

Annabella Crabtree: Hunted

By Nick Creech

Volume I of the Annabella trilogy

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Set in Times New Roman

*For my family.
Some of whom actually
read it more or less voluntarily
and particularly for my wife who
gave invaluable assistance.*

*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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Three-P

Galiconia

THE AUTHOR

Nick Creech is a former newspaper journalist. He has two sons, both now successful and more-or-less responsible adults who still deign to talk to him from time to time in tones of kindly condescension. He has a wife who does the same, mostly.

Since leaving journalism he has written extensively for children, young adults and people of all ages who just enjoy a story.

Prologue

The witching hour came and went and still the storm that lowered over Castle Alamut refused to break. Far down in the depths of the fortress, Hassan-i Sabbāh, the Old Man of the Mountain, also known as the Emir of Evil, founder and Grand Master of the Order of Assassins, feared and detested the length and breadth of many lands, unfastened the great polished doors to his personal domain. The chamber was vast and seemed to contain the roots of the castle, pillar after massive pillar disappearing into the shadows above, with ribs and arches reaching out in tangled profusion forming the branches of a frozen forest supporting the massive canopy of stone pressing down from above. Torches cast flaring pools of light and from somewhere came the trickle of running water.

As one penetrated through the serried ranks of piers and buttresses, so the space between them expanded to a large open area, part workshop, part library, part study. There were stands and workbenches piled high with scrolls, others bearing strange implements, retorts and alembics, pincers and clamps. To one side there appeared to be some sort of triangular scaffold set on a circular channel incised into the stone of the floor. In the centre, standing dominant and isolated, was a great bronze cauldron raised on a marble dais so that if one climbed the seven steps to the podium, the rim would then be waist high.

At each corner of the dais, set solidly into the floor, was a solomonic, porphyry column, twisting high into the shadows. Each slender pillar was surmounted by a small, obsidian flask, invisible except when a stray gleam of light reflected from the polished black surface. The perfection of each flask was marred by a rough, wax seal bearing a strange device.

Hassan-i Sabbāh, the Old Man of the Mountain, also known as the Emir of Evil, mounted reverently to the height of the dais. He was a tall man, from a distance imposing, but at closer range his hawk-nosed face was raddled with the scars of disease and dissipation. He was also marked by one other feature difficult to disguise. His hands were unusually small and slender, as though they had stopped growing at the age of twelve. They were tiny hands, a girl's hands.

He gazed for long moments at the dark, glutinous surface of the liquid within the cauldron, then summoning his resolve he reached within his robes to bring forth an ancient object so irreplaceable that he kept it secreted, suspended on a golden chain about his neck. It was a ring, a massive gold seal which bore the same device imprinted on the obsidian flasks. Again, he paused.

At last, convulsively, he inserted his thumb into the torus. It fitted easily despite the chain and it was clear that without the chain, the ring could never reside safely on his hand. As he twisted it down, simultaneously peel after peel of thunder crashed overhead, terrifying the people of the valleys huddling in their hovels, while lightning played about the turrets of the castle as though it had suddenly become electrified.

Which, in a sense, it had.

The surface of the cauldron came to instant roil and the emir hurriedly stepped down from the podium, and back, three long paces. Vapour began to rise, gaining body and substance, shape and form until it towered above the human.

"Speak," the emir commanded. "What of the savants?"

"They resist." The voice was sibilant, disembodied, seeming to come from nowhere and everywhere at once.

"Then press them, harder."

"They are pressed now to the point of breaking. Is that your wish? That we break them?"

The emir considered. If he persisted with torture and they died, they would never give him the secret to al iksir, the white drops he craved with all the soul he had left.

"No," he said. "They must not die. The daughter?"

"Is gone."

"Fool..." The emir hurriedly took another step backwards as the apparition seemed to sway towards him. "Find her," he said.

Chapter 1

At first, Annabella thought that the huge old cabinet was empty. It was set far back in the cavernous attic all but buried in a mountain of cast-off furniture, bric-a-brac and a miscellany of more or less nameless objects that dated back who knew how long. Outside, it was a rainy, miserable day, but quite why she was poking round the attic like some 10-year-old, and quite why she felt the need to investigate something so essentially uninteresting as the cabinet Annabella couldn't say. Was there some sort of emanation coming from within, some sort of subliminal sound even? Whatever, there was a definite compulsion pulling her on despite the difficulties. Just to get there, she first had to conquer a giant chest by pulling out the drawers and using them as a ladder, and then descend by and tunnel through a nest of abandoned chairs.

The cabinet was so big that Annabella could not imagine how anyone had managed to get it up the winding stairs to the attic in the first place and it had been there so long, lonely and unloved, that the doors were now warped and swollen. The only way that Annabella could achieve any movement at all was by sitting on the floor and heaving with arms and legs together. At last, with a creaking groan, one of the doors yielded a fraction, enough for her to put her eye to the crack and peer inside.

It was, of course, very dark and hard to see. Annabella had just about convinced herself that she was being ridiculous and utterly wasting her time when her eye, now more accustomed to the light, perceived a dull gleam. Her interest aroused, she hunted around and found a broken chair leg to use as a lever. Five minutes later, she had worked the door far enough open to be able to see properly.

The cabinet was indeed empty except for one thing, sitting on the bottom shelf – a gigantic, glass bell jar, so coated in cobweb and grime that it was impossible to see what, if anything, might be inside, but undeniably whatever had been drawing Annabella on was coming from within. She pulled out her handkerchief and without a thought as to what Mrs Milliken might say when she found it in the wash, went to work with spit and elbow grease to clean a window in the glass, all the while careful not to disturb or damage the jar.

It seemed to take for ever but as more and more of the dirt came away, Annabella became more and more excited. Finally she stopped and put her eye to the peephole she had managed to make to survey her find. It was amazing. Under the protective glass there seemed to be a model but the most lifelike Annabella had ever seen. From the base rose up what appeared to be the rocky pinnacle of a mountain, dotted here and there with scrubby thorn bushes. There was a path that spiralled its way round and round to the summit and set right on the peak there was a swooping stone tower, complete with turrets, balconies and arches. It was like part of a miniature world, captured and left to moulder, forgotten, for the rest of time.

The more Annabella looked, the more she came to feel that the only difference between this miniature world and the real world was a question of size. The model was perfect in every detail down to the tiny leaves on the bushes and the all but

invisible grains of dust on the track. It was as though a magician seeing the tower set on its mountain top had thought, "I like that; I'll have that," and had waved his wand.

Annabella gazed into the glass, transfixed. The mountain peak was truly enchanting. She traced the path all the way from the bottom to the top and then began to inspect the tower narrowly, wondering all the time whether there was anything inside and if there were, what it might be. As far as she could tell, the exterior was constructed from tiny blocks of light grey stone apparently fitted together without mortar. The balconies and arched windows were of a contrasting white and carved with exquisite delicacy. Trying to peer through one of the apertures, Annabella thought she could glimpse a mosaic floor and what might have been a spiral stairway.

Who could possibly have made such a splendidly detailed model, she wondered? How could it possibly have come to rest at the bottom of this filthy old cabinet, long forgotten in the attic of an isolated manor house. It was the sort of mystery that Annabella found most captivating and as she gazed and gazed at the tiny world, drinking in the wonder of it, her mind raced, constructing possible scenarios, each one more unlikely than the last.

Slowly, barely registering the fact, she became aware that somehow the world inside the grimy glass was subtly changing. Something was different, though there was still so much dirt on the surface of the jar that it was hard to make out. Without stopping to think what might have been ladylike and what not, Annabella spat on the glass again and went back to work with her handkerchief, enlarging her window into this strange world.

Sometime later, with her hanky now resembling a disgraced cleaning rag, Annabella bent to look again and exclaimed wordlessly with surprise. Something most strange was developing. There appeared to be... She was almost sure... How on earth could it be possible...? But there, yes... It was a wisp of smoke, the merest tendril, issuing from the topmost window in the tower. How extraordinary. Whatever could be causing it? Was the model catching on fire? Should she rush for help, for a bucket of water, in case the whole house burned down? She tensed and was about to turn to burrow her way back through the tunnel of chairs when a sound caught her attention. Faint, but distinct, it was almost as though someone was shouting at her. She touched her ear to the jar and yes, there was definitely a sound coming from inside. A voice seemed to be saying:

"You rubbed?"

Feeling utterly ridiculous and desperately glad there was no one to see her, Annabella said tentatively: "Is someone there?"

"Of course there is!" the voice replied petulantly. "Of course there's someone here. How else could we jolly well be talking?"

Annabella nearly fainted with shock. Then she reared back from the jar in alarm.

"There can't be," she said wonderingly. "There can't be! It's impossible. I'm dreaming."

"I say! Beastly rude... calling me a dream. Damned insulting."

"What...? Who...? What are you...?"

"Who, thank you very much. I'm a djinni, well, technically a Marid... If that's all right with you?"

"A what...?"

"I told you, who. A djinni. A Marid. Of the Light. Not the jolly Dark."

"You mean like Aladdin? But you're not in a lamp..."

"Of course not. Of course I'm not in a lamp. Jolly cramped. Jolly smelly. And too damned hot. But if you rub my jar, then here I jolly well am."

"Why do you talk like that?"

"Talk like what?"

"All poncey... All plummy..."

"I say!" the djinni exclaimed, deeply offended.

"Sorry," Annabella mumbled, realising she had indeed been rather rude. "But what are you doing in there?"

"I'm a prisoner."

"Why?"

"Absolutely none of your damn business. But I'll grant you one wish if you let me out."

Annabella paused and considered. On balance, she thought she must be dreaming. She couldn't not be dreaming. Anything else was utterly impossible. But as it was an interesting dream and promised to get more interesting still, she decided she might as well play along.

"I thought Aladdin got three wishes," Annabella said casually.

"And damned well ruined the market. No sense of proportion, no sense of value for services rendered. Very well, two wishes."

"Two," Annabella said. "Only two..."

"Heartless I call that. Beastly. Think of my children. Think of my wife. Ruination. They'll be left destitute on the jolly streets."

"Three," Annabella said. "Three wishes."

"Three! Three! There's modern youth for you. Corrupt morals. Corrupt values. All me, me, me... I don't know what the world's coming to... Oh, if I must..."

Annabella paused again.

"So let's be quite clear," she said. "If I let you out of the jar you'll give me three wishes?"

"Yes," the djinni agreed eventually and most reluctantly.

"What sort of wishes?"

"Anything you jolly well like," the djinni exclaimed, surprised.

"Anything? Anything like what?"

"Like... The Irishman who asked me for a bottomless glass of stout and when I gave it to him he jolly well asked for two more of the same."

"Ha," Annabella said. "Got you... So it is supposed to be three wishes..."

The wisp of smoke turned a faint shade of pink.

"Can't blame a djinni for trying," he said. "Wishes are jolly hard work."

"And I'll bet you don't have any starving children. You probably don't even have a wife..."

"Poetic licence...?"

"No deal," Annabella said.

"What? I say..."

"No deal," Annabella repeated firmly. "There's only one thing I want to come true and I know you can't do it."

"Now just a minute, just a jolly minute. That's not fair. You could at least let me try. Or there must be something else you want. Dresses? A puppy? I know. A pony, a jolly fine pony...?"

"No," Annabella said. "Nothing. I'm too old for a puppy and I hate horses, so I'll just let you out anyway." And simultaneously, with some difficulty, she lifted the great glass jar up and away from the mountain top.

The djinni was shrieking at her: "No! Wait! Stop! Stop!" But he was too late, far too late. Annabella set the jar down on the floor next to the cabinet and he was suddenly free.

"There you are," she said with satisfaction to the wisp of smoke which was now turning purple and shouting incoherently, apparently with anger.

"You...! You...! You...!"

"Why, whatever is the matter?" Annabella said, rather hurt. "I thought you'd be pleased."

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" The djinni keened in a descending wail.

"But you said it was what you wanted," Annabella protested, astonished and not at all understanding the djinni's distress. He was now so upset that he was quite unable to speak. Annabella waited patiently.

"You didn't want me to set you free?" she asked eventually when she thought the djinni might have recovered a bit.

"No, I jolly well didn't," he said forlornly. "At least not like that. There has to be a price. I had to pay you a price."

"Or what?"

"Or I have to be your slave. Now I have to be your slave for the rest of your jolly life." The wisp of smoke looked limp and totally dejected. Annabella thought for a moment.

"That's easy to fix," she said. "I'll just set you free. I'll release you. From slavery. Right now."

"And jolly generous, I'm sure," the djinni said. "But unfortunately, damned unfortunately, it doesn't jolly work like that. I am now bound to you for all time, at least all your time. And to make jolly damn sure I don't try to hurry things along a bit, I am also bound to protect your silly jolly life with my own. There's no escape, no loophole no jolly way out. As of now, I'm your slave. Chained to you. Bound hand and foot and how's your father? That's that, end of story and a jolly good night to you Scheherazade."

"But I don't want a slave," Annabella said. "And if I did, I certainly wouldn't want you..."

"Oh, wounding..."

"And who's this Sherry person anyway?"

"Scheherazade was a young woman a damn sight smarter than you, and whether you want a slave or not, you've jolly well got one."

"Suppose I just tell you to go away and live your own life? Suppose I order you never to come near me ever again? What about that?"

"Can't be done," the djinni said shortly. "Under bylaw 27, subsection 3, paragraph 2, clause (i) of the CODE, it clearly states that I am bound to attend your person directly, never leaving your side, whether you wish it or whether you jolly well don't on pain of death, your death as well as mine, no appeal, no extenuating circumstances. But if you really feel like dying, far be it from me to jolly well try to stop you. "

"That's ridiculous," Annabella said, both alarmed and cross at the same time. "What code? And don't I have some say in it?"

"C-O-D-E... The Charter of Djinni Ethics. And no you don't have any say in it. Jolly well none. You wouldn't listen. I tried to stop you but you jolly well went and set me free anyway."

Annabella sat back on her heels and considered the situation. She was more certain than ever that it must be a dream and one turning rapidly into a nightmare, but it showed no sign of ending. Determinedly, she pinched herself. It hurt.

A thought struck her.

"You said, of the Light. Does that mean what I think it means?"

"Loosely speaking."

"But how loosely speaking?" Annabella asked narrowly, homing in on what seemed to her a crucial point.

"My Light and your Light are not necessarily the same jolly thing."

"And Light and Dark are what I think they are?" Annabella said. "We are talking about good and bad?"

The wisp of smoke contorted itself into what looked like a head nodding mournfully.

"Oh dear," Annabella said at last.

"Oh-jolly-dear, indeed," the djinni said.

His name was Basil, Basil al Yazid, not the Greek Basil – meaning kingly – but the Arabic Basil – meaning brave – as he explained testily to a rather incredulous Annabella. But how he came to be imprisoned in a tower on a tiny mountaintop shut inside a glass jar, locked inside an ancient cabinet, hidden in a junk-filled attic, high in a mouldering country house, he refused to say, even when Annabella ordered him to. She could only command of him the present, not the past, he informed her crossly. When she argued, he quoted Bylaw 27, Subsection 3, Paragraph 2, Clause (ii,b) of the CODE and would not be moved.

Annabella was finally forced to concede once and for all that whatever was happening, it wasn't a dream when she heard the distant and irritated shout from Mrs Milliken calling her to lunch. She thrust her filthy handkerchief into her pocket, scrambled through the tunnel of chairs and over the chest of drawers, picked her way through the rest of the chaos and finally emerged on the landing.

"Coming," she called and tried hurriedly to do something about the dust clinging to her jeans. Mrs Milliken had evidently been forced to come a long way up the stairs from the ground floor to make herself heard and Annabella could hear her clumping down again, the sound of her footsteps a sharp reproach to wayward young ladies who put their elders and betters to far more trouble than they were worth, the young ladies that is.

And in her anxiety and haste, Annabella more or less managed to forget all about the djinni.

Great-uncle Warwick, dressed as always in tweed jacket and tie with highly polished shoes, had not waited. He paused as Annabella crept into the gloomy, old dining room, a soup spoon poised mid-journey, and gazed at her severely.

"Better three hours too soon, than a minute too late," he remarked. "And who do you think might have said that young lady?"

Annabella groaned inwardly. It was to be one of those conversations.

"I-I don't know, Great-uncle Warwick," she said meekly.

Instantly, there was another voice in her head, a poncey, plummy voice, a voice she had forgotten for the moment, a voice which a sudden premonition told her would become all too familiar.

Shakespeare, the djinni said.

What!? Annabel thought. She was so startled she almost spoke aloud.

Shakespeare jolly well said that, Basil repeated impatiently.

How could you know? Annabella wondered.

The advantages of an Oxford education.

You went to Oxford?

Of course, I jolly well went to Oxford. djinn are quite civilised, you know. At least, some of us jolly well are.

Great-uncle Warwick was regarding her with a peculiar expression on his face.

"Are you feeling all right?" he asked. "You're looking very strange all of a sudden."

"Yes thank you, Great-uncle," Annabella said, and then greatly daring: "Was it Shakespeare?"

Great-uncle Warwick stared at her a moment longer. "Why yes," he said, momentarily nonplussed at losing the moral advantage. "It was."

"I'm very sorry," Annabella said. "I think I must have fallen asleep and didn't hear the bell." She slipped into her place and surreptitiously searched the room. There, behind Great-uncle Warwick up near where the dark-stained wainscot ended and the regency-striped wallpaper began, was that a wisp of smoke, all but invisible?

Great-uncle Warwick cleared his throat. "As it is near the end of the holidays I have been contemplating your future," he said. "Your last term report... Most unsatisfactory Annabella. Most unsatisfactory indeed. I have been giving thought to whether I should remove you from your present school – I had hoped you might do well there – and send you to one with stricter standards. I'm beginning to think that the free and easy ways of your past life should be brought up with a round turn. A round turn," he repeated with satisfaction.

Annabella's heart sank. She had been expecting – and dreading – just such an interview but it had taken so long to materialise she had begun to hope that last term's exam results might have faded into the background. Evidently, no such luck. "In the soup again," she muttered to herself with a muffled groan. She braced herself for what was sure to come.

However, what did actually come was something totally out of the blue.

Great-uncle Warwick's consommé somehow managed to upend itself into his lap. There was a moment of frozen shock, then Annabella clapped both hands to her mouth while Great-uncle Warwick leaped to his feet with a most ungentlemanly exclamation, the plate falling to the floor and breaking into several pieces. He brushed at himself ineffectually with a napkin, then beat a hasty retreat.

Basil! Annabella shrieked inside her head. *Basil! Was that you? Did you do that?*

There was a lengthy silence.

Basil!

What?

Did you do that?

It was appropriate, don't you think? Damned appropriate, I'd say. You in the soup, him in the soup... Tit-for-tat and all that. And you did say, 'In the soup again', I heard you.

Basil!

What?

You can't go round doing things like that. Not to Great-uncle Warwick.

I can. I just did..

I thought you were supposed to be my slave?

Indeed, madam mistress, shining pearl.

Well, doesn't that mean you have to do what I tell you? Annabella was beginning to feel a mounting sense of unease.

When did you ever jolly well tell me not to do that? The djinni demanded. *Or did I miss something?*

Annabella's sense of unease suddenly flared into a feeling of full-fledged panic.

I thought you were supposed to be a Light djinni, a good djinni? I thought you were supposed to be on my side.

And I am, madam mistress, mine. Indeed I am.

As if. And what's this business of reading my mind? How dare you read my mind?

Basil was suddenly contrite.

No, no, no. I say, definitely not. Wouldn't jolly well dream of it even if I could. No, no, no. We can talk, telepathy, but that's it.

Are you sure? Annabella demanded.

Abso-jolly-lutely. Couldn't have you reading my mind back, now could we? That would be fearfully frightening for both of us.

Abruptly, the door swung open and Mrs Milliken bustled in with a dustpan, a bucket of water and a cloth. She looked suspiciously at Annabella but fortunately she was still all innocence, sitting demurely in her place, hands folded in her lap, gazing at her plate. The housekeeper got down on her knees, swept up the broken china and began to sponge at the pool of spilled soup soaking into the carpet. Annabella, still unwary and still angry about the fate to be visited upon her, mouthed an imprecation about the bucket and what she would like to happen to it. The wish proved father to the deed. A moment later there was a loud exclamation of annoyance and a sharp bang. Mrs Milliken's head had hit the underside of the table as she reared back. Somehow she had managed to upset the bucket and was now kneeling in the middle of a large puddle, her skirt drenched.

She stumbled to her feet and rushed from the room. Annabella put her head in her hands. This can't go on, she thought.

Why on earth did you do that? she demanded of Basil.

Isn't that what you said you wanted? he inquired innocently. *Anyway, I don't like her. And you jolly well don't either. She's beastly mean to you. I can tell.*

Annabella couldn't deny it and beneath her very proper horror at recent events, there was a sneaking sense of just come-uppance visited on people thoroughly deserving. Not that either Great-uncle Warwick or Mrs Milliken could be described as bad, or vicious, but both had a firm belief in the virtues of a strict upbringing, a devout fear of sparing the rod and spoiling the child and an unshakeable belief in their own rightness. And it all made for a dour, grim life for Annabella, not that the boarding school she had been sent to after the "event", as she thought of it, was much better, indeed, promised to get rather worse if Great-uncle Warwick was to have his way.

Annabella felt the old heartache sneaking back up on her again and resolutely pushed it away.

This can't go on, she repeated to herself but this time so that Basil could hear. *You can't go round playing tricks on people just because you think they don't like me or I don't like them.*

Why ever jolly well not? That's what djinn do. Jolly good fun, what?

I won't have it, Annabella said grimly. *You are not to play tricks on anyone without my express permission.*

I take it that's an order then, madam mistress, mine? came Basil's voice in her head. He sounded distinctly put out, downright sulky.

Absolutely, it's an order, Annabella said firmly. *They'll start thinking I'm a witch or something and then who knows what will happen?*

Ducking? Basil said hopefully. *Burning at the stake?*

If I burn, I'll order you to burn with me... There was a chuckle and the wisp of smoke danced a little jig on the table in front of her.

I already have jolly well burned in a manner of speaking, or hadn't you noticed?

The door to the dining room swung open and Great-uncle Warwick stalked in. He was wearing fresh trousers and an expression of profound irritation. He was immediately followed by Mrs Milliken in a clean skirt and bearing more instruments of domestic torture. Basil drifted back towards the ceiling, out of view, and Annabella stared at her now very cold soup, bracing herself for the worst. It was not long in coming.

Flintlock College was, according to its reluctant inmates, most aptly named: hard as stone and impossible to escape. Its specialty was taking girls whose parents feared they might be on the cusp of waywardness or who had, indeed, already fallen. They were then subjected to a regime so rigorous that all thoughts of sinful delights were beaten into submission to become not even a distant memory. Unbeknownst to Annabella, Great-uncle Warwick, afflicted with second thoughts about the necessarily hasty choice he had been forced to make at a time of family crisis, had taken the trouble to pay a visit at the end of the previous term, Annabella's disgraceful exam results in hand, and had been mightily impressed with the conduct of the girls he encountered. They were uniformly clean and tidy, spoke only when spoken to, sat attentively in class with backs straight and walked demurely, never running, eyes cast down and with none of that pushing, jostling, shrieking and general carry-on so prevalent among today's youth. And none of that dreadful, loud music either. Certainly not.

Discipline was the word, he thought, discipline that took him back to his days in the army, discipline that would be the making of Annabella, discipline that, acting in loco parentis as he now was, it was clearly his responsibility to foster and encourage. He had signed Annabella up on the spot, never pausing to wonder why there just happened to be such a convenient vacancy and congratulating himself the while that such a wise course of action had recommended itself.

Permitted at last to disappear into her room and throw herself on her bed, Annabella actually allowed her eyes to moisten. A life that had been skating along the edge of unbearable now seemed to have definitely plummeted over into the abyss.

I say, came Basil's voice in her head. *Things can't be that bad.*

Go away! Annabella said miserably.

Certainly, madam mistress, mine. But why are we so jolly well upset? Annabella rolled over furiously and sat up. A tendril of smoke came to perch on her knee.

You wouldn't understand, she snapped. *And just my luck. Instead of a nice, sympathetic girl djinni I have to get you for a slave.*

And whose fault is that? Basil said, offended.

I don't believe this, Annabella said, more to herself than anything. *It's impossible. Totally impossible. There are no such things as djinnis...*

Djinn, Basil interposed helpfully. *And yes there are. Here I jolly well am, like it or not.*

I don't, Annabella snapped. *You're some weird trick of my mind...*

I assure you...

Don't. Don't assure me. Don't do anything. Just go away.

I keep telling you, I jolly well can't, Basil said patiently and added, speaking very slowly and distinctly: *I am now your slave. End of jolly story.*

But I don't want a slave!

Why not? Why ever jolly not? Think of the advantages...

Annabella paused. Indeed, why not, she suddenly asked herself? A magical being at her beck and call, dancing attendance 24/7, performing miraculous feats solely for her benefit... She must be mad to object... Except she was obviously mad in the first place ever to have conjured up this impossible illusion.

Suppose, she said to herself... Suppose he is real, suppose the soup and the bucket weren't just accidents, suppose this djinni...person actually does exist, suppose, like he says, he is my slave, what then...? It has to stop, that's what then.

If Annabella knew only one thing about herself it was that she couldn't tolerate, never would be able to tolerate, the thought of having a slave. The idea made her feel physically ill. It was bad enough that Great-uncle Warwick had a housekeeper, a servant, but the notion of anything more she found totally abhorrent.

Seriously, Annabella said. *If you really do exist, this can't go on. Apart from anything else, it will ruin my character, the little character they tell me I have... So there has to be a way we can unslave you. I mean, how do you expect me to even undress if you're hanging around all the time? Or... Or anything?*

I say, Basil said even more offended. *I'd have you know that I am a gentleman djinni. I'd never think of looking. I don't even want to look. Naturally, I'll jolly well turn my back.*

But you'll hear, Annabella said. *And that's just as bad.*

Well, you'll just have to jolly well get used to it.

There must be a way to unslave you. There just has to be. I'll bet you can't put your hand on your heart and swear that there isn't...

There was a long silence.

Can you?

There was an even longer silence.

Well? I order you to answer.

There...might be... But it's very dangerous...too dangerous... It would very probably be the end of both of us. And an end I don't jolly well care to contemplate.

Oh fabulous, Annabella said bitterly. *What a choice. A fate worse than death or being sent off to some Alcatraz school my guardian thinks is "eminently suitable" with you in tow. And I don't believe you ever went to Oxford, either. How could you possibly have gone to Oxford?*

Graduate student, Basil said with a self-satisfied chuckle. *Doctor of Philosophy. That's to say Master of Mystery. And think about it. This school we're being sent off to could be jolly entertaining with me around.*

Chapter 2

Hassan-i Sabbāh, the Old Man of the Mountain, also known as the Emir of Evil, broke from his constant brooding to perform a necessary and usually rewarding duty. He surveyed the carefully contrived setting with justifiable irritation. He pointed to a leaf marring the smooth perfection of the path that wound its way through the garden. Such would never be allowed in Paradise, at least Paradise as he conceived it to be. An attendant encouraged with a hefty kick to his posterior scurried to remove the offending detritus.

The emir moved on but despite the most severe inspection, he was unable to find further fault. Paradise, or it least his simulation of it, was perfect. The air was balmy and heady with scent. The houris, all with pillowy breasts and reclining on silken cushions in the golden pavilion, were suitably, if deceitfully, virginal in their diaphanous garments. The music which seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere was insistent with the promise of heavenly delights. He took one more careful look about and then made the signal.

Two things happened. Channels artfully circling the pavilion began to flow with milk and honey and, simultaneously, a discreet gate opened in the high wall about this haven and long lines of litters were borne in, each with a recumbent form, drugged and insensible.

The young men were carried into the pavilion and surrendered to the attentions of the alluring forms within. As the litter-bearers silently departed, the emir retired behind a screen to witness, to savour, if only vicariously, the amazement and the delight of this latest batch of fida'is as they slowly awakened to blessed bliss.

For the past ten, long years they had been subjected to the most tortuous of training until they were now adepts with every weapon known to man and masters of the arts of concealment and deceit. Further, their education had been so fostered that now they could pass anywhere in intelligent society.

The emir allowed them only an hour, time enough to tantalise, to beguile, to infatuate, to establish paradise as the only possible goal worth striving for, worth living for, worth dying for, then he sounded the small chime that would bring it all to an end. One by one, each young man was seduced into drinking from a drugged cup, and one by one each gently succumbed to unconsciousness.

They woke on the windy battlements of Alamut. The emir waited until they had each regained sufficient command of their faculties before addressing them.

"I have shown you Paradise," he said in a sonorous voice. "The true Paradise. The Paradise that is eternal reward for unquestioning obedience here on earth. The Paradise that may only be regained by unquestioning obedience to me, your Grand Master." He paused and held the gaze of each fida'i for long seconds. He saw only acceptance and belief. At last, he continued:

"If I am to order one of you to leap from this wall to be dashed to death on the rocks below, who will volunteer?"

With one accord all 50 of the young men stepped forward. The emir smiled inwardly with satisfaction. In one sense, what was about to happen was a sad waste but the emir had learned after many such occasions that the moral effect on those who remained was incalculable. His eye lingered on each man in turn and finally came back to the most promising of the young initiates.

"Abdul-Wahid," he said at last. "You have excelled in all that you have done. The honour is yours. The reward is yours. Go now to Paradise with my congratulations and my blessing."

The young man glowed at the emir's words, bowed deeply, climbed up to the edge of the battlements, took a moment to survey his doom and then silently launched himself into the abyss. For long moments there was no sound and then there came a distant, squelching sort of thud. The remaining young men gave a collective sigh of envy. Without the smallest hint of exception they too yearned to make the death leap, to return immediately to the enchanted garden of heavenly delights they had just experienced, all too briefly.

The side-road eventually came to a high, stone wall which appeared to be topped with broken glass. A little further on there was the beginnings of a drive blocked by an equally high, iron-barred gate, spiked on top. It was also locked. Great-uncle Warwick, who had chosen on this occasion to drive himself, tooted the horn and drummed his fingers on the steering wheel.

Looks like a jolly prison, Basil said.

And here's the jailer, Annabella replied gloomily. A porter wearing peaked cap and cape reluctantly emerged from the gatehouse into the drizzle and squelched towards them. He unlocked the gate, stepped through and carefully locked it again behind him.

I say, a bit excessive, what? Basil remarked. Annabella said nothing but sighed inwardly. Great-uncle Warwick lowered his window.

"Major Crabtree for Dr Croker," he said. The porter pulled a plastic covered clipboard from under his cape and consulted it with a frown.

"Yes sir," he said eventually, reluctantly. He returned to the gate, unlocked it and ushered them through.

The drive wound its way through a dank copse to emerge into an area of manicured playing fields. There were hockey goals, netball posts and, off in the distance, a cluster of tennis courts. Annabella's heart sank even further. She hated sports. The central oval even had what looked like a cricket pitch. Beyond that again was a group of buildings in mixed architectural styles, all pseudo.

Without any of the hesitation one might expect from a newcomer – which Annabella found revealing – Great-uncle Warwick swept regally along the drive, around the centre carriage circle, which framed a rococo fountain, and pulled up in front of the steps to what was obviously the main entrance.

"Come," he said, opening his door. "No time to waste. I wish to be home before dark." He opened his umbrella and without bothering to shield Annabella overly much, peremptorily hurried her across the gravel and up the steps. There were no other

cars parked out front, no sign of other new victims being presented for incarceration. Great-uncle Warwick noticed her puzzled expression.

"I had a necessary appointment in the city," he said in his usual condescending tone.

And of course that was ever so much more important than starting you at a new school... Basil remarked in a snarky voice.

"...Wherefore I arranged a day's postponement for you. Though I doubt that there are many other new arrivals, if any. It's not the start of the school year, you know. They're taking you now as a special favour to me."

Annabella nodded glumly. Even without the rain trickling down her neck, she would have felt supremely uncomfortable. The past week had been a nightmare with Mrs Milliken hustling her from shop to shop, ticking off items on the endless list of stuff the school required her to bring and then putting nametags on everything. In between times, Annabella had managed some surreptitious research.

Know thine jolly enemy, Basil had said and together they had devoured whatever they could find. Flintlock College, apparently, was a smallish school with only some 200 students, all boarders. Its principal boast was a very high staff-to-student ratio, the better "to monitor and encourage individual development".

Oh bally dear, Basil had said. Annabella could only concur, though she had by no means come to any sort of terms with the fact that her every waking moment was now shared with a djinni. For Basil to be real was plainly impossible, therefore he could only be a figment of her imagination, and such a figment could only reasonably mean one thing: she was either going or had already gone completely crazy.

In what she hoped was still the privacy of her own thoughts, Annabella decided that the only thing she could do was to ignore the whole situation as much as possible. It was clearly ridiculous to think that she might talk about it to Great-uncle Warwick or to Mrs Milliken – they would be summoning men in white coats on the instant – and there was no one else. Any of the girls that she might have called a passing friend at her old school would be just as certain to think her totally insane.

Most of the past week she had been so occupied that it was easy enough to forget there was a wisp of smoke dogging her wherever she went. There had been no further incidents and she had certainly made no requests of Basil or given any orders. For the rest, she was more or less able to convince herself that she was actually talking to herself.

Now, here she was in her brand-new uniform – everything in the most unbecoming and clashing shades of mauve she could imagine – and squeaky shoes, half a size too big – room to grow, you know – about to be dumped into what would doubtless prove yet another one of the horrible situations which life seemed determined to construct exclusively for her benefit.

She wondered absently if she looked as a woebegone as she felt.

Chin up, old sausage, Basil suddenly said out of the blue. Obviously she did.

She glanced about but failed to spot him. He could, when he chose, make himself so transparent as to be effectively invisible. Talking to myself again, she told herself firmly. But this time, not seeing things, she added wryly.

Dr Croker, the "noted educationist", turned out to be a woman, thin, tall, drawn, severe, permanently sour, one of those women, Annabella thought, who spend their lives resenting the fact that they were not born male. She determined to keep her eyes down and to speak as little as possible, which wasn't the least bit difficult as she clearly wasn't expected to speak at all.

Great-uncle Warwick and Dr Croker were evidently very pleased with each other. With some ceremony he was ushered to the carved chair positioned slightly to one side of the headmistress's own grand desk. Annabella was left to stand somewhere in the middle distance. The two adults then proceeded to discuss her as though she were not even in the room.

"As I explained," Great-uncle Warwick said after what Annabella thought a rather too gracious exchange of pleasantries. "She is not a bad girl, at least not yet... But difficult circumstances, you understand. She does need a firm hand, a very firm hand..."

"And let me assure you again," Dr Croker said in a voice that resembled nothing so much as the slow drip of vinegar, "that Flintlock College specialises in just such cases. Indeed, I have made it my life's work..."

"And a most impressive legacy it will be when eventually – not for many years we devoutly hope as clearly your work is most necessary..." Great-uncle Warwick's voice trailed off, whether from delicacy or because he had quite lost his way, but the sentiment was abundantly clear and much appreciated. Dr Croker even allowed herself the thinnest of smiles.

"Too kind," she said. "Now Major, all that remains is for Crabtree to be shown to her new life and then perhaps I might offer you some tea to fortify you for your return journey?" And without waiting for an answer, Dr Croker pressed a hidden buzzer on her desk. The door was opened from outside a moment later.

"Go," Dr Croker said to Annabella. "But first let me warn you that it would be best for you that you never have occasion to enter this office ever again. You are required to learn the rules immediately and to abide by them at all times. There will be no period of grace and ignorance will not be considered any sort of excuse. Some girls find the period of adjustment, shall we say, more difficult than others but believe me when I also say that there has never yet been a girl who has failed to adjust." And clearly not expecting any sort of reply from Annabella, she motioned her from the room.

I say, Basil said before she could move. A gesture, do let me make a gesture. We need to nail our jolly colours to the mast...

Why not? Annabella said, not really believing anything would happen.

So what do you jolly well suggest?

Me? Annabella was surprised. *What do I suggest?* Unbidden, her mind fixed on the handsome pen set prominently displayed on the headmistress's desk. *I wonder if there's any ink in that inkwell I saw?*

Oh goody...

Annabella hesitated in the doorway between the offices. As well as Dr Croker's secretary, there was now a second person in the anteroom, a tall girl in that hateful mauve uniform with some sort of badge pinned to the lapel of her blazer. At that moment, there was a distressed cry from behind Annabella and the secretary pushed past her to go dashing in to the headmistress.

Basil! Annabella said furiously, as the faintest wisp of smoke sidled up to her.

What? You said I could...

But I never thought it would really happen...

Annabella was horrified, not so much by the inkwell being upset but by the fact that it had happened at all. The other girl was watching her curiously.

I'll speak to you later, she said, trying to control her expression.

I can hardly jolly wait...

Basil!

The other girl abruptly decided she had seen enough.

"I'm the head prefect," she said in a bored voice over the sound of commotion from the other room. "And you are the lowest of the low. You're just new meat. You don't even have a name until we give you one..."

"So what's yours?" Annabella said, refusing to be intimidated. The other girl's eyes narrowed.

"Uppington," she said after a pause.

"Uppington what?" Annabella demanded disingenuously.

"Cordelia...Cordelia Uppington."

"Oh dear, poor you..."

"Unwise, Crabtree..."

"Well fancy that. I do have a name... It seems I won't need to be troubling you for one, after all."

Oh, bravo, Basil interjected.

And you, shut up. I'm not talking to you...

Uppington's eyes had narrowed dangerously.

"A smart arse," she said. "Don't think we don't know how to deal with smart arses." And with that she spun on her heel and stalked off leaving Annabella nonplussed. Was she supposed to follow, or what? In the end she did.

She trailed behind as the head prefect mounted a broad flight of stairs and then turned down a long corridor. Through the windows on one side Annabella could see the service yard onto which the other buildings of the school also backed. On the inside, there was a row of what were evidently classrooms. Uppington stopped at the door near the end labelled 3B and jerked her head.

"In there," she said. "And we'll deal with the matter of your insolence later." She pushed roughly past and Annabella was left with the choice of flattening herself against the wall or being trampled.

"Pond scum," Cordelia threw over her shoulder as she stalked off.

Cow, Basil said. *That was damned rude...*

So what am I supposed to do now? Annabella said absently. She could hear a faint banging sound coming through the thick door.

Knock?

After a moment's thought, Annabella did just that and hesitantly entered the room. A woman was standing by a large desk, a blackboard behind her, facing a group of a dozen girls, all about Annabella's age. She had a heavy ruler in her right hand that she was about to bring crashing down on the desk. The banging was explained. Annabella wondered vaguely with part of her mind what it was that had required such heavy emphasis.

The woman inspected her unfavourably for a long moment.

"What?" she demanded at last. Annabella shrugged. How was she supposed to know?

"Well?"

"The head prefect brought me here," Annabella said.

"You're Crabtree?" Annabella nodded. "I am Miss Bronson. Miss not Ms. I am your form teacher. Sit there." She pointed to the one empty desk at the back. "And be aware for your own sake that I do not permit talking or any other form of disruption in my classroom."

Annabella hesitated a moment and then made her way to the empty desk, very conscious of the dozen pairs of eyes boring into her.

I say, Basil began. This is all beastly unfriendly, what?

Tough, Annabella said. You think I want to be here? The banging had started again. A regular thump...thump...thump interspersed with forceful words, though Annabella had not the least idea of what was being said. She could feel herself sinking into a slough of self-pity and just for once made not the slightest effort to take herself in hand. Flintlock College was the most miserable place in the whole world and she was the most miserable person within it, and that was all there was to it.

A bell rang. Miss Bronson gave her desk one last resounding bang – that will teach it, Annabella thought listlessly – and left the room. A moment later, the other girls were all crowding round her and the inquisition began.

"So what are you in for...?"

"What did you do...?"

"What were you expelled for...?"

"Expelled?" Annabella interrupted.

"Of course," someone said. "You only ever get sent here if you've been expelled..."

"We're bad girls, bad, bad girls..."

"School of last resort..." somebody else said.

"But I wasn't expelled," Annabella said. There was an astonished silence.

"Then what are you doing here?" another voice asked eventually. Annabella shrugged.

"I don't know," she said forlornly.

I do, Basil said. *Great-uncle Warwick is a rotten cad who just wants to wash his hands of you...*

Shut up, Annabella hissed. But truth be told, she had come to much the same conclusion.

When are you jolly well going to tell me why he happens to be your guardian...?

None of your business, Annabella said.

"So what's your name?" Annabella stopped staring at the desk and looked up. The speaker was an already handsomely developed blonde girl, rather stunning if one could ignore the awful school uniform, but with sad eyes and hair Annabella thought extraordinarily short.

"Pond Scum," she said with an edge. "At least, that's what Cordelia Up-herself called me, so I suppose you will too..." The group of girls surrounding her suddenly seemed to shrink back. She looked around in surprise.

Uh oh, Basil said.

"What?" Annabella demanded.

"You're in trouble, big trouble," the blonde girl said.

"Why? I haven't done anything. I've only just arrived."

"If Cordelia called you Pond Scum then you're in huge trouble."

"I haven't done anything," Annabella repeated, a touch desperately. "I don't know anything. I don't even know where my stuff is. I don't even know where I'm supposed to sleep. And I haven't done anything."

"Doesn't matter. You're doomed."

It appeared classes were over for the day and that they were to be allowed some free time before whatever the next scheduled event might be. The other girls congregated at the front of the room, whispering among themselves and leaving Annabella isolated.

They're waiting for something, Basil said. *They're jolly well waiting for something.*

What? Annabella said.

No idea, madam mistress, mine. But never fear, jolly old Basil's here. And much to her surprise, Annabella suddenly, for once, found the thought rather comforting, even if he was just a ridiculous figment of her crazy imagination.

The other girls had fallen into an expectant silence and on cue, the classroom door banged open. Cordelia Uppington marched in, pointed at Annabella and motioned imperiously. Annabella hesitated.

Come on, old thing, Basil said encouragingly. *Jolly japes. We're going to have jolly japes. I can tell.*

Annabella rose and walked towards the door. The other girls drew back to give her the widest possible passage. Cordelia motioned again and Annabella went on through to the corridor outside. Immediately, she found herself surrounded and tightly hemmed in by a phalanx of Cordelia's minions, prefects, each armed with a hockey stick. And then, without a word, she was being marched along the passage. The

doorway to every classroom they passed was crowded with heads and girls poured out of each room in succession in their wake, forming a procession.

Annabella was forced down a stairway she hadn't encountered before and then outside and across the service yard. At least it's stopped raining, she thought. They crossed the access drive and then entered a path through another wood, the trees dripping dispiritedly. The track wound on, trending downwards, and finally came to a clearing in the centre of which appeared to be a large pond, except instead of water it seemed to be full of quaking, green jelly.

The procession halted and the prefects drew back from Annabella, leaving her exposed in the centre of the crowd, her back to the water. There was a pause as two of the heftiest girls, all bolster bosoms and billiard table legs, did something involving a deal of heaving and grunting. At last they stood up and Annabella, looking over her shoulder, could see what awaited her.

A long plank stretched out over the slimy surface of the pond. The inshore end passed over a log and was now anchored by the two hippopotami standing on it. The other prefects assembled themselves in an avenue leading towards it, hockey sticks at high port. There was no mistaking the object of the whole exercise.

"Right," Cordelia said stepping forward and addressing Annabella. "There's only one place for pond scum around here, and that's there." She pointed to the morass of green slime. There was an expectant sigh from the crowd.

"I-I don't understand," Annabella said, though she did perfectly well.

"Not so smart-arsed now, then," Cordelia said with satisfaction. "It's very simple. You get on the plank. You walk along the plank. Susan and Miffy here step off the plank. You..." She made an expressive gesture with her hand. "...And end up exactly where you belong. Pond scum swimming in juicy, green pond scum." She gloated for a long moment. "Oh, and one other thing. Swimming in the pond is strictly forbidden. I have to put you on bread and water for two weeks for doing it."

There were giggles and laughter from the crowd, and quite a few catcalls.

"Now, get on the plank," Cordelia ordered.

"Or w-what," Annabella said shakily, despite being determined to show no fear.

"Or we make you," Cordelia said, gesturing to the hockey sticks.

"You wouldn't dare..." Annabella said desperately.

"Of course we dare. This is one of the official initiations to Flintlock College. Good for discipline. Dr Corpse encourages it. Unofficially, you understand." Annabella automatically understood that in the language of the school, Croker would automatically transmute to croak and hence to corpse.

"I'll tell," she said. "I'll tell my guardian. I'll go to the police..."

"No," Cordelia said, supremely confident. "You won't. We'll see to that. Now get on the plank."

So do you have anything to say about this? Annabella said, stalling and clutching at non-existent straws for want of anything better.

Djinn are not so much on ideas, Basil said cheerfully. *Wishes, we do wishes.*

Well, what should I wish for?

Whatever you jolly well like. Annabella groaned aloud with frustration and the crowd thinking it was fear suddenly switched modes to mob and began to hoot and bay.

"Get on the plank," Cordelia repeated, beginning to get impatient.

"No," Annabella said. "I won't." And then, "I'm warning you."

"What...!?" Cordelia guffawed. "You're warning us...!"

What I'd really like, Annabella said plaintively and without the least expectation that it could happen, *is to blow them all away.* It was, she instantly realised, an utterly vain hope and all she could think to do was to repeat:

"I'm warning you for the last time..."

"You're mad...!" Cordelia started to exclaim but her mouth fell open in astonishment as she was cut off by a great, rushing wind. Then she, the prefects and Susan and Miffy were all picked up and hurled backwards into the middle of the pond. There was a mammoth splash and a fountain of pond scum rose high in the air to patter down on those nearest, adding blotches of bilious green to the nauseating mauve of their uniforms.

The deluge seemed to last for an age, then there was silence. Complete silence. Utter silence. The silence of total shock and stunned awe. Cordelia and her cohort struggled to the surface, draped in duckweed and algae. They stared at each other, their expressions ranging from ludicrous to petrified, then one by one they began to paddle towards the shore, rising to their feet and wading as they touched bottom. The more they emerged, the more ridiculous they became. The mess their uniforms had been reduced to was indescribable.

Jolly satisfactory, I'd say, Basil murmured, but Annabella was horrified.

What have you done? she demanded. *They're going to kill me. They have to. They have to kill me. It's the only thing they can do.*

Of course, they're not going to kill you, Basil said comfortably. *They're all jolly well terrified of you.*

And it was true. The crowd of students, every last one in the school Annabella wouldn't mind betting, were starting to murmur amongst themselves and, more tellingly, to edge away from her. Cordelia and the others, once they could wade, were trudging through the muck and the slime to finally come ashore well away from her. And most telling of all, no one, not one single person, was prepared to meet her eyes.

Now, madam mistress shining pearl, Basil said. *You need to jolly well carry this off with aplomb...*

Don't you talk to me... You're dangerous...

I say...

After what you've just done...

I say, Basil repeated, a hurt tone in his voice and turning a faint, frosty bluish colour. *That's beastly unfair...*

You... you're lethal. That's what you are. You're lethal. And you'll be the death of me.

Annabella gave Cordelia, her sodden minions and the crowd a last, lingering, contemptuous survey and turned to the path back through the wood. The way cleared before her as though by magic.

"I believe I warned you never to darken my door again," Dr Croker said in a quiet, dangerous voice. "And yet here you are, still on your very first day, standing before me. What do you have to say about this disgraceful affair?"

Annabella stared at her shoes.

Madam mistress, shining pearl, Basil ventured. *If I may advise...*

You may not.

"Well," Dr Croker demanded. "What exactly happened?"

Annabella raised her eyes and suddenly decided that she was sick of adults, sick of them telling her what to do, sick of being bullied and, most of all, sick of having no control over her own life. And with that decision came calm resolution.

"I think you should ask your head prefect," Annabella said firmly.

"You may be assured that I have. But what she tells me scarcely makes sense."

"Well, I'm very sorry," Annabella said, refusing to be cowed. "But I don't think you can blame me if she and those other girls suddenly decide to jump in the pond. I have no idea what they were doing or why they were doing it."

Damn good, Basil said. *That's the spirit...*

And you, shut up, Annabella retorted.

Dr Croker was staring at her narrowly. "And that's all you have to say?"

"What more can I say?"

"Have a care, Crabtree. That is perilously close to insolence."

"I'm sorry," Annabella said, managing to give quite the opposite impression. "I was taken to the pond. I don't know why. Then those girls jumped in the pond. I don't know why. How could I know? This is my first day. If I've done something wrong, I'm sorry but I don't know what it is."

Dr Croker glared unblinkingly at her for what seemed like hours but Annabella refused to lower her eyes.

"Very well," Dr Croker said at last. "You may go. Find someone to show you to the dining hall. But I entreat you most earnestly: do not have occasion to present yourself to me, ever again."

Chapter 3

Annabella was exhausted, and distraught. She collapsed into the narrow bed she had been allocated in the worst corner of the dormitory and longed to sink into grateful oblivion, but sleep would not come. After the rout at the pond, it was no longer possible to pretend that Basil was just a figment of her imagination, a phase that she would grow out of. Basil was real. He existed. However bizarre, however impossible, there could be no denying the fact of his presence. Finally, she had to accept the situation for what it was, not some aberration of overcharged teenage hormones. The soup, the bucket of water, the inkwell could all just have been accidents, coincidence – maybe she was even a poltergeist without knowing it – but the affray at the pond was absolutely conclusive. She was being stalked – yes, stalked was definitely the word – by a bona-fide djinni.

Basil, she said wearily. This can't go on. And I don't understand, anyway. If you're my slave, why do you do stuff that keeps getting me into trouble?

But the wind, that's what you said you wanted.

It doesn't mean you should do it. You could have just...

What?

I don't know. Something.

I told you, Basil protested. Wishes, we do wishes, not ideas. But only...

But only, what?

If I jolly well approve.

What do you mean, approve? I thought you were supposed to be my slave.

Ah, Basil replied. We're going to jolly well have "the" conversation, are we?

Yes, we are, Annabella said firmly. And I want proper answers. No slippery-dippery sliding away.

Ah, Basil said again, rather shiftily Annabella thought. There was a pause.

Article 1, paragraph 1, clause 1, part 1 of the CODE, he said at last. Fundamental rule. Clearly specified. No wriggling. No jolly well getting out of it. I am indeed your slave, but I am slave to your best interests.

Annabella very nearly said a very rude word.

And who decides what my best interests might be? she demanded heatedly.

Me, of course, Basil said with satisfaction. You're in no position to decide anything; just ask jolly old Great-uncle Warwick.

I was afraid you'd say that, Annabella said, and then: This really can't go on. I can't stand it.

So hurtful, Basil said, and indeed he did almost sound hurt. Are you seriously telling me that you'd rather I'd let them make you walk the jolly old plank? And Annabella had to admit that this was one of Basil's interventions for which she was more than grateful. Even so, she didn't know which had been more alarming: the threat of the pond or Basil's method of preventing it.

It's just not right, she said. It's my life and I don't want you living it with me, or for me if it comes to that.

This time Basil was definitely piqued.

Madam mistress, mine, does it ever jolly well occur to you that I, myself, might not wish to be trailing around after some beastly, snotty-nose schoolgirl...?

Annabella let the insult pass and seized the moment.

So do something about it. You said there was a way we could be separated... Basil made no reply.

You did, she pressed. I distinctly remember. There was a long, long silence. Annabella, this time, nearly did fall asleep, but roused herself with a jerk. *Well?*

Basil spoke at last.

And I distinctly remember saying it was too damn dangerous, that there was very little chance of either of us surviving. And what's so terrible? Most people would be jolly pleased to have a magical slave at their beck and call.

But that's just it – amongst other things. You're not at my beck and call. You do more or less as you please.

Well, excuse me! Basil snapped. *So sorry humble slave not up to standards of madam mistress, shining pearl.*

Annabella drew a deep breath. Something was nagging at the back of her mind, something she had dismissed in the belief that Basil had to be merely an illusion. Now, however, now that he had categorically proved his existence, it came back to her.

Basil, she said. Basil, what are you doing here?

W-what? Yes, Annabella thought. There had been a definite hesitation.

I said what are you doing here?

I jolly well don't understand...

Yes you do, Annabella insisted. You understand perfectly. My finding you was no accident. You led me there, to the cabinet, to your jar... Didn't you? Deliberately...

Certainly not...

Liar! Either you tell me what you're doing here, stalking me, or tell me how to get rid of you...

I jolly well resent that. I am not stalking you.

Then tell me how to get rid of you.

There was a long, sulky silence.

Basil... Basil, I order you to tell me how we can end this. And don't tell me it's not in my best interests. It absolutely is.

There was another long silence, but of an altogether different quality.

You really don't want me? Basil said at last, his voice subdued.

No, Annabella said. I don't.

I thought we were starting to get on rather well...

Basil...! Tell me.

It's a long story, a jolly long story...

So the quicker you begin, the sooner I can go to sleep. And whilst you're at it, she added, if you weren't stalking me, which I don't believe for a moment, you'd better tell me what you were doing imprisoned on a mountaintop in a glass jar in the bottom of the dirty old cabinet buried in an attic in a horrible old house. There was another long pause. Well?

I wasn't actually imprisoned, Basil said at last. Not at first. I was jolly well hiding. Hiding? From what? And you were imprisoned. You couldn't get out. I had to let you out.

So how is it you're at the mercy of Great-uncle Warwick? Basil countered.

Uh uh, Annabella said. No deal. None of your business. Who were you hiding from...? Well...?

My wife, Basil said reluctantly.

Your wife!

Or more exactly, her beastly father.

What did you do to your wife?

None of your bally business.

What did you do to your wife? Annabella insisted.

There was someone else...

And...?

She caught us...

I don't believe a word of this, Annabella said. Djinnis don't have wives...

The plural is djinn, I told you. And of course we have wives. How do you jolly well think there get to be little djinn? Except she isn't a djinniya, she's an 'ifrita and her father is one of the worst 'ifrit in the whole of Araby, Persia and Asia beyond.

What's an 'ifrit?

One of the Dark djinn, and this one is very large, very powerful and very evil.

So why on earth did you ever marry his daughter?

I was in love, Basil said shortly.

So much in love, Annabella said primly, that you went off with somebody else...

Well aren't you the goody-two-shoes? Basil was apparently extremely put out.

Sorry, Annabella said, not at all repentant. Except that doesn't explain what you were doing in the bottom of that cabinet in a glass jar. Or why you lured me there...

I told you, Basil said. I was hiding.

Hiding?

I took my home and shifted it to a different time so they wouldn't be able to find me. Then someone put that horrid jar over the top of me to "protect such an interesting model" and I was trapped... Shunted around from pillar to post, year after year, till I was finally banished to the jolly old attic...

You are the biggest liar, Annabella interrupted but before she could launch a further attack, there came a faint shuffling sound. She lifted her head slightly to see a shadow coming towards her. It was the blonde girl from the classroom, the one with a buzz cut. She was holding her finger to her lips.

"Shsh," she whispered, sitting down on Annabella's bed and putting her head close.

"What?" Annabella whispered, not the least bit disposed to be friendly.

"I'm here to warn you. They'll be coming for you soon."

"Who?" Annabella said after a moment, though she knew very well. "Why?"

"After what you did at the pond... They can't let you get away with it. How *did* you do that?"

"What are they going to do?" Annabella demanded, her voice starting to rise.

"Shsh," the other girl said again. "They'll shave your head."

"They wouldn't dare!"

Of course they jolly well would, Basil said.

"They did it to me. That's why my hair is so short," the girl said.

"Why are you warning me?" Annabella said.

"I hate them, I hate them... What you did at the pond was so great..."

"What's your name?"

"V," the other girl whispered. "Vivienne. I know who you are. Annabelle..."

"Annabella!" Annabella said with automatic vexation.

"...Annabella. Everybody knows now. I've got to go. If they catch me..."

She was too late. Unnoticed by the two girls, their heads down, shadows had been creeping the length of the dormitory. A torch beam suddenly flared, dazzling them, spearing them.

"How sweet," a voice said. Annabella was quite certain it could only be Cordelia Uppington, though she sounded oddly muffled.

Basil, she said reproachfully. *You could have said something.*

And what thanks would I have had, might I jolly well ask?

"Bring them both," Cordelia was saying. "Our little V obviously needs to be taught another lesson..."

"No! Please! Please...!" Vivienne cried, but both she and Annabella were seized by many hands. Annabella managed to stamp on somebody's foot, bringing a cry of pain, and kneed someone else in the unmentionables to be rewarded with a squeal, but there were too many and they were too strong for her. In seconds, both girls had been blindfolded and frogmarched to the door. It was all rather frightening, Annabella thought, and Vivienne was clearly terrified. She was whimpering and had made no attempt to struggle. Annabella had the grace to wonder whether she would be quite so sanguine without Basil up her sleeve, so to speak, and then she began to wonder why Basil had failed to intervene.

Are you proposing to do something about this? Annabella challenged as she was forced stumbling along the corridor. *And if so, when, might I ask?*

But madam mistress, shining pearl, I have been given to understand – beastly rudely I might say – that you jolly well want nothing whatsoever to do with me ever again.

Basil!

You've made it very clear – abso-jolly-lutely crystal – that I'm djinni non grata, and never mind my feelings.

Basil!

So you do want my help? There was a pause as Annabella tried to collect her thoughts while being pushed and pulled as they hurried her along.

Uh uh, she said. Even though she was speaking telepathically, she still sounded breathless. That's blackmail. And cheap. You ought to be ashamed.

Oh, I am, I am.

Well you might be a djinni, Annabella said crossly, but you're certainly no gentleman, taking advantage like this.

Unfair! Who's trying to have their cake and jolly well eat it too, might I ask? You don't want me, except when it suits you.

I don't want you at all, ever! Annabella shouted inside her head. *I'll deal with this myself.*

They were taken to an old storeroom, deep in the basement. It was all but soundproof and in any case far from any ears that might be disposed to interfere. There were two hard chairs arranged under a glaring bulb. The two girls were thrust inside and made to sit while they were lashed to the chairs with lengths of rope. Then the blindfolds were removed.

Oh, puh-leese! Basil said delightedly when the two could see. *The bally Coo Clucky Clan... Just look. All in their nighties and jimjams and dressing gowns with hoods over their heads.*

It was true. The group confronting the two prisoners were all masked with pillowcases, pierced through with rough eye-holes, which explained the muffled voices. And indeed, Annabella thought, the effect might have been quite frightening without Basil's derision. Certainly, Vivienne beside her was shaking uncontrollably.

One of the bigger girls stepped forward, obviously Cordelia.

"Court is in session," she said. "You, Annabelle Crabtree..."

"Annabella!" Annabella exclaimed furiously. "And stop being ridiculous..."

"Silence," Cordelia thundered. "The prisoner will remain silent."

"You must be joking," Annabella said, suddenly genuinely amused. "Do you have any idea of how stupid you actually look?"

"Gag her!" Cordelia ordered. There was a brief struggle as Annabella tried to resist but moments later somebody's none-too-clean handkerchief had been thrust into her mouth and tightly tied.

Still don't want my help, then? Basil inquired delicately.

Leave me alone, Annabella said stoutly. I'm handling it.

Looks jolly like it...

"So," Cordelia said to her minions at large. "The prisoners stand accused of gross disrespect, disloyalty to the school and downright cheek. How do you find?"

"Guilty!" the hooded girls chorused with relish.

"The mandatory punishment is compulsory balding forthwith." Vivienne gave a heartbroken little cry.

"But it's only just starting to grow back," she pleaded. "Not again. Please. Please..." But her words were ignored in the bustle of activity. Somebody produced a set of electric clippers, somebody else an electric razor and an extension cord.

Well, Basil said. Still handling it on your own then? Happy to see those handsome chestnut curls of yours falling to the floor?

Go away! Annabella said grimly. I will not be blackmailed.

Commendable, Basil said mockingly. Damned commendable. And here was I jolly well thinking that principle was a thing of the past. Jolly well lost on the young.

Go away! Annabella repeated. And stop gloating.

We're abso-jolly-lutely certain, are we? Totally sure?

Leave me alone! I don't want you. I never wanted you. I never will want you.

And that's your last word?

Y-ee-ss! How many times do I have to say it?

The lynch mob had finally sorted itself out and Cordelia came forward, wielding the clippers tauntingly. She switched them on and a loud buzzing filled the room.

"The new one first, I think," she said. "Hold her still. We wouldn't want her to lose an ear, now would we?"

"Oh, I don't know," somebody said. "I wouldn't mind..." It was the girl Annabella had kneed where it hurts most.

"Hear that?" Cordelia said directly to Annabella. "Don't move, if you know what's good for you..."

It was as though her last words were some sort of trigger, which had she but known it, indeed they were.

Cordelia made to take another step forward and on the instant, froze, quite unable to move, her foot suspended in mid air. At the same time, it was clear that none of the other girls could move either. Annabella's bonds fell away. She reached up to untie the hated handkerchief and then set to work on the rope holding Vivienne. After a moment, that too fell away. Vivienne herself seemed to be in a state of shock.

Why did you do that? Annabella demanded. What did you do?

I froze them. That's what she wished for. You heard her. Don't move, she said.

You mean, you do other people's wishes too?

When convenient, and this was jolly convenient...

How does freezing work? Annabella asked, curious despite herself.

Line of sight, Basil said. I can freeze people if I can jolly well see their eyes.

But I told you, I don't want your help. I told you, I won't be blackmailed, Annabella protested, returning to the main point at issue.

And I'm not bally well blackmailing you, Basil said rather shortly. I tried that and it didn't work.

So why are you helping?

You forget, madam mistress, mine. Unfortunately, damned unfortunately I am slave to your best interests, whether you like it or not, whether I like it or not. And having your head shaved is not in your best interests. Definitely, categorically not.

So what now? Annabella asked, rather less aggressively.

Entirely up to you, I would have jolly well thought.

Vivienne seemed to be recovering. She turned to Annabella wonderingly.

"Are you a witch, or something?" she asked in a whisper.

See? Annabella said waspishly to Basil. *I told you that's what they'd say...*

"No," she said aloud. "Of course not."

"Then how did you do that? How could you do that?"

"Never mind that. The question is what do we do with this lot?"

"But what's wrong with them? Why are they like this? How long will it last?"

"As long as I..." Annabella started to say and then changed her mind. "A while. Long enough."

"Long enough? What do you mean?"

"I don't know about you," Annabella said, her determination firming as she went on. "But I'm not staying here, not at Flintlock College. Apart from anything else, this lot will probably kill me if they ever catch me again. So I'm going to make sure they don't. I'm going to make sure Dr Corpse can't keep me. You all tell me you have to be expelled to be sent here in the first place. Well, I'm going to make Flintlock College expel me so they can never send me back."

"What are you going to do?" Vivienne asked.

"Watch. No. You should go. Then you can't be blamed."

"They'll blame me anyway. Of course, they will. I can't stay either. There's no way I can stay. So let me help. Please. I owe them. Oh, how I owe them."

Annabella nodded.

Can you get me out of here? she suddenly thought to ask Basil. *Without blackmailing me?*

Of course, I jolly well can, he said.

Without blackmailing me? she insisted.

Blackmail is such an ugly word...

But so appropriate...

I promise, Basil said at last though so reluctantly that Annabella still had doubts. However, it really wasn't the time to pursue it.

One by one, Annabella removed the pillowcase hoods and suddenly it was clear that while immobilised, nevertheless all the girls were still fully aware of what was happening. Bulging, rolling eyes followed Annabella about the room. She chuckled. It made things even better. She went back to Cordelia and took the clippers from her unresisting fingers. They were still buzzing.

"What a pity you couldn't bear just to leave me alone," she said. Cordelia's eyes stared back at her, begging, pleading, but remorselessly Annabella went to work,

standing on an old box to make it easier, except that it wasn't so much balding as a group improvement program, she thought austerely.

"A mirror," Annabella said. "V, do you think you could find a mirror? I do so want to see their reactions." Vivienne chuckled and slipped out of the room, leaving Annabella to work on, her imagination running riot.

Annabella stepped back from the last one, brushed away some stray locks and surveyed her handiwork. She made the mistake of glancing at Vivienne and the two could restrain themselves no longer. They both went pop, bursting into hysterics and clutching at each other in glee. The giggling fit went on for a long time until at last Annabella managed to pull herself together. She took the mirror Vivienne had brought and held it up so Cordelia could see herself, could gaze her fill at the apparition staring back at her. At first, Annabella thought Cordelia's eyes would burst, then they began to flood with tears for where once there had been a tawny mane, of which Cordelia had been inordinately vain, now rose a naked dome surrounded by a bedraggled fringe drooping down towards her shoulders like some bizarre monk's tonsure. The effect was excruciating.

Annabella had, in fact, excelled herself, gaining inspiration as she worked. The rest of the group sported crosses and polka dots, zigzags and swastikas, and a floppy mohawk or two for variety, but no one looked quite as horrible as Cordelia. As far as revenge went, it was about as complete as it was possible to be.

"Well, you're right about one thing," Vivienne said at last. "We certainly can't stay at Flintlock College."

"No," Annabella agreed. "But then that was the whole point... We need to plan our getaway."

"What are you going to do?"

