated roughness the rest of the way.

Again, she was fixed immovably to the trestle. Again, the heavy iron chain was fastened to Darius's ankle. Again Sinan stood back, and again they waited.

Careful to hide his anxious intent, Darius first checked that the amphorae were still in the rack and still within reach. They were, and Darius had to struggle to hide his relief. Next, he checked that the pincers were heating in the coals of the forge. They, too, were where he expected them to be. Already they had passed through cherry red and were glowing yellow. Finally, he searched for and located the heavy leather gloves and, equally importantly, the knife he had spotted hanging amongst the other implements of torture.

He wondered in a moment of trembling weakness whether he would have the physical strength to carry out his plan, and indeed, the mental strength, then bore down hard. He would do what had to be done. For Annabella's sake. And because he couldn't go on living with what had already come to pass.

As before, Sinan dropped his eyes and kept them fixed to the floor. Darius was counting on it, relying on it. At the same time, he backed up as far as the chain would allow, for all the world cravenly putting as much distance as he could possibly manage between himself and the events that would unfold.

Hassan-i Sabbāh swept into the room and took up a position at the foot of Annabella's trestle and slightly to one side. It put Darius behind his right shoulder. Annabella stared Hassan-i Sabbāh full in the face, unflinching, as yet unbeaten, as yet unbowed. Again, Darius could only marvel at the courage of this seemingly insignificant girl-child, child-woman, woman-warrior.

Hassan-i Sabbāh contemplated Annabella greedily for long minutes, noting her defiance, savouring it, prolonging the anticipation of destroying it, as he inevitably would. And the longer she resisted before collapsing into gibbering insanity, the greater would be his pleasure, his gratification, his revenge.

Darius eased into a crouch, cursing his creaking knees, and felt behind him. An amphora came to hand and he surreptitiously hefted it. It was, he judged, something over half full. He straightened, lifting it with some difficulty, and silently removed the stopper.

"So," Hassan-i Sabbāh rasped at last. "We shall proceed. The tongs..." he added, addressing Sinan.

However, before Sinan could begin to move, Darius stepped forward and emptied the contents of the amphora over Hassan-i Sabbāh's carpet. Some splashed on the stripped meat of his legs. There was a moment of frozen shock, broken when Darius dropped the amphora to the stone floor, where it cracked into pieces.

Sinan, at last, began to move but Darius was far too quick. Using a glove to wrap the handle, he seized the glowing pincers from the forge.

"Stop," he said. "Or I fire the carpet."

Sinan halted, standing ludicrously with one foot half raised. Hassan-i Sabbāh swung the carpet about to face Darius. One short step would now be enough to bring the white-hot tongs plunging down into the Greek fire which had soaked into the fabric beneath his feet. The subsequent conflagration would be unpleasant in the extreme but nevertheless he would perforce survive. The carpet, however, would not and was essential to him. He was effectively helpless without it, unable to walk, unable to move without the greatest effort and pain. Further, it could only be replaced by again confronting Iblis, and should this cause Iblis to discover the girl, the girl who had escaped from Waq Waq...

He signed to Sinan to wait. Darius slid sideways enough to be able to reach down the knife from the pillar and still with the pincers poised, crossed to Annabella.

"Don't move," he said, embracing both Sinan and Hassan-i Sabbāh. He slit the strap immobilising Annabella's right wrist and gave her the knife.

"Free yourself," he said. "Quickly." A moment later, Annabella was upright and then swinging her legs to the ground.

"Darius," she said urgently. "What are you doing?"

"Remember your promise," he said equally urgently. He could feel the initiative rapidly seeping away. "Remember, you swore." He paused for a fraction of a second. "Now!" he shouted with all his might. "Now! Run!"

One instant, Annabella was staring at him with a shocked expression, her eyes huge and unfathomable, the next she was doing as she had promised, and was racing from the chamber.

Sinan made a half-hearted move to grab at her in passing but froze when Darius dropped the tongs on the carpet. Instantly, it erupted into an inferno of leaping flame. Hassan-i Sabbāh screamed, a high, curdled note wrung from him by the most intense agony, but Darius was not yet done. He seized the other amphora – this one full, as he had calculated – whipped out the stopper and hurled it on to the forge. There was a moment stolen from eternity when the universe stopped completely and then the chamber went nova, exploding into the incandescent ferocity of a star committing suicide.

Darius was immolated in an instant, mercifully, before feeling could travel from nerves to brain. Sinan died where he stood, his melting fat feeding the frenzy that was charring his bones. Hassan-i Sabbāh, the unquenchable fury of the Greek fire searing the raw flesh of his body, screamed and screamed and screamed, with pain, unimaginable pain, with fury, elemental fury, and with fear, the demented fear of a monster who must now again face the fiend who had created him.

Annabella, her mind racing with unanswerable questions, was some little way down the corridor when the chamber behind her detonated, sending a blast of heat and flame spewing out into the passage and on towards her. Instantly she was swamped by her deep, unreasoning dread of fire and her system, already overloaded, surged with new adrenalin. She spared a moment for one, fearful glance behind her, a moment to realise Darius must be dead, a moment to mourn, and fled onwards, the flames licking at her heels and smoke billowing about her. A shape loomed up before her and she cannoned into the man before he could react, sending the Assassin to the floor. Again her mangled hand hit something. This time, there was no involuntary shriek and the pain was almost welcome, a spur, a goad. She had to win clear. She had to escape or Darius's death would mean nothing.

She came to the staircase and raced upwards... a shout... the next level... pounding footsteps from a passage... the other way... more stairs... gasping... tiring... on... keep on... the courtyard... people rushing at her... another staircase... up... up... up the wall... run... run... behind her... men... coming... the ramparts... coming at her... closing in... exhaustion... don't stop... can't breathe... the battlements, the battlements...

Annabella somehow scrambled up the last two steps to the top, staggered across the rampart to the outer wall, avoiding the hands reaching to grab her, and launched herself into space.

She floated, or so it seemed, falling through time that had slowed to the welling of a tear. She had moments to wonder what she thought she was doing: she couldn't kill herself, not any more. It was now impossible. All she could do was to break and maim her body beyond repair. She had moments to marvel at what Darius had wrought, the escape he had engineered, the sacrifice he had made for her. She had moments to think of Vivienne, her parents. Then, there was the ground at last, swimming towards her, so close and yet still so far away.

Now! The last fraction of the last second. And in embracing it, she surrendered to the one thought swamping her mind, drowning all else.

Basil! I love you! I love you! I love you more than I can bear!

The gasping Assassins clustered along the rampart, leaning through the battlements, watched in amazement. The young fugitive from the dungeon who had somehow managed to evade them all hurtled towards the ground, to inevitable doom. A wisp of smoke appeared, silver in the moonlight, and at the last possible instant enfolded the girl, arrested her fall, bore her upwards, swept her away. A moment later, both smoke and its burden vanished.

Hassan-i Sabbāh lay motionless on the griddle-hot floor of the torture chamber, his consciousness submerged beneath engulfing torrents of pain and fury. The air about him was molten to breathe and reeked of burned flesh, cooked meat, sizzling fat. Apart from himself, anything combustible had been turned to ash. Had the ferocity of the flames lasted only a little longer, he, too, might not have endured despite the protection of the white drops. As it was, the putrid tissues of his body were now charred and blackened, seared, barbecued, no longer just boiled, but roasted as well.

Slowly, the superheated chamber began to cool. Slowly, sentience began to return to the creature on the floor, now no longer recognisable as anything that had ever been human.

Bakri Touma was in the grip of wildly oscillating and conflicting emotions. Fear. Bewilderment. Uncertainty. But most of all resentment, resentment that Sinan again had disappeared, arrantly deserting his post in the most despicable and cowardly fashion, leaving him, Bakri Touma, to bear the whole brunt of this unprecedented crisis.

First there had been the appalling explosion in the torture chamber which had shaken the castle to its very foundations.

Then there had been the unaccountable and grossly negligent failure of the duty guards to recapture that abominable child, never mind the fact that it was obviously Sinan's gross incompetence that had allowed her to escape in the first instance.

And finally, there was the matter of her complete disappearance, her vanishment without trace. In mid-air.

And where was Sinan when he was most needed? AWOL, that's where. Also vanished. And despite the fact that Bakri Touma had the most floccinaucinihilipilificatory opinion of his contemptible superior, nevertheless, his presence at this time was absolutely essential if only to insulate Touma, himself, from the consequences of exercising responsibility on his own account.

He supposed it was possible that Sinan, that great barrel of blubber, had perished in the blast that had rocked the castle, but as far as he was concerned, it was absolutely no excuse. Touma could have wept with vexation, and very nearly did.

The forty or so Assassins who had abandoned their posts to pursue the girl were now standing about in flagrant breach of discipline, whispering among themselves and looking to him for direction.

Why him? Why should he have to tell them what to do? Why couldn't they think for themselves? Why must he make every little decision...?

Petulantly, he sent them back to their posts and stood striking a pose of thoughtful consideration. Someone, he supposed, would have to investigate matters in the torture chamber, but he was damned if was going to be him. Once, Sinan's gross dereliction of duty had forced Touma to enter the presence of the reincarnated grandmaster, but never again. During Sinan's wild goose chase up and down the countryside he had managed to limit contact with the presence to verbal exchanges from beyond the entrance to his chamber, and he was determined to keep it that way.

He beckoned to the two duty sergeants still standing there, waiting for orders and regarding him with patent disapproval.

"The dungeons..." he said. His voice a tone too high and embarrassing because of it. He tried again. "Check the dungeons. Find out what happened. Report."

The sergeants' expressions of disapproval changed to open derision. They were quite aware that Touma had only ever been elevated to second-in-command as an expression of Sinan's fears for his own personal safety. An underling's general incompetence was ever the best insurance against treachery and a stab in the back.

And thanks to the inevitable gossip, they were also equally determined that they should not be forced into the presence of the monster below, assuming he was still alive.

"No sir," one said, openly defiant and daring Touma to take action. "It is your place..."

In the end, they all went, Touma most unhappily and most unwillingly leading the way. Moving with extreme caution, and more and more slowly, they penetrated down into the depths. Eventually, they reached the bottom-most level. To the left was the cistern where the prisoners had first been held and the subsequent cell. To the right was the torture chamber. With extreme reluctance they ventured into the corridor and the further they went, the more hesitant they became until what had started out as the barest shuffle slowed to the merest crawl. Touma, in a defensive crouch, was brandishing a torch before him as much to ward off evil spirits as to light the way. One of the sergeants was nervously thrusting a spear from shadow to shadow, the other had his sword cocked above his shoulder. They came to the corner before the torture chamber and risked a peek. They could see the entrance but yet nothing of what had occurred. The air, however, was still scorched and the smell enough to make one gag, making it almost impossible to breathe at all.

They ground to a complete halt. Something was about to happen, they could feel it. The hair on the back of their necks was lifting, hearts were pounding. Touma actually whimpered but it went unremarked. Such was their tension, the others were quite uncertain as to who might have made the sound, themselves perhaps.

All at once the temperature, distressingly hot, began to drop. Within seconds, they were freezing, shaking with cold, and with fright. Their rivers of sweat, from equal parts heat and funk, turned to ice. Touma whimpered again, a little moan of abject terror.

A voice rang out, a deep voice, sibilant, redolent with menace:

"Again, you break your bond."

"I-I have no choice," came the reply. This voice, Touma recognised. It was the grandmaster. There was an undertone of fear to it and Touma, on the edge of complete hysteria, wondered what on earth could possibly be so terrible as to make what was already the most awful of apparitions afraid.

"My freedom you pledged against three things: to hear the mindtalk of the djinn; immunity from the powers of the djinn; a means to fly with and against the djinn. These three things I bestowed upon you. A bond is a bond is a threefold bond."

"And the ring is the ring," the grandmaster said. "My bond was given in good faith and is broken not of my wish or my doing. I will renew my bond. You will renew your token, you will replace the carpet... The Seal of Solomon speaks."

"Have care, Hassan-i Sabbāh. Have great care. The Seal may speak but will you be sure of what it has said? The power of the ring is threefold and thrice-edged."

There was a long pause. At last Hassan-i Sabbāh spoke again.

"It speaks as it has spoken. I will have the means to move. You will have quittance."

"So be it. But beware should ere you summon me again."

Slowly, the unearthly chill saturating the dungeons began to dissipate. Without a word, without so much as a glance at each other the three men who had been audience to matters they dared not contemplate turned about and crept back the way they had come.

Annabella came awake, gazing upwards at a domed ceiling. It was marble, veined with silver tracery and set with precious stones to give the illusion of the most exotic of fruit trees spreading above. She was lying on satin sheets spread on a low divan, carved and fretted from aromatic sandalwood. There were silken bolsters and the most wondrous, embroidered coverlet depicting a peacock in full display. The chamber itself was not particularly large but perfectly proportioned. The floor was an intricate, geometric mosaic, also of marble, in a variety of subtle colours, while the walls were hung with silks interspersed with tapestries depicting royal courts, hunting scenes and battles. Outside, a flaring desert sunset glowed through the delicate arches of the eastern windows.

She sighed. With the most exquisite relief. She knew exactly where she was. Home. Basil's home. His tower in the Sinai Desert. Still three parts asleep and content to remain so, her mind wandered off down frivolous by-ways. How long had she been here? she wondered idly. Since the night before? Hours and hours and hours it must be. But why the desert? Why did Basil choose to live in the desert? Why not the coast like his father? Basil was also Marid, a djinni of the sea, not the sand. It was a puzzle. He was a puzzle but now perhaps there might be occasion for her to solve him. With that thought, she came fully awake.

"Basil?" she said aloud, sitting up. "Are you here?" A wisp of smoke materialised and drifted across to perch on her knee.

"I am," Basil said. "I am indeed." They fell to silence, a long, warm, loving silence. At last, Basil spoke again.

"There is something I must say." His voice was different, no longer the poncey, mocking tenor but rich with tones that Annabella had heard only twice before, at a times of great peril for both of them.

"And there is something I must tell you," she said, interrupting.

"No. Not yet. First, I must speak," Basil paused, so long that Annabella was forced to wonder what could possibly be wrong. She opened her mouth to ask, but he forestalled her.

"When you sent me away," he began, "I thought I was going to die. Of misery. For love. For loss... I understand now that even if you should die tomorrow... So soon, so soon you will die... Even though you will die tomorrow, I must be with you today. I must love you today. I cannot not love you..." Basil paused, for the longest time.

"You will forgive me?" he dared to ask at last. "I beg you to forgive me. I must have your forgiveness. Or I *will* die today."

Annabella said nothing. She was quite incapable of speaking, her heart was so full. Tears began to fall, unregarded.

"Don't weep," Basil said. "Please don't weep. I can't bear it."

"You don't understand," Annabella managed to say. She stirred and looked about for something with which to dry her eyes. A square of linen materialised before her. She took her time with it, some sneaking part of her mind suggesting that Basil deserved some small punishment at least.

"Will you show yourself to me?" she said eventually in something approaching her normal voice. "I need to see your face."

The wisp of smoke before her seemed to hesitate and then began to resolve into the outline of a head and body. A face appeared, a face that Annabella had only ever seen once before, fine-drawn, aquiline, etched with laugh-lines and love, a face infinitely dear.

"Beloved," Annabella said when she had looked her fill. "This is what I must tell you: You don't have to die today. And I'm not going to die tomorrow. Hassan-i Sabbāh forced me to take al iksir... He planned to torture me for eternity."

There was a long, long silence as Basil absorbed the import of her words.

The sun was now full risen and the day warming rapidly. Annabella gave up trying to finish the huge meal that Basil had lavished upon her and pushed the tray to one side. Always, hovering at the edges of her mind was the unresolved emotion bequeathed her by Darius's sacrifice. Resolutely, she thrust that away, as she had the tray.

"Basil," she said inconsequentially. "Why are you so shy about showing your face?"

"It makes me feel jolly well naked," he replied reluctantly. He was still corporeal but had reverted back to his usual, irreverent habit of speech.

"Naked?"

"Nude... Stripped. Unclothed. Exposed. Bare."

"Oh... So, can I have a bath now, please?" Annabella asked, following an unconscious association of ideas..

"A bath?" Basil said warily.

"You know, hot water, soap, towels..."

"You mean in the bathhouse?"

"Of course, in the bathhouse... Basil...!"

"All right," Basil agreed reluctantly.

"Basil, why are you being so thingy?"

"Moi! Thingy...?"

"Come and scrub my back?"

"I jolly well knew you'd say that..."

"So...?"

"Um... Not this time..."

"Why not? Nothing you haven't done before... Nothing you haven't seen before, you always tell me."

"Um... Well, actually, there jolly well is..."

"What on earth you talking about?" Annabella demanded.

"Front," Basil mouthed.

"Front?" Annabella exclaimed, looking down at herself. It was true, she realised. Al iksir seemed to have addressed the matter of her long-delayed puberty, all in a rush. She had no idea how she felt about it. At last, some competition for Vivienne was her first thought...

"Are you sure you haven't been meddling?" she asked suspiciously. It was, after all, something Basil had been threatening on and off ever since she'd met him.

"Abso-jolly-lutely not," Basil said. "Wouldn't jolly dream of it, wouldn't jolly dare... Not without your jolly say-so."

"Well," Annabella said consideringly after a long moment. "My back still needs to be scrubbed... And fair's fair. If you're naked, there's no reason I shouldn't be."

And then, the intrusion of the outside world could no longer be kept at bay. Along with her grief for Darius, it nagged at her with the same sort of persistence as her throbbing finger. Basil had to hear of all that had happened, and they had to consider what best to do about it.

"How did you know where to come?" Annabella asked at the end of her long recital. Basil hesitated.

"I went back to the hospital when..."

"When you couldn't stay away..." Annabella helped him out.

"When I couldn't stand it any longer... But you'd all jolly well disappeared. You, Darius, Vivienne, Darius minor... Obviously, I didn't jolly well know about you sending Vivienne and young Darius off with the refugees... I thought Hassan-i Sabbāh must have got all of you... And Castle Masyaf seemed like the only place he would jolly well take you. So I went there and I was trying to work out a way of getting to you when you came flying headfirst over the jolly battlements..." He fell silent.

"Darius was a good man," he said at last. "A good doctor and a good man. He loved you, too..."

"I had no idea what he was planning," Annabella said, the guilt plain in her voice.

"Could you have stopped him if you had jolly well known?" It was a good question. It helped.

"No," Annabella said. "I don't suppose so."

"So, accept his gift in the spirit he gave it. I for one will jolly well always be devoutly grateful."

"But to do that... What he did..."

"Greek fire," Basil said. "An explosion like that... He wouldn't have felt anything. Hassan-i Sabbāh, however, the way you describe him... Darius took full measure there..."

The sights and sounds of those last few moments as the torture chamber exploded played themselves out again in Annabella's mind... Darius holding Hassan-i Sabbāh and Sinan at bay, long enough to free her... Hassan-i Sabbāh's curdled screams as the flames erupted about him...

"What did Darius mean?" she asked. "When he threatened to fire the carpet? Why did that hold Hassan-i Sabbāh back? I don't understand..."

"The carpet?" Basil said. "We guessed right, I suppose. The state of his body must mean Hassan-i Sabbāh can't jolly well move without it. And the only way to get a carpet, a new one, a replacement, is for him to make Iblis give him another... Pause for thought, that one..." Basil, himself, paused thoughtfully.

"Tricky," he went on. "In the jolly circes, dead tricky. I wouldn't want to try it, even with the ring. No jolly love lost between those two. None."

They fell to silence, again, a rather defeated silence. They were again confronted with the insoluble situation. Hassan-i Sabbāh, temporarily at least, might be more or less helpless without a carpet, unable to move without excruciating pain, but that put them no closer to destroying him.

Without distraction, Annabella's damaged hand again forced itself on her notice. She held it up to the light and for the first time brought herself to examine it at length, rather than just glancing fleetingly at the angry red stub of what was left of her little finger. The missing joint seemed to be hurting rather more than the remainder. How could that be possible? It was gone, wasn't it? It no longer existed. How could it still hurt? It was her hand, her body, that was immortal, not the amputated joint, surely?

A sensation began to flood her brain, warm, tingling. It suddenly flared into bright, flaring illumination.

"Basil!" Annabella whispered, as though frightened of destroying the revelation by exposing it to inspection. She held up her hand, the hand with the missing finger. "Look..." Basil actually shuddered.

"Must I? I'd really rather not..."

"No. Look! Tell me I'm not wrong. To exist, to be alive, even if you're immortal, you have to have a body, an actual body, even you, even if it is fire... No body, no immortality...?"

"No body, no immortality?" Basil repeated.

"That has to be right, doesn't it?"

"Y-es-s...?"

"So, we have to..." A thought that had struck her long before, in Saladin's camp, returned to Annabella. She had asked herself then how they could eliminate Hassan-i Sabbāh. The answer, she now understood, lay in the very word itself. "We have to eliminate him, completely obliterate his body, atomise it, so that there's nothing left. No bones. No teeth. No nothing."

"Um..."

"Yes?" Annabella said urgently. "Tell me, yes."

"Yes," Basil said at last. "But remember, the jolly old volcano couldn't do it, so I don't know what could."

"What about the Greek fire?" Hope suddenly surged in Annabella. "How could he possibly have survived that?"

"I don't know," Basil said soberly. "But he has."

"How do you know? How can you know?"

"Iblis was summoned." Annabella bit off her automatic exclamation of disbelief. She knew from the past that the Other World held to different principles, that the denizens were aware of shifts and currents impossible for a human to register. It also probably meant that Hassan-i Sabbāh had already replaced the carpet, something Basil had delicately chosen not to stress.

"There must be a way," Annabella insisted eventually. "There must be a way to completely destroy him."

Twice, Basil began to speak. Twice, he stopped. In the end he said simply: "How?"

"I don't know," Annabella said. Eliminating a body completely, it seemed to her, given her luck, was unlikely to be a simple matter, particularly a body protected by al iksir, particularly when the tenant could be expected to take strenuous exception to the process. Then inspiration seized Annabella for a second time.

"I don't know," she repeated. "But I know someone who might."

Chapter 18

Touma stood outside the grandmaster's personal chamber whence he had been summoned by a bellow relayed by frightened servants. He did his best to still his trembling in an effort to concentrate properly on the stream of orders from within where he dared not go. Making frantic mental notes, he then departed at the run.

Ten minutes later, half a dozen couriers debouched from Castle Masyaf at the gallop. Each had a pannier of homing pigeons strapped behind his saddle, the pigeons all aflutter and clinging grimly to their perches. The couriers' task, their most urgent task, was to locate the wandering patrol of Assassins left leaderless by Sinan's sudden elevation to the grandmaster's carpet some days before. No doubt the patrol was making its dutiful if somewhat leisurely way back to Castle Masyaf. If the men were looking forward to the fleshpots of barrack life at home base at last, they were in for an unpleasant surprise.

Mrs Gordon stopped with her hand on the door to her office. She had a premonition, a tingling down her spine. She was sorely tempted to walk away, to go home to bed and pull the covers up over her head, to depart immediately on the long vacation she had been promising herself for the past ten years. But bravely, she squared her shoulders and went forward. She kept her eyes down and closed the door behind her, carefully, with restraint, before turning to face the room. Things were every bit as bad as she had feared. It was not that she had any particular objection to young Annabella Crabtree beyond a certain reservation at the girl's forthright disregard for the proper deference owed to her elders, but to find her sitting there, at ease, behind the headmistress's locked door in the headmistress's own study was too much, far too much, beyond a joke, beyond reason.

"Annabella!" Mrs Gordon exclaimed on a rising note. At least the girl had had the decency to wear school uniform but even so, something was strangely different about her. It took a long moment for Mrs Gordon to realise that Annabella was no longer the skinny, twiggy thing she remembered; she was now a slender and shapely young woman, distinctly shapely, the sort of shapely that usually meant trouble of a kind Mrs Gordon was well accustomed to dealing with. Something told her, however, that she would be most fortunate if boy-bother was all this particular young lady had brought to bedevil her.

