

# OLLIE'S CLOUD

FIRST EDITION FEBRUARY 2013

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ISBN – 978-1-939548-02-3(pbk)

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Cover art and book design by Gary Lindberg

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# OLLIE'S CLOUD

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## THRILLERS BY GARY LINDBERG

The Shekinah Legacy

Sons of Zadok

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gary Lindberg has travelled around the world to research his novels. As a writer and film producer/director, he has won over one hundred major national and international awards. He is the co-writer and producer of the Paramount Pictures feature film *That Was Then, This Is Now* starring Emilio Estevez and Morgan Freeman. He lives in Minnesota with his wife, Gloria.

PART 1  
BUSHRUYIH, PERSIA 1823



# CHAPTER 1

Two boys, each twelve, lay on a blanket of warm Bushruih sand, heads nearly touching, eyes fixed on the clouds. Ali, younger than his friend by a month but taller by three inches, squints as the sun emerges from behind a luminous mountain of nervous vapor, then his eyes widen.

“Do you see it? Right there!” Ali points toward a small pinched cloud near the peak of the white mountain. His friend, Jalal, tries to follow the aim of that rigid finger. “It’s the Prophet Muhammad, in the clouds,” Ali exclaims.

“How do you know? Have you seen the Prophet?” Jalal smiles. “Maybe it’s the Promised One.”

“The Qa’im? No, it looks like the Prophet. He’s come to me in my dreams.”

“Then maybe *you* are the Qa’im.”

“Don’t be disrespectful!” Ali barks angrily, a pious reflex hammered by a careless remark. He can barely believe that Jalal would say such a thing. Anticipation of the coming of the Promised One, the Qa’im, the Islamic messiah, is stirring in Persian hearts. It has become a religious passion, enveloping the minds of small children, middle-aged merchants, old mullas, camel drivers and muleteers and rice farmers and harem eunuchs, seizing their dreams and shaping their lives.

“It is said the Promised One may already be among us,” says Jalal. “There is a Tradition that says, ‘His cause will appear and His name will arise in the year sixty’.”

Ali’s eyes narrow. On the Islamic lunar calendar, 1260 coincides with the Gregorian year 1844, only 19 years away. He says, “If he’s born in 1260, how could he be among us today?”

Jalal sits up and drops a handful of sand in Ali’s hair. “Sometimes I wonder about you. How can you grow up to be a great mujtahid if you pay so

little attention to details?" He takes a sip of water from a gourd slung over his shoulder.

Ali shakes the sand from his hair and jostles his friend with a bony elbow. "You didn't answer my question."

"All right, the Tradition says that His *Cause* will *appear* in the year sixty. And so if He were thirty years old by 1260, He would be our age right now. He could be *you!*"

Ali flinches at the suggestion. The thought makes him tremble. Could he be the Promised One, the *Qa'im*, and not know it? Had Zoroaster or Jesus or Muhammad known His true station when He was twelve years old?

Jalal stares at Ali momentarily and then laughs. "I was joking!"

Ali realizes that he has been caught in a terrible fantasy. Even to entertain the slightest notion that he, of all the youngsters in Persia, could be the Promised One of God is to have committed the sin of pride. He kicks Jalal in the leg and then stands up, stomping a few steps away with his arms folded angrily in front of him.

Jalal rubs the pain from his leg without complaint. "I think it's safe to say you are not the *Qa'im*."

"Of course not!" What is this new feeling that has overtaken him? *Disappointment!* He is disappointed that he is not the *Qa'im*, that he was not chosen to be the Promised One.

"Ali, forgive me if I said something to hurt you."

In a silvery flash Ali sees that Jalal exhibits the qualities that one would expect in the *Qa'im*. Never has this boy shown anger or violence. He seems possessed of spiritual insight far beyond the other twelve-year-olds in the village.

Ali turns to face his friend, who is smiling, and in that youthful countenance Ali sees the flickering of something—a mirage perhaps, or a glimpse of... what? Could it be the reflection of Allah in the mirror of this boy's gleaming face?

A dagger stabs at Ali's heart. Had he kicked the Promised One? He feels suddenly hot and prickly. He drops to his knees as if sword-struck, then raises searching eyes. He touches his friend's arm lightly, leaving a trail of sand and goose bumps.

"What's the matter?" asks Jalal.

Ali Qasim feels caught in a vortex. The world is tilting. History and prophecy, once rivals, embrace. He is ether, a feather on the desert breeze, a beetle floating on the froth of time. He cannot speak, can only stare at his friend's

face, which eclipses the sun. He is dazzled and frightened. Filled up like a new wineskin. Completely unprepared for the prospects that are unfolding. Dreaming, perhaps!

Jalal bends and speaks. His words like riprap break the waves of hope and terror. "Ali—I am not the Qa'im either."

Ali sits. Sighs. Of course! They are both just twelve-year-old boys. In the sand. Playing. Imagining great and wonderful and terrible things. Minds affected by the heat. Just boys. "Yes, I know," he says. But he is still not quite convinced.

The sun is too much for them now. The boys crawl to the shade of a small clump of mulberry trees that breaks the monotonous flat horizon outside the city walls. Their horses, sleek and strong Arabians with bridles but no saddles, are tied to one of the trees. To the west, the Salt Desert stretches beyond the curve of the earth, beyond Ali's imagining. But the boys' gaze now is toward home, Bushruih, which lays a half-mile west of the mulberry trees, a grimy, sun bleached village that seems to have been heaved up ungenerously from the desert floor. This is their home, in the mighty region of Persia called Khurasan.

Crumbling mud walls mutely encircle the village and guard it from Turkoman marauders, invading armies, hostile neighbors, evil spirits, all that is unknown and uninvited, which is almost everything. Ali wonders why a village would waste precious water making mud for walls. He tries hard but cannot think of anything in Bushruih worth guarding.

The wooden city gate in the southeast wall is massive and ornate, serving as both warning and greeting. Mountains form a wall beyond the city. And beyond them Ali has heard there is an even greater ocean of sand. He has never been beyond the mountains, or past the Salt Desert to the east.

The dwellings inside the walls of the village are built of mud-coated stone, marl, or brick, carelessly whitewashed. From a distance they look like rotten teeth. The larger habitations of the merchants have flat roofs and tall *badgeers*, wind-towers that capture the wind from any direction and guide a refreshing breeze through channels into the dwelling below.

Dusty, twisting Bushruih streets follow ancient footpaths. In some places they are too narrow for two people to walk shoulder to shoulder. In one quarter of town the graveyard overlaps the main street, its flat tombstones providing sparse pavement.

Through the city gate Ali can see the glimmering white abode of Mirza Hasan Qasim, Ali's father and the *kelauntar*, or mayor, of Bushruih. Ali can

also see the chief mosque of Bushruih, a shabby mud and brick edifice that is undistinguished except for its large size. From this joyless structure, the *mujtahid*—the chief Muslim cleric of Bushruih—oversees the spiritual life of the residents.

A hundred steps behind the mosque is the flea-infested caravanserai, an inn for travelers and their animals. Tall arched entrances open onto a square yard surrounded on all sides by two stories of squalid, bare rooms. A gallery on the upper floor serves as a hallway and passage to the rooms used by travelers. Camels, mules, and horses are quartered in stables below these rooms.

The colorful and noisy bazaar is across the street from the caravanserai. Behind one of the largest shops, which offers a rainbow of exquisitely colored and patterned fabrics, are the dying rooms of Jalal's father, Haji Mulla 'Abdu'llah. Some say that this cloth dyer's way with colors is close to alchemy. The title *Haji* before his name identifies him as one who has completed the Haj—a holy pilgrimage to Mecca. Because he leads prayers at the mosque, Bushruiyis also call him *mulla*, a respectful title for learned men and religious scholars. 'Abdu'llah's shrewdness has helped him become one of the wealthiest residents of the village.

