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# SHRINE OF THE DESERT MAGE

Volume I of The Parsina Saga

**Stephen Goldin**

**Parsina  
PRESS**  


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This book is dedicated to  
Alexander Borodin  
Edward Knoblock  
Charles Lederer  
Luther Davis  
Robert Wright  
George Forrest...  
and Alfred Drake as Hajj



## PROLOGUE:

### The Holy City

The tale is told of a time when all Parsina was shaken with war; when the oceans bubbled and the very sky caught fire; when a legion of demons fought the army of men; when the Peris took up arms and the King of the Winds bent himself to human purposes; when the earth split open and swallowed a city at a single greedy gulp; when strength and courage vied against treachery and corruption; when love battled hate and creation warred with destruction; when kings and princes fought for the honor of humanity against a swelling tide of demonkind; when the forces of Oromasd and Rimahn themselves contended for control of the world and the universe hung in the balance scale, half a feather's weight from chaos.

Such a time there was, and if you're patient you will hear of it.

But before that time, there was Ravan.

Ravan the Golden; Ravan the Beautiful; Ravan, the City of the Gilded Domes; Ravan, the Mother of Cities;

Ravan, the Fountain of Goodness; Ravan, the Jewel of Mankind; Ravan, Bane of Djinni; Ravan, Blessed of Oromasd and Cursed of Rimahn; Ravan, City of a Hundred Temples; Ravan, Center of the World.

Ravan, City of a Thousand Names, City of a Thousand Thousand Blessings.

Ravan, the Holy City.

The builders of Ravan had sought to make it perfect, for no site more deserved perfection. In that crack of time between the Fourth and Fifth Cycles, between the Age of Heroes and the Age of Ravan, it was this spot that stood as fulcrum in the balance between good and evil. In the Kholaj Desert to the east the battle was waged, and heroes died so men might live free of Rimahn's evil influence. In the heart of what came to be Ravan, King Shahriyan himself declared the victory of Oromasd and mankind over the forces of darkness and dissolution. Likewise in that spot did the wizard Ali Maimun, greatest mage of a wondrous age, shatter the Crystal of Oromasd in twain, and then in twain again, so no man could profane its holy powers.

No heroes of that stature were left; their Age had gone, and them with it. But their legacy of peace was enjoyed by men for so many generations that even the oldest villagers could not count them.

To celebrate and commemorate this triumph, King Shahriyan ordered built the finest city in the world. Tribute poured in from all lands, from Indi and Sinjin, from Tatarry and Sudarr, even from Norgeland and the far Islands of Fauk; no kingdom was so far it had not heard of the marvels, and none was so untouched that it would not contribute to the greatness.

Materials arrived in train after train, and the land around Ravan was so cluttered with caravans they could scarcely move for their crowding. Marble and al-



abaster, cedar and teak, turquoise and diamonds, rubies and emeralds, lapis and jade, silver and ivory, all arrived in quantities beyond reckoning. But most of all there was gold—gold in wicker baskets, gold in bricks, gold in jewelry, gold in dust, enough gold to burden ten thousand camels for a year and still have enough left over to please a sultan's harem.

But it was not just materials that made the city. Each king, in grateful tribute, sent his finest artisans and craftsmen to aid the construction. From all corners of the world came architects, engineers and builders, stonemasons and carpenters, sculptors, plasterers, bricklayers, and woodcarvers, all vying to outdo one another and make Ravan the most beautiful city the world has ever known. An army of artisans, working day and night; an army, some say, that was larger even than the army King Shahriyan used in his triumphant battle. The sounds of their hammers and chisels and saws echoed through the surrounding countryside for many years as the city of Ravan rose from the plain of mankind's most tremendous battlefield.

King Shahriyan was an old man by the time the city was completed, and he had vowed never to set foot inside the walls until Ravan was finished. Now at last he came with his procession, an old warrior mounted on his white horse with the gold trappings. By all accounts there were tears in his eyes as he and his retinue marched through the Palace Gate and down the magnificent streets of Ravan; some say he was struck dumb by its beauty and grandeur, and could not speak again for upwards of a month. A few even say he never spoke again save in a whisper, so awed was he at the marvel he'd caused to be created.