"More to the point, what are we going to do with you? Probably the best thing is to stash you in Dr Corpse's office till the morning, and then you just ride it out until she makes your parents come and collect you."

"I don't have any parents," Vivienne said.

"Don't you?" Annabella said, surprised. "Nor do I, at least I don't think I do."

"So what are you going to do?"

"I don't really know..."

What am I going to do? she asked Basil.

Search me, Basil said.

Well, thank you very much. So helpful...

"Well..." Vivienne pressed.

"I suppose I'll have to go back to my great uncle's place, at least to start with."

"Okay, so I can come too, can't I?"

This hadn't been part of what passed for Annabella's thinking at all, but what could she say? She shrugged her shoulders.

"I suppose so," she said. "But things are going very crazy very quickly. So the first thing we have to do is get dressed..."

And exactly how are you proposing to get us out of here? she added to Basil.

However you jolly well like. Wishes, remember... Annabella groaned aloud with frustration, bringing a curious look from Vivienne, and was about to stamp her foot when all at once she grinned.

The lobby, she said. *Do you remember what's in the lobby?*

Abso-jolly-lutely, Basil said comfortably.

Chapter 4

They crept back to the dormitory, changed and gathered the few personal things they needed. The room was quiet, all the girls apparently asleep, and nobody challenged them. Then they slipped back to the basement. Cordelia and co. were still there, still frozen, still mortified at the humiliations wreaked upon them.

"What are we going to do now?" Vivienne asked. "What's the plan?"

"Maximum trouble," Annabella replied. "We have to make sure we never get sent back here."

You understand what I want you to do? she added to Basil.

Madam mistress, shining pearl... Basil said reproachfully.

"And...?" Vivienne said.

"Just be ready to run for your life."

"Literally?"

"Well, not literally perhaps. But don't get caught. It won't be pretty if you do."

She surveyed her victims one last time, suppressing the horrified giggles that threatened to overwhelm her anew. They really did look absolutely ghastly.

"So, Cordelia," she said. "I know you can hear me and I know that the one thing in the world you really want to do right now is beat me to death with your hockey stick. Well, fair's fair. I'm going to give you the chance. In a minute or two, I'm going to unfreeze you all and then it's up to you to catch us if you can."

Annabella noted with satisfaction that Cordelia's eyes were suddenly glinting and held something of the look of a famished beast. She moved to the door of the basement and motioned Vivienne through in front of her.

"Ready?" she asked. Vivienne nodded. *Then let them go*, she told Basil.

It seemed to take an age for Cordelia and the others to come to life. At last, Cordelia let her foot, which had been suspended in mid air all this time, drop to the floor. She lifted the other foot experimentally and then all at once, she was charging at them.

"Run!" Annabella shouted and the two of them took off down the corridor with the pack of prefects in hot pursuit.

At first it seemed, much to Vivienne's alarm, that Annabella had sadly miscalculated. The girls behind, inspired by fury at the abominations wrought upon them and even hampered, as they were, by their nightclothes and slippers, were gaining appreciably. Nobody noticed the wisp of glowing smoke drifting along near the ceiling, and then, with shocking suddenness, one by one, as the pursuing pack passed beneath, the fire sprinklers began to spout torrents. At the same time, the clangour of one fire alarm after another began to scream at the night until the whole building was vibrating with noise. Annabella shuddered as she ran. She found anything that even hinted at uncontrolled fire, wildfire, deeply disturbing.

The prefects were all drenched in seconds and began to fall behind. However, they held grimly on, splashing and squelching, Cordelia's gleaming pate a shining beacon

before them. Down the corridor they pounded, ignoring the deluge as best they could, and then up the stairs at the end. Distantly they glimpsed their quarry turning into the main corridor which led to the school's ostentatious entrance lobby and, incidentally, Dr Croker's office. Lights were coming on in all the dormitories and staff quarters and people were beginning to appear, confused, bewildered, on the edge of panic. The fire alarms kept shrieking on and on, insistent, strident, demanding, beating at them, pulverising them.

Annabella and Vivienne hurtled up some stairs and round a corner where the lobby opened before them. It soared two stories high with a first floor gallery branching off from the sweeping staircase. The hall had polished parquet flooring and was elegantly empty apart from a pseudo-antique occasional table with a striking flower arrangement, set on a large and ostentatious Persian rug.

"We need the rug," Annabella gasped. "Push it off." She had vaguely noted the rug's existence on the way to Dr Croker's office and was thankful that she had remembered correctly.

The two girls flung themselves at the table and began to heave and struggle. The outsize vase toppled and went rolling across the floor, trailing gladioli and rather slimy water.

"Crabtree!" an awful voice rang out, a voice they knew, a voice that managed to defeat even the continuing shriek of the fire alarms. "Walker! What do you think you're doing?"

"Don't stop," Annabella said, suddenly feeling rather desperate. "We have to have the rug." Vivienne looked at her as though she'd suddenly gone mad and hesitated. "Don't stop," Annabella said again, and then without thinking: "Where's that dratted djinni? Never around when he's needed."

"What!?" Vivienne exclaimed, her eyes going round.

"Crabtree! Whatever it is you're doing, stop right now." The voice was nearer, descending. Dr Croker was evidently on her way down the staircase and Annabella spared time to glance in her direction and then wished she hadn't. The headmistress was in curlers and wearing the sort of lilac chenille dressing-gown best burnt at midnight on Midsummer's eve with blood oaths and fearsome incantations, lest it haunt female kind for ever.

The wisp of smoke guarding their rear came shooting towards them and instantly the table was so light that it seemed to leap clear of the rug of its own accord. There was a growing commotion coming from the corridor and suddenly Cordelia and her cohort burst up the steps and into the open. Dr Croker turned to admonish them but stood gaping open-mouthed, as well she might. The sight that confronted her was indescribable: eight sodden girls in disgraceful nightwear, panting and heaving, each with her hair impossibly butchered. They stood there dripping, the light of battle slowly fading from their eyes as they realised the true dimensions of the catastrophe in which they found themselves.

You two get on the jolly rug, Basil instructed Annabella. And sit down in the middle.

Annabella did exactly as she was told, manhandling Vivienne to do the same. They were just in time. Dr Croker finally recovered from the shock of being confronted by Cordelia, not to mention the others, and turned about.

Nobody ever believed what happened next. Each invented a different rationalisation to explain it away: ...weird hallucination...stupid dream...it must have been the cauliflower cheese... But the fact remained. The double doors of the main entrance swung ponderously open of their own accord and the rug, bearing its two passengers, rose to about waist height and flew smoothly off into the night.

Vivienne, her hands clutching at the fabric beneath her, turned to Annabella, her eyes wide with astonishment.

"Magic carpet," Annabella said.

"I don't believe you," Vivienne said automatically.

"Whatever," Annabella retorted. "But this is a carpet. You're sitting on it. And if it isn't flying, I don't know what you'd call it." She looked back and gasped. Dr Croker, lilac chenille ballooning about her, was in hot pursuit, followed by all the prefects and a motley pack of students and staff, except one teacher, cleverer than the others, who had thought to run to the phone.

Can't you make this thing go a bit faster? Annabella demanded. *I thought they were supposed to go whoosh.*

Well, excuse me, Basil said crossly. *If you jolly well think you can do any better, you're most welcome to try. Just because you're used to beastly cars and jets and things...*

The carpet was sweeping down the school's driveway at about the pace of a cantering horse and there was no denying their progress was distinctly stately. Annabella looked back again and Vivienne, catching her glance, did the same.

"They're gaining," she cried anxiously.

Come on, Basil. They'll catch us. Annabella urged. *And they'll have time to warn the jailer.* She was right. As they came round the last bend they saw a portly figure in a nightshirt, tails flapping, rush out from the gatehouse to stand four square in the centre of the pool of light cast by the gate lamps. He was holding something long, thin and dark across his chest.

"He's got a gun," Vivienne screeched. "We have to stop, or turn back, or something."

"We can't," Annabella said impatiently. She gestured to the bizarre posse galloping along behind them. "They'll catch us."

"But what if he shoots...?"

And indeed, as Vivienne spoke, the porter began to shout at them:

"Halt or I fire..."

"He wouldn't dare, would he?" Vivienne asked worriedly.

"Don't fuss," Annabella said rather more calmly than she felt. "It'll all be taken care of..." *Won't it?* she added privately for Basil's benefit.

Madam mistress, shining pearl...! Basil said reproachfully. *If that is your wish...*

And as the girls watched, the barrel of the porter's shotgun tied itself into a knot and the carpet rose smoothly to glide over his head and then the barred gates and on to freedom.

"A djinni?" Vivienne said incredulously. "A djinni?" she repeated. The two girls, seated cross-legged in the middle of the carpet, were flying across rolling farmland, following the highway a little to their left. A late moon had risen, the air was quite mild, and all things considered flying along at this leisurely pace was really rather pleasant.

"Basil," Annabella said. "I think it's time you introduced yourself." She found rather to her surprise that she was speaking with proprietorial pride.

Jolly unwise, don't you think? Basil said reluctantly.

She'll never believe any of this otherwise, and it'll probably send her mad trying to make sense of it if you don't. You want that on your conscience? Assuming, that is, you actually do have a conscience...

What a beastly, rotten thing to say!

So introduce yourself...

The wisp of smoke that had been sitting unnoticed on Annabella's shoulder slowly grew thicker until it seemed almost solid and danced round in front of them.

"Vivienne," Annabella said formally. "Let me present Basil al Yazid, djinni extraordinaire and my personal slave."

"You are joking... You must be joking... Aren't you?" Vivienne said. "That's impossible..."

"No," Basil said, bowing. "She is not joking. I jolly well wish she were, but I'm definitely a djinni and I'm definitely her slave."

"Who said that?" Vivienne said wonderingly. Annabella gestured at the smoke in front of them.

"I thought that was just a bit of cloud or something," Vivienne said. "You're not serious? That's him?"

"That's him," Annabella said.

"That's me," Basil confirmed. "Jolly old me."

"I still don't understand," Vivienne said. They were just passing a small town and Annabella, now weary with explanation as much as the events of the night, calculated they were well over halfway to Great-uncle Warwick's. "I don't understand at all," Vivienne went on. "This djinni..."

"Basil," Annabella said helpfully.

"...Says he's your slave for the rest of your days, and he can do all sorts of magic and stuff, and you want to get rid of him...?"

"Absolutely. You try having a quick whizz with him around all the time..."

I jolly well resent that. Haven't I always been a perfect gentleman?

"You're nuts," Vivienne said, and then: "I say, Basil, you wouldn't like to be my slave? Do a transfer or something? Like in football..."

"If only," Basil said. "I can see you're a jolly sight more sympathetic than madam mistress, shining pearl. But unfortunately, jolly unfortunately, it's jolly just not possible."

They proceeded in silence for a long time after that, until suddenly Vivienne spoke again.

"I am dreaming, aren't I Annabella? Tell me I'm dreaming." But Annabella made no reply. There was nothing to say.

Dawn broke and they set down in a little wood for a comfort stop – Basil, very pointedly making it plain that he had his smoky back to them – and to stretch their legs. Also, Annabella had decided she didn't want to get to Great-uncle Warwick's too soon. The earlier in the morning they arrived, the more uncertain his temper was likely to be and the closer they got, the more Annabella was dreading the encounter. How she would be received and what she could say, she had no idea. She was certain of only one thing: that a great deal of trouble was about to descend upon her. Still, unpleasant as it would doubtless prove it was exactly what she had so blithely planned to bring about only a few short hours before.

Great-uncle Warwick was on the phone. They could hear him shouting in his study as Mrs Milliken ushered them through the front door, disapproval writ large in every bone of her body. She marched them across the hall, knocked at the study door, half open as it was, and pushed them inside.

Great-uncle Warwick was standing, staring out the window, the phone clutched in his hand as though he would like to strangle it. He turned and glowered at them. They could hear the sound of an outraged voice coming from the receiver but not what was being said. Finally he spoke.

"Very well!" he snapped and slammed the phone down. He then proceeded to inspect each girl from top to toe, slowly and with extreme disfavour, a general confronted with a pair of disgraced privates.

"Assault and battery!" he suddenly roared.

"Grievous bodily harm!

"Malicious damage!

"False alarms involving three fire brigades...!

"Destruction of a licensed firearm...!

"And last but certainly not least, theft of an antique and extremely valuable Persian rug! Have I missed anything?"

"I don't believe so," Annabella said, greatly daring.

"Do not... Do not under any circumstances be impertinent with me, Miss," Great-uncle Warwick fairly shrieked. He gasped and breathed heavily for some little time, clutching at his chest.

"And all this in less than 24 hours," he added at last, wonderingly. There was another long pause.

"Miss Walker," he said eventually, addressing Vivienne and biting off each word as though it were lethally poisonous and needed to be spat out on the instant lest it slay him on the spot. "Dr Croker has spoken with a representative of the department whom I will advise to collect you here, then to visit upon you the fate you so richly deserve. In the meantime, you will wait with Annabella in her room. Neither of you will leave it for any reason under any circumstances. Annabella! I will deal with you in due course. You may depend upon it that it will not be pleasant. You may depend upon it that it will be extremely unpleasant, punishment justly fitting your disgraceful crimes. Now get out of my sight."

Well, it might have been worse, Annabella thought, and probably would be but at least part of the plan had succeeded. It was clear that she would never be required to return to Flintlock College. And that was cause for considerable celebration, she decided, as she led Vivienne up to her bedroom, which as it happened was only one floor beneath the attic. For a moment she wondered that no one had thought to question how they had managed to travel here from Flintlock College so expeditiously, and then dismissed it. In her experience, adults could be relied upon to overlook the obvious when dealing with the young.

"You think there's any chance of any breakfast?" Vivienne asked tentatively. She had settled herself on Annabella's bed and was looking about, curiously. There was a small, framed photograph on the bedside table.

"Are those your parents?" she added, without waiting for an answer.

"I'm not asking Mrs Milliken for anything," Annabella said. "But I'm sure Basil can provide."

"Well," Vivienne insisted. "Are those your parents?"

"What happened to yours?" Annabella countered.

"The usual," Vivienne said dismissively. "Just a car crash. I was very small. I don't remember them. The really sad part is that I wasn't in the car with them."

Annabella was shocked.

"How can you say that?"

"Do you like your life so much?"

"What do you want to eat?" Annabella said, to gain time. "How about a hamburger with the lot? Milkshake? Chocolate?" Vivienne nodded and nodded again. "...Basil, would you be so kind?"

"Well I must say," Basil remarked from somewhere up near the ceiling. "For someone who can't wait to jolly well get rid of me, you do seem to be making full use of my services all of a sudden."

"Just my luck," Annabella snapped. "I had to get a slave with a mouth..."

"Don't you think," Vivienne interrupted, "that we should say thank you to Basil for getting us out of that horrible school?" Annabella sighed and looked up.

"I suppose," she said grudgingly. "Thank you, Basil. But don't think this changes anything."

"As if I jolly well could," Basil said.

"You are mad, you know," Vivienne said slowly. "I can't imagine why you don't want to keep him." She watched approvingly as a table materialised with a spotless white, damask tablecloth, two chairs, stiff linen napkins and finally plates, covered with silver warmers.

"Now that," she said, "is what I call room service." She sat down, removed a cover and the delicious aroma of hamburger wafted about them. "French fries?" she asked Basil hopefully. "I think Annabella forgot to order them." A moment later, two side orders of chips and two huge milkshakes also materialised.

Annabella gave up trying to resist temptation and sat herself down. There was a noisy silence as the two girls wolfed down the food.

"Now I know..." Vivienne said at last, dabbing at her chin with the napkin.

"Know what?" Annabella said. She found that suddenly she was feeling much better. Nothing like comfort food to fortify one against the vicissitudes of outrageous fortune.

"Why you don't want to keep Basil." Annabella raised an inquiring eyebrow. "You're frightened of getting fat." Annabella laughed.

"If only it were that simple..."

"And don't think I haven't noticed..."

"What?"

"That you haven't told me about your parents," Vivienne said.

"She jolly well won't tell me, either," Basil observed. "Have we finished, ladies?" The two girls retreated to the bed and a moment later table, chairs and the detritus of their meal had all vanished. There was a lingering smell of onion but a moment later, the window opened of its own accord and for a second or two there was a brisk gale as Basil changed the air.

"So what were you doing at Flintlock College?" Annabella asked. "What were you expelled for to get there?"

Vivienne's pretty face clouded.

"They bully me," she said. "I don't know why. Everywhere I go, they bully me. I must be a natural victim, or something. So I snapped, and I stabbed a girl in the leg with a pair of scissors. They wanted to take me to court and send me to reform school, but somebody pulled some strings and I ended up at Flintlock College. As if that place isn't just as bad."

"And they bullied you there?"

"Of course they did," Vivienne said angrily. "That Cordelia is vicious. She deserved everything you did to her ten times over. And the others are just as bad." There was a long silence as both girls relived events of the immediate past.

"What are we going to do now?" Vivienne said eventually. Her voice was suddenly very small, as though she were beginning to realise exactly how difficult the future had become.

"I don't know about you," Annabella said. "But Basil and I are going to do whatever has to be done to unslave him. Basil..." she added expectantly. There was

another long silence and Basil seemed to have vanished. There was no wispy presence to be seen anywhere.

"Basil? Annabella said at last. "Basil! Show yourself. I order you to."

Slowly, the skinniest possible tendril made itself apparent in the furthest possible corner.

"We're going to have to do this, Basil," Annabella said firmly. "I'm not going to live my life with you hanging about me 24/7. I'm just not." There was another long silence. "So tell me what we have to do?"

"No," Basil said bluntly.

"I order you to."

"It's not in your best interests – abso-jolly-lutely not – therefore, I can't tell you."

"Can't or won't?"

"Jolly well both." Basil drifted over to the window and for a moment was struck rigid. Far down the valley, an official-looking black car was nosing its way along the narrow lane towards them. And for all the world, it appeared as though it was being followed by a wayward bit of purple cumulo-nimbus that somehow had detached itself from a thunderstorm, which, of course, was plainly impossible.

"The Taklamakan Desert," Basil said suddenly.

"What about it?" Annabella said.

"Where on earth is that?" Vivienne said simultaneously.

"Central Asia," Basil said. "We have to go there."

"Oh... Well... That shouldn't be too hard," Annabella said sarcastically. "Just a hop, step and a jump... And you've changed your tune all of a sudden."

"A long time ago..." Basil added. The two girls looked at each other, eyebrows very raised.

"And how, exactly, would you suggest we do that?" Annabella demanded.

"And can I come?" Vivienne said.

"What!?" Annabella and Basil exclaimed simultaneously.

"You can't leave me behind. You just can't," Vivienne said.

"What do you mean?" Annabella asked.

"You heard your great uncle, or whatever he is. The department is coming to get me and this time I will be sent to reform school, not another foster family..."

"But you can't just run away... That is what you're thinking?"

"Why not?" Vivienne demanded. "Nobody cares about me. I'm just a file and a trust account – my parents' legacy... If I disappear, they'll be thankful and forget about me in a month."

"But you can't just run away..." Annabella repeated.

"I have before. I keep trying but every time they catch me and they just send me to new foster parents or a new school. I hate them all. I tried to get away from the college but they caught me climbing the wall. That's when they balded me... Besides if you go to this desert place, aren't you running away?"

Annabella stopped what she was going to say, her mouth hanging open rather inelegantly. If you came right down to it, she would be running away too, running away with a purpose perhaps, but still running away. And what a relief it would be. So how much more would it mean to Vivienne? On the other hand, determined as she was to terminate the bond with Basil, did she really want Vivienne tagging along? What did she really know about her? She seemed nice enough but was she the right companion for what promised to be an extremely difficult journey? Did she want a companion at all?

Not on, Basil said, as though echoing her thoughts. *Jolly well not on. Can't be done.*

It can be if I say so, Annabella snapped back. *And how do we get to... a long time ago, anyway? I don't believe that can be done...*

Of course, it can jolly well be done, Basil snapped in his turn. *How do you jolly well think I got here in the first place?*

Annabella made to speak but stopped, holding up hand for silence. There was the sound of wheels crunching on gravel. The two girls looked at each other and rushed for the window. A large black car was pulling up the drive to stop at the front door. A man and a woman got out, both formally dressed. Unnoticed, a peculiar cloud was hovering in the background.

"They're from the department," Vivienne said, a note of panic in her voice. "Don't let them take me. Please don't let them take me. I don't know what I'll do if I have to go with them." She looked beseechingly at Annabella. "Please," she implored. "Please..."

Annabella hesitated and then all at once made up her mind. When you came right down to it, she had no more desire to face the music than Vivienne.

"Basil, how do we get to...a long time ago?"

I say! We are not taking your beastly friend!

How dare you call her beastly? Annabella retorted. *And we are taking her. So get a move on and do whatever you have to do.*

There was a long sulky silence.

Basil!

Very well, madam mistress, shining pearl. But be it on your own shining, jolly head. We have to go to my tower.

"Come on," Annabella said to Vivienne. "We have to go up to the attic. Quickly. Quietly."

She eased open her bedroom door and peered out. She could hear the sound of voices down below in the hall. She motioned Vivienne to follow and crept across the landing to the attic stairs. She missed the third step which she knew creaked abominably. She pointed to it and held a finger to her lips. Vivienne nodded and also avoided it.

Basil's mountaintop was just as they had left it in the bottom of the old cabinet, with the great, glass jar still sitting on the floor beside it, filthy except where

Annabella had tried to clean it. Vivienne's eyes widened as she realised what she was looking at.

"What now?" Annabella said.

"Touch it," Basil said simply. "Both of you, jolly well together."

Annabella and Vivienne looked at each other and then on the unspoken count of three, both reached out and put a tentative finger on the model. Instantaneously they found themselves standing on the rough, gritty soil of the track to the summit, staring up at the tower silhouetted against the back of the cabinet. As they gaped at each other, working out that they had been reduced in size until they were relative to the mountain top, the cabinet about them began to whirl and dissolved into a blur. They found it unbearable to watch and instinctively closed their eyes.

"All right," Basil said at last. "You can open them again. We're here."

Annabella cautiously cracked an eyelid. She was still gazing at the tower, but now it was silhouetted against a piercing blue sky.

"Where is here?" She asked, staring about at a rocky, barren landscape, gashed with tangled ravines and dotted with peaks similar to Basil's. "And when is here?"

"A long time ago," Basil said. "Just as I jolly well told you."

"Time travel? Time travel's impossible," Annabella stated dogmatically.

"Only because you lot jolly well insist on jolly well thinking that time is linear," Basil snapped. "And you can jolly well take it from me that it's jolly well not."

"Oh," Annabella said, quite failing to understand but suddenly unwilling to show it. "Well, where are we then?" she added to cover her confusion.

"In the desert."

"Which desert?"

"The Sinai..."

"Because...?"

"Because it's where I jolly well live."

"Because...?"

"Because I jolly well like peace and quiet. The jolly old rels, you know... Aunt Jamina," he added darkly. "But fat chance of any peace and quiet with you here..."

"What exactly are we supposed to do now?" Vivienne asked.

"Proceed to Basil's tower, I should think," Annabella said.

"No chance of a carpet, I suppose?"

"Only if you want to risk every 'ifrit and ghul within a hundred leagues knowing we're here."

"How?" Annabella asked curiously, setting off along the path. "How could they know?"

"Eyes every jolly where," Basil said, drifting along beside her. "You never know who might jolly well be watching, even in the desert. And all that aetheric noise we made getting here..."

"Aetheric what?"

"Noise. Never mind..." And already beginning to feel the slope, Annabella let it go.

"Well, why couldn't we have gone straight to the tower?" Vivienne insisted petulantly. "Why did we have to end up here, right at the bottom?" Annabella turned to look at her. She knew why. Basil was venting his spleen at being forced to bring her along, even trying to discourage her to the point where she would demand to be taken back.

"Suck it up," Annabella said. "It's editorial comment..."

"Editorial what?" Vivienne puffed.

Neither Annabella nor Basil chose to answer and Vivienne had no breath to push the point further.

It was a long, hot, dusty climb and pretty much the last straw for both girls, given that they'd had no sleep the night before and a lot of emotional upset. They were both thoroughly exhausted by the time they thankfully crossed the threshold to Basil's domain. But if they were at the end of their tether, coming home seemed to rejuvenate the djinni. He shed his grumpiness and bustled about, the perfect host, arranging hot water in the bathhouse, clean robes and beds for them both, but truth be told, by then the two girls were so tired they barely noticed.

Chapter 5

Hassan-i Sabbāh, the Old Man of the Mountain, also known as the Emir of Evil, again took three long steps back from the cauldron.

"Well?" he said to the apparition. "Speak."

"Too late," the 'ifrit said in his whispery voice. "She has escaped."

The emir was tempted to vent his frustration but after a struggle managed to hold his temper in check. When dealing with the Other World, it could be fatal to lose control.

"How?" he demanded.

"A guardian intervened."

"A guardian? What sort of guardian?"

"Of little account."

"Of sufficient account to make you look foolish," the emir snapped, provoked out of his caution. "Where is she?" he asked at last.

"It is not known."

"When is she?"

"It is not known."

"Nevertheless, you will find her."

Annabella woke to a glorious sunset over the desert, shining through the arched windows to her chamber. She stretched and yawned, drinking in the flaring beauty outside for some minutes, then turned to inspect her immediate surroundings. To say that she was impressed was putting it altogether too mildly. The chamber was not particularly large but it was perfectly proportioned with a domed ceiling of marble, veined with silver and dotted with precious jewels to give the effect of an exotic fruit tree spreading above. The floor was an intricate geometric mosaic also of marble in a variety of colours and the walls were hung with silk interspersed with tapestries depicting royal courts, hunting scenes and battles.

The only furniture was Annabella's bed, a low divan, carved and fretted from aromatic sandalwood, with satin sheets, silken bolsters and the most wondrous embroidered silk coverlet depicting a peacock in full display.

She looked about for Basil, who was drifting up near the ceiling.

"This is amazing," she said. "Incredible."

"Why thank you," Basil said with uncharacteristic modesty.

"You must be someone important..." Annabella said slowly. "And very rich."

"Important? I should damn well hope so."

"How important?"

"I am the sole son of the great djinni, Sheikh Harun al Yazid, may he live forever. Who incidentally formulated the CODE."

"Wow," Annabella said with rather less than due reverence. "Should I be impressed?"

"Yes, you jolly well should."

"So who exactly is this sheikhy person?"

"Only the reason I'm being so nice to you instead of jolly well smiting you on the spot. If I were a beastly 'ifrit or a beastly shaitan, or worse still a beastly ghul, then you'd be in trouble. My word, would you jolly well be in trouble."

"But you're married to an 'ifrit..."

"'Ifrita... As if we can help who we jolly well fall in love with... And I'm divorced."

"Does she think that?" There was a thoughtful pause.

"What's her name?" Annabella asked when it became clear she wasn't going to get a reply to the first question.

"Nazan," Basil said shortly.

"What language is that? What does it mean?"

"Turkish. It means proud, vain, hard to handle..."

"And you married her...?" Annabella said incredulously.

"Love is ever jolly well blind," Basil remarked mournfully.

"And does Nazan think you're divorced?" Annabella insisted.

"I don't know and I don't care. It's her beastly father I worry about."

"And he is...?"

"Iblis. Iblis the terrifying..."

"You're frightened of him...?"

"Of course, I jolly well I am. Why else would I be making a fool of myself in the 21st century."

"Which reminds me," Annabella said thoughtfully. "You never did explain how you came to be imprisoned in that jar, or why you couldn't get out."

"Didn't I?" Basil said disingenuously.

"No, you didn't." Annabella paused. "It was all just part of the plot to lure me into range, wasn't it? To get me to talk to you?"

"Not at all. Whatever jolly well makes you think..."

"Why, Basil?" Annabella interrupted. "What's really going on?"

But Basil drifted away and refused to answer.

"One or the other, Basil," Annabella said eventually. "Tell me what's happening or get out of my life." Still Basil made no reply.

"All right..." Annabella said when the silence had become painful. "That's clear. So why do we have to go to this...whatsit desert?"

There was another long, long pause.

"Well?"

"The only being who can sever lifetime fealty of djinni for human is Lilis..." Basil said at last. "I think."

"What do you mean, you think?"

"Nobody has ever been damn fool enough to try to do it before, that's why. You, madam mistress, mine, are unique in the annals of time. There have been five recorded instances of a djinni finding himself jolly well caught in a situation of lifetime slavery, and I can tell you that the five beastly humans involved were all jolly happy about it and made all the hay they abso-jolly-lutely could while the jolly old sun was jolly well shining. Why, if I told you who they were, you'd be amazed."

"Who?" Annabella asked, her curiosity getting the better of her.

"Cleopatra, for instance..."

"You're joking."

"I am not. How do you think a woman as beastly ugly as she was ever got Mark Anthony and Julius Caesar to fight a jolly old war because of her?"

"But she was beautiful..."

"Only because her djinni weaved a bit of magic and made them think so... Are you sure you won't change your mind? I could make you beautiful too, spiffing...Well, a bit..."

"And thank you very much," Annabella said. "As it happens, I'm quite happy with the way I look..."

"The poitrine?" Basil said enticingly. "There is a certain deficiency, perhaps...possibly even a grave deficiency...?"

"You leave my chest alone. I absolutely forbid it." Annabella found she was breathing heavily.

"In that case, my jolly humble apologies," Basil said, not the least bit repentant. "I was only trying to be helpful...to show you the possibilities."

"Possibilities! You were trying to tempt me, that's what you were doing."

"Can't blame a djinni for trying..."

"And I won't be tempted."

"Astounding! That's what you are, jolly well astounding. I offer you your heart's desire..."

"My heart's desire is *not* a big bosom..."

"Some bosom...? And you jolly well choose Lilis..."

Annabella strove to calm herself. "Who or what is Lilis?" she asked eventually.

Basil drifted back from the window where he had been admiring the last of the sunset and perched on the end of Annabella's divan.

"Lilis..." he said gravely. "Lilis is the great ghulah of the Taklamakan Desert, the Desert of Death."

"Ghulah?"

"When Sheikh al Yazid, may he live for ever, led the Djinn and the jolly no-account Jann to the Light, the 'Ifrif, the Shaitan and the Ghul chose the Dark. The beastly Ghul devour human flesh. They're insatiable. They eat the living and they jolly well eat the dead. Lilis, the great ghulah, sucks out your essence, your spirit, whether you're living, dead, human, djinn, jann, shaitan, even other ghul. It is the source of her power."

"But she can separate us?"

"If anyone can... If we survive."

There was the sound of footsteps and Vivienne came in from an adjoining room.

"I thought I heard voices," she said.

So, you see, Basil said, why it's jolly well impossible for her to come with us.

Um... I suppose...

There is no beastly supposing about it. She can't come. You can't let her. It's jolly well impossible.

"I'm hungry," Vivienne said. "Are you hungry...?"

"Vivienne," Annabella said uneasily. "You have to go back. You really do have to go back."

Vivienne just stared at her and for a moment Annabella was afraid she was about to burst into tears.

"I'm so alone," she murmured at last. "You're the first person who's been nice to me for I can't remember how long. Please don't make me go back."

She must, Basil said. You jolly well know she must.

I can't make her. I just can't...

"Vivienne," Annabella said aloud. "I'm not going to force you... We're not going to force you, but you have to understand this is going to be very dangerous. You might die. We all might die. Worse..."

"What worse?"

"All the usual things..."

"Plus," Basil chimed in. "You jolly well might lose your spirit. If we get that far, it's likely to be sucked out of you with a straw..."

"So," Annabella took up the running. "You can see that we can't ask you to come. It's just impossible."

"Then if it's so dangerous," Vivienne said stubbornly. "Why are you going?"

"I didn't know it was so dangerous until a minute ago," Annabella said, stalling.

"But...?"

Annabella paused. How could she explain that she felt thoroughly trapped? She was certain Basil was manipulating her, for what reason she had no idea, but nor was it a situation she was prepared to accept. It seemed that the only card she had was her insistence on dissolving what Basil said was the bond between them, and it was a card she was determined to play

"I can't go back," Vivienne said. "There's nothing for me there. It's just horrible. I can't stand it. Please don't make me go back... I don't know what I'll do..."

Annabella looked helplessly towards Basil.

So what do I say now? she demanded.

You don't have to say anything. I can just jolly well make it happen.

We can't just force her...

Why ever not?

No! Annabella snapped. Besides, did it ever occur to you that I might like some company?

So sweet! Two jolly little orphans, together against the beastly world...

You can be as snarky as you like, Annabella said, regaining her composure. But I'm not going to force her... And that's that.

Vivienne had been watching the play of emotions across Annabella's face.

"You're fighting with him, aren't you?" she said in a low voice. "Basil, I mean..."

"Not any more," Annabella said crisply. "Bottom line, Basil has to do as he's told."

"So does that mean I can stay?"

Annabella looked at her searchingly. She really knew nothing about Vivienne and it had to be said that during the ruckus at the school, Vivienne had not been particularly impressive. She had surrendered to Cordelia and her gang without any sort of fight, but on the other hand she had shown the courage to risk her own safety in warning Annabella, which had got her into the situation in the first place. That was worth something. That was worth quite a lot, particularly as she already had compelling reason to fear Cordelia and the others.

It was plain to Annabella that more than anything, Vivienne was desperately lonely, and loneliness was something she understood very well. She had her own methods of dealing with it but even young as she was, she was wise enough to know that no two people could be expected to react to the same thing in the same way. She was resigned to the fact that life had decreed her a loner, whether she wished to be or not, but she was well able to understand that Vivienne might be less equipped to deal with it.

And that was actually rather dishonest, she told herself, downright dishonest, in fact. Underneath everything, right down at the bottom, no faking, no fibbing, she was desperately lonely herself. Annabella made a sudden decision.

"Yes," she said impulsively. "You can stay... If you're sure you really want to..."

Oh beeswax! Basil exclaimed crossly. Being enslaved to one beastly neophyte is bad enough, but two...

Annabella, however, wasn't listening. She was watching the relief flood Vivienne's face. Whatever the consequences, she thought, she had done absolutely the right thing. For the moment, at least. And then she also realised, that like Vivienne, she was extremely hungry.

"Food," she said. "We need food. I don't suppose we could have another hamburger, could we Basil?"

"No," Basil said in an extremely grumpy voice. "No, you may not. Junk food hasn't been invented yet."

"What then?"

"Cook's night off..." Basil grumbled but nevertheless, led them to an airy balcony where moments later they were sitting cross-legged on a plush carpet, tucking into pilaf and kebabs with myriad delicious side dishes, eating oriental fashion with their fingers.

"I suppose it saves heaps on the washing up," Vivienne remarked with her mouth full. There was a snort from up near the ceiling.

"I don't think Basil needs to worry about the washing up," Annabella said. She paused reflectively. "So tell us," she said directly to him. "What's next? Where do we go? How do we get there? How long will it take?" There was a pause and then Basil drifted down towards them, as though gathering his thoughts.

This is not a simple matter, he began. *In fact, it's jolly difficult...*

"Speak up," Annabella said. "Vivienne needs to hear, too."

"You can't just toddle over to the Taklamakan Desert and say: here ghulah, nice ghulah. Lilis would suck the spirit from your body before you could say Scheherazade, like jolly old marrow from a jolly old bone."

"Yuk!" Vivienne said. "We are still eating, you know."

"Though I never touch spirits, myself," Basil added.

"Very funny," Annabella said. "So what do we do?"

"No bally idea," Basil said. "But I know who might know..."

"Your father, Sheikh al Yazid...?" Annabella asked.

"No, no and again, jolly well no. I wouldn't dare ask him – may he live for ever – how to dissolve what he has ordained should jolly well last unto death..."

"Then who?" Annabella said encouragingly.

"Luqman. Luqman the jolly old sage of the age."

"Who is where?"

"Iram, city of columns. The lost city of Iram."

"Oh great..." Annabella began.

"But you know where it is?" Vivienne interrupted.

Basil hesitated. "Sort of," he said at last.

"Where?" Annabella demanded.

It was a long, protracted process and in the end the two girls were not all that much the wiser. From Basil's somewhat cryptic explanation it seemed that Iram, if it existed at all, was a city of 1000 palaces, each built on 1000 columns from bricks made of silver and gold, a way station on the road to Paradise. Luqman, it was believed, had been residing there for the past several centuries.

"Must be a bit lonely for the poor old geezer," Vivienne said irreverently. "If he's all alone in 1000 palaces, I mean."

"Never mind that," Annabella said impatiently. "If I've got this right, all we have to do now is to find some figment of Basil's imagination living in a city that obviously never existed in the middle of some trackless desert. Easy peasy... Which desert?" she added as an afterthought.

"The jolly old Rub' al Khali," Basil said. "Where else?"

"Oh, of course," Annabella said sarcastically, and then she demanded: "Why am I suddenly thinking you're having a gigantic lend of us? Really! How could you expect us to believe any of this nonsense?"

Basil sniffed.

"You're not seriously trying to tell me we have to go talk to...an apparition?"

"Why not?" Vivienne said cheerfully. "After all, we are sitting here talking to a djinni in quite the wrong century about going to see some terrible ghulah so that you can get rid of him. The djinni I mean."

Annabella stared at her.

"I believe you're enjoying this," she said accusingly.

"Of course I am," Vivienne shot back. "Aren't you?"

"Baghdad," Basil said. "We have to go to Baghdad."

"We do?" Annabella queried disbelievingly.

"There is a tomb robber... Aswad, Aswad al Halabi, Aswad the rat... If anyone knows where Iram is, or might be..."

"Baghdad?" Vivienne said wonderingly. "I've always wanted to go to Baghdad..."

"Weird," Annabella said. "So how do we get there? And don't say, walk."

"Camel?" Basil said, mischievously.

"Oh no..." Annabella began. She had once had a camel ride at the zoo when much smaller and had been comprehensively seasick.

"Carpet, of course," Basil interrupted.

"But you said we couldn't..." Vivienne protested.

"And they're so slow..." Annabella chimed in.

"Valuable, antique Persian rug," Basil said scornfully. "That bally pathetic rag at the school was nothing but a machine-made, chemically-dyed piece of 20th century rubbish. It was a wonder I could damn well make it fly at all. Now this..." A carpet magically appeared before them and unrolled itself. "...Is a carpet. Finest silk, hand-dyed, hand-tied, 550 Persian – not Turkish, mark you – 550 Persian knots to the inch, five years in the weaving and made for a jolly old prince."

The carpet glowed and shimmered before them, the central mandala seeming to pulse gently as though with a life of its own.

"And of course," Basil added. "I've made a few modifications... Bit of tinkering under the hood, so to jolly speak..."

"Whoosh?" Annabella asked.

"Vroom," Basil corrected. "And handles like a dream."

"But you said, we couldn't use a carpet," Vivienne repeated.

"Not in the daytime," Basil said. "But we can certainly jolly well fly by night."

And they did. "No time like the present," Annabella said, and rested and fed, they set off forthwith.

It was dawn, a day later. The domes and spires of the city were beginning to glow as they were touched by the first flush of light. A bird called in the date palm overhead, and Annabella woke. She rose, shook the dust from her robes and crept to the edge of the grove where they had spent the last hour or two before daylight.

Baghdad, the "fair garden", loomed distantly across the plain, rather too distantly, Annabella thought. She estimated it would take it least most of the morning to walk the rest of the way but Basil had been insistent, when they stopped, that it would be too dangerous to fly closer. Besides, he had added, this was the nearest cover where they could rest. Annabella heard movement behind her and a moment later Vivienne was there beside her.

"Can't see much," Vivienne said grumpily.

"Patience," Annabella told her absently and as the light increased so the scene before them revealed itself. The great river Tigris wound its way from left to right in front of them across the featureless plain, splitting the city, the then capital of the Arab world, into two semi-circular halves and feeding the tangle of canals and aqueducts that watered the suburbs, the parks and the gardens. Directly in front of them they could begin to make out the outer perimeter of the city walls and here and there behind the ramparts, the flat roofs of the crowded tenements and alleys. In the centre rose the massive bulwarks and towers of the citadel, the Round City, protecting the heart of Baghdad, the House of Wisdom and the fabled Golden Gate Palace of the caliph.

"It's huge," Vivienne said in amazement and she was right. The city then held a population of about two million and was almost four leagues in diameter. "How on earth will we ever find Aswad?"

"No idea," Annabella said slowly. "I expect something will turn up."

"Breakfast now or later?" Basil inquired unctuously on cue.

"Now," Vivienne said. "Definitely now..."

By the time they finally reached the city entrance to which they were heading, it was the hour of the siesta. It had taken rather longer than Annabella had estimated to cover the distance from the palm grove. The people working in the fields they passed had all disappeared as had the guards at the gate, leaving just a lone sentinel who only glanced at them with complete indifference as they plodded through. They felt dwarfed by the great bulwarks protecting Baghdad but were grateful for the deep shadows bisecting the first narrow streets and lanes.

The girls were tired, footsore, again hungry and most of all thirsty. By unspoken agreement, they stopped in the first real shade they came to. The relief from the brazen heat of late autumn beating down on the plain was delightful. Like the gate, the whole city seemed more or less deserted except for a dog or two stretched out in the coolest places they could find.

Suddenly a man and a boy came round a corner, the man leading the boy by his ear and berating him. The girls looked at each other and grinned.

"Stupid, stupid boy," the man was saying. "Stupid beyond belief. Just wait till I tell mother of thy stupidity..."

Then the penny dropped. The man was speaking in Arabic.

"But..." Vivienne began.

"How can we understand...?" Annabella seconded.

"Gift of tongues," Basil said nonchalantly. "You didn't jolly well suppose that I was going to spend my life interpreting for you?"

"Oh," Annabella said and then: "Can we also speak it?"

"Abso-jolly-lutely. Word perfect and your accents tuned to the jolly old circumstances of the moment."

The girls stared at each other.

"Say something..." Annabella said.

"You're doing it, too," Vivienne replied wonderingly.

"What?" Annabella said.

"Speaking in Arabic."

"So are you." They laughed delightedly.

"Wait a minute," Annabella said. "Gift of tongues? Does that mean we can speak any language...?"

"Abso-jolly-lutely," Basil repeated.

"No more French lessons," Vivienne crowed.

"No more irregular verbs."

"And best of all..."

"No more Latin..."

"Outstanding!" they said together.

"You are mad, you know," Vivienne added a moment later. "To want to get rid of Basil, I mean. I heard that bit about your front..."

"And you can both leave my front out of it," Annabella said with some heat.

"But fronts are nice," Vivienne said complacently.

"Bully for you," Annabella snapped.

"Two bullies..."

"Leave it. Just leave it."

"Speaking of which," Basil interposed. "Best you be jolly inconspicuous. This is a man's world. Keep your hijabs up around your faces and keep your jolly eyes down. This is not a safe city for ripe young fruit wandering about by themselves."

"And so just exactly what are we supposed to do now?" Annabella said, grateful for the change of subject. "Though something to drink would be a good place to start."

"Coke, please," Vivienne seconded. "With lots of ice."

"Inconspicuous, I said," Basil retorted. "And I jolly well told you that beastly junk food..."

"Junk drink?" Annabella said.

"...Hasn't been invented yet."

"Then what?" Vivienne demanded.

"Sharbat," Basil said. "Sharbat in the jolly old bazaar."

"But that will cost money," Vivienne protested.

"I don't think money is a problem," Annabella said. "Is it, Basil?"

"How much would you like?" he smirked.

"What's sharbat?" Vivienne asked.

"Sherbet...?" Annabella said uncertainly.

"But a jolly sight nicer than any you've ever tasted."

As they talked, people had begun to emerge from the stout doors that studded the blank walls of houses and courtyards lining the street. Following the faintest wisp of smoke, the two girls penetrated deeper and deeper into the city, eyes cast down and clutching their veils tightly about them.

The journey seemed to last forever and they grew more and more parched, and grumpy with it. Ignoring their muttered complaints, Basil led them on and on, through parks and down paved streets, past mosques and bathhouses, across bridges and along the facades of noble buildings whose purpose they could only guess at. Finally they crossed another canal, then another, and at last they found themselves in the middle of a jostling throng.

The street had finally opened out into a market area of crowding stalls set out beneath a motley array of awnings and sunshades that more or less completely roofed the whole souk and which cut the white glare of the sun down to a tolerable level. However, the roof also cut off any trace of breeze and they were assailed by a powerful stink of sweating humanity mixed with cooking, tanning, sheep, goats, chickens and camels, with now and then, a strange, sweet counterpoint from the piles of spices and herbs displayed for sale. The noise, too, of that vast concourse was also trapped and buffeted them relentlessly.

A sharbat seller bearing a gourd and a tray of brass cups pushed his way through the crowd, so thick it was hard to move. Annabella suddenly found a coin in her hand and stopped him. She held up two fingers and proffered the money. The man nodded and a moment later she and Vivienne were sipping cautiously at what turned out to be a delightful, cool liquid tasting of rose petals.

"Hurry up," the peddler said impatiently. "You should be at home..."

Annabella looked about as she hastily gulped the rest of her drink. There were few women about she noted, and they all seemed in a hurry.

He's jolly well right, Basil said.

Don't start that again, Annabella replied shortly, but she was interrupted as a thickset man in dirty white robes rudely pushed between her and Vivienne.

Annabella's cup was knocked from her hand and clattered to the ground.

"Some of your fine sharbat for me, also," the intruder growled. "She will pay," he added, gesturing at Annabella.

"But I have no more money," Annabella protested in surprise, showing her empty hands.

"Then I must search your person till I find some," the man said with anticipatory relish, producing a wicked looking dagger.

There was a sudden silence about them and in an instant the two girls found themselves isolated in a rapidly widening space as the crowd drew back. The sharbat seller snatched his cup from the ground and made haste to disappear.

So what now, mistress mine? Basil demanded.

I think I'd better become a witch, don't you? And very quickly... Annabella said. Vivienne was staring at her, her eyes huge, but Annabella found she was

unaccountably calm. Perhaps it came from knowing that Basil was more than a match for any stray bazaar bully.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Annabella said to the man into the spreading silence.

"Oh," he said mockingly. "And why would that be?"

"Because you might find yourself in that dung heap over there," Annabella said quietly.

There was some scattered laughter from the crowd and the man flushed angrily. He was accustomed to a measure of fear, if not respect, and to be held up to ridicule by a flat-chested slip of a girl was intolerable. Without more ado, he lunged at Annabella but instead of ripping at her robes with his knife as he intended, he found himself rising into the air hanging grimly to the hilt. The knife carried him across some open ground and halted above the putrid pile of rotting garbage.

There was a long pause as people watched open-mouthed, then the knife gave a shake and a wriggle, the man lost his grip and with a despairing yell he plummeted into the filth.

"I'm impressed," Vivienne said.

"Don't think they are," Annabella answered, gesturing to the crowd, the mood of which had changed instantly from laughter to muttering and scowls.

"Sorcery!" someone shouted and suddenly it became a chant: "Sorcery! Sorcery! Sorcery!"

A piece of rotten fruit came flying out of the crowd towards them and abruptly the chant changed to: "Stone them! Stone them!"

Already, one or two of the crowd were starting to move towards them and it would only be moments before it became a general rush.

"No," Vivienne said, alarm rising in her voice. "No, they don't seem impressed at all. What do you think?"

"I think, run!"

Chapter 6

They fled through the aisles and alleys of the souk as though their lives depended on it, which indeed they surely did. At first it seemed the thronging crowd must corner and capture them in short order, when who knew what would occur, but suddenly, as Annabella's gaze darted about and half-formed ideas flashed across her mind, strange things began to happen.

The goats...! she gasped and a dozen animals waiting their turn to be slaughtered suddenly found themselves loosed from their tethers. Already terrified by the smell of blood and maddened by the swelling uproar of the chase, they made a bolt for freedom, the butcher and his minions in frantic pursuit. People were brought down right and left, in turn sending others flying in a cascading chain reaction.

The melons...! she panted and a great pyramid of the fruit unaccountably collapsed to roll treacherously amidst the pursuing pack. More people tripped, crashing into stalls which tottered and fell, to the outrage of their owners. It seemed now that Annabella only had to look for things to happen. A large coop of chickens was transformed into a cloud of avenging furies pecking at eyes and clawing at faces. A camel broke loose and stampeded, bucking wildly. Sacks of flour burst, raising a choking white pall behind them. More stalls swayed and disintegrated. A cook stove overturned in the melee and fire instantly took hold of the flimsy fabric of the booth and threatened to spread disastrously. The uproar grew and grew until it was full-blown chaos, and still the girls ran, darting and weaving through the maze, desperate to win clear and find refuge.

Annabella threw a glance back over her shoulder and was horrified at the carnage she had brought about. If they hadn't been in deep trouble before, they certainly were now. She raced after Vivienne around a stall selling brass pots and bowls and wondered for an instant what sort of damage they might do. No sooner had they passed when that booth also subsided, sending a hail of devastating missiles tumbling among the flying feet pursuing them.

However, it couldn't last. They hurtled around another corner only to find themselves facing a dead end. The people in front of them, as yet unaware of the pursuit and the reason for it, turned to stare. Behind them they could hear the tumult of the chase, gaining rapidly. They had only seconds before they would inevitably be caught.

"This way," Annabella managed to gasp. "Quick!" She dived under a table displaying cheap silver jewellery, through a tangle of legs, under the flimsy cloth wall at the back of the stall, then through the next booth, this one selling knives, and finally into the lane beyond, Vivienne so close on her heels that they both almost fell. The occupants of both stalls were far too stunned to react. The tide of pursuit temporarily blocked by the dam behind the girls, swirled and eddied and gave them a moment of breathing space, enough to winnow their way through the crush in front of them without arousing too much attention, and then to vanish round the next corner.

Annabella grabbed at Vivienne and forced her to slow down to a more natural pace. Trying to disguise their heaving chests, the girls sidled their way onwards, heads down and wishing they could become invisible. They worked their way into another alleyway, this one lined with stalls selling spices and began to dare to think that they might have escaped until, that is, they rounded another corner to find their way barred by a detachment of armoured mamlukes.

Basil! Annabella shrieked. Do something...

And what does madam mistress, shining pearl have in mind?

Anything! Anything! Something...! Annabella pleaded, now bereft of ideas.

Jolly well calm down, Basil said. Best thing that could have happened. The guards will protect you from the crowd. We'll worry about getting away from them later.

Oh great, Annabella said. Thank you very much...

Now look here, Basil began. I might jolly well point out, mistress mine, that this mess is all your doing...

My doing...! But Annabella had to break off before she could properly get going. The sergeant, or whatever he was, in charge of the patrol was staring down his nose at her with extreme disfavour. He had sweeping moustaches that wiggled incongruously when he spoke.

"You will come," he said.

"But sir," Annabella began. "We have done nothing..."

"The naqib was watching." The sergeant gestured. Annabella looked past him and realised that the spread of the souk stopped abruptly at a wide moat, behind which reared the massive walls of the Round City, the inner sanctum of Baghdad. Directly in front of her there was a bridge, then huge iron-clad doors and above those a gate tower. From there it would have been possible to observe her encounter with the bazaar bully, the cesspit being open to the sky, as was the area immediately around it. The subsequent chase would have shown up as surging turmoil beneath the motley fabric roofing most of the market. It must have somewhat resembled the roiling of a pack of sharks beneath the surface of the sea, she thought in passing.

"My Lord will see you now," the sergeant added with heavy emphasis. At another gesture, the squad surrounded the two girls, suddenly feeling extraordinarily small and lost, and began to march back the way they had come. Annabella and Vivienne had no choice but to fall into step, lest they be trampled. Their footsteps rang hollow on the bridge over the moat and then they were through the great iron doors and into the heart of Baghdad proper.

The chamber into which they were thrust might have been a dungeon, except it was high up not low-down. The thick, studded door thudded shut behind them and they heard a heavy bar drop emphatically into place, locking them in. Annabella went to the narrow embrasure, piercing the thick wall – a window far too small even for her to squeeze through – and peered out. The marketplace was spread before her, smoke still rising from the fire they had caused. She noted that she could indeed see the dung heap and the cleared ground about it. She turned back and surveyed their prison. Apart

from the door and the window, it was all of the same uniform, rough stone and completely bare.

Vivienne was watching her. "Well this is cosy," she said. Annabella was surprised. Without really thinking about it, she had expected Vivienne to be thoroughly demoralised, given her timidity back at Flintlock College. But here she was, after what could only be described as a riot and facing who knew what, giving a good impression of cheerful calm. Was there nothing so frightening for Vivienne as a schoolgirl with a pair of clippers, Annabella wondered absently? Certainly, the further that horrible school receded into the distance, the more Vivienne seemed to be coming out of herself.

"So, can you get us out of here?" Annabella said to Basil. He had lingered by the door.

"In two jolly shakes of a jolly goat's tail," he said. He, too, sounded unreasonably unconcerned, Annabella thought. "But we should wait to see what this jolly old naqib jolly well has to say for himself, don't you think?"

"Why on earth should we?" Annabella demanded.

"Well, if anyone knows where jolly old Aswad the rat might be found then I should think it might be the naqib in charge of the guard. That is...?"

"No," Annabella said tiredly. "We are not, repeat not, never, ever, giving up."

"Mad," Vivienne said, and then: "I wonder how long we have to wait for something to happen?"

"Not long," Basil said. "I hear someone coming, now."

This time they found themselves in a chamber overlooking the inner city and through the wide, unshuttered window, open for any faint breeze that might be passing, they caught glimpses of breath-taking palaces, mosques and libraries. The room was furnished with carpets and at one end there was a low platform with bolsters, a sort of divan. A man was seated there, cross-legged. He looked up as they entered and were marched before him.

He was middle-aged, the girls saw, with a puffy face and a hooked nose. He stared at them coldly. Why, Annabella wondered, did every adult she ever encounter always attempt to intimidate her. She felt her hackles rising in the old, familiar response. She let her veil swing down and stood defiantly. Vivienne, standing at her elbow, did the same. The naqib lifted an eyebrow.

Mistress mine, Basil said. *I would suggest some jolly deference.*

Why? Annabella demanded, truculently, but whatever Basil's answer might have been was forestalled.

"So," the naqib said. "Riot. Public endangerment and destruction of property. Why should I not have you whipped senseless and cast out for the dogs?"

"I was attacked." Annabella shook off the restraining hand of the guard and took a step forward. "I was attacked and surely I have the right to defend myself?"

"With sorcery?"

"If that's what you want to call it."

"I do not. Nor should you. Sorcery is a capital crime for which the punishment is stoning to death." Vivienne gasped.

"Who are you, child?" the naqib went on, still addressing Annabella. "You have blue eyes. Your companion is blonde. You are clearly not of Baghdad. Where do you come from? What do you do here? Whom do you seek?"

Tell him, Basil said urgently, but Annabella ignored him.

"I am not a child," she said angrily. "Why must everyone call me a child?"

"Perhaps because you behave like one," the naqib said coolly. "I will ask you just once more. Who are you? What do you do here?"

Tell him, Basil said again. *Tell him...*

Annabella hesitated and then decided there was no reason not to. She was almost too late. The naqib was turning away and lifting a hand.

"We're looking for Aswad," Annabella blurted. "Aswad, the tomb robber..." The naqib turned back to stare at her. His hand dropped.

"Aswad?" he repeated.

"We have to get to Iram..."

"The city of columns...?"

"Yes," Annabella said.

"And you think Aswad can take you?"

"Yes," Annabella said again. There was a long silence.

"Why should I believe you?" the naqib said at last.

Because he jolly well wants to, Basil said.

Why? Annabella asked.

Bricks of silver. Bricks of gold. He's greedy... And he wants to be rich enough to retire. Ask him if he's ever seen how Aswad lives.

"No reason at all," Annabella said after a thoughtful pause. "But Aswad might convince you..."

"Aswad? Aswad is in Baghdad?"

"Oh yes," Annabella said with false confidence. "And you should just see his house."

When moved to it, the naqib proved eminently decisive. In short order, he, the two girls and an escort of 20 mamluks had marched across the moat from the Round City and were heading back into the labyrinth of the suburbs. They stopped eventually outside what might have been a tavern except for the fact that alcohol was strictly forbidden to the faithful. Two of the mamluks went inside and some minutes later emerged, dragging a nondescript little man who was evidently trying to stop his head spinning by physically holding it.

Is he stoned? Annabella asked.

Or worse... Basil said.

What worse?

You're not supposed to know, Basil said, suddenly having second thoughts.

Don't be ridiculous...

"Aswad the tomb robber..." the naqib began. The mamluks gave the man a good shaking in an effort to make him pay attention.

"Aswad the tomb robber," the naqib said again. "Aswad the rat... Where is he?"

The little man said nothing but made the mistake of allowing a gleam of intelligence to pass across his face.

"A choice," the naqib hissed. "You can take us to Aswad or we'll feed you your own offal..."

"I know nothing," the little man cried, trying to squirm free.

"...Who pays for his opium by selling information," the naqib scoffed. "...Who if he had kept faith would have sold this information to me long since."

"I know nothing," the little man tried to insist again. A mamluk smashed him backhanded across the mouth and dislodged a rotten tooth. The two girls flinched as it landed on the ground in front of them. Vivienne closed her eyes.

"Aswad," the naqib said gently.

"He will kill me," the little man said, spitting blood.

"Whereas I will merely feed you your own offal..."

They marched on again immediately and if Annabella and Vivienne hadn't been comprehensively lost before, now they were totally bemused. All sense of direction had deserted them completely. Their surroundings grew poorer and poorer until they degenerated into outright slum.

At last they came to what was undoubtedly the meanest alley they would ever wish to see, little more than a drain winding its way through a mountain range of rubbish. The girls choked at the smell and pressed their veils close. A cloud of flies rose from the corpse of a dead dog and buzzed angrily at the disturbance. Their guide, who needed the support of a soldier to be able to walk at all, led them down the valley through the piles of refuse until they could go no further. Their way was blocked by a long length of stone wall, incongruous against the mud-brick on either side but impressively solid and almost twice the height of a man. It was pierced by stout wooden doors, doors unusually wide and unusually strong, doors that would not have been out of place on a fortress.

"There!" the man said and the mamluk holding him up allowed him to subside into a patch of ooze.

"Yech," Vivienne muttered.

The naqib gestured and two of the mamluks began to pound on the doors with the butts of their spears but to no discernible effect. The wood emitted only a dull, thudding sound and gave no hint that it might ever be induced to open. They grew weary and were replaced by two fresh men, and then two more. At last, when it seemed they would have to give up and retreat, their tails between their legs, they heard a quavering voice from the other side of the wall.

"Who seeks to disturb an old man on his sick bed?"

"The naqib of the guard," the sergeant roared. "Open up or we'll bring a battering ram."

There was a pause.

"The naqib...?" came the voice at last.

"The naqib of the guard! Stop stalling. Open up."

There was another long pause and eventually the sound of fastenings being undone and bolts being drawn. One of the doors opened a crack. Impatiently, the sergeant thrust at it and strode through, only to stop short.

"Go on, man," the naqib said impatiently and pushed through behind, only to rock back on his heels, himself.

It was heaven, Annabella thought, or very close to it. The noisome lane and the high stone wall, deep in the slums of Baghdad, concealed heaven, a garden of earthly delights, a setting such as the caliph himself might covet. The place was a riot of exotic trees, shrubs and tinkling fountains. Any hint of the stinking poverty only metres away that came creeping over the wall was drowned instantly in the wave of perfumes and sweet aromas rising from massed plantings. Raked paths wound their way here and there around softly mounded dips and hollows, and in the centre there was a small lagoon with matched pavilions at either end, pavilions that seemed to have been carved from solid emerald, but which must have been marble of a particularly rare and unusual variety.

And nor was the man who had eventually come to the door at all what he seemed from the other side. Once the troop had marched in, he shut and rebarred the door and stood before them tall and dignified, obviously the major-domo of a considerable establishment.

"You have business with my lord?" Gone was the quavering voice to be replaced by a firm baritone.

"If your lord is Aswad, then yes, I most certainly do," the naqib said. It was clear to Annabella that he too had been jolted by the surroundings in which they now found themselves.

"Then if you will be pleased to follow me," the major-domo said. "Your men may take their ease in the pavilion there." He indicated the nearer of the two gazebos. "Refreshments will be brought."

The naqib signalled to the sergeant, and then he and the girls followed the major-domo, who led them down a winding path and eventually around a small bluff which proved to shelter the facade of an elaborate portico. This, too, was marble and housed two large bronze doors. The major-domo ushered them inside, down an elaborate staircase, across a grand vestibule and into a richly furnished reception room.

"I will return with my lord in due course," he said.

Did you know about this place? Annabella asked Basil, gazing about. *It's amazing. I...suspected,* he replied. *Oh yes, I jolly well suspected, all right.*

But how could Aswad, it is Aswad's...? How could he build a secret underground palace like this right in the middle of the worst part of Baghdad?

Money, Basil said succinctly. Jolly old bricks of silver and jolly old bricks of gold. They can buy lots of protection, apart from anything else.

And you knew about this? Annabella repeated.

There were rumours. There are always rumours, however much money you jolly well spread around, however many throats you slit.

A smallish man swept into the room. He was as richly dressed as the room was furnished and was obviously Aswad. Apart from anything else, he looked like a tomb robber, compact and agile, able to squirm through tunnels and into dark, secret places. He was accompanied by a tall young man who bore a family resemblance but who was a young golden eagle to his father's grizzled rodent. Annabella noticed with something of a stab that the young man's eyes passed right over her and went straight to Vivienne.

"Well you've done well for yourself," the naqib said, opening hostilities without any attempt at preliminary courtesy. Aswad shrugged. It was pointless to deny it.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"Iram." There was a long, hostile silence.

"And what makes you think I know anything about Iram?" Aswad said at last. The naqib merely smiled gently and made a sweeping gesture.

"All this," he added, quite unnecessarily.

"Iram doesn't exist," Aswad said coldly.

"Nor does this place you have here, not officially. And I'm sure you wouldn't want it to. The caliph might decide that with a bit of work it would make a good dungeon. We're always looking for extra dungeons. What with new prisoners coming in all the time...yourself, for example."

"I think you mistake your position," Aswad said. "Pray, do me the extreme favour of joining me in the garden." He turned on his heel and he and his son, without waiting to see if they were being followed, marched out and across the lobby. The major-domo already had the great bronze doors standing open. Aswad led them back up the sunken staircase and along a path that took them directly to the pavilion. When it came into view through the shrubbery, the naqib stopped short and paled.

His sergeant and the rest of the mamluks were kneeling on the ground, their hands clasped to their turbaned heads. They were surrounded by an equal number of strange men, all in some sort of uniform livery and each with a short, horn bow, drawn and nocked with a steel-tipped arrow. Each arrow was pointing unwaveringly at a mamluk neck.

"You wouldn't dare," the naqib said at last. But his voice was rather less certain than it might have been.

"Of course I dare," Aswad said. "A patrol of mamluks and the naqib of the guard vanish in the slums of Baghdad. The Caliph is distraught and searches high and low, for weeks, for months, but of his men and his naqib there is no sign. So sorry. Insha' Allah. Alternatively, it may be that your bodies are discovered far distant. I haven't decided."

"They will find this place," the naqib said, trying to conceal his sudden desperation and failing. "They will certainly find this place."

"They never have before," Aswad replied negligently. "And the wretch who brought you here is already silenced. Unpleasantly silenced. I'm quite sure the lesson will be taken to heart throughout my territory. My territory, naqib, not yours. I pay much better than the Caliph."

Annabella felt a pang for the fate of the little man who had guided them. There was a long pause as the naqib contemplated the situation and Aswad contemplated his victims.

Well I bet you didn't suspect this, Annabella said, recovering.

Um... Not exactly, Basil said. For once he sounded somewhat chastened.

So, how do you suggest we get out of it? Can you freeze them?

Not jolly likely. Not all of them. Not in time.

Why not?

I told you. I jolly well have to be able to see their eyes, all their eyes.

Then what? Annabella demanded, feeling the first stirrings of panic.

You, ideas. Me, wishes. Remember? You'll think of something.

What, me! You're the djinni...

"So it would seem, naqib, that the time has come for you to meet your fate," Aswad said. He sounded regretful. "I will leave you with the knowledge that even though our acquaintance has been so short, it is a memory I shall cherish." He turned to go and was actually moving off when Annabella pushed forward.

"Wait," she said. "Please wait." Aswad turned, and regarded her with indifference.

"Yes?" he said.

"Aren't you curious about us?" Annabella's gesture took in herself and Vivienne.

"Should I be? Though I had wondered in passing why mamluks should bring children on a...visit such as this."

"Why must everybody call me a child?" Annabella demanded crossly. Aswad merely raised an eyebrow.

"You can't just kill us," Annabella said. And as she spoke, she realised that indeed Aswad could do just that. She felt a sudden shiver and glanced at Vivienne, whose eyes had grown huge, a reaction to fear with which Annabella was becoming all too familiar. Aswad raised his other eyebrow and again made to turn away.

"But why?" Annabella demanded.

Aswad considered her for a moment. "I much dislike being bothered by officialdom," he said gravely. "I am concerned that unless I act promptly, I will now never cease to be importuned by the naqib and his minions."

"Oh..." Annabella said, and then was seized with inspiration. "Supposing they could never find you again...? Supposing no one you didn't like could ever find you...?"