Ali and Jalal continue to stare peacefully at the village. The rhythm of Islam courses through their veins, beating a steady cadence. In a moment, just a moment, the *mu'adhdhin* will summon the faithful to their noon prayer with a voice like the breath of angels, and Ali will shiver in the heat, press his moist forehead into the sand, empty his mind of all but the Will of Allah, resonate to the spiritual impulses, and recite the prayer that he has spoken so many hundreds of times.

The wind shifts as the call to prayer begins. A cool mountain breeze wafts across the village toward the mulberry trees, toward Ali, carrying the golden melody of the *mu'adhdhin* to his ears, into his mind and his soul. He is a pilgrim on a mystical journey, a traveler who has never left home, a seeker. If it pleases Allah, *let him be the one to find the Promised One!*

The mesmerizing chant of the *mu'adhdhin* ends. Ali raises his head. Sand rains from his face like tears. A single thought invades his mind: *he had not recited the prayer*. He had disobeyed the commandment of Allah and selfishly pled his own cause. What a sinful, prideful, self-seeking person he is!

Jalal is seated in the sand, staring at Ali. "I have something to confess," he says.

Ali shakes his head knowing that he should be the one to confess.

Jalal continues: "I asked Allah to appoint me to find the Qa'im."

Ali's guilt is swept away by something else—*competition*. Perhaps it was not selfish to volunteer for a divine mission. Maybe it was an act of courage. Now they would see who Allah favors!

Ali stands, feeling suddenly tall and strong. The clouds above have disappeared, like veils parting. Looking up, there is nothing between Ali and Allah.

"Someone is coming!" Jalal is looking south. A shape with many legs, made wrinkled and warped by the rising mirage heat, seems to float on the watery glare of the desert floor. Slowly the shape swells into something more distinct—not one shape, but many shapes. Men on horseback. Silhouettes against a boil of dust.

A hot and crampy ball of fear explodes in Ali's chest. All strangers here are scorpions. Every child has heard the frightening tales of the Turkoman nomads of Anatolia and northeastern Iran. *Turkoman* is the most feared word in Khurasan. They raid and burn Shi'ite villages, kill the women and elderly, and take the young men to Bukhara or Khiva to be sold as slaves. Of course, it has been many months since a Turkoman party ventured so far from the northeastern frontier as Bushruih. But just last year the vulture-shredded carcass of a lone Turkoman—identified by his black sheepskin cap and scraps of his billowing trousers and shirt of coarse linen—was found in the desert barely five miles from the Bushruih gate.

Like Ali and most Persians, the Turkoman nomads are Muslims, but of another stripe. Shortly after the death of its Founder, Islam was cleaved into two warring camps—Shi'ite and Sunni. Each camp accused the other of heresy. Mutual hatred grew so intense that Sunni mullas legalized the killing and looting of Shi'ites. Attacks on Shi'ite *infidels*, they said, would please God and His Prophet, wash away one's sins, and provide sure entry into Paradise. Such beliefs fan the flames of brutality already raging within Turkoman breasts.

What frightens Ali is that even one Turkoman was so close to Ali's home. There were enough perils to keep one awake at night—snakes and scorpions, evil eyes, demons... and Turkoman raiders. Of course, these barbarians would never venture so far over the Persian border if they did not possess the finest breed of horses. A horse is to the Turkoman what a ship is to the pirate; it carries himself and his fortunes. The saddle is his fortress. It was known that some Turkoman horses could go 600 miles in five days!

As the undulating shapes come nearer, Ali and Jalal cautiously retreat to the mulberry, untying the horses and desperately grasping the bridles. The

boys are breathing heavily, but neither wants to be the first to bolt. Ali fingers a small silver charm that hangs among many others from a chain around his neck. This comforting object, which looks like a tubular needle-case, contains pieces of paper inscribed with verses from the Qu'ran. Wearing the Qu'ran is a great protection.

"It's probably a small caravan," says Jalal hopefully.

"Yes, probably." Ali is prepared to agree with any theory that does not involve the Turkoman.

"There is not much sand being kicked up, so there can't be that many of them."

Ali grips the bridle more tightly. "Probably just a few."

He speaks bravely, but Ali cannot shake his fear that the menacing, shape-shifting shadow moving toward them is Satan manifested as a band of Turkoman raiders on the strongest, fleetest horses in the desert. He imagines that they are the horses of the apocalypse that he has learned about from Gordon Cranston, the roving Christian missionary who sometimes teaches English to Ali and his mother.

Ali has always been proud of the Arabian stallion that his father had given him for his tenth birthday. It is a magnificent animal, pure white except for a mane and tail dyed deep orange with henna. The tail is proudly tied up in a knot.

Ali judges the distance to the Bushruiyih gate. Yes, he could make it there safely on his Arabian if the Turkoman began their charge at full gallop.

Muhammad squints and cocks his head, trying to straighten the rippling figures. "I'm trying to see if they're carrying flags," he says expectantly.

Ali does not understand. Why would these horsemen be carrying flags?

"I'm looking for the Black Standards," Jalal says. "Certainly you know why."

"No."

"The Black Standards—flags of pure black. They are symbols of the promised Qa'im."

"How do you know these things?"

"I read." And then Jalal punctuates the desert air with an exclamation: "Yes! I can see the Black Standards hoisted aloft."

He leaps onto his Arabian stallion and repeats the words of the prophecy. He leans forward in the warm arch of the animal's back and digs in his heels. The horse rears with a snort and lunges toward the jagged string of travelers.

Ali instinctively follows. He mounts his horse and slaps the huge beast into a fierce gallop. He cannot let Jalal be the first to reach the Black Standards! It is a race. If Ali is to be chosen for this divine mission, *let his stallion grow wings*. Flashing hooves chop at the ground. Flared nostrils drink the fiery air. A muscled neck rhythmically thrusts forward and back, cadenced by Ali's heartbeat, which grows faster still. He can no longer feel the bone-jarring thump of hooves striking the ground. The gallop smoothes into an airy glide. He and the stallion are one. If he would look down, surely the ground would be falling away, his shadow growing smaller.

The first jarring sound is like a finger snap, a dry mulberry twig breaking. Ali recognizes it at once—a rifle shot. The second sound is a loud jumble of Farsi, the native language of Persia. Someone—many people—are yelling for him to stop. *Come no closer!* Jalal reins his stallion to a halt and Ali almost runs into him.

The mysterious figures ahead are now close enough to be clearly seen. There is no Black Standard. Instead, a man is propping up his dark cloak with a stick to shield his head from the sun. And there are no Turkoman horses, only mules and seven men. Two of the men are old, with white flowing beards. Three ride mules. Four walk, and one of these is aiming a rifle at Ali.

The men are tense. They squint malevolently in Ali's direction. At last they seem to identify the interlopers as two unarmed boys. The man with the rifle laughs coarsely and lowers his weapon.

Two large white encasements, like mummies, are bound with thick ropes to each side of the baggage mules. Ali now understands what he is confronting—a small caravan carrying corpses to be buried near the Holy Shrines in Najaf or Karbala. The old men, bent and sagging on their mules, are going there to die. For a moment, everything is still and silent except for the chiming of bells suspended from the collars of the mules.

*Approach!* A hoarse voice intrudes.