"Annabella, what on earth are you doing in my office?" Mrs Gordon demanded.

"Waiting for you," Annabella said. "What else would I be doing?" There it was again, that lack of respect bordering on insolence. "I thought you might prefer it," the girl added a touch more meekly. "To me waiting outside, I mean, where everyone would see." And Mrs Gordon was forced to concede that Annabella indeed had a point. She played for time by marching round behind her desk, pulling out her chair and sitting down with a precision so clinical that it was overtly threatening.

"Your parents are extremely worried," Mrs Gordon said accusingly. She had not at all enjoyed trying to explain the situation to them. "And where is Vivienne? I have a bone to pick with that young lady..." A bone the size of dinosaur's tibia, she thought

grimly. She had enjoyed explaining the situation Vivienne had created to the school governors even less.

"Um... That is, I'm not exactly sure," Annabella said. "Somewhere on the road to Tyre, I think. Or at least, that's what we guess. It's our next job, to find her. And Darius."

"You mean to tell me that she's still with that boy."

"I hope so," Annabella said. "I hope he's looking after her. I don't think she's very good at doing it for herself."

"I wouldn't say that," Mrs Gordon snapped, and then conscious of the inherent contradiction added: "Last time she was here, she did an admirable job of creating maximum chaos and then disappearing completely."

"Jolly good jape, though," Basil interposed. Mrs Gordon's shoulders slumped.

"Basil, please!" Annabella said. "You promised you wouldn't interrupt."

"Sorry," Basil said, not the least bit repentant.

"Annabella," Mrs Gordon said with all the restraint she could command. "Why have you come?"

"And here was us thinking you'd be so jolly glad to see her..."

"Basil," Annabella said warningly. "We need to ask you a question," she added to Mrs Gordon.

"A question?"

"Information," Annabella said. "We need to know how to do something."

"What?"

"How to get rid of a body... How to destroy it, eliminate it so that there's nothing left, absolutely nothing..."

"What?" Mrs Gordon repeated incredulously. "A human body?" Annabella said nothing but her gaze never wavered.

"Why on earth would you think that I could tell you that?" Mrs Gordon asked eventually.

"You're a scientist," Annabella said. "A chemist... Please," she added after a moment. "I can't tell you how important it is." There was now a note of supplication in her voice, enough to induce Mrs Gordon to bite off an angry rejoinder. She took a deep breath.

"You have to tell me why," she said at last. "Are you asking me to help you plan a murder?"

"Yes..." Annabella admitted.

"... The murder of a monster," Basil said. For once, his voice was devoid of mischief.

"Hassan-i Sabbāh..." Annabella said.

"Who, whatever he might have been, is not now human," Basil said gravely. "Not any more." Annabella laid her left hand on the desk between her and Mrs Gordon. She pointed to the little finger.

"He did this," she said. "With a pair of red-hot pincers. He was planning to cut me down, joint by joint, day by day..." Mrs Gordon stared at Annabella's mutilated hand and blanched.

"What do you want to do?" she asked after a pause.

"I don't know," Annabella said. "It depends on what you tell us. Because of the elixir, we have to eliminate him completely, or so we think. As long as he has a body, we can't kill him. So we have to destroy his body... totally... nothing left. We have to atomise him..."

"You're serious? I believe you're serious..." Annabella made no reply. She waited.

"Would acid do it?" she asked at last. "There is vitriol. I know we can get vitriol."

Mrs Gordon regarded her uncomprehendingly for long minutes. Eventually she seemed to have worked through her thoughts and come to some sort of decision. She shook her head.

"No," she said. "Not in the 12th Century..." Annabella's face fell. "That is still when we're talking...? You would never get enough, and never at sufficient concentration. Industrial manufacture wasn't developed until the 1700s. Fire...?" Annabella shook her head.

"We tried that," she said. "Accidentally, sort of. It didn't work."

Mrs Gordon got to her feet and began to pace between the desk and the door. On the wall nearest her there was displayed a large, old-fashioned topographical map of the continents and the oceans. She walked past it, twice, three times and then suddenly stopped.

"Pressure," she said almost inaudibly and swung back towards Annabella. "The calcite compensation depth... Even bones dissolve."

"I'm sorry," Annabella said. "I don't understand." Mrs Gordon assumed her best pedagogical voice.

"At sufficient pressure, that is at sufficient depth, calcium is chemically unstable and dissolves."

"You mean...?"

"I mean no calcium, so no calcium carbonate, so no bones, so no body, all gone, nothing, finished." Annabella stiffened with hope.

But there's a catch, Basil said. There's always a jolly old catch...

"How deep?" Annabella asked, suddenly wary.

"It varies," Mrs Gordon said. "Different oceans, different chemical composition, different depths. Let's say 5000m to be safe."

"But..."

"Here," Mrs Gordon said turning and tapping the map. "The Hellenic Trench." Annabella rose and went to stand beside her. Mrs Gordon's finger traced an area to the south-west of the Peloponnese, 900 miles or so across the Mediterranean from Tyre.

Which is all very jolly well, Basil said. We might even be able to trick Hassan-i Sabbāh into going there, somehow – I've no jolly idea how – but then what are we going to do? Ask him to jolly well duck dive down to the bottom?

"How deep is that?" Annabella asked, ignoring Basil.

"It varies," Mrs Gordon said. "The deeps go down to 5200m in places. Look here, the Calypso Deep..." She pointed to an area close to the Greek coast. Annabella noted that the nearest town was called Pylos, about 45 miles away.

They all fell silent.

"Annabella," Mrs Gordon began again. "I really must insist that you talk to your parents, phone them at least. You must. You can't not." Annabella frowned. The last thing she wanted to do was to find herself buried under an avalanche of parental concern. There was no telling how long it would take to dig her way out and time was pressing, never mind that Basil seemed able to make it somewhat malleable.

"No," she said. "Not a good idea."

"Annabella!" Mrs Gordon protested. "You must! What on earth can I tell them if you don't?"

"Don't tell them anything. What they don't know won't hurt them, at least not any more than I already have..."

Mrs Gordon groaned wordlessly.

"Please," Annabella said. "If you make me talk to them, they'll get everything out of me, I know they will. And then they'll worry twice as much, believe me..."

"Three times as much..." Basil said sotto voce.

"Please," Annabella pleaded. "They know what we're up against. They'll understand... They'll forgive me..."

You hope, Basil slipped in.

They will, Annabella insisted. *Come on. Let's go. Before I weaken...*

You're sure?

Abso-jolly-lutely.

And before Mrs Gordon could marshal her arguments to protest further, Annabella vanished. Mrs Gordon slammed her hand down on the desk in frustration, not wisely but too well. Her subsequent cry of pain magnified by her vexation brought her secretary rushing through the door in alarm. First, there had been the sound of voices which was impossible, given that the door to Mrs Gordon's office had been locked when she arrived and the secretary was certain that no one had got past her, and now this cry of anguish. Surely Mrs Gordon had not been talking to herself? And shouting like that. Was she all right? Was she quite well? The secretary was deeply worried. Mrs Gordon had been under a great deal of strain of late...

Vivienne was extremely fed up. She was not fond of walking at the best of times but now, trailing along in the wake of the straggly, slow-moving refugee column, breathing its dust and trying to persuade a recalcitrant donkey not to come to a halt every second or third step, she had just about had enough. They had been on the road so long she had quite lost track of the days. Eight? Nine? They hoped finally to reach Tyre that evening.

The donkey stopped again for the umpteenth time that morning. The donkey was a total disaster, Vivienne thought. Good name. She opened her mouth to scream at him

and caught Dari watching her warily out of the corner of his eye, waiting for the explosion. All of a sudden, she laughed instead.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Have I been totally impossible?"

"Mmmm," Dari said, still wary. "Pretty much..."

"Oh dear... And now you hate me...?"

"Mmmm," Dari said again.

"Forgive me. Say you'll forgive me..."

"Of course. How could I ever hate you? You're much too beautiful..." Vivienne looked at him searchingly.

"No," she said. "Don't say that. I don't want you to like me just because I'm pretty. I want..."

"What?" Dari asked gently, aware that Vivienne was trying to say something important. "What do you want...?"

"I want to be good for you... Not just..." Disaster stood there, ears drooping, but his four feet planted four square to resist any possible suggestion of movement in any possible direction. Vivienne and Dari also stood there, one each side of the donkey, regarding each other yearningly across his back, lost in the significance of the moment.

"How jolly sweet," a voice sounded between them. They jerked back guiltily as though they had just been caught doing what they were dreaming of.

"Basil...?" Vivienne said wonderingly, at last managing to close her mouth.

"Yours truly and one and the jolly same," the voice said. A wisp of smoke materialised and perched between Disaster's ears. "Missed me?"

"Where have you been?" Vivienne demanded, instantaneously cranking up. "Where's Annabella? What have you done with her? Is she all right? Why aren't you with her...?" Dari reached a hand across Disaster's back and put a finger to Vivienne's lips.

"Shsh," he said. "Basil?"

"She's quite all right," Basil said, for once forbearing to beat about the bush. "In fact, she's just over there, round the brow of the hill. I'm to take you to her."

All at once, Disaster gave a great hee-haw of a bellow, cavorted wildly for a moment, forcing Vivienne and Dari to jump back, and then stampeded off the rough road to gallop in the direction Basil had indicated, his pack jouncing wildly and threatening to spill Vivienne and Dari's few meagre possessions all over the countryside.

"Come on," Basil said. "After him! That's your excuse to leave this lot."

With a wildly speculative glance at each other, Vivienne and Dari did as they were told and began to chase determinedly after Disaster. People in the column who had turned to watch as the little drama unfolded, grimaced sympathetically and turned back to the trudgery of the weary road to Tyre.

Annabella was waiting for them in a little olive grove. Dari stopped when he saw her standing in a patch of shade, but Vivienne rushed towards her and seized her compulsively. It was a long time before Annabella could persuade her to ease up.

"I thought you were dead," Vivienne said in a low voice, brushing away tears. "I really thought you must be dead."

"It might be better if I were," Annabella said. She too was crying.

"Don't say that. Please, don't say that..." Annabella sniffed and reached for something to mop her face.

"Why do you say that?" Vivienne demanded after a moment. "Annabella, why do you say that? What's happened?"

"I'm all right," Annabella said. "Just a weak moment. Don't pay any attention." She beckoned to Dari, a strategic diversion, and went halfway towards him. He came up to her and hugged her in the most natural way in the world. Wryly Annabella noted that his embrace was entirely brotherly and she drew her own conclusions accordingly. It kept things simple, she supposed.

"I'm so glad to see you," he said. "We're so glad to see you. We were so worried..."

"We didn't know what to do," Vivienne interrupted. "We went back to the hospital but you'd disappeared and we thought *he* must've got you..."

"He did," Annabella said soberly. "I'm sorry Dari, but I have to tell you: Darius is dead. He died so bravely. He died to free me. It's how I escaped. I'm so sorry. I wish it hadn't happened. I didn't know what he was planning to do. I'm so sorry." They all fell silent, Dari still with his hands to Annabella's elbows but his gaze lowered. He dropped his arms and turned away. Vivienne went to him. Annabella felt the tears coming again and turned back to the shade of the tree. She sat down, hands clasped about her knees, head down. She felt terrible. Shattered. She wondered if her grief and all the other complicated emotions that Darius's death had inspired would ever really leave her.

What should I do? she asked Basil. *I don't know what I can do.*

Give him the truth, Basil said. *All of it. Let him see what a great and noble thing his grandfather did, a deed for which I shall always honour him, for which I will be eternally grateful.*

Annabella talked for what seemed like hours. Even Vivienne refrained from interrupting, gripped by the narrative. At one point she took Annabella's left hand, examined it wincing, and gently folded it in her own, refusing to release it.

Finally, Annabella explained how she and Basil had searched the road all the way to Tyre the night before and eventually spotted Dari fetching water from a stream by the light of a burning brand. Reconnoitring further along the road, they had also spotted two nondescript men resting by a small campfire, at a point where no traveller could pass by unobserved. One was evidently asleep, but the other was obviously awake and alert. There was something else. Hobbled a little way off were a pair of horses, one of which Annabella could not fail to recognise: Brutus. And Brutus, Annabella knew, through no fault of his own had come originally from the Assassin stables at Castle Masyaf. Something about the quiet discipline of the watchers by the

roadside made her come to the conclusion that Brutus had been reclaimed by the order.

It was something Annabella thought they could use.

"Use how?" Vivienne asked, suddenly deeply suspicious. In her experience, Annabella's plans tended to range from fearful to terrifying.

"We need to lay a trail," Annabella said. "For Hassan-i Sabbāh to follow."

"How?" Vivienne demanded. "I mean how do we lay a trail?" Annabella raised an eyebrow.

"Oh no," Vivienne said watching her face.. "Whatever it is you're thinking, forget it..."

And just what are you jolly well thinking? Basil put in.

Chains, she said. *I know you can do chains...* Annabella was referring to a much earlier occasion when Basil had caused Hassan-i Sabbāh to be draped in half a ton of ironmongery.

Aloud, she said innocently: "Bait, is what I'm thinking." And going on to thoroughly mix her metaphors, she added: "To lay a trail we need to bait the hook..."

"Bait?" Dari said.

"Don't ask," Vivienne interjected. "Just don't ask..."

"There won't be any danger," Annabella said. "At least, not much... I hope..."

"No," Vivienne said flatly. "Whatever it is, no!"

Which is how it came to pass that still with some hours of daylight left Vivienne and Darius, along with Disaster, came to rejoin the road to Tyre. Strangely, Disaster seemed much more disposed to be cooperative and they made good time in the wake of the refugee column, which was now miles ahead of them.

A good hour later, the track wound its way up the shoulder of the hill. On one side was a steep gully, on the other a wooded slope. Ahead of them a drift of smoke from a small campfire was rising almost vertically in the still afternoon, but neither of them noticed. They came round the corner and were setting themselves for the last climb to the crest when two men stepped down into the road in front of them, one rather older than the other.

"Salam alaikum," the elder said, holding up his hand, while the other sidled around to their left. "Stop a moment." Dari stepped protectively in front of Vivienne. She already had her hijab tight about her head and face, only her eyes showing.

"We have no time to delay," Dari said. "We must reach Tyre before nightfall and they close the gates."

"Yet stay," the man said, making no move to get out of their way. He had small, unblinking eyes and under his dirty robes looked to be hard-muscled, a fighter. The second man was still moving and abruptly he snatched at Vivienne's veil. She yelped and put her hands up to hold it in place, but she was too late. A tell-tale lock of blonde hair escaped.

"So," the first man said. "Now you will definitely stay." Both of the men drew the scimitars that had been more or less concealed by their robes. The leader stood aside

and gestured invitingly towards the trees. Vivienne and Dari no choice but to obey. In passing, the second man smacked Disaster sharply on the rump with his sword and that was the last anyone ever saw of the outraged donkey as he bolted over the crest of the hill.

What did you mean, chains? Basil demanded. Annabella was lying on top of a rocky bluff that conveniently overlooked the Assassin's camp. Basil, all but transparent, was floating in mid-air in front of her, where he could see her face. The little wood was still and quiet except for the murmur of a pair of pigeons in a wicker basket sitting on a rock near the campfire.

Like I said, Annabella replied absently. *I know you can do chains.*

But why should I jolly well want to?

Why do you think?

You tell me, Basil said crossly.

Chains sink, Annabella said, giving Basil her full attention. *All the way to the bottom...*

Oh... The wisp of smoke hovering before Annabella turned a faint shade of pink. *Stupid of me...*

Abso-jolly-lutely stupid, Annabella said kindly. They subsided into their own thoughts.

Hey, Basil said. Annabella was absorbed in watching the two Assassins step out into the road to confront Vivienne and Dari. *Just a minute. Just a jolly minute... To sink, chains have to be in the water. And just how are you proposing to jolly well achieve that, might I ask?*

I'll think of something, Annabella said, but just a touch too glibly, which set all Basil's alarm bells clanging on the instant.

You jolly well have already, haven't you? Basil accused her. *You've got a plan, I know you... I know you have. What? Tell me...*

Shsh, Annabella said, saved by the crackling of branches. *They're coming. We need to hear.*

Chapter 19

The two Assassins prodded Vivienne and Dari into the clearing and backed them up against the rocky bluff behind their campfire.

"Now," the leader of the two said, the man who had first stepped into the road. "We shall discourse like civilised people." He had allowed his scimitar to dangle down from his raised arm and to swing mesmerically before them. Vivienne could not take her eyes from it and was already feeling dizzy.

"There's nothing civilised about the point of the sword," Dari said boldly.

"Exactly my feeling, too," the Assassin said. "Which is why I earnestly beseech you to answer my questions, freely and openly, without resistance." He regarded his two captives with practised calculation. Interrogation was something upon which he rather prided himself. The trick was to find the weak point before it all became distressingly hard work, and distressingly messy. He had thought Sinan's questioning of that Crusader knight some few days ago, for example, extremely unsophisticated and unprofessional, indeed downright crude. Where was the intellectual challenge in singeing a man's feet?

"What questions?" Dari demanded, still speaking boldly. "And who are you? How dare you kidnap us... I'll..."

What? Annabella wondered. Protest to his local member? She had slid back from the edge of the bluff to avoid being spotted but could hear every word perfectly.

"... Do nothing," the Assassin said negligently.

"Stop wasting time," the number two man interjected. "I can beat it out of them before you've finished pissing about."

"You won't," his leader said still negligently. "Just shut up." The other man shifted angrily, opened his mouth to protest, then clamped it tight shut, his jaw muscles working. Dari watched him warily. He, too, had to make a nice calculation. Annabella had said that they should do their best to make it real, but not to get hurt, and it was hard to know which of their two captors was actually the more unpredictable: Mr Suave or Mr Brutal.

"Where is the girl with blue eyes?" Mr Suave inquired, his voice again restrained.

"I have no idea who you're talking about," Dari said.

"And where is her djinni?"

"Djinni? Are you telling me that you believe in djinn?"

Mr Suave's sword suddenly ceased its pendulum swing and tracked towards Vivienne. Delicately, the Assassin, all the while watching Dari closely, inserted the point of the scimitar between Vivienne's headscarf and the side of her face. He flicked it sideways and the cloth slit with an audible susurration. Vivienne's eyes suddenly grew huge and very, very round. She squeaked, but Dari apparently appeared unmoved.

Abruptly, Mr Suave shifted the sword to Dari, laying the edge next to his carotid artery. Clearly, as perhaps one might expect, the girl was the weak point.

"Blue eyes," he said, his face turned slightly towards Vivienne. "And her djinni?"

"S-she's gone to Tyre," Vivienne stammered, her performance all the more convincing as she was genuinely afraid for Dari.

"Don't tell him any more," Dari said. The sword pressed harder and a thin line of blood suddenly appeared on the side of his throat. Vivienne gasped.

"And why has she gone to Tyre," Mr Suave inquired mildly.

"To find a ship..." Vivienne said. "Please, don't hurt him."

"A ship, you say?"

"To... to take us away..."

"Away where?"

"I don't think..." Vivienne began.

"I do." The blood suddenly began to run more freely down Dari's neck.

"Anywhere," Vivienne said hurriedly. "Another country. Over the sea. Anywhere away from... him." And Mr Suave found that he was not entirely unsympathetic to the notion. From the gossip he had heard, he was rather of the same opinion, that's to say that "him" was definitely best avoided.

Mr Brutal had been fidgeting restlessly. He now stepped forward.

"That's enough," he said. "Kill the boy. Send the message. I'll... take care of the girl."

"Orders are to keep them alive," Mr Suave said.

"The boy was stupid," Mr Brutal grinned contemptuously. "He was killed trying to escape. The girl..." He shrugged. "The girl will still be alive when I finish with her."

Mr Brutal looked at Mr Suave meaningly. The point of his scimitar wavered like a compass needle and moved around until it was not quite threatening. The two Assassins stared at each other for a long minute until Mr Suave finally dropped his eyes. Neither Vivienne nor Dari, nor Annabella now peeping over the bluff, were in any doubt as to what that meant.

Enough? Basil inquired gently.

Enough, Annabella replied, again worming her way away from the edge. *I'll meet you back on the road... Don't hurt them too much. We need them to send that pigeon...*

Mr Suave might have had an intellectual advantage when it came to interrogation, but physical violence was very much Mr Brutal's province, particularly as gratuitous murder was something Mr Suave had always found downright vulgar.

"You do it," he said shortly.

Mr Brutal grinned again, again contemptuously, but in the event he didn't get a chance to do anything. He suddenly found himself rising feet first into the air. He dropped his sword in panic as a rope appeared, snared his feet and then snaked around a convenient branch, leaving him dangling upside down quite some distance above the forest floor, like so much meat hoisted up clear of the vermin.

Mr Suave watched open-mouthed, that is until he, too, found himself in exactly the same situation. He also dropped his sword in fright.

"Guess what?" Dari said. He walked over to the two men, dabbing at the blood smearing his neck. His face was on about the same level as the two inverted heads so that they were eye to upside down eye. He found it a most peculiar situation.

"Actually, we do believe in djinn," he continued. "This one was a bit late arriving, but better late than never." He hawked noisily and spat full in Mr Brutal's face.

"Yech!" Vivienne protested. "Did you have to do that?"

"It's nothing to what I'd like to do," Dari said. "Not after what he was planning to do to you. I should kill him, but I won't. He can hang there till he rots. Sure you wouldn't like a go?" Vivienne thought about it, but turned away.

"Come on," she said instead and concerned to reinforce the message, added: "We have to get to Tyre, to meet Annabella. I hope she's found a ship. I can't wait to get out of this horrible country." She moved off towards the two horses, which had remained quite indifferent to all these strange goings-on and were still placidly cropping.

Dari took one last look at the two dangling thugs. He noted that faithful to his instructions, Basil had not made it impossible for them to free themselves. He hurried after Vivienne and, removing the hobbles from the two horses, boosted her into Brutus's saddle. He mounted the other himself and a moment later they were wending their way through the trees, back to the road.

Well out of earshot of the Assassins' camp, they stopped as Annabella stepped out in front of them. Brutus whickered when he saw her and despite Vivienne hauling on his reins, moved forward until he could gently bunt Annabella in her fine, new chest. It reminded Vivienne of something she had been meaning to say.

"Annabella," she admonished, peering around Brutus's neck. "I want to have a word with you... about... about... things."

"Two things..." Annabella chuckled, climbing up behind Vivienne. "I can't help it, V. They just happened. Are you jealous?"

"You must be joking," Vivienne said, making sure Dari had moved far enough ahead not to overhear. "They're not nearly as big as mine. Nice though..."

Mr Suave, his head throbbing from the excess of blood draining down, waited until he was sure his erstwhile prisoners were gone, never to return. He had no idea what might have happened to the invisible djinni but could only hope that he had disappeared along with the others. He looked unhappily at the ground, pulled a knife from his sash and with considerable effort hauled himself up high enough to be able to see at the rope suspending him from the tree. Very quickly he was panting and sweating with the strain but eventually, all at once, the rope gave way and he plummeted down, landing awkwardly and extremely painfully on the point of his shoulder.

He looked angrily at Mr Brutal, who in his mind should assume total responsibility for their predicament, and moved across to the pigeon coop.

"Hey!" Mr Brutal said. "Get me down!" But Mr Suave ignored him, instead, composing a careful message. After transcribing it all over again on to a second scrap of parchment, he attached each missive to one of the pigeons and sent them wheeling up into the sky. Only then did he pick up a fallen sword and slash at the rope suspending Mr Brutal, who, all unprepared, crashed brutally to the ground.