This, then, was the Ravan of King Shahriyan: A city built on a mound more than two stories tall, a mound

surrounded entirely by a deep ditch except in those places where the roads approached. To the west of the city flowed the Zaind River in its southerly course, far enough away so that even at its highest flood the waters would not threaten the city's walls, close enough to allow the river commerce that brought wealth into the city. To the north, the Tirghiz Mountains rose as majestic backdrop to this jewel of all cities, their streams and creeks feeding the underground aqueducts that brought life to Ravan. To the south were the fertile plains of Leewahr, whose crops and whose livestock fed the hungry population of the Holy City. And to the east lay the burning sands of the Kholaj Desert, ever a reminder of the desolation Rimahn brought into the world.

Atop its peaceful mound, surveying its surroundings, was Ravan itself, a city built in a circle. The outer walls, four stories tall and built of massive stone blocks, enclosed the circular city with a diameter of more than a parasang. Inside the outer wall ran a second ditch and then the inner wall, five stories tall, of brick and plaster. Safe within these formidable defenses, the city of Ravan reposed.

Four gates only breached these walls in the time of King Shahriyan. To the north, the Palace Gate shone out its hues of burnished gold with bas relief birds and animals, real and mythical. To the west was the silver River Gate, inscribed with calligraphic motifs. To the east, the massive bronze Merchant's Gate with floral designs welcomed travelers who'd journeyed across the desert from the far and mystical lands of the east. To the south was Peasant's Gate, carved in geometric patterns from rare teak.

Four roads ran through the city from these gates, intersecting in a maidan at the very center, and along the roads were the major bazaars that served the city. The

bazaar running north and south from Palace Gate to Peasant's Gate was called the King's Bazaar because it passed the palace. The bazaar was wide enough for four ox carts to pass abreast. The entire length was enclosed with a vaulted arch of wood. In the northern half the wood had been gilded, but the southern half was scarcely less impressive, lacquered in floral designs of blues and reds and greens and golds; because of this design, the southern half was sometimes also known as the Flower Bazaar.

The road across the east and west sides of the city was narrower, just two ox carts wide. From the central maidan to River Gate the bazaar was overhung with fabric of a hue that gave the street its name—the Saffron Bazaar; while the eastern half of the street was shaded by brocade canopies and thus named the Silk Bazaar.

In the maidan at the very center of town, on the precise spot where King Shahriyan declared his victory, stood a public fountain issuing forth its sweet water for all who needed it. From the center of the fountain rose a memorial obelisk on which was inscribed the story of King Shahriyan and his knights, and of Ali Maimun the wizard, and their triumph over the forces of Rimahn. Each year thousands of pilgrims journeyed to Ravan from all parts of the world to read the story for themselves and drink the water from the sacred fountain.

The palace Shahriyan had built for himself lay in the north of the city, against the inner wall and just to the west of the King's Bazaar. Built of stone and marble and purest white alabaster, it was every bit as impressive as should befit the monarch who had saved the world. The domes of its roof were all gilded, and so numerous that any man who tried to count them rapidly lost track and gave up the task in hopeless frustration. There were

fountains and shady gardens within the many palace courtyards, but the great wonder were the gardens that adjoined the palace on the south side. The royal gardens, so it was said, contained every flower and tree known to man, and were so extensive they required an army of gardeners to tend them. Lucky visitors to the gardens could wander for hours without repeating their path, and it was widely agreed that the royal gardens of Ravan were numbered among the wonders of the world.

But for all his worldly wisdom, for all the fact that he was a strong and noble monarch, King Shahriyan did not forget that the true victory belonged to Oromasd, and that he and his armies had merely been acting as the appointed instrument of Oromasd's divine will. From his first commission, good King Shahriyan had insisted that the builders of Ravan make it a city devoted to Oromasd, a city of light and virtue—as much a city of spiritual good as of worldly goods. Ravan was to be a beacon to people everywhere, proclaiming the glory and power of Oromasd throughout the world.