With a pinch of knees, Ali and Jalal nudge their horses forward. The men begin slapping their sleeves and chests, making clouds of dust. One of the old men raises a water gourd to his lips, finds it empty.

The boys stop a few yards from the caravan of corpses. Ali sniffs the air, expecting a foul smell. The corpses are so tightly wrapped that even the desert heat cannot leach out the fetid, stinging odor of death. Except for the vaguely human shapes, these enshrouded cadavers may as well be rolls of silk or linen on their way to the market in Mashhad. Ali counts sixteen corpses, two per mule-side.

The man with the rifle points toward the city walls, then opens his parched lips and speaks. "What is this village?"

"Bushruih," answers Jalal.

The man nods. "There's a caravanserai?"

"Yes. Have you been traveling long?" Jalal seems at ease with these strangers.

After a long pause, the man with the rifle lets out a long sigh that seems to reduce his size by half. He squats to stretch his long leg muscles. "About five days," he replies at last. "We come from Khur to the south. A band of Turkoman attacked us two days ago. They spared our lives when they saw the corpses. Not out of pity—the Turkoman have no pity—but as slow torture, I suppose. They left us with the burden of carrying our dead, but with no money or provisions for ourselves."

"I have some water," says Jalal. He unslings his water gourd, sloshes the water inside to show that it is not empty, and then tosses it to the old man with the empty gourd.

Ali finally finds a voice. "Did you fight them?" he asks.

"You want to know if we fought the Turkoman?" The man with the rifle stands and walks menacingly toward Ali, eyeing the boy's gourd. Ali hands it to the man, who smiles.

"Thank you." The man takes a long drink and hands it to another man. "We chose not to fight. There were at least twenty Turkoman, heavily armed with blades and muskets. We surely would have been killed and our dead relatives left to rot out here in the wilderness. On the day of resurrection, they would have been very surprised to rise from their sandy graves and look upon the barren desert instead of the Holy Shrines."

The men find this very funny. They laugh heartily.

The man with the rifle looks up at Ali and smiles. "And so, my little friend—my name is Sadiq Muqaddas. These are my mules." Sadiq is the *charvadar*, or chief muleteer, who has provided the small band with mules for about six tumans each.

"I am Ali Qasim."

"Will you lead us, my friend, to the caravanserai?"

"But how will you pay? If the Turkoman took all of your..."

"My father will see that you have food and water," interjects Jalal. "No man who lives through an encounter with the Turkoman should go without nourishment."

Ali had not thought to offer hospitality to this ragged band of travelers. He has much to learn if he wishes to be chosen for the sacred mission. Deciding it is not too late, he adds: "My father, too. He is the kelauntar of Bushruih."

Sadiq smiles. "Thank you, friends. But if you can show us to the caravan-serai, we can take care of ourselves."

"Rest a while," Ali says. "Then we'll accompany you to the caravan-serai."

Ali glances at the two old men seated shapelessly on their mules like sacks of grain. The life seems already drained from them. Ali wonders if they can make it as far as the city gate. Long before reaching Karbala—another seven hundred miles or so—they will probably end up as another pair of mummified corpses hitched to the sides of a mule. Ali watches as Jalal's horse gently walks over to one of the old men. Seated high on the stallion's back, Jalal looks down at the old man who is hunched on a mule. The man, who has been staring at the sand since the encounter began, slowly lifts his gaze and smiles at the boy. His face is long and brown. Thick white eyebrows seem to be holding up the weight of an immense striped turban that is a puzzlement of folds. Upon seeing the youth, his slumped body straightens.

"Can I get you anything?" Jalal asks. His voice is a whisper, almost lost in the gusting desert breeze. Ali strains to hear.

"Nothing for myself, thank you."

"You are going to Karbala?"

"Yes. With my wife." The old man sadly turns his eyes to one of the enshrouded corpses. "She wanted to be buried near the tomb of Imam Husayn. It was her greatest wish."

"It's a great distance."

"Yes, I know, and I am very old and tired. But I am simply honoring a promise to my wife. Some men have many wives, but I had only one." The old man pauses, cocks his head, and stares at the youth's eyes. "And who do I have the privilege of addressing?"

"Jalal."

"I am Muhammad Kujiri."

"What will you do in Karbala after your wife is buried?"

"Ahh—the directness of youth. Perhaps you are wondering if I am going there to die. Such is the reason that most old people go to Karbala, I know."

Jalal is embarrassed.

Kujiri continues: "My reason is different. Perhaps I will die there, perhaps not. My purpose, however, has more to do with something I wish to do *before* I die."

“Pray at the Shrine?”

“Oh, I will certainly do that. But there is someone there I want to see again.”

“A relative?”

“You are an inquisitive one,” Kujiri says. “I have questions, too. Deep questions. And that is why I must gain an audience with this person. I believe he has the answers.”

“A great mujtahid, then?”

“No. Someone even greater than the greatest mujtahid.”

This statement mystifies Jalal. Kujiri can see the questions written on the boy’s face. For a moment Kujiri considers withholding the answers, but this youth has charmed him.

“Have you heard of Shaykh Ahmad?” Kujiri asks.

“Yes. The mujtahid says he is an *infidel*. Why would you want to see him?”

“Are you familiar with his teachings?”

“We’ve been told to ignore them because they are false.”

“Then how do you know he is an infidel? How can you judge for yourself?”

Jalal thinks about this.

Ali feels suddenly repulsed, as if surrounded by something unclean. This man is a Shaykhi, a follower of Shaykh Ahmad, a known blasphemer and perverter of the teachings of the Qu’ran.

Jalal finally replies. “Since I know nothing specific about this man’s beliefs, I cannot judge for myself.”

“Well, that is why I go to Karbala,” Kujiri says. “I could have paid Sadiq to take my wife to the Holy Shrine for burial. But for myself, I seek the source of those teachings.”

“We should be going,” Ali says. Maybe Jalal will take this hint.

“One moment,” Jalal says. Then he turns to Kujiri. “I have a question about your beliefs.”

The old man looks skyward, as if hearing the question before it is asked, then says: “Perhaps you want to know how much longer we must wait for the Promised One?”

Jalal is astonished. He stammers: “Well—yes...”

“And what is your understanding of the Qa’im?”

Ali seizes this opportunity to confront Kujiri and prove his religious knowledge. “The Promised One will come to kill the enemies of true Shi’ites,

infidels like the Sunnis and the Turkoman. He will kill so many that a river of blood will reach the stirrup of his horse.”

“So the Qa’im is a warrior who will come to fill the world with justice by slaughtering enemies of His true faith?” Kujiri says.

“Yes, and he will bring all infidels to Islam by his sword —Sunnis, Jews, Zoroastrians and Christians.” Ali is proud of himself. He feels passion building as he speaks. One day he will become a great mujtahid and use his knowledge and zeal to stir the souls of Shi’ites throughout Persia.

“I see. Very interesting,” Kujiri says flatly.

Ali is deflated. His passion has failed to arouse the Shaykhi.

“And you, Jalal, is that what you believe also?” Kujiri asks, his gaze firmly focused on the youth’s unblinking eyes.

Jalal blinks once, twice, gaining time to think. Ali’s rhetoric, a serviceable condensation of one of the mujtahid’s more popular sermons, now sounds skewed, even radical. Could it be that killing infidels is the way to worldwide justice? Hadn’t this been tried before without lasting result? Would not the Promised One have some clearer insight, some innovation, some better solution to offer?

“Certainly, the Qa’im may prove to be a great warrior and leader of armies,” Jalal says.

Kujiri laughs and says: “You would make a fine diplomat.” He turns to Ali. “What can you tell me about who the Qa’im is?”