Mr Suave grinned inwardly. It was some slight compensation for finding himself stuck leagues from anywhere with an uncultivated thug, horseless and humiliated. Mr

Suave then embarked on a long, pleasurable fulminate about the deplorable level to which Assassin recruitment standards had sunk over recent years.

Originally, the ancient city of Tyre, built on a small island just off the coast, had been more or less impregnable. High walls and the wide, natural moat formed by the sea had defeated even Nebuchadnezzar, who wasted 13 futile years attempting to capture it. The inhabitants mockingly took to referring to him as Nebuchadnever. Alexander the Great, however, being Alexander, had found a way. He had demolished the suburbs that had grown up on the mainland and employed the rubble to create an artificial isthmus across to the city, allowing him to bring up siege engines. Irritated by what he regarded as a great deal of unnecessary trouble – a sensible establishment would have seen the writing on its walls and simply surrendered – Alexander in conquest was less than gentle. Some six thousand of the defenders were summarily executed, two thousand more crucified and thirty thousand of the citizens, men, women and children, were sold into slavery to be replaced by Greek and later Roman colonisers.

Tyre had long since rebuilt itself, fortunately for the Crusaders remaining in Outremer. Even though no longer an island it was still extremely difficult to besiege successfully. Accordingly, it was also a magnet for those who, one way or another, had managed to save themselves from the fall of Jerusalem.

Pushing the two Assassin horses rather more than was quite right in Dari's opinion, he, Annabella and Vivienne managed to catch the tail of the refugee column they had abandoned that morning just before it disappeared through the city gates. They, too, were allowed to enter unchallenged and along with the throng pushed their way into the bewildering maze of streets and alleys, twisting hither and yon without any apparent rhyme or reason.

"So what do we do now?" Vivienne asked when the crush about them thinned out enough to allow them to pause in a little square to take stock.

Have you been here before? Annabella asked Basil.

But of course...

So how do we get to the harbour?

That jolly old street, to your left. Annabella inspected an unappealing thoroughfare disappearing between blank walls and trending downwards. It was slightly wider than most of the other thoroughfares, wide enough for a cart and a single horse or pedestrians to squeeze past each other. Annabella couldn't help wondering what happened if two carts should come to a meeting. An organised city would have some sort of system of one-way control, but looking about her, Annabella had grave doubts that organisation was one of Tyre's strong points. She made an expansive gesture.

"Down there," she said to the others. Darius frowned at her worriedly.

"Shouldn't we be trying to be a bit more discreet?" he asked. "There'll be Assassins here. Guaranteed. You saw those pigeons. They'll know about us, like the others. They'll be watching for us."

"Which is exactly what we want," Annabella said patiently. She had thought that everyone was quite clear on the plan. "I want them to spot me. They can't try anything,

at least not successfully, not with Basil about. They'll have to report to Hassan-i Sabbāh and it will take time for the message to get to him and for him to get here."

"How much time?" Vivienne asked nervously. Annabella sighed. This too was old ground but she supposed she couldn't blame them for being apprehensive. If she were utterly honest with herself, she would have to admit there was a deep, underlying throb of fear in her own heart.

"No idea," she said. "Enough time for us to get a ship if we do it now."

You hope, Basil interjected. *And there won't be anywhere to stay, not with all these people in town...*

We'll stay on the ship...

If you can find a ship...

"Everybody stop it," Annabella said aloud. The others had been watching her face and understood whom she meant. "I know this is all crazy. I know it's mad. But I don't have any other ideas. I don't want you to have to come with me but Hassan-i Sabbāh is hunting you, too. We've seen that. Those two Assassins back there on the road were waiting for you. If you go off on your own again, he'll get you and then he'll have me exactly where he wants me. I won't be able to do anything but give myself up, to save you. And knowing him, it won't anyway..." Annabella was speaking in a low, impassioned voice. Vivienne put a hand on her arm and another to her lips.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's all just so frightening. What he did to you... What he'll do to us..."

"He's not going to do anything to any of us," Annabella said with brave false confidence. "I'm not going to let him..."

The three of them, with Basil invisible on Annabella's shoulder, were standing in a huddled group, the horses waiting quietly. Ostensibly, they were no different to any of the other clumps of refugees clustered about lost, bewildered and with no clear idea of what to do next. However, a watcher in a second-floor window, concealed in the shadow, had marked them immediately. Two more thoroughly anonymous Assassins were already slipping down to street level, one to follow and one to report, as appropriate.

The harbour, like all working waterfronts the world over, past, present and future, was messy, rundown, confused and confusing. A stone quay, flanked on one side by a motley collection of warehouses, taverns, drug dens and brothels, and on the other by an even more motley collection of assorted war galleys, merchantmen and fishing smacks, moored haphazardly four and five deep, ran around three sides of a surprisingly large basin until it butted up against an artificial mole protecting the bay from the open sea.

The street down which they came swung abruptly around a blind corner and before they were anything like ready or prepared, dumped them into the midst of a jostling crowd, half of which were struggling to finish the day's work, the other half rowdily embarking on the evening's entertainment.

We are being followed, Basil remarked.

I thought so, Annabella said. *Good...*

They stood there, uncertainly, surveying the scene before them.

"This way," Annabella said at last, and started off round the quayside, using Brutus to force a passage for her. She had no real idea of where she was going but she could feel the others were beginning to wilt and any movement was better than standing still. As they progressed around the harbour, the press of people began to thin out somewhat and it was clear that they were coming to the even seedier end of things. The buildings to their right were meaner and more and more squalid, the shipping to their left smaller, dirtier and more rundown.

At last, with not far to go until they reached the mole, they came to a stumpy little merchantman with one stubby mast, a much patched sail untidily furled around a lateen yard and ports for a dozen sweeps on either side. She was moored on her own, hard up against the wharf, an outcast shunned in dismay by the other shipping. Annabella stopped and spent some little time examining the scarred planking of the deck, the stained topsides and the general mess and disorder.

Something like this? she asked.

It might float long enough, Basil said doubtfully. *But I wouldn't want to jolly well bet on it.*

Are you sure you can sail it?

Of course, I can jolly well sail it. I'm not Marid for nothing, you know...

And you can keep it afloat, if you have to?

Now that's a much more difficult question.

Oh, surely not, Annabella said. *Not for a Marid as clever as you...*

A swarthy man emerged from the aft cabin, bent double by the low height of the deck above. He had dark ringlets, a knife scar disfiguring one side of his face and a gold earring. He threw some remark over his shoulder to the cabin behind. The words were indistinguishable but the tone was one of command.

The captain? Annabella said.

Looks jolly like it.

The man was now half way across the gangplank to the harbour side. Annabella stepped forward.

"Excuse me, sir," she said in Arabic, for want of knowing what might be more appropriate. The man stepped ashore and stopped. He took his time examining her. Then he turned his attention to Brutus, the second horse, and finally to Vivienne and Darius.

"What?" he said in Greek. Annabella smoothly adjusted her language.

"I want to buy your ship," she said, also in Greek. The man laughed, mirthlessly, and made to push past her. Annabella reached into her robes and pulled out the purse Basil had provided. She clanked the coins within and held it out. The man stopped abruptly.

"This for your time," Annabella said. "To listen to me." The man regarded her owlshly for some seconds and made the only possible decision. Annabella's purse magically vanished, transferred by some sleight of hand to the man's own robes without anyone seeing how it was done. He bowed elaborately.

"Captain Aristides Onassis at your service, madam," he said. "You may call me Captain Aristides."

"A moment, please," Annabella said. She turned Brutus about and took the reins of the other horse from Dari before marching down the quay to where one of their shadows was loitering inconspicuously.

"Here," she said imperiously, holding out the reins. "These horses belong to you. Or at least to your people."

Stunned, the Assassin gaped at her wordlessly, quite unable to react. Impatiently, Annabella draped the reins over his shoulder and left him to make of it what he would. She did feel a pang as she walked away at yet again being forced to abandon Brutus to his fate, but comforted herself with the thought that his future could be no worse than ever it had been. She also noticed a second, anonymous, individual drifting along the wharf.

He would also be an Assassin? she asked Basil.

Guaranteed, Basil said. *You want me to run him off?*

No, no. I want him to hear everything...

"Now," Annabella said returning to the group. "About your boat..."

"Ship," Captain Aristides said. "And she is not for sale, not now, not ever."

Rubbish, Basil remarked. *Absolute jolly rubbish. Every boat is always for sale...*

"That's a shame," Annabella said. "Because I was prepared to pay really well. Really well. Oh dear. I suppose we shall just have to find another one... But yours is just what were looking for."

"How well? How well will you pay?" Annabella paused.

How much is it worth? she asked Basil.

Drachmas, dirhams or bezants?

Money, Annabella said impatiently and went on without waiting:

"Why don't you name a price?" There was another pause, a calculating one. It seemed to Annabella that she could see a stream of figures flicking past Captain Aristides's eyeballs.

"Twenty thousand," he said at last. "You ask me to be so cruel as to sell my beloved, my mistress, my Maria, whom I have loved man and boy... It cannot be less than twenty thousand. Even then, it will break my heart..."

"Drachmas, dirhams or bezants?" Annabella interrupted, repeating Basil's question. "Well...?" she added after a moment.

"Bezants..." Onassis said reluctantly, caught short calculating exchange rates.

Ridiculous, Basil said. *Utterly ridiculous. If that tub isn't riddled with worm and dry rot, I'm a monkey's uncle.* Annabella giggled aloud at the thought. The others all looked at her curiously.

"I'm thinking," she said.

How much is it worth, then? she asked.

Two hundred tops. One-fifty would be fair.

The money really isn't the issue, is it? We can just give him what he wants and be done with it...

Abso-jolly-lutely not, Basil exclaimed, shocked.

Why ever not? Annabella said, surprised.

It's... it's the principle of the thing. You'll ruin the market. People will talk. They'll jolly well think we're on the run...

We are...

But we don't want the whole world to know it. No jolly telling what extra trouble that might cause. And anyway, you'll spoil all his fun...

Fun!

Haggling is sport to people like him.

"One hundred," Annabella said eventually. Captain Aristides burst into hearty laughter but Annabella was certain she detected a gleam of respect cross his eyes before they were hastily hooded. Evidently, Basil knew exactly what he was talking about.

"Excellent joke," Captain Aristides said. "A young girl stops me on the wharf, tells me she wants to buy my ship, and I believe her..."

"You believed the purse I gave you," Annabella corrected him. "And you and I both know that two hundred is top money for that tub of yours." Vivienne and Dari, silent witnesses to the negotiation, looked at each other with exactly the same thought: the advantages of having an unseen adviser.

"Ah," Captain Aristides said. "The value of the ship is one thing – though I must tell you, your estimate is deeply insulting – but it is also the source of my livelihood and the livelihoods of my crew..."

"One twenty," Annabella cut him off.

"Ten thousand would condemn me and my men to a lifetime of poverty. Twenty thousand might provide some modest comfort, and you offer me one hundred and twenty bezants...!"

"All right, one fifty. And you and I both know that is the fair price."

"Five thousand," Captain Aristides said, suddenly changing tack. "And I and my men stay on board." He looked disparagingly at Vivienne and Dari. "You will need a captain and you will need a crew..."

No, Basil said. *Abso-jolly-lutely not*.

"Two hundred and you stay," Annabella said. "And that's my last offer."

"Done," Captain Aristides whipped out, before she might change her mind. He then bethought him to temper his enthusiasm. He assumed a mournful expression and a lugubrious tone. "It will mean life on a pittance for me and poverty for my men but what will be must be..."

Annabella was puzzling at the logic, given that the captain and crew were being retained, not fired, but Basil broke into her thoughts.

Madness, he said crossly. *As soon as he gets the jolly money, and as soon as we're out to sea, he's planning to knock you on the head and drop you over the jolly side.*

Of course, Annabella replied. *That's where you come in. And won't you enjoy it?*

Um... I can do whatever we like...?

Abso-jolly-lutely. But in the meantime, we need some more money... She broke off as she felt a sudden weight dragging at her waist.

"Perhaps we might go on board," she said, reaching into her robes and producing a bulging leather sack which clinked enticingly. "And I want to leave first thing in the morning."

"The morning...?"

"Possibly sooner."

"And where is it that madam wishes to go?"

"Cyprus then Kriti then Pylos." The listening Assassin allowed himself a small grimace of satisfaction. The captain, who might have been expected to be flustered at the thought of more or less instantly embarking on a long voyage, smiled obsequiously. After all, he had no intention of spending more than an hour or two at sea.

Captain Aristides led the way over the gangplank and thumped loudly on the deck. A dozen dubious characters, all of whom looked to be well practised in assorted forms of villainy, came pouring up onto the tiny poop.

"Boys," he said, still lugubrious. "I have bad news... Meet the new owner." He gestured to Annabella and then bowed. However, despite what one might expect, there was not the least expression of surprise or concern among the crew and Annabella found herself wondering sourly just how many times the captain might have sold his ship before. He shooed the men back and had a small table and two stools brought on deck, inviting Annabella to sit opposite him.

You need a bill of sale, Basil informed her. It won't mean a jolly thing, of course, but he'll expect you to ask.

Annabella dropped the sack on the table with a satisfying clunk.

"Parchment and ink," she said. "For the bill of sale..."

"Unfortunately, madam," Captain Aristides began. "I must regret to inform you that I can neither read nor write..."

"That's quite all right," Annabella said. "I can." Captain Aristides shrugged reluctantly and spread his hands.

"But madam, if I cannot write why would I keep parchment and ink?" Dari, standing at Annabella's shoulder, suddenly started. He reached into his breast with a puzzled expression to bring forth a small roll of parchment, an ink horn and a quill. He held them out.

"Well then," Annabella said, unsurprised. "Just as well I came prepared..." Looking extremely put out, Captain Aristides sat down, delved into the sack and began to count, separating the coins into neat stacks. At the touch of the gold, however, his mood abruptly changed to downright ebullience, even though he professed to be losing his livelihood for what he claimed was a pittance.

What's he so pleased about, all of a sudden? Annabella asked.

The two happiest days of your life, Basil informed her. The day you buy a boat, and the day you jolly well sell it.

Especially when he doesn't think he really is selling.

Abso-jolly-lutely.

Chapter 20

Night closed in around them and the sale of the Maria Callous, as Basil instantly renamed the ship, dragged on interminably. Captain Aristides was disposed to examine each golden bezant with due care and attention by the light of a flaring lamp, often testing the coin with his teeth. He was watched with equal care and attention by the assembled crew, straining forward and only barely contained.

Why Maria Callous? Annabella asked Basil, as they waited. Basil sighed.

So ignorant, he protested.

Well, when I've been around for thousands and thousands of years, like you, I probably won't be... Annabella paused and when Basil offered no further explanation, changed the subject completely. *How exactly are we going to find the Calypso Deep?*

Magic. Trust me, navigation is not a problem. Have you ever known me to jolly well get lost or not know where I am?

Gotcha, Annabella said with a hint of mischief. *Iram. You couldn't find Iram...* She was referring to a lost city that she, Basil and Vivienne had once had occasion to visit.

No jolly fair, Basil said, aggrieved. *You know jolly well why that was.*

Annabella chuckled. She suddenly turned serious. *What about Hassan-i Sabbāh? What will he do? You're absolutely sure he won't try to follow on his carpet? The plan won't work if he does. He'll catch up way too soon...*

I'm sure, Basil said comfortably. *I wouldn't try a trip over water that long on a carpet and I'm jolly sure he won't. Much too chancy. Nowhere to stop, nowhere to set down... One good storm and he's likely to jolly well lose the thing altogether. You can't reef a carpet, you know, and it's a long jolly swim, all the way to Crete...*

So what sort of a ship will he get? Annabella asked, changing tack again. Basil shrugged invisibly.

Who knows?

Captain Aristides finally finished counting. Trying to hide his satisfaction, he held up three coins.

"Clipped," he said accusingly. "You're trying to cheat me."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous," Annabella snapped. She suddenly felt three more coins materialise in her hand. She held them out. "Here, give me those. Take these."

The crew's heads all swivelled towards her as one and Captain Aristides raised a very speculative eyebrow.

Damn, Basil said. *Mistake. Now they think you've got lots more money.*

Annabella dropped the coins on the table and pushed them across together with the parchment on which she had already written in Greek and Arabic:

Received, the sum of 200 bezants, being full payment for the vessel, Maria, formerly owned by Captain Aristides Onassis. Signed, Captain Aristides Onassis:

"Make your mark there," Annabella said, pointing. The heads of the crew all swivelled back and watched intently as with a frown of concentration, Captain Aristides gave every appearance of reading the document – though ostensibly quite

unable to – and then made rather too laborious work of drawing a ragged cross. He returned the bill of sale to Annabella only with the greatest reluctance, even though everyone there knew very well it would mean absolutely nothing very soon.

Annabella walked to the side of the ship nearest the dock and peered intently into the gloom.

Are we still being watched, do you think? she asked.

Abso-jolly-lutely, Basil replied. *There, by those barrels...*

I see him, Annabella said, picking up a flicker of movement. *What do you think? Should we leave now or wait till morning?*

Now, Basil said without hesitation. *Then Hassan-i Sabbāh won't jolly well be tempted to try anything. All he can do is get a ship and follow.*

But is there enough light?

Of course. Ships do jolly well sail in the dark, you know.

All right, Annabella said doubtfully. She turned back to Captain Aristides.

"Change of plan," she said. "We need to leave now."

"Now!?"

"Right now. There's not a minute to lose."

"But that's impossible," the captain protested vociferously, throwing up his hands. "Half my crew are ashore... who knows where? Drunk... drugged..."

Disrobed, disgraced, disgruntled, distraught and abso-jolly-lutely discombobulated... Basil added helpfully and Annabella had to bite back a smile.

"Nevertheless," she said adamantly. "We must leave now." Captain Aristides looked at her searchingly and abruptly switched gears. Too abruptly, as though he had just remembered the main game.

"If that's what madam requires, then that is what madam shall have," he pronounced. "However, I shall take a quick walk while the ship is readied. It may be that I may find some more of my men. We need all we can get."

"Is that really necessary?" Annabella demanded.

"The oars..." Aristides said. "I must have rowers and we can't leave on the instant anyway. Preparations must be made. It will take no extra time." Annabella nodded reluctantly.

"Taki!" Captain Aristides bellowed. "Standby to get underway."

The bo'sun, now lounging at the bulwarks digesting the ceremony of counting the gold, straightened incredulously. He opened his mouth to protest but Captain Aristides cut him off.

"Do it!" he said. "Just do it." He turned to the gangplank and seconds later was disappearing into the gloom cloaking the wharf. Distracted by the sudden bustle about them, neither Annabella nor Basil noticed the lurking Assassin also slink away, drifting in the captain's wake.

Captain Aristides was gone for a good half hour. He returned shepherding three more of his crew in various states of dissipation and outrage, the least dissipated being the most outraged. It seemed a poor return for the time invested and Annabella

wondered what difference the addition of three drunks could possibly make to the working of the ship and why it had taken so long to find them. Captain Aristides, himself, seemed strangely subdued, his earlier ebullience and self-satisfaction quite gone.

What's up with him, all of a sudden, do you think? Annabella asked. *Looks like he's been sucking on a lemon.*

No, Basil said judiciously. *Not a lemon. He looks frightened...*

Frightened? What could have frightened him?

I don't know, but I don't jolly like it...

However, their ruminations were rudely interrupted. At a nod from the captain, Taki roared: "Hands to unmoor ship." And all again was bustle and confusion.

Annabella, Vivienne and Dari took refuge by the taffrail as the crew, with a great deal of bad language and many a resentful look in their direction, went about the familiar business of casting off the mooring lines and poling the ship away from the wharf with a pair of battered sweeps. Then with room to row, the undermanned port oars backed water while the equally undermanned starboard oars pulled ahead, swinging the ship's bow round till it could fetch the entrance to the harbour. Finally at the word of command, the oars gave way together and slowly they began to gather speed.

Crossing the harbour bar, the ship dipped and rose to a gentle swell. A minute or two later, Vivienne and Dari were looking at each other with exactly the same expression, that's to say, uncertain, queasy alarm.

Surely they can't be seasick already? Annabella said. She, herself, was feeling absolutely normal and indeed, rather enjoying the sensation of movement.

They can be, and they jolly well are, Basil replied. He chuckled. *Shall I tell them my patent cure?*

Which is what?

Well, you get a nice little piece of half-cooked lamb's fat, a bit slimy and oozy is best, and you tie it to a thread and then you jolly well swallow it and jiggle it up and down. Annabella gagged despite herself and the other two turned to her with mutual commiseration.

"Try not to think about it," Vivienne told her bravely. "We'll get used to it. I'm sure we'll get used to it... Very soon." But she didn't, nor did Dari. They both grew greener and greener until out of pity, Annabella was moved to find somewhere they might take shelter from the cool night air.

The Maria was divided into three simple sections. Under the poop deck on which they were standing at the stern there were two tiny cabins which could only be entered by bending more or less double. One was the preserve of Captain Aristides and the other was given over to anyone foolish enough to take passage. For'ard, the waist of the ship was taken up by a hatch-covered hold, above which were the stretchers for the oarsman and tackle for handling the lateen rig. For'ard again, there was a raised foredeck enclosing the bow and providing some sort of rudimentary living quarters for the crew. Even in the dark, the general air was one of filth and squalor.

Annabella slipped down into the waist and with Basil providing a surreptitious glow of light poked her nose under the poop deck. The port cabin was obviously the captain's, the starboard stank to high heaven. Previous occupants had been comprehensively seasick and evidently nobody had ever bothered to swab it out. Annabella went back up top and accosted Captain Aristides at the tiller.

"We'll be taking your cabin," she told him, earning a furious look. "Come below," she added to Vivienne and Dari.

Annabella came uncertainly awake, puzzled as to where she was and what had roused her. The ship, she eventually realised. They had bought a ship. They were on the ship. They were in the captain's cabin. They had fallen asleep in the captain's cabin, exhausted by the long, long day. And Vivienne and Dari had been sick... The ship wasn't moving. It was still, no motion, stopped. Why?

Basil? Annabella said. Why have we stopped?

Because we've jolly well pulled into the coast... A little bay.

And you've let them?

Of course. It'll be much easier to get rid of them. We won't have to worry about them drowning...

I wasn't worried.

But you don't have to follow the CODE...

Annabella paused to take stock. The dim light of dawn was beginning to seep into the stuffy cabin. She could see Dari asleep, wedged into a corner. Vivienne was curled up next to him with her head cradled on an arm. Annabella felt revolting, she realised. Her eyes were gummy and there was a vile taste in her mouth. Why had the ship come into the coast?

I thought you said they would want to take us out to sea, knock us on the head and drop us over the side, she accused Basil querulously.

Mmmm, he said. I expect they jolly well got a better offer.

A better offer...?

Jolly old Captain jolly old Aristides was gone for quite a long time just before we sailed...

You mean, that Assassin...?

That's exactly what I mean.

And what...?

I expect the plan is to hand you over to a shore party. Maybe to jolly old Hassan-i Sabbāh himself.

Except...

Except.

Basil, Annabella said seriously after a moment. Are you sure you can handle this thing by yourself? Don't we need the crew?

Why would you think that, Lady Mine?

You really can sail the ship all by yourself, is that what you're telling me?

I'm astonished you even think you jolly well need to ask, Basil said, miffed.

*So why didn't we get rid of them before we started?
And have them yelling blue jolly murder all over Tyre...?
So how are we going to get rid of them now?
You tell me, you're good at that.* Annabella thought for a moment, then grinned.
Ghosts? She said. *I think this ship is haunted, don't you?*
Abso-jolly-lutely, Basil agreed with undisguised glee.