True to their orders, the architects and builders of Ravan set out to make the new city the holiest spot on earth. In collaboration with the priests and the mages they installed relics and talismans every few cubits within both the inner and outer walls around the city, so no forces of evil could ever breach those barricades. They designed and built shrines throughout the city, so Ravan acquired its name of the City of a Hundred Temples. Each was a work of art, each a tribute to the glorious creator of the universe. Theologians and priests came from all over Parsina to study in the madrasas of Ravan. While it was universally known that Oromasd saw all that transpired on earth, the citizens of Ravan contended with justifiable pride that he paid a little

more attention to Ravan than elsewhere.

Jewel of all the temples was the Temple of the Faith, also called the Royal Temple because it abutted the southwest wall of the palace. This was a building to rival the palace itself, its gold dome the largest ever built by man. The minaret at the south side of the temple was the highest point within Ravan, and atop it burned the everlasting flame, symbol of Oromasd's power. The flame could be seen from any point in Ravan and in the countryside for parasangs around, so the populace would know that the power of Oromasd never diminished in its sustenance of Ravan.

In addition to the palace and the temples, there were other buildings in Ravan as well. Spacious and comfortable caravanserais were spread among the bazaars for visiting merchants, pilgrims, or scholars. A myriad of flat-roofed houses bordered on the twisting lanes of each quarter. None of the houses was less than a mansion, and each had a central court with a sumptuous garden, a tribute to Oromasd's blessings and the fecundity of the Holy City.

Such, then, was the Ravan built by King Shahriyan: a city of dreams, a metropolis unparalleled in the history of Parsina, a center of both worldly and spiritual wealth. It was a city without cares, where any man could enter and be happy and at peace.

King Shahriyan lived for only a year in the palace of Ravan, growing weaker and older with each passing day. It was as though, with the completion of the city, his appointed task on earth was done and he could look forward to nothing else life had to offer. The priests of the Royal Temple comforted him, and at last his soul slipped off to meet its destiny on the Bridge of Shinvar.

Other kings followed King Shahriyan to reign in Ravan. Some were as good as he, some were less good,

some few even were bad. Some were loved by their subjects, others tolerated, and some were vilely hated. Some extended their influence throughout most of Parsina, while others were content merely to run the affairs of the city itself. Kings of other nations made war and sued for peace one with the other; armies invaded, armies defended, armies conquered. But Ravan remained untouched, a pearl inviolate in the bed of earth. War, dissension, famine, and even plague passed it by, as though unwilling to blemish Ravan's sanctity. Whatever happened to the rest of the world, the people of the Blessed City remained secure in the knowledge that their place in the scheme of life was settled and stable.

Thus it was for generation after generation. Sons grew old and daughters got married, and life succeeded itself in its eternal revolution. Men and women came and went, and the wheels of Time would spin and grind.

The Holy City changed but slowly. After more than a thousand years a fifth gate was added in the southeastern portion of the wall, Beggar's Gate, and the road leading northward from it to intersect the Silk Bazaar was called the Winding Bazaar because of its twisting route among the streets of Ravan. The shops here were poorer and there was no canopy to shade passersby from the heat of the sun. Some of the merchants put small awnings over the doors to their stalls, but many didn't even bother.

Many grew rich in Ravan, and even more grew poor. The adage "Better a beggar in Ravan than a king in Kandestan" was of more consolation to the kings than the beggars. The rich merchants, the fat landlords, the snobbish moneylenders expanded and consolidated some of the original houses; a single household could incorporate three of the old buildings, and some of the

elite mansions began to rival the palace itself. The nobility gathered in the northern half of the city; the closer the home was to the palace, the more honored and privileged the noble.

The southern half of the city was left mostly to the middle-class merchants, the pilgrims, and the poor. Houses here were often divided among many families. As the buildings grew older they were often razed instead of repaired and newer, meaner dwellings took their place. While poverty never took root as deeply as it did elsewhere, not even Ravan was immune from the decay of time. The city's original luster wore thin, revealing the common clay beneath the glazed facade.

Still, life proceeded on its daily pace and the people accepted their lot with grace.