“Well—he was born a thousand years ago. He escaped from his enemies. And he has been living there ever since, with his wife and some believers, in a city of seventy thousand portals where people speak seventy thousand languages.”

“My, it must be hard to have a conversation there!” Kujiri says. “Go on.”

“We are told that he has helped many travelers who were lost in the desert. Maybe he helped you survive your encounter with the Turkoman!”

“Yes, perhaps. And young Jalal, do you agree with your friend?”

Again Jalal blinks. His mind whirls. He had heard this story countless times and had never questioned its literal truth. But now, hearing it again...

“How can I say if this is true?” Jalal replies at last. “Perhaps over time the story has gained some decoration. Or perhaps it may have another meaning.”

“Ahhh!” Kujiri says, letting the long vowel seep slowly from his lips. “In other words, the story may be symbolic, not literal. In which case, to find the true meaning of the story, we should consider...”

“Ali is right, we should be going,” Jalal says curtly. He feels suddenly uneasy with the direction of this conversation. His mind is agitated, his gut rumbling. Never before had he challenged the longstanding teachings of his faith. Or thought to.

Kujiri sighs, smiles, and then sags into his thin saddle. “You are right.”

As the small band of travelers ride toward the village, Ali and Jalal, almost in unison, wonder how Kujiri would have answered that question—*how much longer before the *Qa'im* appears?*—if they had let him. But what does it matter? Scores of Bushruyis solemnly stare at this macabre caravan of the dead as it enters the city gate and passes the mosque.

Seized by the desire to pray, to cleanse himself of the Shaykhi taint, Ali makes an excuse to abandon his friend. He removes his boots, places them near the entrance to the mosque and silently enters.

## CHAPTER 2

On the far side of the mosque the mujtahid speaks to a small gathering of robed mullas who sit reverently at his feet. It is a dialogue, with questions thrown to the mujtahid who then dispenses truth and wisdom as he sees it. Mulla Ibrahim Baqir, like all mujtahids, exercises authority to expound his own theories and opinions about religious laws. He is a prominent doctor of jurisprudence and religion, and in religious matters his followers adopt his views, imitate his behaviors and follow his instructions, sometimes unthinkingly. In Bushruiyih, Mulla Ibrahim has many followers. The brightest and most serious ones are invited to attend classes in which heated debates are common. As Ali approaches the group, the topic is whether the Prophet Muhammad's urine was ritually clean.

Ali unconsciously stirs, his face a hatchet of smoke in the darkness. The mujtahid sees him. Mulla Ibrahim knows that Ali is the son of the governor of Bushruiyih. At first, the mujtahid is angry. It is easy to see Ali as an agent of the despised Qajars. Was he sent here to spy on my teachings? Did I say something that would offend the governor?

The mujtahid bites back an inclination to chastise Ali for interrupting the group, knowing that his powerful father might take offense. He motions the youth forward.

Ali slowly walks through stripes of sunlight that pierce the chamber.

"Ali Qasim," the mujtahid says.

"Yes, Mulla Ibrahim. May your shadow never grow less."

"And to what do I owe this honor?" The mujtahid now seems amused. His smile softens and he cocks his head to listen, favoring his good left ear.

Ali glances at the faces of the mullas. All are staring at him.

“There is a matter on which I need to consult,” Ali says. He is no longer certain this was a good idea.

“I see. Well, you have a mosque full of the brightest religious minds in Bushruyih. We can spare a few minutes to resolve any perplexity that you may have.” The mujtahid turns to the assembled mullas and then says: “Isn’t that right?”

The robed gathering murmurs approval.

“Please, go ahead. What is your dilemma?”

Ali is not sure how to begin, so he mumbles.

“Speak up, Ali Qasim, so we can all hear you.”

Ali clears his throat and starts again. “In the desert today Jalal and I encountered a group of travelers headed for Karbala.”

“And why were they headed to Karbala? To bury their dead at the Holy Shrine?”

“Yes. And they had been attacked by in the desert the Turkoman, who took all their valuables.”

“Let me presume that your dilemma is how to help this unfortunate band of travelers, though the best fortune of all is that they are alive! The Turkoman are not known for compassion.”

“That is not what I am concerned about. While we were talking to the pilgrims, I discovered that one of them follows the teachings of Shaykh Ahmad.”

These words erase the amusement from the mujtahid’s lips. His eyes narrow coldly and his voice drops an octave. “Tell me—did you speak to him?”

“No, I just listened to him talk to Jalal.”

“Did you touch him?”

“Touch him? I—I don’t think so. No, I didn’t.”

“And did this caravan continue on toward Karbala?”

“They were very tired, so Jalal took them to the caravanserai.”

The mujtahid begins to pace. “It’s good that you did not touch him. Shaykhis are unclean, no better than dogs!” He turns to the mullas. “They corrupt the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad and possess the satanic power to mislead those who listen to them.”

Ali backs away, feeling responsible for the mujtahid’s sudden wrath.

“This youth found the strength to resist their false teachings,” the mujtahid continues. “He found the strength to report the Shaykhi heresy that has poisoned our village.”

The mullas mumble approvals. Two of them smile and nod.

“Shaykh Ahmad is an imposter, for no man who studies the Qu’ran can reach the conclusions that he expounds.”

Several of the mullas rise in anger, shouting curses. One of the younger clerics, pulls a knife from its sheath, exclaiming: “I will cut out his blaspheming tongue!”

There are more shouts, more drawn knives. Ali is frightened now.

As the mujtahid continues to pluck the exposed nerves of the mullas with his rhetoric. Now swords are drawn. They glint in the slanting beams of sunlight.

The mujtahid is not finished. He is carried on a wave of emotion. “These infidels are worse than idolaters,” he says. “They are heretics and cannot be redeemed. If such a man were in the caravanserai, he must be punished and made to recant!”

Ali tries to envision the old Shaykhi as a powerful agent of Satan, but can’t reconcile the images. Certainly the old man was no threat. Ali begins to regret his words and fear for Kujiri. He feels suddenly emboldened. “Excuse me,; he says, “but if this man cannot be redeemed, then what would be the purpose of making him recant?”

The mujtahid immediately understands his error. He glowers at Ali’s in-subordinate challenge, .

At last one of the students says: “Even though a Shaykhi cannot be redeemed, by recanting he will demonstrate the power of truth over satanic fancy. Mulla Ibrahim, thank you for allowing us to reach this inevitable conclusion.”

The mujtahid’s humiliation is reversed. He smiles and says, “This is the lesson I hoped you would learn. We must lay bare the Shaykhi lies and make this evil-doer renounce his infidelity—or die.” He unsheathes his sword and carves the air with it. “Let us go find Satan!”

The mullas all rise and shout. With his final words before marching out of the mosque, the mujtahid pierces Ali’s heart: “We go in the name of Ali Qasim!”

Ali watches the mullas leave. Their blades are sharp. Ali’s head is pounding and perspiration rains from his face. I have no right to question the authority of the mujtahid, he tells himself.

Ali wants to nullify his catalytic role in the coming violence but he cannot find a convincing argument. In the end he knows that he has betrayed an old man who possesses a kind and searching heart. Ali had offered up a sacrificial victim to the ready knives of self-righteousness.

We go in the name of Ali Qasim!

The mujtahid's scorching words sear his heart. Ali has become the banner of bloodlust!

I have no right to question the authority of the mujtahid, he tells himself again. I am just a boy. But his heart does not believe his argument. He can only picture the old man Kujiri. The kind smile. The gentle laugh.

Ali prostrates himself and prays that the Will of Allah be done. It feels like a cheap way out, but it's the best he can do.