Deprived of his own cabin and for obvious reasons disdaining the spare, Captain Aristides was asleep on the poop, untidily sprawled on some old canvas. Another member of the crew was perched on the prow, supposedly on anchor watch but in reality dead to the world. The ship was embayed in a narrow horse-shoe cove, formed where the coast suddenly trended eastwards then swung back to the west in an abrupt U-turn round a small beach. The water was glassy and just beginning to glow molten in the light of the rising sun. A bird was calling on shore...

Apparently in answer, a low, throbbing moan began to emanate from the bowels of the ship, as though the ship itself were in pain. It gradually built in intensity until the very timbers were resonating like the sound box of some vast instrument. Aristides was jerked awake and leapt wildly to his feet. The look-out lurched into consciousness, reared back and promptly disappeared over the side. There was a loud splash. Panic-stricken faces began to emerge from the frowsty tween decks of the fo'c'sle.

Of their own accord, the hatch covers in the waist sprang open and before the petrified gaze of the crew, a giant spectral head, dripping blood, rose from the depths. There was a concerted howl of terror, and as one, the men of the Maria hurled themselves over the bulwarks. Captain Aristides resisted longest, but it was only a matter of seconds before he, too, leapt into the sea and struggled, splashing mightily, the few yards to the safety of the shore.

Annabella, Vivienne and Dari, who had been watching the performance from under the break of the poop deck, applauded enthusiastically. The gory head somehow gave the impression of bowing.

"Bravo! Bravo!" they called. Abruptly, the head disappeared to be replaced by the familiar tendril of smoke that was Basil. Ashore, the frightened men dragged themselves from the water, one by one, coughing and spluttering and several near to drowning. They turned to gaze at what had been their home. There was now no sign of the apparition and suddenly regaining his courage, Aristides, still thigh-deep, shouted in fury:

"Give me back my ship!"

"Give me back my gold," Annabella retorted. Aristides singled out the bo'sun, a compact, nuggety man, the survivor of a thousand waterfront brawls.

"Are we going to lose our ship to two girls and a boy?" he demanded. In response, Taki just growled. He was echoed by the rest of the crew.

"Come on, then," Aristides said and began to wade back into the water, followed somewhat reluctantly by the others.

"Persistent, aren't they?" Annabella remarked to no one in particular.

"More?" Basil inquired, hopefully.

"Yes please," Annabella said.

"And what would madam desire?"

"An azdahāg? Yes, I'd really like to see an azdahāg again."

"Oh, goody," Basil said

"A what?" Vivienne asked but was cut off short as a huge, fire-breathing dragon suddenly reared over the ship and let loose a jet of flame towards the approaching men. It landed in the water just short of them and erupted into hissing, bubbling clouds of steam. The men variously yelled, screamed and shrieked, and with one accord stumbled back to the beach, to keep on running until they had disappeared into the hinterland.

From lightness of heart and to drive home the message to Aristides and his men, Basil still in the form of the ancient, Persian monster took a turn round the bay, high above the ship. A moment later the dragon vanished and he was arrowing back, again a wisp of smoke.

"Quick!" he called. "Ships... Coming down the coast... We'll be trapped..."

"Well, you're the sailor," Annabella said crisply. "Do something..." But before she had even finished speaking, a great many things were happening all at once. The anchor warp unfastened itself from the bitts and snaking, disappeared over the side. Oars thumped their way out the ports, dipped and then bending with the strain began to urge the little ship towards the narrow entrance to the cove. Looking down into the waist, Annabella had time to think that the sight of the disembodied oar-looms, all working vigorously in unison, was one of the eeriest things she had ever seen, and she was a young lady with no shortage of weird memories to call upon.

By the time, they emerged into the open sea, a handsome bow wave was foaming past the cutwater, yet even so they were almost too late. Very near, and spearing towards them, two ships were closing rapidly.

"Galleys!" Dari exclaimed.

"Galeas." Basil corrected, even though fully occupied. Like all amateur sailors, he was a stickler for the proper technical term. Both the approaching vessels were small, slender scout ships with twenty-five oars aside and long raised spurs protruding from the bow above the water. Galeas were used for patrols, for reconnaissance, as screens for the full-size galleys of the main war fleets and, as in this case, for smuggling. They were very fast, very manoeuvrable and as far as the poor, old Maria was concerned, very deadly. These two relatively recent Assassin acquisitions from an increasingly venal Byzantium, were even more so as a careful observer would have noted a pair of tubes poking out over the prow of each ship – cannae, the forerunners of cannon and the siphons used to hurl Greek fire in combat.

"We need more dragon," Vivienne squeaked, her eyes very big and very round. "Burn them, set them on fire..." she added, unconsciously picking up on the galeas own main weapon of attack.

"Don't you dare," Annabella commanded. "We need them. We need them to follow..."

"But..." Vivienne began and then fell silent. Even as they had been speaking, the two galeas had separated and were curving out and around in opposite directions. As they watched, the oars changed rhythm to a short, sharp, staccato tempo that the rowers would not be able to sustain for long but which suddenly almost doubled their speed.

"What are they doing?" Dari asked. Annabella shrugged wordlessly, but a moment or two later the plan became quite clear. Both galeas were now curving in towards them in opposing directions placing the Maria in a classic pincer movement, a helpless nut about to be cracked by the jaws of the trap crunching shut.

"They're going to sink us," Dari exclaimed.

"Not jolly likely," Basil had time to say. "They want to use those rams to shatter our oars, that's what they're for. One down each side..."

"So w-what...?" Vivienne stammered. "What are we going to do?"

Have you got this? Annabella asked.

But of course, Basil said. *Naval warfare is a hobby of mine...*

Like skirt-chasing, I suppose... But this time, Basil had no time to reply. He was too busy, subtly adjusting their course without alerting the attacking ships.

It was all a matter of timing. If the change became too apparent too soon, the galeas would be able to react; if Basil were fractionally too late, the galeas would have them. To the three watching helpless on the poop, it seemed that Basil had totally miscalculated, that they must be savaged, that there could be no escape. Vivienne clutched at Dari and buried her head in his shoulder. All three held their breath, waiting for the collision that must destroy their oars, if not the ship herself. It came, but not at all as they anticipated.

At the last possible second, Basil backed his starboard oars, took two quick strokes with the port sweeps and swung the helm hard over. The Maria, still moving at maximum speed, heeled sharply round. Suddenly she was heading at ninety degrees to her original course and cutting across the bows of the nearest galea to safety. There was an outbreak of frantic shouting behind them and then a rending crash as the two galeas, with a little extra help from Basil, ploughed into each other, each shattering the other's oars down one, complete side. Basil rested their own sweeps and the Maria slowly began to lose way.

Annabella, Vivienne and Dari rushed to the taffrail to gaze back at the devastation behind them. The two galeas were drifting, locked together, surrounded by a sea of what looked like matchwood.

"Whoa," Vivienne said. "That was close..."

"I would've said, perfectly jolly well judged, myself," Basil retorted.

"You've wrecked them," Annabella accused. "And I said..."

"Not at all," Basil interrupted, a hurt tone in his voice. "They jolly well carry spare oars, of course they do. And even if they don't have enough, they can strip one ship to get the other going."

"Oh," Annabella said. "Sorry... So that was all a bit brilliant?"

"Now that you mention it," Basil said, somewhat mollified.

Thank you, Annabella said. Really, thank you.

"Totally brilliant," Dari said. "I thought they would have us for sure."

"So the Assassin last night didn't send a shore party at all...?" Annabella began.

"Ships," Basil said. "He sent ships. His people must have a secret base along the coast... He must've got a message to them..."

"And he threatened Captain Aristides..."

"Or bribed him..."

"Or both... to make him pull into the cove and wait," Annabella finished.

"So what do we do now?" Vivienne asked, contemplating the chaos just across the water where the two galeas still lay hopelessly entangled, their hulls grinding together in the small seaway, frantic figures trying to prise them apart.

"So how long before Hassan-i Sabbāh arrives, do you think?" Annabella asked Basil.

"Pigeon to Castle Masyaf yesterday evening, arriving this morning, say... Carpet back... Not long. Not jolly long at all."

"Then we should set sail for Cyprus right now," Annabella said firmly. "We have to be far enough out to sea before he comes so that he can't risk flying, so that he has to use one of those ships to follow us."

Before she had even finished speaking, the disembodied oars of the Maria began to dip, moving in unison like some vast machine, and the little ship turned west into the open and empty Mediterranean.

Bakri Touma hated the sea. He hated the sea even more than he hated flying. And because of the flurry of pigeons both coming and going, and more particularly the messages he had been required to relay, he was fully aware that his suffering would continue for an unconscionable length of time, all the way to Pylos, hundreds of leagues to the west.

To find himself obliged to mount the carpet behind the now decently shrouded figure of his master had been terrifying, but the flight had at least been manageable by the simple expedient of keeping his eyes firmly shut. However, to discover the two ships delegated to do the business wallowing in helpless confusion, their quarry vanished, then to be trapped on this unspeakable galea thing, trapped in the firing line of his master's incandescent rage at again being thwarted, dry-heaving his guts into the ocean... The only possible word was hideous.

And it was clear that the crew, being driven to exhaustion as they were, all hated him too. Welling self-pity triggered yet another bout of helpless retching. It wasn't his fault. None of it was his fault. And yet they all blamed him, held him personally responsible for stripping the other galea of every last sweep, every last morsel of food, every last drop of water, and then abandoning the crew to their fate, such of the men who couldn't be crammed aboard here, that was – rowers who could expect to be worked to death, literally to death, given the frantic pace that was being demanded.

Wretchedly, Touma again turned his glassy gaze to the water rushing by just below. Let me die now, he prayed. Salvation lay there, in the green depths, one small movement away. Drowning was an easy death, they said. But still hard, too hard...

So why Maria Callous? Annabella asked, returning to her earlier question. Vivienne and Dari, greening nicely once the excitement was over, had once more retreated to the cabin and she was alone with Basil on the poop, a Basil who given privacy had again allowed himself to become intimately corporeal and to Annabella, intimately irresistible. It was a bright, sparkly, autumn day, a warm sun glinting from the ruffles a light breeze was kicking up on top of the easy swell. The ship was alone in the centre of a vast blue bowl. The Mediterranean might be landlocked but once out of sight of land it had the same glorious immensity as any of the great oceans. The burgeoning of the beautiful day after the adrenaline of the encounter with the galeas followed by a substantial breakfast, not to mention a bucket bath and Basil properly manifest, had Annabella feeling quite her old self.

He sighed theatrically. *Maria Callas, C-A-L-L-A-S, was the great diva of the 20th Century, perhaps the greatest diva of all jolly time...*

Opera or pop? Annabella asked mischievously. Basil did not deign to answer. *You're as bad as your father,* Annabella prodded after a moment.

If pater, may he live forever, can do the jolly old clubs in jolly old New York, then I can go to the jolly old opera... And I do... He paused. *We can go together,* he added, suddenly pleased with the realisation and smiling happily.

Timeshifting...?

Abso-jolly-lutely. All her famous performances. Her Elvira, her Tosca, her Norma... Ah! La Divina...!

So, if she was so all-fired good...

Good? Good? She was fabulous, abso-jolly-lutely...

But why Callous? Annabella insisted. Basil hesitated.

She was difficult, he said at last. *A very great artist... A very great temperament... She never took prisoners... And then it all turned full jolly circle... Fate treated her most callously, not to mention that rotten old shipping tycoon, Ari Onassis.*

Ari Onassis? Like this Onassis...? Annabella gestured at the ship. *You're telling me they're related?*

Aristotle in her case, but why not? The Greeks have been big in shipping since the jolly old Trojan War. Odysseus and all that lot. Not that I ever thought Odysseus was much of a seaman. Just had a jolly good spin doctor...

Which reminds me, Annabella said. *If you're Marid, as you keep telling me, and such an amazing sailor... Why do you live in the desert? Why not on the coast like your father?*

I was afraid you'd get around to asking that...

So why? Annabella insisted.

The jolly old rels, Basil said lugubriously. *More particularly, Aunt Jamina...*

Aunt Jamina...?

Don't ask.

Come on, give...

Pater might think he's jolly old boss djinni, but Aunt Jamina...

Oh... Annabella said, beginning to get the picture.

She and Basil chatted on for hours, supremely comfortable with each other and thoroughly enjoying a stolen opportunity for indulging each other. More, the mention of attending famous performances had begun to open up for Annabella the possibilities that might lie before her, if only she could ever overcome Hassan-i Sabbāh. The rewards for success were suddenly intoxicating and she had to put severe violence upon herself not to get carried away.

Vivienne and Dari did not emerge on deck until late in the afternoon. They both looked thoroughly wan but were evidently emerging from the coils of seasickness and no longer wished to die as a matter of urgency. As they peered about, blinking in the bright light, they found the *Maria* a vastly different vessel. Basil, while delighting in having time alone with Annabella, had also occupied himself with restoring things to something which might be described as shipshape and Bristol fashion.

The decks and topsides had all received a mighty sluicing from a chain of disembodied buckets. The great lateen sail was now neatly brailed and furled along the length of its yard. The sheets and halyards were all properly coiled and, where appropriate, even flemished. And for some considerable time a tide of detritus had trailed in the ship's wake, the goods, chattels, possessions and rubbish of the previous denizens of various Augean hidey holes scattered about the ship.

"So," Annabella greeted them solicitously, looking down into the waist. "Feeling better?"

"Feeling jolly hungry, I should think," Basil offered. He had reverted to his usual tendrill of smoke at the sound of movement. Vivienne put a hand to her mouth and looked wildly about.

"Stop it, Basil," Annabella giggled. "They hate us enough already..."

Dari climbed the short ladder to the poop and stood uncertainly, gazing about at the bodiless working of the ship, the rhythmic creak and thump of the sweeps, the small, automatic movements of the helm. He also noted the breeze, which had freshened and backed until it was now somewhat abaft the beam.

"Shouldn't we be using the sail?" he asked. "How long can Basil keep rowing, all by himself?"

"In-jolly-definitely," Basil said comfortably. "Thank you for your concern, but no jolly need..."

"How long will it take for us to get where ever it is we're going?" Vivienne asked, joining them. "I don't suppose we could have a map, or something?"

"A chart," Basil corrected fussily. "But certainly." An outline of the Mediterranean began to appear on the deck at their feet and they stepped back to give it room.

"Tyre is here," Basil said, using a pointer he suddenly caused to materialise to tap an island promontory about halfway along the eastern shore of the sea. "This morning we were here." He tapped another point on the coast some leagues to the north. "Now we are here." He tapped a final point, somewhat more to the north and far to the west.

"But I can't see anything," Vivienne said gazing about at the horizon, absolutely unmarred in any direction. Basil and Annabella both declined to comment.

"So where is it we're going, exactly?" Vivienne asked, unabashed and turning her attention back to the chart.

"First here," Annabella said, taking the pointer and indicating Cyprus. "And then, here, Kriti..."

"You mean, Crete," Vivienne interrupted.

"And then here," Annabella said with a look. "The Calypso Deep."

"But that must be hundreds of miles," Vivienne said. "It'll take for ever."

"Eight hundred and fifty miles," Annabella said. "Give or take. And at this rate, Basil says it will take six days, give or take. Seven to be safe."

"Only seven," Vivienne said bemusedly. "That can't be right."

"We're making six knots," Basil said acidly. "You do the jolly math. If you can that is."

"Sorry," Vivienne mumbled. She looked around again at the empty horizon. "But how on earth," she began again after a minute or two. "Do you expect Hassan-i Sabbāh to be able to follow us? Out here?"

"He doesn't have to," Annabella said a touch wearily. "He knows where we're going, remember? Pylos... And the way he'll drive his crew, he'll get there long before us, anyway."

"And is that a good thing?" Dari asked.

"What do you think?" Annabella said cryptically and refused to say any more on the subject.

Chapter 21

They were golden days, autumn at its best. The sun was warm, the sky blue, the breeze balmy, a gentle southerly that skipped about, tickling the wave tops into outbursts of frothy white chuckles. Annabella and Vivienne spent their time lounging about in the time-honoured female fashion and unlike his father on a previous occasion, Basil made no difficulty about providing Vivienne with a bikini, even if it was rather more chaste than she might have wished.

Dari for his part, once he had found his sea legs, was dead keen to learn how to handle the ship. He prevailed on Basil to set the single lateen and ship the sweeps. The girls could only approve the sudden ceasing of the grind, the squeak, the bump and the final thump produced by each stroke, while Dari was beside himself with boyish delight at being allowed to take the helm.

Vivienne, knowing what was expected of her, watched him admiringly for at least two full minutes then turned to Annabella.

"Why are they all such children?" she asked indulgently. Annabella laughed.

"Especially Basil," she said. Vivienne let the silence build.

"What about you and Basil?" she said, finally.

"Don't ask," Annabella said good-naturedly. "What about you and Dari?" Vivienne laughed in her turn.

"I will say this for him," she murmured. "He's a lot more... enterprising than his grandfather ever was."

"Ooooh. Do tell." But Vivienne chose to change the subject.

"Do you think suntan lotion has been invented?"

"I'm certain not. But olive oil or something like that might be available... to get you properly medium rare." And Annabella sighed enviously. Vivienne was one of those blondes who tanned easily to a light, honeyed glow without even a hint of sunburn, let alone cooking.

The enforced relaxation was working on Annabella like gentle rain on parched plants. The strained look around her eyes began to smooth out. As of old, she laughed easily and often. Her mutilated hand stopped throbbing and with it the threnody of dread at all that was still to negotiate. Life, just for the moment, was particularly sweet.

She was dozing on the foredeck when the whales came. She had discreetly abandoned the poop to Vivienne and Dari and had stretched out on a pallet. At first she was unwilling to rouse herself but Basil refused to let her be.

Wake up, Lady Mine. Whales...

Mmmm, Annabella said. Another time.

No. Now. You don't want to miss them.

I do. I do want to miss them... But Annabella found herself rising to her feet whether she wanted to or not. She surrendered with good grace and went to the rail.

Whereabouts then? she asked.

Port bow. See? See him blow? A spout of vapour rose quite high into the air, angling forward at about 45 degrees. Annabella caught it out of the corner of her eye and turned towards it. After another 20 seconds or so it came again.

A big, old male, that one... Basil said.

How do you know? How can you tell?

Males breathe slower, and see how high the spout goes...?

What sort of whale is it? I didn't know they had whales in the Mediterranean...

Not so much in your time, perhaps. But they're jolly common back now. Sperm whales...

Okay, Annabella said. *I've seen the whale. Can I go back to sunbathing now?* On the whole, she thought, the whale had been rather disappointing. Not worth the trouble of getting up. Just a bit of misty vapour shooting up from the merest suggestion of a grey shape awash in the water. But suddenly there was a series of whooshes all about the ship, the sound of steam escaping under pressure, and they were surrounded by grey, rolling bodies, huge bodies, bodies that seemed as big as the ship itself, with great flailing tails that could rend the vessel to splinters in seconds should they choose.

Annabella found herself fixating on the thought: how do you frighten off a whale without making it angry? Then she caught an eye, solitary in a mass of grey flesh, regarding her with what seemed benevolent and extremely intelligent interest, and she relaxed a trifle. The sense of raw power given off by the massive creatures was awe-inspiring.

The pod lingered for some minutes as they prepared for their next travelling dive, huffing and puffing like steam trains working up the nerve to leave a station, then just as suddenly as they had arrived, with an elegant roll and a final flick of the tail they were gone.

"Wow!" Vivienne said. She had rushed up to join Annabella at the prow. "Far out. What sort whales were they?"

"Sperm whales, Basil says."

"You mean, the ones that go really far down and hunt giant squid?"

"I don't know," Annabella said. "Do they?"

"Indeed they do," Basil put in. "And whatever else happens to be jolly well down there. Who knows what? Jolly deep water around here. That's why we're here..."

"Can I have a steer?" Vivienne asked Dari. Even a voluptué can only lie about voluptuously for so long without getting bored.

"Oh... I don't think that would be a good idea..." Dari spoke with quite the most irritating air of male superiority.

"Why not?" Vivienne demanded.

"Ah... It's difficult... You have to be strong..."

"You're saying I'm not...?" Vivienne retorted, belligerently.

"Um... I'm sure you are... For a girl..."

"And you think I can't do something just because you find it difficult...?"

"I... didn't say that." Dari was suddenly beginning to flounder badly.

"Yes, you did. And very insulting it was."

"Well, I didn't mean it that way..." Dari said, squirming.

"Vivienne," Annabella laughed. "Stop torturing the poor boy."

"Why?" Vivienne said. "It's fun. And it's good for him... And I still want to steer..."

"Here," Dari said, surrendering completely. He stepped back, keeping only a distant hand on the helm. Vivienne stepped inside his arm and put her hand on his.

"Now, isn't this nice?" she said. Dari blushed.

Women!, Basil said.

What do you mean women? Annabella fired up. *You got a problem...?*

No, no, Basil said hastily. *Love 'em. Abso-jolly-lutely love 'em.*

Uh-uh, Annabella said. *Wrong answer.*

Wrong answer? Basil said, beginning to flounder in his turn.

You love one, just one. Me...

The delightful breeze which had kept them steadily ploughing along was being produced by a low pressure system high over the Mediterranean, in turn kept stationary by a blocking high far to the east. It lasted them all the way from Cyprus, until halfway along the southern coast of Crete. Then the high finally began to move, in turn allowing the low pressure cell to track to the east. As it did so, a mass of hot air created by the African deserts was sucked north in its wake and began to accelerate, feeding on its own energy and the coriolis effect until finally it reached the intensity of a genuine, full-scale, rip-snorting, equinoctial sirocco.

The increasing motion woke Annabella just after dawn. She looked across the cabin at Vivienne and could see in the half light that she had her eyes screwed tight shut and that her face bore a familiar expression of suffering. Annabella went on deck to find Dari at the helm, looking exhilarated, with Basil in close attendance. The wind was already uncomfortably strong, whipping her hair about and tugging at her clothes. The sea was rapidly building and the rising sun was curiously veiled by what Annabella took to be cloud but which was, in fact, dust from the deserts far to the south.

"Isn't this great?" Dari exclaimed as she lurched across to him. The motion on deck was far worse than down below.

"What is it?" Annabella asked, raising her voice against the wind. "A storm?"

"A sirocco," Basil confirmed. "And it'll get much worse before it gets better. A jolly sight worse, if I'm any judge. And I am a very good judge... Time to get the sail off," he added to Darius, who looked disappointed even though the little ship was clearly over-pressed, heeling sharply and racing in swoops and staggers from one wave top to the next.

As he spoke, Basil eased the sheet to set the canvas flogging in a thunderous volley that vibrated down through the mast and rigging, shaking the ship as a dog shakes a rat. At the same time, he hauled up on the brails, gradually subduing the thrashing sail. Then, gauging the roll of the ship, Basil lowered yardarm and sail until it was all safely down on deck, where it was made fast with double lashings. And without the

sail to hold her off the wind, the ship naturally rounded up until she was lying easy, broadside on to the sea. Suddenly, the world seem back under control. The frightening crash and bang of the flogging sail and spar was gone and the wild motion of moments before subdued and tamed. A white face belonging to a trembling body crawled up the ladder and appeared over the break of the poop.

"What's happening?" Vivienne quavered. "Are we sinking?"

But in fact, the Maria was now riding relatively quietly, taking the seas broad on the port bow, rising up as each crest approached to allow the wave to slip harmlessly by beneath.

"That's better," Annabella said at large.

"For now at least," Basil said, almost shouting to penetrate the noise rising about them.

"What do you mean?"

"We're on a lee shore."

"Lee shore?" Dari said.

"Crete is just over there. Just over the horizon. We're drifting down on it. Quite fast..."

"How long will the storm last?" Annabella asked.

"A sirocco?" Basil said. "Your guess is as good as mine. Might jolly well go on for days..."

"So what can we do?" Annabella said with a worried look.

"Are you saying we're going to be shipwrecked?" Vivienne squeaked, finally catching up.