"And how would I suppose that?" Aswad asked, curious despite himself. "The naqib, thanks to you I suspect, has now seen my palace. If I spare his life, in duty he must return."

"Not if he can't find you," Annabella said. "Not if I make your palace invisible..."
We can, can't we? she added privately to Basil.

And didn't I jolly well tell you you'd think of something... There actually seemed to be a hint of reluctant admiration in Basil's voice.

"Invisible?" Aswad mocked. "Are you a sorcerer, mayhap?" Here and there amongst the guards a grin broke out and even one of the mamluks, even with an arrow stinging the back of his neck, struggled to suppress a smile.

The pavilion? Annabella asked. *The other one?*

Certainly, madam mistress mine. But may I suggest some drama, a jolly performance.

Abruptly, Annabella swung round, her robes sweeping the ground with a certain panache. She pointed dramatically at the second little pleasure-dome and when she was certain that she had fixed every eye upon it, she raised her arms and wiggled her fingers as though doing a five-finger piano exercise. The pavilion began to shimmer like some desert mirage and slowly faded from view. There was an unbelieving silence and then a murmur of speculation from guards and prisoners alike.

Thank you, Annabella said gratefully. *Thank you, thank you.*

A pleasure, Basil replied. *Even if you are jolly well trying to get rid of me...*

Now, don't be like that...

And the fingers. Did you have to jolly well wiggle your fingers? Embarrassing, that's what that was.

Well think of something better... But then, you wouldn't think of anything at all...

Annabella allowed the effect to sink in, then wiggled her fingers again and the pavilion magically re-materialised. She turned about to face Aswad, struggling to suppress a feeling of undeserved triumph. After all, it was actually Basil's doing. Aswad regarded her with open astonishment, as did everybody else.

"See?" Annabella said, seizing the moment. "Or rather, you don't see..." Aswad's son, she was pleased to note, no longer had his attention fixed on Vivienne and like everyone else was staring at her. "So, I really don't think that trying to kill us all is the best idea," Annabella continued, emphasising the word *trying*. "It really would make me rather cross, and I'm sure you wouldn't like that."

Aswad took a deep breath.

"It was a trick," he said disbelievingly. "It was a trick of the light."

"Oh puh-leese," Annabella snapped. She swept around on her heel again and repeated her performance. Again, the second pavilion vanished. Again, everyone was astounded.

Send someone to touch it... Basil said. *If they jolly well can, that is.*

"Perhaps you would like a closer... look?" Annabella said.

Aswad stared at her searchingly for a long moment and then moved forward.

"Come, Darius," he said, and his son moved uncertainly to join him. Together, they strode around the lagoon and the group of guards and their prisoners watched with fascination as the two, with increasing bewilderment, attempted to find some sign of the pavilion. However, it had literally vanished.

Annabella, seated cross-legged on a large plush cushion, accepted the golden goblet proffered by a servant on a silver tray, and sipped cautiously. More sharbat, apricot this time, she thought. It was delicious. Aswad and Darius, also seated on cushions, watched her narrowly, though Annabella couldn't help noticing that Darius's gaze strayed towards Vivienne at regular intervals. Her hijab seem to have slipped, somehow, and there was now more than a hint of blonde hair showing. Annabella sighed. Once free of that dreadful Flintlock school uniform, Vivienne was revealed as altogether far too fetching.

Oooh, Basil said, picking up on the vibration. *Do I sense the jolly old green-eyed monster raising his ugly head?*

Certainly not, Annabella snapped.

I could turn her into a toad for you, easy as jolly winking.

Don't you dare...

Sure you wouldn't like some front, then? To make it a bit more of an equal contest...

Stop being so dreadfully rude...and leave me alone.

Certainly, madam mistress mine. No need to get in a jolly old tiswoz...

A what...?

"So," Aswad said. "It seems you have...certain powers..."

"I do," Annabella said definitely.

"And you could make my palace, my whole establishment, invisible?"

"To those you didn't wish to see it, certainly."

"In exchange for your life and those of the men outside?"

"Oh no," Annabella said disingenuously. "I would want much more than that. You have to understand that our lives are not at risk, not at all. Not if you and your son also wish to stay alive..."

Vivienne, who had been gazing calf-like at Darius, turned to stare at Annabella.

"You threaten me?" Aswad demanded.

"Only if you threaten me," Annabella retorted.

Excellent, Basil said. *Perhaps you jolly well do have enough front, after all...*

Which is exactly what I've been telling you.

"What then is it that you do want?" Aswad asked in a neutral voice.

"Iram," Annabella said. "We have to go to Iram." This time, Darius was unable to hide a slight stiffening.

Got him, Basil said.

"Iram is a myth," Aswad said carelessly. "A story of Scheherazade's."

"Oh dear," Annabella said equally carelessly. "That is a shame. Now you'll have the naqib and the mamluks bothering you all the time... They'll never leave you alone."

Check, Basil said.

There was a long pause as Aswad considered the situation. Annabella was disappointed to see that Darius's eyes were again straying towards Vivienne.

"Let us suppose," Aswad resumed cautiously. "Let us suppose... that I pretend this place you mention, Iram, does in truth exist. Let us suppose that I lead you deep into

the desert of the Rub' al Khali, deep and deep, deeper than any man or beast has gone. And let us suppose that on a night when the sand demons are howling, are whirling with all the force of every dervish who ever has lived and who ever will live... Then let us suppose that I steal away and leave you to your fate... "

"Well," Annabella said, matching his tone. "I suppose that would be doubly unfortunate, for I fear you too would be lost. Certainly, you would never find this palace again. I would make it my last task, my last duty, to ensure that it vanished for ever."

Again check, Basil said.

"And of course," Annabella continued. "It goes without saying that I would take a very dim view if someone were to try any other sort of dirty trick on me or Vivienne."

Again, there was a long pause. Aswad got to his feet and began to pace pensively. He moved backwards and forwards in front of Annabella, imperceptibly growing closer with each pass. She followed him with her eyes.

What's he up to? She asked Basil.

Nothing good, that's for jolly certain...

All at once when he was again directly opposite Annabella, Aswad swept the scimitar from the scabbard at his waist and in the one motion slashed at her neck. Vivienne screamed and closed her eyes, quite sure that if she left them open she would see Annabella's corpse fountaining blood and her head rolling on the marble floor. Instead, the scimitar crashed and shattered against some invisible barrier, the shards falling with a crystalline tinkle.

Checkmate, Basil said.

Nobody breathed. Nobody except Annabella dared to. She was somewhat taken aback at the sudden violence of the attack, but not surprised.

"Now, that was really unfriendly," she said. "Really, really unfriendly." Aswad was regarding her with a comical mixture of emotions: astonishment at what had happened to his sword, chagrin at having failed to kill her, alarm at what Annabella might do in return. She gazed up at him with her sternest expression.

What do you advise? she asked Basil.

A show of force, I should think, he said. *A jolly forceful show of force.*

What?

Whatever you like... Annabella sighed deeply, alarming Aswad even more.

Levitation? she said at last, thinking back to the bully in the bazaar.

By all means.

Then please, Annabella said. *Feel free.*

Some more with the hands. Palm up, palm down... You'll get the jolly hang of it...

I don't want to really hurt him, though. We need him.

You must think I'm jolly stupid, Basil said, offended.

Annabella stretched out her arm, hand closed. She opened it slowly, turned her palm upwards and began to raise it. As she did so, Aswad, too, began to rise. It took a moment for him to realise what was happening and then he began to clutch at the air about him in panic as he rose inexorably further and further from the floor.

"Khatun," he gasped. "Please..."

But Annabella kept raising her arm and Aswad rose with it. His head bumped into the lofty ceiling but still his body kept rising until he was spread-eagled flat against the roof, staring down at the floor far below.

"Khatun," he rasped hoarsely. "For pity's sake." The distress, the dread, was plain in his voice,

Not so damn cocky now, is he? Basil said. *Not nearly so lord of the jolly old manor. Once a rat, always a rat.*

What next? Annabella asked.

Close your fist?

We're not going to hurt him?

No, no. But we are going to damn well terrify him. Just so he doesn't get any more beastly ideas.

Annabella waited another two beats, calmly contemplating Aswad's pleading expression. Then with a sigh for his turpitude, she abruptly snapped her hand shut and Aswad dropped like a stone. He shrieked, a high keening wail that would live in his memory as one of the worst shames of his shameful life, but instead of smashing face first into the intricate, marble mosaic of the floor, he stopped a hairsbreadth above it, bouncing slightly. He couldn't help glancing at Darius to see how his son had reacted to his father's humiliation, but Darius was sitting immobile, stone-faced

Again Annabella lifted her open palm until Aswad, still spread-eagled, was raised level with her and they were staring eye to eye, Aswad craning his neck.

"Khatun," he begged. "No more. No more..."

"Well that rather depends on you," Annabella said austerely. "After all, you did just try to kill me."

"An accident. A terrible accident..."

"An accident?" Annabella inquired gently.

"A mistake then," Aswad said, gabbling slightly. "A sad error of judgement. Never again, I swear. I swear..."

"So let's get down to tin tacks." Annabella was suddenly all business, though the effect was rather spoilt by Aswad's incomprehension.

"What?" he asked, bewildered despite his fear. "What is tin tacks?"

"Never mind," Annabella said, annoyed with herself. "Here's the deal. You take us to Iram..."

And bring us back...

"...And bring us back, if that's what we want. And you let the naqib and his men go free. In return, I will make your palace invisible. Though of course, if any more unfortunate mistakes should happen to me or Vivienne, then it will become instantly visible again. And I'm sure the naqib will be most interested if it suddenly pops back into view. He likes money and he'd really like some of yours. All of yours, I should think."

"But Iram is a journey of many hundreds of leagues," Aswad wailed. "And many, many dangers. You may die through no fault of mine."

"Then you'd better take very good care of us, hadn't you?"

"We all may die."

"Tough luck," Annabella said implacably. There was a long silence as Aswad squirmed in mid air, trying to find a way out. It was broken by his son, who up to now had remained dutifully mute.

"Father," he said. "You have no choice." There was a weary tone in his voice that hinted at disgust.

Ah, Basil said. The cub is impatient to become the lion.

Vivienne will be so pleased, Annabella replied, cattily.

"Silence," Aswad snapped at Darius. "Speak when you're spoken to."

"But I don't really think you're in any position to give orders," Annabella said. She closed and opened her hand rapidly, causing Aswad to plunge a few inches and then jerk to a halt. He yelped.

"See what I mean?" Annabella added. "So do we have a deal?"

Aswad hesitated, still desperately searching for a way out. Impatient, Annabella caused him to plummet a few more inches.

"Yes," Aswad cried. "Yes, yes..."

Chapter 7

Once again they proceeded gravely out into the garden. The naqib and his mamluks were ushered to the door in the wall and herded outside into the stinking alley, followed by Annabella, Vivienne, Aswad and Darius. Annabella turned to face the entrance.

We need a password, or something, she said to Basil.

Open Sesame...

You are joking. Not that old one...

It's traditional, Basil said, miffed.

Oh, all right...

"So," Annabella said to Aswad, very conscious of the assembled audience behind her. "My part of the bargain..." She raised her arms and again went through her hocus-pocus routine. Somehow, the stone wall and the doors shimmered out of focus and seemed to disappear with the sides of the alley now curving in to form an unbroken mud-brick barrier.

"There," she said, pleased with the effect. "All done. You can let the naqib go now."

"Not so fast," Aswad said. He was recovering quickly from the indignity and terror of the negotiating session. He beckoned invitingly to the naqib, who nothing loath strode forward and busied himself for some minutes, tapping and feeling about in an effort to locate Aswad's wall, never mind the doors. He quite failed and eventually was forced to give up.

Aswad, struggling to hide his satisfaction, pointed peremptorily and the naqib followed by his mamluks, still threatened by the drawn bows of Aswad's guards, were forced to retreat the way they had come, through the stinking heaps of refuse. When they were quite gone and far from earshot, Aswad turned to Annabella.

"Which is all very marvellous, as far as it goes, but how now do I enter my humble abode?"

Annabella again faced the blank expanse of crumbling mud brick. "Open Sesame," she said in a clear, carrying voice. There was a slight blurring sensation and suddenly, the end of the alley was again defined by Aswad's high, stone wall and his stout wooden doors.

"Say 'Close Sesame' when you shut the doors on the other side," she told Aswad. "And it all disappears as you saw. No one will ever be able to find you again, if you don't want them to."

It had been a very long day and all things considered, Annabella thought, rather too demanding. When Aswad suggested, somewhat desperately, that the 'ladies' might wish to retire to recruit themselves for the rigours to come, Annabella accepted gratefully even though Vivienne looked momentarily crestfallen. Sickening, Annabella thought sourly to herself.

Aswad clapped his hands and a cloud of servants descended upon them, whisking them away to a bath chamber, whisking them out of their clothes, whisking them into a huge sunken tub and scouring and rinsing them to the point where flat-out drowning might have come as a welcome release. They were then whisked dry with feather-light silken towels and required to surrender to two beefy masseuses who most conscientiously proceeded to pummel them boneless. Barely able to move, they were at last allowed to dress in clean robes of quality such that Basil actually sniffed with pique at having his own offerings so comprehensively challenged, if not bested. And finally they were escorted to an airy chamber where they were left to themselves with the assurance that food would be brought in due course.

To their surprise, the room actually opened on to one of the small dells and they realised that the hollows and declivities which artfully modulated the expanses of the garden must all similarly bring light and air to the chambers of the underground palace. The two girls took time to inspect their quarters and the view outside, then nodded to each other with satisfaction and threw themselves on to the pile of cushions, obviously left there for the purpose. They looked at each other and giggled. It was the only way they could find to express their delight at the way everything had worked out.

"You were amazing," Vivienne said generously. "Absolutely amazing."

"So were you," Annabella said rather more bitchily.

"Whatever do you mean?" Vivienne was suddenly very wide-eyed.

"I thought you were going to eat that Darius alive."

"Oh," Vivienne said and then: "Isn't he gorgeous?" She paused for a moment. "Do you mind?"

Annabella was brought up short. Did she mind?

Should I mind? she asked Basil.

Well even if you do, it won't do a jolly bit of good, he said. *He's only got eyes for her anyway. If only you'd let me...*

Certainly not. And do stop going on about my front.

Well then...

"No," Annabella said slowly. "No, I don't mind..." And she realised as she spoke that it was true. If Vivienne wanted Darius, she was welcome to him.

Another cloud of attendants came bustling in, bearing a lavish array of dishes.

"Goodness," Vivienne exclaimed. "You've really got Aswad going. Look at all this... We'll never eat it all in a fit." Platters and bowls were spread on a fine, embroidered cloth before them and Vivienne reached out with greedy fingers.

"Wait," Annabella commanded, suddenly switching to English.

"Wait? You must be joking, I'm starving," Vivienne replied, also in English, but with a doubly puzzled look on her face. At the other end of a cunningly designed vent, Aswad mouthed rude words of frustration at the change of language.

"No," Annabella insisted. "Wait..."

"Why?" But Annabella would say nothing more until the servants had departed.

"Aswad wouldn't try to poison us, would he?" she asked Basil at last, still in English.

"My!" Vivienne said. "You are suspicious..."

"And it wasn't your head he tried to chop off... Would he try to poison us?" Annabella repeated.

"Probably not," Basil said judiciously in a whisper audible only to the girls. "At least, not yet. He wouldn't want his palace to become visible again, not before he's jolly well had a chance to deal with the naqib..."

"Deal with?" Vivienne interrupted.

"Assassinate," Annabella said impatiently.

"Why would he want to do that?"

"So he can get rid of us, of course," Annabella said. "You don't think that just because he's agreed to take us to Iram, he's really going to do it?"

"Oh," Vivienne said.

"But you just go right ahead and taste the food for me..." Vivienne hastily withdrew her hand and waited for Basil to remove and replace the meal with offerings of his own. Needless to say, he went to great trouble to make the dishes he provided superior to the palace's, which was all rather lost on both of them. They ate in silence, immersed in their own thoughts and without paying the least attention to the food.

Vivienne dabbed at her mouth with a napkin, embroidered to match the cloth, and gave a sigh.

"So," she said, making a point of still speaking in English. "You think Aswad would rather kill us than take us to Iram...?"

"Abso-jolly-lutely," Annabella said.

"So what will he do?"

"Basil...?" Annabella said.

"Delay," Basil replied, remembering to whisper and resigned to his culinary efforts passing unnoticed. "Delay, delay and jolly well delay some more. "

"That's what I think, too," Annabella said.

"So what do we do?" Vivienne asked.

"Make him move, fast," Annabella said and yawned. "But right now I'm going to bed."

In the morning, after a breakfast of fresh fruit and yoghurt, Annabella sent a message to Aswad, demanding he see them forthwith. It took almost an hour for a reply to come back to the effect that Aswad would graciously be pleased to grant them audience in another two hours time.

So the stalling jolly well begins, Basil remarked.

But not for long, Annabella retorted.

They spent the time exploring the garden, which really was truly remarkable, all the more so because once they knew the secret of the dells and hollows, they could gauge just how extensive was the palace that the garden concealed.

"It must have cost an absolute fortune," Vivienne said at one point.

"Nothing a camel load of gold bricks wouldn't cover," Annabella replied. "And I'll bet there was more than one camel. Look," she added. "There's Darius."

Vivienne spun round on her heel to peer through some shrubbery.

"So it is," she said, and before Annabella could stop her, she had broken cover and was heading rapidly in pursuit of her quarry, without stopping to think that she, herself, might actually be the hunted. Annabella shrugged and left her to it. Nor did she see Vivienne again until she was summoned to Aswad's audience chamber. In fact, Vivienne and Darius were already there, looking distinctly pleased with themselves.

Aswad chose to receive her as a supplicant, he ensconced in a sumptuous chair, mounted on a dais to give the effect of a throne, she standing meekly before him, or so he thought.

Cheeky, don't you think? Annabella said.

Beastly cheeky.

I think the positions should be reversed...

Say no more, madam mistress, shining pearl.

"Greetings..." Aswad began but got no further. Annabella raised her arm, pointed her finger directly at him and then described an elaborate loop in the air. Aswad rose high and, following the arc of her finger, was deposited in a sprawling heap some little distance away. Annabella marched forward and assumed his seat.

"You were saying?" she said in a conversational voice. Aswad, on hands and knees, was unable to prevent himself glaring at her, before hooding his eyes. He scrambled to his feet, struggling for dignity, straightened his robes and then cautiously moved closer.

"Khatun..." he muttered.

"So when do we leave?" Annabella demanded, not bothering with further niceties. Aswad was clearly taken aback, again. He gazed about wildly, seeking inspiration.

"Khatun," he managed at last. "Such an expedition as is required takes many, many days to prepare. Weeks, even." He spread his hands and his voice grew stronger as he warmed to his task. "To procure so many camels, so many drivers, so many cooks to feed them, so many soldiers to guard them, so many provisions... It is a task of great complexity. So many details... Even working with great haste... Weeks, Khatun, it must take weeks...months. It cannot take less."

Annabella smiled indulgently.

"No, no," she said. "I wouldn't dream of putting you to all that trouble. We'll leave tonight. Just you, me and my friend..."

"And Darius!" Vivienne blurted. Annabella stared at her a moment.

What do you think? She asked Basil.

Can't do any jolly harm, and he might be a useful lever...

"And Darius," Annabella affirmed. Aswad gaped at her in shock.

"Excellent," Annabella said. "That's settled then. You don't need to bring anything. I will provide whatever we need. Shall we say two hours after sundown?"

"But Khatun..." Aswad stammered.

"But we will need the map," Annabella added. "Or whatever it is that you use to find Iram."

"But...but how...?"

"Never mind," Annabella said. "But you'll be racking up your frequent flyer points."

You do give points, don't you? she added privately, ignoring Aswad's look of total incomprehension.

Oh, jolly witty...

The girls were alone again in their chamber, with time to kill.

"So what did happen to your parents?" Vivienne asked idly. Annabella was silent for a long time.

"I don't know," she said at last.

"So don't tell me then," Vivienne said, starting to become offended.

"No. No, it's not like that," Annabella said in a low voice. "I really don't know. One day, they just disappeared. They vanished. They never came home from work. They just disappeared. They...abandoned me. Nobody knows where they went or what they're doing. They just abandoned me." Vivienne stared at her.

"You're joking?" she said wonderingly.

"No," Annabella said. "I wish I were." At that moment she looked small, lost and totally forlorn.

"But that's terrible," Vivienne said in a rush. "You poor thing..." She moved across the cushions and opened her arms, but Annabella made a little gesture.

"It's all right," she said. "I'm used to it."

So that's what happened, Basil interposed. *And you are not used to it. You should jolly well let her hug you.*

Who asked you?

It'll make you feel better...

Mind your own business.

But madam mistress, shining pearl, you are my business...

Which is exactly why this has to stop.

"You're fighting with Basil, aren't you?" Vivienne said. "I can tell."

Annabella made no reply. She was thinking. Something was not quite right, off key, out of tune...odd.

What do you mean, I am your business? she demanded.

Err... I'm your slave, ergo you are my business...quod erat jolly well demonstrandum.

No. That's not it. You meant something else.

What else could I jolly well mean?

I don't know, Annabella said crisply. I hate to think.

Madam mistress, mine, I assure you...

"What's happening?" Vivienne asked. "What's going on?"

"I don't know," Annabella said. "But something is. Something's weird..."

"You mean apart from everything." Vivienne laughed and waved her arms, embracing their surroundings and all that had happened to them. Annabella smiled, despite herself, but her eyes were searching the room.

Basil! Basil! There was no answer. Basil! I know you're there. Up there in the corner. I want to know what you're trying to hide from me... Apart from yourself.

Hiding? What could I possibly be hiding?

I don't know. But you are, aren't you? You're hiding something.

How could I jolly well hide anything from you? Am I not your slave?

Are you? Annabella said, struck by a sudden thought. *Are you really?*

Yes I am, Basil said emphatically. *Abso-jolly-lutely.*

"This is very rude," Vivienne said. "If you going to go on fighting you might at least let me join in..."

"Sorry," Annabella said. "But it's a bit private." She turned her attention back to Basil.

So if you really are my slave, give me another straight answer. What are you hiding?

There was a long silence.

I can't, Basil said at last. He sounded very uncomfortable.

You can't or you won't?

I jolly well can't. It's not in your best interests.

Annabella groaned aloud in exasperation.

"What on earth is going on?" Vivienne demanded.

"I don't know," Annabella said shortly. "He won't tell me."

"Basil!" Vivienne commanded. "You come down here and show yourself." The merest wisp of slightly thicker air, high in the corner, took on shape and body and reluctantly presented itself before them, like some errant child.

"Now," Vivienne said, sitting up straight. "Fess up. Why are you upsetting my friend, Annabella?"

The vague apparition before them turned slightly pink with embarrassment at having allowed himself to be so badly compromised.

"I jolly well can't tell you," he said, deeply annoyed. "There are things going on, that's all. I can't lie, not to my mistress..."

"That makes a change..." Annabella snapped.

"...Not about this, but I can't jolly well tell you either." Annabella and Vivienne stared at each other, but beyond that, no matter how much they bullied him, they could not get Basil to say another thing.

At the appointed hour, a servant came to conduct them to Aswad and Darius. The two were dressed in travelling clothes, Aswad glum and Darius barely managing to suppress his excitement. Both had scimitars strapped to their waists and both had a short, horn bow with a quiver of lethal-looking arrows. Annabella and Vivienne each had a thick cloak draped over an arm, courtesy of Basil.

"Khatun..." Aswad said with an attempt at urbanity. "And Lady..." Annabella noted sourly that Darius and Vivienne were exchanging heated glances and trying to manoeuvre themselves into touching distance while making it appear accidental.

"So," Annabella said, for some reason feeling almost as glum as Aswad looked. "How are we supposed to find this place?"

For an answer, Aswad delved deep within his robes and from his breast reverently produced a small package wrapped in many layers of black, figured silk.

Ah, Basil said. Just as I jolly well thought.

What? Annabella said.

You'll see, Basil replied comfortably.

You really are becoming totally irritating.

Becoming? Only jolly well becoming?

All right, Annabella snapped. *You are the most irritating djinni I have ever...met.*

Oh good. I wouldn't want to be like all the other djinn you know...

Vivienne and Darius were gazing intently at Aswad's packet. Darius couldn't contain himself.

"Is that it, father?" Darius asked. "Is that the secret, you...took?" He was either unable or disinclined to mask the disdain in his voice.

Aswad ignored him.

"You see, Khatun," he said. "I keep faith..."

"I see some silk," Annabella said. Aswad loosed the tie and reverently folded back the folds of cloth to reveal a small, open-work silver orb which cupped a clear crystal of many facets. There seemed to be a faint golden luminescence glowing at its centre..

"What happens?" Annabella asked. "How does it work?"

"As one draws nearer to the great city," Aswad said, "so the crystal glows brighter and brighter. When the radiance is such that no man may bear to look, why then we are there, yet if we are to see the city of columns then look we must."

There was silence as his words were digested.

Does this sound right? Annabella asked Basil.

Pretty much, Basil said. *One must be blind to truly see...*

And that sounds like absolute nonsense...

"Where does it come from?" Vivienne asked. "Where did you get it?"

"I...discovered it," Aswad said reluctantly.

He means he jolly well stole it from a jolly old tomb, Basil commented.

Well, good for him, Annabella said and then added aloud:

"So let's get the show on the road." Aswad and Darius looked at her, puzzled by the expression. She ignored them.

The carpet...?

But of course, Basil said. Annabella spread her arms in a sweeping gesture and Basil's souped-up carpet materialised and unrolled itself before the disbelieving eyes of the two males, hovering at a convenient height for boarding.

"Please..." Annabella said. She stepped up and seated herself, leaving Vivienne to do with Darius as she would. "Sit here, beside me," she said to Aswad. "You navigate, I'll drive." She made a motion with her hand and the carpet rose into the air, turning towards the doors which the major-domo hurriedly flung wide.

"Hold tight," Annabella said, and with that, the carpet whooshed off into the evening.

Outside it was clear, starry night and as they circled to gain height, Baghdad spread out beneath them, the loom of shadowy buildings speckled with lamps and cooking fires. As they climbed higher, a faint breeze set the surface of the canals and the great river dancing in the moonlight. At one point Annabella glanced behind her and was amused to see Darius clutching at Vivienne's hand in pretended fright while she, for her part, was all soothing insouciance, experienced magic carpet traveller that she now was. It put Annabella something in mind of a hostess on an airliner.

"Where to?" Annabella asked Aswad over the rush of their wind of passage. For answer, he held up the orb, the golden glow much clearer in the dark, and pointed south. The carpet banked smoothly beneath them and settled down on course.

The last glimmer of Baghdad had faded behind them, the moon had set and they were now wrapped in a velvet, black blanket only relieved by the blaze of stars overhead and the odd speck of light on the ground from a village or homestead as they passed.

Basil, Annabella said thoughtfully. *Back at my uncle's house, just before we left, you were absolutely determined never to bring me out here. Then just before those people arrived to fetch V, you completely changed your mind. Just like that. In a flash. One second you're all no, no, no, never, never, never and the next instant we're rushed off to the middle of nowhere...*

Baghdad is hardly the middle of nowhere.

And then back at Aswad's, Annabella continued, refusing to be diverted, *you let slip that there were things going on you couldn't tell me about.*

Did I? Basil said dismissively.

Yes you did. You know you did. There was a long, long silence.

Basil! Annabella demanded. *Tell me what's going on.* Still, there was no answer. Annabella was just about to launch into a tirade, when finally he did speak.

You must have misunderstood, Basil said, for once totally without embellishment which, Annabella realised later, was extremely telling. But for the moment, nothing more could she get from him.

Chapter 8

One entire bench in the workroom was strewn with scrolls and tablets. Each purported to give the one true recipe for al iksir, but each was so shrouded in code, ambiguities and double meanings that the next was more indecipherable than the last. It was stated many times that the secret was so simple that any fool might aspire to manufacture the white drops, but then this so simple secret skittered away deep into convulsions and complexities devised to protect it from all but the most subtle of minds.

Hassan-i Sabbāh, the Old Man of the Mountain, also known as the Emir of Evil, gazed in frustration at the rolls of parchment, each one of which had cost him king's ransom, and then turned again to the apparatus which had evolved from his studies. A tetrahedron, the height of a man, rose before him. It was constructed of ancient copper pipe, hand beaten and joined by plumbers of the last age and stolen from a pharaoh's tomb where it had been intended to ease his eternal ablutions in the afterlife. Each of the three corners of the base just touched a circular channel graved into the stone floor. In the exact centre, suspended on a golden chain, hung a much smaller but solid tetrahedron – a pyramid within a pyramid within a circle – this one made from solid gold and the size of a man's heart.

The emir took a pail and half filled the channel with water. He then unstopped a large amphora, bearing the stamp of the Byzantine Empire, contraband that had cost the lives of five men. Working with greatest care he dribbled some of the contents on to the surface of the water and watched as it flowed evenly around the circumference. He then retired to an alcove, stripped naked and re-robed himself in garments of purest white, veiling his face and head and ensuring that every inch of his skin was similarly covered.

He re-emerged and prostrated himself before the pyramids to pray, to beg, every demon he knew or could imagine for their aid. Prayers and incantations were not called for in any of his recipes, but he was a truly desperate man.

Finally, he took a yard-long taper, lit it from the hearth and touched it to the channel in the floor. Instantly, the Greek fire shot to life, the flames leaping as high as the stone ceiling far above and completely obscuring the double pyramid in a curtain of shimmering violence. The heat was so intense it was as though a volcano had erupted and the emir staggered backwards to cower in a corner. The cloth that had shielded his hand was charred and blackened, and the rest of his garb shimmered faintly brown, like the skin of a chicken beginning to glaze as it roasts.

The flame was short lived, flaring for less than a minute, but even so the room now felt like a furnace. The emir hastily shed his robes, stripping down to his loincloth. Sweat dripped freely, greasily, marking his footprints on the stone floor, only to evaporate in an instant in the super-heated atmosphere of the room.

The temperature diminished at last to the point where the emir could cautiously step across the channel. The gold of the inner tetrahedron was now coated with a white

powder that had exuded from within. He took a golden blade and working with greatest care scraped every grain of the deposit into a golden basin held beneath.

With the powder safely captured, he made a sketchy job of wiping himself clean and dressed.

Thus far, the emir had progressed many times, so often indeed it was almost routine. The texts were all agreed on this, the fundamental step, and once he had overcome the difficulties – albeit enormous – of procuring the necessary components, the emir had found it relatively simple to proceed to this point. It was what came next that had defeated him time and again and driven him so deep into despair that he had risked the terrible consequences of resorting to the Other World.

Of itself, the white powder was useless, of value only when combined with the reagent that would convert it into the white drops of al iksir, the white drops which the emir craved to the exclusion of all else. It was here in their description of the reagent that his many texts descended into blatant obfuscation and malicious confusion. He was certain after much experimentation and trial and error that he had the greater part of the formula correct, however, one ingredient still eluded him. Two possibilities remained to him: the flask with its nameless fluid he now held in his hand, which might yet prove the secret; alternatively he must persuade the future to divulge its knowledge of the past.

Even 'ifrits could not raise the dead, so the skills of those who had gone before him were lost, but the future was another matter. The future was there to be plundered by those with the courage to defy the Other World.

The flask in the emir's hand, the flask which was his last remaining hope but one, contained the heart's blood of a male infant born precisely 24 hours before the first ray of the new moon gleamed on the knife that excised his heart. The immense difficulty of obtaining such a human sacrifice had cost yet another king's ransom.

The emir took a measure of his basic formula and added five drops of the precious blood, each drop drifting in a lazy swirl for a moment before it was absorbed by the clear fluid. He then approached the golden bowl containing his hard-won white powder and using the baby's skull as a beaker he added a thin stream of the adulterated formula.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then the workroom was rent by a shattering scream, the caterwauling of a new-born, tortured and abused beyond all conscience. The emir clapped his hands to his ears but continued to gaze at the contents of the bowl. Would the liquid resolve into the white drops, the true white drops, or would it not? However, the powder simply dissolved and the fluid remained obstinately clear.

With a great oath the emir dashed the skull to the floor and the heart-breaking screaming ceased.

Far down in his deepest dungeon, Hassan-i Sabbāh, the Old Man of the Mountain, also known as the Emir of Evil, took the blue vial from the sleeve of his robe and allowed two drops of the serum it contained to spill to the cauldron below, one after another. The first set the surface darkly shimmering, the second stilled it instantly,

then turned it cloudy. Finally, the opacity cleared and the emir was left to gaze at a scene he could scarcely begin to comprehend but which he knew now was his one remaining hope of achieving al iksir, of achieving salvation, by which he meant salvation from death.

Above all else, the emir was terrified of dying, or more precisely of what would follow his passing over that great divide. He was horrified by the fire pits into which he would be hurled, pits filled with flames the height of the sky, eternally dancing on beds of flowing lava, flames that seared with the most exquisite of agonies yet never consumed. He was appalled at the thought of the monstrous red crabs dripping blood that would tear the flesh from his bones and pick them clean, flesh eternally renewed to be devoured anew. He was petrified of the demons who would flay his skin, roast him on red-hot griddles and then quench his flaming body in pools of molten brass, time after time without number. And most of all, he was paralysed with fear at the thought of the vengeance that would be wreaked upon him by all those thousands he had already sent to hell when at last he would be forced to stand before them.

He must not die. He, Hassan-i Sabbāh, could not be allowed to die. It was as simple as that. And these people in their iron cage staring unknowing from the surface of the cauldron must be made to understand.

Dawn found the travellers in the middle of a vast, sandy plain, not quite desert but not quite anything else either. With Annabella doing her best imitation of a pilot, Basil brought his carpet down in a long, gliding turn, finally landing next to a patch of thorn scrub.

Do we really have to stop? Annabella asked. She was tired but unwilling, somehow, to break the momentum of their passage.

I told you, we can't jolly well fly during the day. Basil also sounded tired, and grumpy with it. Do djinn get tired, Annabella wondered? And if so, do they sleep...or what?

So what are we supposed to do now?

You tell me.

A tent?

So wiggle your jolly old fingers, or something.

Annabella realised that the others were all watching her expectantly and she did just that. Instantly, a large, dun-coloured tent materialised before them. The shading was so subtle that ten paces away it was all but invisible. She stepped off the carpet and as the others joined her, watched it roll itself up and vanish. Then she held aside the entrance flap and ushered the others within.

Inside they found a spacious carpeted area, furnished with comfortable piles of cushions. It was divided into two rooms by a heavy cloth partition, at present rolled up and tied to the ceiling.

"Make yourselves at home," Annabella said. "And I'll do something about food..."

"And drink, please," Vivienne said. "Definitely drink. I'm parched..."

Aswad and Darius for the moment were speechless. Though they had been surrounded by magic ever since the advent of the two girls, still they were amazed at

each new manifestation. Wonderingly, they sat down only to be further astonished as platters of food materialised before them, plus Vivienne's longed-for liquid.

"I would like to see the crystal, please," Annabella said to Aswad when they had finished. He took the silken packet from his breast and unwrapped it. The golden glow within the orb was appreciably brighter even by the light of day.

"Closer," he said. "But still far to go."

They set off again at nightfall. The day had been hot and windy, thoroughly unpleasant outside but reasonably comfortable within the tent, which although not exactly air-conditioned somehow seemed to exert a cooling influence. For the most part they slept, with the girls on one side of the partition and Darius and his father on the other. What conversation there was, was muted and stilted in the way of people unwilling to expose themselves before strangers. Annabella and Basil, of course, could chat on perfectly happily without anybody being any the wiser, but neither had much inclination to talk. They woke towards evening and Basil provided another meal.

"Is this breakfast or dinner, do you think?" Vivienne asked vivaciously and with a coquettish glance towards Darius. For his part, he looked uneasily at his father. Aswad, however, only had eyes for the food.

I think I'm going to be sick, Annabella remarked sourly to Basil, despite having given Vivienne her blessing.

Don't whinge to me, Basil replied equally sourly. *You're the one who abso-jolly-lutely insisted she had to come.* Annabella grimaced.

The wind dropped with the sun and by the time they emerged into the early evening gloom, the chill of the autumn night on the edge of the desert was beginning to grip. Annabella, through Basil, produced the carpet and then, at Vivienne's suggestion, extra coverings to keep them warm.

Are you thinking what I'm thinking? Annabella demanded of Basil.

Well, Basil said judiciously, *it is going to be jolly cold...*

And I really am going to be sick...

They climbed aboard and set off. A while later Annabella glanced back and noted acidly that it had taken only minutes for her prediction to come true. What had been two humps behind her when they started had now coalesced into one. There was also a murmur of conversation and by straining her ears Annabella could hear something of what was being said. Darius was probing Vivienne's history and Annabella grinned as what began as polite disbelief rapidly became frank incredulity. From the future? Hundreds of years into the future? Go on then, what's the future like... Tell me all about it... And Vivienne tried to, her explanations becoming more and more convoluted as one incredible thing led to another even more implausible.

Aswad was also listening now and Annabella could see the whites of his eyes as they grew wider and wider.

"She is perhaps Scheherazade?" he muttered to Annabella as Vivienne drew breath while trying to explain the difference between a train and an automobile. "Certainly, Khatun, her tales would keep any shah from taking her head."

As Vivienne launched into a valiant attempt to describe what television was and how it worked, Annabella stopped listening. There was not yet a moon, but the starlight was so bright that she was able to register the gradual change from the arid plain to the sand dunes of the Rub' al Khali proper, the vast empty quarter of Arabia.

Basil, Annabella said reflectively. How old are you?

None of your jolly business, he said after an appreciable pause.

Come on Basil. Simple question...

Very old, he said at last.

But exactly how old? Sixty, seventy...?

Older...

Ninety?

Older...

You can't be a hundred? That's ancient.

Older, much older.

Annabella paused. *How much older?* she asked.

I don't remember...

Oh come on. Everyone knows how old they are.

It's jolly well true. I don't remember.

A thousand? You surely can't be a thousand years old?

Older, Basil repeated. Much older...

Annabella stopped to think. When you came right down to it, she knew next to nothing about this strange presence that had taken over her life. Well, perhaps that was a bit strong. Basil hadn't exactly taken over, but things had certainly changed unimaginably since he had come on the scene, which led Annabella to wonder again whether their initial meeting had been quite so accidental as Basil maintained.

Basil, she said. What are you made of?

And aren't we beastly inquisitive all of a sudden?

Come on, Basil. I want you to tell me things. I don't know anything about you. I want to understand. What are you made of?

Fire, he said shortly.

Fire...? You're made of fire?

Indeed, madam mistress mine. Where there's smoke, there's jolly old fire, and that's jolly old me. Leaves a burning impression, don't you know?

And your powers? What can you do, exactly?

Refuse to answer jolly stupid questions.

It's not a stupid question. Why is it a stupid question?

Rude then. Rude, damn rude and abso-jolly-lutely discourteous.

Rubbish, Annabella said stoutly. If you're my slave, I'm entitled to know what you can do. So tell me. That's an order. There was a long silence.

Well?

If you can think it, Basil said at last, I can pretty much do it. Within limits...

What limits?

Crowd control, for example, Basil said unhappily. Not my best feature. I told you. The eyes... And transport... Restricted passenger capacity you might say...

Annabella mulled that over for some time, then changed tack.

So, if you're thousands of years old, she said, how many times have you been married?

Just the once, Basil said absently.

And her name was...?

I told you.

But I've forgotten...

Hazan.

Which means...what again?

Autumn... Like now. It was clear from Basil's uninterested tone that he had no idea of the trap about to spring shut. Annabella pounced.

Gotcha! she said gleefully. Got you, got you, got you.

What? Basil was suddenly seized with caution.

Gotcha, Annabella repeated. You said your wife's name was Nazan, not Hazan. You said that meant vain, proud, hard to handle, not Autumn... You haven't been married at all, have you? Not if you can't even remember your wife's name.

Ah...

Have you? Annabella insisted. More lies. Everything you told me is all one great big fib. Isn't it?

Ah...

Isn't it?

There was a long long silence. Annabella could hear Vivienne and Darius bickering away about what was and was not possible in the future, but she had attention only for the djinni.

Basil, she said at last. Confess. I know you've been lying to me. Great, huge whoppers. So now, I order you to tell me the truth. You weren't trapped under that jar, were you?

No, Basil said at last, his voice subdued.

Of course you weren't. Why did I ever think you were, with all the other stuff you can do? Stupid of me, stupid, stupid, stupid. And somehow you did lure me to that cabinet where you were hiding, didn't you? she said.

Yes, Basil murmured.

But why?

I was sent to protect you, Basil said, his voice firming.

To protect me? From what?

'Ifrits and ghulan.

Ghulan? Annabella repeated, puzzled.

The plural of ghul.

'Ifrits and ghuls...?

Ghulan.

But what on earth would 'ifrits and ghulan want with me? Annabella said, incredulously.

We don't know. But we do know they're jolly well hunting you.

There was another very long silence as Annabella struggled to digest what Basil was saying.

Who is we? Annabella said at last.

Sheikh al Yazid...

And...

Me...

And...

Other Marid. Here and there. Scattered through time.

Basil, Annabella said in a very neutral voice. You're not really my slave either, are you?

Yes, Basil said quickly. Abso-jolly-lutely, worse luck.

But...

It was an accident. You were supposed to be greedy like every other human I've ever jolly well met. You were supposed to bargain me up to three wishes and then let me out. Jolly quid pro quo, don't you see? But no. You had to be generous, self-sacrificing, noble... And all those other jolly horrible qualities. I'm your slave, all right, and I damn well don't like it any more than you do.

But why? Why was I supposed to get three wishes?

To give me an excuse to tag along. To jolly well protect you.

But you could have done that without giving me three wishes, Annabella objected.

Would you have believed I really existed, could do what I do? No, of course not, Basil said gloomily, answering his own question. *And I can't protect you unless you believe I jolly well exist. Timeshifting, for example. Can't be done unless...*

Annabella suddenly interrupted.

Basil, why wouldn't you tell me this before? And don't you think you should tell me everything? she demanded. *Don't you think I have a right to know what's really going on?*

Um...

Basil!

We don't know.

Rubbish. Or at least tell me what you do know.

We know 'ifrits and the ghulan they control are hunting you.

And...

That's pretty much it.

So why wouldn't you tell me that before? Why all the secrecy? Why all the nonsense?

We didn't want to frighten you...

Frighten me...!

Terrify you, then, if you believed me. And if you didn't believe me it would have been worse. I wouldn't have been able to protect you at all.

I don't know that I believe you now, Annabella said slowly.

See?

How do you know they're hunting me? she asked after a moment.

We watch them.

Why?

So that we jolly well know what they're up to, of course.

But why do you need to know?

To stop them.

To stop them what?

Taking over the world.

But why would they be hunting me? Annabella had returned to what seemed to her to be the crucial point. Basil chose to answer obliquely.

Tell me about your parents, he said.

My parents...! I told you, they disappeared. They abandoned me...

Maybe they didn't have a choice, Basil said, quite gently for him. Did anyone ever consider that?

Of course they did, Annabella said slowly. There were police inquiries and everything. But there was no trace. Nothing suspicious. No sign of anything...kidnapping...not a clue. They just vanished. No reason. The police said it was almost impossible for that to happen unless they meant it to. They just abandoned me, left me to Great-uncle Warwick.

So why are you being hunted? Basil asked, his voice still uncharacteristically gentle. Why did an 'ifrit follow that car up to your great uncle's place, just before we left? There was a long silence. Annabella wasn't surprised that Basil had confirmed what she already suspected had caused his sudden change of heart about leaving, but the implications were difficult to absorb.

You don't think...? she said at last, almost inaudibly.

Don't you? Basil replied firmly. There was another very long silence. Annabella shivered and not only because of the chill night air flowing past them. She huddled deeper into the rug she had drawn about her. The blackness through which they were flying, even with its glittering stars, suddenly seemed deeply alarming.

What are your parents? Basil asked at last. What do they do?

Research, Annabella said slowly. They're scholars...historians. At least they were....

And what were they working on? Annabella shook her head.

I don't know, she said. No idea. Something old...?

So, Basil said. *We know that they've disappeared and we know that 'ifrifs are hunting you. And with all due respect madam mistress, shining pearl, they're not doing that because you're the irresistible temptress of the age.*

You think it's to do with my parents?

Don't you? Basil repeated.

What on earth could 'ifrifs want with my parents? Annabella asked. *That's crazy. Whoever heard of 'ifrifs in the 21st century? It's stupid, just stupid. Impossible.*

Am I impossible? Basil asked innocently. Annabella smiled inwardly.

In every possible way, she said. But that doesn't answer the question. What can 'ifrifs want with my parents? Basil was suddenly serious again.

Probably nothing, he said. Not for themselves. They're probably working for someone.

Working for someone?

It happens. Humans learn how to summon, how to control or at least, think they control we of the Other World. It always ends badly.

Terrific, Annabella said. That makes me feel so much better.

It nearly always ends badly, Basil amended.

So who could the 'ifrifs be working for? Annabella asked after a moment. *Surely there can't be so many people who can control them?*

More than you might imagine, Basil said gloomily. People will dabble and a little knowledge is such a dangerous thing. Damn frightening, actually. When I think of some of the things they do...

Who? Annabella insisted, refusing to be diverted. *Who are they working for?* There was a lengthy silence. At last Basil spoke.

I don't know, he said reluctantly.

But how could they find my parents? How could they find me?

Your parents? I don't know that either. But you... You had their picture beside your bed.

Their picture? Annabella said disbelievingly.

Pictures have power. Abso-jolly-lutely they do. Primitives know. It's why they fear cameras. You civilised moderns know nothing. They followed the picture... And they found you.

Basil, Annabella said. I'm frightened. What will 'ifrifs do to me if they catch me?

Nothing I've any jolly intention of telling you about. Best if we don't let them get you. His voice suddenly reverted from the serious to the acidulous tone to which she was most accustomed. Still want to jolly well get rid of me, then?

Abso-jolly-lutely, Annabella snapped and then, more thoughtfully: So why are you letting me do this? Trying to separate us, I mean.

I seem to remember you jolly well ordering me to.

But that's not it, is it? You think this...quest is as good a way as any of keeping me on the run...?

So astute, Basil said admiringly. So sharp. Better watch out you don't jolly well cut yourself.

A new thought occurred to Annabella.

You say 'ifrits are after me, but aren't we supposed to be on our way to see one, Lilis...?

Lilis is not an 'ifrit. She is a ghulah and she's not involved directly, at least I don't jolly well think she is.

But she'll just suck out our spirits anyway... Great, absolutely fantastic... Why do 'ifrits want to take over the world?

They don't want to, particularly, but it's what will happen if we don't jolly well keep stamping on them. It's the nature of the beast. And if we ever let evil get past the tipping point, then there will never be anything but evil.

Annabella had been so absorbed in her conversation with Basil that she had forgotten all about the others. Slowly, she began to be aware of them again. Vivienne and Darius were still bickering away behind her, but Aswad, no longer sitting motionless beside her, was reaching into his breast. He withdrew the silken package and carefully unwrapped it. The crystal was now glowing brightly.

"Khatun," he said. "If it pleases you, turn to the right." Annabella, without comment, made a suitable motion with her hand and Basil did the honours. After five minutes, it seemed that the light in the crystal had diminished slightly. Aswad nodded with satisfaction.

"Now," he said. "Fly there." He pointed back over his shoulder and the carpet banked smoothly round. They were now again flying at about 90 degrees to their original course but in the opposite direction. The glow first brightened then began to fade as it had before. Aswad nodded again and indicated their original course.

"This is indeed the true line," he said with satisfaction.

The murmur of conversation behind them had ceased when they began manoeuvring. Now Darius spoke:

"Are we close, father?" he asked. "Are we there yet?"

Aswad glanced at the lightning of the sky to the east.

"This time tomorrow," he said. "We should be there this time tomorrow."

Chapter 9

The vapour coiled and swirled, bulged and billowed, and finally swelled to a form deeply ominous. Hassan-i Sabbāh, Old Man of the Mountain, Emir of Evil, stepped hurriedly backwards.

"Well?" he rasped. "Speak?"

"They are gone from Baghdad," the 'ifrit hissed.

"Gone?" the emir said, his voice rising.

"Again she escaped." The 'ifrit remained impassive.

"Escaped!" the emir howled. For all his caution when dealing with the Other World, he was unable to restrain his fury. "How could she escape, again?"

"She was traced to the palace of Aswad, the tomb robber. Minions were dispatched. Before they could act, another caused the palace to vanish." The emir struggled to regain his composure. To show emotion was weakness, and weakness could quickly prove fatal. His control over the 'ifrit depended on his control over himself. And there was a new factor here to be taken into consideration.

"This other," the emir said, carefully modulating his voice. "I was led to believe this interfering other was just an imp of little account, yet he has so much power?"

"He is an al Yazid." The emir was unable to suppress a tremor.

"The Sheikh " he whispered.

"The son."

"You are sure?"

"We are sure. No djinn save those two have sufficient strength for such as that, and the Sheikh yet resides in his cavern."

"How could they know?" The 'ifrit gave an impression of shrugging.

"You summon me through the aether. I, Iblis, come. If I am summoned, the Sheikh also hears. He cannot not hear. It is in the ordering of our world. So he sends his son to watch."

"You have said nothing of this."

"In your ignorance, your vanity, you have not asked. You dabble with forces you understand sufficient only to compel my passing obedience. Have a care, Hassan-i Sabbāh, have great care. I, Iblis, must presently do your bidding but for how long and on what terms? And what will happen should ever you cease to command me?"

The emir fought to disguise another tremor. "How much do the al Yazids know?" he asked, finally.

"That we seek the girl. So much is obvious."

"Nothing else?"

"How can I know what they know? Yet, if they knew more would they not have acted already?"

The emir was scarcely mollified but with that had to be content.

"Find her," he commanded. "Find the girl now!"

They came down in a sea of sand, the frozen waves marching away in regular ranks in every direction to the distant horizon. An angry dawn was slashing the sky blood red as though already furious at the sharav that would surely come.

A desert hawk screamed.

"What was that?" Vivienne asked nervously. The sound had set her heart pounding.

"Just a hawk," Darius said, before his father could answer.

The scream came again, harsh, deeply unsettling.

Is it? Annabella asked Basil. *Just a hawk?*

Let's jolly hope so, Basil said.

What does that mean? Annabella demanded. *What else could it be?* But Basil would say nothing more.

Their tent was conjured into being and as they disappeared inside, already the sharav was beginning – the scorching, scouring desert wind that could abrade a body to bones within hours. First a grain of sand, then a whisper, then trickles, began to flow across the surface of the dunes. The frozen sea was on the move. The force of the sharav increased with shocking speed and in minutes the air was so filled with flying sand that the sky had vanished and it was impossible to see more than a handspan in front. Inside, the walls of the tent rocked and swayed alarmingly, threatening to collapse at any moment and expose them to the roaring avalanche outside, or so it seemed.

We are safe, I hope? Annabella said to Basil.

I should jolly well think so, Basil said. *From the storm, at least.*

Basil, Annabella demanded. *What are you not saying? What are you hiding?* There was a long silence.

Well?

At last Basil spoke. *I think they might have found us,* he said reluctantly.

Who?

The 'ifrits. Whoever it is that's hunting you.

You mean the hawk?

That wasn't a hawk.

Outside, the wind increased to a howl but once it became clear that the tent would withstand the storm they began to relax, all except Annabella. Aswad produced the orb from his breast. The crystal was now glowing so brightly that it shone through the heavy black wrapping as though it were tissue. Aswad made no attempt to remove the covering.

"We are here," he said with satisfaction. "We have arrived."

Darius looked at him with a strange expression, his lip curling slightly.

"And so you are to start plundering again..." he said. It wasn't a question.

"Soon," Aswad said, mistaking his son completely and his gaze far away. "But first we must eat and sleep."

"Sounds good to me," Vivienne said.

Annabella was dozing fitfully when something brought her fully awake. It would have to be about the middle of the day, she thought muzzily, and wondered what had woken her. It was the wind, she realised at last. It had ceased. It was no longer howling outside. The walls of the tent no longer shook and flapped as though on the point of imminent collapse. The gale had suddenly stopped.

She crept to the entrance, careful not to wake the others, and peered out. The air was still thick with dust and the landscape seemed quite different to what she remembered from only hours before. The sun shone hazily high overhead, little more than a reddish glow, and despite the heat of the day, Annabella shivered.

I don't like this, she said to Basil, who had been standing guard at the door as they slept. *I don't like this at all*. There was a crackling of menace in the air, imminent threat. Annabella felt the hair on the back of her neck lifting and it was nothing to do with the static electricity generated by the dry heat of the storm.

I don't like it either, Basil said soberly. *The wind jolly well shouldn't have dropped like that. It should have blown for days*.

What does it mean?

That they're coming.

What can we do?

Fight...

But can you? Annabella asked.

I don't know, Basil said honestly. *It depends how many they are, how powerful...*

They fell silent, staring out into the thick murk.

Basil, Annabella said at last. *I want to thank you for being here to look after me. I really do. And I'm sorry it all went wrong, that I enslaved you... I didn't mean to. And I am very grateful. Really grateful.*

Time enough, madam mistress mine, to be grateful when I save you. If I save you... Basil sounded uncertain in a way that Annabella could never have imagined. She didn't know which was the more alarming, his words or his manner.

Basil, she said slowly. *Are you afraid?*

Yes, he said with stark simplicity.

For me?

For both of us.

For both of us...? Surely, they can't hurt you?

They can jolly well kill me, Basil said forcefully. *To fight them, I will have to take form, and my form is vulnerable, just like yours. Of course they can kill me, and I don't like to think of what they might do to you.*

But you can kill them too...?

Maybe, Basil said.

Shouldn't we wake the others? Annabella said, struck by a sudden thought.

They can't help, Basil said. *Let them sleep as long as they can.*

They fell silent then and waited passively for whatever would come to pass. Annabella found herself wishing that Basil had a hand she could hold. All the weird happenings of the past days and the grim future now confronting her, horrible as it promised to be, were threatening to overwhelm her. I wish I were home, she caught herself thinking. The mouldering old manor house safe in its quiet country setting suddenly seemed deeply alluring, even with Great-uncle Warwick and Mrs Milliken in disapproving attendance,.

Over there, Basil said. Annabella peered in the direction indicated. A sand dune seemed to be changing shape. Another movement caught the corner of her eye.

And there, she said pointing. A second dune was mounding into a great hump. *And there*, she added pointing at a third.

Three! Basil said. *Three...!*

Annabella watched with horrified fascination as the three dunes, one to their centre and one on each flank, heaped high, changing shape and form, stretching, rearing, until what confronted them were three giant scorpions made of sand, each twice the height of a man. Their stings soared even taller, arching high over their backs, held poised to attack. One by one, they turned their sightless, staring, malevolent eyes towards Annabella.

Instinctively, she shrank back and sought to flee inside the tent. But what earthly protection could the flimsy cloth offer against monsters such as these? She caught herself and forced her trembling body to turn back, to face them. Her courage did not go unnoticed.

Bravely done, mistress mine, Basil said. She turned to him expecting the familiar tendril of smoke but was astonished to see that he too was changing form. Before her eyes he thickened and swelled, gaining shape, form and substance, until he stood a warrior, armed with scimitar and shield. He, also, was now twice the height of a man but even so, it would plainly be a most unequal contest.

You can't fight them, Basil, Annabella said urgently from behind him. *They're too many...too strong. We must flee... The carpet...*

No good, unfortunately, Basil said. *Jolly unfortunately... They can follow, and it will be worse...*

But you'll be killed... And I don't want you being killed for me...

It will be an honour and a jolly privilege, Basil said quickly with something of his usual bite.

Don't you give me that Oxford gentlemen nonsense... Annabella snapped. Inspiration flared in her brain like a flash of lightning. *Iram*, she gasped. *Can we escape to Iram? Can they follow there...?*

However, as she spoke, the preliminary stand-off ended. The three massive scorpions finished their baleful inspection of the duo confronting them and began to move ponderously forward. In turn, Basil moved warily out to meet them.

It might work, he said as he went. *I'll try to hold them off while you get out.*

No! Annabella shouted at his back. *We all go...* And with that she dashed into the tent.

"Wake up! Wake up!" she hollered at the three recumbent forms. "We're being attacked. Hurry! Hurry!" She raced straight to Aswad and began to shake and pummel him.

"The crystal..." she yelled in his ear. "Get the crystal... We have to get to Iram, right now...! Right now...!"

Dazed, Aswad sat up and then catching Annabella's urgency reached inside his robes. Vivienne and Darius were both now staring at them, confused, bewildered.

"We're being attacked," Annabella said again. "We have to escape to Iram. It's our only chance."

"Who's attacking us...?" Aswad started to say, but Annabella cut him off. Outside, they could hear tumult and commotion as the battle began in earnest.

"Listen! Listen!" Annabella exclaimed. "We have to go right now. What do we have to do?"

Aswad hesitated. He had been hoping, planning, somehow to thwart this termagant who had descended upon him without warning and who threatened to ruin his comfortable life, the life he had struggled so hard to win, the life he had stolen, scratched and cheated for, the life for which he had risked everything. He had held it in mind that he and Darius with a little cunning would be able to spirit themselves away to Iram, leaving the others behind, but now... There was an unearthly shriek from outside the thin cloth wall of the tent, a note that was somehow both impossibly deep and impossibly high all at once. It was like nothing any of them had ever heard before. On the instant, Aswad made up his mind.

"When I reveal the crystal," he said. "You must stare into the heart of the light. You must not flinch. You must not blink. However unbearable you find it, yet bear it you must..." He began to loosen the bonds about the silk package, the flare from the crystal playing weirdly through the thick layers of cloth and about his fingers. "Are you ready...?"

"Wait," Annabella said. "Wait till I come back." She dashed for the door and failed to notice Vivienne following behind, as far as the opening.

Outside, one of the giant scorpions was lying dead, its head separated from its body. Already the sand that formed it was trickling back into the anonymity of the desert. The other two monsters, however, were still very much alive and were working together to pin Basil between them. One of the great stings lanced forward and Basil parried with his scimitar. Smoke and sand met with a deafening clash and sparks rained down. Again the sting lanced forward. Again Basil turned it aside with his sword, but he appeared to slip slightly as he swung, exposing his back to the second scorpion. Annabella screamed inwardly.

Behind you! she shrieked. She was too late. The sting, barbed and already dripping venom, struck with the force of a lightning bolt. Annabella was certain it must be the end, that Basil was finished, and in that fleeting moment an impossible number of thoughts flashed through her brain.

Basil dead meant that she and Vivienne were abandoned here in the desert.

They could never return to their own world.

It didn't matter. They were about to die too.

But Basil wasn't dead. As swiftly as the scorpion had lashed out, Basil had moved faster and the sting slid by harmlessly to one side. In its thwarted rage the scorpion, or rather the 'ifrit, which is what it was, gave another of those unearthly shrieks. However, it was clear that while Basil had survived that particular moment, thanks to Annabella, he would be quite unable to withstand both foes for long.

Annabella took another half second to size up the situation, gulped, somehow stopped her knees from buckling with fear and then dashed forward, shouting at the top of her voice. She ran straight beneath the nearest monster, dodging the thrashing legs and still screaming like a banshee. Confused, the great beast took its attention from Basil for a fatal moment and the next instant its head, too, hit the ground. Annabella felt rather than saw the impact and sensed the headless body beginning to topple. Desperately she raced for the open and had just won clear when an avalanche of the tonnes of sand that made up the carcass came crashing down behind her.

The third 'ifrit, suddenly finding the odds very much against it, broke off and drew back.

What's it doing? Annabella gasped breathlessly to Basil.

Calling for reinforcements, Basil said, still facing the monster, his back to Annabella. Despite the hectic engagement of only seconds before, his voice was calm, resigned.

How long will they take? Annabella asked.

Not long, Basil said. *Minutes. Only minutes.*

Come on then...

No. I must stay.

No, Annabella contradicted him. *Your duty is to come with me...*

Basil hesitated and Annabella thought she had lost, then to her relief he relapsed into the familiar tendril of smoke and they hurried back into the tent, Annabella to all intents and purposes quite alone. Vivienne was watching her, her eyes like saucers.

Again Aswad had been tempted to trickery, to abandon the two girls to whatever the fate was rampaging outside, but for crucial moments he had been frozen with fear and then Darius had seized his wrist, immobilising his left hand, the hand that would have to unwrap the crystal now held in his right. Annabella and Vivienne came bursting back into the tent. They stared for a moment at the tableau in front of them. Neither was in any doubt as to what it meant.

"We have to go now," Annabella commanded. "Right now!"

The four humans knelt in a tight circle, with Basil in attendance on Annabella's shoulder, so faint that even Vivienne failed to realise he was there. Aswad set the package on the ground in the centre, removing the ties so that the silk could be swept aside in one movement. Even thickly shielded as it still was, the crystal was so bright they kept turning their heads away from it.

"On the count of three," Aswad said. "I will reveal the crystal. Then if you would see Iram, you must see the light... You must bear the pain."

"And believe me," Annabella said. "You don't want to see what's waiting for us outside, so don't shirk." As if to underscore her words, there was another unearthly shriek, simultaneously impossibly high and impossibly low, from just the other side of the flimsy wall.

"Now," Annabella ordered. "Do it now..."

Aswad cleared his throat nervously. "One," he whispered. "Two. Three..."

He swept aside the thick black silk and instantly it seemed that the sun must have fallen from the sky and landed between them, so powerful was the radiance that flooded the tent.

It will send me blind, Annabella thought. It must send me blind. But nevertheless, she opened her eyes and stared deep into the heart of the flaring white light before her. The agony was intense, extreme, but somehow despite an almost irresistible urge to turn away she managed to hold her gaze fixed. And slowly, the longer she held it the more she began to see.

Shimmering before her were towers and turrets, spires and minarets, pillars and columns, all in glorious profusion. They gleamed and glistened, weaved and danced, advanced and retreated in waves and curtains, undulating like a desert mirage. Except unlike a mirage, slowly the images firmed and solidified and then, all at once, Annabella was no longer in the fragile tent cowering from the nightmare prowling outside but she was there, in Iram, city of columns, safe. Of the tent there was now no sign. She was kneeling in a garden, hearing not the shriek of the 'ifrit but the call of songbirds and the trickle of gently running water.

Her first thought was of Basil.

Are you here? she asked. There was no answer.

Basil...?

Yes, mistress mine, came his voice. Annabella sighed with relief. *I am here but only because of you,* Basil added.

Oh rubbish, Annabella snapped, speaking rather more tersely than she'd intended.

It's jolly well not rubbish, Basil said, unaccountably angry. *There's no blinking the fact that you saved my life with that crazy, crazy stunt. How could you do that? How could you risk yourself like that? I'm supposed to be protecting you...*

A simple thank you is all...

You were nearly buried alive, Basil overrode her. *You were jolly nearly stung to death. You could have been captured...*

But I wasn't, Annabella said impatiently. *So stop going on about it. You're not my mother...*

And thank paradise for that... Annabella drew a deep breath.

Basil, she said. *Why are we fighting?* There was a long, sulky silence.

Where are the others, do you think? Annabella said at last. Still Basil refused to speak.

Really! Annabella said. *All right, I apologise for saving your miserable life and I promise I'll never do it again...*

It's jolly well all wrong, Basil said in a small voice. *It probably breaks the CODE...*

Djinn! Annabella exclaimed. *I said I'm sorry... So what about the others?* But impatiently she set off in search of them without waiting for Basil to answer.

The garden was a place of winding paths and secret hollows. There were scattered lakes connected by a chuckling stream and Annabella realised that it was from here Aswad must have taken the inspiration for his own establishment.

Do you think they got through? she asked Basil, worriedly. It took a moment but finally he did bring himself to speak.

It depends, he said in a low voice, which was less than comforting, Annabella thought, and rather less than helpful. She was about to press Basil again when she caught sight of blonde head through some foliage.

"Vivienne!" she called. "Vivienne... Over here..." Vivienne glanced over her shoulder and a moment later was rushing towards her. They came together and Annabella suddenly found herself being seized convulsively and crushed in a great hug.

"I saw!" Vivienne gasped. "I was watching. I saw what you did. You were so brave. What were those things? I was so frightened... Who was that with the sword...? Was that Basil...? Annabella, what's happening? What's going on?"

Annabella was struggling for breath.

"Ease up," she managed to get out. Abruptly Vivienne let her go and stepped back.

"Well?" she said. "Annabella...?"

"I don't know what's going on," Annabella said. "Basil says someone is hunting me but we don't know who and we don't know why."

"Hunting you?"

"That's what he says."

"Why would anyone be hunting you?" Vivienne said incredulously.

"We don't know," Annabella repeated. "But the others... We should see if we can find them. Darius..." she added enticingly, but Vivienne was not to be diverted.

"Annabella," she said sternly. "Tell me what's going on. I have a right to know."

Why? Annabella wondered, but aloud she said:

"I don't know, V. I really don't know. It seems Basil was sent to protect me from something. Who or what he doesn't know. He agreed to the Taklamakan Desert thing only as a way of getting us on the run, keeping one step ahead of them, or something... Whoever they might be..."

"Those sand monster things...?"

"And other stuff, I suppose..."