## CHAPTER 3

The large door to the caravanserai is open, there being no immediate threat to security. Jalal and Sadiq lead the weary caravan of the dead through the gate and into the bright courtyard where they are greeted by Omar, the *dalandar* or entrance-keeper, who is a cousin of Jalal's mother.

"Jalal!" Omar says with smiling eyes. "I have not seen you in quite a while. You bring us business?"

"My friends are looking for the finest caravanserai. Do you have any recommendations?"

"Well, since we are the only caravanserai within forty pharsangs, I suggest they rest their weary bones here."

"Very wise and unbiased counsel. Omar, this is Sadiq, the charvadar."

The men greet each other. Omar takes Sadiq aside to negotiate for provisions.

The courtyard is surrounded by austere rooms—barren cells with straw-covered floors—elevated a few feet upon a ledge. The rooms have no doors and are built in the form of Saracenic arches. Behind the rooms lie the stables.

As Omar and Sadiq negotiate, Jalal watches the men of the caravan slowly walk their mules into a tight knot with Kujiri at its center, as if protecting him. Seated high upon his Arabian stallion, Jalal can see Kujiri's back. The protectors' eyes are darting back and forth, searching for spying eyes.

In a horrifying move, Kujiri suddenly plunges his arm into one of the mummies, the one secured on the right side of his mule. The arm easily slides up to its elbow through a fold in the muslin wrap. Husayn imagines the arm wriggling through the rotting entrails of the corpse. And then Kujiri quickly removes his arm. It is not dripping with the slimy stuff of death. Instead, his unsullied hand is grasping a small leather coin pouch that looks quite full.

Kujiri turns and looks around guiltily. He catches the eye of Jalal and immediately knows that his secret has been discovered. Kujiri raises his index finger to his lips. *Shussshhh! Don't tell.*

Jalal nods. *I will not tell anyone.*

Omar and Sadiq have finished their bargaining for provisions. Kujiri approaches them and the three men quietly discuss something. Jalal cannot hear them, but it looks like Omar and Sadiq are explaining the deal they struck. Kujiri nods politely and then removes some coins from the leather pouch, placing them into Omar's outstretched hand. Omar glances at Jalal and smiles: *Thank you, boy.*

The boy climbs off his horse and tethers it. "I thought that was your wife," Jalal says, referring to the corpse.

"My wife is on the left side. On the right is everything else that I possess converted into tumans."

"The Turkoman—they never searched...?"

"Of course not. Who would interrupt the sleep of the dead?"

Jalal hands the coin back to Kujiri, who says: "It is not enough?"

"It is too much. Neither my silence nor my friendship has a price."

Kujiri is touched. "Jalal," he says, "may your face one day look upon the Promised One, who indeed is very near." Kujiri kisses the boy on both cheeks.

The old man goes back to his mule and begins to remove some of his belongings from a sack of coarse haircloth. As the boy watches, Kujiri climbs to a room and spreads out several carpets on the floor. He hangs a curtain in the open doorway and vanishes behind it.

Glancing across the courtyard, Jalal sees Omar in a heated discussion with an Englishman, Gordon Cranston, a Christian missionary who passes through Bushruiyih to administer medical aid and give English instruction to the privileged ones including Ali's mother. The mullas tolerate this tall blonde man because he does not try to propagate his religion; if he did, he might be put to death.

Omar whispers conspiratorially to Gordon. "The vizier is in Bushruiyih meeting with the kelauntar as we speak. This must mean that they are about to consummate their bargain."

"Then the exchange could take place as early as tomorrow."

"They've been seen at the tea house. My nephew works there. He has very large ears."

Gordon hands Omar some coins. "I need confirmation of when the exchange will take place. Do you understand?"

Omar takes the coins and smiles. "If it can be learned, it will be, I assure you."

"Assuming the worst, I need to be ready tonight. Is that possible?"

"Of course. But I will need to pay for some things in advance."

Gordon understands. He will pay whatever it takes to guarantee that the arrangements are satisfactorily made. Secretively, he hands more money to Omar. The men shake hands English-style, then kiss each other on both cheeks. Gordon marches out of the courtyard.

## CHAPTER 4

The cloth dyer's shop opens onto the street that approaches the caravanse-rai. It is always stuffed full of brightly-hued fabrics neatly folded into soft piles or draped over dowels like rainbows of light to attract the eye. Now, during the heat of the day, the shop is free of customers.

Haji Mulla 'Abdu'llah, father of Jalal, sits on a large Persian rug fanning himself in the oppressive heat. Daggers of memory prick him with the unfulfilled desire of his youth. His body tingles, as it did twenty-five years ago, with the yearning to become a great religious scholar, a renowned doctor of Islamic law.

As if blown away by a faint whistle of wind through the dye shop, the fading remembrance of the boy vanishes completely. 'Abdu'llah drinks in a lungful of hot, dry air. To a desert creature, the warmth is comforting. He knows that the course of his life is established; it makes no sense to wish it were not. But the future of Jalal—ah, that's different. 'Abdu'llah sets his mind on planning the journey he will soon make with his son. In one week they will leave for Mashhad, the most prestigious religious center in Persia. There Jalal will attend the finest *madrisih*, a religious seminary. One day Jalal will be a great religious scholar, a renowned doctor of Islamic law. Perhaps he will return to Bushruyih and replace that bigoted buffoon, Mulla Ibrahim, as mujtahid.

There are still no customers in the shop. 'Abdu'llah decides that this will be a good time to visit Jaffir the blacksmith, who is creating a very special gift for Jalal.

As 'Abdu'llah stands and straightens his garments, his eyes are drawn to a flurry of activity outside the shop. An agitated group of white-turbaned mullas is marching down the street. The loud threats of these holy men of-

fend ‘Abdu’llah, who finds violence abhorrent. Though designated an honorary mulla, due to his teaching activities and calls to prayer at the mosque, ‘Abdu’llah finds many of the mujtahid’s teachings illogical and radical. While Mulla Ibrahim for years has ranted against women’s education, ‘Abdu’llah married a literate woman and encouraged her to continue education. His wife, Nadja, is a celebrated poet—celebrated everywhere, that is, but in Bushruih, where her works are unknown.

‘Abdu’llah watches the band of mullas charge past the shop. What frightens him most is the glint of steel; the clerics are marching with swords and knives drawn. Blood will flow! ‘Abdu’llah steps from his shop and falls into the swelling throng that trails the mullas. Some of these people, too, are now cursing the evil that has entered the village. No one knows what that evil is, but everyone is certain that it will be excised by the clerics.

And then ‘Abdu’llah hears words that darken his heart. *In the name of Ali Qasim!* Has some harm come to his son’s friend?

‘Abdu’llah quickens his pace. He begins to look for his son, Jalal. Weren’t the two boys together this morning? If harm has befallen Ali, what of Jalal? The emotion of the crowd begins to excite ‘Abdu’llah. Fear overtakes him. Obviously some great peril has been unleashed. He imagines the worst—murder, abduction, an accident. Who would harm a youngster? *Please, Allah, if it be Your will, allow Jalal to be safe.* Soon he finds himself shouting with the crowd. Without understanding why, but with great intensity, he shouts: *In the name of Ali Qasim!*

## CHAPTER 5

Mirza Hasan Qasim, pear-shaped and thick-bearded, will be thirty-five years old tomorrow. He is the nephew of Fath Ali Shah, Persia's Qajar ruler. Even though he is only a capillary in the dynasty's bloodline, Qajar nepotism has rewarded him with a major position in a village that is but a flyspeck on the shah's map. As *kelauntar* of Bushruih, he oversees village security, civic governance, and tax collections, making sure the shah's due is quickly forwarded.