"It's jolly tricky," Basil said. "Can't use the sweeps in this sea – far too rough... Ordinarily, I'd set a trysail, a storm sail, and try to get past the end of the island... More sea-room... Until we run into jolly old Greece, that is... But..."

"But what?" Annabella demanded. Basil contrived to gesture at the mast and rigging.

"Pretty much rotten," he said. "If I'd left the sail up another five minutes we probably would have lost the lot. Jolly old Captain Aristides ought to be ashamed, the state they're in..." Except for the noise of the building storm, there was silence. Eventually Annabella spoke.

"But we have to try," she said at last. "It's a chance. You're telling me that if we do nothing were going to lose the ship anyway, right? And I need the ship. So we have to try... If the mast falls down, we're no worse off than we would be if we do nothing..."

Basil waited a minute or so to make sure she wasn't going to change her mind and then set about producing a tiny scrap of three-cornered canvas, lashed top and bottom to the mast, with the outer end sheeted down to the deck.

"Can't you do something about beefing up the rigging?" Annabella asked. "If you're so worried about it...?"

"I could," Basil replied. "Except then it's likely to pull the whole ship to pieces. The hull is jolly well full of worm and dry rot. Better the shrouds carry away than the ship break up around us..."

"I suppose..." Annabella shouted doubtfully.

In a future time, 1805 to be precise, Admiral Francis Beaufort would conclude a hundred years of evolving precision by devising the Beaufort scale, an empirical measure of wind and sea.

The sirocco steadily built from Force 7 (moderate gale, 28-33 knots; on land, whole trees in motion, some difficulty walking into the wind; at sea waves heaping up with white water forming streaks) to Force 8 (fresh gale, 34-40 knots; small branches splitting from trees, real difficulty walking; moderately high waves with breaking crests) to Force 9 (strong gale, 41-47 knots; structural damage on land; high waves with dense foam and airborne spray affecting visibility). The sirocco seemed to pause then, as though gathering breath.

The Maria had long since ceased to be comfortable. She spent all that long day both plunging and rolling as each wave passed. First Vivienne, then Dari, were brought to offer all they had to the gods of the sea and were miserably huddled in the scant protection of the weather bulwarks, seeking at least the illusion of shelter. Cold, wet and utterly miserable as they were, both had refused to go below, long convinced the ship was in imminent danger of foundering and unwilling to risk being trapped in the cabin when she did.

It was now almost impossible to think for the noise of the storm, to which the ship added a cacophony of creaking and groaning as the timbers worked, the planking opening and closing to allow jets of water to squirt within. She was leaking badly and was noticeably heavy in the water, struggling to rise to the next crest like a fat old lady caught deep in an overly soft chair. The ship had always seemed small; now, in that maelstrom of moving mountains, she seemed absolutely tiny.

Basil, convinced the mast must go any second if he didn't douse the trysail, was saved the trouble. The sail blew out with a report like a cannon shot, shreds of canvas vanishing instantly downwind.

How long can we last? Annabella asked.

No idea, Basil said soberly. *But this is why Hassan-i Sabbāh couldn't risk a carpet. And it's going to get worse...*

Worse!

Abso-jolly-lutely.

He was right.

Having paused to regroup, the sirocco went back to serious business, building to Force 10 (whole gale, 48-55 knots; the sort of wind on land that uproots trees while turning the sea to a pandemonium of pounding waves). And finally, Force 11 (violent storm, 56-63 knots; mayhem, true mayhem). The Maria's crew didn't know it but they were fortunate that a sirocco's ambition seldom, if ever, extended to Force 12 (hurricane; unimaginable) which the ship would certainly never have survived. As it was, Vivienne and Dari were correct. She really was in the gravest possible danger of going to the bottom with all hands. Or being driven on to the iron-bound coast of Crete now threateningly visible through the murk, just to leeward..

Waves, more particularly wave trains, are complicated phenomena, discrete parcels of energy created and intensified by the friction of the wind on the surface of the water. And every so often, these separate parcels briefly combine to produce a much higher, steeper and more destructive wave. Statistically one wave in 23 will be over twice the height of the average. One in 1,175 will be over three times the height of the average. And one wave in 300,000 or so will be over four times the height of the average. If the average height is already dangerous in the extreme, then to be in the wrong place at the wrong time can only be catastrophic.

As dusk was falling, the Maria found herself in exactly the wrong place at precisely the wrong time.

They heard the wave before they saw it, a roar that quite subsumed all the rest of the pandemonium pummelling and belabouring them. Annabella had also retreated to the scant shelter of the windward bulwarks, where Basil had insisted on lashing the three of them in place with a safety line. She saw the faces of the other two turn towards her, white and staring in the gloom. She had time to see Basil leave the helm to come for her, time to fear for him. She had time to look up, straight up, time to see the wave towering impossibly high above them. Then it crashed down, engulfing the Maria with irresistible force.

In the first instance, the angle of the bulwark saved them. It provided just enough protection to break the initial, crushing shock as the ship was flung over on her beam ends and pressed down, far, far beneath the surface. She was completely submerged, entombed in an inconceivable chaos of primal tumult, silent tumult, an elemental turmoil. Down the ship was forced, down and down, to be pinned, utterly helpless, by the overwhelming roiling juggernaut. An eternity later, the keel finally passed the critical point and the ship rolled completely, slowing just sufficiently for the wave to lose its grip and reluctantly pass on.

Annabella was sure she was drowning. She couldn't not be drowning. It was impossible not to be drowning. She might have had al iksir forced upon her, but nevertheless this pressure, this pain, this burning agony could only be the prelude to death, it could only be the torment of dying itself.

Basil!

Basil...!

There was no answer. All that filled her head was the roar of her own blood. She was completely disoriented. She had no idea which way was up, which was down. The turbulence tore at her, threatening to snatch her from the safety lashing. She was slipping. She could feel herself slipping beneath the rope. Desperately she struggled to resist, a still quiet corner of her mind wondering as she fought whether that was the wise thing to do. Better to free herself, surely? The ship could only be going to the bottom, and she with it...

But before she could decide, a new sensation slashed at her face, different, painful in its intensity. Wind. She could feel wind again. And the pounding noise had returned. Desperately she sucked in air so thick with spray that it was almost solid water. Somehow, the ship had rolled completely through 360 degrees and righted herself. She hadn't sunk. She hadn't split wide open like some rotten fruit. She hadn't

made the death plunge to the bottom, still far beneath them even so close to the coast. The ship was afloat. She was still afloat.

Annabella opened her eyes, tried to wipe away the streaming water. Vivienne was still there, still lashed to the bulwark. Dari was there. Were they breathing?

Basil! Annabella cried urgently. *Basil!*

She paused. Desperate for the sound of his voice.

Basil! She was screaming now. *Basil!*

She tried shouting aloud then, with all the force she could muster, at the same time fumbling at the lashing which had kept her from being swept away:

"Basil! Basil!" Was it lost in the wind?

Again she paused. Listening. Trying to discriminate a voice amid all the noise, the shriek of the wind. She could see Vivienne's eyes were open, huge, gazing at her fearfully. "Together," she mouthed.

"Basil!" they shouted. The next time, Dari joined in.

"Basil...! Basil...!"

Here... It was faint, faint unto death, so faint that she could barely hear it even in her head.

Where? Where are you?

She rose to her feet, clinging to the rail, braving the stinging sheets of spray sweeping the deck like a fire hose. The Maria was low in the water now, so low she was awash, barely afloat, but much more stable because of it.

Where are you? she repeated.

Mast... she heard. *The mast...*

She picked her way across the poop and down the ladder to the waist, where she waded for'ard through the swirling water, handing herself along the lowered yardarm, somehow still lashed to the deck. She reached the mast and clung on grimly, peering about, trying to penetrate the deepening gloom and the flying foam. She nearly missed him. He was there, she realised, finally realised, right by her hand, caught on a halyard, the merest wisp of limp, white thistledown.

Basil, Basil... What's wrong? But she knew. Too much water, too long. Basil had been trying to reach her, to protect her, when he should have been saving himself, abandoning her and fleeing upwards and away from the crushing avalanche of tons and tons of water. Basil might be Marid, but his essence was still fire, and even the fire of a djinni could only take so much before being extinguished, snuffed out forever.

Gently, ever so gently, Annabella unwound him, weightless and desperately fragile, from the coarse fibre of the rope to which he had somehow managed to cling after being swept away from her. She folded the scrap of him that was left softly into her hand and thrust him within her robes, cupping him against the bare skin over her heart, praying that her own warmth, her own vitality, her own fire might save him, preserve him, revive him.

You must not... she said incoherently, over and over again. *You must not... You must not...*

There was a shout behind her. Dari was at the helm. He was pointing. She turned. They had been sucked right in to the coast. She could see the huge surf pounding the rocky shore, rearing skyward, breaking on the reefs and running far up the land, savaging it like some mortal enemy. The ship was wallowing broadside, caught by the undertow, doomed, again. Yet as Annabella looked back a second time, she could see Dari still struggling with the helm. A white hand flashed as he pointed to starboard. There was a dark gap in the surf there, an opening. The mountainous seas were still bearing down in unbroken procession, but there was no surf, no shoreline for them to be dashed against and demolished. It was a chance.

In that ferocious wind, the Maria's mast, which though three parts rotten had somehow survived capsize and roll, still gave her some slight speed of her own, enough for steerage, enough that Dari could eventually swing the bows towards the dark opening. Then the current pouring through the gap took hold of them and they began to accelerate, the ship's stern now bearing the pounding from the following sea and the poop being swept by crest after crest.

It seemed to take an aeon upon an age, but slowly, slowly, they passed through the gap between Paximadia Ena and Paximadia Dio, two small, uninhabited islands, once mountains that had been drowned just off the coast of Crete and known to the locals as the Elephantaki. Judging his moment, Dari at last swung the helm hard over, bringing the Maria round to port and into the lee of the land. The transformation was instant and magical. No longer was the sirocco seeking to tear them asunder. The water only yards from the channel was quiet, merely ruffled by the back eddies of the tempest thrusting round the corner and through the passage.

With the last of their momentum, Dari nosed the Maria into the shore, where her forefoot grounded on the steep beach. Suddenly, all was still, miraculously still, even quiet, relatively at least. The sirocco was now hitting the weather side of the island and bouncing high over the hill protecting them. The storm had become remote, disembodied, something belonging to another world, a different, violent, destructive world, a world that no longer had relevance.

Vivienne went to Dari and grabbed at him convulsively.

"You were..." she began, automatically shouting. Dari lifted a hand in protest and winced.

"Sorry..." she said in a normal voice. "You were terrific. Really, really, terrific..."

"Lucky..." Dari said. "We were all really, really lucky..." He turned to Annabella, expecting her to add her congratulations, say something at least, but she was staring fixedly away to starboard. Dari followed her gaze. There were ships there, galleys, ominous galleys, one large and two smaller, sheltering from the sirocco. Already, a small boat was putting off from the nearest and heading towards them. The men handling it showed very dark against the white of their clothing.

"Moors..." Dari said, a peculiar tone in his voice.

"The more, the merrier," Vivienne said vivaciously, still high on survival.

"You don't understand," Dari said quietly. "They're corsairs. Slavers..."

Annabella was distraught beyond caring. She held her heart cupped next her heart, to all intents dead, lifeless, gone, leaving her to face an eternity of lonely misery, of

utter desolation. It had never occurred to her that Basil would be the vulnerable one, the weak link in their partnership. That Basil might die.

Concentrating her entire being into reading the nerves of her right hand, she thought that possibly he was not quite yet gone. There seemed a hint of warmth there still, the merest suggestion. She could feel her own heart pounding, desperate with her need for Basil to live.

You must not... You must not... You must not die, she commanded, finally completing the mantra she had been repeating over and over. *You must not die*.

She had not been looking at the galleys, as Darius had thought. She had been gazing unseeing at nothing, totally focused on willing Basil to live. She had not seen the boat putting off. She had not registered the conversation between Dari and Vivienne. It was only when the shallop pulled alongside that some awareness began to return.

Chapter 22

Al-'Aqrab had been known as The Scorpion for so long he scarcely remembered his real name, nor indeed wished to. The soubriquet not only pleased him but precisely encapsulated both his nature and his calling, referring, as it did, to one of the constellations he habitually used for navigation.

He had watched the wallowing old tub shoot the gap between the islands with detached interest that turned to quiet amazement when the wreck, barely still afloat, managed to veer out of the current and ground itself on the beach. Evidently there was still life on board and life could be turned to profit. He nodded to his bo'sun, who automatically went about the business of despatching a boat.

Al-'Aqrab stood on his poop in his pomp, arms folded, watching intently as several of his men swarmed aboard the derelict, made a brief inspection, then hustled three people down into the shallop. Only three. Disappointing. Still, it was bad form to sneer at any offering providence might deign to present, gratis, free of charge, and without requiring the slightest effort on his part.

Even so, despite his self-admonishment, it was difficult not to feel even more disappointment when the three drowned rats were paraded before him, that is until he examined them more carefully. Good bones. Undeniably, all three of them had superior bones. And under those wretched robes, equally there was the promise of sweet, young flesh, saleable flesh, profitable flesh, the boy particularly. Al-'Aqrab had at least three clients who would compete eagerly for his servicing. And he could also make something of the girls. Somewhat scrawny, particularly the smaller one, but nothing a bit of force-feeding wouldn't remedy and the return for investing the necessary food and care would be out of all proportion to its cost. All things considered, they were a nice little bonus to mark the end of a successful trip, though why was the small one clutching her arm across her chest like that? An injury perhaps? No matter. It wasn't her arm that buyers would be concerned with.

He nodded again to his bo'sun who had come to the same conclusion as his master and who thus needed no telling that these three should be treated as prime stock and not be consigned to the hold where three score unfortunates, too slow to make good their escape when the corsairs came marauding, already lay crammed tight in abject filth and despair.

Instead, Annabella, Vivienne and Dari, now shivering violently with cold and reaction, found themselves marched along the length of the Yasmina to be incarcerated in a small compartment under the forepeak. As an afterthought, a bundle of dry rags was thrown in behind them.

Outside, the sirocco still raged and showed little sign of waning. Shepherds high in the hills of Crete, whose fathers and forefathers had watched the same phenomenon since time immemorial, knew it would last for at least two more days, possibly three. Al-'Aqrab, for his part, was unwillingly resigned to a tedious stay, safe in the lee of Paximadia Ena or whatever it was the barbaric locals now called the island. Once again he regretted the fact that Byzantium had ever managed to retake the mainland of Crete and abolish the pirate emirate of his forefathers, which had provided such a

convenient base for raiding the Aegean, and such decadent entertainment both before and after. Right now, for instance, it would have been infinitely preferable to be alongside in some salubrious port just across the water with indulgences appropriate to wiling away an unlooked for period of enforced idleness. Al-'Aqrab sighed.

Bakri Touma also sighed, but with relief. For the moment at least, with the galea at rest in calm water, he felt reasonably safe. Earlier, at the insistence of Hassan-i Sabbāh, they had poked their nose around the northern extremity of Crete and had hastily turned back, seeking shelter in a wide bay. It was plainly impossible to continue, however much Hassan-i Sabbāh might rail at the fates. The sirocco was roaring past the tip of the island and turning the strait between Crete and Antikythera into a roiling death-trap that must be the destruction of any ship sufficiently foolhardy to venture forth.

It had been bad enough as it was, the galea being only able to continue this far by virtue of creeping along close in to the lee provided by the northern shore of Crete, ever alert for both outlying reefs and for their quarry. That they had sighted nothing at the pace Hassan-i Sabbāh had forced them to travel must mean the Maria, for reasons only known to those on board, had chosen the longer, southern route around the exposed side of Crete.

The sirocco must have caught them in the open and Touma thought it unlikely that the ship could possibly have survived, which gave him some hope that his own ordeal might soon be over.

Annabella came awake with a guilty start. She had not meant to fall asleep. She had been determined to stay awake for fear that her hand might open and that Basil might slip finally away without her constant attention. But it was all right. As far as she could tell nothing had changed. She was still resting on her back against the bulkhead, her hand still cupped to her heart. She was dry – Vivienne had insisted on wringing out her clothing and rubbing her down with some of the rags, telling her that it would do no earthly good for Basil if she were to come down with pneumonia – and with the combined heat of their bodies crammed close in the tiny compartment, it was now pleasantly warm. A faint lightning of the gloom suggested it might be daylight outside.

Basil... Annabella dared to try. *Basil...?* There was no answer and Annabella felt her heart plummet. Again, she concentrated every fibre of her being on her right hand. Was there still a sensation of warmth? Possibly. More, less? More? She was almost sure there was more. Annabella clung to the thought, unable to contemplate the alternative.

You're getting better, she commanded desperately. *I know you're getting better. You have to get better. I won't let you not get better... Please... Please...*

Vivienne and Dari woke when the grating was flung open for food and drink to be thrust in at them. The grating was slammed shut again and a heavy bolt rammed home.

They both looked at Annabella hopefully but could tell instantly that nothing had changed and turned to the food. They were both ravenous.

"What about you?" Vivienne said, holding out some bread. Annabella mutely shook her head. Vivienne made to insist but then let it drop. Annabella looked so desolate, Vivienne didn't have the heart to be bossy.

"What do you think's going to happen?" she demanded of Dari instead, rather too crisply. Dari began to react to her tone but realised that Vivienne was merely venting her worry.

"Nothing good," Dari said. "We've been taken by slavers. We're being looked after..."

"So?" Vivienne prompted.

"If we were just going to be ordinary slaves," Dari said slowly. "They would have put us in with the rest. In the hold. But they haven't..." Again he ground to a halt.

"So?" she repeated, her irritation mounting.

"We're young. We're pretty... Well, you and Annabella are..."

"So are you..." Vivienne began to say and then realised the import of his words. There was a long silence as she digested the situation.

"You, as well...?" she said at last. Dari nodded. If things had been less serious, the expression on his face would have been priceless.

"I don't believe it," she said automatically, but she did, all too well. "What are we going to do?" she added, her eyes suddenly very large and very round. There was no answer.

Sometime about the middle of the day, the grating was opened and they were forced out on deck, blinking in the harsh light. Overhead the sky was still obscured by the dust of the African deserts whipped along by the sirocco. A glance to their right showed the sea still raging through the gap between the islands. It was a chastening sight. An even more chastening sight was the poor old Maria, still hard aground on the beach, decks awash. It was plain she would never move again and would linger there till either she broke up or rotted away. All three of them, even Annabella, had the same thought simultaneously. How had they ever managed to survive the storm and win to safety on that water-logged wreck?

They were allowed some minutes in the fresh air and then were herded back to their prison. Annabella immediately sank back into a state of fugue which was almost, but not quite yet, mourning. Random memories of Basil flickered across her consciousness. Scenes. Glimpses. Vignettes. Snatches of conversation. And each fragment merely served to deepen her sense of loss, her despair, her anger.

Here was Basil telling her that he could not possibly dare to lie to his father; that the only time he had, the Sheikh as punishment had made him stand under a waterfall for 50 years.

Here was Basil telling her that like all djinn he was made of fire.

Here was Basil telling her that he was Marid, of the tribe of sea djinn, that sea djinn favoured umbrellas for staying dry. She remembered her amusement at the thought of dozens of disembodied umbrellas skipping about the ocean.

Here was the wave, doom descending. Basil's doom.

None of it made sense. It was all conflicting, contradictory. How could Basil stand under a waterfall for 50 years if one wave, only one wave, albeit an absolute avalanche of water, could all but destroy him? Why would djinn ever take to the sea if they were so vulnerable to water, if they were indeed made of fire? And the most vital question of all: if the essence of Basil was, in fact, fire, how could it be rekindled?

The day crept on into night, slowly, oh so slowly. But Annabella had no notion of the passing of time. She lay unmoving, completely indifferent to all but her right hand clasped to her breast. She was so still that from time to time, Vivienne or Dari would half rise on an elbow to check that she was actually breathing.

On this the morning of the third day of the sirocco, Al-'Aqrab scanned the sky with scant enthusiasm. The burden of dust, if anything, appeared to be worse and judging by the motion of the low scrub on top of the hill behind which they sheltered, the storm still raged unabated. Certainly, the sea yet surged through the gap between the islands as though determined to sweep them away, once and for all.

He knew his crews, the worst dregs of the Middle Sea and proud of it, were bored and restless, already stricken with cabin fever, the hotheads among them bumping into each other, jostling, seeking an excuse for a fight, anything to ease the tedium. Twice already, the bo'sun had been forced to wade into knots of angry men, banging heads to restore order. Al-'Aqrab's ship was a tinderbox that could easily self-combust into an uncontrollable conflagration. He knew his lieutenants on his two rather smaller consorts, the Nasreen and the Warda, would be facing an even more explosive situation. It was one of Al-'Aqrab's lesser conceits to have named his fleet of pitiless marauders after flowers. Apart from anything else, it kept his men in fighting trim ashore, defending their honour.

Ordinarily, as was his custom, he would defer the matter of the slaves until reaching home port but now, it struck him, that the usual exercise carried out in unusual circumstances might provide an entertaining diversion. Certainly, the shrieks, the wailings, the lamentations would at least be soothing to the ears of the rapacious sewer rats who manned his ships. He gave the necessary orders.

The grating was thrown open and Vivienne, Dari and finally, a seemingly catatonic Annabella were obliged to emerge on deck. There were people everywhere: men, women, children, dejected, frightened, pitiful, the pathetic gleanings of Al-'Aqrab's present cruise. His villainous crew were herding them none too gently into long lines that snaked back and forth across the deck. The crew of the other two, rather smaller, galleys close by on either side were lining the bulwarks, jeering and shouting ribald advice.

"What's going on?" Vivienne said in a low voice. "What's happening?"

"I don't know," Darius said worriedly. "Nothing good."

Al-'Aqrab on the poop looked down on them along the length of the ship. His eye caught Annabella being guided by Vivienne and Dari between them.

"That one first," he ordered, pointing. "She looks half asleep. Let's wake her up, boys." There was a raucous laugh. Two of the crew seized Annabella, one on each side, propelled her aft and up the ladder. She fought to keep her right arm clasped to her chest and somehow managed to resist a determined effort to pull it free. Al-'Aqrab stepped back and Annabella, now wild and staring, fully roused, saw revealed a large brazier giving off waves of heat, the charcoal glowing red even in the full light of day. As she watched, a flicker of flame danced among the several metal rods thrust into the coals. Each ended with a curious device, a small, rampant scorpion.

Fire to Annabella had been her earliest and remained the visceral, the primal terror. It was irrational, she knew, but unalterable, fixed. Fire, the threat of fire, had always been and would always remain a clarion call to set heart and mind racing, the adrenaline pulsing. In that one instant, a torrent of thought and emotion flooded through her and she knew what she must do. It might prove, probably would, almost certainly, the end of everything, everything that mattered to her – Basil. But at the same time she knew instinctively, with absolute conviction, that it was the one and only chance that remained. The absolute last chance.

Al-'Aqrab nodded and her two tormentors made shift to go to work, but Annabella anticipated them. She broke free and stepped forward of her own accord, one, two, three paces. Her right arm swung out and across the yawning mouth of the brazier, the intense heat shrivelling the down on her wrist. Her hand opened and as it did so, a small scrap of matter, a wisp of thistledown floated down.

Embarrassed, her two guards regained possession of her arms and forced her down to her knees. The bo'sun tore back the shoulder of her robe, picked up one of the branding irons, savoured for a moment the bright, yellow glow of the scorpion symbol then brought it boring down on to her right shoulder.

Annabella screamed. She couldn't help it. But it was not so much the pain, extreme as it was, but anger. Rage. Rage at the world, rage at the injustice of it all. Rage! And defiance. She would not be beaten. Whatever they did to her, she would not be beaten.