"What were they?"

"Ifrits? Ghulan...?" Annabella shrugged.

"This is too dangerous," Vivienne said, her voice rising to the edge of hysteria. "Annabella, this is much too dangerous. We have to go home."

"You don't have a home," Annabella said. "Or have you forgotten?"

"But you do."

"Sort of. Only sort of. But that's beside the point, they found me there. That's why Basil suddenly changed his mind and whisked us away."

"But..."

"If we go back, we'll just be playing into their hands. If they have hands, that is."

"Don't talk like that," Vivienne said, shivering, her voice rising again.

"Well it's the truth," Annabella said. "And don't think I like this any more than you do. I don't. But all we can do is trust to Basil. Isn't that right Basil?"

But Vivienne forestalled anything that Basil might have to say on the subject.

"Do you?" she said. "Do you Annabella? Do you trust him?"

Annabella began to speak, and then stopped. It was a good question and one to which until minutes ago the only possible answer had to be 'no'. Now, however everything had changed.

"Yes," she said without the slightest inflection of doubt. "Of course I trust him. If we hadn't managed to escape back there in the desert, he would have died to protect us. He nearly did."

"And you nearly died saving him," Vivienne shot back, completely changing tack, with classic feminine logic. "How could you?"

"Oh rubbish. I do wish everyone would stop going on about it. Come on, we have to try to find the others... See if they made it... Darius," she added. "He'll be worried sick about you."

As it turned out, it took them the best part of an hour to locate the other two. Vivienne and Annabella wandered about the lush gardens, searching and calling, and it was only when they came near the boundary that they saw movement. Aswad and Darius were next to a creeper-covered wall. Aswad was doing something with his scimitar and from the set of Darius's back he was deeply disapproving. Also, his eyes were constantly sweeping his surroundings, as though he were desperate to spot something. As the girls came closer they could see a dull gleaming through the foliage of the vines.

"The bricks really are gold and silver," Vivienne said wonderingly. And indeed, the object Aswad was now straining to hold was a block of solid gold which he had finally succeeded in prising free. Vivienne waved and hurried towards them, Darius rushing to meet her. Annabella hung back.

How does he get the loot back to Baghdad? she asked Basil completely mystified. If it was only possible to enter Iram through the portal of the magic crystal then how could they leave, never mind spiriting away gold by the camel load.

Leaving is easy, Basil replied. *The city is supposed to rival paradise and the king who built it couldn't imagine anyone jolly well ever wanting to go once they got in here. To leave you just walk out the gate, back to the desert.*

But the gold...?

Well what would you jolly well do? I'd carry it out to my waiting camel train and come back in by way of the crystal for another lot...

Hard way to make a fortune, Annabella remarked. Staring at that crystal is murder and you'd kill for a wheelbarrow...

What...? Oh, jolly amusing...

Basil, Annabella said seriously. Is this place empty? Are there any people?

A few, I think, Basil said.

And they don't mind someone stealing their garden walls?

Apparently not.

Who are they? These people? What are they doing? How do they get here?

They see the light...

Very funny.

No, I mean it. Wisdom. Enlightenment. That sort of light.

But...

If you achieve true harmony, then you see life as golden, serene...

And you get to imagine Iram...

Except it's real...

And here we are...

And here we jolly well are, Basil confirmed. Half way to Paradise...

Well, it's all very strange, Annabella said in what was one of the biggest understatements of her life.

Chapter 10

It was fortunate for Hassan-i Sabbāh, the Old Man of the Mountain, the Emir of Evil, that he was struck speechless by the 'ifrit's report of the latest debacle. Even if Iblis had delivered his account of the battle in the Rub' al Khali with a hint of apology, it in no way indicated that he would brook the sort of tantrum that might have erupted had the emir been capable of venting his extreme anger.

Iblis waited with mounting impatience for the emir to regain the power of speech.

"What is your command?" he demanded at last.

"Continue," the emir finally managed to gasp. "Find her. Find her again..."

Eventually, with the help of two of his favourite vices, the emir calmed sufficiently to be able to think coherently. And finally it came to him that if his creatures of the Other World had proved so singularly inept in accomplishing what was a simple enough task in all conscience, or rather lack of it, then it was time to enlist his own resources. He cleared the room of houris and their implements to summon a team of scribes. Shortly thereafter, a cloud of pigeons rose high above Castle Alamut, circled once, and then dispersed to every corner of the compass, bearing orders for each Chapter of the Order of Assassins. Further, the emir had determined that at the next sighting of his quarry, he personally would take charge, whatever the risks to his person.

Basil... Annabella began.

Madam mistress, shining pearl...? And Annabella was relieved that Basil appeared to have emerged from his fit of sulks, though quite why he should have been sulking in the first place still eluded her.

I think it's lunchtime, she said.

Certainly. And what does madam mistress, shining pearl have in mind?

A picnic here on the grass would be nice, don't you think...? By the lake...?

"I want to go swimming," Vivienne said apropos nothing but with a motive so transparent it was scarcely ulterior. She had spent most of the meal still brooding about the battle but now evidently had set it aside. Darius regarded her, his eyes wide.

"Can you swim?" he asked, looking about for his father, who after only a mouthful or two had gone back to prise more bricks out of the wall.

"Of course, can you?"

"A bit," Darius said uncertainly.

"You don't have a costume," Annabella said sourly.

"I'm sure you can do something about that," Vivienne said meaningly.

Basil? Annabella said.

But, of course...

A moment later they beheld Vivienne dressed in a shapeless Victorian neck-to-knee bathing suit, complete with frilly cap and frilly bits around her hips to match.

"Oh, very funny," Vivienne said petulantly.

"Just perfect," Annabella laughed. "And you know he's...I'm right. Anything else would frighten Darius out of his wits."

"It's not at all..." Vivienne began.

"...What you had in mind," Annabella finished for her. "But it's all you're going to get. Go on then, if you want to go swimming...go on..."

Vivienne glared at Annabella for a moment without the least effect and then took herself off to the water.

"Go on, Darius," Annabella added. "Go with her. She won't bite. At least not very hard..."

That young man is already frightened out of his wits, Basil said.

Not for long, I'll bet, Annabella replied. And they watched indulgently as first Vivienne turned to splash Darius who then with great daring suddenly shed some of his clothes to chase after her.

Très sportif, Basil observed acidly.

So how do we find this Luqman chappie? Annabella said.

Search me, Basil replied. *Ask someone, I should jolly well think.*

But we haven't seen anybody to ask.

Not here. But we could go and look...

They stopped by Aswad on the way out of the park. He had stacked up a neat row of gold bricks while tossing the silver ones aside, any old how.

Litterbug, Basil sniffed.

"I'm going to have a look around," Annabella said to Aswad. "I won't be long, I shouldn't think."

Aswad barely acknowledged her. He tested the corner of his latest brick with his teeth, set it on the stack and went back to the wall with a grunt. He was sweating heavily with his labours but it was clear he had no intention of stopping until he collapsed with exhaustion.

Annabella with Basil sitting companionably, albeit invisibly, on her shoulder made her way to the entrance and through to the boulevard beyond. It was an astonishing sight. The paving of the road, the walls and fences, and the buildings were all made of alternating gold and silver bricks. The reflected dazzle should have been blinding but somehow was pleasantly muted. Even so, the sheer quantity of fabulous bullion was overwhelming.

I don't wonder Aswad has gold fever, Annabella remarked. *Do you think Darius will get it, too?*

He jolly well has another sort of fever entirely, Basil said. Annabella was struck by a sudden feeling of guilt.

You think I should have stayed there to chaperone them? she asked.

And spoilt all Vivienne's fun?

But...

If it comes to it, she can jolly well swim and he can't. And...

And what?

That swimsuit's worse than a suit of armour.

Oh... Spoilsport... Where shall we go?

The principal palace, I should think.

They strolled on down the boulevard, which was pleasantly shaded by a central planting of trees and which seemed to be going in the direction required. It became apparent after a little while that the city was circular with the main thoroughfares radiating out from the central plaza. Each palace that they passed, set in its own grounds, was more elaborate than the last and Annabella couldn't help marvelling at all the opulence.

"It really is a city of a million columns," she said aloud, and then: *You say some king built it?*

King Shaddad ibn 'Ad, Basil began. It took him 300 years...

What nonsense, Annabella interrupted.

Yet here you are. Basil was clearly offended.

Go on, Annabella said apologetically. Tell me what happened...

The desert happened, Basil said after a moment. Somebody didn't like the idea of a rival paradise and the desert drowned it.

Except...

Except, not if you know the secret.

Look! Annabella said suddenly and pointed. There is somebody here.

A man had emerged from a gate and was walking along in front of them, quite some distance ahead.

I expect he's going to the Principal Palace, Basil said. We should follow.

The central plaza was vast, a great circular expanse in perfect proportion to the hugely elaborate building rising from the centre. As they drew nearer, Annabella saw to her amazement that the plaza itself was actually a maze. She stopped at the boundary and together with Basil contemplated the exquisite complexity of the multitude of circular paths before her with their bewildering links and dead ends. The man they were following had disappeared.

I wonder how he got through this so quickly, Annabella said. He must know it by heart.

Or perhaps...

Oh, she said. You mean, he went cross-country...

She lifted her eyes from the puzzle before her to inspect the palace itself, which was magnificently symmetrical, dome by dome, turret by turret, spire by spire. The grand entrance before them seemed to be matched by a second and a third on either

hand, and Annabella guessed there would be a fourth directly opposite, and that all four would correspond to the cardinal points.

Shall we? she said.

By all means, Basil replied. *After you.*

Annabella moved forward, paying no attention to the paths except to hop from one to the next, avoiding the raised divisions between them. It was hot out there in the middle with the afternoon sun beating back from the bullion paving beneath her, and she was glad finally to climb the double flight of steps to the entrance and reach the shade of the portico. The man they had followed was waiting for them.

"Our maze did not amuse you?" he inquired.

"Ah..." Annabella began, somewhat at a loss.

"No," he said resignedly. "I can see it didn't. Such a shame. It's a metaphor, you see, or rather you don't. The path to enlightenment is never simple. To follow the twists and turns of your heart and your mind to the core of your being is the most difficult of all tasks. Newcomers to Iram who have earned their admittance delight in our maze when first they see it and I had hoped that you might be an initiate. It is long since we have had such an arrival." He shook his head mournfully.

Well, we blew that one, Annabella remarked privately.

Sorry, Basil said. *I should have thought...*

Obviously, you're not enlightened...

Quite, the man said. And it was hard to know who was the more shocked, Basil or Annabella.

"Oh yes," he said, this time aloud. "The benefits of enlightenment, you know. So how may I help?"

"We..." Annabella began uncertainly. "We've come to Iram to see Luqman... Or at least we hoped..."

"And you are...?"

"My name is Annabella Crabtree. Annabella, not Annabelle " Annabella gestured to her shoulder. "And this is Basil al Yazid..."

"Ah yes... The son of the Sheikh."

"Are you Luqman, by any chance..." She asked rather forwardly. "Or could you...?"

"As it happens, I am he."

Annabella paused to take stock. Luqman was clearly a man of extremely advanced age yet still he stood straight, his eyes were clear and his voice firm. His expression was largely unreadable but Annabella felt an underlying sense of kindness lurking just beneath the surface.

For his part, Luqman was directing his attention towards Basil. A quizzical expression was allowed to pass across his face and he raised an eyebrow.

"Well," he said. "Perhaps you should come inside."

He led them across an echoing antechamber with a vaulted ceiling so high it was lost in the gloom, then down a corridor and finally into what was apparently an audience chamber. Annabella couldn't help noticing that there were drifts of sand here

and there in the corners and that every surface bore a film of dust. Clearly housekeeping in paradise was not nearly up to Mrs Milliken's standards.

"You don't live here then?" Basil asked. His voice was moderately deferential but only in the sense of equal talking to equal.

"No, no," Luqman said. "Far too big, far too draughty and as you can see we have a sad deficiency of enlightened servants. I would offer you something, but..." He spread his hands with a little gesture of helplessness.

"Please," Annabella said. "Allow Basil. Tea perhaps...?"

"Delightful," Luqman said. "I haven't had tea in I don't know how long. The Silk Road rather bypasses us, you know."

"The Silk Road?" Annabella said, puzzled.

"The trading route to China," Basil said and when Annabella still looked blank, added: "China... Where tea comes from..."

"Oh," Annabella said, feeling foolish and vaguely remembering some mention of the Silk Road in a history lesson.

"And," Basil went on, "it also happens to be the way to the Taklamakan Desert."

"Oh," Annabella said again, feeling even sillier.

"Perhaps we could sit down," Luqman said. "Old bones, you know..."

"Of course," Annabella said, contrite. However, she couldn't help running her finger over the cushion indicated. It came away distinctly dirty. Instantly, Basil caused it and the others scattered about to vanish, producing fine new ones. He also produced a low table complete with fragile pot and delicate porcelain cups.

Annabella and Luqman seated themselves on either side. At his insistence, she reached for the pot and poured him an offering of green tea.

"Delicious," Luqman said after a long moment, savouring the beverage. "Quite delicious. I don't know how long since I last had a nice cup of tea. Paradise has its disadvantages, you know. Now, let me ask again: how may I help?"

Annabella paused a moment, took a deep breath and then launched into the story of all that had happened.

"So you see," she said. "Why we have to find Lilis." Luqman made to pour more tea but the pot was empty, only to be instantly refilled when Basil realised he was being remiss in his duties.

Luqman savoured the new brew before finally speaking.

"You do realise," he said, "that Sheikh al Yazid incorporated the enslavement clause when he formulated his CODE for very good reason?"

"No," Annabella said as Basil simultaneously said:

"Yes."

"What reason?" Annabella went on.

"It's to prevent djinn manipulating people, taking advantage of them with their much greater powers. In his wisdom, the Sheikh decreed that no djinni could accept a service from a human without first paying a price, on pain of enslavement." Luqman paused. "And I judge this to be a very sound policy," he finished.

"Then you must excuse me if I don't," Annabella said rather more forcefully than she intended. Luqman raised an eyebrow and Annabella took a deep breath.

"What I mean..." she said more calmly, then paused to gather her thoughts. "What I mean is that I couldn't bear to be somebody else's slave and I won't have anyone enslaved to me. I just won't. I don't care what anybody says, I don't care who they are or how smart they are, I will not have a slave." By the end of her little speech, Annabella's voice had acquired a tone that rang through the chamber and Luqman was regarding her with considerable respect.

"A most unusual attitude," he said after a moment. "Not one that I think I can ever remember encountering. You have found yourself a rare mistress, Basil al Yazid."

There was another long silence.

"You have nothing to say?" Luqman eventually asked the djinni.

"No," Basil replied with a very odd tone in his voice. Annabella swung round to look at him.

"What's wrong with you?" she demanded. "You know this can't go on. We've agreed this can't go on..."

"However," Luqman said. "Ending this...liaison must prove extremely dangerous."

"I don't care," Annabella said with some heat.

"Even if it should prove fatal for you?"

"I still don't care. Basil must be freed."

"And if it should prove fatal for Basil?"

Annabella opened her mouth to reply and then stopped short.

"I owe Basil a lot," she said at last. "I know I do. I owe him my life..."

"As I owe you mine..." Basil interrupted.

"But I know that he hates being my slave, and I hate having him. It can't go on."

"Yet," Luqman said. "Correct me if I'm wrong – and if I am, please forgive me – but has not the real reason for dissolving this bond rather disappeared?"

And Luqman was indeed correct, Annabella realised, wondering at the same time how he could have divined the truth. Originally she had been determined to hold Basil to account by playing the one card it seemed that she held, her insistence on freeing him. Now the matter of Basil's machinations had been completely resolved. So why then was she still so determined to set him free? The answer suddenly flooded her mind and was deeply disturbing.

"Very well," Luqman said, after a long interval during which he inspected Annabella narrowly but detected no sign of wavering. "Then I shall have to explain in detail the difficulties you face. Lilis is a ghulah, meaning she will require payment, not the reverse, and the only payment Lilis accepts is spirit. Do you have a spirit to offer?"

Annabella shook her head and looked suddenly downcast.

"I couldn't do that..." she began to say, but Luqman cut her off.

"Then she will require you to face the ordeal."

"No," Basil said angrily. "I forbid it."

"Excuse me!" Annabella snapped. "I thought you were the slave... What ordeal?"

"A challenge of her choosing," Luqman said. "If you win, she will grant you one boon. If you lose, your spirit will be forfeit."

"Well," Annabella said grimly. "I suppose either way, Basil will end up free again."

"No," Basil said. "And again no." But this time, Annabella ignored him.

"And Lilis really is the only...one who can do this?" she asked.

"I'm afraid so," Luqman said. "She and Iblis are the only beings with sufficient power to break the bond and who are also able to defy the Sheikh. Of the two, you have marginally more chance of dealing successfully with Lilis. You do realise that your father will be extremely distressed if you attempt this?" he added, speaking to Basil.

The djinni managed to convey what amounted to an eloquent shrug.

"You've heard this person whom I must call mistress," he said with scant courtesy. "If you can jolly well suggest some way of changing her mind, I'm all...smoke."

Luqman refused to take offence and smiled.

"I take your point," he said.

"So how do we find...Lilis?" Annabella asked.

"Don't worry, that's the least of your problems," Luqman said. "If you venture out into the Desert of Death, where no man willingly goes for fear of her, she will be sure to find you. Prey is not so plentiful that she can afford not to. The trick is to stop her devouring you on the spot before you can open your mouth to speak."

"How do we do that?"

"The Fountain of Aiyub."

"In Bukhara?" Basil asked.

"Indeed," Luqman said.

"I don't understand," Annabella said.

"Lilis dislikes water extremely," Luqman said. "That's why she lives in the Taklamakan Desert, which is one of the driest in the world. She particularly dislikes water from the Chasma Aiyub."

"Why?" Annabella asked, deeply curious.

"Aiyub was a messenger sent from above to save the city from dying of thirst. The water from the fountain he created is not only sacred, it is healing. Lilis can't stand it. To her, it's like acid, only worse. It burns her soul."

"I'm hungry, again," Annabella said. "Do you think we could have a proper tea, with cakes and sandwiches and things? Please, Basil."

"Can't wait to jolly well get rid of me but first you want cakes..." Basil said discontentedly. "Besides, they haven't been invented yet."

"I'm sorry to be contradictory," Luqman said with rather more greed than apology in his voice. "But indeed they have. And I must say, it does sound rather pleasant." He watched approvingly as a variety of comestibles materialised on the table along with a fresh pot of tea.

"Delicious," Luqman said, helping himself, and then there was a lengthy silence as he and Annabella did proper justice to Basil's offerings.

"Where exactly is the Taklamakan Desert?" Annabella asked at last, dabbing at some stray cream that had unaccountably transferred itself from a heroic slice of raspberry sponge to the end of her nose. She folded the dainty linen napkin and put it back on the table. She might have been embarrassed but for the fact that Luqman was doing exactly the same thing.

"There is a map I can show you," he said, rising to his feet. "Come."

He led them down a corridor to what turned out to be a sort of library. The walls were lined with shelving and these in turn were filled with scrolls, packed in higgledy-piggledy without any apparent order. They all had a thick coating of dust. Annabella and Basil assumed that Luqman wanted to show them one of the scrolls, but instead he took a twig broom leaning in a corner and began to make rather ineffectual motions at the floor.

"Please," Basil said. "Allow me." Luqman stepped back and watched complacently as a miniature tornado tracked backwards and forwards across the floor, gathering the dust and holding it in suspension. A moment later, it deposited its burden tidily in a corner and disappeared.

"Now, that's what I call a vacuum cleaner," Annabella said, gazing at what had just been revealed. Luqman reversed his broom and using the handle as a pointer on the huge map incised into the floor, began to give Annabella a sadly overdue lesson in basic geography.

"Presently, we are here," he said. "The Rub' al Khali in Arabia." He moved to the middle of a large empty area and tapped the floor. "The Silk Road, you understand, has many diversions and side routes, more than one beginning and many different ends. However, it can be said that the main route begins here."

He moved quite some distance to the north and to the west and touched a point on a coastline that bore some resemblance to the familiar outline of the Mediterranean.

"This is Tyre," he said. "And from there, we would travel first to Aleppo, then to Baghdad..." He tapped a point almost due north of his starting point in the Rub' al Khali. "...On to Teheran, in Persia. Then to Konjikala in the Turkic lands, Merv, Bukhara, Samarkand, over the Pamir Mountains and on to Kashgar. From there you may strike off directly into the Taklamakan Desert and seek Lilis. As you can see, it is a journey of many, many months."

"Vroom?" Annabella said hopefully to Basil.

"Even so, mistress mine, it's a jolly long way. A damn long way."

"Oh," Annabella said, unsuccessfully trying to hide her disappointment, a failure which was lost neither on Basil or Luqman.

"I have to tell you another thing," Luqman said. "Neither of you have asked, but I will tell you anyway, for we all are bound to fight the Dark. But perhaps, first, we might return to those wonderful cushions you so thoughtfully provided..."

"The 'ifrits pursuing you..." Luqman said without preamble when he was again comfortably seated. "They are being controlled by Hassan-i Sabbāh."

There was a sound remarkably like sharply indrawn breath. It came from Basil.

"Who?" Annabella said inelegantly.

"Hassan-i Sabbāh," Luqman repeated. "He is the Grand Master of the Order of Assassins. The Old Man of the Mountain. The Emir of Evil."

"I'm sorry...?" Annabella ventured. Luqman allowed himself a small sigh for the callowness of his audience but Basil forestalled him.

"Why?" he demanded, extreme distaste in his voice.

"I do not know," Luqman said. He then inquired delicately: "But your father, the Sheikh, knew Iblis had been summoned...?"

"But not by whom," Basil said. "Not by jolly whom."

"But who's Hassan-i what's his name?" Annabella said.

"He started life as a Nizari missionary and demagogue," Luqman said. "Unfortunately, a very talented demagogue. And he used his power to found the order..."

"Assassins?" Annabella interrupted.

"Trained killers," Basil supplied. "Dead sneaky, so to speak."

"Which he used to gain power," Luqman went on patiently, "By disposing of anyone who opposed him. He now controls huge areas and anyone who dares resist, be they king or pauper, vizier or peasant, warrior or merchant, is summarily executed by his legions of murderers. He even kills scholars, because of their influence. Thousands are dead... Followers of my teachings... History will tend to see him as a sincere and devoted man, a revolutionary given to personal austerity, and history will be utterly wrong. He is the worst sort of megalomaniac and of particularly evil personal habits."

"But what on earth can he want with me?" Annabella said weakly. "I'm from the future. I don't even exist yet, or at least I shouldn't."

Luqman could only raise his hands, palm out, and sadly shake his head.

"Isn't there anyone to fight him?" Annabella said after a long pause. "Do they just let him do what he wants?"

"The Caliph has tried, and tried again. But the emir holds Castle Alamut, the eagle's nest, perched high above a mountain gorge which itself is often flooded. There is only one narrow path to the castle and it is impregnable to any army. As long as he stays within, Hassan-i Sabbāh remains untouchable while his Assassins range the empire in disguise, killing at his command and all prepared to die for the promise of paradise."

"Oh dear," Annabella said.

"Oh dear, indeed," Luqman and Basil said simultaneously.

"Do come again," Luqman said as they took their leave from the grand entrance. "I suspect that afternoon tea is destined to become a very fine and necessary institution and I would greatly enjoy to confirm my opinion."

Annabella did her best to be polite in return but her head was spinning with a catherine wheel of thoughts, sparked by what Luqman had had to say.

"So now we have to go to Bukhara," Annabella said at last, as they walked back down the boulevard.

"If we must," Basil said grudgingly.

"And what sort of a challenge?" she asked. "I'm quite good at draughts," she added hopefully. Basil snorted.

"But I suppose that wouldn't be any good," Annabella went on. "She'd want to play chess, wouldn't she? Or...?"

Basil said nothing for a long moment and then, reluctantly: "The ordeal will be...whatever she thinks will give her the best jolly chance of defeating you."

Annabella failed to notice his hesitation.

They found Vivienne and Darius more or less where they had left them. Darius was dry and fully clothed again, whereas Vivienne was still locked into her damply clinging swimsuit, and grumpy with it.

"About time," she said. "You've been gone for hours. It's nearly dark and I'm cold. And I can't get out of this horrible costume."

You jolly well weren't meant to, Basil said. Annabella giggled, which brought a sharp look from Vivienne.

I think you'd better put her out of her misery, don't you? Annabella said.

A moment later, Vivienne had been restored to her clothes.

"Where's your father?" Annabella said to Darius. He shrugged and pointed towards the garden wall. And indeed, they found Aswad still there, uncomfortably asleep, clutching at a pile of gold bricks.

"He looks exhausted," Vivienne remarked.

And serve him jolly well right, Basil said. *And what, madam mistress, shining pearl, are you proposing to do with him and the boy, might I ask?*

Um...

Can't leave them here and we can't jolly well abandon them in the middle of the desert with no way to get home...

Couldn't you produce some camels for them, or something? Annabella asked.

I can't create life, Basil said with finality. *Only the Sheikh can do that. Sometimes. Jolly rarely. In extremis...*

But you offered me a puppy, and a pony, Annabella objected.

Don't you just hate having a mistress with a memory? Basil cried to the world at large. *I can't create life but I can...borrow...anything that jolly well happens to be in the neighbourhood...*

Just as well I didn't want anything then. I could have ended up in jail...

...I was desperate. And I can assure you, there's nothing in this particular neighbourhood. Zip. Jolly well nada...

Then we'll have to take them with us. Maybe we can drop them off somewhere along the way...

Oh splendid! Abso-jolly-lutely spiffing...

But cheer up, Annabella said. Think how happy Vivienne will be.

Chapter 11

Basil, Annabella said. *What am I going to do?* It was early morning and the first rays of the sun were beginning to find their way through the trees of the garden, giving a lovely, luminous effect. The others were all still fast asleep, Aswad snoring, and the other two twitching slightly as they dreamed. Annabella found herself resenting the fact they could sleep at all – she had spent a very restless night – and preferred not to imagine what they might be dreaming about.

We, mistress mine. What are we going to do...? I thought the agenda was the jolly old Taklamakan Desert, and never mind what I might think about it all.

That's another thing, Annabella said. *It's not fair that you should have to risk your life protecting me... Are you sure you can't just disappear, or something?* Basil allowed his form to thicken slightly and came to perch on Annabella's knee, where she sat cross-legged in the entrance to the tent.

You know I can't, he said unusually gently.

But sooner or later, this emir person and his horrible 'ifrīts are going to catch us... Possibly...

And then what? Basil, what are we going to do?

Keep our courage... The djinni began, somewhat sententiously.

Do I have a choice? Annabella retorted.

"Khatun," Aswad began. "Your plans, what are your plans?"

"We go to Bukhara," Annabella said incautiously. "We have to visit a fountain..." Basil jumped on her immediately.

Mistake, he said. *Bad mistake.*

Fleetingly, Annabella wondered why but had no time to pursue the matter. Aswad was clearly furious, though managing to keep himself under control.

"I have kept faith," he said. "I have kept faith and brought you to Iram, therefore I should be free to do as I please."

"The deal was Iram and back," Annabella said sharply.

"But khatun, surely you have no more need of my humble self and my even more humble son. And Bukhara..."

"You want me to let you off, release you?"

"If it pleases you, khatun..."

"It doesn't. If I leave you here, what then? You can't eat gold. You can't drink gold. And you can't carry it out of the desert without camels." Vivienne and Darius were watching the exchange, anxiously.

"I will find..." Aswad began but Annabella cut him off.

"You won't. You can't. There are no camels and without me you have no water and no food."

"I will find camels," Aswad insisted. "There are Bedu. I will buy camels from them."

"Father..." Darius ventured.

"Silence!" Aswad snapped.

He's mad, Basil remarked. Stark, staring mad with jolly old gold fever. If the Bedouin do find him, they'll just cut his throat and take the gold without a second thought.

"Ridiculous," Annabella said to Aswad. "You're being ridiculous. Much as I'd like to, I can't leave you here. You'll die. One way or another you'll die. And if you don't care about yourself you might think of Darius."

"And is that your last word?" Aswad demanded.

"Abso-jolly-lutely."

"Then I am sorry, khatun. But you leave me no choice." And so saying, Aswad stooped, picked up the short horn bow he had secreted behind a bush with the arrow ready nocked, and drew.

Some people damn well never learn, Basil said.

Aswad lovingly allowed the bowstring to caress his fingers and the arrow flew. Vivienne screamed and Darius took half a step forward in an attempt to stop his father. He was, of course, far too late but neither did he need to worry.

The arrow stopped dead, halfway to its target, and hung there in mid-air, quivering with thwarted energy. Annabella coolly walked forward, plucked it down and broke it across her knee.

"Really, really ridiculous," she said. "Have you forgotten what happened the last time you tried something like that? Or has all this gold just made you totally blind to everything?"

Aswad made no reply. He just stood there, aghast, the empty bow dangling limply from his hand.

"Please, khatun..." Darius began.

"I am not a khatun, whatever a khatun might be."

"It's just a title of respect..." he started to say.

"I don't care," Annabella interrupted impatiently. "I'm not going to hurt him. Just take him away somewhere and try to get some sense in him. Please. I can't leave you here. And I can't leave you in the desert with nothing. And no, before you ask, I can't make camels."

"Are you sure Basil can't make camels?" Vivienne demanded. The two girls were by themselves, down by one of the lakes.

"No, I can't," Basil said before Annabella could reply. "And even if I could, I jolly well wouldn't. If we let them go, the 'ifrīts will get those two as soon as they leave here and are back in the desert."

"So what about us?" Vivienne asked, a note of panic beginning to sound in her voice. "Those scorpion things..." She shuddered.

"Yes," Annabella said. "What about us?"

"Speed and darkness," Basil said. "And jolly well hope for the best."

"But we have so far to go," Annabella said, referring to Luqman's map and to their earlier conversation. "We can't possibly make it all the way to the Taklamakan Desert, can we?"

"I don't know," Basil said honestly.

"But what else can we do?" Annabella said, more or less to herself. "Wherever we go, the emir will still be hunting me."

"Who?" Vivienne said, still panicky and now puzzled as well.

"Some arch baddie," Annabella said. "Luqman told us about him."

"Hunting you...?"

"That's what he said. And we don't know why."

"But that's..."

"Deuced awkward," Basil said helpfully.

"We could just stay here. We're safe here, aren't we?" Again, there was a rising note in Vivienne's voice.

"Don't be silly, V. We can't possibly stay here," Annabella said kindly.

"Why not? If you're being hunted? Till whoever it is..."

"The emir..."

"Gives up."

"I don't think he's likely to give up," Annabella said. "Not if he started hunting me back in our own time."

"No," Basil affirmed. "He won't give up. To have summoned Iblis, to have taken the risk and it's a huge risk... It means he must be jolly well far beyond desperate. No, he won't give up. He can't. And if he or Iblis find a way into Iram, then you won't be safe here either. We'll simply be jolly well trapped," he added for Vivienne's benefit.

"At least," Annabella said. "We can dump Aswad and Darius as soon as we get out of the Rub' al Khali and somewhere near civilisation..."

"Not Darius," Vivienne said, a different note in her voice. Annabella looked at her about to tease, but changed her mind.

"That rather depends on him," she said quietly.

Luqman, when Annabella told him of their planned departure that evening, was scarcely surprised but perhaps a touch regretful. He brightened, however, when Basil provided another of his most excellent high teas.

"Now this cheesecake," Luqman said at one point. "Were you aware the recipe dates back to the ancient Greeks?"

"Amazing," Annabella mumbled through an overly full mouth.

Mistress, mine! Manners, please, Basil protested.

"Indeed fascinating," Luqman said, helping himself to another piece.

So when did you become Mrs Milliken? Annabella fired back at Basil, still with her mouth full.

Jolly uncalled for, he replied in a hurt tone. *Good manners travel anywhere.*

Leave off. Bet they won't cut any ice with Lilis.

"Ah yes," Luqman said. "Lilis..."

"Sorry," Annabella said, abashed. "I forgot you would understand..."

"No matter, but you should probably try to remember next time you want to be rude about me."

"But I would never want to be rude about you..." Annabella began to protest and then realised that Luqman was gently pulling her leg.

"Thinking it over," Luqman went on. "I wish there was more I could tell you about Lilis. But water from the Chasma Aiyub is the only thing I know of that might keep her at bay long enough for you to talk."

They took their leave of Luqman with the sun low in the sky and it was dusk by the time they got back to the garden.

The others were ready and waiting, although Aswad, looking strangely bulky, was moving with great deliberation. And was there or was there not the suggestion of clanking, Annabella wondered?

How much gold, do you think he's got? Annabella asked Basil.

I jolly well hate to think, Basil said. *But let's not worry about it.*

The extra weight won't slow us down?

Not likely, Basil said. *This is damn serious vroom we're talking about.*

Annabella forgot herself and nodded, looked to see if Aswad or Darius had noticed and then went through her pantomime to produce the carpet. However, they were all surprised that this time it was somewhat different.

What are those strappy things? Annabella asked.

Seatbelts, Basil said. *Except you'll jolly well have to tie them. Seatbelt buckles haven't been invented yet.*

"Seatbelts...?" Vivienne exclaimed, when Annabella had explained. "What on earth do we want seatbelts for?" Aswad and Darius simply looked mystified.

Manoeuvres, Basil said to Annabella. *Evasive action.*

"Manoeuvres," she relayed to the others. "Evasive action. Just in case there's trouble..."

The other members of the small company looked variously worried, alarmed, and in Darius's case, expectant.

"Time to go," Annabella said and showed Aswad how to tie his seatbelt, quite sure that Vivienne was enjoying doing the same for Darius. She lifted her hand and the carpet looped up out of the garden and headed along the main boulevard, but this time not towards the Principal Palace but in the opposite direction, towards the main gates.

When he received the report from Iblis, Hassan-i Sabbāh, Old Man of the Mountain, Emir of Evil, allowed himself a small smile of satisfaction. He consulted a map and then ordered a rukh be made ready. He also ordered a hand-picked squad of Assassins to prepare themselves for battle. The quiet efficiency of his organisation, long honed, meant that he was able to depart within the hour.

The night passed uneventfully. At one point, Annabella asked Basil:

Do you think we got away without them spotting us?

No, was all Basil would say.

They set down in some rocky hills and retreated into the tent.

"Khatun," Aswad said as they were eating. "Where are we? Where are we going? I demand to know where you take us."

Yes, where are we? Annabella said to Basil.

Near the coast, Basil said. As he had all night, he seemed distracted and barely paying attention.

Which coast?

The jolly old Persian Sea, of course.

Never heard of it, Annabella said, puzzled.

The Persian Gulf?

Oh. And where are we taking them?

I thought Shiraz, Basil said. *From there, with all the gold they're carrying, Aswad and Darius will easily be able to make their way back to Baghdad.*

"We're near the sea," Annabella said. "The Persian Sea. We're taking you to Shiraz. Then you're free to do whatever you like."

Aswad, true to his nature and training, remained poker-faced but by some subtle shift it was now clear that if not pleased, he was at least satisfied. Vivienne, however, frowned. As soon as she could, she drew Annabella aside and began an intense, whispered conversation in English.

"I don't want Darius to go," she hissed. "And he doesn't want to go either."

"How do you know?" Annabella asked, more to gain time than anything.

"I asked him, of course."

"But his father..."

"Darius hates him."

"Rubbish," Annabella said.

"He does," Vivienne insisted. "Darius is honourable and his father is a sneak and a thief. You saw, back in the tent. If it hadn't been for Darius, we would have been left to the scorpions... Darius can't bear that his father doesn't have any honour..."

"Oh...tough!" Annabella whispered impatiently. "I mean, Darius is absolutely right but what he does about it is between him and Aswad..."

"And me..."

"If you like. But it's none of my business and I don't want any part of it."

"But I thought you were my friend..."

"Oh V."

"Please, Annabella."

"I can't V. You must see that..."

"I really did think you were my friend..." Vivienne said sadly. Abruptly, she turned away and buried herself in her bedding.

Well that went well, Basil said. Jolly tactful...

So what would you have said? Annabella demanded. She was feeling quite guilty enough without Basil twisting the knife. Guilty and suddenly very lonely.

Oh, I don't know, Basil said. I'll see what I can do... I'll try my best... No jolly promises, but...

Yes, you would say that, Annabella snapped. I'd forgotten... You're a world-class liar. Look at all the whoppers you've told me. In fact, I don't think you ever have told me the truth. Not straight out. Not the first time.

Now, that's beastly unfair, Basil snapped back. Have I ever done anything that wasn't in your best interests?

But Annabella refused to answer. Now also feeling thoroughly miserable for reasons she couldn't really explain, she too buried herself in her bedclothes.

It was a very constrained company that prepared to resume the journey as dusk was falling. Vivienne's eyes were rather red and swollen, though Annabella couldn't help noting, bitchily, that even so Vivienne still managed to look thoroughly attractive. For his part, Darius was circling protectively about her and glaring at Annabella whenever he thought she wasn't looking, while Basil had made himself transparent to the point of invisibility and was flat-out ignoring her. Aswad, as he had been ever since they left Iram, was still totally focused on the bullion concealed about his person.

Annabella felt a wave of self-pity engulf her. It's not my fault, she said to herself. I didn't want any of this. It's not fair. It's not my fault. It's just not fair. The temptation to crawl back into bed and to stay there for the rest of her life, short as it undoubtedly would be, was almost irresistible. Instead, she went through her hocus-pocus routine, which was now second nature, and obliged Basil to produce the carpet.

A while later they picked up the white flash of the shore-break along a beach and headed out over the dark water. Here and there they could see the spark of a lantern on an inshore fishing boat, but very quickly these too faded behind them and there was nothing but the stars.

I don't like this, Basil said suddenly. I don't jolly well like this at all.

Oh, so you've decided you are speaking to me, Annabella said.

I thought you were the one who wasn't jolly well speaking to me, Basil replied coldly.

What don't you like? Annabella said after a long moment. It was plain Basil was taking the equivalent of a deep breath.

It feels wrong, he said at last.

What can we do?

Nothing. Wait.

Wait for what? But Basil didn't answer.

They flew on, the air still and silent about them. A while later, to the east a fullish moon began to heave itself over the horizon, slowly diluting the velvet blackness of the night with a silvery luminescence. But as visibility increased, so did their tension.

"What's going to happen?" Vivienne asked quietly, touching Annabella on the shoulder.

"We don't know," Annabella replied.

"We?" Darius said. "What we?" Annabella bit her lip at her carelessness and hoped Darius would let it drop. He didn't.

"I don't understand," he said. "What do you mean, we?"

"Nothing," Annabella said. "Just a slip of the tongue." She wondered why Darius, who up to now, at least around Annabella, had been more or less a totally silent partner on the journey, was suddenly becoming more assertive. Because of Vivienne, she supposed, or more accurately her rejection of Vivienne's plea. She also noted that the title "khatun" was suddenly conspicuous by its absence.

Darius was disposed to argue but Aswad turned to quell him, earning a distinctly mutinous look which also was not lost on Annabella. She was still musing on the change when Basil spoke.

There, he said with what almost might have been a tremor in his voice.

Where? Annabella said.

Half left, four fingers above the horizon.

Annabella stared at the sky in what she thought was the right direction. At first, it still looked totally innocent but then she realised there was a small black hole where stars should have been, and as she watched, more and more blinked out. Whatever it might be, it was growing rapidly in size which must mean it was coming towards them very fast.

I see it, Annabella said. *What can it be? There are no planes, not when we are now. What is it?*

A rukh, Basil said after a lengthy pause. *It can only be a rukh.*

What's that? Annabella said, mystified.

A giant bird, Basil said slowly. *Very rare...*

Oh. Is that all, a bird? Annabella allowed her relief to show.

A bird big enough to jolly well pick up an elephant and carry it off to its nest.

Oh, Annabella said again, but in a completely different voice.

It must be the Old Man of the Mountain, coming himself...

Who?

Hassan-i Sabbāh...

Oh...

And he'll have 'ifrits and Assassins with him...

Oh, Annabella said yet again. Some part of her mind noted that each 'oh' marked an exponential increase in her fear.

We have one advantage, Basil suddenly said. *I've just jolly realised.*

We do?

The emir must want you alive.

This is good?

It means you're our best protection. If we stay close to you...

But can't you blast the rukh, or something?

No, Basil said instantly. *The 'ifrits will protect it*, he added after an appreciable pause. Had Annabella not been so concerned, she might have stopped to wonder why it had taken Basil so long to formulate a reason.

In the short time they had been talking, the rukh had come much closer and was now rushing towards them. The others had seen it and were pointing in alarm.

"Strap in really tight," Annabella commanded. "And get your bows ready."

Arrows won't hurt it, Basil said.

But they might hurt the people with it...

Of course...

How far to land? Annabella asked.

There, Basil said. *I can see the far shore.*

They were the last words either of them had time for. The rukh had been climbing as it approached and now dropped towards them in a screaming dive, giving off the raucous hunting screech of an eagle but magnified a thousand times. The sound was terrifying and reduced them to frozen shock, which was exactly what it was intended to do. Their first proper sight of the huge green bird, glistening black in the moonlight, was equally appalling. The creature's beak set between two eyes, flaming red, was a monstrous weapon that would snap a man in half without the slightest pause. Yet it was nothing compared to its talons, which reminded Annabella of nothing so much as the giant claws on the vast mining machines she had once seen on some film or other. There was no question that the talons could effortlessly pierce and crush an elephant before bearing it away.

Annabella was the first to recover something of herself.

"Fire!" she shouted, with all her might. "Shoot! Shoot!"

Aswad, however, could only whimper and cower down on the carpet. His bow dropped from his nerveless fingers. Annabella grabbed for it convulsively, but was too late. It slid over the edge and was gone, twisting slowly as it fell to the sea far below.

Darius spared his father a contemptuous glance, then holding his own bow slantwise across his body, drew and fired. What happened to the arrow, no one could see, but undaunted, Darius drew and fired again, and again. Then the rukh was almost on them, groping talons reaching, its great double sabre of a beak gaping wide as though to swallow the world.

Annabella had time to notice that there was some sort of edifice mounted on the rukh's back, like the howdah on an elephant except much bigger. There were shadowy faces craning over the bulwarks and two figures clinging to the outside, as though ready to jump.

"Aim for the people," she ordered Darius while simultaneously trying to alert Basil, but he had already seen. He waited till the last possible moment and as the two men leaped out into space aiming to board and capture the carpet, he swept it out and up in a climbing turn that took them looping up over the top of the rukh. The would-be boarders shrieked with rage as they realised they had missed, then fell silently to their deaths.

Darius was still shooting as fast as he could and had managed to wound, if not slay, at least two more of their attackers, but suddenly he was out of shafts. Vivienne wrenched the quiver from Aswad's back and began to feed Darius more arrows, but it would be only moments before these, too, were gone and they would be quite defenceless.

The pressing need for more weapons and Basil's handling of the carpet combined to give Annabella an inspiration.

"The gold!" she said. "Aswad's gold. We can use the bricks as bombs. They're heavy. They'll do damage..."

"No!" Aswad yelled, suddenly roused from his funk. "No! I forbid it..."

But Darius, having fired the last of his arrows, was already ripping at his father's robes.

"Give it to me," he shouted in Aswad's ear. "All of it. Or would you rather die...?"

Can you put us above them? Annabella asked Basil.

Of course, Basil said. *Just say the jolly word.*

What about 'ifrits? she asked.

Not yet, he said. *The emir hasn't let them off the leash. As I said, he wants you alive...*

"Are we ready?" Annabella said to the others. She turned to look back and saw Darius and Vivienne clutching at a number of large gold bricks. There were six of them. Two had been strapped to Aswad's thighs, two to his belly, and two had been hanging over his shoulders, down his back. How he had been able to move at all was a complete mystery.

"Hang on to them," Annabella warned. "Things will get rough. Don't lose them. Don't waste them."

For the last few moments the carpet and the rukh had been circling, the combatants staring at each other across a narrowing circle, the emir ordering his forces for a fresh attack. This time three of his remaining Assassins were clinging to the outside of the howdah, ready to leap.

"Any second now," Annabella said but her words were lost as Basil launched them into a savage climbing turn that segued into a barrel roll. An instant later, miraculously, they were above the rukh, staring down.

"The head," Darius cried urgently to Vivienne. "Aim for the head..."

Basil edged the carpet forward and a moment later, a fusillade of gold ingots rained down. Five of the bricks missed and plummeted harmlessly past, but the sixth took the great bird in one of its eyes.

It again let loose one of its terrible screeches, this time in pain, and reared up, flapping its wings in outrage. The Assassins clinging to the outside of the howdah had no chance. The huge bird's gyrations flung them off into the night and they plunged silently to their doom, praising as they fell their imminent arrival in Paradise.

Basil cranked up the carpet to maximum speed and they tore off through the night, the wind of their passage buffeting them mercilessly and threatening to dislodge them

at any moment. Annabella found herself extremely grateful for the seatbelt. The rush of air past them was freezing and her eyes were streaming so much she was quite blind.

Where are we going? she gasped.

Anywhere, Basil managed to reply. His voice was distracted. *Anywhere away from...*

'Ifrits...?

Behind us... In front of us...

How many?

I don't know. Too many.

What can we do?

Flee...

But as it turned out, they couldn't. Not for long.

The loom of the shore passed beneath them. At least, now, we won't drown, Annabella thought but a moment later was wondering if that might not have been the best option.

Without any sort of warning, a giant fireball came screaming at them from directly ahead. Annabella had an instant to register somebody shrieking – Vivienne – as Basil flung the carpet into a frantic roll, which just created enough lateral separation for the missile to miss. There was a moment of intense heat as it flashed past and then they were diving almost vertically for the safety of the ground.

What was that? Annabella managed to say, as they hurtled downwards.

Warning shot, Basil replied, shortly. *Land, or else. Land or they'll blast us out of the sky.*

Can we fight them?

No. That was Iblis. I'm sure that was Iblis. And there are others with him. Too many...

So what?

So nothing. They've got us. They've got you. I'm sorry, truly sorry...

Chapter 12

They came down next to a small grove and, instinctively abandoning the carpet, huddled into the trees seeking whatever protection the pitiful cover might provide. Strange shapes that might or might not have been there seemed to be prowling about, ringing them, preventing any thought of escape.

"What is happening?" Darius hissed. "What's going on?" He was crouching down behind the narrow trunk, trying to make himself invisible. He had his scimitar in his hand. His father was a crumpled heap beside him. Despite his fear, Aswad was consumed by mourning for his lost gold. Vivienne was on Darius's far side. She was on her knees, and clinging to a handful of his robes.

"Tell me what's happening," Darius demanded again.

"People are after me," Annabella said at last.

"Why? What have you done?"

"Nothing," Annabella snapped irritated by Darius's accusing tone. "And I don't know why..."

"But, you must..."

"I don't," she spat, now extremely aggravated, not just by Darius but by the whole injustice of this impossible situation. She stood up and made to move out of the trees.

Instantly, one of the amorphous shapes seemed to flow towards her. She stood for a moment longer, challenging it, but when it still kept coming dropped back to her knees. The shape retreated.

What are they waiting for? she asked Basil.

The emir, Basil said simply. Annabella realised that it was long since she had heard the djinni "jolly" or "damn" anything. She supposed it was a measure of just how serious the situation had become.

The rukh arrived with a great flapping of its wings as it decelerated to land. The wind it created caused a blizzard of dust and sand and general rubbish. For a long moment they were all blind.

Finally, the great beast came to rest and a silken rope ladder was unrolled over the edge of the howdah to reach all the way to the ground. The survivors of the squad of Assassins slid lithely down and fanned out into a protective ring. Then another figure stepped over the edge and slowly descended.

Is that who I think it is? Annabella asked.

Indeed, mistress mine, Basil said reluctantly.

Can you freeze them?

Iblis will just unfreeze them...

Will he be able to understand us? Annabella said warily after a moment, remembering Luqman.

No, Basil said.

The 'ifrīts?

No, he said again.

Basil... I'm scared...

You jolly well think I'm not? He said it with a touch of his old acerbity, and Annabella was grateful.

The rukh cast such a huge shadow that despite the moon, it was difficult to make out anything much of the group coming towards them. Annabella came to a sudden realisation. She stood up and haltingly walked forward, away from the cover of the grove.

What do you think you're jolly well doing? Basil demanded.

You said it's me they're after... They might let the others go... And summoning all her courage, Annabella determinedly kept moving.

"Annabella," Vivienne squeaked. "Don't... Come back..." Then she did a remarkable thing. She, too, scrambled to her feet and hurried to catch up, followed an instant later by Darius. Aswad alone was left, shrinking behind a bush.

It was only when Vivienne reached for and trapped her hand that Annabella realised she was being followed.

"What are you doing?" she whispered. "It's me they want..."

"But you're my friend," Vivienne whispered back. They came to a stop, with Darius behind them, his scimitar hanging down in his hand and concealed by a fold of his robes.

The crump of the footsteps coming towards them sounded like the march of doom. Annabella felt her knees trembling but somehow kept her head up and her gaze fixed on the shadowy magus striding towards her who for some unfathomable reason of his own had been hounding her through the centuries.

Flint struck steel and abruptly torches flared, dazzling them with sudden brilliance. Annabella blinked and strained, trying to clear her vision. The footsteps finally stopped and as her eyes adjusted, she found herself staring at a scene beyond her wildest imagining.

Confronting her was a tall, hawk-nosed man of indeterminate age, dressed in a gorgeous black cape slashed with crimson and thickly embroidered with gold, surmounted by an elaborate high collar again heavily worked with bullion. On his head was a towering turban, in matching black, crimson and gold.

Hassan-i Sabbāh, Old Man of the Mountain, Emir of Evil – for indeed it was he – glowered down at her, his lips twisting with satisfaction. Behind him in a semicircle stood his black-clad fida'is bearing their flaring torches, raised high. Behind them again, just visible in the light and impossibly elevated was the huge head and beak of the gargantuan rukh, hanging over them, strangely disembodied and bizarre beyond belief.

After a long, long interval during which the silence became oppressive to the point of madness, the emir reached within his robes and drew forth a small flask made from obsidian, black and totally opaque. With some ceremony, he removed the stopper.

"The djinni will now enter within," he said, holding up the flask invitingly. His voice was bland and his tone conversational.

Why? Annabella asked, totally taken aback.

It will hold me captive, Basil said. *Powerless.*

"No," Annabella said.

There was no apparent signal but on the instant, an Assassin stepped forward, wrenched Vivienne away from Annabella, seized her by the hair and laid a knife across her bared throat. The knife was so sharp that just the weight of the blade severed her skin and a thin trickle of blood appeared. The pain and the realisation that pressure would make the cut much worse made Vivienne bite off her scream.

At the same time, a second fida'i moved smoothly forward and with the edge of a hand smacked Darius hard on his bicep. The scimitar fell from his suddenly nerveless fingers and clattered on the ground.

"I think, yes," the emir said.

Why? Annabella asked Basil again.

Hostage, Basil said. *He wants to hold me hostage against the Sheikh. He could just kill me. There would be a fight, but he knows his 'ifrits would win in the end. So it's a hostage he wants and for Vivienne's sake, for your sake, and because I believe he could make me do it anyway...*

"Now," the emir said. His voice was no longer conversational but carried the sharp crack of command.

It's been an honour and a jolly genuine privilege... Basil said with what might have been a catch in his voice. Before Annabella could protest further, a slender tendril of smoke flickered across the space between her and the emir and slipped into the black flask gleaming threateningly in the torchlight. Thoughtfully, the emir replaced the stopper, smoothed the soft, wax back across the join, and caused the great seal hanging on a chain about his neck to imprint it with a strange device.

"How wise," he said when he had finished. The flask disappeared back beneath his cape, leaving Annabella to stand before him absolutely bereft.

Basil! Basil! she shouted. And again, but there was no response. His prison evidently insulated him completely from the outside world. With the click of the stopper being pressed home, Annabella had been shorn of her only real source of help and support, her only possible hope for the future. And something altogether different, altogether greater, something she was only just beginning to realise existed. It was quite the most devastating moment of her life, in its way far worse than the disappearance of her parents, which had been a gathering crisis played out over days, weeks, and months and never brought to any sort of final resolution.

This, by contrast, was instantly and completely crushing, the sky falling.

Vivienne and Darius were staring at her. Vivienne, too, understood what Basil's capture must mean although she had no notion of the greater grief flooding through Annabella. Darius, with the uttering of the word djinni, was beginning to piece together what must have been the real state of affairs ever since the girls had entered his life. And as comprehension dawned, so he also came to realise the true dimension of the catastrophe that had just befallen them.

The emir turned away without another word, leaving the fida'is to bind and gag the captives who were then slung across wiry shoulders to be carried up to the howdah on the rukh. They were dumped unceremoniously on the floor and shunted to the back. Each of the three was aware that Aswad had been overlooked but none, for different reasons, gave it a second thought.

Another gale lashed at the grove as the rukh struggled into the air, but then it was gone, leaving the dust to settle slowly. Eventually, Aswad deemed it safe to emerge from beneath his bush. The loss of his gold bricks constituted an enormous personal tragedy, yet he was still far from destitute. If anyone cared to check, they would find his robes still unaccountably heavy, stitched as they were with nips, tucks and miniature pockets, each painstakingly filled with gold shavings. Aswad calculated that his turban alone carried more than enough to buy safe passage home with a handsome sum left over, while the rest of his clothing would yet make the whole expedition more than worthwhile.

It was a pity about Darius, but some things just couldn't be helped and the boy had lately been displaying a distressing tendency towards rebellious independence. It was, indeed, probably all for the best. There was nothing to say that he couldn't beget another son or two, possibly three, to comfort his old age.

Aswad made a careful survey of his surroundings to check for any more unwanted visitations, glanced at the stars overhead to mark his direction and then set off, heading north for Shiraz. Put to the question, he would have had to admit that he was now a great deal happier than he had been for quite some little time past.

The rukh, upset by its injured eye, had been cranky and uncooperative on the flight back, and it was with quite some relief that the emir and his remaining fida'is greeted the sight of Castle Alamut, picked out on its mountain top by the last rays of the westering sun. The rukh made a perfunctory circle and dropped down to an extremely bad-tempered landing. The jolting woke the three prisoners, who had been left crumpled in the back of the howdah without food, drink or any easing of their bonds during the long, long flight. Each had somehow managed to fall asleep in self defence but now they woke to quite serious pain and suffering.

They found themselves being manhandled down to the ground, then to be propelled across a courtyard and into the castle. It was already dark inside and they only caught vague glimpses of stone walls and ceilings as they were taken down endless stairways and along echoing passages. Finally, someone used a knife to cut the ropes binding them and they were pushed into a small cell. A door slammed behind and they heard a stout bar falling into its slots.

It was pitch dark and there was a skittering sound which Annabella thought was probably rats. She was about to say so when she realised it would be unkind to mention it to Vivienne, if she hadn't already worked it out for herself.

"Well this is cosy," Annabella said, instead. She groped her way to a wall and sat down, her back against it, rubbing at her wrists where the rope had chafed. Neither of the other two spoke.

"It's not my fault," Annabella said defensively into the accusing dark. "I have no idea why we're here. I have no idea what's going on. I'm sorry you're involved. But it's really not my fault."

On top of being hungry, thirsty, bruised and sore, she was deeply afraid. And on top of that again, she was utterly miserable at losing Basil. The thought of him magically imprisoned inside a tiny black cavity, deprived of sight, sound and all sensation, was deeply upsetting, never mind the loss of his abilities and all that meant. It seemed to her just then that the only possible response, the only reasonable response, was to burst into tears.

There was a slight scuffling sound and then Annabella felt Vivienne sliding down the wall beside her. Vivienne groped for her hand and then Annabella heard her say:

"I know it's not your fault. And I do remember that you tried to persuade me not to come." With that, Annabella did burst into tears. Moments later, she felt Darius sit down on her other side, his hand on her shoulder. Any little control she might have had left vanished. She sobbed her heart out as Vivienne rocked her gently and made meaningless, soothing noises.

The storm passed eventually, as all storms always do. Annabella's racking sobs slowly eased and, with a final sniff, she sat up straight, found a corner of her robe and wiped her eyes.

"Sorry," she said when she could trust herself to speak.

"Not to worry," Vivienne said. "It happens to all the best people."

"Are you all right, now?" Darius asked.

Annabella found she had a choice of laughing or bursting into tears again. She laughed.

"Apart from the fact that here we are, locked in a dungeon by some maniac, somewhere in the wilds of Persia and we haven't a clue what's going on... Yes, I'm fine."

"And that really was a djinni, not you doing all that...stuff?"

"Basil..." Vivienne said.

"You should have told me."

"Your father..." Vivienne began, and left it at that.

"What about your father?" Annabella asked.

"Oh he'll be all right," Darius said dismissively. "He'll just use the gold he had hidden in his clothes."

"You mean, he had more?" Vivienne asked.

"Of course. He's very tricky. You know he's very tricky." They fell silent.

"I'm thirsty," Vivienne said at last. "Dying... And hungry. Do you think they're just going to leave us here...?"

But on cue, there was the sound of feet on the other side of the door. They heard the bar being removed from its slots and then the door was pushed open. Light flared into the room causing the three hurriedly to shield their eyes. A lamp was set on the floor, followed by a rough platter with unleavened bread and a pitcher of water.

"So," Annabella said when the guards had gone, barring the door behind them. "They're not going to leave us to starve."

"What a relief," Vivienne said with an attempt at lightness.

Was it? Annabella wondered rather bitterly. Dying of hunger might be greatly preferable to whatever the future held.

They came for her when the night was at its lowest ebb. They had shared the bread – not nearly enough for three healthy, deprived, appetites – taken it in turns to drink from the pitcher and talked desultorily as the lamp burned lower and lower, finally guttering into oblivion. It was a particularly dispiriting moment when the impenetrable blackness again descended upon them. It was so thick and heavy they felt they could almost touch it. Again, Annabella was forced to think of Basil, whose situation was far worse. She felt emotion welling up again and grimly forced it back down.

She was dozing and the other two were fast asleep, curled together for warmth, when again they were roused by the tramp of feet in the corridor. This time it sounded like a whole squad. Annabella could sense Vivienne reaching for her but scrambled to stand, determined to face whatever might be coming on her own two feet.

The door was flung wide, light flooded in and the Assassin in charge gestured. After a moment's hesitation, Annabella gathered herself and walked forward.

"I'll be back," she said, wondering as she did so whether indeed she would ever see her friends again.

The guard detachment fell in about her and she found herself being hustled along, uncomfortably quickly. The castle seemed an absolute warren of passages, corridors, staircases and, at two different points, what were apparently tunnels. By the time they reached their destination, Annabella was totally bemused. She had no real idea of whether she was even above or below ground level. At last, they came to a halt at what was evidently the entrance to a superior chamber. Large double doors of some polished wood were set into a lofty arch. A guard knocked with the butt of a spear and then she was inside, the squad still outside in the corridor and the door closed behind her.

As Annabella's eyes grew accustomed to the light, she saw she was confronted not so much by a chamber as a vaulted cavern, evidently hollowed into the core of the mountain. Massive pillars, each with great ribs disappearing up into the ceiling above, receded into the distance, as though bearing the whole weight of the castle. Torches flared, casting random pools of light and shade. Somewhere there was the sound of running water and the air was tinged with a strange mixture of scents and smells, astringent, sharp, each one distinct but somehow melding with all the others to signal just the one thing. Danger. Nerve-twisting danger. Screaming danger.

Annabella felt her legs going to jelly. She would have turned to flee except she knew the door behind her was barred and guarded. Never had she felt so alone, so exposed. She would have given anything to have Basil still by her side, for all his aggravating ways, his deeply endearing ways.

She found she had a choice. She could either dissolve in a puddle on the floor or she could march forward to meet whatever horror was awaiting her. She chose the latter, not from pride or stubbornness, but because suddenly she decided she was angry, extremely angry, outraged at the fates which had conspired to put her in this impossible situation. She passed the first row of pillars, then a second and a third, where she stopped short.

Here the pillars abruptly opened out to form a large open space, before reforming their regimented ranks. There were workbenches piled with scrolls and curious implements of alchemy. There was a strange triangular contraption off to one side and in the centre there was a huge bronze cauldron set upon a stepped, marble dais. There were also four slender columns arranged about it, each strangely twisted, stretching towards the ceiling, the tops lost in the shadows. Annabella had time for one sweeping glance of her surroundings. There was a stray gleam from high up, light reflected from something. Then her eyes were riveted to the figure waiting for her. Standing a little to one side so that he had been obscured from her line of sight between the pillars, was Hassan-i Sabbāh, Old Man of the Mountain, Emir of Evil.

There was a slightly quizzical look on his face, as though he had been curious to see whether Annabella indeed had the courage to come forward. She stared at him for a moment and then stamped her foot with genuine rage.

"How dare you!" she stormed. "How dare you treat us like this! And you will release Basil this instant!"

The emir regarded her with astonishment. Annabella opened her mouth, about to continue her tirade, but was cut off short.

"Silence," The emir hissed. "Silence for your parents' lives."

Annabella gasped and swayed with the shock. Whatever she might have been expecting, this seared through her like a lightning bolt. Before she could begin to marshal her resources, the emir stepped forward and with one of his tiny hands seized her by the back of the neck. For all its small size, nevertheless, his fist had a grip of iron.

"I will show you," he said, propelling her forwards and up the steps of the dais. Annabella struggled for all she was worth, kicking at his legs and clawing at the hand that held her, but had not the slightest effect. Hassan-i Sabbāh thrust her on until she crashed brutally into the giant bronze cauldron, which gave off a muffled thud.

"You will look," the emir insisted, forcing her to stand and peer over the edge. The liquid within the cauldron was still marred by the ripples caused by Annabella's impact, but slowly they stilled. Annabella was forced to gaze at the surface, resisting all the while, but as a scene began to resolve before her. She ceased to struggle. The emir released her and stepped back.

Annabella stood there, gripping the edge of the cauldron with both hands. At first the image was blurry and indistinct, but as the focus grew sharper and sharper so revulsion at what she was seeing began to take control. She screamed, unable to tear her eyes away, then she began to whimper wordlessly and finally, mercifully, she fainted, collapsing in a heap on the steps.

The emir regarded her unemotionally. It was what he had expected would happen and in due course it would come to serve his purpose.

Two guards dragged Annabella into the cell and left slamming the door. Vivienne and Darius rushed to her inert body.

"What have they done to her?" Vivienne wailed. "What have they done to her?" She cradled Annabella's head in her lap and began to stroke her hair.

"I don't think they've hurt her," Darius said, gently running his hands over her arms and legs. "I can't feel anything wrong."

"Then what?"

"I don't know," Darius said worriedly, then Annabella moaned.

"Is there any water left?" Vivienne said.

"A little, I think." Darius groped around for the pitcher, careful not to upset it. "Here," he said, guiding Vivienne's hand.

She moistened a corner of her hijab, now much the worse for wear, and began to sponge Annabella's face. Annabella groaned again and made to sit up.

"Just be still," Vivienne told her. "What did they do to you? What's wrong?"

But Annabella either wouldn't or couldn't speak.

Morning revealed that the cell or the dungeon or whatever it was into which they had been thrown actually had a small slit of a window recessed high up into one of the walls. As the sun rose a sliver of light made a weak and hesitant entrance. They were still cast in gloom but at least they could see a little.

Annabella was crouched in a corner to which she had insisted on retreating despite Vivienne's efforts. She obviously hadn't slept and her eyes were fixed straight ahead, blank and staring.

"Whatever can be wrong?" Vivienne said. "Annabella is so strong. What have they done to her?"

They heard footsteps outside the door and Vivienne put her arms protectively around Annabella.

"I don't think they'll take her again," Darius said. "Not till tonight." He was right. When the door opened, they were given more bread and water and then left alone.

Darius brought the platter and the pitcher across to the two girls. He offered the water to Annabella, but she made no response. Vivienne again moistened a corner of her niqab and squeezed a drop or two of water on to Annabella lips. She was rewarded at last with a reaction. Annabella blinked and slowly her eyes began to focus. Vivienne held the pitcher and after hesitating a long moment, Annabella drank.

"Please Annabella," Vivienne said again. "You have to tell us what happened. I can't bear seeing you like this. What did they do to you?"

But Annabella could only shake her head. To talk about what she had seen was impossible, quite beyond her.

"Did they hurt you?" Darius asked. "If they did, I'll..."

Annabella's lips quirked.

"No," she managed.

"Then what did they do?" Vivienne demanded. "Why are you like this?"

"Not they," Annabella said in a low voice. "He..."

"The emir?" Annabella nodded. Vivienne and Darius fell silent, leaving Annabella to wrestle with herself.

Time and again with morbid fascination her mind attempted to force her back to the cauldron, to revisit the ghastly scene she had been compelled to witness. Time and again she resisted, dragging her eyes away, seeking to fix them on anything, anywhere but that – the corner columns, the shadows overhead, the stray gleam of light... She knew that if she once allowed herself to succumb to the compulsion to gaze again at the demonic horror the emir had forced upon her, she would be lost. She had to find a way to wall it off, to bury it, to drown it, lest it consume her totally as it almost had during the night.