An ever-shrinking government salary stimulates Hasan's creativity in financial management. Tax overages and bribes of every kind find their way into his bottomless purse, allowing for a lifestyle far above the other local desert dwellers. The lifestyle has grown more expensive, however, and the normal spoils of the office have recently fallen short of his obligations. For six months he has short-changed the shah—a dangerous game, but in such an obscure little hamlet who would notice?

Unfortunately, the vizier—who pays attention to such matters for the governor of the province—has an eye for detail and a nose for felony. And like so many in the government, the vizier also has no detectable code of ethics. This is what has brought the vizier to Bushruih where he sits in the back corner of a teahouse with the *kelauntar* and discusses the financial dilemma over the steaming brew.

The *kelauntar* is a bitter man. For seven years he has lived in a wilderness that even Allah surely has forgotten. He sees his appointment as a life sentence in hell and curses his father's name. If his father, the shah's brother, had not jealously competed for the throne, Fath Ali Shah may have shown mercy on his wretched sibling and given his nephew a job in some bearable place.

The *kelauntar* does not understand moderation. The Qu'ran allows a man

four wives, and he has the maximum, plus six concubines. Though alcohol is strictly forbidden for Muslims, the kelauntar surreptitiously imports cartloads of fine Shirazí wine and drinks it alone by the bottle.

He has one other passion: his son, Ali Qasim. His only son. Three wives have born him seven daughters, but only Anisa, a slave-girl purchased from the Turkoman, has given him a son. Anisa is a fair-skinned angel with sandy hair and blue eyes. The kelauntar had been immediately mesmerized by her spotless beauty. She had been thirteen when he bought her and returned to his father's house in Mashhad, the holy city near the Bokhara frontier. She then became his first wife.

The Turkoman had claimed that Anisa was English, that her missionary parents were killed in a Turkoman attack when she was seven. They'd said she was greatly prized for her beauty but was considered stupid because she could not speak any of the languages or dialects of the region. She had been bought and sold, worked hard, used often by the men for their pleasures; and then she'd developed a maddening streak of independence. She had grown less submissive, more aggressive. This wisp of a girl had begun acting like one of the men, making demands and giving orders. Her owner, a shaggy one-eyed Afghani, had wanted to kill her but his brother suggested that the girl's beauty might fetch a fine price. Within a month she had become the property of Hasan Qasim and the Turkoman had acquired a handsome profit.

Besides having given the kelauntar a son, Anisa provides a target for his anger and frustration. Fueled by wine, his fury often erupts in violence. He pummels the poor woman with his fists, calling her vile names and accusing her of unspeakable things, often with his slaves and other wives looking on. He blames Anisa for his wretched existence, his father's sins, his own jealousy. He tries to defile her incandescent beauty, so often the cause of his suspicions. He threatens to kill her, maim her, sell her back to the slave traders. But always he falls asleep in tears before carrying out these threats, awakening in his own vomit. And then he leaves, never with an apology, sometimes for a week or more.

The kelauntar fears that someday his fiscal infidelity will be discovered; many other embezzling princes and officials had been found out and punished. But what could they do to him? Assign him to a lower hell? Here, in a dark corner of this rancid-smelling café, seated on a wooden platform opposite the vizier, he is about to settle his account in a most painful manner.

An enormous striped turban like a monstrous weight seems to drive the vizier's head down into a pudding of jowls, plumping them out into exagger-

ated pouches bristling with beard. "I presume the details are taken care of," he whispers. "And that I can take possession tomorrow morning."

A server pours more hot tea.

"Of course. Just as we agreed," the kelauntar replies sadly. "And I presume you are prepared to fulfill your end of the bargain."

"Naturally. I am an honorable man," the vizier lies. "May I see the marriage contract?"

The kelauntar passes a document to the vizier, who quickly scans it.

"You are clever," the vizier says. "In the event of divorce, her dowry is almost nothing."

"She was my legal slave when I married her."

"She is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen."

"She is a scorpion—with a fierce sting in her tail."

"Tomorrow morning, after you divorce her, you will sell her to me for the amount of her dowry. No money will change hands. She will become my slave. And then I will marry her so you have no further claim on her."

Persia is truly and gloriously a man's world. The kelauntar's mind races through the simple process of divorce. Three times he will repeat to his wife the words "you are divorced" and it will be done. And yet, as the vizier knows, the kelauntar can recall her twice without further ceremony. But if he divorces her three times, or if she remarries, he cannot take her back. So by marrying Ali's mother immediately, the vizier severs all claims of recall by the kelauntar. The vizier possesses her as slave and wife. It is complete ownership.

"But the boy stays with me," the kelauntar emphasizes.

"It is the woman I want, not her pup."

A year earlier, the vizier had paid a visit to the kelauntar's compound. Violating all Persian custom, the kelauntar had brought the fatted official to the anderun and asked for his wife, his prize possession, to be unveiled before him as if she were a magnificent sculpture. Most women would have swooned in shame, but Anisa had stood proudly, even arrogantly, as the head eunuch removed her veil and exposed her exquisite English features. Covetousness immediately had overwhelmed the vizier and he had pledged to possess this woman. For months he could scarcely think of anything but the magnificent creature that had been revealed to him. Knowing that most village officials were corrupt, he had conspired to find the kelauntar's crime. It was surprisingly easy—and cheap—to obtain the damning records. And then had come the extortion.

“When you have your new wife,” the kelauntar says, “you will sign an official statement that my stewardship of the shah’s finances is without peer.”

“Yes, you’ll be free of me. You are a lucky man to have such an astonishing wife to save you from disgrace and punishment.”

The kelauntar’s mood is sour. He was a fool to have left uncovered the evidence of his graft. He was even more of a fool to have boastfully exposed his wife to the lustful vizier. But what of it? The woman is a scorpion. Her venom is the obsession she incites in men made unattainable by her arrogance. Ali will be heartbroken, but the kelauntar will think of some compensation to give him. Something to ease the pain.

The kelauntar sips the last drop of his tea and stands. “Tomorrow morning, then. At the mosque,” he says.

“You have no idea how I am looking forward to it.”

The kelauntar steps into the street and begins walking. Like a serpent’s tail, his retinue follows in an undulating wave. The local people nod respectfully as they pass, but not kindly. He does not care. He is thinking about going home. He is dreaming about the bubbling *kalyan*—the water pipe—and the opium he has brought from Isfahan. He is dreaming about the bottles of ruby wine that await him. He is dreaming about a few hours of blessed oblivion.

A sound intrudes. There is shouting and cursing. He can hear footsteps, many of them, scuffling over the stony street. He turns to see a group of sneering mullas striding toward him with a swagger, blades drawn. A crowd follows, urging them on. What could this be about? The shouts grow louder, and then the kelauntar hears the words. *In the name of Ali Qasim!*

He is chilled. What does this mean? *What has the boy gotten himself into now?* The kelauntar squints into the sun, shades his eyes, and watches the crowd turn a corner. They are headed toward the caravanserai. *This is a religious matter, I’m sure*, the kelauntar tells himself. The mullas take care of religious business and he takes care of Qajar and civil business. But he is worried. They are shouting the name of his son. Swords are drawn.

The kelauntar begins to trail the crowd, staying a few steps behind so he doesn’t look like part of the mob. He feels a tug on his arm and looks down. Beside him is Ali, red-faced and breathing hard.

“I’ve been trying to find you!” Ali says.

“What is going on? Why are they chanting your name?”