The flesh of her shoulder sizzled and burned, the smell repulsive, the pain excruciating, as bad as anything she had ever been forced to suffer. And still the bo'sun pressed, seemingly determined to eat through to the bone.

She screamed again, a wild animal in a trap, a fury, frenzied. Alarmed, the man to her left let her arm slip free and she brought it swinging round, her fist bunched, into the bo'sun's groin, low down. He gasped and cursed, raising the iron to beat her about the head. Instead, he found that the rod kept on rising and himself with it, hanging grimly to the handle, until he was suspended well above the deck. His knuckles whitened as he looked down and realised just how far there was to fall. Suddenly he was moved sideways and abruptly deposited into the sea with a resounding splash.

Basil? Annabella said, wonderingly.

Sorry... Weak... Couldn't hold him...

You're alive... Annabella knew she was scarcely being coherent, but couldn't help it for the heady cocktail of sensation warring within her. The pain of the brand on her shoulder was searing, agonising, yet her heart was suddenly singing with joyous trumpets, soaring violins.

I love you so much, she said. I love you so much. I thought... I thought I'd lost you. Not... yet. Basil's voice was hoarse, halting, almost inaudible. The brazier...? How did you know...?

I didn't. I thought it would probably finish you off, but it was the only thing I could think to do. And that reminds me, I have a huge bone to pick with you...

Now? Basil said with the merest hint of his old mischief. Annabella looked about her at the crowd gawping at the bo'sun struggling in the water. She could see Vivienne and Dari pushing their way along the deck, to join her.

Perhaps not now, Annabella said. But just you wait till I get you alone... What can we do about this lot? How strong are you?

Not good... Feeble...

Annabella glanced about, desperately seeking inspiration. The crew's stunned shock would last only seconds longer. Al-'Aqrab was already starting to turn towards her. Her eyes fell upon two mallets hanging in beackets by a large drum. They were used to beat time for the rowers.

The hammers, she said. Can you use the hammers?

The hammers?

Tap dancing, Annabella said. Are you strong enough to invent tap dancing? There was a faint, answering chuckle in her head.

Al-'Aqrab was moving towards her now. He was close. He was stretching out an arm. The two mallets slipped out of their straps and landed on the deck. They began to tap. Al-'Aqrab froze. The mallets began to tap their way towards him, obviously with malice aforethought. He drew back in alarm and nervously shuffled his feet. He was too slow. One after another, he was hammered on both big toes. He yelped and leapt backwards, the mallets pursuing him until he was brought up hard against the bulwark. Frantic, he struggled to lift his feet off the deck, overbalanced and toppled backwards into the water.

There were stifled gasps from the crowd. The mallets turned sharply about and began to dance their way down the deck, purposefully singling out any black foot that offered. The gasps turned to cries of alarm and then a general clamour of pain and outrage as, leaping and gyrating, the Moors were driven the length of the deck and then finally over the bow, abandoning the ship to Annabella, Vivienne, Darius and the putative slaves. The spectators on the other two galleys, for the moment at least, were so astonished at the rout as to be struck into immobility.

Can you sail this ship? Annabella asked. It was clear it would not take long for the Moors to organise a counter-attack. Already Al-'Aqrab had been hauled aboard one of the other galleys and was shouting orders.

I... I can try...

Be honest. Annabella insisted. Can you do it? There was no answer. *Tell me. Can you do it?*

I... I'm sorry... If I can stay in the brazier... Tomorrow, perhaps... Annabella didn't waste time remarking that that would be far too late. Her eyes swept the crowd of

liberated prisoners, whose freedom was likely to be extremely short lived. An older, strongly built man caught her attention.

"Can you sail?" she asked in Arabic. He stared at her blankly.

"Try Greek," Dari said. He was now standing beside her.

"Can you sail?" she said again. The man shrugged and spread his hands wide.

"Of course," he said. "We are from the islands. We are fishermen..."

"Then I suggest we start sailing right now," Annabella said.

"Into the sirocco?" Again the man shrugged expressively.

"It's a chance," Annabella said. "Would you rather stay a slave?" The man stared at her a moment longer, then nodded. He turned, calling urgently to various men and suddenly all was purposeful bustle. Before the Moors could react effectively, the mooring lines were slipped, rowers were running to the sweeps and the galley was being backed out from between the other two ships.

There was a roar of rage from Al-'Aqrab.

His name was Petros, and a rock he proved for Annabella. There was perhaps a mile of sheltered water before they would hit the sirocco again and then they would have to make another 50 miles to clear the coast of Crete, an ever looming threat not far to leeward.

Very quickly, Petros had all the prisoners, men, women and children, heaving at the sweeps, while he and a few picked hands from his own village, all scooped up by the Moors, went about setting a scrap of canvas. With a last look over his shoulder he hastened back to the poop and took the helm from Dari just as the galley crossed the boundary from the shelter of Paximadia Ena back into the clutches of the storm, with the crew scrambling to get the sweeps inboard before they were shattered. The transition was instantaneous. One moment the galley was a relatively civilised means of conveyance, the next it was a demented, unpredictable beast of a thing, bucking, heaving and plunging, seemingly determined to hurl them all off into the ocean. Even so, it was clear that the worst of the sirocco was finally passing. Both wind and sea had moderated somewhat from their convulsions at the height of the gale.

The first lurch as they crossed the line sent the brazier sliding across the deck, rolling the hated branding irons into the scuppers. Annabella made a frantic grab for one of its legs, desperate to stop it overturning.

"Help me!" she shouted. Dari, quick to react, seized a second leg and between the two of them they managed to hold it upright. One of Petros's fishermen came to their aid with a lashing.

Are you all right? Annabella asked anxiously. *Are you still here?*

I'm... here... Basil said.

"We have to keep this burning," Annabella shouted to the world at large. "It's vital. Absolutely vital."

"We'll have to get it below, somehow," Dari said. "It won't last long with all this water flying about." He was right. Already spray was flying across the deck in sheets and the coals were hissing.

"Petros!" Annabella called. "We have to do this. We have to get this below." She had no idea how the awkward task might be undertaken as all but the legs of the brazier were red-hot. He looked at her uncomprehendingly for a minute, far more concerned with the fact that the other two ships had wasted no time in getting underway and were now far too close for comfort. Also, the Yasmina was on the limit of control, and he was struggling to hold her. Even with only a tiny storm sail she was horribly over-pressed and caroming from wave top to wave top, which was actually something in their favour, he realised with part of his mind. In this sort of a seaway it would be impossible for the other two ships to grapple them. All three would be smashed to pieces.

"Please!" Annabella begged. "Please!" With a start, Petros shouted something and two of his men seized a pair of the branding irons, now lying cold in the streaming scuppers, slid the rods through rings on the brazier, there for the purpose, and manhandled it off the poop and into one of the aft cabins. Annabella, Dari and Vivienne followed close behind.

"Thank you, thank you," Annabella said gratefully. "I can't tell you how important this was." One of the men, with a likeable open face, smiled at her as he and his mate lashed a leg of the brazier to a stanchion.

"Be careful with it," he warned. "Don't let it spill or the ship will catch fire and we'll all be drowned."

"We will be," Annabella promised. "We'll be really, really careful. Please, one more thing, do you think you could find me some wood, or something... to keep it burning?" The man nodded.

"I'll try," he said. "After what you've done for us..."

Chapter 23

Vivienne was wedged in a corner, an all-too-practised look of long-suffering etched deep into her face. Annabella, who had her own suffering to be going on with, found it hard to be compassionate. She was doing her best to ignore the searing pain of the brand burned into her shoulder but couldn't help a most unkind thought: perhaps now, Vivienne might stop complaining about the discomforts of flying on a carpet.

For his part, Dari, in his own mind a seasoned sailor, had made a few sympathetic noises before hurrying back on deck as soon as he decently could. The thrill of racing for their lives through the storm against the two pursuing galleys close behind was far too compelling to miss. The mixture of exhilaration and fear was a most potent drug. He stationed himself next to Petros, avidly absorbing the spectacle of their own ship creaming through the tumbling seas with the other two in line abreast crashing along astern, flinging great sheets of spray far to leeward. A weak sun was now managing to flare through the dust haze overhead, meaning the sirocco was indeed dying, but the ominous coast of Crete was close at hand to starboard and still a constant threat. No refuge there, Darius thought, even if they weren't being so hotly pursued. And the shore already looked closer, much closer. Too close. They would never manage to clear the end of the island, surely?

He glanced at Petros and the look of worry on the fisherman's weather-beaten face confirmed Dari's own opinion. They were making too much leeway and were being inexorably sucked in towards the shore. However much Petros struggled to keep the galley up to the wind, it was clear the tangent of their course would meet the rocks long before they could hope to clear the last cape and gain breathing space.

Dari turned to watch the chasing ships. At least they had the same dilemma, he thought.

How are you feeling? Annabella asked. *Should I put some more charcoal on the fire?* She gestured at the sack the nice young man had found for her. Much better than wood, he had remarked, happy to be able to assist.

Please... Basil said. *I'm so cold... Old and cold... And jolly nearly dead... If it hadn't been for you...*

So you are feeling better? Annabella found she was vastly cheered by that one, simple little "jolly" as she carefully heaped more fuel on the brazier.

Yes. Yes, I am. What about you? What about your shoulder?

I'll live. It's no worse than the finger was.

No worse!

It's just pain, Annabella said impatiently. *So are you well enough for me to tell you what I think of you?*

Um... Basil said warily.

You lied to me, Annabella said severely.

And you're lying to me, Basil countered. *I can tell. Just pain...! You're in agony.*

Stop trying to change the subject. You lied to me...

Um... When, exactly?

You told me your father had made you stand under a waterfall for 50 years, for lying to him... And one little wave, one little drenching and you're at death's door...

It was actually a jolly big wave...

So the waterfall thing was all just a great big whopper...

Pretty much, Basil confessed after a moment. If I jolly well remember, I was telling a little bit of a fib so I wouldn't have to tell a really big lie.

Lies, lies and more lies... When are you going to stop lying to me? You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Annabella said but her tone quite failed to match her trenchant words.

I am, I am... And I have stopped lying to you, mostly, a long time ago. And you should be being nice to me...

What happened? Annabella asked, suddenly serious. What did the wave actually do?

I can drown just like anyone else... Basil was equally serious. Really, if it hadn't been for you... I would have.

I was so frightened, Annabella said with a catch in her voice. I thought you had. I thought I was going to be all alone. Forever...

No, Basil said quietly. At least, not yet.

They fell silent, each contemplating their dependence on the other, total, utter, indissoluble.

I thought you didn't do ideas, Annabella said at last, striving for lightness. How did that bo'sun end up in the air like that?

You forget, Lady Mine, Basil said, attempting to match her tone. That's one of yours... The bazaar at Baghdad... The thug you had me drop in the jolly old cesspool.

Oh... Yes... I'd forgotten...

I hadn't.

The ship suddenly gave a rather more violent lurch and Annabella bumped her shoulder on the bulkhead. The pain lanced through her like an electric shock and she was unable quite to suppress a groan.

Show me, Basil demanded. Annabella eased her robe away from her shoulder and tried to squint round at the angry puckered burn.

What is it? she asked. I can't see.

A scorpion. Or at least it will be when it heals.

Oh, Annabella said disgustedly. So tasteful. A thought occurred to her. Can you do something about it? Come to that, can you give me back my finger?

Um...

Um...? Do you mean to tell me, Annabella said with a hint of underlying laughter. Do you mean to tell me that all that stuff about making Cleopatra beautiful, all that stuff about my front, everything... That that was all fibs, too?

Um... a bit... sort of... pretty much...

What you mean is, abso-jolly-lutely.

Well, in a word, yes.

Which means it was jolly lucky for you that I never said yes.

Not lucky, Basil said comfortably. Not lucky at all. After the first few minutes way back when in Great-uncle Warwick's attic, I was pretty sure you never would.

Pretty sure...? So you went on testing me? Annabella said accusingly.

To start with... A bit... Then it was just jolly japes.

At first Al-'Aqrab's flagship, being somewhat larger than the Nasreen and the Warda, handled the still heavy conditions with rather more composure and managed to gain appreciably. However, as the sirocco slowly continued to lose intensity so the smaller galleys came to hold their own and then even to gain slightly in their turn. And all the time, as the hours passed, the coast came nearer and nearer until it was definitively clear that they had no hope of weathering the end of the island. A narrow peninsular looming in front of them, a rocky finger protruding into the ocean, forced the issue.

"We must turn," Petros said to Dari. "We must come about."

"Yes," Dari said. So much was obvious. Greatly daring, he added: "Can we set more sail? The wind is easing... They're gaining..."

"Perhaps," Petros said. "If we can make our tack before they catch us. They are close. Very close."

"You think they'll try to board? It's not too rough?"

"Dangerous. Still dangerous. But not now impossible."

"Please wait," Dari said. "I'll be right back." And without pausing for an answer, he dashed below.

"You'd better come on deck," he said to Annabella. "Quickly. There might be trouble. You too," he added to Vivienne. She groaned but started to rise.

What about you? Annabella asked. Can you manage?

I think I'd jolly well better, don't you?

But are you all right?

I'll live...

A slim tendril of smoke materialised from the brazier. To Annabella, Basil still looked frail but there was no denying he was recovering quickly and seemed much more like his old self. She hesitated a second longer and then she and Vivienne followed Dari back to the poop.

"We must tack... turn," Petros said to Annabella, gesturing to make his meaning clear.

Is he right? she asked.

Looks jolly like it to me and the sooner the better.

"Please," Annabella said. "Whatever you think is right." Petros nodded and began to shout a stream of orders.

Petros made a last survey to check all was ready. To have attempted to wear a ship – to turn away from the wind, loop around and gybe – would have been fatal, leaving

them far to leeward of their pursuers, hemmed in between them and the shore, easy prey. The only possible alternative then was to bring the ship up through the eye of the wind, across and so on to the other tack. It was a manoeuvre fraught with danger. The wrong wave at the wrong time and there was a good chance of the ship going into irons and wallowing, helplessly stalled, while the other galleys closed and boarded. However, Petros at Dari's urging was also planning to replace the storm sail with the reefed mainsail as they tacked, thereby increasing the risk of something going wrong by several orders of magnitude. On the other hand, if their scratch crew on an unfamiliar deck should manage to pull it off, they would gain a huge advantage.

"Standby!" Petros shouted and put the helm down. The ship began to swing to port, towards the wind. Without the least understanding of the technicalities, Annabella found she was holding her breath.

Slowly, slowly, the ship carved around, losing way as she did so. Now, she was nearly head to wind, the storm sail flogging thunderously as it was lowered. A wave crashed into the bow full on. The ship staggered, slowing even more, all but coming to a dead stop. It was the critical moment. Would she have enough momentum to slide around? Or would she stall completely? Another wave crashed into the bow, slightly more to starboard. It was enough to push her on and through the eye of the wind.

"Now!" Petros roared, and his men jumped to the halyards, frantically hauling to raise the great yard and the reefed mainsail. They were too late. The nearer of the two galleys was almost on them. Already it was luffing up to range along their lee side.

I think their mast should fall down, Annabella remarked, managing to sound almost casual. *If you can manage it, that is...?* She could see Al-'Aqrab standing in the bow ready to spring, brandishing a scimitar and gazing at her malevolently.

Abso-jolly-lutely, Basil replied with delight and as he spoke there was a rending, cracking noise that carried to them clearly over the rapidly diminishing gap. A moment later, the Nasreen's mast was teetering and then crashed into the water. Al-'Aqrab swung round to stare at the wreckage before turning back to face Annabella, shouting vile words she was rather glad she couldn't hear. The Yasmina gathered way and the snarling look on his face, she thought, was some slight recompense for the damage he had caused to be inflicted on her.

The Warda made a valiant attempt to come to grips with the Yasmina in her turn, but now setting much greater sail area, they quickly pulled away. The people on the poop about Annabella began to cheer spontaneously, and the roaring quickly spread throughout the ship. For the moment, they were safe. And free. Again free.

They were assembled in the aft cabin, Annabella, Vivienne, less sick than she had been now the weather was moderating rapidly, Dari and Petros. Basil was back, toasting himself in the brazier, well on the way to full recovery. They had waited until Al-'Aqrab's ships had disappeared below the horizon and then tacked again. They were now back on course for Pylos and well clear of the corner of Crete. The last they had seen of the pursuing galleys, the still functioning Warda had taken the Nasreen in tow to prevent her being swept ashore and dashed to pieces, and as it was still too rough to row, they were struggling to replace the fallen mast with a jury rig.

"However," Petros observed. "They will try to follow, they will try to find us. We have Al-'Aqrab's Yasmina, his pride and joy. He will not forget. Or forgive."

"Well," Annabella said. "We'll just have to worry about that when it happens. If it happens. But we owe you great debt for getting us away."

"No more than we owe you," Petros said. He paused delicately. "Where is the lady goes? What do you plan for us?"

"Pylos," Annabella said. "I have to go to Pylos. Or at least, quite near."

"Pylos?" Petros said unhappily. "That is far from our homes."

"A proposition," Annabella said, working it out as she spoke. "Stay with us until I finish what I have to do. It shouldn't take too long, I hope... Two days, three days... Then we'll leave this ship to you and your people. You can take them all home and keep the galley, or sell it, or sink it, if that's what you think would be best."

"And Al-'Aqrab? Even if we sink his ship, he knows where we live. He will come again."

Annabella regarded Petros gravely. He was a strong man, a man who had spent his whole life at sea in hard, grinding labour.

"Then you have a choice," Annabella said. "You can let yourself be captured again. Or you can fight."

Petros stood for some seconds regarding her equally gravely. Then he nodded and ducked out the companion way.

"But there's still a big problem," Annabella said when he'd gone.

"With you around, it's just one jolly problem after another," Basil observed not quite sufficiently sotto voce.

"What problem?" Dari said.

"Hassan-i Sabbāh thinks we're still on the Maria..." There was a long silence. "I can't think how to show him where we are now..." Annabella went on eventually. There was another long silence. It was broken by Vivienne.

"Hire a sky writer?" she suggested facetiously. "X marks the spot..."

"What is a sky writer?" Dari asked.

"A sky writer?" Annabella snapped simultaneously. "Thanks very much..." With the passing of the crisis, her shoulder was again making its presence felt most unpleasantly. She winced as another wave of pain swept through her.

"Sorry," Vivienne said, watching her face. She grimaced sympathetically.

Then they all suddenly turned to Basil...

"Could you do that?" Annabella asked. "A bit of cloud or something..."

"Difficult," Basil said. "Difficult to jolly well keep it in place for more than a few minutes... But a kite, now. That might jolly well work. O marks the spot..."

"A kite?" Annabella repeated, her attention focused internally.

"A kite," Basil said firmly.

"But you don't do ideas, remember?"

"I do remember. But it's not my jolly idea. It's Vivienne's. And you should jolly well say thank you very much."

"A kite?" she repeated for the third time. "O marks the spot? What on earth are you talking about?"

Bakri Touma cursed silently but with intent. He, like the rest of the now mutinous crew of the galea – mutinous if only they dared – had assumed – reasonably assumed, logically assumed – that they would remain safe in the deep bay they had found at the northern extremity of Crete and resume the voyage on the morrow. But no. With the easing of the sirocco, they had been commanded to slip the ship's mooring and take her down the sound out into the gathering dusk. On rounding the western point they had immediately found themselves in a most uncomfortable situation. The wind was such that under sail, they would only be able to lay the northern side of Antikythera, setting them well off course for Pylos, and so it had been decreed that they would continue under oars, punching into the confused head sea.

The motion was appalling, the work brutal, and however hard the men struggled at the sweeps, progress meagre. It was, Bakri Touma told himself, going to be a long and miserable night.

Al-'Aqrab was still beside himself with rage, but it was now a cold, vicious, vengeful wrath, far more dangerous than the half-crazed fury with which he had begun the pursuit of his stolen galley. That the slaves had dared to rebel and drive him overboard from his own ship before his own men in such humiliating fashion was monstrous. That they had then presumed to steal his most precious possession was beyond belief. As far as Al-'Aqrab was concerned, they were slaves no longer. They were dead men, dead women and dead children. Cruelly dead. Most particularly the girl who had started it all. As cruelly as he could possibly devise. Ganching, for instance, impalement. An ancient method of execution that had fallen into sad disuse and was long overdue for a revival... Or the technique he had heard whispered in one of the very specialised waterfront dives he patronised, whereby a man could be cut in half and his trunk cauterised on a red-hot, bronze shield to prolong his screaming agony and the enjoyment of the audience. The girl, for instance, and that stinking fisherman now standing up on Al-'Aqrab's poop, daring to steer his ship, they would make most suitable subjects for such an experiment...

In the meantime, Al-'Aqrab had driven his crew like a man possessed to set up a jury rig. It had taken the better part of the afternoon but at last, as dusk was falling, they were again underway.

Al-'Aqrab had also taken note that the Yasmina had not, in fact, disappeared over the southern horizon into the empty Mediterranean as it had been purposing to do. Watching intently, he had observed that the minute nick on the horizon, which was the peak of his very own sail, on the point of vanishing had instead altered course to the north-west. The idiots had come round too soon, assuming that as the single remaining mast of the chasing ships had slipped below the horizon, that they too must now be out of sight. They had forgotten that the peak of the lateen yard they had thought to set rose significantly higher than a mast still carrying only a trysail.

That left two possibilities: The thieves would either swing round the end of the island to the north and east and head back into the Aegean, or continue on a north-westly heading to land somewhere on the mainland of Greece. And if Al-'Aqrab was any judge, the north-west it would be. In the same situation, it was what he would do. Vanishing into the interior offered some hope of permanent escape. Heading anywhere near the islands and home was simply inviting an ugly death.

As the night advanced, so the wind steadily declined until it was just a pleasant breeze. Aboard the Yasmina, confident they had eluded pursuit, Petros was content just to mooch along without bothering to shake out the deep reef that effectively reduced the size of the mainsail by half. Partly he was concerned to let people sleep and recover from the misery of the past days, but more particularly he was unwilling to sail further away from home more quickly than was strictly necessary. He felt some slight guilt but rationalised it with the thought that if the young lady was in haste to get to Pylos she would come and tell him.

As the breeze dropped, so did the seaway, until towards dawn the ship found herself ghosting along in the merest zephyr, sail slatting lazily to an oily, leftover swell. The motley crew began to rouse with the light and the noise woke Annabella, Vivienne and Dari. They came on deck to find a pale sea merging into a sky so equally pale that it was difficult to tell where one ended and the other began. Some of the women were preparing food and they were all thankful for the breakfast gratefully pressed upon them, Vivienne especially.

So... Annabella said with her mouth full.

Oh puh-lease...

What?

Manners, Lady Mine.

Don't be ridiculous. What's the point of telepathy if I can't eat and talk at the same time?

So rude, Basil sniffed.

Rubbish. If you ever eat anything, you'd do it too... So, a kite? Are you really serious?

Abso-jolly-lutely. Get it up high and it'll be seen for leagues and leagues.

There isn't any wind to fly a kite, Annabella said repressively. And even if there were, why should it mean anything to Hassan-i Sabbāh?

Ah-ha... It all rather depends on the jolly old kite.

Well...?

Wait and see. When you've finished eating.

And there's still no wind...

Not a problem. Not a jolly old problem at all, at all.

Where Petros had been content to leave well enough alone as the wind died, Al-'Aqrab had cracked on sail, eventually setting every stitch the Nasreen and the Warda could muster. As a result, they had gained appreciably on the Yasmina but at

dawn were still well below the horizon. As it became clear that the visible circle of sea about them would remain empty no matter how much the light strengthened, Al-'Aqrab suppressed a deep feeling of doubt beneath his habitual air of supreme confidence. He sent his crew of cutthroats to the sweeps, rejoicing at least a little in the knowledge that with the Yasmina's original complement divided between his two remaining ships, he could sustain a more than respectable pace under oars more or less indefinitely.