The day passed, endless second by endless second, and Annabella continued to wrestle with herself. The struggle was plain to Vivienne and Darius and they kept silent out of respect, watching her face and wondering what on earth could have reduced her to this.

Towards evening, more food was brought. They were all grateful if for no other reason than this was a concrete signal that time had actually passed.

Vivienne tore off a piece of bread, stiff and stale as it was, and offered it to Annabella. She found that she was able to take it, even to eat. Darius passed her the pitcher, and she drank.

"Do you feel any better?" Vivienne asked anxiously. Annabella regarded her with huge, shadowed eyes but said nothing.

"They will come for you again," Darius said.

"Yes," Annabella replied, her voice toneless.

"What did he want?" Vivienne said.

"I don't know," Annabella said.

"You still don't know?"

"No," Annabella repeated.

"What can we do?" Vivienne asked.

"Nothing," Annabella said.

"There must be something," Darius put in. He was trying to be aggressive, if only for his own benefit, but merely succeeded in sounding plaintive.

Annabella simply shook her head, but in that instant the germ of an idea poked up a tiny green shoot to the surface of her mind. Lovingly, she cleared away the loose soil round about and fed it moisture, drop by drop, nurturing it, cosseting it, begging it to grow. But despite her best efforts, it remained a weak and feeble thing, too fragile to bear the burden of hope. At best, it offered the merest suggestion of a chance.

Chapter 13

Again they came for Annabella when the tides of the night had ebbed to their lowest, when the oily black mudflats of fear were exposed defenceless to the creatures of the psyche crawling and slithering up through the ooze.

All three were expecting it, of course, and Vivienne and Darius did their best to offer support as they heard the tramp of feet in the corridor outside. Each seized one of Annabella's hands as she rose and squeezed hard. Then the door to the cell was flung open and Annabella was peremptorily summoned forth.

"We love you," Vivienne wanted to say, but didn't.

Again, Annabella was forced to make the tortuous route march to the emir's lair. Again, she became totally lost. It was as though the emir was a spider lurking deep within layers of cobweb, twisted and gnarled by centuries of neglect. Again, the guard detail eventually halted outside the polished doors. Again, there was the sound of a spear butt. And finally, again, she was pushed inside not knowing what awaited her. Except this time, there was the merest wisp of possibility.

She took a deep breath and summoning all the courage she had left, every last skerrick, she again managed to move forward between the pillars, on through the pools of light and shadow.

Again, he was waiting for her, no longer dressed in his gorgeous robes but in plain black. He was watching her intently and as though intimidated by his gaze, she glanced away as naturally as she could manage. It was still there. The column on the left... There was still a stray gleam of light reflecting from something on top of it, something that just might be a polished obsidian flask. It was only then that Annabella realised each of the other three columns were giving off the same stray gleam. Had she not already been battered to the point of madness, this final shock would have completely destroyed her. As it was, she just felt the numbness clamping back down around her heart.

She came to a hesitant stop, her eyes down. There was a long, long silence during which the emir continued to inspect her, a hawk high in the heavens tracking a mouse desperately seeking cover. Finally he spoke, his voice a delicate scalpel flicking open her skin.

"You can help them," he said.

Annabella said nothing.

"You can help them," he repeated. Annabella took a shuddering breath.

"What must I do?"

"You must persuade them that unless they reveal the secret, you will suffer the same fate."

"What secret?" Annabella managed. It was as though she had pulled a trigger.

"What secret?" The emir's voice was suddenly quivering with barely suppressed insanity. Automatically, Annabella backed away. The move took her closer to the

column on the left, the column she had first been aware of. But was it the right one? Could it be the right one? One chance in four...

"What secret...?" the emir continued, his eyes staring. He raised an arm as though to strike her, and again she backed away. One chance in four, but the only chance. She had to take it.

"The secret they wilfully persist in withholding," he shrieked at her. "The secret of..." Abruptly, he stopped.

"Stay still," he ordered. Annabella glanced over her shoulder. She was now close to the column. Should she try? Was there any point? One chance in four, even if she could topple it. She must try...

"Stay!" This time it was thunder rolling round the mountain peaks and pouring down the valleys like an avalanche.

Annabella cast another sidelong glance and convulsively made up her mind. If nothing else it was a gesture... Realisation hit the emir at the same moment that she launched herself. He too exploded into motion.

She hurtled into the column with all the force she could possibly muster but a sickening instant later realised it was not nearly enough. There was not even a tremor as her shoulder crashed into the twisting form. The base had been set solidly into the floor and slender and precarious though the column looked, her slight weight was not nearly sufficient to move it.

The pain of the impact had barely begun to register when there was a second, much greater, collision. Perhaps the emir miscalculated, perhaps he tripped slightly on the hem of his robe and stumbled, but whatever the reason he too crashed into the column and despite the buffer that was Annabella, his momentum did have an effect.

The base remained solidly anchored but an unseen flaw in the stone failed to absorb the second impact. There was a crack and the top half of the column teetered, hanging poised for an endless instant. Annabella and Hassan-i Sabbāh watched in frozen fascination. Would it fall or would it just reseal itself? Then all at once it was swinging down towards the floor. In the process, the obsidian flask was catapulted high into the air.

"No...!" The emir gasped and threw himself full-length towards it. For a second, Annabella thought he must catch it, but the flask finally eluded his grasping hand and she found a vagrant moment to give thanks that cricket had not yet been invented. Two things happened simultaneously. Both the emir and the flask crashed to the floor. The emir cried out with the impact, the flask shattered. A fine tracery of lines crazed the surface, an instant later it was lying in shards. But was it the right one? Could it be the right one? One chance in four... One chance in four...

Basil! Annabella screamed. *Are you here? Are you here?*

Gently, mistress mine. Annabella nearly fainted with relief at the sound of Basil's voice in her head. As it was, she collapsed into a heap on the floor, her shoulder white hot with pain. She wondered if she had broken something, her collarbone.

Can you deal with him? She asked, still desperate.

Oh yes, Basil said. With the greatest of jolly pleasure.

Hassan-i Sabbāh had raised himself on his arms and, head swivelling, was desperately seeking to spot the djinni he knew had been set free, released to wreak disaster upon him. However, there was no immediate sign of Basil. Then Basil spoke and if the emir's last words had been thunder, Basil let loose the voice of doom, shaking the castle to its very foundations.

"Stand!" came the command, reverberating throughout that vast chamber and making it throb like the war drum of some demonic god. "Stand! Face your fate!"

So powerful was the volume of sound that Annabella found herself momentarily robbed of the power to think. As for Hassan-i Sabbāh, he disintegrated. In that one single instant, he fell from the certainty of arrogant, absolute power to the despair of utter helplessness. He threw himself again full-length on the cold, stone floor and buried his head beneath his arms.

"I said, stand!" This time Basil's voice also held the ring of massed trumpets summoning an army to battle.

Annabella pressed her hands to her ears, trying to shut out the pounding echoes. Pain lanced through her shoulder as she raised her arm, making it even more difficult to think.. She had to remember something. There was a thing she had to tell Basil. Before it was too late.

Wait, she said, desperately trying to recall it. Wait...

What?

My parents. I think he's got my parents.

The echoes finally ceased and there was a long silence. Hassan-i Sabbāh still cowered on the floor, twitching slightly.

How do you know? Basil asked eventually.

I saw them, I think, Annabella said hesitantly. *He made me look into that thing...* She pointed at the cauldron. *And I saw them... I think... Except...*

Ask him.

Annabella crossed to the prone figure on the floor. Hassan-i Sabbāh was no longer the imposing, seemingly all-powerful despot dressed in black, gold and crimson. He appeared to have shrunk to half his size and Annabella realised now he was only pathetic. She touched him with her toe and he flinched.

"What have you done with my parents?" she demanded. "Where are they?"

The man on the floor said nothing, but cringed away from her.

"Speak!" Basil said, after an interval. His voice no longer crashed and rang. This time it was sibilant with menace.

Hassan-i Sabbāh mumbled something indecipherable.

"Get up," Annabella said with contempt. "Speak properly."

Slowly, he twisted around and pressed himself into a defensive crouch.

"Where are my parents?" Annabella repeated.

"I don't know..." he began, bringing an impatient gesture from Annabella.

"It's true, it's true," he gabbled. "Iblis has them. Iblis has them on Waq Waq..."

Again there was silence.

What does that mean? Annabella asked. *Waq Waq?*

It's an island, Basil said slowly.

Where?

I don't know, Basil was forced to admit.

Hassan-i Sabbāh was watching her face and his own expression of fear began to be replaced by a look of low cunning.

"If I die," he said at last. "They die."

Annabella stared at him.

"Why should I believe that?" she finally brought herself to ask.

"Because if I die, Iblis will then be free, free to feed them to his ghulan, or..."

Does that make sense? Annabella asked.

Yes, Basil said quietly.

What do we do?

You saw them? Your parents? I have to ask... Is it not too late already?"

Quite without volition or control, a great, whooping sob shook Annabella to her core.

I don't know, she said when she could. But I can't leave them there. You know I can't leave them there... Don't you...?

Yes, Basil said, his voice the merest whisper.

What do I do?

Absorbed in the ramifications of their conversation, neither Annabella nor Basil remarked Hassan-i Sabbāh stealthily begin to slide a hand within his robes. It was almost too late when Basil noticed the flicker of movement and instantly froze the man crouching before him, as he had once done to Cordelia Uppington and her minions.

He's up to something, he said to Annabella. I'll jolly well wager there's something hanging around his neck. And I'll bet it just happens to be a ring. It would be wise, mistress mine, to take it from him.

Annabella remembered the seal with which Hassan-i Sabbāh had imprisoned Basil.

Why?

Because if we don't, we might find that he can control me...

But you're my slave.

An interesting point. Does the fact that I am your slave trump what he's got? I don't know, and I don't much want to put it to the test. But we also might suddenly have some very undesirable company. Beastly undesirable...

Annabella hesitated and then with extreme reluctance moved behind Hassan-i Sabbāh. She felt about his neck and through the cloth could make out something hard. Nerving herself, she parted the robes and with her fingertips eased the chain she found over Hassan-i Sabbāh's head, flinching as she touched his naked flesh. Had she been able to see, she would have been struck by the expression in his eyes. The horror there was identical to the horror in Cordelia's in similar circumstances.

Annabella lifted the gold chain and examined the object dangling from it. Basil had been right. It was a ring, a great gold ring made to fit the thumb of a large man. The

upper surface was flat and bore a raised, six-pointed star formed by interlaced triangles. Each of the smaller triangles so created was inset with a tiny, triangular ruby

What is it? Annabella asked.

Amazing, Basil said. *Abso-jolly-lutely amazing. I never thought I'd see it.*

But what is it? Annabella repeated impatiently.

The Seal of Solomon. There was a strange, reverent tone in Basil's voice.

The Seal of Solomon, Annabella repeated uncomprehendingly.

King Solomon's ring, Basil said. Now it was his turn to be impatient. *The youth of today – so jolly ignorant.* Annabella sat wearily down on the bottom step of the dais.

Are you going to tell me?

It gave Solomon power over the Other World. He made 'ifrīts jolly well build his jolly old temple for him, the one Nebuchadnezzar pulled down... With the ring... That ring... The one you're holding.

So?

It's what gives the emir power over Iblis, don't you see? When the seal resurfaced... When Hassan-i Sabbāh began to use it... There was so much aetheric noise, we knew only one thing could be causing it... We knew we had to jolly well track it down... It's a huge jolly threat to all of us. It could have power over all of us... And when Hassan-i Sabbāh made Iblis send 'ifrīts into your world, into your time, to capture you, that's when I followed... Except I found you first...

At last the real story, Annabella said bitterly. *Finally the truth comes out. You... "picked me up" because you thought I might lead you to the seal...*

I did not pick you up... Basil began, with extreme discomfort. *Well, yes. But only in the beginning. In the very beginning.*

Not even "lead", Annabella said reflectively. *Bait... You must have known where the ring was.. from the noise. So I was bait... Wasn't I?*

Only in the beginning, Basil pleaded. *Truly, only in the beginning. Then I...*

What? Annabella demanded.

I... But Annabella interrupted him, imperiously brushing aside whatever it was Basil was going to say.

Power over Iblis...? she said, fixing on what to her seemed the critical point. *You mean, Hassan-i Sabbāh was going to summon Iblis...? Or could summon Iblis...?*

Abso-jolly-lutely.

You mean, I could summon Iblis...with this?

Yes, but...

And ask him what he's done with my parents?

Basil was silent.

Well? Say something...

I'm thinking.

What?

I'm thinking that you can't summon Iblis because he'll eat you alive. You might have the ring but you would never be able to resist him.

Why not? Annabella demanded. *He does...* She gestured disparagingly at the emir.

You don't understand, Basil said. *He is evil, through and through. Iblis is evil, through and through. You are anything but, which to Iblis makes you weak, vulnerable, a jolly old sitting duck. Iblis would gobble you up and spit out the feathers. And he'll take the ring... He will take the power. Good can only fight evil. It can never manage evil. If you try, you'll either succumb to Iblis, or just become evil yourself.*

Well, you take the ring.

I can't do that, either.

Why not? Annabella cried, an edge of hysteria in her voice.

Because I'm not evil...

And King Solomon was...?

Yes, Basil said simply. *Pretty much. Kings are. Power corrupts. They can never resist. They can hide it, but they can't resist.*

Then what? How do I find my parents?

That's what I was thinking about. Basil paused. *Lilis,* he said at last.

Lilis!

She will know where Waq Waq is and we have some chance of getting it out of her. There is no chance with Iblis. None. On my honour. Basil paused again. *Please, mistress mine. It's the only way.*

Annabella sat, staring at the Seal of Solomon, an object priceless beyond imagining. But if she couldn't make use of it, what good was it? None. It was just a gaudy bauble. Worthless. With a sudden motion that lanced through her shoulder, she made to heave it far into the shadows.

No! Basil said urgently. *You must keep it.*

Annabella looked at him a moment and then understood. If nothing else it must be denied to the emir. She hesitated a moment longer, then slipped the chain over her head and tucked the ring inside her robe. It hung heavy against her chest, unnaturally heavy.

So what now? she asked.

Escape, Basil said. *We have to get away from this jolly old castle...*

After we rescue the others...

Must we?

You need to ask?

Worth a jolly try... But there's something I have to do first.

What?

I must abase myself before you.

What?

For freeing me from that cursed prison. I would have been trapped there for eternity, without you... I am now twice enslaved.

Oh, rubbish! Annabella said impatiently. *Not this again.*

The prison was locked with the Seal of Solomon. No djinni...

I broke a jar, Annabella said. One chance in four. I just got lucky and broke the right one. Come on, if we're going...

Mistress...

Basil! I need you more than you need me. Just drop it...please. And what do we do about...this...? She gestured at the still frozen emir.

Why should we jolly well do anything? Basil said, a deeply unsatisfied tone in his voice. *He can damn well stay like this. Serve him right.*

And my parents...? What will happen to them? Annabella demanded. There was a pause. *Iblis has to believe the emir still controls him.*

Oh, very well, Basil said, even more dissatisfied. And on the instant, the emir was unfrozen only to be bound with heavy manacles, fetters and coil after coil of imposing chain. There was also a most efficient gag. Despite the comical look of outrage and disbelief on his face, the most he could do was gurgle.

There, Basil said. *It should take them days to get rid of that lot.*

Annabella realised she would never be able to find her way back to Vivienne and Darius, which left only one option. Persuasion.

The guard outside the door, she said to Basil. *We need him to show us the way.*

Say no more, mistress mine, Basil said. *The usual?*

Why not? Annabella said tiredly. *It works well.* Increasingly, pain from her injured shoulder – which seemed to be getting worse – and general weariness were weighing her down. She was beginning to think that if they didn't move in the next few seconds, she would never move again. Now that Basil had been restored to her and the emir dealt with, however temporarily, the adrenaline of the moment was rapidly dissipating, leaving her with nothing but hurt. In an attempt to ease the pain, she tucked her bad arm into the vee of her robes as a makeshift sling.

She gave the emir one last, considering look and then set off back through the pillars towards the doors. Once there, she put her ear to the wood but could hear nothing.

Perhaps you should go first, she said to Basil, and watched as a slight tendril of smoke slipped through the gap at the bottom. A moment later, the doors swung open as though of their own accord. Annabella stepped through to find the guard suspended horizontally halfway between the floor and ceiling, his mouth gaping foolishly. She raised her hand in front of his face, to be sure he could see, and abruptly closed her fist. The guard dropped with a sickening lurch and yelped in terror. Annabella let him contemplate the stone of the floor for a moment, an inch in front of his nose, and then went through the pantomime of raising him back up.

"You will lead me back to the cell," Annabella said in a voice that could brook no argument. "If you take a wrong turn, if you make a sound, I will lift you up to the roof and let you crash face first into the floor. Do you understand?"

The guard was accustomed to the weird sounds and sometimes the smells that emanated from his master's workshop, but never before had the necromancy passed beyond the door to confront him personally in the corridor. He nodded frantically, his eyes bulging.

"Then lead on," Annabella commanded. The terrified Assassin – and it took a great deal to frighten a member of the order – took some seconds to gather his resolve, then he pointed to the left. A moment later to his even greater consternation, he found himself swimming off down the corridor horizontally at waist height with Annabella stalking behind, cradling her bad arm. She failed to realise that she had left the doors to the workshop ajar behind her.

It was now so deep into the night that morning could not be far away and Annabella hoped they might be able to avoid any encounter. She was wrong. She had followed the guard for what seemed like miles and was beginning to think she would get away with it when she heard the tramp of feet beyond the next corner, coming towards them. She looked about frantically for a hiding place but it was too late. They were then in one of the strange, traboule-like tunnels with no hope of retreating without being seen.

She was still standing, uncertain, when four men bearing torches swept into view only to clatter to a halt in astonishment. One opened his mouth to shout, but before he could utter a sound, all four were frozen and then found themselves stacked tidily along the wall to give passage to Annabella.

How long can you keep them like that? she asked Basil.

Forever, he said indifferently.

They went on and at last came to a spiral staircase that Annabella thought she recognised. Two minutes later, they had reached the cell. Annabella lifted the bar from the slots and pushed open the door. In the light from the corridor, she could see Vivienne and Darius lying side by side. If they had been asleep, they still lifted their heads instantly the moment the door was opened.

Annabella pushed the still floating guard into the cell, hoping that Vivienne had filled in the hours of waiting by explaining as much of the situation as she knew to Darius. It would be difficult if he were still ignorant.

"Come on," she whispered urgently. "We're getting out of here." She shook her head impatiently as the others simultaneously opened their mouths to ask questions.

"Not now," she said and turned to the hapless guard, still floating at waist height. "The battlements," she ordered. "Take us to the battlements."

It was quite the strangest procession, but fortunately there seemed to be no more wandering patrols. They retraced part of the route that Annabella had just traversed, then entered a broad, spiral staircase that appeared to be winding its way up one of the castle's turrets. It was all very well for the guard, whose ascent was effortless, but for Annabella, injured as she was, the climb was extremely taxing. At last they reached a doorway which gave directly on to the battlements.

Annabella motioned the others to a halt and peered around the corner, only to duck back on the instant.

"Sentries," she whispered. *We need the carpet,* she added to Basil. *And can we use this one to distract them?* She gestured at the guard still floating alongside them.

Diversion? Abso-jolly-lutely...

The carpet unrolled before them as he spoke. It still had the seatbelts and the guard watched bug-eyed as they stepped aboard and settled themselves. He opened his mouth but closed it abruptly when Annabella held a finger to her lips, her other arm still tucked into her robes. She felt a fumbling at her waist and realised that Vivienne must be fastening her seatbelt.

"Hang on," she said to them, and then to Basil: *All right, do your stuff...*

What would you like?

Anything. But fast, please...

Wishes...! Wish for something. Flames?

Basil! You can't set him on fire... You just can't... Memories of another time, far in the past, tore at Annabella. *If you do that I'll...*

Fake flames? Basil cut her off, resignedly.

As long as they are only fake...

But we want him noisy...

So smack him across the bottom, or something...

And with that, the last minutes of a quiet night watch on the battlements of Castle Alamut suddenly degenerated into total chaos.

There was a crack, very reminiscent of a hard slap. Annabella's unfortunate captive gave a loud yell of pain, apparently burst into flames and went shooting out along the ramparts, trailing clouds of sparks and smoke. As he realised that he was now some sort of blazing missile, the yell changed to a shriek, so that the 20 or so fida'is on duty were suddenly confronted with a screaming, fiery banshee evidently intent on destroying every last one of them. Not surprisingly, there was a complete and instant breakdown of discipline. Shock became panic, became pandemonium.

In vain did the squad leader push and shove and strike about him, trying to restore order, trying to stem the headlong flight of his troops. It was an instant rout. In only seconds he was left standing, aghast, watching the rapidly retreating backs of his men pursued by the flaming Assassin. So transfixed was he that he had no notion of an equally strange event occurring just behind them. Basil's carpet bearing its three passengers nosed out of the doorway, lifted over the battlements and made to slide quietly off into the night.

The sergeant must have caught a flicker of movement in his peripheral vision. He swung round, saw a strange object slipping over the wall, drew back his bow and loosed the arrow he had automatically nocked during the crisis of moments before. Whether he hit anything, he had no idea, but just the very act of doing something vaguely positive made him feel somewhat better.

The only sound the arrow made was a nasty thwack as it plunged into Annabella's side. She felt a heavy blow, as though someone had just punched her brutally in the ribs, but for the moment that was all. Then pain, terrible pain, began to flood through her. She swayed and crumpled forward.

Vivienne was the first to react. She reached forward to help her back upright and her hand encountered the shaft of the arrow. For long seconds she was uncomprehending, then she realised.

"Basil," she said, her voice breathless and panicky. "I think Annabella's been shot. Annabella's been shot..."

Chapter 14

"Basil! We have to stop. We have to help Annabella." Vivienne's voice was no longer edged with hysteria. The situation was far too serious.

"I'm trying to find somewhere," a more or less bodiless voice said, but if Vivienne's tone had firmed, Basil's was anything but. They flew on over the jagged landscape, dark beneath them. The sky to the east was brightening quickly and then the first rays of the sun began to strike slantwise across the terrain.

"There," Darius suddenly said, pointing off to the left where a precipitous ravine carved its way through the peaks. "That looks like a cave." There appeared to be a dark opening high up in the sheer wall of the cliff.

"We would be safe there," he added. "They could never get to us."

Basil brought the carpet banking round and slowed to a hover as they tried to peer inside.

"I'll check," Basil said, still with deep concern in his voice. "Wait here..."

"As if we have any choice," Vivienne muttered as a tendril of smoke slipped across the gap. He was back in seconds.

"It's empty," he said, taking the carpet into the opening to land on the floor of the cave. Vivienne and Darius slipped out of their seat belts and immediately bent to Annabella. The arrow had taken her in her left side. Had her injured arm not been tucked up it would probably have received the brunt of the impact and it would have been nothing worse than a flesh wound. As it was, the arrow had passed between two of her ribs and was now deeply embedded. Annabella's clothing was soaked with blood and it was still oozing from around the shaft. Fortunately, she was profoundly unconscious.

"We have to get the arrow out," Darius said. "And it looks like her shoulder is injured, too."

"How?" Vivienne said.

"How what?"

"How do we get the arrow out?"

"It will be barbed," Darius said. "We'll have to cut it out."

"Basil?" Vivienne said.

"No. I can't do it."

"Can't? Or won't?" she asked, unsuccessfully trying to hide her astonishment. Basil sounded absolutely distraught

"I can do it," Darius said. "I'm not frightened of blood. I've seen wounds before." Vivienne looked at him searchingly.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"Do you want to do it?"

Vivienne looked stricken at the thought. "I couldn't," she said.

"Well then, unless there are other...beings around that I still don't know about, that leaves me." There was a pause, then Vivienne nodded.

"Basil," Darius said addressing the djinni directly for the first time. "I need stuff to work with... Can you...?"

"I don't trust you," Basil said bluntly. "Not after the tricks your father tried."

"I am not my father," Darius said with affronted dignity. "And if you won't do it and if Vivienne won't do it then you don't really have any choice."

"If you hurt her..." Basil said his voice crackling with tension.

"She's already badly hurt and if we don't do something quickly, she'll die."

"Very well," Basil said at last. "What do you need?"

"Wait," Vivienne said. "We have to sterilise the knife before you...cut..."

"What?" Darius demanded.

"Future stuff," Vivienne said. "Trust me, please. Basil, can you give us antiseptic, antibiotics, that sort of thing?"

"They haven't been invented yet... Like hamburgers..."

"Ridiculous! Then flame. We have to sterilise the blade with flame."

"What is sterilise?" Darius said, bewildered.

"Never mind. I'll explain later. But you have to hold that knife blade in flame before you start..."

The discussion was summarily cut short, Darius finding to his surprise that he was suddenly holding a flaming brand. With a sidelong look at Vivienne, he held it up to the knife blade.

"Enough?"

"More," she said. "Another minute. Then let it cool." She was struck by a sudden thought.

"What if Annabella wakes up while you're doing it?"

"I don't know... You'll have to hold her, or something..."

"Basil, can't we do some anaesthetic? Surely drugs have been invented..."

A moment later, a small smoking pot had materialised beside Annabella's head, where she now lay on a low bier. They could see the fumes drifting towards her nose as she breathed.

"Opium," Basil said.

"And we have to cut her clothes away..." Darius began.

"I forbid it," Basil said in an awful voice.

"Oh, don't be stupid," Vivienne snapped. "It's Annabella... There's nothing to see, anyway. You were the one who was trying to...build her up. And give Darius another knife, for the clothes. And hot water, and soap, he must wash his hands very carefully..."

"What?" Darius interrupted and Vivienne lost her temper.

"If both of you don't stop arguing," she stormed. "Annabella will bleed to death and I'll never forgive you."

It seemed to take hours but in reality, once they started it went quickly and well. Darius slit away the blood-soaked clothing, carefully cleaned around the area at Vivienne's direction and then with the second, sterilised blade began to enlarge the wound so that he could withdraw the arrow. Fortunately for Annabella, the arrow had only a regulation steel tip and not one of the large, wickedly barbed, razor-sharp, hunting heads the fida'is tended to use when on assignment and which would have left her with very little chance of survival. Doubly fortunately, most of the force had been absorbed by one of her ribs before it had slid its way in deeper.

Darius was able to work it free without causing much extra damage. It came clear with a sucking sound and Vivienne, who had turned her head away when the cutting began, felt herself beginning to faint.

"Don't," Darius said sharply, seeing her sway. "I need you. Here, hold her still... There's a splinter of bone I have to get out... Now press on this..."

Vivienne found her hand guided to a wad of some sort of compress.

"...And now help me lift, so I can bandage..."

"Her arm," Darius said when they had made a neat parcel of Annabella's ribs. "We have to see what's wrong with that..."

Together, he and Vivienne eased Annabella's slight body on to her back and Darius immediately pointed to a bump on her left clavicle.

"The bone's broken," he said.

"Poor Annabella," Vivienne exclaimed. "But what's this?" She added, holding up the Seal of Solomon on its chain. Darius shrugged.

"Whatever it is, take it off," he said. "We don't want her choking." Vivienne slipped the chain over Annabella's head, careful not to catch her hair, and put it around her own neck, inside her robes.

Darius gently examined the fracture and then pressed quickly to realign the bone. Annabella shifted restlessly and a small, unconscious groan escaped her.

"What are you doing?" Vivienne said, sharply.

"It's all right," Darius murmured. "Just setting the bone. I've had the same thing. It hurts for a bit but all we have to do now is to keep her arm still."

With Vivienne's help, he strapped Annabella's arm across her chest.

"You should bathe her, before she wakes up," he said. "And get Basil to give her clean clothes. It'll make her feel better. I'll go away." And suiting his actions to his words, Darius rose and stepped back.

"Thank you," Vivienne said. "Thank you so much. I couldn't..."

"It's nothing," Darius said and went to sit in the entrance to the cave, dangling his legs insouciantly over the sheer drop to the ravine below and surveying their surroundings. He was not to know that his movements, sharp in the early morning sun, had drawn the attention of one of the many regular patrols of Assassins who guarded the approaches to Castle Alamut. Invisible in the deep shadows still concealing the valley floor, the gaze of the three men was drawn inexorably upward by Darius's waving feet.

The emir was forced to receive their report, still chained, but the urgency of the situation outweighed the indignity of his position. Petulantly, he screamed for silence from the armourer trying to cut him free, listened avidly and made his dispositions. Perhaps all was not yet lost.

Annabella remained unconscious until late afternoon. She woke with a fever and a raging thirst. Darius was worried and insisted on removing the dressing to inspect the wound. It still appeared to be clean and healthy and when he sniffed carefully he could detect no smell of infection.

"I think it's all right," he said doubtfully and asked Basil for a clean dressing.

Annabella groaned once as he replaced the bandaging, managed to drink a mouthful or two of the water that Vivienne offered, and then lapsed back into unconsciousness.

She woke again some hours after dark, first hearing the voices of Vivienne and Darius with an occasional comment from Basil, then opening her eyes. It took her some little time to work out that the flickering light must be coming from a fire and that they were camped in a cave.

She tried her voice but managed only a faint croak. Irritated, she tried again.

"Could I have something to drink, please," she said. They didn't hear her and she cried out with frustration. A moment later Vivienne and Darius were anxiously bending over her.

"Sorry," Annabella murmured. "I didn't mean to shout. I'm just so thirsty..."

"It's the loss of blood," Darius said with professional interest. "I've noticed that people who lose a lot of blood get very thirsty..."

"What would you like?" Vivienne asked, interrupting with a vexed look at Darius. She couldn't help adding: "How are you feeling? You look awful... We were so worried..."

"Sharbat...?" Annabella said weakly. A moment later, a silver goblet cradled in a bowl of snow materialised beside her bier.

"Apricot," Basil said, his voice solicitous with an undertone of guilt. "For strength, mistress mine. Or pomegranate? Would you prefer pomegranate?"

"Apricot is fine," Annabella managed. "If someone could..."

"Of course," Vivienne said, raising her head and holding the goblet to her lips. Annabella sipped cautiously and then drank. She didn't stop until the goblet was empty.

"More?" Basil asked.

Annabella shook her head slightly. "Thank you... What happened?"

"Somebody shot you," Darius said. "Just as we were flying over the battlements. And you've broken your collarbone. I don't know how you did that."

"The column," Annabella murmured. "When I crashed into the column..."

"The column?" Vivienne queried when it became clear Annabella wasn't going to amplify. "What column?"

"The column she rescued me from," Basil said. "I was imprisoned on top of it and she managed to bring it down."

"That's not what happened," Annabella began and then decided she was too tired to argue. They all fell silent.

"Who fixed me up?" Annabella asked at last. "Basil?"

"Darius," Vivienne said. "Darius did it. He cut the arrow out, and he set the bone."

Annabella turned her head towards him. "Thank you," she said. "I didn't know you were a doctor."

"I'm not," Darius said, suddenly bashful. "But my father has one and he lets me help with the men... I want..."

"What?" Vivienne demanded, surprised by this insight.

"Nothing," Darius muttered, his voice dropping. "I just like to be useful..."

"Very useful," Annabella said, taking pity on his confusion. "And very lucky for me." She let her head sink back and closed her eyes. An irresistible wave of fatigue was carrying her away again.

They came an hour before dawn, sliding soundlessly down ropes dropped from the cliff top above. Basil was caught completely off-guard. He had no notion that anyone, never mind Hassan-i Sabbāh, could possibly know their whereabouts.

The alarm was raised only when Annabella screamed. The leading man into the cave had made out her recumbent form in the glow from the fire Basil had kept burning nearby for warmth, and he made straight for her as ordered. His grasping hands, searching about her neck, jarred the broken bone and sent a jolt of agony searing through her body.

Basil reacted instantly and the man went flying out the cave mouth to hurtle down to the valley floor, far beneath. He collided with a second man as he passed, and he too was sent crashing to his death. Basil then systematically set about eliminating the rest of the squad. Only one, unnoticed, managed to haul himself back to the cliff top and conceal himself in the rocks.

Annabella had blacked out with the pain. Vivienne and Darius were not functioning much better. Woken from a deep sleep, they were dazed, confused and bewildered.

"Quickly," Basil ordered. "Lift her on to the carpet. We have to go. Right now."

Darius was the first to recover and pushing Vivienne into place, they eased Annabella across as gently as possible and laid her down between them.

"Here," Basil said and a large fur rug materialised. "Put this over her. She mustn't get cold." Outside, the late autumn night was bitter, with the threat of snow. Basil barely waited for them to tuck in the rug and strap themselves in before the carpet was nosing its way out of the cave.

The sole surviving Assassin watched them go, a darker shape against the black of the sky. Resignedly, he set off to report to the emir before reporting to paradise. The emir did not brook failure and saw no contradiction in the ultimate reward and the ultimate punishment being one and the same.

Basil was in a quandary. Dawn was lightening the sky and still he had found nowhere he might shelter his wounded mistress. Should they fly on and risk being seen? The emir no longer had control over Iblis and his minions but Basil couldn't be sure what Iblis might determine to do on his own account. Nor, given the events of hours before, could he be certain that they were unobserved by human eyes.

Deeply worried, he resolved to fly on and it was with great relief that almost immediately he spotted an isolated shepherd's hut. It was used in the summer for the pasturing of sheep on the high mountain meadows and had now been vacated for the winter. It was perfect.

Annabella woke to a sharp throbbing in her shoulder where the bone had been jarred and a dull throbbing from the wound in her side. She felt desperately weak and deeply unwell. She opened her eyes slowly only to be baffled by her surroundings. She was lying on a huge bed in a sumptuous chamber, warm and cosseted.

I'm sorry, mistress, Basil said, softly. *Yet again, I failed you.*

Annabella said nothing. She felt quite unequal to dealing with Basil in a fit of remorse.

I'm so sorry, Basil repeated.

Do stop it, Annabella said petulantly. *What happened?*

Assassins, Basil said. *They found us. I never thought for a jolly moment they could get to that cave.*

A memory of the attack came to Annabella, the searing pain as her shoulder was jolted, somebody groping around her neck...

"The ring," she said aloud. "They took the ring."

A voice spoke from behind her.

"No they didn't," Vivienne said. She moved around to where Annabella could see her. "I've got it. We didn't want it to choke you..." She reached into her robes and pulled the massive piece free, holding it up to the light so that it gleamed and glittered. "I wonder what it looks like if I put it..."

"No!" Basil roared. "Drop it. This instant. Do not put your finger inside."

"What?! Why?!" Vivienne exclaimed. "...And I don't think you should talk to me like that."

"For your own sake," Basil insisted, his voice cracking with urgency. "If you put it on, you will summon Iblis."

"Iblis?" Vivienne repeated, the ring still poised over her thumb. "Who is Iblis?"

But Darius darted forward, seized her wrists and forced her hands apart.

"Iblis is the devil," he said, equally urgently.

"Close," Basil said. "Not quite, but close enough. More like the Prince of Darkness."

Vivienne suddenly dropped the ring as though it had become red hot. Darius lifted the chain over her head and took it to Annabella.

"Here," he said. "You'd better have it back."

"Oh, thanks," she said faintly. "Just what I want. The Prince of Darkness hanging round my neck."

Annabella drifted in and out of delirium for days. The loss of blood, the rough surgery, the broken bone, the cold of their night escapes, fever and pain had all taken their toll. As she failed to improve, Darius became increasingly worried about the possibility of infection. However, the wound appeared to remain clean.

He and Vivienne took it in turns to stay by her side and of course, Basil was constantly in attendance. Then, on the fourth morning, Annabella woke feeling remotely like someone she used to know. She was still pitifully weak, she discovered when she tried to lift her head to survey her surroundings, but her mind was clear and she was beginning to recover.

It had taken Aswad rather longer than anticipated to make his way to Shiraz. It had cost him more than a week of hard walking but as he settled into a corner of the common room in the caravanserai, he was still of good heart and quite content with his lot in life. He ate, paying from a purse of ready coin he had prudently thought to secrete about his person before ever leaving Baghdad, and then inquired the way to the street of the money changers.

The financial heart of the city was a narrow alley bordered by high walls and stout doors. Before each of the doors was an awning with a representative of the banker within sitting cross-legged on a mat in the shade. Before them were small piles of coins and behind each, a uniformly burly bodyguard, uniformly moustached and with uniformly crossed arms.

Aswad found himself an inconspicuous spot and stood carefully watching the bustling scene. After twenty minutes, it was clear to him that the man third on the left was doing rather more business than any of the others.

Aswad approached and after the usual exchange of courtesies produced a small twist of cloth. The clerk weighed it in his hand speculatively and raised an inquiring eyebrow.

"Gold," Aswad said negligently. "Gold I would convert to coin." In fact, it was but a small fraction of the bullion hidden about his person, but sufficient, he calculated, to pay his way home.

"Then pray, enter within." The clerk signed to the guard who rapped on the door behind him and then pushed it open. Aswad squeezed past and found himself in a narrow passage which led to another door and beyond that a quiet room where a large, very fat man on a raised platform was supervising the work of four or five clerks, all with heads bent and scratching away on tablets.

The transaction went smoothly enough, Aswad finding that after the obligatory, protracted bargaining the price agreed for his gold was quite satisfactory. The trouble began when instead of handing across the full amount, the fat man deducted 25 per cent.

"Fees, charges and commission," he said blandly. "Not to mention the vizier's tax." Aswad, outraged, began to protest, graduating quickly to causing serious trouble. For

so old a hand as himself, it was an unaccountable error of judgement. More bodyguards were summoned and kicking and struggling Aswad was frogmarched to the citadel forthwith where he was left to cool his heels in a rancid cell for the rest of that day and well into the following morning.

The official who finally proceeded to interrogate him was conscientious to a fault and Aswad realised the situation was correspondingly delicate. He had about him more than sufficient gold to bribe his way clear. On the other hand, a man such as the magistrate he was now facing could not be trusted to respond appropriately. Such a man was just as likely to confiscate everything Aswad owned, turn it over to the city and condemn Aswad to who knew what fate.

All that was left to Aswad then was to cooperate as best he might in answering increasingly sceptical questions and, in an effort to convince, Aswad found himself revealing more and more of the details of how he came to be in Shiraz. The magistrate had been quite prepared to resort to torture – he had just heard details of a new technique that he was most interested to try – but it had proved sadly unnecessary. Aswad with only minimal probing, a slap or two and certainly nothing worth speaking of, had told him everything he wished to know.

Which was how, in due course, the story had come by way of two paid intermediaries to the head of the local chapter of Assassins. Which was how an urgent pigeon came to be dispatched to Castle Alamut. Which was how Hassan-i Sabbāh, Old Man of the Mountain, Emir of Evil, came to hear that the infamous child who had stolen the Seal of Solomon, *his* Seal of Solomon, was very probably en route to Bukhara, to a fountain. And in Bukhara, there was only one fountain that anyone ever thought worth mentioning.

Basil had spent the time while waiting for Annabella to pass the crisis by making the interior of that humble little stone hut ever more elaborate. Apart from Annabella's chamber, and no modern hospital room could begin to rival it for luxury, he had provided separate bed chambers to suit the wishes of Darius and Vivienne, plus a bath chamber and also a large living room furnished, as the mood took them, in a most eclectic mixture of styles.

Outside, the hut was still just a shepherd's rude summer shelter, inside, it was now huge. Vivienne and Darius were quite unable to fathom how what still appeared externally to be a tiny structure could now contain so many large rooms, and in the end just had to shrug their shoulders.

"Magic," they told each other.

"And I'd give anything to see the shepherd's face when he comes back next summer," Vivienne said. "You will leave it like this, won't you Basil?" And she and Darius went into fits of laughter. Basil sniffed.

Annabella continued to improve and quite soon was insisting on getting out of bed if only for half an hour at a time. After another day, she was demanding they continue the journey to Bukhara.

"Why? Why? Why?" Vivienne said for the fourth time.

"I have to talk to Lilis," Annabella repeated stubbornly.

"But why Bukhara?" Annabella sighed and realised she would have to reveal at least some of what was really going on.

"To stop Lilis sucking out my spirit on the spot," she said. "I have to have water from the Fountain of Aiyub, and that's at Bukhara."

"So why do you still have to talk to Lilis? Surely you've got used to Basil by now?" There was a long, charged silence. Darius opened his mouth to speak, but thought better of it.

"It's to do with my parents..." Annabella said at last.

The explanation took most of the morning, or seemed to, by the time Vivienne and Darius had stopped exclaiming, asking questions and going over things again and again, from every possible angle. Annabella still could not bring herself to face, never mind describe, the details of what she had seen on the surface of the cauldron but eventually she managed to satisfy the other two of the essentials of the situation, to wit:

That her parents had apparently been kidnapped from the future, for reason or reasons as yet unknown.

That they were being held on some island called Waq Waq by the 'ifrit, Iblis, and his assorted minions.

That evidently this had been brought about at the behest of Hassan-i Sabbāh, Old Man of the Mountain, Emir of Evil, who until now, by means of the Seal of Solomon, had exercised control over the said Iblis.

That the emir, having lost the Seal of Solomon to Annabella and therefore control of Iblis, had attempted to recover the ring by attacking the cave.

That having failed, it was all but certain he would try again, using his network of Assassins.

That, in lieu of summoning Iblis directly, which Basil insisted would prove disastrous for all concerned, the only way of discovering the location of Waq Waq was to ask Lilis, an encounter they were only a little less unlikely to survive. And hence the need to go to Bukhara.

"All right," Annabella said at last. "Obviously, it's impossible for you to come with me. It's far too dangerous and it just makes no sense. Basil will give you all the money you need and you should go back to Darius's place in Baghdad and wait for us there."

"I think she's still running a fever," Vivienne said.

"She's certainly raving..." Darius put in. Basil snorted.

"You're not coming," Annabella said with all the force she could muster.

"We are," Vivienne and Darius said simultaneously. They looked at each other and grinned.

"You need Darius to patch you up," Vivienne said.

"And Vivienne to bathe and dress you," Darius added.

The argument raged for a solid hour, a classic case of the irresistible force meeting the immovable object. Basil kept silent the whole time and in the end, Annabella was forced to resort to appealing to him.

"If you'd jolly well asked me before you started fighting everyone," Basil said waspishly. "We could have saved a great deal of time and heaps and heaps of jolly bad cess. Of course, they have to come..."

All three burst into exclamation, but Annabella won through.

"You traitor!" she said bitterly. "Whose side are you on? And you changed your tune all of a sudden..."

"We wouldn't have got this far without them," Basil said. "We need their help and that's all there is to it."

Chapter 15

Though Annabella was healing only slowly, she was desperate to continue the journey. She nagged and badgered the others unconscionably, but they refused point blank. The wound in her side stubbornly refused to close, her left arm was still largely useless and it was apparent that whatever she might say, her strength was still severely limited. Despite all her determination, she still required to lie down and rest at regular intervals.

"We can go when you can last a whole day," Darius repeated for the umpteenth time. "And not before." Basil eventually put an end to all debate by making his carpet disappear and remaining totally unmoved by threats, orders or commands.

"It's jolly well not in your best interests," was all he would say.

However, despite Annabella's impatience it was a happy time. Darius and Vivienne began to graduate from flirtation to something potentially more serious. They were superficially much attracted to each other in the first place, and spiced with shared hardship, danger and proximity, there seemed a certain inevitability to relations deepening between them.

For his part, Basil recovered his acid effrontery which was a great relief to Annabella, who found his grateful slave routine trying in the extreme. They began to bicker again contentedly and were the source of much innocent amusement to the other two.

"Is the future truly so marvellous, as Vivienne says?" Darius murmured. He was again replacing the dressing on Annabella's wound. Vivienne was outside in the bracing air. Basil was floating around somewhere above, a suspicious chaperone. Annabella considered the question.

"Compared with now?" she asked over her shoulder. Her voice was becoming firmer, more like the old Annabella. "I suppose so," she went on. "But is it better? That's a much harder question."

"Medicine..." Darius said. "We are so ignorant. It's pitiful. Your doctors know so much more than we do..."

"But only because of the work your doctors have done." Darius was surprised by the thought, and gratified. He finished retying the bandage and Annabella rearranged her clothes.

"How does it look?" she asked.

"The wound is starting to close," Darius said. "But you still must be careful not to tear it open again."

"I suppose it really should have had stitches."

"Stitches? Do you mean...?"

"Oh yes," Annabella said. "We sew bad cuts closed. It helps them to heal."

"You mean, with a needle and thread?"

"Abso-jolly-lutely. But you have to be careful about infection."

"Ah yes. Germs...?" Darius said uncertainly. "V was trying to explain but it sounds like...superstition?"

"No, no," Annabella said seriously. "Vivienne is absolutely right. It's all been scientifically proved."

"Scientifically...? What is that word?"

Annabella stopped. Of course, for Darius the term didn't exist. To explain a thousand years of advancing human knowledge was an impossible task, particularly as she was suddenly aware of the huge gaps in her own understanding.

"Scientific means we know something to be true," she said. "That we've proved it with tests."

"Oh..." Darius said, and then: "Do you think V...Vivienne, could ever be happy living now? In this time, I mean?"

Annabella suddenly understood the drift of the conversation. What could she possibly say? Was the future so wonderful? Certainly easier, cleaner, with lots more stuff, but better? Did she want to go back, herself? To Great-uncle Warwick and Mrs Milliken? If she failed to rescue her parents? But if she failed, then the question very likely wouldn't arise anyway. But it was interesting to speculate.

"I don't know," she said. "I honestly don't know. Only Vivienne can answer that."

Darius, who had come round in front of her, looked crestfallen and after a moment Annabella took pity on him.

"If you were to ask me if I could be happy, then I think the answer would probably be yes," she said, surprising herself as much as Darius. He brightened. "But I really can't speak for Vivienne," Annabella hurried to add.

Basil, Annabella said. Tell me about your father.

Certainly not.

Why can't we ask him to help free my parents?

We just can't.

If he's so powerful...?

I've told you. Because you're jolly well trying to get rid of me...

But suppose I tell him that I really don't want you.

And thank you very much, Basil snapped. Just what I jolly well need. Some human telling Pater – may he live forever – that she doesn't want to have anything to do with his ne'er-do-well son.

But what can he say?

That the CODE is the law, and that the law is inviolate and jolly well can't be bent under any circumstances, especially not for his son, which would be rank favouritism and jolly well ruin everything he's created.

Annabella thought a moment and then tried again.

Well supposing we don't say anything about wanting to get a... divorce and we just...

You want me to lie to the Sheikh?

Well you don't have any trouble lying to me when it suits you.

No.

No what?

No, I don't have any trouble lying to you, when it's in your best interests...

But?

But the Sheikh is Marid, the most powerful Marid in the world, the most powerful Marid who has ever jolly well been, as powerful as Iblis... Lying doesn't work. He sees straight through it. I tried once and never again.

Why? Annabella said, intrigued despite herself. *What happened?*

He made me stand under a waterfall for 50 years. It's a wonder I have any jolly spark left at all.

Of course, Annabella thought. Djinn were made of fire. It was only natural they would dislike water. She should have put two and two together when Luqman had been explaining about the Fountain of Aiyub and Lilis preferring to live in the driest of deserts. And then there was the fact that Basil, himself, had chosen to live in another desert. A vague memory struck her, leading to an interesting question, somewhat at a tangent but never mind, there was time to fill and she was curious.

But aren't Marid sea djinn? she asked. *I read somewhere about sea djinn. How do they manage in the wet?*

Umbrellas, Basil said. *How do you think?*

Annabella burst into a helpless giggle, carried away by a vision of disembodied umbrellas, busily tracking backwards and forwards over the rolling ocean. It was only later that she realised how neatly she had been diverted from the main point at issue.

She returned to it the next day.

I would really like to meet your dad, she said without preamble. Basil, who had been making himself useful bringing her a tray of fresh fruit and yoghurt for her breakfast, dropped it with a clatter.

You're stark, staring bonkers! he exclaimed. *First you want a...divorce, now you want to get married...?*

Don't be silly, Annabella said, wondering at Basil's strange association of ideas. She watched with amusement as Basil, embarrassed, took an inordinate length of time to clear up the mess. As he produced a replacement breakfast, she pounced again.

Why not? she demanded. The second tray, floating towards her, wobbled dangerously.

What makes you think that Pater, may he live forever, would have any interest in meeting some silly, addle-pated schoolgirl?

Oh, charming... Well, he did send you to look after me, didn't he? Or have I got that all wrong?

No.

No, I haven't got that all wrong?

No, you're not meeting him.

Why not? Annabella repeated, starting to get cross.

There was a long silence.

Because I don't trust you, Basil said at last.

Trust me to do what?

Trust you not to ask him to set me free.

But, he must know where Waq Waq is? The argument had been going round in circles on and off all day. Wouldn't it be easier to ask him? Annabella continued.

So, now you don't want to find Lilis?

I need to rescue my parents...that's the most important thing, of course it is... and if your father knows where Waq Waq is, it would be stupid not to ask him. We can waste time finding Lilis later.

He doesn't.

What?

Know where Waq Waq is.

How do you know?

Because if we did know, don't you think we would have wiped it off the map thousands of years ago?

The briefest memory of what she had seen in the cauldron flashed across Annabella's mind before she managed to blank it out. She screwed up her eyes in pain and gave an inadvertent gulp. Of course, Basil could only be right.

The Fountain of Aiyub, Annabella said. You know anything about it? What are we looking for?

It's famous, Basil said. So jolly famous, they built a shrine over it.

So we won't have trouble finding it? What do we look for?

A shrine... Are you jolly well going deaf?

You know what I mean. Do you know what this shrine looks like?

No. But you've got the gift of tongues in your head. You can jolly well ask.

Are there Assassins in Bukhara?

Basil paused. He took the point.

Maybe, he said. I don't know.

So we're going to have to be careful.

The whole way. We'll have to travel by night.

It's getting very cold. Freezing. Can we have thermal underwear.

It hasn't been invented yet.

But...

We'll think of something.

Annabella declared she was fit to travel. Basil, Vivienne and Darius – the latter for their own reasons, she was certain– said she wasn't; at least for two more days. She

threw such a tantrum that they eventually agreed they might proceed forthwith by easy stages.

"We must leave tonight," Annabella said. *And no more argument from you*, she added for Basil's benefit.

Madam mistress, shining pearl...to jolly well hear is to jolly well obey. Your slightest wish is my command...

If only, Annabella retorted.

Basil, at Annabella's behest, provided a selection of cold-weather clothing, including felt boots, leggings and thick, sheepskin poshteens, coats reversed so that the wool was on the inside and with the outer leather marvellously embroidered. Vivienne had a wonderful time, trying things on and persuading Basil to experiment with the patterns and colours. The result was rather more gaudy than tasteful but Darius loyally proclaimed it a masterpiece. Annabella said nothing. Nor did she attempt to modify her own coat. Basil had already excelled himself. He also provided fur hats with ear flaps, and thick mittens.

They had a farewell meal that afternoon and as dusk was falling, trooped out of the considerable establishment Basil had made and turned to gaze one more time at the tiny stone hut which concealed it.

"Do you think we'll ever come back?" Vivienne said softly. "I love it here. It's such a beautiful place and the hut felt like home." Darius, greatly daring, let his hand rest on her arm for the merest moment.

"You mean the palace," Annabella snorted. "And you're getting ideas above your station, girl..."

From their refuge, that first night they flew north and east, seeking to cross the heights of the Alborz Mountains, already thick with snow in many places, heading for the kinder lands along the shores of the Bahr al-Qazwin as Darius knew it, or the Caspian Sea as Annabella and Vivienne eventually realised it must be.

Do you actually know where we're going? Annabella asked Basil after they had been flying for some time along a seemingly endless valley.

I thought you did, Basil said.

Very funny.

Yes, of course I know where we're jolly well going...

And you can still see in the dark, all right?

That one, however, Basil didn't even deign to answer.

It was extremely cold, even with their thick winter clothing and they were all glad when the land began to trend down and the air became perceptibly warmer.

"We should land," Darius said. "That's enough for one night."

"No," Annabella protested. "I'm all right. We have to keep going till dawn."

"No," Basil said.

"No what?"

"...Madam mistress, shining pearl. But still no."

"My parents..." Annabella began.

"We haven't forgotten..." Darius said.

"No jolly chance of that," Basil interjected.

"...But it won't do them any good if you come down with another raging fever and drop dead," Darius went on.

Annabella would have continued the argument but suddenly realised that Darius was right. She was feeling terrible again and said nothing more while Basil found a secluded gully and provided accommodation in the form of a thick felt tent. Nor did she protest when Darius and Vivienne summarily stripped off her outer clothing and bundled her into a fur rug. Basil set a brazier going and very quickly the tent was warmed by the comforting glow. Warm broth finished the treatment and Annabella had time to acknowledge that she was now feeling rather better, before falling fast asleep.

She slept solidly right through the day and only woke at dusk.

So, Basil said as she opened her eyes. *Madam mistress, shining pearl, finally deigns to rise and view the jolly old world.* It was a valiant attempt to sound his usual, waspish self but there was no disguising the fact that his voice also held a note of deep concern.

I'm fine... Annabella began, but Basil overrode her.

We should have stayed at least another week. I don't know what I was jolly well thinking, letting you start this journey before you've properly recovered...

I'm quite all right, she said crossly and then, rather more thoughtfully: *I do believe you're worried about me.* Basil couldn't help himself.

Of course, I worry about you, he said. *That arrow should have killed you...*

Bad luck for you that it didn't, Annabella said without thinking. There was a long silence.

What a jolly horrible thing to say, Basil replied at last. His voice was low and it was clear that he was deeply hurt. There was another long, long silence. Several times, Annabella made to speak and then stopped. It wasn't that she didn't know what she wanted to say, the problem was that she didn't know how to put her feelings into acceptable words.

I'm sorry, she said in the end. *I didn't mean to upset you. It was just a joke.*

Of course, Basil said. His voice was remote, cool, as though he realised he had revealed rather too much of himself. *Say no more about it.*

Darius as the de facto doctor of the party was very dubious about them continuing. Annabella's face was drawn and there were dark smudges under her eyes. He also had a shrewd suspicion that her wound had started to hurt again. There had been a definite flinch and a sharp intake of breath that she couldn't disguise when he was changing the dressing. As well, there had been a trace of pus on the old compress. He was worried that the wound was developing an infection.

However, Annabella wouldn't hear of them not flying on and Basil for his own reasons declined to take part in the argument.

As they left, snow began to fall.

Basil, Annabella said. *This Fountain of Aiyub...* They had been flying for some hours, mostly in silence, and she had been mulling over a particular problem in an effort to forget how low she was feeling. The snow had stopped and the land beneath them was flat and open. To their left, they could see a glint from time to time reflected from the waters of the great inland sea.

The Fountain of Aiyub? Basil said, his voice if anything even more distant.

Well, Annabella continued determinedly. *It seems to me that it's all very well if Lilis hates the water, but how exactly do we use it to hold her off long enough to talk?*

Basil said nothing for the longest time. There was no sound either inside or outside her head except for the faint whisper of the freezing night air as they cleaved through it.

Basil? Annabella said at last.

I don't know, Basil said. Despite his words, he no longer sounded remote, more like he had been thinking hard and though engaged and interested had quite failed to find an answer. *What do you think?* He added.

Well, I might say water pistols – but you'll tell me they haven't been invented yet.

No, Basil said. *They haven't... But there is something similar.*

And Annabella, upset by the awkwardness between them, said nothing more.

Darius called a halt shortly afterwards and Annabella, though she wouldn't have dreamed of admitting it, was grateful. She was not noticeably worse, but she was certainly no better. She took no part in proceedings, allowing herself to be put to bed without protest. Nor did she eat anything, something the others all found greatly worrying.

The next day she had definitely deteriorated. Suddenly, her face was all sharp edges and angles, her eyes were glittering, and the fever had clearly returned. More alarming, the arrow wound in her side was angry and inflamed and when Darius inspected the dressing, there was appreciable discharge. Somehow, despite all his care, the wound had become infected.

Annabella insisted that it was nothing... She would be perfectly all right... She just needed to rest until nightfall when they must set off again... Who knew how long her parents could survive...? The need for haste was paramount... There simply was no alternative if they were to save them...

Then she fell into a restless doze.

"It's bad, isn't it?" Vivienne whispered to Darius. He said nothing.

"But she will be all right, won't she?" Vivienne insisted. Still Darius said nothing. Vivienne looked at his downcast eyes and realised what he was trying to tell her.

"Basil," Vivienne said, no longer troubling to lower her voice. "We have to do something. We need antibiotics. You know we need antibiotics..."

"Antibiotics...?" Darius started to say, but Basil overrode him.

"I can't," Basil said unhappily. "You know I can't. If there was any way, jolly well believe me... But I can't, I just can't. It's impossible." His distress and his helplessness were both very plain.

"Even if she's dying...?" Vivienne demanded.

"I can't," Basil repeated. "They haven't been invented. It's just not possible."

"And you're sure you're not saying that because you want her to die? It would set you free..."

"I resent that," Basil said fiercely. "She saved my life. And she got me out of that hateful jar. I could have been trapped there forever. She is my mistress and I..."

"What?" Vivienne said, still aggressively sceptical.

"I...owe her my life," Basil repeated, although it was clear he meant something else entirely. Vivienne understood.

"There must be something we can do," Vivienne said looking at Darius. Annabella was tossing restlessly. Vivienne put a hand to her forehead.

"She's burning up," she said.

"We can sponge her," Darius said. "That's what the doctor at home does."

"All right, but something more, something better...?"

"I don't know," Darius said helplessly.

Together, they set about trying to reduce Annabella's temperature, and patiently, hour after hour, Vivienne sat sponging Annabella's face and boyish body. Nothing seemed to help, however. Time and again her mind returned to the subject of antibiotics. She mightn't know much but she knew infections like this could be quickly dealt with if only they had the right medicine. She racked her brains for anything else that might help, anything else she knew of that could be put to use.

She managed to capture a faint memory of yet another boring lesson, one hot afternoon when the whole class was concentrating only on trying to stay awake. It was something to do with how penicillin had been discovered. Not directly about penicillin, but it was some interesting sidelight that had piqued their attention for a moment, that had raised a slight murmur, a giggle. But try as she might, Vivienne could not bring it to mind.

Darius came to relieve her.

"Have a rest," he said. "You should eat something. We don't want you getting sick too."

Gratefully, Vivienne rose from beside Annabella and stretched. She wandered away to where Basil had set out some food. Idly, she picked up a piece of bread and ate a mouthful, her mind blank. But she really wasn't hungry, she realised, and went back.

"Here," she said to Darius. "It's better if I do it. She might wake up..." And she began again, mechanically soaking the cloth in the bowl of cool water, wringing it out, and gently soothing Annabella.

The bread! The bread!

She had it. The thing they had laughed about in class.

"Basil!" she said trying to keep her voice low, but failing in her excitement. "We need bread, mouldy bread, bread with blue mould. Can we do that? Surely that's been invented..."

"Why?" Basil and Darius said simultaneously, catching the sudden lift of hope in her voice.

"I'll explain later," she said. "But can we do it?"

A moment later she was holding a large hunk of very old bread.

"Like this?" Basil asked.

"Smaller," Vivienne said. "And lots more mould. The more mould, the better." The bread changed as she watched and when she was satisfied she passed it to Darius.

"You have to bind this over the open wound," she said. "So that the mould can get right in."

"But why?" Darius said, mystified.

"It will help," Vivienne said, urgently. "Trust me, it will help."

Neither Darius nor Basil believed it could be possible. Vivienne explained about penicillin being discovered in mould and she also told them that long before the development of antibiotics mouldy bread had been used as a remedy for infected wounds. Without knowing why it worked, people had discovered that it did work.

However, try to convince them as Vivienne might, Darius remained totally sceptical and Basil totally dejected. It was clear they put little faith in a cure so seemingly humble. But Vivienne refused to be discouraged. Every two hours she made Basil produce more of the mould and insisted that Darius re-dress the wound. And devotedly, she stayed by Annabella all that day and through the night.

As dawn was breaking, she could feel that Annabella's fever was finally receding. She reached out to touch Darius who had fallen asleep beside her.

"It's working," she whispered. "I really think it's working."

It was the evening of the third day.

I told you we need them, Basil said softly. *I...we nearly lost you. Vivienne saved you.*

Annabella was lying fragile and as transparent as porcelain, but her eyes were open and clear, even if the blue stood out so intensely against her pallor that she looked quite alien.

How long...? she asked.

Days, Basil said. *Three days.*

My poor parents... We have to...

Rest.

But...

No buts. It won't do them any good if you die on the way.

"So," Darius said. "You're awake at last. How are you feeling?" He had been watching as her eyes opened and then the expressions on her face as she spoke with Basil.

"I...don't know," Annabella managed. Her voice was hoarse and faint.

"But you'll be all right soon," Vivienne said confidently, coming across.

"As long as you give yourself time to get better," Darius added sternly. "You've been very, very ill. You nearly died. Vivienne saved you."

"So Basil just told me," Annabella whispered. "Thank you. But how?"

"Mouldy bread," Vivienne said, her voice cheerful to disguise the relief they all felt. "Penicillin..."

"Oh," Annabella said, and then: "Thank you. Really, thank you."

"No biggie," Vivienne said. "About time I did something to pay you back for everything you've done for me."

No, Basil said. It's a biggie, all right. Jolly well humongous.

This time, Annabella did recover quickly. Once the lingering infection had been eradicated, the wound in her side began to heal and soon there was no more point in Darius poulticing it with yet more of the mouldy bread that seemed to be piled in every corner of the tent. The enforced rest had also given her shoulder a chance to knit and soon she was no longer much troubled by it, if at all.

She was, of course, desperate to continue the journey but Darius, Vivienne and Basil, presenting a united front, refused point blank to go anywhere until they were absolutely sure she was fit to travel. At last, they agreed they might try a short stage.

Chapter 16

"And why are you so excited?" Vivienne said, prodding Darius mischievously. Faintly, far in the distance they could see a speckle of lights. It could only be Bukhara.

"It's where Ibn Sīnā lived," Darius said. "100 years ago."

"Who?" Vivienne and Annabella demanded simultaneously.

"Avicenna," Basil supplied.

"Who?" Vivienne and Annabella repeated, grinning at each other. Basil sighed, a deep sigh for the ignorance of hapless youth.

"The great man of his age," he said. "A great man of any age. A philosopher and a scientist, I suppose you'd call him."

"And doctor!" Darius said. "Most of all a doctor."

"Abso-jolly-lutely," Basil agreed. "Not that any sort of learning impresses these two ignoramuses."

"And thank you very much," Annabella sniffed.

"I must jolly well speak as I jolly well find," Basil returned fire.

"Stop it," Vivienne commanded. "You're like a pair of children and we've had enough one for night... So how are we supposed to find this fountain place?" she added.

"Basil's idea is to ask someone," Annabella said thoughtfully.

"Who? Where?" Vivienne asked and then laughed: "I don't think they have tourist information, you know."

"At the Ark," Darius said unexpectedly. "The citadel. That's what they call the citadel."

"And how do you know so much about Bukhara?" Vivienne asked curiously.

"I don't," Darius said hesitantly. "A little... It's where Ibn Sīnā lived..."

"Who is your hero...?"

"Abso-jolly-lutely," Basil came to his rescue. "He's one of mine too. And I hear there's something else very special about Bukhara," he remarked.

"What?" the other three asked dutifully and in unison. They laughed.

"A jian," Basil said. "There's supposed to be a jian here."

"Which is what?" Vivienne asked.

"A bird," Basil said. "From China. There is a rumour that the Emperor sent one to the Sultan as a bribe."

"A bird..." Annabella scoffed. "Let's talk about important things. How do we do this?" And she quite failed to notice that Basil was rather miffed by the abrupt change of subject.

It was eventually decided that Darius would have to be their eyes and ears. After their experience in the Baghdad bazaar, it didn't take much persuading from Basil for the girls to agree that it was too risky for them to venture into the city, particularly if

Hassan-i Sabbāh might still be on the hunt for them. Darius, one more anonymous young man who had scarcely impinged himself on the emir's consciousness, was far less likely to be spotted if anyone were indeed watching, whereas Vivienne's blonde hair and Annabella's striking blue eyes were instant giveaways. To cover all eventualities, Basil agreed readily enough also to confer on Darius, as he had done with the girls, the priceless gift of tongues. Annabella and Vivienne, who had come to appreciate just how valuable an endowment it was, thought it a just reward for all Darius's loyalty and his skill in caring for Annabella. Darius, himself, was overwhelmed, acutely aware of what it would mean for his future life.

As they had done outside Baghdad, Basil found them a secluded grove of trees far enough away from the city for them to hope to escape notice.

"I'm afraid it'll be a jolly long walk for you," he said to Darius, who, however, was unconcerned.

"At least, it will keep me warm," he said. The others were already looking miserable as they huddled down, trying to get out of the biting wind.

As dawn was finally beginning to break, he set off. Vivienne walked with him to the edge of the trees and stood looking after him, forlornly, for the longest time.

"Do be careful," she told him as they parted. "If anything happens to you..."

"Shush," he said gently. "I'll be fine."

It was a terrible day for the girls, freezing cold and all they could do was to spend the time worrying. They couldn't even have a fire for fear of attracting the attention of the trickle of passers-by heading to and from the city.