“They’re going to kill a Shaykhi at the caravanserai. It’s my fault. You must stop them!” The boy is crying.

The kelauntar comes to a halt. Mulla Ibrahim and he had never before crossed swords. There was an implicit understanding between them, a line drawn in the warm Bushruih sand. The Qajars have power, yes, but at the local level the clergy have the people behind them. The kelauntar is not anxious to test this delicate balance of power.

“What do you mean it’s your fault?” the kelauntar says to Ali.

“I told the mullas about a Shaykhi coming to the caravanserai. I thought I was doing the right thing. I didn’t think they would want to kill him.”

The kelauntar understands the dilemma. He can step in and protect his son from these haunting feelings of guilt, or he can do nothing and preserve the balance of power. As for the Shaykhi, who cares?

“Come with me.” Hasan puts his hand behind Ali’s back, rubs it gently, then pushes the boy forward. They begin to follow the crowd toward the caravanserai. The kelauntar has no idea what he’s going to do.

“The Shaykhi is with Jalal,” Ali says.

The kelauntar dreams of the kalyan.

## CHAPTER 6

Jalal is seated in Kujiri's room when the noisy mob enters the courtyard. "They've come for me," he says. "Your friend told them a heretic was in the caravanserai."

"Ali? He would not do that."

From the courtyard, the old man and the boy can hear the hoarse voice of the mujtahid, Mulla Ibrahim. "If there is a Shaykhi present here, let him show himself!"

Jalal sweeps aside the thin curtain and steps out onto the gallery overlooking the courtyard. The mob below audibly gasps when they see the youngster. Of all the children of Bushruih, this boy is thought of as the most pious and spiritually gifted. Fathers hold him up as an example for their own sons, and some even call him the *child of light*.

'Abdu'llah is at the rear of the crowd, stunned by the image of his son standing alone above the mob.

The kelauntar instinctively weaves his way through the crowd, approaching the mujtahid as he tugs Ali by the hand.

Surprised at the appearance of the boy, Mulla Ibrahim takes a step back. "Jalal—perhaps you did not understand. I was calling for the Shaykhi."

"Yes. You believe that he is a heretic and deserves punishment for his beliefs."

Some of the mullas thrust their swords skyward and shout agreement. Mulla Ibrahim gestures for them to lower their blades.

"My child," the mujtahid says gently, "has this satanic force corrupted your thinking? That certainly would be cause for the Shaykhi's execution."

"The Shaykhi is a devout Shi'ite, as you are, my teacher," the boy replies.

Mulla Ibrahim nods graciously, knowing that he has often claimed credit for developing Jalal's spiritual insight. "Perhaps some of the Shaykhi's ideas are different than yours," Jalal continues, "but then, as I recall from one of your classes, you disagree with some of the doctrines of Mulla Fazlollah, the great mujtahid of Fars. And if my memory is correct from another class, you take issue with some of the teachings of other mullas. Are we to pronounce them heretics and sentence them to death?"

Mulla Javad, a student standing near the mujtahid, grasps his sword handle angrily. "The mujtahid's argument with these most learned doctors of law are over minor points!" he shouts. "The Shaykhis insult Muhammad by teaching that the physical resurrection is a fantasy!"

Javad expects the crowd to cheer his words, but there is only hushed silence as everyone waits for the boy's response. Jalal steps to the edge of the gallery and places his hands on the rail. His father sees the boy standing there, as if in the pulpit, speaking to the congregation below with such conviction and authority that even Mulla Ibrahim remains silent. This image of Jalal, preaching at the age of twelve with a man's life on the line, will linger in the mind of 'Abdu'llah for the rest of his life.

Behind the curtain, Kujiri sits and listens to Jalal argue for tolerance of the Shaykhi views. The boy aptly repeats the teachings that Kujiri had given him on the journey to the caravanserai, but creatively weaves in references from the Qu'ran and the traditions to bolster his convincing argument.

As the boy speaks, the mujtahid glances at the kelauntar and begins to appreciate the increasing delicacy of the situation. The villagers are certainly behind the mullas, but ultimate power and authority still rests with the ruling Qajars. If only the kelauntar had not shown up here! The mujtahid suddenly is not anxious to test the balance of power.

"I ask you," the boy concludes, staring at Mulla Ibrahim, "should we punish a Shaykhi for his desire to comprehend the spiritual significance of the Prophet's teachings? If we punish each attempt to discern meaning, whether right or wrong, we may quench the spark of reason and interrogation that you yourself, Mulla Ibrahim, have ignited in so many of us.

He gestures toward the curtain. "The man you seek is behind this curtain. He journeys to the tomb of Imam Husayn to bury his wife, who believed that she would be physically resurrected. This man respects the beliefs of his wife, even though he doubts the need for a resurrection of the body. He and his wife lived in peace for many years, each of them holding fast to their own questions

and beliefs. On his way to Bushruyih, this man's caravan was marauded by the Turkomans who took everything of value that they could find. But they spared his life so he could bury his wife at the Holy Shrine. Surely if the murderous Turkoman can show mercy, you can as well. What an example of the Prophet's mercy this can be!"

The hundred or so spectators are stunned by the eloquence of this child. There is not a word spoken until Mulla Ibrahim breaks the silence.

"You have a bright mind, Jalal. It has been a joy to have you as a pupil!" The crowd murmurs approval. The mujtahid smiles, again taking credit for the boy's genius.

## CHAPTER 7

The kelauntar's compound is encircled by a windowless mud wall spattered in patches by white pigeon droppings. The cooing, fluttering birds strut along the top of the wall like an army of sentries. Ali and his father, trailed by the retinue, walk along the barren wall and approach a barrel-chested man.

Gholam Reza and three others guard the solitary front door, a massive wooden slab studded by iron bolts. Gholam nods respectfully at the kelauntar, opens the groaning door and says, "The tutor has arrived. He is in the *anderun*."

Beyond the door and through a short corridor Ali inhales the leafy breath of the garden—a shady oasis of mulberry, walnut and fruit trees, fragrant red and yellow roses, luminous white irises and china asters, sculpted iron benches, fountains fringed with violet leaves.

The house reaches like the thumb and fingers of a hand to grasp the courtyard on three sides. To the left is the *birun* or men's apartment and to the right is the mysterious *anderun* or women's quarters. The house is built of sun-dried bricks thickly whitewashed and glimmering in the leaf-dappled sunlight. Steps lead up to a verandah that stretches nearly round the garden. A dozen two-leaved doors, each capped by fanlights and filled with gaudy-colored glass, provide gay portals to the interior. Numerous windows, like sparkling jewels, catch and fling the sunlight toward the kelauntar as he and Ali walk toward the Judas tree. Four sullen children, Ali's younger half-sisters, play dignified games around the edge of a large water tank.

Hasan and Ali have not spoken a word to each other since leaving the caravanserai. The kelauntar's mind is lost in chaos. He is simultaneously astonished by Jalal, envious of the cloth dyer whose son has captivated the vil-

lage, ashamed of his own gutless performance at the caravanserai, stung by the vizier's extortion, and deeply craving the opium-rich kalyan.

He slowly bends his cracking knees until he is seated on a bench, and then turns his deep-set eyes toward Ali who is staring at him. He sees in Ali's face disappointment and rejection. After hearing his son's plea for help he had been outdone by a brave twelve-year-old boy. But the final outcome had been positive, had it not? Perhaps if he had intervened the result would have been worse. It may have been the kelauntar's wisdom and maturity that caused him to recognize the virtue of restraint, of letting young Jalal act out his disarming performance.