A rose by any other name may smell like jonquil, but in short order the only aroma coming from the two galleys so named was a powerful stench from unwashed and already noisome male bodies, sweating heavily.

Still well to the north, but on a rapidly converging course, the galea trailed an equally unpleasant odour through the fresh morning air, though here the stink of sweat was mixed with a counterpoint of rancid, rotting meat.

Bakri Touma had long since ceased to think. Also consigned to an oar, he knew only one thing. He would rather die than stop rowing. As a trifle of encouragement, Hassan-i Sabbāh had come forth on his carpet and removed his shroud to reveal what lay beneath. The galea had been going like a scalded catamaran ever since.

Well, Annabella said. If we're really going to have a kite, now would be a good time, don't you think?

Except for one jolly thing.

What?

I'm not doing any jolly thing at all until you tell me exactly what you're planning. We're very close now... To the jolly old deep... What you going to do? I need to know, Annabella...

Annabella, is it?

And I'm really not going to do another jolly thing until you tell me.

I... I haven't made up my mind...

And now who's telling jolly whoppers?

Chains, I told you.

What about chains?

They sink, I told you.

And...?

And if Hassan-i Sabbāh is in chains, then he'll sink, won't he?

And just how are you jolly well proposing to put him in chains and then push him into the water?

Well, I was hoping you might do the chains. Even if you can't freeze him, you can still do chains...?

And getting him into the water...?

I'll think of something.

Not good enough. Not jolly good enough by a jolly long chalk.

Well, it's the best I've got.

*Annabella, you can't go through with this. I won't let you go through with this.
You have to, Basil. We have no choice. You know we have no choice.*
It was a long, long silence.
So, Annabella said at last. *The kite...*

The assembled crew of the good ship Yasmina, presently wallowing motionless in the early morning calm, watched proceedings on the poop with growing astonishment. No one could make head or tail of it. What the purpose of this large, round object that gleamed like gold might be, or indeed of the coil after coil of gossamer thin line, no one could even speculate.

Now, Lady Mine, Basil said when all was to his satisfaction. *Seeing as how – as usual – I don't jolly well officially exist...*

Don't be like that. I know you exist...

... You three will have to handle the kite, and we need someone to row.

Annabella turned to Petros who was standing a little apart.

"Time to get the ship moving," she said. "Would it be all right to start rowing?"

Petros nodded and turned to his people. A minute or two later the rowing benches were manned, a signal given and the sweeps were churning the water. Reluctantly, the galley started to move and slowly gained speed until an appreciable wind of passage was flowing along the deck from bow to stern.

Ah, Annabella said. *I see. Or rather I feel.*

In-jolly-deedy, Basil replied.

Haven't heard that one before.

New lease on life, new vocabulary...

What do we do now?

Launch the kite, of course, what do you jolly think?

Annabella put Dari in charge of the string, explaining what she wanted him to do. Then she and Vivienne lifted up the kite. Even though it was twice their height, the silk and cane of its structure seemed to have no weight at all. They could feel the breeze wanting to take it and at a nod from Annabella they let it go. It rose smoothly into the sky as Dari paid out the line until it was flying high above and behind, a beacon visible far beyond the horizon.

Dari made off the end of the line to the taffrail, mooring the kite in position so long as there was breeze of one sort or another and stood back, admiring its flight. Even though kites had been invented thousands of years before in China, he had never seen one. Nor had the rest of the crew.

"Amazing," he said. "But what is it?"

"Can't you guess?" Vivienne said. Dari frowned and then his face cleared.

"Oh," he said.

How far to the deep, do you think? Annabella asked privately.

At this speed, ten hours maybe, 12...

And then, Annabella said, unable to disguise the tremor in her voice. *And then...*

Roger, Basil said after a long moment. *Roger, jolly wilco*. Annabella laughed aloud, despite herself.

That's another new one.

Pilot talk. The kite, you see... Brings it back... When I was flying jolly old Sopwith Camels...

What nonsense, Annabella gurgled. Suddenly, despite her fears she felt loving and carefree.

Al-'Aqrab found the strange object floating low down in the sky before him extremely puzzling. What in heaven's name, so to speak, could it possibly be? It bore no resemblance to any thing he had ever seen or indeed heard of before. One thing, however, was certain. It lay directly on the bearing he was convinced the Yasmina would have taken. It was not impossible that the object was even some strange manifestation of his stolen ship. He ordered a change of shift for his oarsmen and urged the new watch to greater efforts.

There was no doubt in Hassan-i Sabbāh's mind, however, no doubt at all. The gleaming golden torus there in the sky before him could represent only one thing, the Seal of Solomon. That it was there at all, in turn, could mean only one thing. He allowed his gaze to range the waist of the galea. The exhausted men on the benches lifted their rating yet again.

Chapter 24

As the sun rose, so did the breeze until the Yasmina was spanking along under full sail, the oars shipped, reeling off the miles. Behind her, on the three assorted ships following in her wake, now also under sail, the spent rowers were permitted at last to collapse gratefully at their benches.

And the closer the Yasmina came to the unmarked point of the featureless sea off the western coast of Greece where the ocean floor abruptly plunged to abyssal depths, the more silent Annabella became. She had lied to Basil. She did have a plan for finishing Hassan-i Sabbāh, a desperate plan, a series of moves that she had choreographed in her mind and which had at least some small chance of success. The major flaw, a huge flaw, was that the whole enterprise depended on persuading Basil to accept the necessity of doing what she would demand of him. She couldn't imagine how she could possibly convince him that, suicidal as it would inevitably appear, there was no other way.

As though echoing her own thoughts, Basil chose that moment to speak. Annabella was standing in the prow, as far for'ard as she could get. Basil was perched on the rail beside her, invisible to anyone who didn't know he was there.

Now would be a good time to tell me. Annabella struggled to hide a guilty start. She was not entirely successful. She turned towards him.

Tell you what?

You know very well.

And what's special about now, she prevaricated.

Because we're here, Lady Mine. The Calypso Deep. Right on jolly top of it. Annabella couldn't resist peering over the side of the ship. The sea, the water, looked exactly the same; the only difference was that just here it went straight down for something over a league, a whole three miles. The knowledge gave her an eerie feeling.

In that case, you'll have to excuse me, she said. She turned about and made her way down the length of the deck to seek out Petros.

"Could we stop here, please?" she said, coming up to him.

"Stop, lady?"

"Please. We have to wait here for someone."

"Wait?" Petros's honest face crumpled into a puzzled frown. "How long?"

"Not long, I hope. Hours. Maybe a day... Then... Then you should be able to go home."

"Stop?" Petros repeated, not quite able to believe Annabella was serious. She nodded. He waited a second or two just in case she might change her mind then gave the necessary orders to heave to.

I'm still here, Basil said. *Nice try, but you don't get rid of me that jolly easily.*

I wasn't trying to get rid of you.

And I have one thing to say to you, Lady Bright. Liar, liar, jolly pants on fire...

I'm not lying...

You can't kid a fibber. Pot and the kettle, Annabella. Pot and the jolly kettle.

Please, Basil... Don't be difficult... It's hard enough as it is...

What...? What's so hard?

You know very well.

No. I don't. That's the whole point. You won't tell me.

I... I can't.

Why not? Why not, Annabella? She drew a deep breath. What could she say?

Because if I tell you, you'll refuse to do it. There, it was out in the open.

I knew it. I damn well knew it.

And you can't refuse.

I can. My word I can. Just you jolly watch me.

You can't, because if you refuse, it'll be worse. A thousand times worse.

The golden torus, whatever it signified, had apparently stopped its advance to who knew where. It now appeared to be hovering, fixed in a stationary position, a beacon drawing them on. As the Nasreen and the Warda came closer, so it began to rise higher in the sky. Al-'Aqrab stood gripping the rail. Why the torus should be associated with the Yasmina he couldn't begin to speculate, but he knew in his bowels that the two were linked. He and every other man on board his two remaining ships stared at it with fixed intensity and there was a concerted sigh when it became clear that the truck of a mast was pricking the horizon beneath the mysterious object and slightly to one side. No one had the slightest doubt that the mast would prove to be the Yasmina's.

Equally, no one had the slightest inkling that behind them and on a converging course, a speedy galea was racing along and gaining quite rapidly.

Bakri Touma, without knowing quite why, found the sight of the two strange galleys heaving into view broad on the port bow distinctly alarming. Evidently, his master was of the same mind. Orders were given for the two cannae, the brass tubes used to direct the Greek fire, to be unplugged, for the vats containing the terrifying liquid to be heated and for the pumps that powered the weapons to be cleared away, pumps based on the design originally developed in ancient Rome for the city's fire-fighting engines. Lastly, the tubes were concealed beneath an old sail, artfully draped.

Whether this was just a precaution, whether Hassan-i Sabbāh was actually planning an attack, or whether the preparations were aimed at some other contingency altogether, Touma couldn't say.

The lookout at the Yasmina's masthead was quick to spot the two strange sails as they crested the horizon. His news was received on deck with grave concern. As it became more and more probable that they must belong to the pursuing galleys of Al-'Aqrab, the people Annabella had so lately rescued from him became more and more agitated.

When there could be no doubt that the Moors had tracked them down, Annabella was confronted by a delegation led by Petros. The arrival of the galleys was an irritating complication but she found it difficult to spare thought for them. She was only interested in the third ship that had also appeared, some way behind. It was Hassan-i Sabbāh's galea, there could be no doubt.

"Lady," Petros said, gesturing at the still distant ships. "Al-'Aqrab... We must flee while there is still time. We cannot stay here." Vivienne and Dari came pushing through the throng to join her, guarding her flanks. She was grateful for the support.

"We must," Annabella said. "I'm afraid we must stay here." There was an outbreak of expostulation from the mass of people who had now crowded in close and were listening avidly. Petros turned, raising his arms and trying to quiet the protests, but the shouting grew angrier and angrier until there was general uproar. A young man with reddish hair, one of Petros's picked hands, burst from the crowd, drawing a knife. He dashed aft towards the helm, obviously intending to cut the lashing and to bring the Yasmina around until she was sailing again, sailing away.

Basil... Annabella said. Freeze him!

I can't, Basil said unhappily. I can't see his face...

An instant flash of memory swept Annabella. Way back at the very beginning when Basil had dealt with Cordelia Uppington and her minions by freezing them, he had told her that to do it, he needed to be able to see their eyes.

She screamed, a piercing shriek that cut through everything. Startled, unable to resist, the boy glanced at her over his shoulder to be frozen in midstride. There was a gasp as people realised what had happened and momentary silence, to be followed by renewed uproar.

"Please... Please..." Annabella shouted, and as Petros bellowed at the crowd, added privately: *We can deal with the galleys, I hope?*

Certainly, Lady Mine, Basil replied, now sanguine again.

You're sure? You're strong enough?

I'm quite better, thank you, Basil said, not quite so comfortably. I can jolly well sink them if it comes to it, CODE permitting.

Well that's something, Annabella said. She suddenly had the distinct feeling that things were getting rapidly out of control.

"Quiet!" Petros thundered several times and at last when the shouting had died to muttering: "Let the lady speak."

"I'm sorry," Annabella said, trying to project her voice. "I'm sorry, but I have to do this. I won't let the slavers touch you, I promise... I promise... But we have to stay here."

"How can you promise?" Petros asked incredulously, articulating the general disbelief. For answer, Annabella pointed to the young man still standing frozen, knife hand outstretched.

"I have magic," she said firmly. "Don't you remember the bo'sun? Don't you remember how Al-'Aqrab was driven from this ship? Do you not see your friend, there? Can he move?" She pointed dramatically.

Can we turn him upside down, please?

But certainly...

"Watch!" Annabella commanded and as she spoke, the young man described a slow cartwheel, still frozen, until he was suspended upside down in mid-air.

"If necessary," Annabella went on. "I will sink those ships. I will not let them touch you." There was another outbreak of noise, but of a different quality. Annabella could sense acquiescence, grudging acceptance.

We should let that boy go, now, she said, and as she spoke, the very confused youth subsided to the deck, his knife clattering from his grasp.

"So," Vivienne said for Annabella and Dari to hear. "That's the plan? You'll get Basil to sink Hassan-i Sabbāh's ship?"

If only it were so simple, Annabella thought. Aloud she said: "You've forgotten his carpet. And we're not far from land..."

"Oh," Vivienne said and then, after a moment: "So what is the plan?"

"Like I said, I'll think of something," Annabella replied dismissively, turning away to stare at the approaching ships, now appreciably closer.

Even after being made aware of the galea following behind, Al-'Aqrab had eyes only for the Yasmina. However, when it became clear that she had remained hove to past the critical point and now had no hope of escape, that again she would surely be his, he did spare a thought for this interloper brazenly forcing herself upon his attention. She was a trim little ship, he saw, apart from that untidy heap of old canvas cluttering the prow, a vessel well-found and well worth the trouble of snapping up, and little enough trouble that would be anyway. She surely would not have nearly sufficient men to resist his combined crews for more than a minute or two. And Al-'Aqrab actually smacked his lips. Perhaps the theft of his Yasmina had merely been a case of divine providence leading him by devious routes to a profitable little piece of piracy. The capture of the galea would certainly more than compensate for any slight humiliation that might linger once he was striding the poop of the Yasmina again. He even wondered, in passing, if with a little finesse he might not convince his men that the whole episode had been an elaborate plan entirely befitting his reputation for cunning.

Bellowing with a voice that had dominated many a battle and many a gale, he gave the Nasreen her orders across the narrow, intervening gap. Unobtrusively, the two galleys began to spill wind from their sails and to slow slightly. As a result, a perceptive observer might come to estimate that all three ships would now reach the Yasmina at approximately the same time, give or take.

Annabella, I demand to know what you're planning. I demand it. And indeed, there was a most insistent edge to Basil's voice.

Annabella gauged the remaining distance to the approaching ships. Not long, she thought, not long at all, minutes...

Timing, she said in a neutral voice. *It will all be in the timing.*

What? Basil said with unaccustomed vehemence. *What will be in the timing?*

And concealment. Hassan-i Sabbāh has to forget about you. You have to stay hidden.

Hidden? Why?

So that when I go to him, I can get the ring or at least stop him using it long enough for you to chain him up and throw him overboard.

You're joking. You are jolly joking. Go to him...!

I have to. I must, Basil. It's the only way.

I won't allow it.

I knew you'd say that. But you have to. You know you have to.

I know nothing of the jolly sort. And you've forgotten something. Al-'Aqrab... If I do anything to the galleys... To stop them... Then I won't be hidden, will I? I'll be standing out there like a sore thumb, shouting: "Remember me! Over here... Here I am... Your favourite jolly djinni..."

Annabella went white with shock. She had forgotten, or at least in the press of events had failed to take that into account. Al-'Aqrab's arrival was more than just a complication. It threatened to ruin what passed for her plan, to ruin it completely. Basil was right. Any action he took against the galleys would instantly signal his continued presence to Hassan-i Sabbāh, voiding any notion of surprise. Suddenly she was trapped between the many headed Scylla of Al-'Aqrab's anger and the seething whirlpool, the Charybdis of Hassan-i Sabbāh's revenge.

What can we do? she said desperately. *We have to finish him, Hassan-i Sabbāh... We have to save these people...*

I don't know, Basil said

With the Yasmina trapped under his lee and manned as she now was by fishermen, women and children – no match for his own hardened thugs and therefore no sort of threat – Al-'Aqrab felt quite entitled first to turn his attention to the interloper, a *bonne bouche* before the main dish you might say. And he fully intended, indeed had promised himself, to make a sumptuous banquet of the recapture of the Yasmina, to linger long over the selection and butchering of the meat, the roasting of the flesh, the carving of the joints, savouring the screams to the very fullest.

He gave the Nasreen the pre-arranged signal and the two galleys wore round in a smooth curve until they were pointing straight back at the galea. Al-'Aqrab had so timed the manoeuvre that the strange ship now had no choice but to sail between them. To attempt to veer off to either side inevitably would mean being caught and smashed amidships by one or other of the onrushing rams.

Al-'Aqrab loosened his scimitar in its scabbard and prepared to give the word that would bring his two ships edging in towards each other, catching the galea in a crushing vice which would allow his boarders to go swarming over her rails. He was just choosing the halyard with which to swing himself across in the van when rapid activity on the stranger's foredeck took his attention.

The old canvas heaped carelessly about vanished on the instant, leaving two groups of men bent over and obscuring whatever it was they were working on. Moments later they ducked away to reveal two brass tubes being run out over the rail. There was also

the glow of flame from oil lamps suspended at the mouth of each cannae. Al-'Aqrab's heart stopped.

"Greek fire!" he roared. "Sheer off! Sheer off...!" He was a second too late. He was an eternity too late.

Pressurised by the chambered pumps, the deadly incendiary liquid was forced from the vat and up through the nozzles, there to be ignited by the lamps, then to send a deluge of inextinguishable flame raining down, all over the two galleys. It brought instant catastrophe, instant immolation. The tar, hemp and resin used so freely in ship building of the period flared to flame instantaneously and within the time it took to take one gasp of superheated air, air already unbearable, the two galleys were roaring funeral pyres more fit for a Viking chieftain than a Moorish slaver and occasional pirate.

Al-'Aqrab had a moment to realise the total ruin that had been visited upon him and then his own particular fate, a fate most richly deserved, came arcing down, doom descending, fixing his eye, rooting him to the spot. Time stopped. Then a great gout of the appalling, incandescent liquid, heat radiating in waves before it, took him full in the face. He screamed, partly in agony, partly in outrage, then maddened with the excruciating pain, he hurled himself over the side into the sea. However, rather than extinguish the terrible flames, the water only made them burn more fiercely and Al-'Aqrab sank into the depths doubly tortured, doubly dying, simultaneously drowning yet being burnt alive.

He was escorted across the great divide by the rest of his men, every last one and most suffering the same torment of the twice damned. The galleys burned to the waterline and then kept on burning as they slowly sank beneath the surface, surrounded by glowing blobs of human agony.

The Yasmina's people lining the rail stood transfixed, motionless, speechless, utterly sickened. The Moors had been pitiless oppressors but their complete destruction and disappearance in so short a space was something so deeply shocking that there could be no thought of rejoicing, at least until their nausea had time to recede.

Annabella watched, apparently stoically, but inside she was screaming and writhing with horror. Fire! Such fire! The instant immolation of the two galleys was one of the most terrifying things she had ever seen, the bodies continuing to burn as they sank quite appalling. Nobody deserved to die like that.

Annabella? Basil said. She failed to respond.

Are you all right? Basil insisted. Annabella lifted a hand weakly from the rail in some sort of gesture of acknowledgement.

What are we going to do? Still Annabella was silent, her mind refusing to think, rebelling against the necessity. Why should she have to? Why couldn't the world just leave her alone? She had never done anything to anyone and yet the world insisted on embroiling her in one hideous catastrophe after another, each worse than the last, or so

it seemed. It was too much, too much, too much... She closed her eyes, despairingly wishing she could just vanish.

Annabella, Basil pleaded. Heart of my heart... You can't give up, not now... He's coming for you... He's coming for you...

And indeed the galea, having dropped its sail, was creeping closer to the Yasmina under oars.

Have you ever wondered? Basil said suddenly, speaking urgently and apparently at a complete tangent. *Have you ever wondered why Hassan-i Sabbāh has never actually tried to use the ring on me, the Seal of Solomon?* There was a long silence, but at least Annabella was now listening.

Not even on the carpet, Basil went on. *When I was leading him away from Castle Alamut. I know what you said... that he wouldn't want us to crash... But if he could really control me, then we wouldn't have, would we... crashed...? He could have forced me just to jolly well stop. Land. Give up. Surrender. You got that wrong. You did, Annabella. You got that all wrong... And I've only just realised.* There was another long silence.

What are you saying? Annabella asked eventually. Her voice was thin, astringent, pared to the essence.

And way back when he caught us, in the desert after the fight with the rukh, he didn't use the ring. I did what he wanted voluntarily. I jolly went into that hateful flask of my own accord because he threatened to cut Vivienne's throat.

What are you saying? Annabella repeated.

He has never used the ring on me. He has never even tried to. Never. Not once. Even when it was the obvious thing to do.

No! Annabella said suddenly, her voice rising, panicky. *I know what you're thinking... No! It's too big a risk! Just because he hasn't used the ring on you yet doesn't mean he can't or won't. No Basil. No! I forbid it. I won't have it.*

Think about it...

No! Annabella cried, her eyes suddenly pricking with tears of fright and her voice cracking with desperate urgency. *No!*

Who says the decision is jolly well up to you?

I do. It's my fight, not yours. You have no right to interfere.

Now just a jolly minute...

No, Basil. You must stay out of it. You must stay hidden. I won't risk you. I can't risk you. If anything happens to you it will be infinitely worse for me. Annabella was clutching at the rail, the tendons on her hands standing out, the knuckles white. Her face was working frantically. *My way is the only way,* she stormed. *Promise me! Promise me you won't try to do anything until I say.*

I don't think I can do that... promise... How do you think I'll feel if anything happens to you?

You must promise, she moaned. *If you love me, you must. It's our only chance. Promise. Promise me. Promise you'll do exactly as I say. It's our only chance.* Tears

were now pouring down her face and she was nine parts hysterical. Basil could resist no longer. All at once, he surrendered.

I promise, he said in a whisper wrenched from his heart.

Whatever happens, Annabella insisted.

I swear, Basil said in a voice that could barely be heard.

Chapter 25

It was late in the day now and the sun slipping towards the horizon was beginning to turn the sky red, as though flushing with indignation at the mindless human folly it was being forced to witness... yet again... times without number... endlessly.

The galea, moving slowly and carefully, edged its way in towards the Yasmina until the galley was in range of the cannae but still with a stretch of clear water separating the two ships, sufficient to act as a fire-break in the event of the flame-throwers again being called into play. The Yasmina's people watched with mounting dread. It was clear the galea was no benign rescuer but a deadly threat, more deadly even than Al-'Aqgrab.

At last, at a shouted command the oars backed water and the galea came to a stop. The world also stopped, or so it seemed. Even the ocean seemed to suspend its scend and heave in anticipation of some momentous event. For Annabella, the silence grew more and more unbearable until finally, when she was at screaming point, a voice sounded. It was Hassan-i Sabbāh's guttural whisper, but magnified somehow so that every sibilant syllable came quite clear on the evening air.

"You will come!" the voice hissed, speaking barely comprehensible Greek. Somehow, no one of the throng crowding the Yasmina's decks was in any doubt as to whom the voice was demanding. People, even Vivienne and Dari, drew back and back until Annabella stood alone, marked by a wide circle of emptiness.

"You will come!" the voice repeated. Again there was silence. "You will come or I will burn that ship, and then still you will come."

Annabella drew in a deep, deep breath and calling on all her reserves, managed to summon the resolution to turn to Petros. Wordlessly she indicated the upturned dinghy. With a panicky rush men hastened to manhandle it over the side. Someone threw in a pair of oars. Annabella moved to the rail.

"Annabella! Wait! Stop! You mustn't..." It was Vivienne, coming forward now, her voice stark and stretched to breaking point, but Annabella made no acknowledgement. Instead, with a quick movement she swung herself over the rail and down into the shallop. Awkwardly she fumbled the oars into the thole pins and pushed away from the side of the ship. With little idea of how to row, her course was erratic and painfully slow, but nevertheless she was heading towards the galea and there could be no doubt that eventually she must arrive there.

Half way across the gap, the voice came again.

"Stop!" Hassan-i Sabbāh commanded. Annabella did as she was told.

"Face me!" the voice ordered, and Annabella paddled with one oar until the stern of the dinghy was pointing towards the galea.

"What's happening?" Vivienne demanded of Dari. "What's he going to do to her?"

"I don't know," Dari said unhappily, then an awful thought struck him. Annabella and Darius had subjected Hassan-i Sabbāh to Greek fire. Darius was dead but Annabella was still very much alive. Indeed she couldn't die, only suffer.