At one point, more for something to do than anything, Annabella broached the subject of Darius.

"You really like him, don't you?" she said. "Apart from him being gorgeous, I mean?"

"Yes," Vivienne said simply. "I really, really like him."

"And you know that he really, really likes you?"

"Really?"

And how many "reallys" does it take to make something jolly well real? Basil inquired facetiously.

"Yes, really," Annabella said, pointedly ignoring him. And she relayed to Vivienne the conversation she had had with Darius about the future.

"So would you be happy, never to go back?" she asked at last. Vivienne looked at her, her eyes very wide.

"Never to go back...?" she said. There was an odd quality in her voice that Annabella couldn't interpret. "Would you?" she added at last.

"Nobody's asking me to stay," Annabella said.

"And nobody has asked me, either."

"But he might. I think he wants to."

They fell silent. Vivienne, at least, suddenly had a great deal to think about.

The girls were both asleep, watched over by Basil, when Darius finally returned. It was about three in the afternoon, still freezing cold, still with the biting wind blowing, still with the sun hiding in disgust behind a thick layer of low-level, gunmetal cloud which promised snow sometime in the immediate future.

Darius stood for a moment, staring down at the two of them, huddled together under a thick fur rug. In sleep, they looked impossibly vulnerable, innocent waifs abandoned to a cruel and heartless world. Vivienne stirred, sensing a presence, and opened her eyes. She gazed at Darius without moving. At last she smiled at him, so sweetly that he felt his legs go to water and he had to drop his eyes. Vivienne nudged Annabella.

"Darius is back," she murmured. Annabella roused instantly.

"Did you find it?" she demanded. "Is it there?"

"Oh yes," Darius said, dropping to his haunches beside them. "I didn't even need to ask. It's just near the entrance to the Ark."

"So what took so long?" Annabella asked grumpily, rubbing her eyes.

"It's a long walk," Darius said, somewhat irked. "And I watched for a while..."

"Were there guards?" Basil asked, inserting himself into the conversation.

"Not guards. At least I don't think so."

"But...?" Basil said.

"I think there was someone watching, like me. There was a peddler. He never seemed to sell anything but he never moved away either, to try his luck somewhere else..."

"But who would be watching?" Vivienne said. Darius shrugged.

Good question, Annabella said. *Not Hassan-i Sabbāh, surely?*

I don't know, Basil said soberly.

How could that be possible?

I don't know, Basil repeated.

"Did this peddler see you?" Annabella demanded.

"Of course not," Darius said, even more peeved. "I'm not stupid." Annabella hastened to make amends.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Of course you're not stupid. And thank you so much for going all the way there..."

"...And back," Vivienne added. "Definitely back." Darius smiled at her and the tension eased, but what Darius didn't know was that while he might not have been stupid, neither had he been nearly as clever as he thought. The peddler had indeed marked him.

"Did you manage to get inside?" Annabella asked, her voice carefully neutral.

"No," Darius said. "I didn't want to make myself conspicuous. But I walked past the doors and I could see a bit. It's quite big, sort of like a bathhouse... With a domed roof. There's a pool raised up from the floor a bit and people were filling jugs and things. The water is supposed to be a health cure... It's very pure...some say holy..."

"That's why we need it," Annabella said.

"We know all that," Vivienne said. "We've been over it and over it." She shrugged. "The question is how do we get some and what do we put it in?"

You want to say something? Annabella asked Basil.

"Skins," Basil said. "Water skins."

"Water skins?" the others chorused.

"You can make them squirt," Basil said.

"Of course," Annabella exclaimed. "Just like water pistols."

"Water pistols?" Vivienne said. "Oh, I see..."

"Pistols?" Darius said. "What are pistols?" Vivienne and Annabella exchanged glances.

"I'll explain later," Vivienne said.

"The gates," Basil said. "Did you have any trouble getting into the city?"

"No," Darius said. "But of course they close them at night." Vivienne and Annabella looked at each other.

"So how do we get in?" Vivienne asked.

"Two choices, I suppose," Annabella said. "We sneak in before they're closed. Or we go over the top."

The carpet, with Annabella, Vivienne and Darius on board, glided down the deserted road. The winter dark had come early and they had waited as long as they could bear as the cold grew more and more intense. It had begun to snow and the wind was rising. All things considered, it was developing into a really dirty night. At last, they could stand it no longer.

"It's freezing my you know-whats off," Vivienne had said. "If we don't go right now I won't have any left."

Which would be dreadfully upsetting for poor Darius, Annabella had remarked in her bitchiest voice, provoking a deep chuckle from Basil.

The wall around Bukhara was a massive structure, colossal. It loomed out of the plain before them, many times the height of a man with forbidding battlements and round, bulbous bastions bulging out at regular intervals, the whole made of brick laid in complicated, circular patterns. All told there were eleven gates through to the surrounding countryside, each entrance as massive as the walls it penetrated.

The carpet lifted smoothly upwards.

Better go quite high, Annabella said. *We don't want the sentries having conniptions.*

Of course, Basil replied. *And teach your jolly old grandmother to jolly well suck jolly old eggs.*

I don't have a grandmother, Annabella retorted. *And if I did she certainly would never do anything so revolting as sucking eggs.*

Well, excuse me. I wasn't aware I was slave to the gentry.

Abso-jolly-lutely, Annabella said. *As if you're not a dreadful snob, yourself...*

So cruel... So heartless...

Basil took the carpet up and up until it would have been quite invisible to anyone watching from below. Dimly through the snow, they could see the outline of the walls, marked by the watch fires, snaking around the city within. Off centre and quite close, they could make out the huge bulk of what could only be the Ark.

"The fountain is this side," Darius whispered. "About six or seven hundred paces."

Basil brought the carpet side-slipping down.

"There," Darius whispered, pointing at a cube of a building with a high, domed roof. From their elevation they could see that there was a matching entrance in each of the four sides, lit by lanterns suspended above. Basil banked around and glided towards it.

"Stop!" Darius hissed urgently. His attention had been attracted by a slight movement.

"What?" Annabella whispered.

"There. Do you see?" The two girls and Basil stared into the dark.

"I've got him," Basil murmured.

"Got who?" Annabella said with some irritation.

"Keep your voice down," Darius replied. "There. Under the tree."

Annabella stared but the watcher was only revealed to her when again he shifted uncomfortably in the cold. He was so positioned opposite one of the corners of the building that he could monitor two of the four doors simultaneously. It was not difficult to guess that there would also be a man doing the same thing on the opposite diagonal.

Over to you, Annabella said.

Certainly, mistress mine. A jolly old pleasure...

Sometime in the near future, before we all freeze to death, would be nice...

As she spoke, the man suddenly crumpled and subsided in a heap as though someone had tapped him on the head, which indeed Basil more or less had, none too gently.

Is that what madam mistress wished?

Abso-jolly-lutely, Annabella said. Thank you.

Basil, a stray wisp of smoke, slipped under the double doors and a moment later a crack opened between them. The other three crept inside and pushed the door closed behind them. It was particularly solid and heavy but moved easily on well-oiled hinges.

"Better lock it again," Darius said and suiting his actions to his words, swung a great bar down until it fitted into the matching slot on the other side. There were also bolts top and bottom which Basil caused to snick home.

Do you think that man was watching for us? Annabella asked Basil.

Who else? Basil said. His voice was equally as concerned.

I don't see how it can be possible, Annabella said.

Nor do I, mistress mine. Nor do I.

Coincidence? Maybe it's something else entirely.

Let's jolly well hope so.

Basil created a glow and they inspected their surroundings. As with the exterior, the interior of the shrine was of a simplicity that was both deeply elegant and deeply reverent. The internal circumference of the domed roof exactly matched the circumference of the circular pool centred beneath it and which channelled the fountain's waters. The roof and pool were tessellated in the same pattern. The floor and coping surrounding the pool were pale marble, the walls stucco.

"So," Annabella said, speaking softly in deference to the other watcher, if there was one. "Water skins?"

"Immediately, madam," Basil said. "If not sooner..." And three large water skins materialised before them. Each had a bung at one end and a stoppered spout at the other. Annabella picked them up and went to the pool.

"Here," Darius whispered. "We'll do it." He took a skin from her, threw it to Vivienne and appropriated the others.

"Thanks," Annabella replied, happy enough to leave them to it. She began to prowl around the shrine. Something was distinctly odd but she couldn't put her finger on it. She made a complete circuit, noting that each of the other three sets of doors were bolted and barred from the inside as the first had been.

Something's not right, she said to Basil.

What do you mean not right? His voice was casual, uninterested.

Well... Strange...

In what way, madam mistress, mine?

I don't know... Something...

Annabella moved to the door through which they had originally entered and ran her hand lightly over the oiled wood. She stood there, caressing the grain, but obstinately, her mind refused to resolve whatever it was that was troubling her.

"Nearly finished..." Darius whispered, but simultaneously Annabella heard something – a faint scrabbling, from the other side of the door.

"Shsh..." she hissed. She put her ear right up to the wood. There was nothing. She must have been imagining it. But just as she was turning away, it came again.

Someone is out there, she said to Basil.

I'll check, and Basil said, his voice suddenly alert.

The wisp of smoke disappeared under the door. It was back in seconds.

Assassins, he said. *Dozens of them.*

"What!?" Annabella exclaimed aloud. "How?"

The other watcher...? Basil conjectured. *He found the guard I put down...?*

"What what?" Vivienne called. "What are you talking about?" Annabella was about to shush her but realised there was now no point.

"Assassins," Basil said. "Outside. Getting ready to attack. They have a battering ram." Vivienne's eyes were suddenly huge and Annabella realised with part of her mind that she hadn't seen that look for a long time, that she'd be happy if she never saw it again.

"Can you deal with them?" Annabella said to Basil.

"Not so much on the crowd control, remember," Basil said. "Far too many of them. Far too risky. One of you, all of you could be hurt, killed."

"We have to escape then!" Vivienne said, with an edge of panic in her voice.

"We're trapped..." Darius said. "They'll have surrounded the shrine."

"Through the roof..." Vivienne said, pointing upwards.

"Archers," Darius said. "We can't risk that. Not again. Not after last time."

"Then what?" Vivienne said, her voice rising. "We have to get away..."

"Wait," Annabella said. "Let me think." She almost had it, the thing that was bothering her, the anomaly. The noises outside were getting louder. The Assassins evidently had everything in place and were no longer concerned about alerting their quarry. Again Annabella wondered how they could possibly have been tracked to Bukhara, and then it clicked, the other thing.

"There must be another way out of here," she said. "There has to be."

"What do you mean?" Basil said.

"All the doors are barred from inside..." There was momentary silence as the others thought it through.

"Well done, mistress mine," Basil said. "A trapdoor. There must be a trapdoor and an access tunnel."

They spread out and quickly discovered the real entrance. At one point, instead of the regularity of the marble tiles, there was a large, single slab. There was also a declivity at one end that looked as though it might be a handle. It was. Darius lifted, tentatively, and the slab pivoted smoothly upwards, obviously operated by some system of counterweights. The opening revealed a well-worn stone staircase descending down into what appeared to be a passage.

A great boom reverberated through the shrine. They swung round as one. The Assassins were attacking the door with the ram. It was still rock solid, not even vibrating, but it could only be a matter of time before they broke through.

"Quick," Annabella said. "The water skins. Let's get out of here." They each seized one of the heavy bladders and tumbled down the staircase, Darius pulling the trapdoor closed behind him.

"Can you seal it?" Annabella asked Basil.

"Not without bringing the whole jolly lot down on your heads," Basil said.

"Come on then," Annabella commanded. "That door won't hold them for long." And she hurried off down the tunnel with the others following close behind. They had no idea where it might be taking them but logically there was only one place it could lead, to the Ark.

Are you thinking what I'm thinking? Annabella puffed. Still not back to full strength, she was already feeling the effects of their hurried passage.

What? Basil said. His voice was coming from behind them as though he were acting as rear-guard.

Out of the frying pan into the fire, that's what.

Basil didn't answer her directly but said aloud: "We'd move faster without the water skins."

"But..." Annabella started to say.

"Don't worry," Basil said and all three water skins suddenly vanished. The relief was immediate.

The tunnel was lined top, bottom and sides with tightly fitting blocks of dressed stone. It was dead level and straight as a die and they were now able to run hard, their giant shadows racing in front of them, and it was this that nearly brought about their undoing. Because they were moving at top speed, they were necessarily making quite a lot of noise. Nor, with their blood pounding and breath pumping could they hear much. Annabella picked it up first. Someone, people, were coming towards them, also at speed. At the same time, they felt a sudden current of air coming from behind. The trapdoor was open again. The Assassins had got through the door, discovered the tunnel and were now in hot pursuit. There was no going back. There was no going forward.

Annabella panicked, and for two seconds her mind was frozen as they ran on. Then, blessedly, a narrow opening in the wall to her left suddenly appeared. She darted into the aperture, praying the others would have the wit to follow without hesitation. They did. Annabella pulled them deeper into the shadow.

"What...? Vivienne started to say but Annabella put a hand to her lips. Then Vivienne and Darius heard it too, footsteps pounding towards them. Basil extinguished himself and instinctively they crouched down.

Suddenly, light was flickering into their hiding place as torch-bearing men rushed past. It flashed on and off like frames from a movie, revealing abrupt glimpses of heavily armed men at the full charge. They were evidently a large detachment of guards from the Ark, dispatched to investigate the unseemly uproar coming from the shrine. There seemed to be a great many of them and Annabella hoped that they would show the hated Assassins absolutely no mercy.

But it also meant, she realised, that the main tunnel was now totally closed to them. Whichever way they went they would inevitably be caught. Then she began to wonder why there should happen to be a recess in the main tunnel just here.

What is this place? she asked Basil. *Why is it here?*

Good question, he said, and then: *I wonder...*

He began to glow again, playing light on the back wall.

Look there, he said suddenly, indicating a block of stone that appeared somewhat polished compared with those around it, as though hands had caressed it over the years.

Press on it... Basil suggested.

Annabella did and immediately a section of the wall opened inwards revealing a small secondary tunnel. Clearly, their only hope of avoiding capture was to follow it, but who knew what new dangers it would lead them into. Perhaps it would be better just to wait. However, a distant outbreak of shouting and the clash of weapons decided her.

"Come on," she whispered to the others. "We have to move. They'll be searching soon to make sure they got all the Assassins." She turned and led the way through, wondering all the time what sort of mess she was getting them into this time. Darius pushed the section of wall back into place behind them and the sounds of battle were lost completely.

Unlike the main tunnel, the tributary was so narrow they had to move in single file and quite soon it began to make sharp, right-angled turns both left and right, seemingly at random.

What do you think this is? Annabella asked Basil.

A bolt hole, he said. A jolly old escape route from somewhere inside the Ark. Out to the main tunnel... On to the shrine...

They came to a staircase which seemed to climb up through several levels. Then they resumed the twisting and turning at regular intervals, always at right angles.

You mean, this tunnel is inside the walls? Annabella said.

I do.

They came to another staircase which itself had a right-angle bend halfway up and which ended abruptly at a thick door.

"What now?" Darius whispered.

"Basil will scout," Annabella said. "Please...?"

He slipped through the crack at the bottom, leaving them in the pitch dark. There was no light, not a glimmer, not even from around the door. Basil seemed to be gone for an eternity and Vivienne very quickly sought Annabella's hand. At last, a glow signalled Basil's return.

"Un-jolly-believable," he whispered.

"What?" Annabella whispered urgently.

"It's the Sultan's haram... "

"What?" Annabella repeated inelegantly.

"Haram... Harem... Seraglio..."

"Oh..." Vivienne and Annabella said simultaneously, raising their eyebrows at each other.

"I've always rather fancied myself in a harem," Vivienne added.

"Shsh," Basil whispered. "There are guards just the other side; jolly old eunuchs..."

"I don't understand," Annabella said, keeping her voice low. "This door...?"

"...Is locked and hidden by a whacking great tapestry," Basil said. "It leads to a grand salon sort of thing, a meeting place, I suppose, a common room. Lots of ladies, entertaining themselves, waiting..."

"Waiting for what?" Annabella said innocently. Vivienne giggled.

"What do you think?" she murmured. Darius blushed so deeply that it was noticeable even in the very dim light.

"But why the door? The tunnel?" Annabella persisted.

"Escape route..." Basil said. "I told you. The Ark will be riddled with secret passages."

"More likely a discreet way in for a bit of hanky-panky," Vivienne remarked. "Or out...which would explain why there were no guards at the actual shrine..."

"Well you seem to know a lot about it," Annabella said, nettled. Vivienne smirked. Darius blushed again.

"I can't go in there," he said. "They'll kill me."

"With kindness, I should think," Annabella said.

"In that case, you definitely can't go in," Vivienne said.

"He's jolly well right," Basil cut in, seriously. "If they catch him, they'll kill him. Slowly. It's forbidden territory for any male except the eunuchs. Abso-jolly-lutely forbidden."

"Well, we could always make him a eunuch..." Annabella began only to stop short at the look of horror which flashed across the faces of the other two.

"I was joking..." she said hastily. "Only joking." There was a suspicious silence.

"...But we could disguise him as a girl," Annabella whispered thoughtfully, after a long pause. "He's gorgeous enough and with a bit of padding and a veil..."

"Too dangerous," Vivienne said quickly. "Much too dangerous... We'd be spotted straightaway... Strangers...in there..."

"Maybe not," Basil put in judiciously. "There are heaps of women in there."

"How many?" Annabella whispered.

"Seventy, eighty, maybe a hundred..."

"Wow," Vivienne said.

"And we can't go back," Annabella said. "That door is our only way out of here..."
There was another long silence.

One by one, dressed in flimsy finery provided by Basil and spaced at discreet intervals, they slipped out from behind the tapestry. The chamber as Basil had said was very crowded and no one appeared to notice the intrusion of interlopers. New shapes and faces probably weren't so unusual, Annabella thought in passing. The 'stock' was undoubtedly replenished on a regular basis. And anyway, given the cordon of eunuch guards, no one would imagine for a moment that imposters could possibly sneak in.

Of the three of them, Vivienne truly looked the part – quite ravishing, Annabella noted with a twinge of jealousy – and Darius passed muster, his naturally long eyelashes fluttering seductively above his high cheekbones and the delicate veil drawn across the rest of his face. He was too tall for perfect form but was doing his best to look willowy. Only Annabella herself was markedly out of place. Vivienne had urged her to assume the same sort of padding as Darius, but she had refused so hotly that no one had dared to press the point, especially Basil.

The chamber in which they found themselves was huge and most ornately decorated. The many vaults of the ceiling were supported by marble columns, banded top and bottom with beaten gold. The walls were hung with wondrous tapestries and

there were thick carpets scattered about the marble tiles of the floor and a profusion of divans, couches, cushions and low tables. All seemed to be occupied by women of startling beauty, though some few were older and were being treated with a marked deference. Long-term survivors, Annabella thought. Music – muted and of oriental strangeness – was coming from some hidden source. Standing unobtrusively, here and there around the perimeter, were a number of large men – the eunuchs.

Annabella quickly spotted a small, unoccupied and shadowy alcove. She drifted rapidly towards it, followed by the others, who crowded in behind her.

"Look natural," she hissed at them while trying to do the same herself. "And try not to look so beautiful," she added for Vivienne's benefit. "Have you noticed? When girls go out in pairs, there is always a good-looking one and a plain one. Guess I'm the plain one, and we don't want..."

"What?" Darius said.

"And you should act dumb," Annabella said quickly. "Your voice is a dead giveaway."

"We don't want what?" Vivienne insisted.

"Someone choosing you for the night." Vivienne made a moue and Darius looked stricken.

"What are we going to do?" he whispered. "How are we ever going to escape? We'll never get past the eunuchs."

"Don't talk! Act dumb! And I don't know..." Annabella said. "We'll think of something."

The music suddenly stopped and from somewhere there was a brief fanfare. A procession of little pageboys entered the chamber, bearing trays of sweetmeats and tiny cups with some sort of beverage. As the music resumed, they circulated about the room, offering sustenance. All three declined when a tray was poked at them, and Annabella noticed that of the others, only the older women indulged themselves. The competition between the young ones to be chosen must be savage, she thought to herself sourly, if they were starving themselves, which in turn meant her own virtue was in absolutely no danger. Time passed and the three intruders did their best to look as though they were spending a delightful evening chatting amongst themselves.

What will happen? Annabella asked Basil at last. *What are all these women waiting for?* And she realised as she spoke, that there was indeed a building air of anticipation.

I don't know exactly, Basil said. *But I can jolly well guess.*

So, are you going to tell me? But Basil was saved from having to answer by another fanfare. The music stopped, never to resume. All conversation throughout the vast chamber ceased on the instant and every woman there turned expectantly towards the grand entrance. Then there was a collective intake of breath.

A very fat man – the fattest Annabella could ever recall seeing – waddled into the room. He was dressed in sweeping emerald robes topped by a confection of a turban in turquoise – a miracle of concealed engineering – and he was escorted by yet more pageboys.

Uh oh, Annabella said. *Is this what you wouldn't tell me? Is this what I think it is?*

I'm afraid so, Basil said soberly. The chief eunuch, here to select the Sultan's companion for the night.

But what if he picks one of us?

I think you're safe. If only you'd jolly well let me...

No! And thank you very much, Annabella said furiously, even though she had come to exactly the same conclusion herself.

A pleasure, Basil said warily.

So what do we do if he does pick one of us? Annabella said after a long interval during which she realised she was being rather ridiculous.

Jolly well go along with it, of course, Basil said. It'll get us out of here.

But the other two...?

Act as handmaidens, or something. Escort the jolly old lamb to the jolly old slaughter.

Do you think we could get away with it?

I would expect it's quite the usual thing for friends to provide support... Just in case the chosen faints from the joy of anticipation.

All this time the chief eunuch had been circling the room, brazenly inspecting the offerings, who for their part were smiling coquettishly and doing their best to be seductive.

What's he looking for? Annabella asked.

I expect the jolly old Sultan has expressed a preference for his night's entertainment...

Oh...

The chief eunuch was now getting alarmingly close and Annabella could feel Darius and Vivienne shifting nervously behind her.

"If anything happens," she hissed out of the side of her mouth. "Just go along with it."

The chief eunuch was now standing four square in front of them and beckoning them out into the light. Reluctantly, they edged forward. His eyes passed contemptuously over Annabella...

Human Resources is now in dead trouble, Basil remarked with wounding delight.

...Paused thoughtfully as he contemplated Vivienne and passed on to Darius. At last, a fateful finger rose and beckoned causing a look of stark terror to flash across Darius's face.

The Sultan must be in a tall mood tonight, Basil said wickedly.

Darius made to flinch backwards but Annabella put a firm hand in his back and pushed forcefully. With the other hand, she seized Vivienne and dragged her forward as well, positioning her at Darius's other elbow. The chief eunuch swept magnificently about and proceeded forth, leaving Vivienne and Annabella to propel Darius in his wake. There was a loud, concerted sigh of disappointment from the rest of the crowded room and not a few quite audible comments about the sad decline in general standards among new recruits.

Chapter 17

The Sultan's personal apartments were predictably splendid, so opulent that sinful luxury was an understatement. However, Annabella, Vivienne and most of all Darius were far too apprehensive to pay any mind to their surroundings. The chief eunuch shed his escort of pageboys and led them between the guards at the main entrance, then to an anteroom which in turn, they guessed, would lead to the Sultan's bedchamber. A number of female attendants were waiting there. The chief eunuch led them inside and then turned to address Darius:

"Please my Lord and you will be well rewarded. But should you fail to bring him to his heart's ease, you will be fed to the dogs, alive. Prepare yourself and when you enter his bed, above all remember you do so from the foot, sliding your way up between the sheets. Do not, on pain of instant death, look into his eyes. You are not fit to gaze on my Lord's face."

Instant death beats being fed to the dogs, I would have jolly well thought, Basil remarked with some interest.

Never mind that, Annabella said impatiently. What do you propose doing about all this?

You tell me, mistress mine. But don't you want to see their faces when they discover Darius is a boy?

I can't wait, Annabella said sarcastically. And you're quite sure you can bring the water skins back when we need them?

Madam mistress, shining pearl...

Where are they, exactly? Annabella asked, her curiosity getting the better of her.

Same place as my carpet, Basil said. Where do you jolly well think?

The chief eunuch stepped back and watched closely as one of the female attendants opened a chest and produced a stunning night robe. She lifted it out reverently and turned to Darius who shied like a startled horse. Two other attendants bustled up, obviously intent on stripping away his eveningwear.

Darius squawked – there was no other word for it – and the chief eunuch frowned with displeasure. Annabella was on the point of intervening but then she decided, yes, she did rather want to see their faces.

The two attendants reached up simultaneously to remove the little pillbox hat and delicate veil Darius was wearing, then reared back in astonishment as they realised there was fuzz on his chin. One of them gasped and the other let out a cry of outrage. The chief eunuch's eyes popped in disbelief, his mind racing as he assimilated all the implications of first the violation of the harem and then this invasion of the Sultan's innermost not to say intimate sanctum. For long seconds he was speechless and then, at last, he opened his mouth to cry for the guards. Annabella decided it was time to take control and stepped forward.

"Don't," she said to the chief eunuch, who was silenced more by amazement that this chit of a girl should so presume to assault his dignity, than anything else." And you others be quiet, too," Annabella added.

"Phew," Darius exclaimed. "You left that late..." Which was a big mistake. The sound of his male voice triggered an outbreak of hysterics in one of the attendants, which in turn proved disastrously infectious. In the blink of an eye, all four were screaming dementedly. Within seconds they could hear footsteps pounding in the corridor outside, and then the door to the inner sanctum also swung open to reveal the august presence of Sultan Toğrul, clad only in lofty dignity. Vivienne's eyes popped.

Whoops, Annabella observed. The emperor has no clothes.

Shameful, Basil said.

Shameless... His jolly modesty must be preserved...

And to his great astonishment, the Sultan suddenly found himself decently clad, albeit in sackcloth, just as the outer door burst open. The screaming redoubled in intensity as four heavily armed guards began to thrust their way into the room.

This is getting out of hand, Annabella said of the developing chaos.

Jolly good fun though, Basil remarked.

But someone is going to get hurt... So much over-reaction...

What a good idea... Wish I'd thought of that...

Ever afterward, whenever she visited the memory, Annabella would giggle out loud at how literally Basil had chosen to interpret her perfectly innocent remark. On the instant, everyone in the room, except for Annabella, Vivienne, Darius and the Sultan, found themselves turned base over breakfast and standing on their heads.

There was shocked silence, frozen silence. The world stopped on its axis and then began to turn again. Gravity inexorably reasserted itself and robes began to slide floorwards exposing most unexpected sights, not least the voluminous undergarment in gold satin affected by the chief eunuch. As people, their clothes falling down around their heads, realised the depths of the indignity to which they were being subjected, they began to kick and squirm and cry out, protesting vehemently and vociferously until the noise reached a crescendo. However, they were all quite unable to right themselves no matter how desperately they tried.

The Sultan for his part did the only possible thing. He gaped for a moment, then burst into uproarious laughter. He pointed. He howled. He sobbed. He hiccupped. He choked. He turned red in the face with tears running down his cheeks and was eventually forced to retreat into his inner chamber where he flung himself on his bed and roared some more.

By studiously avoiding looking at either Vivienne or Darius, Annabella managed more or less to keep a straight face. She picked her way through the chaos of upended people, futilely struggling to right themselves, and motioning to Vivienne and Darius to follow, boldly marched into the Sultan's chamber.

He was still writhing on his bed in paroxysms of mirth and Basil took the opportunity to adjust the wardrobe of his charges to something a little less revealing and rather more suited to travel in a storm on a freezing winter's night. Darius,

particularly, was greatly relieved to find himself again decently dressed. He closed the door to the anteroom against the threats and imprecations flowing forth ever more violently, and threw the bolt. At a word from Annabella, Basil released his victims and as they subsided to the floor, so did the noise. A moment later, someone was pounding on the outside of the door.

At last the full tide of the Sultan's mirth began to ebb. Finally, he wiped his eyes and hoisted himself on his elbows to regard the three strange youngsters standing before him.

"Desist!" he shouted to whoever it was trying to break in. "Desist! I am safe."

Suddenly there was silence, and then someone called:

"My Lord, are you truly well?" It was the chief eunuch.

"Yes, yes," the Sultan shouted with irritation. He took a moment to gain his composure, spared a wondering glance for the prickly sackcloth that now clothed him and opened his mouth to address his immediate audience. Annabella wondered fleetingly how severe a tantrum she would have to deal with but found herself totally disarmed.

"Thank you," the Sultan said. "My eternal gratitude. That was the funniest thing I've ever seen."

Annabella hesitated, nonplussed. "Our pleasure," she managed eventually.

"And how shall I repay you?" the Sultan inquired.

"By which you mean, I suppose, how did we get into your rooms and what are we doing here?"

"The thought had occurred," the Sultan admitted, and then: "I don't suppose you also happened to be responsible for that disgraceful affray at the Chasma Aiyub?"

"Well," Annabella said apologetically. "We weren't exactly responsible but we were involved."

"Perhaps, child, you would care to explain?" the Sultan said delicately. "And indeed, while you're about it, you might also tell me how I come to be dressed in this..." He picked disdainfully at the sackcloth. "...And how you managed to make quite such a spectacle of my chief eunuch, not to mention everyone else out there."

"Probably not," Annabella said.

"Probably not what?" the Sultan said with a hint of underlying steel.

"Probably I wouldn't care to explain," Annabella said.

"Oh, but I think you must." It was a command, the command of an autocratic, absolute ruler accustomed to instant and unquestioning obedience from all in his domain.

Annabella sighed. *He needs convincing*, she said to Basil.

A pleasure, mistress mine.

A moment later, the Sultan found himself standing on his head on his bed, but quicker thinking than his minions, he managed to clench his knees to prevent the sackcloth dropping and exposing the imperial crown jewels to unkind comment.

"You see," Annabella said with austere restraint. "I don't actually *must* do anything. And could I mention, that I really, really hate being called a child. I am not a child."

She wiggled her fingers and the Sultan found himself upright again and sitting on his bed. As she had once said to Basil, it was indeed proving very bad for her character to be able to manipulate adults. It was very quickly becoming totally addictive.

The Sultan was regarding her with wary calculation. Annabella gazed back, wondering what sort of man he might be, apart from a ruthless oriental potentate with a harem of heroic proportions. The fact that Basil's escapade had reduced him to hilarity indicated, she decided, that he might not be totally unsympathetic.

"So," the Sultan said slowly. "You are evidently a sorcerer, a witch?"

"Certainly not," Annabella said.

"Yet you have powers."

"I...can call on them."

Toğrül's eyes narrowed and suddenly he changed tack. "Why are you being pursued by Assassins?" he asked.

"Why should you think we are being chased by Assassins?" Annabella fenced.

"Please, don't presume to insult my intelligence."

"And if we are being chased by Assassins?"

"Then perhaps I can help."

"Help? Why would you help us? After what we've done?"

"What you've done is to entertain me," the Sultan said. "Also, the enemy of my enemy is my friend and Hassan-i Sabbāh is definitely, most definitely, my enemy."

What do you think? Annabella asked Basil. *The blizzard...we can't travel anyway. Stay here in a safe place...?*

But is this a safe place? Basil replied. *That's the jolly question. And you're the one all in a hellfire hurry. Faster, faster, you keep telling me, faster.*

I know, Annabella said, suddenly wretched and guilty. *But...the blizzard...we really can't travel tonight...*

Yes, speed was of the essence, but the need for a respite from the endless agony – and the cold was agony – of freezing, night-time travel exposed to the winter elements, bad enough without the storm, was suddenly overpowering. And if she, even with her pressing need for haste, was feeling like this, how much more so must Vivienne and Darius be hating the journey, however loyally they kept their thoughts to themselves? Abruptly she made up her mind.

"If we could stay for the night," she said. "That would be really nice."

They were taken to a princely apartment with a self-contained bathhouse and every conceivable luxury, conceivable for the time, that is. They were cosseted and fed, the whole being supervised by a very sulky and thoroughly disapproving chief eunuch, and then, clean, relaxed and tired to the bone, they were left to themselves for a long, undisturbed and utterly blissful sleep.

However, through it all, one question kept nagging at Annabella. How could Hassan-i Sabbāh possibly have known to set an ambush at the Chasma Aiyub? Being able to surround the shrine with large numbers of Assassins at basically a moment's notice spoke of considerable planning and staff work done well in advance.

It just doesn't make sense, she grumbled to Basil before drifting off. How could they know we were coming?

Basil said nothing and his very silence triggered a distant memory. It came to her suddenly.

Aswad, she said. He must have got it out of Aswad somehow. You told me that was a mistake... Bother, bother...

...Beeswax, Basil finished.

In the morning they made a leisurely breakfast before being summoned to attend the Sultan in his audience chamber. They stood waiting for some minutes and then finally were ushered in. Toğrül summarily dismissed the gaggle of competing courtiers, who left with many a hard look at the three young strangers being accorded unheard of privileges, and beckoned them forward. Annabella noted that though the room had ostensibly been cleared, there were still at least thirty guards posted around the walls. It seemed a somewhat excessive number, even for such a ruler.

"So," the Sultan said. "I trust you are refreshed, at least a little?"

He might 'trust', Basil said. But don't you. This is giving me a beastly bad feeling.

"Thank you," Annabella said, speaking for the three of them. "We do, feel better I mean. Your hospitality is wonderful."

"I am gratified that you think so," the Sultan said. He chuckled with what seemed to be genuine amusement. "I'm still laughing at your splendidly unorthodox entrance. Magnificent."

The three standing before him shuffled a little with embarrassment. Darius, in particular, did not care to be reminded of his career as a harem houri.

"However," the Sultan said with alarming gentleness. "I do think an explanation of some sort is required for bringing such a large troop of Assassins inside my very fortress. It is not the way honoured guests usually arrive. Hmmm?"

"No," Annabella said, now somewhat abashed. "I suppose not, but we didn't really have much choice." Very quickly, she realised, she was starting to pick up Basil's bad feeling.

Can you handle all these guards? she asked him. If it comes to a fight, or something?

Um... he said. Not so much on the jolly old crowd control, remember...?

That's encouraging. Really encouraging.

You'll think of something. You always do.

"So let me inquire," Toğrül was saying, still in the same gently insistent voice. "Why didn't you have any choice? And what were you doing in the Chasma Aiyub in the first place? After dark. When the shrine was closed."

You were right, Annabella said. We should have got out of here last night, when the going was good.

"Um... We were thirsty?" she said aloud.

"Don't be insolent!" the Sultan's words slashed at her like a whip and Annabella actually flinched, the attack was so sudden. Protectively, Darius stepped up beside her, and then Vivienne.

"Let me tell you what I think," the Sultan resumed after a moment. Again his voice was silky, modulated. "For so many fida'is to be pursuing you, for them to dare to break into the Chasma Aiyub, and then even into my Ark, Hassan-i Sabbāh must want you very badly. You, or something you have. Perhaps even both..."

Annabella, struggling to remain impervious to the accuracy of Toğrül's guesses, missed the small, discordant movement of his hand.

"As we have seen, you have powers," the Sultan went on. "And as we have also seen, Hassan-i Sabbāh has powers. The emir's powers, so we are reliably led to believe, are conferred on him by a ring, a very particular ring, the Seal of Solomon. The fact that he is now so desperate as to attack me in pursuit of you might indicate – just a wild surmise, you understand – that you have come into possession of his ring, his very particular ring, and that he wants it back."

Annabella suddenly felt decidedly claustrophobic. She tore her eyes away from the Sultan's and glanced about to discover that on the signal, the guards had moved silently in from the walls and now ringed them solidly, standing shoulder to shoulder, arrows nocked and bows drawn.

This I jolly definitely can't handle, Basil said. *Too many arrows pointing at you three.*

Annabella turned back to the Sultan, her mind working feverishly.

"Do you see me wearing a ring?" she asked. She held up her hands, displaying her fingers, all of which were quite bare.

I think we're going to need more levitation, she added privately.

"Indeed not," Toğrül said. "But nor do I see you using your...powers."

Annabella brought her right hand down, stretched it in front of her, turned it palm up, and raised it slowly. As she did so, the Sultan began to rise from his throne. All but one of the guards managed to hold rigid discipline, however, from somewhere in the ranks there was a single, frightened gasp. Annabella stopped only when the Sultan had reached a threateningly destructive elevation.

"First things first," she said. "Let's be clear. If anything happens to me or to my friends, then you will fall." Toğrül couldn't prevent himself looking down and blenching slightly. The vaulted ceiling of the audience chamber allowed for a long drop.

"So I think," Annabella went on. "It would be best for all concerned if you were to send your guards outside. In case of accidents. Yes?" The Sultan looked down again. It took him two attempts to get out the words, but in the end all thirty of his men turned about and dutifully filed outside.

"And close the door behind you," Darius yelled at the retreating backs. A moment later, there was a solid thump. Annabella slowly lowered her hand, but stopped with the Sultan still poised above his throne. A drop now would be less painful to his person but still greatly damaging to his dignity.

How would he know about Solomon's ring, Annabella asked?

Who knows? Basil said reflectively. Spies? Rumours? There are always rumours... But one thing is for sure, he is now abso-jolly-lutely certain that you've got it, even if you're not wearing it. How else to explain the things you've been doing?

Bother, Annabella said.

And I'll tell you something else, Basil continued. Not only is he certain you've got the ring, but he's jolly well determined to get it from you. You heard him last night. Hassan-i Sabbāh is his enemy. Who knows? Maybe the jolly old emir has even tried to assassinate him. The Sultan obviously wants the ring for himself to give Hassan-i Sabbāh a taste of his own beastly medicine.

Bother, Annabella said again. So now we'll have the Sultan hunting us as well...

Looks like it. Unless...

Unless what?

We take him with us.

Then his people will be hunting for him, which means hunting for us.

But at least we'll have him to bargain with, Basil said. He paused. And another thing, he added.

Not more... What?

If he hasn't already, Hassan-i Sabbāh will jolly well work out where we're heading. He knows you need to get to Waq Waq... He now also knows we must have taken water from the Chasma Aiyub – why else would we go there...? And the two together can only mean one thing...

Annabella sighed deeply, aloud.

It had turned into a lengthy conference. Vivienne and Darius waited patiently, knowing what Annabella must be doing. Toğrül, however, had been using the time to draw conclusions on his own account.

"So," he said when Annabella finally looked up at him. "You don't actually need to wear the ring to use its powers. Most illuminating."

Told you, Basil said.

Bother, bother...

...Beeswax, Basil finished for her. Jolly ironic, he continued. You do have the ring, but don't need it. And because you don't need it, he's now sure you've got it.

So what? What do we do now?

You tell me, mistress mine. You're jolly good at that.

"All right," Annabella said at last, addressing the Sultan. "I can see that nothing I say will convince you that I don't use the ring, so the only thing to do is to take you with us."

"And if I refuse?" the Sultan inquired mildly.

"You can't," Annabella said simply.

Handcuffs? Annabella asked.

Haven't been invented yet.

Straitjacket?

Hasn't been invented.

Then what?

Chains?

Too clanky, the way you do them...

Rawhide?

But really strong. We don't want any accidents.

But of course, madam mistress, shining pearl...

The Sultan had been watching with avid interest as the carpet appeared, and unrolled itself while hovering at a convenient height above the floor. Vivienne, Darius and Annabella went through the long practised routine of climbing aboard and strapping themselves in, then it was the Sultan's turn. To his great vexation, he found his wrists tightly bound with a leather thong before being deposited on the carpet next to Annabella. The seatbelt snaked up about his waist and tied itself uncomfortably tightly. Darius nocked an arrow to his bow and rested the point against Toğrül's throat, so that if anything happened to him the arrow would automatically be loosed and the Sultan would inevitably die.

"And just what do you think you're going to do now?" the Sultan demanded.

"You are going to guide us out of the Ark," Annabella said. "And if anybody tries to stop us, you'll be the first to get shot. So I'd tell them all to be on their best behaviour, if I were you."

"And in the unlikely event that we do escape, what then?"

"Oh, we'll escape all right," Annabella said with false confidence. "Don't you worry about that."

The carpet rose higher and swooped towards the doors of the audience chamber, which parted before it. The corridor outside was packed with the previously expelled guards and courtiers. They stumbled backwards as the doors forced their way open against them and here and there, Annabella could see men fighting for room in which to draw a bow.

"Don't shoot!" the Sultan roared. "Do not shoot! Do not do anything!"

There were cries of disbelief and gasps of astonishment as the carpet sailed above their heads and off down the corridor. At the end, Toğrül indicated they should turn left and the carpet banked sharply. Another long corridor stretched before them and behind they could hear the clatter of footsteps as the Sultan's people pounded in pursuit.

At the end of this corridor they shot down a sweeping staircase but instead of continuing on along the ceremonial way, Toğrül had them turn sharp right down a much lesser passage, and then right again. The sounds of pursuit had already faded to nothing and it was clear they had given everyone the slip, for the moment at least.

A heavy door loomed before them. Annabella wondered for a brief second what might lie on the other side, whether they should stop and reconnoitre, but then it was too late. The door swung open and they were through to find themselves in the open air.

They had entered an enclosed, courtyard garden, bare, drab and dispirited in the winter cold. The door swung closed behind them which was of little import, Annabella thought quickly. If Basil couldn't open it again at need, they could always escape upwards. Flight that way was blocked by netting, she noticed, difficult to see against the sky. But again, no matter, she thought. That would detain Basil not a moment. Someone, the Sultan, emitted a curious, keening whistle. And then, on the instant, they were under attack and there was no time for any thought at all.

With the cunning for which he was justly renowned Toğrül had led them into an ambush. Some years before, the besieged Emperor of China, in desperate need of replenishment stocks of the region's famed warhorses, had despatched along the Silk Road the most impressive of gifts, a jian, a bird so fabulous that it was thought to exist only in myth. At first sight, it appeared just another large bird of prey, rather similar to though somewhat larger and fiercer than an eagle, with handsome red and gold plumage. Only on very close inspection did it become apparent that the creature was actually two halves forming a symbiotic whole, that it was, in fact, split down the middle, each half totally separate though totally dependent on the other.

The Sultan – sensible of the huge prestige of this bribe, personally bestowed on him by the Emperor's ambassador plenipotentiary – had converted an entire garden into an aviary and continued to devote a great deal of his own time to the care and training of this extraordinary manifestation of the impossible.

The two halves of the jian came stooping down from the eyrie, flying of necessity with the closest possible synergy. However, a definite double scream rent the air as it plummeted down and Darius would have been less than human had he been able to resist swinging his arrow away from the Sultan's throat to loose it at this sudden, new threat. At the same time, Basil took the carpet diving down to the safety of the garden below and the Sultan, seized his moment. Wrists still bound but seatbelt slashed by the knife he had pulled from his boot, he rolled over the edge and dropped neatly to the ground. He began to run on the instant.

A second scream tore at them, a scream of intolerable pain, of unbearable loss, of unendurable grief. A single scream. A body crashed down, followed by the second half, flapping helplessly in circles on its single wing and descending rapidly, quite out of control. Basil groaned but in the chaos of the moment Annabella failed to remark it.

Abruptly, the Sultan stopped running to watch, stood wretchedly for a moment then moved across to where the half still living was now desperately trying to rouse its lifeless self, transfixed by Darius's arrow.

Darius, equally wretched, dismounted from the carpet and went over.

"Shoot it," Toğrül ordered.

"I-I can't," Darius stammered, gazing in dismay at the two halves of this strange creature, one dead the other still alive and in paroxysms of distress.

"You must," the Sultan said.

"I can't," Darius repeated. "I just can't."

The Sultan held out his bound wrists.

"Set me free. Give me the bow." Darius hesitated, then all at once made up his mind. He ignored Annabella's shout, drew his own knife and began to saw at the rawhide thong. A moment later Annabella was beside him.

"What are you doing?" she demanded. "Stop it..."

But Darius kept on and a second later Toğrül was free. Darius handed him his bow and a single arrow. The Sultan nocked and drew. For a long, long moment he held the point on Annabella's heart then abruptly turned and shot. The other half of the jian exhaled, seemingly with relief, and died. Toğrül stared at the two limp corpses.

"I-I'm sorry," Darius said shakily.

"You shouldn't be," Annabella snapped. The sensation of the arrow about to impale her heart had been most unpleasant. "It's his fault," she said indicating the Sultan. "Not yours. He thought he was leading us into a trap."

"Can't really blame him, I suppose," Vivienne said from behind them. She too was staring disbelievingly at the twice-dead bird. "That's the weirdest thing I've ever seen in my life," she added.

"Come on," Annabella ordered urgently. "We have to get out of here before the guards find us."

Chapter 18

Hassan-i Sabbāh, Old Man of the Mountain, Emir of Evil, received the report of the debacle at the Ark and subsequent astonishing events with incandescent rage. The whole of his Bukhara chapter – fifty men – wiped out and for what? For nothing. At some point in the very near future he would deal with the Sultan Toğrül, deal with him permanently if the girl didn't do it for him, but for the moment that was a matter of scant consideration. The crucial thing, the only thing, was to retrieve the Seal of Solomon and with it the girl herself. Without the one he was substantially defenceless, without the other he stood condemned to the agonies of hell. Neither prospect was thinkable.

The only mitigating factor – slightly mitigating – in the whole disastrous situation was that it had become clear what the girl's ultimate destination must be.

Hassan-i Sabbāh, Old Man of the Mountain, Emir of Evil, eventually managed to put aside his anger to make the necessary dispositions. It was imperative that he get to the mountains before her, however hard he had to drive his minions.

If Toğrül had shot at me, do you think you could have stopped the arrow?
Annabella asked thoughtfully. They had now left Bukhara well behind them and were flying across the desolate, flat countryside. The Sultan was again strapped down, hands bound. He had been thoroughly searched by Darius for any more hidden weapons.

Hmm, Basil said. From that range, probably not. There would only have been a split-second...

So why do you think he didn't shoot?

Too jolly risky. In the end, too jolly risky. He didn't know what would happen, what you might do to him if he didn't get you.

Well, why didn't he just keep on running?

I suppose he must have loved his bird. He jolly well loved his bird...

I thought it was horrible. Annabella shuddered.

Horribly rare... I never thought I would ever jolly well see one... Something in the way Basil said it caught Annabella's attention and she thought back to their conversation outside Bukhara when he had first mentioned the jian. Also, there was that groan from Basil when the first half of the bird had been shot, a groan of genuine distress, a groan she had failed to note at the time.

You're not, are you? she teased.

Not what?

Tell me you're not.

Not what? Basil repeated with irritation.

You are. I don't believe it. You are.

What? Basil demanded, now definitely put out.

A birder, Annabella crowed delightedly. A twitcher. There was silence. Well, are you?

Um...

Annabella laughed. I knew it, she said. Basil laughed too.

But only the rarest of the rare, he said.

Go on, Annabella urged. Tell me your best ones.

Well, Basil said slowly. A jolly old phoenix, of course. Three actually. And then, I once spotted a fenghuang...

A what?

A fenghuang...rooster's beak, swallow's face, snake for a neck, stag's legs and a fish's tail, just for starters.

Wow...

Very special. And rukhs, naturally. Hassan-i Sabbā's makes it six, or is it seven...?

Oh, Annabella said. Downright common...

But the jian is abso-jolly-lutely the rarest of all... Such a shame...

It couldn't be helped and at least now you can die happy.

Basil snorted.

Basil, Annabella said seriously after a moment. What do you think Hassan-i Sabbāh will do next?

The djinni was silent for a long moment. Well, he said at last. If I were him I would probably think Samarkand would be the next jolly stop on the way then Tashkent, so I'd have people waiting at both places.

But then, Annabella said. If I were him I'd think that we'd think he would think that, if you see what I mean. If I were him, I'd think that we would make a point of avoiding the Samarkand, and Tashkent route. So if I were him, I would just leave some people there in case, and then what would I do?

So smart, Basil said with rather more irritation than admiration. If we don't go by Tashkent, he continued, then to get to Kashgar and the Taklamakan Desert, we have to cross the Pamir mountains direct – the Roof of the World. In winter he knows we can't go over them, by the passes, so there's only one jolly route left. Along the Vakhsh River, the valley... And if I were him, I'd try very hard to get there first.

Can he?

We have to jolly well assume so.

So that's where he'll be waiting...?

Basil said nothing.

With the rukh...?

Again Basil said nothing.

So how long will we be in danger? How long is this valley, exactly?

Long, Basil said. Jolly long. Fifty leagues.

Which is what? Half a night's flying?

Give or take.

They might not see us... In the dark... I mean, he can't use 'ifrits any more, not without his ring...

No, Basil said.

But...?

He is a necromancer, a magus. He has other powers.

What powers?

He can see things... He saw your parents somehow, and their picture by your bed...

There was a long silence.

Whatever can he want from them? Annabella burst out at last. What does he want from me?

There was another long silence.

I don't know, Basil said eventually. I wish I did.

They flew on until the winter afternoon began to fade.

"We might as well stop for the night," Annabella said, jumping off the hovering carpet. "We don't think there'll be any more trouble until we get to the river, and it's so cold already..."

The Sultan's head turned sharply at her words. He had been silent ever since they had lifted up out of the Ark and the others, assuming he was grieving over his bird, had left him alone.

"Who is we?" he demanded. Annabella shrugged and spread her hands indicating Vivienne and Darius.

"No," Toğrül insisted. "You said, *we* don't think... I heard no discussion. Who is that we?"

Do we care if he knows about you? Annabella asked. It might be better if he did. He might understand that I don't need the ring...

But he's sure you've got it and knowing about me won't change that or stop him trying to get it, Basil observed. Jolly well keep him guessing...

"We is me, myself and I," Annabella said to Toğrül dismissively.

"What river?" he wanted to know next. "Nobody has said anything about a river."

"Come to think of it," Vivienne put in. "Nobody has."

"It's on the way to where we're going," Annabella snapped, glaring at Vivienne. Tactfully, Darius ran interference, moving between them to help Vivienne down.

What do we do about Toğrül? Annabella said after a moment.

We could just freeze him... Safest...

Um...

Annabella went through a perfunctory pantomime of producing the tent, and led them inside. The brazier was already glowing and they stood around chafing themselves, all except the Sultan whose hands were still bound and in quite a bad way because of it. He had made no complaint but was grateful when Darius thought to remove the wrapping Basil had provided and cut the bonds. Two of his fingers were beginning to turn white and dead with frostbite.

"Here's the thing," Annabella said to him, feeling rather guilty. "I can just freeze you until we leave again, like this..." She waved her hands and waited while Toğrül absorbed the fact that he was quite unable to move. "...Or you can promise to behave... Not to try to escape... Not to hurt any of us... Not to do anything." She waved her hands again.

Whatever makes you think you can jolly well trust him? Basil said furiously, refusing to free him. *He's sure you've got the ring and he'll try to steal it or something when you're asleep.*

Then you'll have to make sure you don't let him, won't you? Annabella said. *I can't have him frozen all night. It wouldn't be right. Now please do it.* And she waved her hands again and waited until Toğrül realised he was again able to move.

"What's it to be?" she asked.

"What choice do I have?" he countered.

"Say it," Annabella said.

"I agree."

"Say it," she repeated.

"I-I swear."

"The matter of your names," Toğrül said as they were eating. "You never presented them to me."

"Annabella," Annabella said, adding automatically: "Not Annabelle..."

"Vivienne..."

"Darius..."

"And the other?" Toğrül said.

"Good try," Annabella said quickly, cutting Vivienne off. "What makes you think there's another?"

Toğrül laughed and spread his hands. "All this," he said. "And I feel a presence..."

No, Basil said. Keep him guessing...

"Or perhaps I'm just amazingly talented," Annabella said, poking about the communal dish in front of them.

"No," Toğrül contradicted her. "You said you had no powers of your own, only that you could call on them..."

"You must have misunderstood me."

"There is no misunderstanding," Toğrül said coldly, and then: "Show me the ring!" It was said with a burning insistence.

You see, Basil said waspishly. He's never jolly well going to be satisfied until he gets it.

"There is no ring," Annabella lied calmly. But the slightest of starts from Vivienne and unnatural stillness from Darius gave her away. Toğrül, watching like a hawk, gave a satisfied twitch of his lips and changed the subject.

"Where are we?" he asked and added without waiting for an answer: "I calculate we are somewhere south of Samarkand."

Are we? Annabella asked.

Pretty much, Basil said.

She shrugged for Toğrül's benefit.

"So," Toğrül went on. "We should go there. I have an army there. It will make short work of whatever men Hassan-i Sabbāh has put in the field, so far from his base."

"No thank you," Annabella said politely.

"Why not?" Toğrül insisted. "Clearly, you need protection."

"What makes you think that?"

"Are you then so powerful that you can resist all Hassan-i Sabbāh's resources, Hassan-i Sabbāh himself? He is surely not far away."

Certain you wouldn't like me just to freeze him? Basil inquired solicitously.

Annabella made no reply to either of them, but sighed deeply to herself. An impossible situation had suddenly become even more complicated. Outside, without anybody noticing, it began to snow.

In the morning it was still snowing, so heavily that visibility was severely reduced. Even Basil would find it extremely difficult to see. In addition, the cold was worse than ever because of wind chill from the howling blizzard. They resigned themselves to staying in the tent for the duration. Annabella just had to accept that if Hassan-i Sabbāh was so desperate to get in front of them that he was prepared to brave the weather, then there was absolutely nothing she could do about it

Basil, she said later. She was ostensibly dozing to pass the time, but in reality was wide awake and fretful.

Mistress mine?

Luqman said Lilis would demand a challenge. What sort of challenge? Despite her earlier facetious remark about being good at draughts, the question had been weighing more and more heavily on Annabella the closer they got to the Taklamakan Desert.

We're not there yet, Basil said. There was an odd tone in his voice. *We don't jolly well need to think about that.* To Annabella, it sounded very much as though he was the one who wanted to delay thinking about it.

What are you not telling me? she said. *You know what's going to happen don't you?*

No...

But?

Why do you have to do it? Always.

Do what? Annabella was mystified.

Meet everything front on. Why do you always have to be so beastly brave?

Hang on, Annabella said, still deeply puzzled. *What are you talking about? And anyway you're always telling me I don't have enough front...*

I don't want to talk about it. We may never get there – jolly lucky if we don't. I don't want to talk about it till we have to.

Basil, Annabella said gently. *Why are you so upset? What's wrong?*

I just don't want to think about it.

Annabella was silent for a long time. Her eyes were closed but her thoughts were racing. At last she spoke.

When you were locked up in that horrible jar, she said. I was so miserable I thought I was going to die.

It was Basil's turn to be silent for the longest time.

What does that mean? he asked at last, very quietly.

It means I understand why you don't want to talk about Lilis, Annabella said. *But we have to. I have to know what to expect.*

Again, Basil was silent so long that Annabella thought he would still refuse to answer.

Fire, he said at last. *I don't know exactly, but it will be something to do with fire.*

Annabella's heart sank. If there was one thing she feared above everything else, it was fire.

I hate fire, she said.

But I'm made of fire, Basil said in a small voice.

Not you, you're different. But fire, real fire... She shuddered.

Why? What happened?

Nothing, Annabella said shortly and then it was her turn to say: *I don't want to talk about it.*

"Where are you taking me?" Toğrül demanded for the umpteenth time. It had been his recurring theme throughout the long day.

"Wait and see," Annabella said wearily for the umpteenth time.

Why won't you let me freeze him? Basil grumbled for the umpteenth time. *Or we could jolly well just leave him behind. He can't do any damage now.*

And then he really would freeze, Annabella said. *You were the one who said we had to bring him with us... I don't want him any more than you do. Isn't there somewhere we can leave him safely?*

No. There jolly well isn't. This is still his territory. If we leave him anywhere there are people, he'll send out pigeons and then he'll be hot on our trail too. He knows you've got the seal. He wants the seal more than anything.

Well, Annabella said, changing the subject. *At least it will be warmer when we get to the desert.*

Don't you jolly well believe it, Basil said. *Siberia on one side, Tibet on the other... Burning in summer, freezing in winter. Much worse than here. They don't call it the Desert of Death for nothing.*

Charming...

"Hassan-i Sabbāh must know where you're going," Toğrül said, desultorily resuming his attack out of boredom if nothing else. "He set an ambush for you in Bukhara, therefore he must know what you plan to do. So if he knows, why not tell me? What possible reason can there be for not telling me."

"There doesn't have to be a reason," Annabella said losing all patience. "It's none of your business, full stop. And if you don't stop going on about it, I'll make you."

Toğrül gave her a very calculating look but said nothing.

"Have cards been invented yet, do you think?" Vivienne asked Annabella privately. "You know, for something to do..."

Have they? she asked.

Of course not, Basil said. *At least none that would make sense to you. How about some jolly chess?*

"Chess?" Annabella relayed.

"I hate chess," Vivienne said, her voice rather louder.

"Why am I not surprised?" Annabella said, but both Darius and Toğrül had pricked up their ears. Darius glanced at the older man, who nodded.

"Yes please," Darius said. A moment later a very finely carved ivory set on an inlaid board materialised in front of him. Toğrül moved across and settled himself cross-legged on the other side.

They went through the ritual of deciding who would start and quickly ran through the opening moves. It was apparent both of them were at least competent players. On the eleventh move Darius, playing black, accepted a knight sacrifice.

Bad mistake, Basil said. *Jolly stupid. You watch. He'll lose in thirteen moves.*

How can you say that, so soon? Annabella asked curiously.

And how long do you think I've jolly well been playing this game?

Annabella had a sudden idea.

What if I challenged Lilis to a chess game, and you coached me?

Weren't you jolly well listening, Basil shouted, suddenly unaccountably angry. *I told you. Fire...! And you can't ask that. You've got no right to ask that.*

Ask what? Annabella was completely taken aback by both Basil's vehemence and volume. Instinctively, though quite uselessly, she blocked her ears.

You can't make me play for your life. For your spirit. I won't do it. I can't do it... Basil was still shouting and along with his voice booming around the inside of her head, Annabella had the distinct impression that he was on the verge of tears.

Please, Annabella said. *Don't shout. It hurts.*

There was a long silence.

Sorry, Basil said at last, almost inaudibly.

I'm sorry too, Annabella said, equally softly. And it was true. Until that moment, the reality of what she was forcing Basil to do had never fully registered. For the first time she had a real understanding of the peril into which she was leading them, and with understanding came fear, sickening fear. For a long time she was unable to speak. And below that again, ran an even deeper dread, so deep it was part of the fabric of her being. Fire. It couldn't be fire.

Basil, she managed to say eventually. *If it was just us, only about us, I wouldn't need to do this, not any more... But it's not just about us, not now, not any more. You know it's not I just don't have any choice...*

The tent was dark, except for a small, relieving glow from the brazier still burning in the centre. The occupants were all apparently deeply asleep. Then there was a soft slither of movement...

Wake up, mistress mine. Wake up. The words were soft, insistent. Annabella turned over restlessly but the words kept coming, refusing to leave her alone.

Go away, she mumbled in her sleep but Basil kept on, demanding she wake. At last she opened an eye. It took a moment for her brain to make sense of what she was seeing, then she screamed and threw herself backwards, heart pounding, the hairs on the back of her neck standing stiff.

Darius and Vivienne woke in confusion. Automatically, Darius stumbled to his feet and then stopped.

Toğrül was kneeling over Annabella's bedding, frozen in the act of thrusting for her throat with the knife Darius had carelessly left lying about. The clawing fingers of his other hand had been the first thing Annabella had seen when Basil woke her.

That's not funny, Annabella snapped, greatly aggravated. *What on earth are you doing?*

Jolly well proving a point, Basil said calmly, not the least bit abashed. *You can't trust this man. You can never trust this man. This is the second time he's tried good old-fashioned treachery...*

He promised. He gave his word...

Which makes you, madam mistress, shining pearl, a fool for believing him. I warned you not to trust him...

All right, Annabella said, still cross. *Have you finished?*

Not by any means, Basil retorted. *You need a jolly good wiggling, that's what you need...*

I said, all right! I get the message.

And here's something else for you to think about. He wasn't just trying to pick your pocket, he was jolly well aiming to kill you to make sure of the ring...

Stop exaggerating...

Exaggerating! Look again, mistress mine. That knife was just about to slice your throat from ear to ear when I stopped him...

Unconsciously, Annabella shrugged. What Basil was saying was really beyond question.

So? she said.

So this, Basil replied impatiently. *And stop being so jolly stupid...*

Well, you stop with the insults...

Toğrül is a killer. A cold-blooded killer. Which makes him a jolly fine spirit to offer Lilis instead of yours.

I have no intention of offering her my spirit...

And just what do you think you'll be doing if you play her jolly game, whatever it is?

I am not offering her my spirit, Annabella insisted. *And I'm not going to offer her anyone else's, either.*

But deep down a terrible temptation had been planted and was taking root.

Basil, Annabella said much later. With thoughts she scarcely could bear to contemplate roiling around in her head, she had been quite unable to get back to sleep.

Madam mistress, shining pearl? The djinni was clearly still peeved.

What do you think? Should we travel by daylight from now on? I mean, the nights are so cold...

And if Hassan-i Sabbāh has got in front of us?

Does it make any difference...night or day?

In the dark, if there's an ambush we might jolly well manage to miss it altogether...

Does it matter...? If he spots us...? He doesn't have Iblis any more. Or the other 'ifrits. And it will be so cold in the mountains at night...

I don't like it. I jolly well don't like it one little bit.

But it will be quicker, Annabella said, her intentions firming. *And there's not a minute to lose...*

Chapter 19

The blizzard stopped towards dawn and when later they dug their way out of the tent, it was to find a bright, clear day. Vivienne took one look and began to sing:

"Good King Wenceslas looked out..."

"...On the feast of Stephen..." Annabella joined in.

"...When the snow lay round about

"Deep and crisp and even

"Brightly shone the moon that night

"Though the frost was cruel

"When a poor man came in sight

"Gath'ring winter fuel..." they finished together, harmonising rather prettily.

Toğrül and Darius both stared at them in amazement. Toğrül, now unfrozen, again had his hands tightly bound and wrapped in fur.

"It can't be long till Christmas," Vivienne said, somewhat wistfully.

"Yes... Well, I don't think they have Christmas in these parts," Annabella said. "But the snow is spectacular." And indeed it was. The storm had produced a thick cover, never less than knee deep and much more in the drifts.

"Just as well we can fly," Darius remarked. "We'd never get anywhere in this if we had to walk." He took a step or two and immediately found himself buried up to the thigh. Vivienne laughed and threw a snowball at him. Darius struggled to get free and chased after her.

Such jolly hijinks, Basil observed sourly, never at his best in the morning.

"Come on," Annabella called. "We have to get moving while we can..."

I don't suppose you could give me a map of some sort? Annabella said when they had been airborne for some time. *It would be really helpful to know where we're going exactly.*

Certainly, mistress mine.

A moment later, Annabella found herself holding a roll of parchment. Reluctantly removing her mittens, she flattened it out.

At the moment, Basil said. *We're about here...* A little dot began to glow on the left hand side of the map, somewhat south and east of Samarkand.

"What's that?" Vivienne said, peering over Annabella's shoulder.

"GPS," Annabella murmured.

"GP-what?" Darius said.

"Well," Vivienne began. "It's like this. First you have to have satellites..."

"V," Annabella interrupted, shooting her a look.

"Complicated to explain," Vivienne cut herself short. "I'll tell you another time..."

So rude, Basil exclaimed.

She didn't even know you were trying to talk, Annabella said severely. So show me where we have to go.

As I was saying before I was so ignorantly interrupted, we are here. We fly east until we hit the jolly old Vakhsh River, then we follow it along the valley till we get to here.

The glowing dot traced the twists and turns of the river between roughly hatched, gradually rising mountain ranges on either side until it came to a point where the river suddenly forked, the main branch heading upstream to north-east and the second swinging ninety degrees to the south-east.

So we jolly well have a choice here, Basil said. The dot circled the junction. The easy way is to keep heading north-east and on to Kashgar. The dot tracked on up the river, skirted a spur of the main range and settled on a town marked on the edge of the desert.

The much more difficult route is to the south, through the worst of the jolly mountains and then to the east, straight to the desert..

Here, the map after a token attempt to indicate whether the tributary might go contented itself with vague and totally meaningless shading, which eventually dissipated into a huge blank area, labelled 'desert'.

Not much of a choice, Annabella remarked.

No, Basil agreed. No jolly choice at all.

So where will Hassan-i Sabbāh try to trap us.

Here, Basil said without hesitation, the dot dancing round the river junction. The valley is narrow enough so that there's no chance we can jolly well slip past, especially in daylight, and he has to do it before the fork or he won't know which way we've gone.

They flew on and towards the end of the short afternoon the ground began to rise until it tangled itself into the foothills of the Pamirs. As dusk was falling, this first range dropped away again and they came to the river plain where a stream, sluggish with crackling ice and low with the onset of winter, wound its way through an impossibly deep and impossibly wide erosion channel. It was a salutary indication of just how powerful the river must be in spite with the spring thaw. They made camp in a secluded gully.

"Tomorrow," Annabella announced. "Tomorrow could get really interesting."

"You mean that's when the sh..." Vivienne began.