No, this self-delusion is not working. Under the piercing gaze of his son he cannot conjure success out of deceit. He knows too well the darkness of his own heart, the tortuous pathways of his scheming mind. And he knows that within hours Ali will be torn from his mother.

The boy looks into his father's eyes. They are moist and expressive. He sees in them love, yes, certainly love, but also something he has not seen before—self-doubt. He also sees pain, such terrible pain. He wants to put his arms around his father to return the love, but he is now twelve; he should not act like a child. He is angry, too. Angry that his father has let him down. That his father beats his mother. That his father's affection is deeper for the wine bottle and opium pipe than for Ali.

The kelauntar glances down at his feet and mutters, "Ali, I've made a decision." He takes Ali by the hand. His lips smile but his sad eyes betray apprehension as he says, "I'm sending you to the madrisih in Mashhad."

*Is this fair compensation—school in exchange for a mother?*

Ali is stunned. He had never been able to muster the courage to ask for such a wonderful thing. After learning that Jalal was going to the famous seminary, Ali had been so envious that he had prayed for forgiveness.

"I'm going to Mashhad?" Ali asks, looking for reassurance.

The kelauntar's eyes smile now. "Yes. I think we can be ready for you to travel there with Jalal next week."

This is pure joy! Ali throws his arms around his father and squeezes as hard as he can.

It has been a long time since the kelauntar has experienced the physical touch of his son, the tactile transfer of affection. It is electric.

Tears gather in the kelauntar's eyes. He knows that he has bribed Ali, but in his emotional abyss even a purchased expression of love is a treasure.

For a blissful moment the kelauntar allows himself to believe that a hug is love, that a son's pardon has been granted, and that a bridge has been built. He knows that when the delusion fades, there is the blessed opium-filled kalyan.

Ali exuberantly rushes toward the anderun to tell his mother the good news.

## CHAPTER 8

‘Abdu’llah strides toward the blacksmith shop. He is anxious to inspect the gift that he is having crafted there for his son. Most of the blacksmith work is coarse and utilitarian—shoes and bits for mules and horses, iron gates and latches, repairs and refurbishments. The simple work suits the crude skills of five sweaty workers. The sixth, however, is an exception—Baqir Muhammad Shafti.

For ten years, Baqir had worked as a master sword-cutler in Isfahan, the old capital of Persia once celebrated for its exquisite manufacture of swords for the Qajars. As with most trades in Persia, the art of sword-making had all but vanished and few artisans were now capable of fabricating blades equal to those of former ages.

Baqir had been working for a maker of fine weaponry when his employer had come into possession of a precious sword crafted by a famous cutler named Assad’u’llah who had lived many years ago. Some of his famous swords, it is said, possess powers that defy belief.

One night the Assad’u’llah sword had disappeared and a frantic search by police discovered it concealed in Baqir’s house. Despite his protests of innocence, Baqir had been sentenced to have his thieving hands cut off. His wife, however, managed to sell all their property and with the proceeds bribed the police chief to allow Baqir’s escape. He had fled east into the Great Salt Desert, finding safety in the remote village of Bushruiyih.

‘Abdu’llah came to know of Baqir’s tale of woe one evening after the sword-cutler had drunk a bottle of red wine and tearfully confessed his secret

past to the cloth dyer. Baqir then had revealed the part of the mystery that had never come out.

Baqir's employer, it seems, had recognized Baqir's immense talent and had commissioned him—for a handsome price—to produce a counterfeit Assad'u'llah sword. The exquisite forgery, from its material and manufacture down to Assad'u'llah's etched signature, was so perfect that no expert could discern the fraud. One evening, the employer had planted the sword in Baqir's house, reporting its "theft" and suggesting that Baqir had been behaving suspiciously. He had hoped to accomplish two things: avoid payment, and ensure that Baqir could never again counterfeit another sword that might devalue the employer's treasure. After the arrest, Baqir could not explain the true circumstances for fear of even harsher punishment. After all, he *had* committed a crime.

A few months after Baqir's drunken confession, while 'Abdu'llah had been pondering alternatives for a gift for his son, the idea of a sword had come to him. Yes, this was it! He would commission Baqir to create an instrument equal to the Assad'u'llah sword. This one would be no counterfeit, however. He would have Baqir inscribe the sword with his son's name.

Baqir had brought with him to Bushruih several *koors*, cakes of Indian steel, from which the finest blades are made, dreaming that one day he would have reason to use them. That day had finally arrived. With great determination, he'd hammered a gently curving blade out of the *koors* and then placed it over a low fire all night. The next morning he had removed the blade, smoothed the surfaces, filed it expertly, and then heated it again. At last he had plunged the blade into a trough of castor oil. Over the next several days he had tenderly polished the blade, sharpened it, and fitted the hilt.

His next step had been to bring out the *jowher*, the damask pattern of the blade, a natural design of dark wavy lines produced by the crystallization of the steel. The true quality of a blade is known by the arrangement and closeness of the pattern and the bell-like chime it emits when struck by another hard object. To reveal the *jowher*, Baqir had cleansed the blade from oil and grease. Then, using sword-cutler's alchemy, he had unwrapped a strange yellow stone mysteriously called *záji shámi* and ground it to a powder in a china cup containing hot water. With a piece of cotton he had painted the solution onto the blade and let it dry, then repeated the process twice. Each time the black *jowher* had grown more vivid. The pattern was unusually dark and tight, the design exotic. Finally it had been time to engrave the name of Jalal of Bushruih in gold upon the blade.

Baqir next had turned his attention to the scabbard, which he had fashioned from thin wood laminate, fitting it precisely to the blade. Then he had joined and covered this hardwood skeleton with black leather on which he had stamped a verse from the Qu'ran rendered in his wife's expert calligraphy. On the finished scabbard he had mounted a pattern of gold and gems that he had purchased with the money 'Abdu'llah had paid him for the sword. He had needed no incentive to produce this masterpiece. The opportunity to again apply his artistry had been its own reward. And in his opinion, the quality of this piece exceeded the fraudulent Assad'u'llah sword he had created years ago.

'Abdu'llah strides into the blacksmith shop, beaming with expectation. He looks at Baqir, who smiles broadly.

"It is finished, then?" 'Abdu'llah asks.

"It is ready for its first breath."

The gleaming object rests in a locked cabinet within the blacksmith's shop. Baqir unlocks the cabinet and removes a burgundy satin pouch the length of a sword. The pouch is rigid as Baqir hands it to 'Abdu'llah, who can vividly remember his first sword, pale and lifeless by comparison.

The other workers, none of whom have seen Baqir's project until now, gather around 'Abdu'llah as he anxiously opens the tie that closes the end of the pouch. 'Abdu'llah's hands are trembling with anticipation. Slowly he removes the bejeweled scabbard. The entire group gasps with delight at the exquisite beauty of this object. 'Abdu'llah is stunned. He glances at Baqir with wide eyes. Baqir nods, urging him to remove the sword.

Holding the scabbard in his left hand, 'Abdu'llah places his right hand on the hilt and slides out the glinting blade. Its beauty—the perfection and uniqueness of the jowher, the flawless arc, the golden luster of his son's engraved name—is beyond belief. As he tilts the blade, a flash of reflected light ignites his face. He turns to Baqir in admiration.

"This is truly a masterpiece!" 'Abdu'llah says.

Awestruck, the blacksmiths applaud the artisan.

"There is one other thing you must do," Baqir replies. "Give it life!"

'Abdu'llah understands. He sets down the scabbard and transfers the sword's hilt to his left hand. He tests the blade's sharp edge. It whines against the whorls of his thumb. He snaps a fingernail against the blade and it sings, resonating with the clear voice of an angel.