"Punishment," Dari said. "He wants to punish her for the fire, what Darius did when she escaped." His words pierced Basil through and through, Basil who for the moment had been forgotten.

Annabella came to the same realisation, staring at the mouths of the cannae with their still flickering lamps. Hassan-i Sabbāh had no intention of letting her get close, of approaching anywhere near him. She was to pay penance first, and subsequently who knew whether she would be capable of anything, anything at all, anything except pain and anguish. Her silly little plan, though it had survived Al-'Aqrab, was utterly futile, thwarted, exploded before she had even begun. She was, she suddenly accepted, completely alone, completely isolated, completely vulnerable and completely without hope. There was nothing left, nothing left at all. Then slowly, as she watched, the cannae tubes began to track around and down until they were aimed directly at her, gaping orifices, yawning wide, promising an eternity of suffering, an eternity of torment, an eternity of hell.

Terror took her, terror such as she had never experienced before, terror that sucked the breath from her body, turned her bones to liquid, her blood to ice. Fire was her bane, and the fire of the cannae was the most terrible, the most pitiless, the most excruciating fire of all. She was broken now, utterly broken. One thought flooded her mind, only one thought, one thought alone:

"Let me die. Let me die first."

She begged. She pleaded. She implored. But still the cannae stared down at her, merciless, relentless, their sightless, glowing pupils burning with malevolent intent.

On the Yasmina, no one could tear their eyes away from the slender young woman sitting totally exposed in the frail shallop, facing a torrent of torture such as the devil might aspire to. Then someone noticed movement and pointed. An object was rising from the deck of the galea. It was shrouded and seemed to be mounted on a carpet. Tall and narrow, its outline somewhat resembled that of a man.

The carpet and whatever it was bearing rose till it was about half the height of the mast then moved for'ard, neatly avoiding the rigging. They could see the men on the foredeck of the galea manning the piston pumps for the cannae craning their heads, watching fearfully.

The carpet stopped above the bow and hung there in mid air, motionless. The object that might have been a man moved and the shroud was pulled away. A concerted gasp rose from both ships, an unconscious gasp as people, friend and foe alike, realised what was before them: a spectre, a spectre more ghastly, more macabre than the wildest nightmare could inflict on any mind, rational or irrational. The crew of the galea had seen the corpus of their master once before, but they were stunned anew. The Yasmina's people simply refused to believe, were unable to comprehend what was before them. Mothers shielded their children's eyes and covered their own. Men looked away, shamed by the knowledge that whatever half thoughts they might have had, now they would not, could not, dare to intervene on the girl's behalf. Their courage was found to be utterly wanting. Though indebted to her as they were, the girl must face this doom, alone, without the merest pretence of their help.

Bakri Touma stood on the poop of the galea, his eyes fixed not on his master but on the shroud held out and away in one hand. He was filled with loathing, loathing of this situation, loathing of what he must do, and in truth loathing of himself. He might not be much of a man – vile was probably the most appropriate word – but even he had sufficient self-knowledge now to find himself in contempt.

The hiatus seemed unending, as though Hassan-i Sabbāh could not bear to bring to a climax such titillating anticipation. But at last he was sated with the foreplay. He let the shroud slip from his fingers.

"Now!" Bakri Touma shouted despite his self-disgust, except his voice came out as a pathetic squeak. He drew breath and tried again. "Now!" This time, he was loud enough to reach the foredeck. The men poised at the pumps heaved up and down in alternating rhythm. The diaphragms expanded and contracted, pressurising the vat of heated fluid. Valves were opened and the incendiary, the terrible liquid of the Greek fire, spurted along the brass tubes and through the nozzles to be ignited by the glowing lamps into questing, ravenous flame.

Annabella, hypnotised as a bird is by a snake, her eyes wide, unblinking, staring, the pupils huge, saw the first sparking and the instantaneous bloom as separate events that seemed to take an aeon, a prelude to the eternity of damnation about to overwhelm her. Then the incandescent torrent was rushing towards her. She tried to shut her eyes, at least to shut her eyes, but she was unable to do even that. At the last possible moment, her mouth opened in the rictus of a silent scream.

Vivienne's scream was not silent. It was a piercing clarion of distress, of grief, of horror. She gripped the rail till her nails tore the wood and vented the emotions overpowering her with every shred of force she had. It was quite unconscious and went quite unnoticed. At that moment, every single person witnessing the scene was imprisoned in an individual cocoon of self, isolated, alone and unbearably lonely. But at the same time, every single witness was experiencing exactly the same sensation, that of flame on flesh, their own pink, cowardly flesh.

Touma was swearing, every filthy word he knew. Over and over. The river of flame arched over and began to descend, dead on target, target now dead, or about to be, or so Touma thought, being unaware of Annabella's condition of immortality. For the girl's last precious instant of life, he held his breath. Now! he thought... Then he screamed in his turn.

The stream of fire had reversed and was rocketing back at the galea as though rebounding from some invisible screen, except in rebounding it had also gained speed and momentum and more, it had doubled in quantity. It was now twice as deadly, twice as ferocious. It descended on the ship in a wave of liquid flame that set the vessel instantly ablaze from end to end. And in so doing, it sought out its own source. The vat containing the remaining incendiary exploded monumentally and the galea disintegrated into fragments of a flaring wreckage.

Fiery debris was hurled high in the air, narrowly failing to set Hassan-i Sabbāh's carpet alight, then to rain down on Annabella, a hail of flaming missiles that must

complete what the Greek fire itself had failed to do. But the bombardment bounced, every last ember was deflected away before ever reaching her to fall hissing into the sea, diverted harmlessly by the invisible shield Basil had fashioned about her.

Both Annabella and Hassan-i Sabbāh were shaken to the core, incapable of thought. Then more or less simultaneously, comprehension returned and they arrived at the same conclusion. Basil! The djinni!

This new assault on her emotions left Annabella completely distraught, more shattered than at any other point in her eventful life. He had promised. Basil had promised. Whatever happened... He had promised. Now he was doomed. She couldn't bear it. How could she possibly bear it? Unbidden, a thought rose in her mind. Suicide was possible. Right here, it was possible. All she had to do was sink herself to the bottom of the Calypso Deep. She clutched at the thought as to a straw that would weigh her down sufficiently to drown her.

The rain of debris ceased. Annabella turned her gaze to the Yasmina expecting, at least hoping, for one last glimpse of a tendril of smoke. What she saw was Basil, Basil the warrior, sword in hand, swooping towards her. His left hand plucked her from the dinghy and then they were rising.

Inexorably, her eyes were drawn towards her nemesis. The grisly, misshapen thing that was Hassan-i Sabbāh was fixed motionless on his carpet. Then she saw the claw that was all that was left of his hand reach for the golden object suspended round his neck. One last hope flashed across her mind. Flash, bang, wallop! Aethelrate!

"Get us out of here," she shrieked. "Now! Before it's too late!" In extremis as she was, still Annabella remembered to speak aloud for fear Hassan-i Sabbāh could read their telepathy.

"No," Basil said gently, also aloud. "This time we finish it. One way or another..."

"But the ring..."

"I tried to tell you, but you wouldn't listen. The ring... and me... I'm an unknown quantity. It will control the Dark – 'ifrits and such, it forced them to build Solomon's Temple for him – but can it control the Light? Can it control me? We don't know. Hassan-i Sabbāh doesn't know. Djinn were never involved back then. We've always assumed it would control us... But we don't know for certain... There's only one way to find out."

"Basil, no...! No...! The risk...!"

"There is one other thing, one other reason why Hassan-i Sabbāh has never tried the ring on me. If it doesn't control me, it will certainly bring Iblis. And I'll bet my little cotton socks that's the last thing he wants."

"But..."

"Too late. It's too late now."

As they were talking, Hassan-i Sabbāh with obvious reluctance thrust the Seal of Solomon down on the distal phalange and then the proximal phalange, the bones that had once made up the joints of the thumb on his right hand. He stretched his arm before him and stabbed his forefinger at Basil.

Annabella waited in an agony of suspense, a direct, physical torture infinitely worse than any she had ever experienced. She felt her heart stop. She tried to scream,

but nothing would come. It was the end, the end of everything she valued, everything she had ever wanted, all her hopes, all her dreams. It was the end of love. It was the end of life. All that was left was purgatory, eternal damnation.

Then Basil chuckled. He actually chuckled. "As I thought," he said. "Nothing. Not a jolly thing."

Annabella's blood pressure plummeted and she fainted, a brief moment of merciful oblivion that was over all too soon.

Once before in the Taklamakan Desert, Annabella had witnessed the arrival of Iblis. He had appeared then as a tornado, hundreds of yards high, striated with bands of ice, snow and dirty sand, roaring across the desolate landscape. This time he came as the ocean equivalent, a waterspout, a twisting, writhing spiral stretching down from a thunderous cloud high above to the surface of the sea, a surface which frothed and boiled about it in a fury of resentment.

His approach was rapid, awe-striking. The Yasmina's people cowered behind the bulwarks with renewed dread, out of the frying pan into the furnace. They knew waterspouts. They knew what could happen if it passed directly over the ship.

As in the desert, when Iblis came to a halt, he stopped dead. The spiral ceased to rotate, the sea subsided. He hung there, stretching from sea to sky, a stationary pillar of water, a monument to the bizarre and unfathomable. A last ray from the setting sun struck both cloud and pillar, turning them a toxic scarlet, the colour of diseased arterial blood. The few charred remains of the galea still floating on the surface made an eloquent counterpoint. The whole world waited. Not a wave slapped, not a rope creaked, not a child cried. The silence was complete, unbreakable.

Once before, Basil and Iblis had fought for Annabella, on which occasion Basil had prevailed. It had led directly to Hassan-i Sabbāh's imprisonment in the volcano. Then, however, he had not been in possession of the ring. Now he was, and Annabella was intimately convinced that even if Basil were not within Hassan-i Sabbāh's control, yet still he must be defeated in battle. Her fear for him, banished for a moment, returned magnified and unbearable, a thundering drumbeat that stifled thought and left only an aching, echoing void.

Still the silence dragged on.

Annabella broke it. She made the supreme effort of her life.

"We still must flee," she managed to say to Basil, still speaking aloud. "You can't fight Iblis and the ring."

Basil made no reply but Annabella could feel a gentle, comforting pressure about her.

At last, Hassan-i Sabbāh could stand it no longer. "Speak!" he demanded of Iblis.

"For the third time, you break your bond," Iblis said. His voice sounded as the surf crashing on a cliff.

"It is required," Hassan-i Sabbāh replied, failing to disguise a slight quaver.

"There will be no fourth time!" The words shaped a huge comber roaring in to dash itself against black basalt rocks and career upwards, white rage climbing high into the sky.

"I have the ring. I yet have the ring. I *will* command..."

Hassan-i Sabbāh then looked directly at Annabella, for the moment safe with Basil.

"Fetch her to me!" he shrieked. "Fetch her to me now! The seal has spoken." His voice cracked and froth bubbled at what had once been his lips.

"That is truly your command?"

"Fetch her to me!" Hassan-i Sabbāh repeated, so beside himself that he was barely able to articulate the words.

"As ye sow, so shall ye reap, so shall ye weep." Long seconds passed.

"What?" demanded Hassan-i Sabbāh, some sense of impending danger penetrating his frenzy. "What did you say? What words are they?"

"The power of the ring is thrice edged. I warned you, Hassan-i Sabbāh. The seal may speak, but will you be sure of what it has said?"

Vivienne and Dari, and the others watching spell-bound from the Yasmina, saw it first. Hassan-i Sabbāh was still directly across from them, floating on his carpet but quite close to the surface of the sea now. Basil and Annabella were to their left, Iblis at the fourth point of the diamond, to their right. The sea between them began to bubble, then to boil.

Iblis spoke one final time.

"Fetch her, you decreed. And fetch her I have."

"What?" Hassan-i Sabbāh demanded again, his passion now instantly panic. "What she have you brought...?"

There was no answer. He never would receive an answer.

A great mounded head broke the surface. Two black, blank, liquid eyes the size of sails fixed on Hassan-i Sabbāh. A tentacle, thick as an oak trunk yet supple as a whiplash snaked out and lovingly fastened about his shoulders, lifting him high. The carpet, a disregarded rag, fluttered away to fall and sink. Hassan-i Sabbāh, himself, was shocked into frozen silence.

A second tentacle appeared and seized his legs. The great head rocked back and further massive tentacles drifted apart to expose the dreadul beak hidden in the creature's secret parts. Hassan-i Sabbāh saw his fate and now he began to scream, dementedly, reduced to the stark insanity that knows only fear.

He was drawn down and slowly down. The beak clashed once, twice and then severed Hassan-i Sabbāh at the waist. Still he lived, not cauterised in the way of Al-'Aqrab but because of al iksir, unable to die, so that he was forced to watch, screaming and screaming, as the other tentacle fed his legs to the creature's insatiable appetite.

Again, he was lifted high. The beak clashed a final time. Hassan-i Sabbāh went plunging down. The screaming stopped. There were crunching sounds. Then it was over.

Slowly, the creature subsided back down to the depths from whence it had come.

Iblis spoke, his voice the suck and swirl of a wave receding having done its worst.

"I see you, al Yazid," he said. "Still it is not finished between us. Still the woman is owed to Waq Waq..."

Basil allowed himself the hint of a smile and made a broad gesture of invitation, his left hand beckoning, his meaning unmistakable to any male.

All at once, Iblis vanished. One moment the spiraling pillar was there, linking sea to sky, the next both it and the cloud were gone. All that was left was a powerful galley floating on a placid sea in the calm of a Mediterranean evening.

And a warrior bearing his maiden.

What was it? Annabella asked at last. *That thing...?* She was numb and speaking merely for the sake of reaching towards something approaching normality. *What "she" did Iblis bring?*

Leviathan, Basil said then intoned: *And on that day were two monsters parted, a female monster named Leviathan, to dwell in the abysses of the ocean over the fountains of the waters... 1 Enoch 60:7-8.*

What?

The Book of Enoch.

The Bible?

Not unless you're Coptic. But Job has views too and he is Bible. They knew a thing or two about monsters, jolly old Job and jolly old Enoch... The other one, Behemoth, is a land monster...

I don't want to know, Annabella said feelingly. The knowledge that she was free, finally free of Hassan-i Sabbāh was beginning to seep into her brain, her consciousness, her essence.

We didn't think of that, did we? she added a moment later.

What, Lady Mine?

Hassan-i Sabbāh being eaten alive... digested, juices doing the job... Though I suppose they're acid...

Still, Basil responded thoughtfully. *If we hadn't gone to all the trouble of getting him to the Calypso Deep, we never would have found jolly old Leviathan. And we owe nasty old Iblis a vote of thanks for that.*

I suppose so, Annabella said to both points, somewhat doubtfully. Then her voice became severe.

You broke your promise, she accused.

Yes, Basil said simply. *I did.*

Thank you, Annabella whispered.

Unspoken between them was the knowledge that Iblis must still be made an accounting. And before turning back to the world, Annabella had a fleeting moment to wonder just how powerful Basil, himself, might be. Iblis in his guise of a waterspout exuded unimaginable strength and yet he had declined to try conclusions. Basil had defeated him once and Iblis, Annabella reflected, was clearly still wary in the extreme, even fearful. It was a chastening thought on a number of different levels.

Chapter 26

Vivienne and Dari stood watching Annabella and Basil floating there motionless, above the sea, aware only of each other. It was a moment richly deserved, a moment they were owed, but at the same time Vivienne, contemplating Basil's muscular form, couldn't resist the most irreverent of thoughts.

"Phwoar," she muttered under her breath. No wonder Annabella is so smitten. Then she reached out and sought Dari's hand.

"Is it over, do you think?" she asked. "Is it really over?"

"I suppose so," Dari said. "I suppose it must be. Hassan-i Sabbāh's gone and surely even he can't survive being chewed up and digested." Dari was certain in his own mind that it was indeed the end of the Old Man of the Mountain, but he was confused about his feelings. On the one hand he was relieved, happy, delighted for Annabella, but on the other hand this abrupt end to their odyssey left the future, for him at least, very uncertain.

As though divining his thoughts, Vivienne squeezed his hand. "What happens now?" she asked. Dari shrugged but made no reply.

"Would you think about coming back with us?" Vivienne whispered, greatly daring. Dari stiffened and Vivienne was quite unable to interpret his reaction.

At last Basil recollected himself and returned to his more usual form, a tendril of smoke that might or might not be visible, depending on circumstances. Annabella floated back to the Yasmina apparently unsupported. She was greeted with awe and respect so deep that the proper word was reverence, a reverence that would become unashamedly religious in years to come as the legend grew even more impossible in the telling than the reality.

Petros stepped forward as Saint Annabella alighted on the deck. His face was a comical study of emotions. His wide-eyed look of amazement, still lingering after so many wonders quite beyond comprehension, was now overlaid with frank devotion.

"Lady," he said. "How may we serve you?" There was a murmur of approbation and agreement from his people. Annabella was taken completely back. Veneration was the last thing she expected, and the last thing she wanted to have to do right now was to think about or be responsible for others.

What do I say? she asked Basil. *And don't tell me you don't do ideas...*

Why don't we all just go home? Basil offered obligingly.

"I don't want you to serve me," Annabella said to Petros. "And I think what we should do is take all these people home, don't you?"

There was an exclamation or two from the onlookers, then someone began to applaud, which instantly spread and grew until the whole crowd was clapping, cheering with abandon and pounding the decks with their feet. The ovation went on and on, swelling to a volume that rendered thought impossible. Annabella, caught entirely by surprise and at least as much in need of catharsis as everyone else, was

forced to stand there, the object of this huge out-pouring of emotion, tears pouring down her face.

Vivienne finally took pity on her, swept her into her arms and held her close.

"Basil!" she shouted at the top of her voice, which she could barely hear herself for the tumult. "Do something! Make them stop!"

"I will not," Basil shouted back. "I'll do no such thing. She's earned it. Every last jolly bit of it..."

And as Annabella sobbed into Vivienne's shoulder, the crowd roared on, rejoicing at their deliverance, quite drunk with jubilation and most of all determined to do proper honour to this slip of a girl who had wrought so many miracles on their behalf.

They quieted at last, eventually, and as the warm autumn night cloaked the ship in black velvet, the lateen was hoisted with a will and the bows brought round to the south-east to begin the voyage home.

It was the happiest of times. The sailing was easy, yet swift, the weather balmy and the purpose of their journey altogether delightful. The women rifled Al-'Aqrab's extensively stocked store rooms with intent and produced meal after meal, each more delicious than the last. The men, apart from steering and adjusting the odd sheet, had nothing to do but loll about, eat and sip at the bootleg arak they should never have found aboard a Muslim ship.

After Kythira, they swung round to the north-east and still with a friendly, following breeze headed for the tangle of islands infesting the Aegean like weeds in a pasture. On the third day they began to make stops, ferrying people ashore to be reunited with family and loved ones who had managed to evade the depredations of the Moors.

Two days later, they arrived at Petros's home island. He and his few remaining men moored the ship and then gathered about Annabella on the poop.

"Lady," Petros said. "We are here. We are home. Thanks to you. We will for ever be in your debt, but this is where we must leave you."

"Of course," Annabella said. "Abso-jolly-lutely. I wouldn't have it any other way."

"But how will you sail the ship without us?"

"I don't even intend to try," Annabella said largely. "The ship is yours. I promised her to you, and I always try to keep my promises. You do still want the ship?" Petros nodded worriedly.

"But how will you travel? How will you move on without it?"

"No problem," Annabella said. "Watch..." And as she spoke, the Sheikh's carpet, complete with garish armchairs and clashing foxtail, appeared before them, hovering at a convenient height. Vivienne and Dari made their farewells and stepped aboard. Annabella turned to Petros for a final time.

Ask him what his other name is? Basil said.

Why? Why on earth...?

Just curious.

"One last thing," Annabella said. "Will you tell me your name, your full name?"

"My name? My name is Petros Niarchos..."

Ah, Basil said. I jolly well guessed as much.

What are you going on about?

Niarchos. Niarchos and Onassis... Shipping... Greek shipping... Oh, never mind... So ignorant...

And whose fault is that? Annabella fired back. If you won't explain stuff how can you expect me to learn?

She stepped forward and embraced Petros, kissing him on each bristly, weather-beaten cheek, and then she too stepped aboard the carpet.

And in a time of amazements, for Petros and his men, including the red-haired youth, this was perhaps the most astonishing thing of all. The carpet with its three visible passengers lifted up over the rail of the ship and then smoothly climbed into the sky.

As it happened, they didn't go far. Spotting a deserted islet, they landed and Basil aetherated Vivienne and Dari back to the Sheikh's beach.

He returned almost instantly for Annabella, which was as well. She was still feeling remarkably fragile and found being alone, more accurately being without Basil, even for the briefest time, deeply disturbing.

The Sheikh, in his offhand, undemonstrative way, was extremely pleased to see them all and it was noticeable that he treated Annabella with marked deference. Indeed, he even went so far as to allow to Annabella, privately, that he felt she was a splendid influence on Basil, steadying, and about time. For her part, Annabella rapidly growing wise beyond what her years had any right to expect took the remark in the spirit it was intended.

"So what are you going to do now?" Vivienne asked. They were sitting on a rock near the point, dangling their feet in the water.

"Me?" Annabella said, somewhat surprised. "I don't know about you, but I'm going back to school. If I have to live forever I'm going to need a good education. Matriculate next year... and then I was thinking of trying for Cambridge, or a university at least... Basil's always complaining about how ignorant I am. What do you want to do?"

"Same as you, I suppose," Vivienne said. She paused. "Dari wants to come too."

"But..."

"He says there's nothing for him now. Darius was the only person he cared about and who cared about him. There was Leila, but..." Vivienne shrugged. "And he says having seen 21st Century medicine, he could never be happy stuck back here, knowing there is so much more."

"But..." Annabella said again.

"I know," Vivienne said with a rush. "You're worried about your... our... parents, having to deal with another blow-in... We thought we'd ask the Trans. They got on really well when we stayed there before. They understand the refugee thing and I'm

sure they'd love to have a son, a doctor. He'll be close to Railbury Hall, too... And money wouldn't be a problem, would it?"

"Money...? No," Annabella said, mulling it over. "If the Sheikh and Basil were happy to pay for Darius to study in Spain, I'm sure they'll do the same for Dari... Is this really what he wants? "

"Yes. It is. He's thought about it a lot."

"And is it what you want?" Annabella asked gently.

"Yes. It is," Vivienne said firmly. Just a touch too firmly, Annabella thought privately.

They went to the Trans first. If that wasn't going to happen they would have to have a major rethink all round. But, in fact, it worked out perfectly. The Trans were thrilled to see Vivienne and Dari again and even more delighted, genuinely delighted, when the proposition was put to them.

Annabella had only one doubt, a doubt she voiced only privately to Basil. Having set eyes on the exquisitely fragile Kim-Ly for the first time, she thought Vivienne crazy to let Dari anywhere near her.

When Mrs Gordon found her locked office occupied by the two schoolgirls who had caused her more variegated trouble than all the rest of the thousands of students who had passed through her hands put together, her reaction was not so much outrage as resignation, angry resignation.

"Yes?" she demanded, managing to confine the expression of her emotions to one, very eloquent, raised eyebrow.

"We're back," Annabella said cheerfully. Mrs Gordon sat down. She steepled her fingers judiciously then abandoned pretence and hugged her elbows so tightly that her hands shook.

"How can I possibly take you back?" she asked. Somehow she preserved a tone that was more or less neutral.

"How can you jolly well not?" Basil inquired innocently from his position invisible on Annabella's shoulder.

"No! No! No!"

"But yes..." Basil said happily. "We're all going to have jolly japes together."

The end