"Don't say it," Annabella cut her off. "You'll shock Darius and he won't understand anyway."

And for once, the rest of the night passed uneventfully. Even Toğrül was content to possess his soul in patience.

The morning had an ominous feel, the weather being quite as uncertain as whatever might be awaiting them.

More snow coming, Basil remarked. Or I'm a jolly Dutchman's jolly old uncle.

It was such an incongruous thing for Basil to say that Annabella laughed aloud, which caused the others to turn in surprise and which earned her a particularly penetrating look from Toğrül.

They flew on for an hour or so, following the river's course across the flattish countryside and then all at once they entered the mountains proper, range after range radiating off on either side like ribs from a backbone. As yet the peaks were not particularly high but the country was desperately wild and desperately rugged. The wind was starting to get up and it was already bitterly cold.

"I'd hate to have to try to travel overland," Darius remarked seriously at one point, repeating his earlier, jocular observation. The others nodded thoughtfully, even Toğrül.

At another point, Vivienne said: "Are we there yet?" She was only half joking. Their exposed situation on the carpet was becoming more and more testing. If flying in winter had always been a cold and miserable business, particularly at night, now it was downright challenging.

At last, Annabella let herself consult the parchment map.

About here, Basil said, wiggling the dot. To Annabella's eye, it looked like they had about another hour to go before they reached the fork. They stopped to eat and as they were leaving, Annabella said to Basil:

I think you should freeze Toğrül, however uncomfortable it might be for him. We can't afford to have him causing trouble on his own account.

Abso-jolly-lutely not, Basil agreed. *Hassan-i Sabbāh is quite enough to be jolly well going on with.*

They rounded yet another bend, and suddenly the river junction was there before them. Basil brought the carpet to a hover and they sat there in mid-air, surveying the scene. It was so cold that their eyes were watering and it was difficult to see properly.

"This doesn't look right," Annabella said aloud.

No, Basil agreed.

"I can't see anything," Vivienne said. "Isn't that what we want?"

"What were you expecting?" Darius added.

"Hassan-i Sabbāh," Annabella said succinctly.

"Oh," the other two replied, with a depth of meaning. Toğrül perforce said nothing, though his mind was racing.

"Well, I suppose all we can do is keep going," Annabella said and then, privately: *What do you think this means? Have we got here first? Or maybe he's just given up and gone home?*

No, Basil said. *Not that. I'd jolly well stake my life on it.*

But if he's not here...?

I'm jolly well not sure that he's not. Not yet.

Which makes this a knotty problem...

Oh, most amusing, mistress mine.

The carpet flew on and in due course curved around to the left, following the main river to the north-east into an even more fantastically jumbled valley. They were just beginning to relax when they were assailed by a terrifying sound, a sound they knew, a sound which had their skin prickling and the hair rising stiff on their necks – the great hunting screech of a rukh, echoing down a ravine, bouncing off the cliffs, quite drowning the quiet burble of the river. A second later, the huge creature heeled around a jagged precipice, marking a turn in the river, and screamed towards them.

Basil reacted instantly. The carpet reared up in front of them, banging noses on knees, looped back the way it had come, then righted itself in a manoeuvre that many centuries later would be named the Immelman turn. Between one breath and the next, Basil's passengers found themselves haring back down the river with the rukh and presumably Hassan-i Sabbāh in blazing hot pursuit. In seconds, they were back at the fork and unhesitatingly Basil banked around to the left, heading them directly into the wilds of the Pamirs.

To Annabella it didn't make sense. Why should Hassan-i Sabbāh have waited until they were committed to the more northerly route? Why had he waited so long? Why hadn't he struck before the junction to make sure of them? Unless... Unless he had calculated that they must inevitably retreat and swing to the south. In which case, he must have something more in store.

I don't like this, Annabella said, worriedly. He's playing with us.

Looks jolly serious to me, Basil replied. He definitely had a distracted air, Annabella thought, which meant he must be fully engaged with flying. She was about to expand on her theme, but thought better of it. Whatever might be lying in wait for them, they really had no choice but to go on. Then the obvious occurred to her. This time Hassan-i Sabbāh had no 'ifrīts with him. There was nothing to stop Basil stopping the rukh, killing it if he had to. Which led to the question, why hadn't he done so already?

She took a moment to glance back over her shoulder and wished she hadn't. The massive creature, all dark glistening green with a tinge of purple, was so close behind them that it seemed impossible it couldn't just stretch forward with its great double sabre of a beak and pluck them from the sky. She gained a fleeting impression of Hassan-i Sabbāh clutching at the rail of the howdah, leaning forward, eyes staring fixedly, urging his monstrous bird of prey to the kill. And then, too soon for her thoughts to crystallise, the ambush she had begun to fear was triggered.

There was a second, terrifying screech of a hunting rukh, but not from behind, from in front. Hassan-i Sabbāh had not one, but two of the impossible freaks of nature and his plan was instantly clear. Whichever way his quarry had chosen to go, they would have encountered one of the rukhs which would then proceed to drive them mercilessly into the clutches of the other.

Damn, Basil muttered, which in the circumstances, Annabella thought, showed remarkable restraint.

There was no time to think. The second bird was almost on them. Its huge wingspan seemed to stretch from one side of the gorge to the other, from one precipice

to the other, completely blocking the way. There was no gap, no escape. None. They must inevitably be taken or collide. Someone screamed. Vivienne. Then all at once, Basil tipped the carpet vertically on its side so that the bottom was scraping along the face of the cliff. Annabella could feel glancing bumps through the thick pile. She looked down and hurriedly took her eyes away from the tangle of boulders and razor-sharp rocks racing past only just below them. To crash now would be fatal.

Another second. Then came a great rush of air as the huge wing in front of them beat down, followed by a pause at the end of its stroke, and then they were through before it could rise again, leaving the two rukhs behind them in a confused tangle as they fought to avoid a catastrophic smash.

Brilliant, Annabella said. That was abso-jolly-lutely brilliant.

Why thank you, mistress mine, Basil said. Even he sounded a touch shaky.

But you'll have to shoot them down, or something.

Certainly jolly not.

Basil! You have to.

I couldn't possibly. Not rukhs.

I don't care how rare they are, Annabella snapped. I order you to shoot them down.

Can't do it, Basil said. It's jolly well not in your best interests.

What!

Think of your jolly reputation. You'll go down in history as the villain who destroyed one of the last breeding pairs of all time. You'll be vilified.

You must be joking, Annabella stormed. It's absolutely not in my best interests to be captured by Hassan-i Sabbāh. Again.

I can't do it.

But Basil, you have to.

Can we at least try to find another way. Please, Annabella.

It was the Annabella that did it. Not once, had Basil ever called her that before and if it meant that much to him, how could she refuse?

I've always heard twitchers are mad, she said after a long moment. Now I know it must be true.

Thank you, was all Basil said.

Annabella took a deep breath. Then another. She turned to stare behind them. The rukhs were only just beginning to sort themselves out and she could see Hassan-i Sabbāh raving and gesticulating dementedly. It wouldn't be long before the two of them would be in furious pursuit again. So, what? Upwards. Surely they could escape upwards? But the thought died stillborn. Already, in just that short time the mountains on either side of the gorge had increased amazingly in size. These now towered above them on either hand, impossibly steep, impossibly sheer, impossibly high, an impassable barrier. Sensibly, they could only go on along the line of the gorge and hope some other way of escape would present itself. The tributary they were following was now solid ice and it was difficult to say whether it was still a some-time river or a year-round glacier. On top of everything, the weather was rapidly breaking. The sky

was now a mass of roiling, purple clouds. Basil's promised snow could not be far away. Already the rising wind was tearing long plumes of snowdrift from the highest peaks. Behind them, the rukhs had stopped screaming at each other and had begun the chase.

On they raced, the gorge rising steadily beneath them, the mountains on either side getting ever higher, the temperature dropping from freezing to frozen. Faint snow flurries began and visibility was closing down. They swept around a slight bend and suddenly were faced with another major junction. Four or five ravines, so deep and so steep that they might have been chopped into the earth with celestial axes, all came to an abrupt meeting.

Which way? Basil asked.

Annabella took a moment to think. The left-hand ravine looked like it might cut its way through, back to the valley of the Vakhsh. Not that way then. Too obvious. The frozen river they were following curved further round to the south. Also obvious. One or other of the central ravines was the natural choice. So also, obvious, but marginally less so.

She pointed to the right-hand of these.

Up there.

She was too late. The rukhs rounded the corner behind them in time to catch a flicker of movement as they disappeared into the cut.

It seemed that the carpet and the great birds chasing it were evenly matched for speed. On they flew, neither gaining nor losing. Glancing back yet again, Annabella noticed that Vivienne's eyes were wider and rounder than she had ever seen them before. She was clutching at Darius, who for his part looked only exhilarated. Toğrül, of course, was still immobilised but Annabella thought in passing that she detected a sardonic gleam in his fixed gaze.

What now? Basil demanded, bringing her swinging back to the front. She heard Vivienne gasp behind her as she did so, and even Darius exclaim.

The ravine was coming to an end and opening out before them was what appeared to be a perfect trap. If some unimaginable colossus had brought his heel smashing down into the mountains he might have produced what now confronted them. The depths of the ravine abruptly broadened into a bowl shaped depression, perhaps a league across. It was rimmed by stark, perpendicular precipices, half a league high. The only way out was back down the ravine, now comprehensively blocked by the pair of rukhs, or over the top of the great wall barring their passage.

The scale of this vast hollow in the mountains was so immense that they felt no more than specks of dust as they embarked on the crossing.

We'll have to fly over the top, somehow, Annabella said.

Too high, Basil said. *No oxygen.* And it was true, Annabella realised. Breathing was already dreadfully difficult. They were all panting and struggling for air, though quite how lack of oxygen might affect a djinni, she had no idea.

And it's up into the storm, Basil added. As though to give point to his words, a great gash of lightning rent the sky, playing around the rim and finally smashing into a rock

buttress. The mind-shattering crack of thunder a moment later started an avalanche as an overhanging cornice fractured and slowly gave way, only to gather force with incredible speed. Even so far away, the tumbling, plummeting mass was quite terrifying.

Well, then you have to kill the birds, Annabella said.

I can't. I just can't, Basil all but wailed.

So try to get us over the top. If we make it and the birds don't, we'll have lost them. If we don't make it... Annabella left the end of her sentence hanging.

Basil made no reply but signalled acquiescence by putting the carpet into a spiralling climb. Behind and now well below them, the pair of rukhs emerged into the great depression. Even massive as they were, they too were dwarfed into abject insignificance by the colossal magnitude of their surroundings.

Another searing, endless blaze of lightning tore at the mountain tops and momentarily the two pursuing rukhs were turned into four, their shadows showing stark on the snow beneath.

"Götterdämmerung," Vivienne managed to gasp. Her music class that year, most reluctantly, had been dealing with Wagner. "Twilight of the gods... What a way to go..."

Annabella grinned momentarily to herself, though it was more a rictus. That was the thing about V. No matter how frightened she appeared, she never let it beat her.

Up and up, they spiralled. The lack of oxygen was seriously affecting them now. Annabella had a vague flash of memory of the death zone on Mount Everest. How high was that, she wondered muzzily? How high were they?

At last, the carpet straightened and headed for the lowest dip in the rim. And as though in a last paroxysm of rage directed at them by Hassan-i Sabbāh, the lightning seemed to concentrate on that very point.

It's too dangerous, Basil shouted. *We have to go back. We have to go back.*

Annabella was in a bad way. Her vision seemed to have narrowed down to two small circles and a red mist was clouding even that. But they were nearly there. They were nearly there. Another minute. Another few seconds. Surely they could hang on that long?

Go on, she whispered.

What? Basil shouted.

Go on! Annabella repeated, agonised.

They were just below the rim now, which meant they were just below the storm. To look up was to stare into the black, moiling heart of nature in all its prodigal malevolence, uncaring, unrepentant, unleashed. Dimly, Annabella was aware they had reached the knife-edge of the summit, that they had crossed over it, that abruptly they were now descending the swooping, white slope on the other side, rocketing down into the gloom below.

Behind them, as the air got thinner and thinner, the rukhs struggled increasingly to gain height. Finally, well short of the rim and however much Hassan-i Sabbāh might

rave at them in impotent fury, first one then the other gave up. Gasping for oxygen and buffeted to the limits of endurance by the storm, even huge as they were they were forced spiralling back down into the bowl.

For Annabella, breathing became little less a desperate struggle for survival the lower they went. Her vision started to clear. She could speak. No she couldn't. She tried again.

Basil? she asked.

I'm here, he said. *We made it. We jolly well made it.*

Are you all right?

In good order and discipline...

I wouldn't say discipline.

No. Perhaps not... But thank you, he added. Annabella remembered the others.

"Are you all right?" she croaked over her shoulder.

"I think so," came a slurry voice. It was Darius.

"V?"

"She's breathing. She's still breathing. She blacked out."

"Should be better soon," Annabella said, rather more confidently than she felt. The blizzard was worsening rapidly – scything remorselessly across the exposed flanks of the range – and she didn't give much for any of their chances if they didn't find shelter soon.

We have to get out of the weather, she said to Basil.

They encountered a glacier and with visibility deteriorating because of the growing storm and darkness both, they were glad to have some sort of guide down off the mountain. Eventually, Darius spotted a couloir to one side.

"There," he shouted over the howl of the wind, pointing to the gully. "Shelter..."

Too risky, Basil said to Annabella. *Avalanches...*

But Vivienne won't last much longer. Nor will I.

Tommy rot, Basil sniffed. *You're tougher than the sole of a jolly old dustman's boot.* Nevertheless, he brought the carpet down and a minute or two later had hollowed out a cave in a bank of snow.

Let's hope that if there is a jolly old avalanche, it'll go right over the top, he said when everybody was inside and beginning to thaw out. Toğrül and Vivienne were both in a bad way and Darius busied himself attending to them, while Basil provided warmth and sustenance.

As they grew warmer and the splitting headaches brought on by oxygen deprivation receded, their mood became quietly exultant. They each knew that the great bowl in the mountains, their spiralling climb up the seemingly unconquerable heights of the great precipice and their final dash through the ferocious majesty of the storm would live long in their memories. There was also a feeling of real achievement. The worst must surely be over. They had survived all that Hassan-i Sabbāh and the mountains

could throw at them and won through to the other side. Safety, food, warmth and accomplishment combined to produce a sense of euphoria, of well-being and benevolence. Even Basil completely dropped his guard.

"Amazing," Toğrül said at one point to no one in particular. He was evidently now quite recovered from the rigours of their journey, which he had had to suffer immobilised. "I never thought to see a rukh, let alone two. I count myself twice fortunate."

Not another twitcher, Annabella groaned inwardly to Basil. *Why don't you admit you exist, and then you two can swap notes?*

And don't think it's not jolly tempting, Basil retorted. *But best leave things the way they are.*

"And so that was the Old Man of the Mountain, himself?" Toğrül went on in a conversational tone. "He must truly value the Seal of Solomon above all else to risk two such valuable creatures in pursuing it. Perhaps you would at least let me gaze upon it? A third wonder would make this memorable day truly unforgettable."

Too tedious, Annabella said. *And I want to go to sleep. Would you mind?*

Of course, mistress mine. To hear is to jolly well obey, Basil said, freezing Toğrül as he spoke.

If only, Annabella retorted. *The day you actually do what I want without arguing, I think I'll die of shock.*

Basil merely chuckled indulgently by way of reply.

They slept then, the sleep of the just, the sleep of the righteous, the sleep of those who believe themselves for the moment, at least, totally secure and with a bright new day to look forward to.

The avalanche thundered down upon them just after dawn. Perhaps the change in temperature had been enough to render the fresh fall of snow unstable and set the first tendrils questing downwards. Perhaps the sound of a rock cracking in the cold had been enough to trigger it. Perhaps, given the weight of the dump from the last blizzard, it was just simply inevitable. Whatever the cause, whatever the reason, it began, and once started there was no stopping it.

Annabella and the others were so well insulated from the outside world in their snow cave that they had absolutely no warning. The first they knew of it was waking in panic to the roar of a thousand locomotives smashing down upon them. And then they were swept away by the irresistible torrent of snow and ice, rock and debris that scoured the couloir clean, demolishing the snow bank and their cave in one, terrifying instant.

Annabella was sure she was dying. She couldn't see, she couldn't breathe for the ice and snow clogging her throat. She couldn't hear herself think for the roar and the rumble engulfing her. She tried to tuck herself into a ball, to hug a little air to her chest, but the forces hurling her down the hill were far too violent. Her legs and arms went splaying. She had no control. She could do nothing to help herself. She was rendered one more inert, senseless speck of matter without will or volition being hurled about by an indifferent universe. It was utterly, utterly petrifying.

Then, abruptly it all stopped and she found herself locked in a blue-white coffin, held rigid, frozen, unable to move so much as a finger. She could hear something, however. A faint whimpering sound. It came again. It was a sound so desolate, so desperate, it was unbearable. It came again. A fourth time. It was herself, she realised finally, herself trying to breathe. It was the second most frightening thing she had ever heard.

The thing that saved them was that they were on the uphill side of the couloir near the bottom. Vivienne was spat out without even being buried. Darius came to rest waist deep and was quickly able to free himself. Of Toğrül there was no sign. Nor of Annabella.

"Basil!" Vivienne screamed. "Are you here? You must find her... You must find her..."

She hurled herself at the great swathe of detritus that had spilled out across the glacier and began to scabble at random.

"Basil!" She shrieked again, her voice cracking. Darius came up behind her and seized her in a bear hug.

"Don't," he said. "Listen. Just listen. She might be calling..."

Then they noticed a wisp of smoke dancing across the rubble. A moment later it became a vortex and began to tunnel its way into the matrix.

"Here," came a voice. "Over here!" It was Basil.

Vivienne and Darius picked their way across to him, to a sight they would never forget. A funnel in the snow went down more than a metre until it framed Annabella's white face. Her blue eyes were staring at them in panic, in horror. She couldn't speak. She wasn't breathing.

All at once Darius threw himself down and clawed at Annabella's mouth. Finally, he managed to hook out the plug of ice that was choking her. She gave a great whoop as she sucked in a huge lungful of air and her eyes filled with tears. She took another breath. Then another. Then she spoke:

"Have you got Vivienne? Toğrül?"

"Vivienne," Darius said. "Not the Sultan."

"Basil?" Annabella said. "Are you there? Find him. You must find him."

"Not till we get you out," Basil said.

"Don't be ridiculous," Annabella shouted in an agony of frustration. "Find him now or it'll be too late..."

"But..." Basil began incautiously.

"Now!" Annabella roared. "I don't care what he tried to do to me. I wouldn't wish this on anyone."

As it turned out, Toğrül had managed to come through the avalanche in rather better shape than Annabella. He had somehow avoided his throat being clogged and his stiff, unyielding body, pre-frozen as it were, had come to rest arched over an air pocket. It seemed to take Basil an age to find him – Vivienne and Darius between

them had managed to dig Annabella free in the interim – and it seemed certain that the Sultan must be dead. However, Basil located him at last and they managed to excavate him not too much the worse for wear, but when restored to full function, unusually subdued.

"I find I am in your debt," he said to Annabella when he could speak. "I accord you my grateful thanks."

"I think that's called hypocrisy," Annabella said. "I haven't forgotten that you tried to cut my throat, you know..."

Chapter 20

What do you think Hassan-i Sabbāh will do? Annabella asked. They had been flying for some time, picking their way down to the lower ranges of the Pamirs on the eastern side.

It depends, Basil said judiciously.

Of course, it depends, Annabella mocked. *But on what, exactly?*

Whether he survived the blizzard, for starters, Basil sniffed. *Whether the rukhs survived the blizzard...*

And if he did, if they did?

Then I'm abso-jolly-lutely certain he'll be coming after us.

Still? Again?

Of course. However jolly well not? You have the source of his power hanging round your skinny little neck...

And what's wrong with my neck? I thought it was my front was the problem...

And on top of that, Basil continued good-naturedly. *You have something else he wants. We still don't know what it is, but whatever it is, he wants it so jolly badly he's chased you across a thousand years to get it.*

So what do we do?

Jolly well keep going. Nothing else we can do. If he survived, if he's still chasing us, then he'll have to backtrack and go all the way round the other side of the mountains – the long way.

So we have a start? How much?

How long's a jolly old piece of string?

Annabella fell silent, deep in thought. A little while later, she asked:

How soon will we get to the desert?

Basil shrugged wordlessly, which in the circumstances was a gesture quite wasted.

Well? Annabella persisted.

Two days? Basil hazarded eventually. *If there's no more jolly drama...*

Towards evening, the ranges beneath them began to rise again and off in the distance they could see another towering bulwark of snowy mountains, so high they seem to be hanging from the sky. It was obviously too late in the day to attempt to cross them, so they camped on a hilltop that everybody agreed could not possibly be subject to avalanche. Even so, Annabella had great trouble getting to sleep. She was pretty sure that the memory of being entombed alive in that press of snow and ice, unable to move, unable to breathe, would always rank near the top of her list of personal horrors, a list that seemed to be growing all too long, all too quickly.

She woke, sometime later, wide-eyed, staring and gasping for breath.

It's all right, mistress mine, Basil whispered gently. It's all right. You're safe. And I'm so sorry. I should have known better than ever to let us camp in an avalanche chute.

It wasn't your fault, Annabella mumbled. I was the one who said to do it.

But I should never have listened to you...

Leave off, Annabella murmured, and calm now, went back to sleep.

The final range of the high Pamirs separating them from the plains and the desert beyond was a spectacle of such grandeur, such towering magnificence, that the only single word that could possibly be used to describe it was 'awesome', applied in its strictest sense.

It really is the jolly old roof of the jolly old world, Basil remarked, unusually respectfully.

Have you been here before? Annabella asked, curious.

Nearly, Basil said. I was planning an expedition once, but something jolly well came up...

An expedition?

Err... Yes.

What sort of expedition?

None of your jolly business.

Come on, Basil, Annabella said, intrigued. Stop being coy. What sort of expedition?

Ah...

'Fess up. You'll feel better.

I jolly well will not. You're going to laugh at me.

Well in that case, you'd better get it over with...

There was a report... Basil began and then tailed off.

A report about what? Come on, Basil. I am going to drag this out of you, if it kills us.

I heard about a simurgh...

A what?

A simurgh. Sort of a peacock, with the head of a dog and the claws of a lion...

Oh Basil! Annabella gurgled delightedly. I don't believe it.

It's true. And I really, really wanted to jolly well tick it off my list.

Oh Basil, Annabella repeated.

I jolly well told you you'd laugh... Basil said sulkily. Then he did, too. Jolly ridiculous, aren't I?

Totally... But lovable...

The two of them chatted on, prolonging the moment, perhaps subconsciously aware that it would be their last light-hearted exchange for who knew how long.

They flew on, passing between two colossal peaks – some seven or eight leagues apart and quite monumental in their majesty – and then found a valley heading

eastwards, towards their destination. Their altitude was dropping rapidly now and they could feel a change in the air. It was drier somehow, harsher, even more abrasive. Slowly, the country flattened out. It was still snow-covered but not to any great depth, patches of bare earth and rock scarring the surface. Then these, too, ceased and all that stretched before them, seemingly forever, was a vast plain of swirling, undulating white, the Desert of Death, shaped by the sand waves just beneath the thinnest possible covering, mostly ice, lingering from the last storm.

They set down at the edge and made what Annabella was pretty sure would be their last camp together, at least for some time.

Despite Basil's best efforts to provide a feast, the evening meal was a sombre affair. Annabella had withdrawn into herself and in sympathy, Darius and Vivienne found they had little to say. Only Toğrül seemed unaffected by the mood, though he watched everything with careful attention.

Basil, Annabella said later. What's going to happen?

What do you mean?

You know very well what I mean.

With Lilis?

Of course, with Lilis...

I don't know.

You must know, Annabella said with a touch of desperation.

I don't, Basil said quietly. Do you really think I wouldn't tell you if I knew?

Sorry, Annabella mumbled, after a moment. And then it burst out: I'm frightened, Basil. I'm so frightened I can't breathe.

There was a long silence, then at last Basil spoke.

Annabella, he said, using her name for only the second time. You are the bravest person I've ever met, ever heard of. Trust to your courage. Trust to your courage.

In the morning, Toğrül was disposed to be chatty. He wanted to know, very badly, just exactly what they might be doing in what was very likely the most godforsaken spot on the face of the earth.

"None of your business," Annabella said tersely. "You're staying here with Vivienne and Darius and the rest doesn't concern you."

"What!?" the other two demanded simultaneously. They were echoed by Basil.

Have you gone out of your silly jolly mind? he added.

"Thank you," Annabella said. "But of course, you're not coming with me. It's far too dangerous. And there's no point. Whatever has to be done, it's me that has to do it."

"But you need someone to watch your back," Darius said. "Or you may never get a chance to do anything..."

"And if he's going, I'm going," Vivienne insisted.

"No, you're not..." Darius began.

"And who do you think you are, all of a sudden?" Vivienne demanded with quick irritation at his unthinking assumption of male mastery.

The argument raged for a good ten minutes, but in the end Annabella was overborne when first Vivienne and then Darius simply sat themselves on the carpet and flatly refused to get off.

"I could make you," Annabella stormed, then abruptly gave way as she realised that Basil would be most unlikely to cooperate. Truth be told, she was desperately glad of their support, anyway.

"But where are we going?" Toğrül demanded, picking his moment.

Without waiting to be asked, Basil froze him and loaded him on the carpet. Finally, Annabella climbed aboard and they set off, still heading east. When the transition from flat plain to rolling desert had disappeared below the horizon, when all they could see in every direction were the hypnotic waves of undulating white, Annabella forced herself to speak to Basil.

Here? she said. Even though it was telepathic, she could not quite disguise a slight quaver.

If you must, Basil said. He seemed equally shaky. *As good as anywhere. And might I remind you, mistress mine?* he added, making a valiant attempt at his old acid self. *We still have Toğrül...*

No! Annabella cut him off, sharply. *Not that. I can't do that. I won't do that.*

His spirit for your parents'?

Angrily, Annabella was about to reject him again, when she stopped. Presented to her like that, the argument was not only persuasive, it was extremely powerful. Toğrül had tried to murder her in cold blood. Why ever then should she have any compunction about trading his life to save her parents? Indeed, was it not her duty, her absolute moral duty as a daughter, to do just that? How could she not? How could she possibly justify not having tried it, should her parents fail to survive?

But even as she argued with herself, Annabella knew underneath everything that it was quite impossible. Toğrül might be capable of killing her as she slept but she, equally, was quite incapable of sentencing him to a gruesome death. Call it weakness. Call it whatever you liked. She couldn't do it. Not in cold blood. Not even in the certain knowledge that it would absolutely save her parents, should that be the way events transpired.

Basil, Annabella said at last. *I hear what you're saying. I understand what it all means, what it could mean – I truly do – but I can't. I just can't.*

There was no reply.

Basil...? Say something. Please say something.

You're impossible, Basil burst out angrily. There was another long silence, leaving Annabella to feel even more miserable. Then Basil spoke again, more calmly.

You're impossible, he repeated. *But I...admire you for it.*

"What happens now?" Darius asked. The carpet had been hovering uncertainly. In answer, Annabella pointed down. They landed and dismounted. The carpet vanished to be replaced by the three water skins they had filled at the Chasma Aiyub.

"What does happen now?" Vivienne said.

"We wait," Annabella said. "We wait."

"Then we'd better get organised," Darius said with a fine air of command, earning another look from Vivienne. He tried a test squirt from one of the water skins, which went what seemed a satisfactory distance, handed the other two skins to the girls, then formed them into a triangle facing outwards with Toğrül, still immobilised, standing in the middle.

"One thing," Darius added. "This water will freeze if we have to wait too long."

"No it won't," Annabella said. *Will it?*

Not now that the boy has jolly well been smart enough to mention it.

What are we looking for, Annabella asked, gazing about expectantly. *What form will this...thing take, do you think?* Basil hesitated.

I don't know, he said eventually, reluctantly. *She could be any jolly thing.*

"How long...?" Vivienne said nervously. "How long before...?" Already, her eyes were very round. Annabella shrugged.

"Minutes?" she said. "Hours? Days...?"

The tension built to an unbearable pitch, and then began to dissipate as they grew bored. Standing became tiresome and first Vivienne, then the other two, cleared away the thin rime of snow and ice to sit cross-legged on the sand. The ground was so cold, however, that it quickly became uncomfortable and they found themselves alternately standing and sitting. Their attention began to flag, even Annabella's.

Over there, mistress mine, Basil said. *Look... To your left...*

Annabella turned her head. At first she failed to spot whatever had caught Basil's attention. Then she saw it. A faint, disembodied shadow was drifting towards them. Most curiously, it was vertical and floating somewhat above the ground.

"Watch out," she warned the other two. "I think she's coming."

"Where? What?" Vivienne said with a gulp, trying to crane her neck to see what Annabella was looking at.

"Keep watching your bit," Darius ordered. "It might be a decoy."

The shadow circled away again as though suspicious of a trap. Darius, on the same side of the triangle as Annabella, looked to his right.

"You think that's her?" he asked.

Yes, Basil said. *Jolly definitely, that's Lilis.*

"Basil says yes," Annabella relayed. Had anyone been able to spare a glance at Toğrül, they would have seen a very curious expression flit across his eyes.

The shadow came drifting back towards them and Darius surreptitiously adjusted the aim of his water skin.

"Let me," he said. "We used to play with these when I was small. I'm a good shot." And suiting his actions to his words, he opened fire at extreme range. The jet of water arced across the desert and connected with the shadow. However, instead of passing straight through it as one would expect, it splashed as though hitting a solid object and provoked an outbreak of frenzy. The shadow became a miniature storm, howling in

circles, complete with miniature thunder and lightning, growing until it was twice the height of a man.

They watched with astonishment, even Vivienne, who had frankly abandoned her post to stand close behind Darius. At last, the ghula stopped careering about in apparent agony and the storm slowly faded. For a moment, Lilis resumed the guise of a shadow then this slowly began to resolve into something else. She was becoming a woman, they realised. She was now a lovely young woman, beautiful of face and form, dressed in a revealing robe.

She came closer and yet closer to the limits of what she judged to be Darius's range, swaying sinuously, invitingly. She opened her mouth and was clearly about to speak. Vivienne reacted instantly.

"Hum," she commanded Darius urgently and clapped her hands over his ears.

"Come, come, come to me, come to me," the ghula sang. "Come, come, come to me, come to me." To any male human it was an irresistible siren call. Indeed, so powerful was it that it apparently broke the spell Basil had cast on Toğrül. He stumbled, all but fell, then before anyone could try to stop him, he was lurching forward. Annabella moved after him but was brought up short by Basil.

"You can't save him," he said aloud. "It's too late. I can't save him."

And indeed, Lilis had already wrapped herself lovingly about him. She brought her head slowly up to Toğrül's ear as though to whisper a lingering endearment, then with the speed of a striking snake, her mouth fastened on the orifice and she began to suck.

At first, nothing seemed to be happening. Over Lilis's shoulder they could see Toğrül's initial expression of bliss subtly change until at last, it was informed only by agony. Then, his face itself seemed to be melting.

Annabella was the first to realise what was happening. Again she took a step forward. Again Basil spoke:

"No," he said in a voice so harsh it was unrecognisable. "He's finished. He's already dead."

Still Lilis kept her mouth implacably fastened to Toğrül's ear, like some terrible succubus from his worst nightmare. Now his corpse visibly began to deflate.

Annabella retched, and again, then she was comprehensively sick. Vivienne had buried her face in Darius's shoulders; he had his eyes clenched tight shut.

At last it was over.

Toğrül's empty skin, still clothed and quite unblemished but drained of every last drop of his essence, physical and spiritual, lay discarded on the ground like a piece of old orange peel.

You don't have to do this, Basil said softly. You don't have to go through with it. It's not too late. We can still get out of here.

Annabella was in shock. She had never really believed Basil's dire warnings of Lilis and what she might do. If she thought about it at all, she had assumed that Basil, for his own inscrutable reasons, had been telling her exaggerated stories. Truth be told,

she had never really believed in the existence of Lilis in the first place. The fear she had allowed herself to feel in the past few days had been intellectual, not visceral. Not like this. Not pure, unadulterated, paralysing terror.

Lilis, still all alluring female, began to drift towards them again. Darius, still with Vivienne's hands clamped firmly over his ears and again humming, raised his water skin threateningly. The ghula stopped, regarded them for a long moment, then spoke. Her voice was sibilant, only just audible.

"What do you seek?" she demanded.

Annabella fought to regain some sort of control. She lifted her eyes and then managed to straighten.

"I-I...s-sseek a b-boon," she whispered. Lilis gestured impatiently, unable to hear. Annabella tried again.

"I-I seek a boon," she said, her voice stronger, strong enough to carry.

"You challenge me? You dare?"

"I do."

Oh, my dear... Basil said, unable to stop himself.

Chapter 21

On the instant, Lilis vanished. Then, some distance away, a door materialised. It was the most bizarre object imaginable. There in the endless, frozen plain of the desert beneath the endless, frozen plane of the sky, stood an oaken door, heavy, iron-studded, complete with frame and jamb. There was nothing in front of it, nothing behind it, but it was clear what Annabella must do. She must open the latch and pass through. What might await her was beyond all imagining.

You can't do this, Basil said. His voice was strained, hoarse. *I jolly well won't let you.*

I must, Annabella said. *You know that.*

No. Basil was adamant.

It's why we came.

You saw what she did to the Sultan. We must go. We can still leave. There's still time.

No! Now it was Annabella who was adamant, immovable. *Please, no...!*

Then I have to come with you.

You can't. You know that too.

I have to do something...

There's nothing you can do, Annabella said in the softest voice, and then, aloud: "I am so frightened. I am so frightened."

With a sharp inhalation, she moved, out beyond the protection of the water sacks.

"Come back!" Vivienne squeaked, caught by surprise. "Annabella, you must come back." She made to go after her friend, but was stopped by Darius. They stood together, watching as Annabella somehow found the courage to keep walking steadily forward.

Then she was there and without giving herself time to think, to panic, to run, she put a hand on the door, passed through and disappeared. For long, long moments there was silence, the eerie silence of barren emptiness. Finally came the sound of a door shutting, as definite, as final as the crack of doom.

Abruptly Annabella was enveloped by impenetrable blackness. She put her hands up protectively in front of her. She began to tremble and then to shake uncontrollably. She took a step forward – it was that or collapse completely – and a vague, flickering light began to register on her peripheral vision. A faint waft of smoke caught at the back of her throat and she drew a deep, shuddering breath. Not again, she prayed. Not again. She couldn't go through that again. The barest susurrations reached her ears. There it was. No mistaking it. The most frightening sound she had ever heard. Fire!

She took another step forward, and another. It became clear to her that to win the challenge, to survive the ordeal, she must walk on, pass through whatever lay before her. If she could.

Another step. Then another. The flicker of the flames was increasing, the smell of smoke growing stronger. All at once she was beaten down by a crushing weight of desolation, the all-consuming desolation with which she had been stricken when it seemed her parents had deliberately deserted her, abandoned her friendless to an uncaring, indifferent world. But this was worse. Now, the emotion was amplified beyond all comprehension. Tears of loss, of self-pity began to flood down Annabella's face. How could they do this to her? Reject her so casually, so cruelly? Discard her like some unwanted piece of clothing that didn't fit any more, that was frayed and worn out? It was so heartless. So unconscionable. All the resentment she had bottled up, suppressed, buried, all the loneliness of an only child seemingly deliberately orphaned, all the anger, all the hate she had tried so hard to banish came pouring out in a great tide of fury that rose about her, lapping at her knees, then her waist, her chin, now her nostrils. One more breath and she would drown in it, lost forever.

Somehow, she found the will to step forward, only to stagger and all but fall, as though from a physical blow. It was now despair smashing her down, the utter hopelessness she had felt when Basil had been taken from her and locked in that hateful jar. Except this was a thousand times worse, magnified beyond endurance, beating at her, resonating like some cosmic organ howling at the stars.

She stood there, bowed, her arms clasped about her middle, trying to contain the pain, the intense physical pain, to ride it. She lifted a foot, somehow she lifted a foot, moved it forward, then the other. Again. She could hear the flames now, still faint but unmistakable.

She knew what was coming. Oh God, she knew what was coming. The anticipation of it was crippling. Yet she moved. Again. Forward. An inch. Two inches. But forward. Still forward. The fire was loud now, the light flaring, the smell of burning dangerous, threatening, the air growing warm. She managed another inch. A shuffle.

Abruptly the despair changed to horror, the unutterable horror she had experienced staring at the surface of Hassan-i Sabbāh 's cauldron. There were her parents, still alive but caught in that unspeakable, that sickening, that ghastly cage. It was a fate so horrendous, so appalling, that it was beyond belief, inconceivable, incomprehensible. She couldn't look but something held her head rigid, forced her eyes open, forced them to focus. She struggled frantically to pull them away, to close them, anything to shut out the horrific scene she was being forced to witness. Worse, far worse, than the fate visited on Toğrül. She screamed. Dementedly. Again. Again. Each breath redoubling her hysteria so that it swelled, surged, pounded, a tsunami intent on overwhelming the frail beacon of her sanity.

But, as before when confronted with the cauldron and she had ultimately found the strength to rescue Basil, this time with the last atom of her courage she again managed to move, forward, only minimally, but enough.

Instantly, the thousand locomotives of the avalanche multiplied by several orders of magnitude roared down upon her. Again, she was swept away, a helpless speck in a universe of bruising, battering chaos. Again, snow and ice were rammed down her throat, closing it with a solid plug. Again, she was locked in the blue-white coffin, unable to breathe, suffocating, her throat clogged, burning, tortured, the whimpers of her own distress sounding louder and louder in her ears, her mind fading, but wrestling

still with the insoluble problem: how could she move forward when she was entombed, frozen, fixed immovably? She was dying. She was dying. This was the end. She knew it. Life was leaving her, leaving her...going...gone... Death rattled in her throat and she jerked convulsively...

She shrieked, and shrieked again, totally destroyed. The fire was roaring now, drowning out her screams, radiating pulsing waves of heat, waves of panic, consuming any capacity for thought she might have had left. She couldn't go on. How could she possibly go on? How could she force herself into that? Not there. Not into that. Not again. Never again. She was finished. This was truly the end. Lilis had won. Annabella was lost in her own mind, overcome by pain, the prospect of infinitely worse, petrified by her own hugely amplified emotions, turned to stone.

She heard a voice. Faint. Distant. Barely audible over the tumult of the fire. It was Basil. He was shouting, shouting something, but she couldn't make out the words, and didn't want to...

"...I'll never forgive you..." he was shrieking at her, over and over again.

She moved. She moved. Forward. She moved forward.

And then she was there. In the midst of it. It was happening again. The thing she feared above all else, that could reduce her to nothing, the thing that was purest essence of terror.

The inferno was all round her now, overhead, walling her in, incandescent, roasting her, sucking the air from her lungs and filling them with molten brass. A beam crashed down beside her, striking her shoulder, showering her in sparks, setting her clothes alight. She was ablaze. Oh God, she was on fire herself. Her hair flared into nothingness. The pain. The pain. The agony.

And this time, there was no one to come crashing through the flames, to wrap a small child in a wet blanket, to fight free of the blazing wreckage that was once her family's home.

This time there was nothing to stop her burning until she was just cinders, ash and shrieking nerve ends.

Basil was still shouting. She couldn't hear him. Not now. Not at all. It didn't matter. Not any more. But he refused to give up. He kept yelling, screaming... Something... Something... She had to hear... She had to get nearer... Whatever it cost... She had to get nearer...

Abruptly, she was standing on the white swell of the desert, the sky above faintly blue, the air clean, the only sound silence. She collapsed to the ground shaking uncontrollably, sobbing her heart out.

They're coming, Basil whispered. The others are coming.

You were there, Annabella managed to say. You were there... In the fire...

No, Basil said.

You were, Annabella insisted with an edge of hysteria. You were shouting at me... Something... I had to hear... I had to move closer... It saved me...

What was I shouting?

You really weren't there?

No.

Annabella said nothing. Her sobs were easier now, less desperate.

What was I shouting? Basil repeated. Annabella hesitated.

It doesn't matter, she said. She looked up. Vivienne and Darius were racing towards her, the water skins jouncing and jiggling as they ran. A little way off they stopped as one and stared at Annabella, slumped, weeping in the snow. Then they crept forward and hugged her close, staring at each other over her head with angry concern.

"What did she do to you?" Vivienne demanded at last. "What did she do to you?"

But Annabella could only shake her head.

"She's over there, waiting," Darius said, after a moment. He stiffened suddenly. His sharp eyes had caught a movement beyond Lilis, far beyond, up high, very, very high.

"Basil," Darius said and pointed. "Do you see? Is that what I think it is?"

There was a momentary pause.

"Hassan-i Sabbāh," Basil said. "He's found us. That's one of his rukhs. One must have survived the blizzard."

"So much for the last breeding pair in history," Annabella murmured. It was only the smallest of jokes but the others seized on it with gratitude. It seemed to mean that however Lilis had tortured her, somehow Annabella, their Annabella, the Annabella they loved, had endured whatever it was the ghula had done to her and was coming out the other side.

She took a moment longer and then stood up, most inelegantly scrubbing at her face with her sleeve. Lilis began to sway towards them but Annabella was not watching her, her gaze was fixed on the rukh. Perhaps Hassan-i Sabbāh would fail to see them, perhaps they would go unnoticed, perhaps he would just sail past. But no, already she could see the rukh beginning a long glide towards them. They and their shadows must stand out on the rolling, white sheet of the desert like letters on a page, there for anyone who would to read.

In that instant, she became aware of what she must do.

"I grant one boon," Lilis said in her sibilant whisper. "Speak."

Annabella stepped forward, Basil to one side and slightly behind. She took a deep breath, aware that she was making a fateful decision from which there could be no retreat.

"I ask you..." she said, somehow managing a firm, even voice. "I ask you to free this djinni beside me from lifetime bond of slavery."

Lilis said nothing but there was an instantaneous flash of light that slashed between Annabella and Basil like a sword, a guillotine. Then Lilis vanished.

What have you done? Basil shrieked.

What I always said I would do, Annabella answered wearily. *I said I would free you, and I have.*

And did it ever occur to you that I might not wish to be free? His voice was remote, brittle, pared to the bone.

Yes, Annabella said. It did occur to me. But I realised that for me to be free to...to... You had to be free too.

Free to what?

Just free... Annabella prevaricated.

But your parents...? You're sacrificing them for me? There was now a tremor in Basil's voice.

I'm not sacrificing anyone.

"What are we going to do?" Darius asked. "The rukh will be here in a couple of minutes. If we're going to escape, we better do something about it, fast."

"It's all right," Annabella said. "There's no hurry."

And what exactly are you up to this time, may I ask, mistress mine? Basil was suddenly stern, insistent.

You forget. I'm not your mistress. Not any more. I'm Annabella. Annabella, not Annabelle...

And as I'm no longer your slave, I'll call you what I jolly well like.

So there...?

So jolly there!

"But what about Hassan-i Sabbāh?" Vivienne was saying, a panicky note in her voice.

"He won't be a problem," Annabella said. "Not this time."

The rukh was overhead now. It circled cautiously once, then came into an ungainly landing. A ladder was thrown over the rail of the howdah, and four fida'is slid down, followed in rather more stately fashion by Hassan-i Sabbāh.

Would you please freeze everyone but Hassan-i Sabbāh? Annabella asked.

Certainly, Basil said. *But you should really tell me what you're jolly well planning to do.* He was no longer severe but an anxious supplicant.

You'll see in a minute.

That's what worries me.

Hassan-i Sabbāh stopped when he realised his men had ceased to function.

"Don't worry," Annabella called. "I just want to talk." Darius and Vivienne stared at each other with wild surmise. Annabella waited a minute but when Hassan-i Sabbāh showed no sign of movement, she fished down her neck and pulled out the Seal of Solomon. She let it dangle from her right hand and even from that distance they could see the gleam of extreme covetousness that flared into the emir's eyes. He began to walk towards them.

What are you doing? Basil said, an edge of frantic concern plain in his voice. *Please tell me what you're doing.*

But Annabella would say nothing. She stepped forward and waited. Hassan-i Sabbāh stopped about ten paces away. Annabella had to put severe violence upon

herself not to rush forward, to claw at his eyes, to bite, to kick. She wanted nothing so much as to tear him in pieces for what he had done, was still doing, to her parents, to her. The urge to homicidal mayhem was overpowering.

"That is my ring," Hassan-i Sabbāh said neutrally after a long moment. Annabella fought to hold her control. She opened her mouth to speak. Nothing came. She tried again.

"I will give it to you..." she began. There was an astonished gasp from Vivienne and Darius and one in her head from Basil. At the same time, Hassan-i Sabbāh overrode her with barely controlled rage.

"You are mistaken," he rasped. "I will take it. It is mine by right." Annabella said nothing, letting Hassan-i Sabbāh's evident impotence speak for her.

Eventually, he was forced to concede.

"You will give me the ring if what?" he said at last.

"First," Annabella said carefully. "You must tell me why you have kidnapped my parents."

Again there was a lengthy silence. Again he was eventually forced to concede.

"They possess the secret," he said. "The secret to al iksir."

"Which is what?" Annabella said.

"The white drops. Liquid gold."

The elixir of life, Basil supplied. *Eternal life... Immortality...*

Is he mad? Annabella said, struggling to comprehend.

Undoubtedly. But very dangerous with it.

"I don't understand," Annabella said. "How could they know what you don't? How can you know that they know?"

"They are savants?"

"Historians, scholars..."

"They came into possession of an ancient manuscript. A manuscript lost for an age. A manuscript denied to me. A manuscript which holds its own power, a power which enabled me to trace it to them. It holds the secret."

"So why didn't you just take the manuscript?" Annabella demanded, her bubbling anger coming to the surface. "Why would you seize them?"

"They destroyed the manuscript," Hassan-i Sabbāh said flatly. "Your father threw it in the fire."

"My father threw the manuscript in the fire...? Why?" Annabella fired that last word at the emir like a shot from a gun. Hassan-i Sabbāh hesitated.

"I am uncertain," he said. "It seems he believed that the 'ifrit I sent to retrieve it had emerged from the book itself. I conjecture that your father in his fear thought that by burning the manuscript he would also destroy my servant."

"So the 'ifrit brought my parents to...now?"

"That they might repeat to me what they had learned from the book so foolishly destroyed."

It was unbelievable, Annabella thought, desperately, utterly, unbelievable. Bizarre beyond all possibility of belief. Though no more unbelievable, she was forced to admit after a moment, than most everything else that had happened since she had discovered Basil skulking in her great uncle's attic.

"But they haven't told you anything, have they?" Annabella said.

"They refuse to speak. They are determined to hold the secret for themselves."

"Which is where I come in?"

"If they will not save themselves, perhaps they will save their daughter. Perhaps then they will speak."

"What if they're unable to? What if they just don't know anything?"

"They had the manuscript. They studied the manuscript. They worked on it. They know," Hassan-i Sabbāh said adamantly. His voice rose and cracked. "They are determined to keep the secret for themselves, cost what it may. But it is mine. I will have it. I will have it."

Annabella took an involuntary step backwards, repelled by the man's vehemence. Somewhere deep in his eyes, the red spark of insanity was glowing brightly now. She paused to take stock. Could she really bring herself to go through with the hare-brained scheme that had sprung fully formed in her mind the moment she saw the rukh? Well, too late to back out now. Basil was free but at the cost of her parents... By freeing Basil she had committed herself irrevocably. Whatever the consequences, she must persist.

Basil, she said. You know how I feel about you. I think I know how you feel about me. So please, do what I'm going to ask you without arguing.

You can't go to Waq Waq.

I can.

You don't understand, Basil said, wild with distress. Nobody ever comes back.

But you brought me here, to Lilis, Annabella said, mystified. It was always the plan. I've just changed it a bit.

I never thought...

What? That I'd go through with it? You thought I'd get frightened and back out?

I hoped... Once you saw...

Once I saw what? Annabella said only to find herself confronted with a sudden revelation. That was you...? You deliberately set Toğrül loose. You let him go to Lilis...

I had to... You wouldn't use him to bargain... And I had to show you... I had to scare you away... It was the only chance... I hoped...

Well, you were wrong, Basil, Annabella said coldly. Badly, badly wrong.

Nobody ever comes back, Basil repeated, now all but incoherent.

I will.

Nobody...

Listen to me. Just listen! You have to take Vivienne and Darius and get away from here. I'm going to give Hassan-i Sabbāh the ring. And you must be gone when I do, out of range or whatever it is, so that he can't control you. Not that I think he'll try. He'll be too excited, too interested in me to think about you at all, if you're not here.

But...

Do it. You're free now, so there's nothing to stop you going to your father. Perhaps he can help.

I can't leave...

You can. You must. And I need a knife, a sharp one. Put it about my waist under my robes. I'm sure they won't bother to search me.

Annabella...

There's no time. Give me the knife and go. Take the others and go.

There was a choking sound in her head. She waited, expecting more argument. Instead, she suddenly felt a belt fastening around her middle and an unaccustomed weight in the small of her back.

Hassan-i Sabbāh shifted impatiently. The girl had been silent for too long. He opened his mouth to speak, but she forestalled him.

"Wait," she said imperiously and he somehow managed to bite off an angry retort. She still held the seal. She still held the power.

"You're going to leave now," Annabella said, speaking to Vivienne and Darius. "You'll be looked after. I hope we meet again. But if we don't, you were the best friends anybody ever had."

They looked at her with shock and amazement, but she gave them no time to voice their reactions.

Go now! she commanded Basil. *Don't say anything, just go.*

And they did. One moment, Vivienne and Darius had been standing there, beside her, the next, they had vanished. Annabella had always had a shrewd suspicion that the carpet was not Basil's only means of transport, even so their disappearance so abruptly was disconcerting. Again, she was totally alone. Mentally she shrugged her shoulders. Get on with it, girl, she said to herself.

She held out the Seal of Solomon, swinging on the end of the looped chain.

"Here," she said to Hassan-i Sabbāh. He made no move to take it.

"What must I do?" he said suspiciously.

"Nothing."

Hassan-i Sabbāh stared at her, trying to divine the trap. Annabella waited. It was all time for the others to make good their escape, if time they needed. Eventually, however, she grew impatient.

"There's no catch," she said. "You want what I want. I must go to my parents."

Still Hassan-i Sabbāh stared at her.

"Oh, for goodness sake," Annabella exclaimed. She swung the ring on its chain round in a circle then let it fly. It arced up in the air. Hassan-i Sabbāh yelped and dived to catch it. For long moments, he caressed it, anxiously examining it for damage. At last, he inserted his thumb.

The tornado appeared as a tiny smudge on the far horizon and tracked towards them in swirling, elongated ellipses, evidently an expression of Iblis's resentment at

being summoned yet again to the thrall of a mere human. And the closer the tornado came the more threatening it became, a colossal column of twisting air, marked by horizontal striations of snow and sand. They could hear the roar of its approach from leagues away.

"He doesn't sound happy," Annabella remarked to no one in particular. Hassan-i Sabbāh glared at her. Dealing with Iblis was quite fraught enough without some child expressing gratuitous opinions.

"Be silent!" he fumed.

"Or what?" Annabella retorted. She had to shout to be heard over the noise of Iblis's approach. Hassan-i Sabbāh 's reply, whatever it might have been, was quite lost to her.

The tornado, which now towered over the landscape, suddenly stopped. It stood stationary, no longer even rotating. Any other time Annabella would have found this quite astonishing – a funnel of dirt and debris towering motionless, high in the sky – but on a day such as this had already proved to be, it was a minor phenomenon.

"You presume to summon me, yet again," a great, booming voice proclaimed. "What?"

Hassan-i Sabbāh had to struggle manfully to conceal his unease. The child, he noted with irritation, appeared completely unaffected even by the presence of so powerful an entity as Iblis. For a fleeting moment, the emir was tempted to crow over the fact that again he had "captured" Annabella, something the 'ifrit had never accomplished, but fortunately for him his common sense prevailed.

"Take..." He had to clear his throat and start again. "Take the daughter to her parents. Take her to Waq Waq. Meanwhile, return me to Alamut." He gestured at the rukh and his still frozen minions. "Leave the rubbish for Lilis. It is no longer useful."

Emotionally drained as she was by the events of the day, such casual brutality still came as a shock to Annabella. She had no love for Assassins, or rukhs, far from it, but they were still living beings. She had no time for more than a passing grimace, however. The moment Hassan-i Sabbāh finished speaking, for the second time that day she descended into impenetrable blackness.

Chapter 22

Vivienne was furious, beside herself with outrage.

"Basil!" she shouted. "Where are you? I want to talk to you." She stared about, for the moment quite unconscious of what she was seeing, interested only in locating a tendril of smoke.

"I'm jolly well right here," a voice said in her ear with irritation. "There's no need to shout."

"So what do you mean by it?" she demanded. Darius was watching her with an expression that was both puzzled and apprehensive. He was beginning to find Vivienne's brand of independent militancy distinctly off-putting.

"Mean by what?" Basil solidified somewhat and Vivienne turned to face him square on, her hands on her hips.

"Dragging us all over the countryside, freezing on that horrible carpet of yours when you can just go flash, bang wallop..."

"Aethelerating," Basil murmured. "It's called aethelerating..." Vivienne ignored him.

"...And here we are, thank you very much, wherever here is..." She was shouting now but suddenly cut short her tirade to look about with some amazement at the rocky cliffs, the white sandy beach on which they were standing, and the clear, azure water dotted with coral reefs. "Where is here?" she said in a completely different voice. "Why are we here?" It was quite warm, too, she realised. She was already starting to feel uncomfortably hot in her thick, winter clothing.

"Which?" Basil said wearily.

"Which what?"

"Which question do you want me to answer first?"

Vivienne returned to her main grievance.

"Why did you make us waste so much time on that stupid carpet...?"

"You don't enjoy seeing the countryside?"

"Why, Basil?" Vivienne demanded, refusing to be diverted.

"Two people," Basil said flatly. "I can aethelerate two people. And as I recollect you were jolly well never less than three, until just now, never mind the slight matter of aetheric noise... And anyway, I wasn't in any jolly hurry."

"But Annabella, poor Annabella, what about her parents? We were supposed to be trying to rescue them, and... everything. You could have done something... Relays..."

"I jolly well told you, aetheric noise. And we were on our way to Lilis and you saw what happened when we got there. That was certainly not in Annabella's best interests. Abso-jolly-lutely not."

"But her parents...?"

"No one ever returns from Waq Waq," Basil said. Vivienne's eyes were suddenly very round. "Whether we hurried, or whether we jolly well didn't, it will make no

difference to them. It would have just meant that Annabella would have been put through that crazy ordeal all the sooner. And I was jolly well playing for time. I was trying to find a way to avoid it. And most of all, I was trying to prevent her setting off for Waq Waq if she succeeded. Nobody ever returns from Waq Waq," he repeated.

"You mean, you were hoping her parents would die first?"

"If you want to put it like that. I am slave...I was slave to Annabella's best interests. Not theirs."

"But Waq Waq is where Annabella is going," Vivienne said, shocked.

"I know," Basil said miserably. "I couldn't find a way...I couldn't stop her. You know Annabella. She's jolly well a force of nature."

"But what is Waq Waq?" Vivienne said in a small voice. "I thought you said it was an island...?" Basil made no reply and in the end she appealed to Darius.

"Do you know what it is?" she said. He shifted uncomfortably.

"I've heard stories," he said reluctantly. "Stories...to frighten children."

"They're true," Basil said. "They're jolly well all true."

"What stories?" Vivienne insisted. "And why didn't you tell me about it before?" Nobody said anything...

"Darius! Tell me. You have to tell me."

Darius turned about and made to walk away.

"Don't you dare!" Vivienne exclaimed. "If you do, never come back."

Darius hesitated, and turned again to face her. He opened his mouth to speak and then thought better of it. Instead, he went up to Vivienne and whispered in her ear. She blenched and gagged.

"So why didn't you tell Annabella that?" she demanded of Basil after a long moment. "It might have changed her mind about going." Her voice was harsh and uncompromising.

"She knew," Basil said disconsolately. "She knew all the time. She'd even seen it... in the cauldron. The emir's cauldron. As if that was ever going to stop her."

Vivienne stared at him for a moment in horror and then suddenly sank down on the sand, her face a matching shade of white.

The beach was at the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula, a stark, magical place. Basil's father, being a Marid, one of Annabella's sea djinn, had retired here, to the coast, to a cavern he had caused to come into being high on one of the cliff faces and totally inaccessible.

Vivienne asked nothing more about Waq Waq. She was upset she had been left in ignorance. She was doubly upset she had never thought to press the point. But most of all, she was appalled by the jumble of nightmarish pictures Darius's murmured words had set coursing through her brain.

"Oh, Annabella," Vivienne mourned aloud. "Annabella...Annabella...Annabella..."

Darius knelt beside her but instead of finding her sobbing into his shoulder as he had confidently expected in an irritating male way, Vivienne grew really angry, not

just furious as she had been, but cold, hard and unforgiving. She swung again on Basil with implacable intent.

"How could you let this happen?" she demanded in a voice so thin it was razor sharp. "You're supposed to be her slave, her protector. You're supposed to look after her..."

"I know, I know...!" It was a howl of anguish, that rang out over the beach and came bouncing back from the cliffs, quite drowning the noise of the water gently nudging at the sand. Indeed, it was so loud that it brought another tendril of smoke flying out from the cavern.

"Basil!" came a voice, a different voice, a voice Vivienne and Darius didn't know. "You're making a spectacle of yourself. More importantly, you're making a spectacle of yourself on my beach." It was a complicated voice, on the one hand evidently wise and kindly, on the other speaking sharply and with some irritation.

Vivienne and Darius stared at each other.

"Who said that?" Vivienne demanded.

"I don't know," Darius replied.

"I said that," the voice informed them. The second tendril of smoke glided in front of them, but where Basil was customarily white, this one was rather greyer and somehow gave the impression of wrinkles.

"I am Basil's father," the voice went on. "Sheikh al Yazid. How do you do? You must be Vivienne. And you must be Darius. I have...so much about you and I must congratulate you on the fortitude you have shown and the support you have given to that remarkable young lady, Annabella Crabtree."

Vivienne and Darius stared at each other again. Unconsciously, Vivienne did this time reach out a hand to Darius.

"Now Basil," the Sheikh said. "Perhaps you would bring your friends and come inside. Perhaps you would care to explain exactly what you're doing here when you should be attending your mistress..."

The Sheikh's cavern was a delight, there was no other word for it. Spacious and airy without being grandiose, the delicate white of the rough-hewn walls and ceiling caught the dancing light from the sea outside and seemed to ripple in sympathy, giving the sensation of being in the water without actually getting wet. The floor was smooth, soft, unmarked sand, and the whole was elegantly bare of furniture except for one, massive, immaculately polished and totally astounding object.

As Basil's carpet hovered delicately in the entrance, Darius gazed at it mystified and Vivienne with astonishment.

"That hasn't been invented yet," Vivienne said accusingly. She stepped down from the carpet, her footsteps instantly marring the smooth perfection of the floor.

"I know, I know," the Sheikh apologised. "But it's the one indulgence of my dotage."

"But if it hasn't been invented, how can you have one?" Vivienne demanded. "That's not fair. Basil keeps telling us that we can't have things if they haven't been invented. Annabella nearly died..."

"Why as to that," the Sheikh said. "I made it myself."

"I don't believe you," Vivienne said baldly and extremely rudely. She had just about had enough of djinn and their duplicities. First Basil and his carpet capers, now this. "I don't believe you," she repeated. "How could you make this?"

"The same way as the artisans of the future," the Sheikh said, refusing to take offence. "With patience, dedication and great difficulty... But it has made an absorbing retirement project. Semi-retirement..."

"But what is it?" Darius interposed, feeling that perhaps Vivienne would welcome time to calm herself. It was a vain hope. She rounded on him before the Sheikh had a chance to reply.

"What is it?" she said on a rising note. "What is it? It's a grand piano, that's what it is. A freaking grand piano... A freaking concert grand piano..."

Darius raised his hands, both in surrender and confusion with underneath a thread of resentment. The lack of respect for things male that Vivienne had been revealing of late was beginning to grate on him quite badly.

"A musical instrument," she added impatiently. She marched across, lifted the cover and brought a damning finger down on middle C. The note rang through the cavern like a clarion, but also warm and richly coloured. Two things were instantly apparent. The cavern, the chamber, had a superb acoustic, to which the piano was superbly matched. Despite her anger, Vivienne could not resist another phrase or two. Then, totally seduced and standing awkwardly, she launched into the *à la Turca*. A moment later, she felt a nudging at the back of her legs and sat down on the piano stool that had magically appeared and which just happened to be set at exactly the right height.

Mozart's wild rondo swirled around them and Vivienne found herself playing with an *élan* she had never ever managed to achieve during long solitary hours she had spent hiding in various music rooms in various schools when the piano had been her only solace. And again, Vivienne, for the moment, was washed clean of all her angers and all her fears.

At last, the final notes rang out, glowed briefly as they decayed and then there was silence.

"Bravo, my dear," the Sheikh said after a proper interval. "You play well. You do indeed."

"Thank you," Vivienne said, disarmed both by the music and the praise. "But not as well as I'd like and I'm really out of practice. It's a beautiful piano... Really beautiful..." Then the magic was suddenly gone, and she hardened again.

"But I don't believe you could possibly have made it yourself," she said flatly. "I think you're lying. Just the strings... How could you even make the strings? And the frame?" She moved around from the keyboard to contemplate the complicated diagonal layering of the strings beneath the open lid.

Again the Sheikh refused to take offence.

"My dear," he said quietly. "We do have iron, and indeed steel, and we do have the ability to cast metal. And as for the rest, well I took myself on a sabbatical into the future to study at both Steinway and Bösendorfer, not that they were necessarily aware of my presence."

"Well..." Vivienne began, then she suddenly blurted: "Then, I don't believe you can play. I just don't believe it."

For answer, the Sheikh drifted towards the keyboard. The piano stool vanished, the tendril of smoke seem to elongate as though stretching across the keys and after a moment, the same à la Turca that Vivienne had played began to resonate again through the chamber. This time, however, where Vivienne had been simply enthusiastic and rather inaccurate, the Sheikh was precise and deeply passionate. The difference between the two renditions could not have been more marked and Vivienne found herself abashed and contrite.

"That was wonderful," she said when the last resonance had died away.

"I am delighted you think so," the Sheikh said modestly.

"I wish I could play like that. I'm sorry I..."

"Quite all right, my dear. I understand."

"It really is a beautiful piano..."

"Praise indeed, from a fellow artist," the Sheikh said magnanimously. "And you must, of course, play it whenever you wish." He paused delicately. "Now Basil, perhaps you'd better tell me what has happened..."

Later, towards evening with the sunset flaring redly across the water from somewhere far beyond Egypt, Vivienne and Darius found themselves alone. Basil had provided a modest beach hut for them and clothing more appropriate to the weather. They had food and drink and time to themselves of the sort they had rarely had the luck to find before. Generally speaking, things should have been altogether enchanting, however, apart from being rather at odds with each other, they were also miserable and depressed. Annabella's absence pained them both like a bad tooth, sharp, nagging and impossible to ignore. It was made all the worse by the knowledge that no one could help her now. Not even the Sheikh, or Basil. They didn't even know where she might be, nor could they find her. Annabella was completely alone and utterly dependent on her own resources.

"What do you think is happening to her?" Vivienne said at one point.

"I don't know," Darius replied glumly. "And I don't think I want to know."

Chapter 23

The black became grey, thick impenetrable grey. Annabella was unsure whether it was inside or outside her head, so to speak. She waved her hand in front of her eyes and it seemed there was a slight swirl. Fog, then. Or mist. But not smoke, thank God. There was no smell of burning. She was kneeling on something soft and spongy. She felt around, investigating, and encountered what was apparently a leaf, then another, then more. That and a composty sort of odour seemed to indicate that the ground was covered in some sort of humus. A forest floor perhaps. Or an orchard. There was a current of sound, a threnody of misery. It was warm, uncomfortably warm. Annabella shed her coat and bundled it up under an arm.

"What am I supposed to do now?" she wondered aloud.

"Wait," came the instant response. The voice was sibilant and might have been no more than the sighing of the wind, except Annabella knew very well that it had to belong to Iblis. She considered a moment. It seemed to her she had a choice. She could allow herself to be reduced to abject fear. Or not.

"Wait for what?" she demanded.

"Wait in silence," came the reply.

"Why should I? You can't touch me. You have to return me to Hassan-i Sabbāh."

"Nobody leaves Waq Waq. He knows that. He will see you in his cauldron. That is all. Silence!"

The word cauldron triggered frantic alarm bells in Annabella's head. Again the scene she had seen on the surface of it flashed before her, except this time she faced it squarely and all at once, she understood what it must mean. A moment later she was leaping to her feet, or trying to. Already, she felt rooted to the ground. Frantic, she leaned forward, put her hands flat down, arched her back and strained with all her might.

She felt one knee give a little, lift up a fraction, then the other. Slowly they were coming clear. She heaved again with all her strength, the strength of extremis.

My hands, she thought. My hands.

It was suddenly clear to her why she had been kneeling when she had regained consciousness. The rooting process obviously required more or less direct contact with flesh. Perhaps the soles of her shoes might be some sort of safeguard.

With one last convulsive jerk she freed herself and stood up. Already it had been an effort to tear her hands free. A rock. A log. Anything. She must have something to stand on. Her coat. It was something. She folded it as tightly as she could and stood balancing on it, teetering, wobbling, terrified. Why didn't Iblis just knock her straight back down? At any second, she expected to be sent sprawling.

Abruptly, the impenetrable fog began to clear. In seconds it had been reduced to thick mist and then it was just lazy trails drifting through the trees. The trees. Dear God, the trees. And the noise. The dissipation of the fog allowed the noise free rein.

Annabella felt herself fainting in shock and revulsion and in desperation slapped herself hard across the face. She could not fall. She must not fall. Particularly, she must not fall unconscious. She began to retch in spasms but had nothing to bring up, just acid and foul-tasting bile. Eventually she quietened and forced herself to gauge her surroundings.

She was in a little clearing, a gap in a row, obviously prepared specially for a new planting. At first glance the trees about her might have been apple or orange or any other sort of orchard crop, except peeping through the leaves were not innocent pears or peaches or plums, but a myriad human heads of various sizes, all different, all as individual as people, all with vestigial bodies and limbs. And each of the heads was apparently alive, mewling, whimpering, pleading, begging, stretching out their pathetic little hands to her.

Then she realised with redoubled horror that each tree had only two branches, remarkably arm like, emanating from just below a knobby protrusion bearing a crude a resemblance to a face. There were eyes, too – some blank, some following her movements, some crazed.

"Annabella?" It was not Iblis's voice. "Annabella, is that you? Is that really you?" It was her father, shouting over the mounting babble. Then she heard her mother joining in.

"Annabella! Annabella!" The cry was frantic, filled with both longing and horror.

"Over here!" It was her father again. "Over here! You must get off the ground."

Annabella stared wildly around then spotted the same scene that had been burned into her brain by the cauldron. An iron cage was hanging just above the humus, suspended from one of the trees amidst a countless mass of the caterwauling human heads. She took a deep breath, another, and then she scooped up her coat and was dashing towards it. Even in that short distance, her feet felt leaden, as though the island was grabbing at her, reluctant to let her go.

She reached the tree next to the cage and scrambled into the branches, forcing a path through the...fruit, which was clutching and grasping at her, trying to hold her, begging for deliverance. Her parents reached out to her hungrily between the bars and they managed to clasp hands. Her mother was sobbing uncontrollably. They looked emaciated, worn down, close to breaking, their clothes in rags.

"Hush Maggie," her father said loudly. "You're making them worse." And it was true. The crying and wailing was now all-pervading, drowning thought, the possibility of reason. Still clutching at Annabella with one hand, he used his other to try to soothe his wife.

"But why are you here?" he said to Annabella, when the noise had died down enough to be heard. "Sweetheart, why are you here? We thought at least we had saved you..."

"No," Annabella said bluntly. "They came for me too. They think it will make you talk." And then it burst out: "Dad, what happens here? What were they doing to me... down there?"

"You... You were being planted. They bring people here. They plant them. They think the young ones grow the best..."

And even though she had more or less worked it out for herself, Annabella began to retch helplessly again.

"Shsh, darling. Shsh," her mother said, recovering a little. "John, the water. Give her some water."

Her father reached for a water skin hanging from the bars, squeezed it through a gap and passed it across. Annabella drank gratefully. The surrounding squalling was beginning to quieten.

"Dad, why are you here?" Annabella asked. She drank another mouthful. "What does he want?"

"Who is *he*?" John said. "We don't even know that."

"Hassan-i Sabbāh," Annabella said. "The Old Man of the Mountain..." Her father and mother looked at each other as though beginning to understand something for the first time.

"What does he want?" Annabella repeated after a moment.

"They...voices...kept asking us questions about the Jābir manuscript. We wouldn't answer them. We thought if we did they would kill us. Then they tortured us. It was excruciating, unbearable..."

"But we still wanted to live," Maggie cut in. "For you. I wanted to see you one more time... Then they threatened to bring you. To plant you. So we had to tell them everything we could, which wasn't much. Jābir was famous for writing in obscure code, Geberish it's called. It's where gibberish comes from. But we hoped the little we knew would be enough to save you. They must have thought we were still holding back..."

"So why did Iblis let me move, just now? Get away..." Annabella said slowly. "It doesn't make sense."

"Playing with us, playing with you," John said. "Cat and mouse. They do it all the time...with the others, the poor sods they bring here... When they realise what's happening... It amuses them..."

"They were going to plant us," Maggie suddenly blurted. "One night, we were tipped out of the cage. But John found a way to get us back in, then they locked us up again."

"They could force us out, of course they could," John said. "But they don't..."

"I think they want to send us mad now, before they plant us," Maggie said. "They do that, too..."

"Are people still alive after...after they've been planted?" Annabella asked, newly horrified. Her father nodded.

"Yes," he said in a low voice. "Yes...Aware..." Annabella gulped.

"And what do they do with the...?" she forced herself to add, gesturing around her. Her parents just looked at her.

"They don't eat...?" Annabella began.

They said nothing. Just looked.

"Oh God!" This time Annabella managed to resist her rising gorge. "When did they try to tip you out?" she went on shakily. A horrible suspicion was forming in her mind.

"Weeks ago," John said. "It's so hard to keep track of time..."

Annabella felt a white-hot shaft of anguish. Unwittingly, she had so nearly been the cause of her parents' deaths. It must have been when she had seized the Seal of Solomon. She had hoped Iblis would still believe he was under the control of Hassan-i Sabbāh but instead, he had known he was free to do as he would, to expand his orchard. So why in the event had he relented? A family grouping, Annabella hazarded? He was aiming for a complete family set?

She began to cry, softly, the tears, all her pent-up emotions, flooding from her in torrents.

"Darling, what is it?" her mother said, alarmed, but Annabella could only shake her head.

It subsided eventually and then Annabella and her parents talked rapidly for hours. They had no idea how much longer they might have. John and Maggie insisted on hearing at least an outline of all that had happened to Annabella, and in return she demanded they tell her everything they knew about the obscure manuscript that was apparently the cause of the disasters that had been brought down upon them.

Jābir ibn Hayyān, or Geber, had lived some three centuries before the present moment. Like Avicenna he had been a prodigious polymath and an equally prodigious author, responsible for thousands of texts. One of his particular concerns had been alchemy and in another manuscript, *The Book of Stones*, he had laid out recipes for the creation of life, including human life. He had also addressed himself to al iksir and to the philosopher's stone. The problem was that often, at the most critical moments, he would write in impenetrable code, the key to which was available only to his closest followers.

"Do you think he really discovered the elixir?" Annabella asked.

"No idea," John said. "But it does seem odd to us that if he did, he died nonetheless."

Jābir had long been one of John and Maggie's special areas of study and the day the manuscript came into their possession had been one of great rejoicing.

"How did you get it?" Annabella inquired delicately.

"Black market," her mother said.

"Very black," John added.

But ultimately the manuscript had proved a total disappointment. Most of the text was completely indecipherable.

"There was nothing?" Annabella asked.

"Nothing. Nada."

"But there must have been something."

"Nothing," they said together.

"Zero," John went on. "The only thing that wasn't gibberish was a little notation at the end. Dot 7 dot 6 dot 5 dot 4 dot 3 dot 2, with the dots on top of the figures. But that's meaningless too, means nothing."

Annabella paused thoughtfully.

"And did you tell them that bit?" she asked at last. Both her father and her mother shrugged.

"There didn't seem any point," John said.

"It's just nonsense, like the rest of it," Maggie added.

Nevertheless, it was something, not much maybe, but possibly enough, just enough, on which to hang the plan that was forming in Annabella's mind. Rescue. Perhaps she could bargain a rescue. She went to sleep finally, cradled in a fortunate conjunction of branches, trying to ignore the heads crowding about her, her mind full of calculations.

Annabella was jerked awake by the most macabre of dawn choruses. Every human head on the Island of Waq Waq was shrieking at the top of its voice, screaming in mortal terror. The noise was unbearable. Annabella pressed her hands to her ears, gazing about in panic.

"What is it?" she mouthed over the cacophony. "What's happening?"

"Harvest," she lip-read her father saying. "They're...harvesting..."

Indeterminate shapes were floating along between the trees. They gave an impression of malice barely suppressed, misshapen hobgoblins searching for the next ill-turn to perpetrate on an innocent world.

"Ghulan," John shouted in a slight lull. "Iblis's ghulan."

They each seemed to be dragging some sort of sack and every so often, one would pause, inspect one of the larger hanging heads for ripeness, wrench it from its stalk and thrust it within, screaming and thrashing futilely, to join others already plucked.

One of the ghulan spotted Annabella and drifted towards her, a twisted, lumpen face resolving itself as it approached. It leered at her evilly, reached past her into the tree and tore down a head by its legs. It had black hair and a snub nose, Annabella registered in passing. It shrieked dementedly, a look of stark terror crossing its face. The ghul dangled it upside down for a long, lascivious moment, opened its mouth revealing twisted fangs and took a large bite. Brains and blood spurted everywhere and the head's screeching became a ghastly whimper, then faded altogether. The ghul threw the remains to the ground, chewed a moment and spat the contents of its mouth full into Annabella's face.

She let out a cry of purest, drenching disgust, then mercifully, there was nothing.

How long she had been unconscious, she didn't know. She could feel unnameable filth dribbling down her face and worked to scrub it away with desperate repugnance. The orchard was quiet now with just the odd whimper, like a baby that had finally screamed itself to sleep. She found herself still in the tree, her parents trying to comfort her from behind the bars of their cage. She began to cry. It was all just too monstrous to be borne and quite drove from her mind the tentative plan she had been

making the night before. It seemed to her then, as her parents watched in horror, calling to her unheeded, that there was only one conceivable thing to be done. She allowed herself to slip a little, then to slide...

Something caught on a branch. The knife she had made Basil give her and which was no longer hidden now she had shed her coat. For a moment, she was unable to move, hanging there suspended above the deadly ground, and then, suddenly, the thought of Basil brought her back to herself. Basil had been with her through the ordeal with Lilis, whatever he might say. He was with her now.

She would get her parents away from Waq Waq. She would. And she would use the knife to make sure they could never be returned.

A flat, circular disc, a porthole to another world, appeared in the sky. It hung there, revolving slowly as though seeking its bearings, then it fixed on the cage and Annabella's tree. The porthole slowly descended and simultaneously moved towards Annabella until Hassan-i Sabbāh's hawk-nosed, raddled face hovered before her. Annabella knew that he must be staring into the surface of his cauldron. She waited, contained, cold, icy cold, very sure of what she must do.

"Well?" Hassan-i Sabbāh demanded at last. "Have they come to their senses? Have they told you the secret?"

"Yes," Annabella said simply. "They have..." She left the sentence hanging.

"So you will now tell me." It was a command delivered calmly in the knowledge that it could not possibly be denied. And underneath, there resonated a greedy intensity.

"You lied to me," Annabella said. "You let me think that if I do tell you... But nobody ever leaves Waq Waq."

"What are you doing...?" her father tried to interpose, but she waved a commanding hand at him.

Hassan-i Sabbāh's eyes narrowed and he seemed to swell in size.

"There are worse things than Waq Waq," he hissed. "Tell me!"

"No." There it was, for good or ill, a flat refusal. The only card she had to play in a game for her life, her parents lives.

"Anna..." her mother began but Annabella waved her, too, to silence

There was a long, disbelieving hiatus which Annabella chose, at last, to break.

"There is a price," she said.

"You bargain?" Hassan-i Sabbāh's voice was beginning to rise. He could no longer contain his anger. "You presume to bargain?"

"Oh, no," Annabella said. "I'm not bargaining. There is a price. Take it or leave it."

"You think you can withstand what I shall do to you, to your parents?" However, the threat was less menacing than hysterical, Annabella realised. She allowed herself a gleam of hope.

"On Waq Waq do you think we're afraid of torture? Do you think we care how we die? I hate you. I loathe you. I detest you. The only thing I care about is that you don't get what you want. Unless..."

The silence this time was longer, achingly so. Annabella resolved that come what may she would not be the first to break it. She kept her hand held high, imperiously barring her parents from interrupting. In the end, finally, Hassan-i Sabbāh proved the weaker.

"Unless what?" he demanded. And was there or was there not now a hint of uncertainty in his voice?

"Unless you get us all back from Waq Waq," Annabella said. "I will tell you face-to-face, but only face-to-face." There, it was all on the table. She held her breath.

"Nobody returns from Waq Waq," Hassan-i Sabbāh said. "Nobody ever has." There was now a definite note of pleading in his voice and the skin around his nostrils had whitened.

"Poor you," Annabella said with mock sympathy. "Now you'll never know how to read the secret books of Jābir."

Hassan-i Sabbāh jerked. It was quite involuntary and quite unmistakable. Got him, Annabella thought. The question now was whether, in fact, the Seal of Solomon would allow him to force Iblis to release them.

Hassan-i Sabbāh raised the Seal on its chain and thrust the great ring on to his thumb, where it hung limply, loose and vulnerable. Wearily, he passed his hand over his face, made an attempt to square his shoulders then addressed his cauldron. The 'ifrit was prompt to appear, rather more prompt than Hassan-i Sabbāh might have wished. He stammered slightly as he made his initial demand. The reaction was exactly as he had anticipated.

"It is written," Iblis thundered. "No mortal ever may leave Waq Waq while still mortal. Only the fruit..."

"The Seal of Solomon, commands it," Hassan-i Sabbāh faltered.

"In this, the seal has no power."

Impasse. Hassan-i Sabbāh took a deep breath and resolved to risk all.

"Yet the seal has power to command you in all manner of other things." There. The threat was scarcely explicit, yet plain enough. Do as I say or I make your existence intolerable. Hassan-i Sabbāh found he was holding his breath and had to make a conscious effort to breathe.

"You dare," Iblis said with disbelief. Hassan-i Sabbāh summoned the last of his resolve.

"I dare," he said. Hastily he added: "But they may be returned to Waq Waq when I have done with them."

Abruptly, Iblis departed in what could only be described as a monumental huff. The surface of the cauldron was racked with turbulence and some of the contents slopped over the sides to lie hissing on the podium, eating its way into the marble. Hassan-i Sabbāh held his breath for long moments and finally, when he was sure Iblis had indeed gone, he allowed himself a huge sigh of relief.

Vivienne and Darius were nonplussed, and hungry. Both had slept uneasily during the night for worry over Annabella's fate. Both now wanted breakfast if only to lift their spirits a little, but of Basil there was no sign.

They both called out to him, Vivienne rather less respectfully than himself, Darius noted, and then went outside to call again. The only response they got was the lapping of wavelets on the beach. Dispiritedly, they took themselves back inside and were glumly contemplating a hungry morning when the door again swung open.

"Good morning," a voice said, bizarrely speaking in English with both a drawl and a twang. "I am your waiter for the day. My name is...but you know my name. Now let me give you the menu, this fine, dandy morning. The special is grilled fish, so fresh it's jumping from the pan to the plate..."

"But where is Basil?" Vivienne interrupted rather rudely.

"Bother," the Sheikh said. "Now you've made me forget the rest and I was rather proud of it. I do like American waiters. Do you like American waiters? When I was last in New York..."

"Basil!" Vivienne said. "Where is Basil?"

"Basil... Ah yes, Basil," the Sheikh said with maddening equivocation. "Hmmm, I saw him last night. You've not seen him this morning?"

"You know we haven't," Vivienne said with frustration. "That's why you're here. Has something happened? About Annabella? Please... Tell us."

The Sheikh solidified sufficiently for them to make him out clearly.

"Not that I'm aware of," he said.

"But Basil...?"

"Is pursuing a line of inquiry. Is that how you say it? Have I got it right?"

Vivienne sighed and grimaced at Darius, who looked away, embarrassed at her persistence. Plainly, for whatever reason, the Sheikh was not about to enlighten them.

The Sheikh watched her expression and then took pity.

"There really is nothing I can tell you," he said. "Basil is playing a hunch – is that the expression? More than that I do not know."

Annabella woke to find herself in what appeared to be the same cell she had inhabited once before in Castle Alamut. There was the same slit high up in one wall, and the same dim, gleam of light. She could make out two humped shapes on the floor nearby, which must be her parents, lying where Iblis had dumped them. They began to stir just as the door was flung roughly open. Guards marched in, hauled them to their feet and began to manhandle them out of the cell. Annabella jumped to her feet and rushed towards them, only to be slammed against a wall by one of the Assassins.

"Leave them alone!" she shouted. "Where are you taking them?"

"Silence!" the squad leader roared at her. "My Lord wishes you separated. As a guarantee of your cooperation..."

"Annabella!" John called, beginning to realise what was happening. "Annabella..."

"It's all right," Annabella called, switching to English. "I have a plan. Let me do the talking..." The door was slammed shut and barred again before she could finish. She hoped it would be enough.

She sat down again in the same corner she had retreated to once before. It brought Vivienne and Darius to mind for the first time since she had left them. Presumably, Basil had looked after them.

Basil.

Basil who had been duplicitous right from the start, who had sought to use her as bait to neutralise the Seal of Solomon.

Basil, who had then deceived her shamefully, who had wilfully betrayed her. Who, against her express wishes, had deliberately sacrificed Toğrul... To frighten her out of submitting to the ordeal with Lilis... To prevent her getting to Waq Waq... Rescuing her parents...

Why would he do that to her?

How could he do that to her?

It was unconscionable. Indefensible. Unforgivable.

Unless... Unless he had believed there was no alternative... Because... Because Lilis and the consequences of failing her challenge terrified him... Because... Because he knew, if Annabella did somehow survive the ordeal and achieve her aim, that no one, no one, ever returned from Waq Waq, that she would be doomed, that he would have failed his bond to protect her. Because... Because of the thing still unsaid between them...

Basil.

How bereft she was without him. On Waq Waq, where he couldn't follow and where she had been overwhelmed with horror and revulsion, and fear for her parents, she had managed to put his absence for all but the most crucial moment out of her mind. Now, however, back in what she assumed was something approaching the real world, she ached with longing for him.

Basil, she thought. Then she articulated it. Softly. Wistfully.

Basil.

The reply was instant and electrifying.

Lady Bright? Basil said. Annabella, where are you?

Basil? Am I dreaming? Is that really you?

And who else might it jolly well be? Or have you been playing footsie with other djinn?

It was an extremely bad joke but Annabella couldn't have cared less. Only Basil could be so crass and it was proof positive that he had found her.

It is you, she said breathlessly. *I'm in a cell. I think it's the same one I was in before.*

A moment later, a wisp of smoke slipped in through the vent high in the wall, danced down the shaft of light and came to rest on her knee. Annabella felt tears of relief and joy wetting her cheeks. It was the best thing that had happened for she didn't know how long.

Gently, mistress mine, Basil said. It's all right. It's all right now.

But what are you doing here? Annabella demanded, swallowing her tears and gabbling slightly. *How could you know to come here? How could you possibly know?*

I didn't, but I jolly well hoped. If anyone could possibly – impossibly – get themselves off Waq Waq, it had to be you. And if you managed it, then it was a reasonable deduction that you'd jolly well end up at Alamut.

Oh Basil! I'm so glad to see you...

Am I forgiven, then? He was suddenly very serious, and fearful. Annabella looked at him for a long minute. Was he forgiven? Suddenly, she thought to wonder what she would have done had their positions been reversed. Could she have sent Toğrül to that horrendous end in an attempt to save Basil from himself? Would she have been able to do it? Strong enough? Ruthless enough? She didn't know. Honestly, she didn't know. But she realised another thing. The most important thing. She realised she could only hope that somehow, somewhere she might have found the guts to do it.

I hate you, Annabella said softly, her expression giving the lie to her words.

And I you, my dear. They were silent for a long moment, revelling in the pleasure of being together again.

So, Basil said at last. *What brings you here? And you realise we jolly well can't go on meeting like this?*

Annabella took a deep breath and began to tell of all that had happened to her, speaking hesitantly at first, then it all came pouring out in a great, cathartic torrent.

That's all your parents could tell you? Basil asked again. Annabella physically shrugged.

They said they thought there couldn't be any such thing as the elixir. They said Jābir died, so obviously it didn't exist.

Not necessarily, Basil said. *Jābir was a very wise man. He may simply have jolly well chosen not to take it.*

Anyway, Annabella said. *It doesn't matter whether it exists or not. Just them talking to me was enough to get me here, for Hassan-i Sabbāh to think they told me something. It's enough to get me close to Hassan-i Sabbāh. I still have the knife you gave me.*

You don't jolly well mean what I think you mean? Basil was shocked.

I do. Annabella's voice was quiet and certain.

No. Not you. Not you. You can't do it. I won't let you do it.

I can and I will. Somebody has to. Somebody should have done it a long time ago.

Not you. There must be another way...

Well if there is, I can't think of it, Annabella said impatiently. *And you were the one who wanted me to feed Toğrül to Lilis.* She grimaced involuntarily. *So why are you all squeamish, all of a sudden?*

You know jolly well what that was about, Basil said quietly, hurt in his voice. There was a long silence, neither of them yet quite certain how solid their reconciliation actually was.

Tell me again that thing your father said, from the manuscript, Basil ventured at last, more for something to say than anything.

Dot seven dot six dot five dot four dot three dot two. But it meant nothing to them. It means nothing to me.

It must jolly well mean something, Basil said thoughtfully. Otherwise, why would Jābir ever have bothered to write it down?

Doodling?

Did your parents say anything else about it?

No, Annabella said uninterestedly. Only that the dots were over the numbers.

What! Why didn't you jolly well say so...?

I just did, Annabella replied, a little put out at Basil's sudden vehemence. Anyway, what difference does it make?

What difference? What jolly difference? All the jolly difference in the world. Let me think...

Annabella bit off what she was going to say.

Minutes passed.

Well? she said at last.

Shsh... Basil said. Annabella mentally shrugged her shoulders. She was piqued. There was no denying she was piqued. More minutes passed and Annabella began to think that Basil might never speak again. She shifted her position, trying to find a more comfortable spot on the hard stone floor. Absently, Basil rose from her knee and hung suspended in mid air before her.

Oh, be like that, Annabella thought and closed her eyes. She was tired, so tired, both emotionally and physically exhausted. She began to drift off, only to be jerked rudely awake.

Got it! Basil exclaimed. I believe I've jolly well got it.

Got what? Annabella demanded crossly.

The jolly secret to Jābir's jolly code, of course. There was a note of pride in Basil's voice.

So you're a code cracker now?

Why, when I was with Alan Turing at jolly old Bletchley Park...

Basil, Annabella said warningly, wondering what on earth he was talking about.

And I am a chess player, Basil said. Dots... In Arabic, a dot above a number is a minus sign. So we have -7, -6, -5, -4, -3, -2. With me so far?

Basil...!

And the Arabic alphabet has 28 letters. So if you jolly well subtract 7 from 28, then 6 from what's left, then 5 and so on down to one, what have you got?

You tell me.

Zero. A jolly, big fat zero.

So what? Annabella demanded.

So what! So what! It's a transposition key, that's so jolly what.

I still don't understand, Annabella said rather less trenchantly. She was starting to catch some of Basil's excitement. Suddenly some glowing Arabic script appeared on the floor of the cell.

Jolly well pay attention, Basil instructed. *This first letter...* A pointer appeared and tapped the floor ... *Subtract seven from its position in the alphabet and what do you get? You jolly well get this.* A different letter appeared underneath it. *Now this next letter, jolly well subtract six and you get this...*

Annabella suddenly twigged.

And so on? she said.

And jolly well on and on and on.

You wouldn't want to lose count... Then a thought occurred to her. *But it only goes down to -2*, she said.

One is one and all alone and evermore shall be so, Basil sang in a tuneless tenor. *It doesn't change*, he added. *It stays the same.* Annabella didn't know which was the more surprising, the fact that Basil could sing, however unattractively, or that he'd chosen a line from an old English folk song.

You sound like a frog, she remarked.

All the world's a critic...

But for a djinni, you really are quite smart.

A compliment, a jolly old compliment? Now I know you really have forgiven me... *But you do jolly well realise that as soon as you tell this to Hassan-i Sabbāh he'll ship you all back off to Waq Waq.*

Of course, Annabella said. *Which is the main reason for killing him.*

But you can't kill Iblis... It's Iblis who'll be coming for you. I'll bet you're only out on remand. I'll bet that's how Hassan-i Sabbāh did the deal.

Annabella sat back in shock. She had been concerned only with Hassan-i Sabbāh and had assumed that if she managed to dispose of him, then she and her parents would be home free. The realisation that there was another, much more sinister, layer to the game was deeply disturbing. She was silent for a long time.

Eventually she shrugged.

Well, she said with a degree of desperation. *If we end up back on Waq Waq, I guess we'll just have to kill ourselves as well before they plant us.*

Basil said nothing. Annabella assumed it was because there was nothing to say, but Basil was making a resolution of his own.

But this code thingy doesn't change anything, Annabella said, sometime later in an effort to put aside the fate apparently awaiting both her and her parents. *It just makes it easier to be convincing. I won't have to lie. It might help me get closer.*

You can't do this, Basil said. He was again deeply serious. Annabella said nothing. *Annabella, you can't.*

There was another long silence and things were suddenly totally fraught again. To say that she intended to kill Hassan-i Sabbāh was one thing, Annabella realised at that moment. To actually do it, however, in cold blood, might well be quite another.

You do it then, she said. There was another long silence.

I can't, Basil said at last. His voice was low and apologetic. Under the CODE djinn may not kill humans.

But you have, Annabella said. You can't deny it. Toğrül, for instance. You killed Toğrül...

I didn't exactly kill him, Basil said. I let him die. There's a difference. I let him die to protect you. I was still your slave. It was my duty. It was sanctioned.

There were others. In the cave...

All in your best interests. Sanctioned. But now...

You're free...

I'm free.

Well that was a bad mistake on my part, Annabella said and then hurriedly added: Joke, just joking. Really...

I know, Basil said. And I haven't had a chance to say how grateful...

Shut up, Annabella said softly.

I won't, not till...

Shut up, she repeated. One question. Would you do the same for me?

Of course. How can you even ask...?

Then shut up.

Why hasn't Hassan-i Sabbāh jolly well sent for you, yet? Basil asked.

Dunno, Annabella said muzzily. She had fallen asleep and Basil had been watching over her silently until she began to stir.

He likes to do business after midnight, she added, waking up. Could I have something to drink, do you think, please? I'm really thirsty.

Abso-jolly-lutely, Basil said. And a large goblet of sharbat appeared on the instant. Annabella drank deeply.

One thing, she said, wiping her mouth on her sleeve much to Basil's disapproval. You will come with me, won't you?

Jolly well try and stop me.

What about the ring? The seal?

What Hassan-i Sabbāh doesn't jolly well know, jolly well won't hurt me. He can't use the ring on me if he doesn't jolly well know that he should.

Chapter 24

The Sheikh and Darius were playing chess; more accurately, the Sheikh was giving Darius some advanced coaching. Vivienne was sulking on cushions at the mouth of the cavern, taking the sun. She had tried for a bikini but for all his cosmopolitan ways, the Sheikh had been shocked and had refused point blank, no negotiation to be entertained.

"You may be morally decadent," he had told Vivienne sternly. "But Darius most certainly isn't. And I won't have him being corrupted in my presence."

"Perhaps he would like to be corrupted..." Vivienne had muttered with very bad grace though no great hopes. Darius had always proved distressingly gentlemanly and of late was distinctly wary, downright distant.

What is it with djinn? Vivienne asked herself petulantly. First Basil and that horrible bathing suit, now this... And I'm not morally decadent, just...hot, whichever way you slice it. A new thought occurred to her.

"Sheikh..." your highness, she added sotto voce.

"Yes, my dear?"

"Back at the beginning, you said semi-retirement?"

"Did I...? No, no, Darius. Knight to queen's bishop five..."

"You did," Vivienne said firmly.

"Yes... Well, at the time I had hopes it might be rather more than that."

"You did?" Vivienne's voice now had the tones of a child hoping for a story.

"Indeed," the Sheikh said absently. "...No, no, no. Try rook takes pawn... I had hopes that Basil might be ready to take over the family business..." He fell silent again as he and Darius studied the board intently.

"Rukh or rook?" Vivienne said vivaciously but got no reaction. She tried again: "So, Basil wasn't...ready?"

"Mmmm," the Sheikh murmured. "Sudden enthusiasms. Still too many sudden enthusiasms, not enough bottom. Always rushing off to look at some bird... And dalliance... Too much dalliance..."

"Like with Annabella?" Vivienne asked disingenuously, but the Sheikh fell silent and would respond to no further goading. Vivienne had to content herself with admiring the glorious sunset and making shadow puppets on the reflected glow colouring the walls of the cavern.

Far to the east, it was already black dark and the night well advanced. The evening ration of stale bread and water had been delivered to Annabella in her cell, promptly to be exchanged for something rather more palatable by Basil. Now, it was just a matter of waiting...

They came rather earlier than Annabella had expected.

Hassan-i Sabbāh must be impatient, she remarked to Basil. It was really late last time.

Good, Basil replied. Maybe that means he'll jolly well be off his guard a bit.

Annabella was taken on the same forced march by the same tortuous route as on previous occasions. This time, however, she had Basil gliding silently and invisibly above her. The knowledge was immensely comforting. Surreptitiously she touched the knife at her back, now again hidden beneath her clothing, though she knew very well it was still there. She wondered if she really would be able to go through with killing a man with a blade in cold blood, however evil the man might be, however much he might deserve it. She felt the beginnings of doubt worming around the edges of her mind. To harden her resolve, she deliberately thought of Waq Waq and all that her parents had suffered there. And then she thought of Hassan-i Sabbāh who had so casually inflicted this whole horrific nightmare on an ordinary, innocent schoolgirl and her family, and her determination to wreak vengeance upon him was again adamant, absolute.

They came to the great doors that protected Hassan-i Sabbāh's lair to find John and Maggie already there, surrounded by more guards. The relief at seeing Annabella was profound. Maggie made to speak but a hand was instantly clamped over her mouth. The message was clear. No communication, no collaboration, cooperate fully or it will be the worse for them. Annabella tried to give them a thumbs up, but her hand was slapped down on the instant.

As before, the guard pounded on the door with his spear butt. A moment later, ostensibly alone, she was thrust inside to find again the great pillars, the flickering pools of light, the sound of trickling water, the astringent smells.

Hassan-i Sabbāh was waiting for her, standing beside the cauldron on the dais. Annabella noted in passing that the column she had caused to break had either been repaired or replaced. When she was still a good ten paces from the foot of the dais, Hassan-i Sabbāh commanded her to halt.

Not off guard, Basil said.

Not yet...

Hassan-i Sabbāh folded his arms and stood gazing down at Annabella imperiously. Neither spoke. Stand-off, Annabella thought.

Shall I tickle him, Basil suggested maliciously.

Don't be ridiculous. He mustn't suspect you're here...

Joke, lady mine. Two can jolly well make jokes...

Shut up, Basil. Do shut up.

Just jolly well trying to lighten the atmosphere... he started to say, but was interrupted by Hassan-i Sabbāh.

"You will speak. Now!" the emir said. He lifted the chain about his neck to reveal the Seal of Solomon. "Or I will have you returned to Waq Waq."

Annabella laughed, despite her tension and loathing genuinely amused.

"You must think I'm six years old," she said. "As soon as I do speak, you're going to hand us back to Iblis anyway, aren't you? That's the deal, isn't it? And we'll go straight back to Waq Waq."

Hassan-i Sabbāh managed to remain outwardly impassive, but inwardly his stomach was churning. On the one hand, he must have the secret – a secret he was convinced the girl could give him; a secret he was convinced would unlock the last barrier. On the other hand, he could not cross Iblis and survive. Then light flared brilliantly in his brain.

Once he had al iksir he would be invulnerable. Iblis would be powerless to harm him. It was a gamble then. A monstrous, monstrous gamble. A chance at immortality versus the wrath of Iblis, a chance at immortality versus the most excruciating torments the demons of hell could devise.

A sane man would never be brought to face such a choice, for Hassan-i Sabbāh it was no choice at all.

Ponderously, he moved down from the dais.

What's he up to? Annabella asked, both subconsciously and unconsciously whispering.

No idea, Basil replied.

Hassan-i Sabbāh picked up a stool and placed it near Annabella, though still out of reach. He removed the chain from around his neck and placed the seal carefully on the stool, then he backed away an equal distance.

Don't touch it, Annabella warned Basil. *Not yet.*

"Now tell me," Hassan-i Sabbāh demanded.

Annabella considered a moment longer and then began an account of the notation her father had discovered in the manuscript, and its significance.

As she spoke Hassan-i Sabbāh began to quiver, a hunting dog offered an irresistible scent, and his face in the yellow light of the torches mirrored his emotions, first whitening with excitement and then reddening as the full import of what Annabella was telling him became clear. At last, finally, overcoming all obstacles, he had the key, the key to immortality, the key to safe haven where no one could hold him to account, the key to ultimate happiness. It was intoxicating, mind-numbingly, brain-freezingly intoxicating. For a long moments he was quite unable to move and then without even waiting for Annabella quite to finish, he was dashing to his piled scrolls, scrabbling through them like a terrier and seizing on his ultimate prize, The Book of Stones.

The Seal of Solomon remained where he had placed it on the stool, unremembered, unregarded.

Both Annabella and Basil watched Hassan-i Sabbāh 's transformation, from some sort of apparent rationality to maniacal obsession, with amazement. Babbling to himself and heedless of damage to this more or less priceless item, he rolled his way through the scroll until he found the passage he wanted, flattened it to the bench with paperweights and began to transcribe on to a wax tablet with feverish intensity, pausing to count on his fingers.

Annabella fingered the knife at her back. She had been fully determined to kill Hassan-i Sabbāh, but the ring placed on the stool before her changed things. It meant they might be able to escape Iblis and a return to Waq Waq.

On cue, Basil spoke urgently:

We need to go, he said. Right now. You said Iblis knows when Hassan-i Sabbāh takes off the ring. He'll be coming. We have to be outside for me to be able to get you all away. It will have to be two trips...

Still Annabella hesitated. If she didn't kill Hassan-i Sabbāh there was no telling what further outrages he might inflict on them. All at once, she made up her mind.

Freeze him, she said. Please.

No, Basil said baldly.

What do you mean, no?

I mean, no, I won't do it.

Why? Annabella said, completely taken aback. Why ever not?

If you're still going to kill him, you're on your own. I can't help you. I don't even want to help you.

Well, thank you very much, Annabella said, starting to get angry. Nice to know who your friends are.

In this, lady mine, I am most definitely not your friend. If you want to do murder, you do it without my help.

You're serious, aren't you?

I have never been more serious in ten thousand years.

Even when you know what he's done to my parents, to all those others...?

You're not a killer...

You were the one who wanted me to sacrifice Toğrül...

I was wrong. I was totally, abso-jolly-lutely wrong. You know I was, and I won't let you turn killer now... Not with my help, anyway... You're not a killer...

Want to bet?

If you do it we're finished. Annabella was shocked.

I don't believe this, she said, stunned.

I mean it.

You mean, you won't respect me in the morning? she said, trying for humour.

I mean, I won't respect you at all, Basil said coldly.

But why? Annabella said. She was at a total loss. Try as she might, she could not understand why Basil was so vehement on the subject. After all, it was not as though he had not himself killed, often, no doubt, and no doubt justified. If executing Hassan-i Sabbāh was not equally justified then nothing ever would be, yet here was Basil prepared to end everything between them because of it. It made no sense.

Why? Why? she repeated.

Because then you'll just be another human, Basil said, his voice as thin as crackling ice. Like all the other humans. Like Hassan-i Sabbāh.

Which left Annabella with an invidious choice, a monstrous choice: Basil or Hassan-i Sabbāh ? Life or death? Love or hate?

And at that moment, staring at Hassan-i Sabbāh hunched over his bench, the man who had hounded her viciously, mercilessly, relentlessly, across a thousand years, hate won.

Then I'm sorry, Annabella said, aware that there was no guarantee how much longer Hassan-i Sabbāh might remain preoccupied. *I am just another human and I have to do this.*

She stepped forward, scooping up the ring as she passed and looping the chain over around her neck. She felt behind her back under the robes and drew out the knife, a traditional dagger, sharpened on both sides to a razor edge, and moving silently as a wraith, as silently as Basil, she crept up behind Hassan-i Sabbāh.

Now was the moment. The final moment. The moment of vengeance. The moment of justice. The moment when the world would be rid of a monster responsible for untold evil. The moment of ultimate vindication. She took a deep breath. She tensed. She consciously flicked the switch in her mind, turning off all her inhibitions...

She couldn't do it.

She screamed at herself. Weak! Pathetic! Coward! Traitor! She strained to break through the unseen mental barrier that had suddenly clamped itself around her. She fought to move, to succeed in inching forward as she had with Lilis. Surely, surely after all she had won through then, she must be able to strike now...

But no. No. No.

This she couldn't do.

She couldn't even raise her hand, never mind bring it plunging down from on high. She stood close behind Hassan-i Sabbāh, the Old Man of the Mountain, the Emir of Evil, breathing in his rank smell, the evil emanations, and strove to find the will to lift her arm.

For my father...!

For my mother...!

For me...!

She began to weep then, silently, and turned away.

Meanwhile, oblivious to everything but his frantic transcribing, Hassan-i Sabbāh laboured on.

Don't say anything, Annabella whispered brokenly.

I wasn't going to, Basil said in his ordinary voice. *I jolly well don't need to*. Clearly, he wasn't going to fall over himself to be comforting or reassuring. He waited a moment, then repeated: *We need to go*.

Annabella began to move back but, her vision still blurred with tears, she managed to stumble over the stool. It crashed to the floor with a loud noise. However, even this quite failed to penetrate to Hassan-i Sabbāh.

Go where? Annabella asked with scant interest. Her whole being had been geared to slaying her nemesis. She had not thought beyond that point and now that she had failed the future was so remote as to be non-existent.

Go where Iblis can't get to you, Basil said.. Come on, we don't jolly well have much time. Minutes...

But failure seemed to be reducing Annabella to a state of fugue. If Basil had possessed teeth, he would have been grinding them in frustration.

Annabella, he said urgently. We have to hurry.

Listlessly she began to move towards the doors. Behind her, Hassan-i Sabbāh, still totally heedless of anything else that might be happening, at last exclaimed aloud.

"Water!" he cried incredulously. "Water! Water of steam...!"

Distantly came the sound of a door opening and closing, but Hassan-i Sabbāh was too astonished to notice. The complicated formula for the reagent that he had agonised over for so long was simply a blind, just persiflage, meaningless misdirection. He cursed in disbelief, then rushed to set a pot of water on the fire, watching in a fever of impatience until at last it came to the boil. Then, still absorbed to the exclusion of all else, he drained the condensation from the underside of the lid into a beaker, the condensation that was water of steam, water free of all impurities, and according to The Book of Stones the only reagent required.

In preparation for this moment, he had already, yet again, gone through the ritual of producing the residue from his pyramid within a pyramid. He took the distilled water he had captured and set it beside the golden basin containing the precious white powder. Then with an involuntary prayer and a deep breath, he poured the one on to the other, watching in an agony of suspense as the two swirled together.

Annabella stepped over the guard slumped beyond the door and looked indifferently at the others who had been frozen. Her parents rushed towards her, their eyes full of wordless questions, bringing her back to a sense of the present, to the realisation that she was responsible for them, their safety. Somewhere deep inside herself, she found a small reserve of energy.

"Come on!" she ordered. "We have to get out of here." And as though in a dream, she found herself leading them in Basil's glowing wake along passages, through archways and up stairs.

Despite herself, Annabella began to flag. Basil, of course, had the route memorised and this time there was no need for a guide. He was in a desperate hurry and kept urging Annabella to go faster. Then she began to feel him pressing her on, like a hand in the small of her back. She did her best but after the events of past days she was now down to running on fumes.

She stumbled up yet another flight of stairs and sank to the floor.

Leave me, she said to Basil. Just leave me. Take my parents. Take them first...

Get up! Basil ordered.

I can't. Just leave me. Let me rest. Take my parents...

But instead, Annabella found herself being raised and slung over an invisible shoulder. John and Maggie spared each other an amazed glance then followed on without comment.

The swirling liquid at last began to still, then all at once it reduced itself to a few globules, milky white, luminous, glowing, beckoning. Hassan-i Sabbāh allowed himself a moment to savour his triumph. He had done it. He had finally manufactured al iksir, the true white drops, liquid gold, invulnerability, immortality.

He raised the basin on high in exultation, then brought it to his lips and drained it. The emulsion slipped down his throat like the smoothest silk caressing the softest skin, then sat next his heart radiating beneficence and well-being. For the first time in more years than he could remember, Hassan-i Sabbāh smiled. He was safe. Finally he was safe. In this world, and the next.

It was then that he noticed the overturned stool, the absence of the girl and more importantly the absence of the Seal of Solomon. It took him valuable seconds to assimilate the import. He began to run...

The mighty castle, the whole massive structure, trembled as though shivering in dread.

Basil, Annabella and her parents felt it, half way up the last spiral stairway to the central courtyard and open air.

Iblis, Basil said. He's here.

Put me down, Annabella managed to say. Just put me down and I'll go by myself. I'm the one he wants. Maybe he'll settle for me and leave mum and dad alone.

What are you saying? Basil demanded, jolted.

Let me go, Annabella repeated. I'm the one he really wants. I can save them, at least.

Basil turned white with anger.

I won't let you do this, he said, quivering. I will not...

Abruptly, Annabella found herself in a heap and the tendril of smoke that was Basil was arrowing up the remaining stairs. She picked herself up and with the last energy of desperation, hurled herself after him, followed a moment later by John and Maggie.

Basil was still shapeless smoke, still white, when Annabella rocketed through the portal into the open. Iblis, however, had assumed the form of a horned giant, all black, muscular bulges and oozing menace. He hung suspended above the vast parade ground of the castle, illuminated by the flaring light of torches and a gibbous moon. Annabella's parents looked at each other with wild speculation.

Stay back, Basil commanded, his voice urgent. However, Annabella walked forward until she was in full view and totally exposed.

"She is forfeit," Iblis boomed. "She is forfeit to Waq Waq."

"Not while I am alive," came a second voice. Annabella realised it must be Basil but she was hard put to recognise the deep growl of defiance.

No! she shrieked. No! No! No! Not this! I don't want you to fight! I don't want you to die! Not you. Not you...

But it's not your decision to make, Basil said gently, his voice still deep but now gentle and rich with tones she had never heard before. Later, she would realise that this was his heart speaking.

"Please," Annabella begged aloud in agony.

"Too late," Basil said, still in the same extraordinary voice. "I have given my word and like you I keep it."

Annabella looked again at Iblis and wondered why he had not acted on the instant to seize and abduct them. Could it be that he was wary of Basil, cautious, none too anxious to begin what he might not be able to finish? She could only hope.

What will he do? Annabella asked.

I don't know, Basil said. *I only know that there can only be one of him at any one time. Same for me. Now, lady mine, I wish you'd go... Somewhere safer...*

No, Annabella said and then repeated: *Please don't do this*. But before her eyes, Basil was also beginning to swell and bulge, legs and arms lengthening, torso expanding. He turned for a moment to smile at Annabella and for the first time she was able to put a face to him. As a warrior fighting the sand scorpions in the desert, she had only ever seen him from behind. Now, for a heart-stopping moment she was able to gaze into a fine-drawn, aquiline countenance with an expression all at the same time that was loving, humorous and fiercely determined.

No, she said again. *Not you! I can't bear it!*

Then it was too late.

Iblis and Basil began to circle, staring into each other's eyes, feinting, faking, wrestlers embarked on a bout to the death. Annabella was certain that Basil had no chance. He was slighter than Iblis, less muscular, and she felt sure that should Iblis ever seize hold of him then there could only be one end. What she failed to take into account was the fact that if Basil was more lightly built, he was also faster, more agile. Twice, Iblis closed on him only to have Basil neatly twist from his grasp. The third time, Iblis seemed to gain an arm lock only to have his legs swept from beneath him. He went down heavily to be followed an instant later by Basil, driving an elbow into his solar plexus.

Basil might have finished it then except that Iblis managed to connect with a wild, swinging blow to his head. The two separated, drawing back, the one dazed the other doubled over. Then Iblis began to change shape. The bulges smoothed out, his arms became legs, his horns swept forward instead of backwards and all at once he was a gargantuan bull, colossal head lowered to charge, foot scraping sparks from the pavement, bellowing with the rage of a thunderstorm.

And as Annabella watched, Basil also changed shape, also rapidly assuming the form of a bull, but with less time to react, perforce smaller, less massive, and white to Iblis's black.

They charged and the shock of their collision shook the castle to its foundations. They backed off, and with only second's pause again charged. Again the shock came vibrating up from the stone beneath Annabella. And this time, Basil was down. Iblis

circled and Annabella screamed a warning as he bored in, intent on goring Basil to death.

But again, Basil was changing shape. On the instant, he had become a giant python and as Iblis lunged, he lunged in turn, throwing his coils about the bull and squeezing with all the strength he could command. For seconds, it seemed that Basil would prevail, then Iblis began to swell hugely and struggle as he might, Basil was quite unable to contain him. In the end he was forced to release his hold or disintegrate. As he did so, Iblis hooked him savagely with a horn, tearing open a length of his belly and flinging him high into the sky, where he hung for an impossible length of time, twisting and turning.

Iblis seized his advantage. In a split second, he had flowed into the shape of an azdahāg, the ancient Persian dragon, and a great tongue of fire burst from his mouth. Annabella screamed again. She knew Basil, himself, was made of fire but the fact that Iblis would resort to it could only mean that the flame he was hurling at the sky must be as lethal to Basil as anyone else. As indeed it would be. Fire subsumes fire...

Basil finally began to fall but as he did so, he metamorphosed and all at once he was a bird, tiny compared with the monstrous dragon, but strangely familiar. Annabella racked her memory trying to bring the creature to mind and as she watched, Basil gained control of his cartwheeling tumble and launched into an arrowing dive.

Suddenly, Annabella remembered. Basil had turned himself into a jian, that strangest of all single creatures. Iblis loosed another great jet of flame but missed. Down screamed Basil, down and down, and at the last possible instant he split into the two halves of the jian, sufficiently close that he could maintain sufficient control for his twin beaks to go spearing separately, one into each of the dragon's eyes.

Iblis was blinded and gave such a shriek of agony and rage that it seemed the mountains must echo his torment till doomsday. Abruptly the dragon dissolved into a shapeless mass of black smoke.

Annabella, who had stopped breathing, inhaled hugely with relief. Basil reunited his two halves and then changed back into the familiar tendril. He came to be by Annabella, who at that moment wanted nothing so much in the world as to be able to hug him.

"Are you hurt?" she asked. "You were gored. What can I do?" Inured by now to the surreal, Annabella's parents looked on more or less indulgently as she conversed with a bit of smoke.

"Nothing," Basil said. "I'll be all right."

"I don't believe you," Annabella said and then: "Why did you fight? I didn't want you to fight..." Basil laughed tightly, as though he were trying to hold himself together.

"You really are hurt," Annabella said accusingly.

"But not as badly as jolly old Iblis."

"I hate you."

"Don't make me laugh," Basil protested. "And you do not hate me... Do you?"

"Abso-jolly-lutely," Annabella snapped.

"Well that's all right then."

"Is Iblis really blind?" Annabella asked after a pause, glad to change the subject.

"The dragon is," Basil said. "But only the dragon. Iblis is hurt, like me, but he can still jolly well see, unfortunately..."

"And fight...?"

"Oh yes," Basil said. "But will he want to? That's the jolly old question. I think he's had enough... I think it's stalemate..."

At that moment, Hassan-i Sabbāh raced into the courtyard from the portal behind them.

Well look who's jolly well just arrived, Basil observed. Annabella glanced back and she and her parents automatically moved as one to put extra distance between them and Hassan-i Sabbāh. He opened his mouth to speak, but it was Iblis who broke the sudden silence.

"You have failed your bond," he thundered at Hassan-i Sabbāh, though there seemed to be an undertone of pain. The emir flinched and Annabella had the impression that it was only a last vestige of pride that prevented him throwing himself on his face and grovelling abjectly.

"They are there," Hassan-i Sabbāh gabbled, pointing a shaking finger. "Take them, you can take them. Now."

"They are protected," Iblis proclaimed. "You have failed your bond," he repeated. "Life for life. Waq Waq demands life for life. You are forfeit."

"The ring," Hassan-i Sabbāh threw at Annabella from the side of his mouth. "Give me the ring. I must have the ring..." His voice was beseeching, rising, on the edge of hysteria.

The ring, the Seal of Solomon. Annabella had quite forgotten she had the ring. She could have used it to save Basil and damn the consequences...

Annabella stared into Hassan-i Sabbāh's eyes, stony-faced, silent. Inside, she was equally numb. That retribution should descend on him in such a fashion was almost impossible for her to absorb.

"The ring..." Hassan-i Sabbāh begged, but already he had abandoned that hope and was glancing wildly about him.

"Guards!" he screeched, waving his arms dementedly at the Assassin sentries on the battlements, sentries who for the most part were crouched in attitudes of frozen terror, still mesmerised by the battle between Basil and Iblis. "Guards! Guards! Draw! Shoot!" He pointed at Iblis. "Shoot!" He repeated.

One or two of the less petrified fida'is actually did manage to rise, nock an arrow and loose it in Iblis's direction. It was the last thing they ever did. The arrows rose in smooth curves, turned about and flew back in exactly the opposite direction to transfix the hearts of those who had fired.

"Stupid," Iblis intoned. "Stupid beyond belief. Waq Waq is a fitting fate for such as you."

"No!" Hassan-i Sabbāh shouted, and then suddenly remembered. His voice changed on the instant from desperation to something approaching smug satisfaction. "No," he

repeated. "I have made al iksir. I have taken al iksir. Waq Waq cannot touch me. I am invulnerable. You cannot harm me. I am immortal."

There was a long pause. Hassan-i Sabbāh stood gloating, confident now that even without the Seal of Solomon he had Iblis's measure.

When Iblis spoke at last, it was not to Hassan-i Sabbāh, but to Basil. His voice was quiet, reflective.

"This is not finished between us, al Yazid," he said. "Nor is it finished between me and the girl. Follow, if you dare, and witness the fate of those who defy me."

Then slowly, Iblis again began to change form. He became a hand, a giant hand, that reached forward, formed a fist about Hassan-i Sabbāh and plucked him from the ground.

Infinitesimally, the fist began to rise into the air and Hassan-i Sabbāh to scream, a scream amplified by and resonating with the screams of all his thousands of victims. The fist paused high above the castle and then began to move south and east.

"He is challenging us to follow," Basil said. "That's why he's moving so slowly. We would be mad..."

"We have to finish it," Annabella interrupted. "Please."

"But your parents?" Basil objected.

"I'll take care of them," a new voice said.

"Pater?" Basil said, astonished. "What on earth are you jolly well doing here?"

"Protecting my investment," the Sheikh said. "Though as it turned out, I needn't have worried. Perhaps now, I really can retire."

Chapter 25

Vivienne and Darius were confused, not to say alarmed. As the dinner hour came and went with no sign of their American waiter, they had slowly come to the realisation that apparently they had been completely abandoned. They wandered about the beach uncertainly, calling, and then went to stand beneath the Sheikh's cavern in the moonlight, shouting as loudly as they could. But they could get absolutely no response.

Very quickly, Vivienne was descending into panic and Darius was not feeling anything like as masterful as he tried to pretend. It seemed that to all intents and purposes they were now completely marooned on the equivalent of a desert island and must fend entirely for themselves.

"Don't w-worry..." Darius began at one point. He tried again. "Don't worry. Tomorrow I'll catch some fish."

"My hero," Vivienne said with wounding sarcasm. "With what?"

"Um..."

"Exactly." Vivienne stalked off back towards the hut, leaving Darius to follow or not as he chose. He sat down on the sand, morosely heaping up a pile and then smoothing it out, over and over again. Vivienne, he was coming to the conclusion, was a complete mystery and not at all the way men of his class expected women to be, that is to say submissive and generally admiring. The question he had not yet resolved was whether the mystery of Vivienne was actually one he really wanted to bother with.

He was still brooding obsessively there on the beach when a shooting star streaked across the sky, except instead of fading into nothingness as they always did, it grew brighter and brighter as it flew straight towards him.

"Vivienne!" he shouted. "Vivienne...!"

She recognised them from the picture. They could only be Annabella's parents, the father tall, gaunt and with a scholar's stoop; the mother dreadfully emaciated but still attractive for all that and with the same chestnut hair and blue eyes as her daughter. Vivienne also noted that Annabella's mother seemed to have entirely adequate front which might indicate there was yet hope for Annabella herself. Vivienne was not quite sure how she felt about that. Then she was running towards them.

Basil took up Annabella in a gentle embrace and together, they too rose into the air above Castle Alamut to follow in the wake of Iblis.

What will he do? Annabella asked.

I don't know, Basil said. His voice sounded strained.

We shouldn't be doing this, Annabella said, all at once racked with deep concern and considerable guilt. *I shouldn't have asked you. You're hurt. You're not well enough.*

I'm all right, Basil said, rather shortly. *Jolly well stop going on about it.*

You do, if it's me... Go on about things, I mean.

Basil made no reply and Annabella also fell silent. This time, she really had reached her limit. Young and strong, she might be, even a force of nature as Basil had proclaimed her, but right now, she was finished. The strains of the past few days, physical, mental and emotional, had completely drained her and now that there was no reason not to surrender, she sank into an exhausted stupor.

She woke with a start.

Wake up, lady mine, Basil was saying. I think we're there. I think we're nearly there.

Annabella sat up and gazed about. The landscape was as desolate as any she had ever seen. The sun was far down in the western sky and Annabella realised that she must have been asleep for the best part of twelve hours. Even so, she still felt dreadful. To their right, the dispirited waters of the Arabian Sea were nibbling at a dirty, brown biscuit, a coastline so flat and disheartened that even the low-slung sun could scarcely find a shadow worth the name.

Where is there? Annabella asked rather dazedly.

Baluchistan, I think, Basil said. Or maybe still just inside Persia.

Why?

I don't know. But it can't be good. Not for Hassan-i Sabbāh...

Slowly, on this utterly featureless landscape, a small discordance became apparent. At first it was the merest pimple on a skin diseased with leprous monotony, but gradually as they came closer it began to acquire shape and form, until it reared up into the sky, a giant, loathsome pustule, hundreds of metres high. Faintly on the wind, came the stink of sulphur. With no warning a jet of flame erupted, shooting viciously into the deepening dusk.

What is it? Annabella asked, wonderingly.

Trust Iblis, Basil said.

Trust Iblis to what?

To find something truly awful, truly disgusting.

Disgusting? What is it, Basil? What is that huge cone thing?

A volcano, Basil said. But worse.

Worse? What worse?

It's a mud volcano.

You don't mean...?

Hassan-i Sabbāh is doomed to spend eternity eternally drowning in boiling mud.

But surely...?

Al iksir, lady mine. If he really has taken it, he can't die. But he will spend eternity suffering the torments of the damned, praying that he might.

Annabella was silent. She supposed she ought to feel triumphant. Finally Hassan-i Sabbāh, that most insanely evil of men, was to receive a punishment both supremely ironic and supremely fitting, but all she felt was empty.

The hand of Iblis came to a stop and hovered over the exact centre of the terrible crater. The thick, viscous mud, the colour of pus, bubbled slowly. Occasionally a jet would be thrown up to splash over the rim, dribble down and add to the sides of the massive cone. Again there came an eruption of gas which somehow was sparked into flame.

They could hear Hassan-i Sabbāh screaming as he realised his fate, the screaming of a man in a frenzy of fear.

Iblis drew it out to the point where Hassan-i Sabbāh began to hope that he might yet be spared, and then the hand opened, and vanished. Hassan-i Sabbāh scrabbled at the sky, trying to haul himself up. For a second he seemed to be succeeding then all at once he began to fall, faster and faster.

He hit the mud with a most incongruous plop, an epitaph as inglorious as it was appropriate, and disappeared. He resurfaced some seconds later. He was already coated with a thick glaze of scalding filth but threshing wildly, he somehow managed to force himself waist high above the surface, shrieking with unbearable agony. Then, finally, he was gone.

"Take us over the crater," Annabella said when it was quite certain that never again would Hassan-i Sabbāh reappear.

"There's nothing to see," Basil said. "He's gone. They're both gone. It's over."

"Not quite... Please, Basil."

A moment later they themselves were hovering above the boiling mud, lazy bubbles rising one by one, eventually to pop with a glutinous squelch. Annabella felt around her neck and withdrew the Seal of Solomon. She held the chain a moment watching the gold ring glint in the last rays of the sun, the rubies shooting sparks of fire. Then she stretched out her arm, the chain pinched between finger and thumb, and finally released it.

It seemed to take an age to fall, twisting reluctantly, loathe to leave the world, but at last it hit the surface with a small splash and vanished into the centre of a small, undulating tremor of ripples.

Vivienne was swimming. The water was a touch crisp for real pleasure but she had finally persuaded the Sheikh to allow her at least a modest one-piece and she was determined to use it lest he take it away again. Anyway, the effect on Darius made the chill all worthwhile. He was shocked to his core but could not help staring avidly. Truth be told, however, Vivienne was rather disappointed with the young man. Apart from anything else and despite encouragement blatant as she felt able to make, he still seemed far from venturing anything more than that one touch on her arm so long ago, particularly with the Sheikh and Annabella's parents around. It was downright disheartening.

Idly, she wondered what Annabella would suggest, and immediately wished she hadn't. For the moment, Vivienne had managed to switch off her constant worry and fear for her friend, but now, here it was, right back up to full force.

She had absorbed everything Annabella's parents could tell her of what had happened and it did indeed seem that things might be coming to some sort of satisfactory resolution. Nevertheless, the fact remained that the last anybody had seen of Annabella was her flying off in hot pursuit of Iblis, a most potent force for evil and incidentally landlord of Waq Waq. Vivienne was of the firm opinion that it would be downright foolish to assume nothing else could go disastrously wrong. She fretted accordingly.

Without Annabella, the future was bleak and uncertain, but to do her justice, Vivienne was far more concerned for her friend than she was for herself. Even so, she would have been less than human not to have been aware that she was in a more or less impossible position. Her immediate situation was pleasant enough but she couldn't stay forever on some remote beach with an inhibited boy and a musical djinni in quite the wrong century. But where she could go and what she might do when she got there, she had absolutely no idea.

She turned on her back and lay floating motionless, complacently admiring the shapely bumps in the front of her swimsuit. Well, she was thinking, life isn't all bad, when her eye was drawn to a movement in the sky. Something seemed to be racing towards them. Vivienne automatically assumed it was some sort of plane and then realised she was being remarkably stupid. For some seconds, she wondered absently what it could be and then all at once she was sprinting for the beach, hope surging.

Annabella – it was Annabella – looked terrible. She was still dressed in many layers of shapeless winter clothing, but her face had the same sort of pallor as bleached bone except around her eyes where it was bruised and smudged with shadings of green. Her hair was filthy and it seemed she could hardly stand. Vivienne took one look, then folded her unresponsive body in her arms only to find herself surrendering her friend to her mother seconds later.

"Basil!" Vivienne said furiously. "Are you here? What have you done to her?"

"I haven't done anything," Basil said with marked restraint. "But others have been doing their jolly best to destroy her... So you be jolly careful what you say."

"Sorry," Vivienne said perfunctorily, only concerned with Annabella. "A bath, Basil. She must have a bath, and food, and bed..." But already, Maggie was supporting her daughter towards the hut.

Annabella slept the clock around and woke to a warm, sunny morning. Her mother was sitting beside her, holding her hand. Annabella lay for a long time, not thinking, deliberately not thinking and then, try as she might, the world and its works started to intrude.

Basil, up near the ceiling, watched the changing expressions on her face but wisely said nothing. Annabella must come to terms with all that had happened herself... Or not. His heart ached, knowing what she must be going through, but still he said nothing.

Twice Vivienne looked in on her, but on encountering Maggie's glare went away. Once Darius lingered outside the doorway, but then he too went away.

At last, Annabella spoke.

Basil, she said. Will you come back with me?

No. It was said unequivocally but with a great depth of sadness.

What am I going to do without you?

When you needed me most, I couldn't be there. You'll do just fine. You're Annabella Crabtree.

But I...

I know. So do I...

We could...

No.

Annabella left her parents to find the others at the end of the rocky point, under the cliff, admiring the sunset. Vivienne and Darius watched her picking her way slowly towards them.

Now was the time, Vivienne thought. If Darius were going to say something, now was the time. Or it would be too late. She turned towards him and twice he opened his mouth to speak. Twice he closed it. In the end, he said nothing. Vivienne shrugged eloquently. To be strictly honest, she had no clear idea of what she wanted to happen and if Darius didn't either, so be it.

They were convened in the Sheikh's cavern. He cleared his throat.

"How shall I put this?" he began, sententiously if not downright pompously. "In recognition of our esteemed colleague's services to the Light..." Here he indicated Annabella. "...It has been recommended and approved..." Meaning Annabella thought of it and Basil and the Sheikh are going along with it, Vivienne interpolated rather snidely to herself. "...That certain domestic infelicities should be addressed with vigour."

And exactly what did that mean, Vivienne wondered?

"Further," the Sheikh continued. "It has also been recommended and approved that this young man..." And here the Sheikh indicated Darius. "...Should be set to study medicine with eminent person or persons deemed suitable for that purpose, with sufficient endowment that he need not ever again be a burden on his father..."

Vivienne saw with a distinct pang that Darius's face was shining with a great deal more animation than he had of late been directing towards her.

"Finally," the Sheikh summed up. "It remains only to note that this has been a most successful operation that reflects enormous credit on those who participated. Thank you. Meeting adjourned."

Vivienne's mouth fell open. She couldn't help herself.

"But what about me?" she demanded querulously. "What's going to happen to me?"

"Don't worry," Annabella said. She was still subdued but already a long way back to being the old Annabella.

"But I do worry," Vivienne said. "How can I not worry? What am I going to do?"

"It's all right," Annabella reassured her. "You're part of the domestic infelicities." And with that Vivienne had to be content as despite a fair to middling tantrum, nobody could or would tell her any more.

"The front door, I think," Basil said. "Yes, definitely, the jolly old front door..."

They were standing, Annabella, Vivienne, John and Maggie, in the driveway to the manor house, just out of sight round a curve. Predictably it was raining. No longer needing a decoy to entice Annabella, on this occasion Basil had not bothered with his tower. The Sheikh had helped with the transport and then with a quick farewell had disappeared.

"How much time has passed?" Annabella asked. "How long have we been away?"

"A while," Basil said cryptically. "Long enough for things to jolly well calm down. Come on, I hate getting wet."

They crunched across the gravel and with a most expressive look at Vivienne, Annabella pressed the doorbell. When, eventually, the door was opened, the look on Mrs Milliken's face was unforgettable. She stood there for a long minute, staring.

"Who is it?" an impatient voice came from down the hallway. A moment later, Great-uncle Warwick appeared. He too was struck dumb.

"Permit me to jolly well introduce myself," Basil said. He allowed himself to thicken so it was quite plain where his voice was coming from. "Basil al Yazid at your service. And it would be best if you were to invite us all inside. We have certain matters to jolly well discuss. I imagine it might take quite a long time..."

Vivienne and Annabella, soon to be sisters, were sitting on what was now Vivienne's bed in Vivienne's bedroom, temporarily anyway. Vivienne was still rather dazed by all that had happened. She and Annabella were to stay at the manor house for the duration, while Annabella's parents went about re-establishing their lives and incidentally began the formal adoption process so that never again would Vivienne be subject to the arbitrary whims of the department. Also, they were to begin hunting for a school that both girls might find rather more congenial than Flintlock College and others of its ilk.

"But, however did you manage to make Great-uncle Warwick take us back, and... everything?" Annabella said to Basil, her waving arms encompassing all manner of small miracles, not least the fact that Great-uncle Warwick, if not Mrs Milliken, suddenly seemed positively jovial in their presence.

"Lots of carrot, and a little bit of jolly old stick," Basil said comfortably. "Great-uncle Warwick is suddenly a jolly sight better off. And not only does he not wish to lose his new-found wealth, he certainly doesn't wish that I should ever jolly well visit him ever again."

"What did you do to him?" Annabella said.

"Abso-jolly-lutely nothing," Basil said innocently. "But he's in no doubt as to what I might do to him if he doesn't behave like a decent human being."

Annabella and Basil were alone. The time had come.

"I hate this," Annabella said, struggling to find a way to express all that was still unspoken between them. "I don't want you to go."

"I know," Basil said softly.

"So don't..."

"I don't belong in this age."

"But Iblis, Lilis... What if they...?"

"They don't belong in this age either."

"Hassan-i Sabbāh sent 'ifrīts..."

"He's gone."

There was silence.

"Don't go...!" Annabella whispered at last. It was a cry wrung from her heart.

Again there was silence. Just silence.

The end