The Cycles turned, the universe revolved, and the threads of Fate were woven into their ever-new tapestry. The Age of Ravan, like some ancient clock, was winding down. The new Cycle, when it came, would depend not on the vagaries of heroes, but those, instead, of men.

# Chapter 1

## The Thief

The night was dark but clear, and the waning moon still had not showed its face above the horizon. In the shadows along Ironsmith's Road in the northwest quarter of the city, a figure moved stealthily along the base of the wall. The figure was cloaked in black and shod in soft leather boots so his footsteps would make no sound as he slipped through the night like a ship through a tranquil sea.

Hakem Rafi was, both by nature and by choice, a fulltime thief and an occasional murderer. His fate had been sealed by his birth as the son of a whoring mother and an unknown father in the city of Yazed some sixty parasangs southeast of Ravan. Sickly and weak as a child, often neglected and left to survive as he could, he lived by his wits and the quickness of his hands and feet. He envied those who had more than he did, which was everyone, and early in life swore a vow to reduce the rest of the world to his own level of moral bankruptcy. To this end he lied and cheated, gambled and whored; he stole when he needed money and he killed



when he had to. He was not a cruel man, just conveniently callous. If Fate decreed him the life of a cockroach, then he would be a cockroach and defy the world to squash out his life.

Hakem Rafi had lived all his life in Yazed until three months ago, when the wali of police died of political causes. As the new wali was less corrupt and less amenable to persuasion, Hakem Rafi decided his fortune might better be made elsewhere. Having heard all his life about the riches of Ravan, he ventured to the Holy City in the hope of making a new, if similar, beginning.

Life in Ravan was difficult, however, for a man of his particular talents. Even the poorer merchants usually had one or two hulking servants guarding the merchandise in their shops, while the nobles and wealthy traders scarcely went anywhere without a full retinue of bodyguards. Hakem Rafi found easy pickings among the poor, the crippled, and the aged, but the rewards were seldom worth his efforts.

With his money spent and in vile circumstance, Hakem Rafi was desperate to change his situation—so desperate he was willing to risk confronting the guards by breaking into the house of a rich merchant. In the past he'd always preferred speed to stealth; it was far easier to cut the strings of a purse and run through the crowd, or to waylay an unsuspecting victim in a back alleyway, than it was to climb over a wall or break through the lattice of a window when the owner might be waiting with a large knife just on the other side. Still, if the one path was impossible, Hakem Rafi was prepared to take the other.

He'd chosen as his victim a wine merchant, a man old in years and infirm in body who was known to hoard great piles of coins in secret niches within his

walls. The merchant would probably die soon anyway, and Hakem Rafi merely sought to simplify the division of his estate. In scouting the merchant's house during the daytime, he had observed a break in the otherwise impassable wall at the northern edge of the house where the gardeners had carelessly knocked some bricks loose into the street; that would serve as his entryway.

As he now reached his chosen spot, Hakem Rafi paused once more to taste the air with his ears for any tang of danger. All was peaceful; not a soul stirred within the house or out on the street. With a final prayer to whatever daeva guided such endeavors, the thief gathered his strength and leaped for the top of the wall.

Hakem Rafi was a small man in body as well as soul, slim and wiry as a coiled spring. In most places the wall was twice his height but here, where the top had crumbled, it was just low enough for him to reach. His hand grabbed hold of the crumbly brick and he quickly pulled himself to the top. Surveying the ground beneath him for a safe spot, he jumped down again into the garden.

His troubles began immediately upon hitting the ground. His black cloak, swirling around him, caught on the upper branches of a pomegranate tree, and the weight of his body caused several small twigs to snap loudly as he awkwardly pulled himself free.

The merchant, as chance would have it, owned a dog. The beast was old and nearly as toothless as its master, but fiercely loyal and fearlessly aggressive. Hearing the twigs snap, small a sound as it was, woke the creature, and its old nose was still keen enough to catch the scent of a stranger. Stirring its aged bones and barking a loud cry, the dog bounded across the garden to attack the interloper.

Hakem Rafi was a nervous man, always edgy, his eyes constantly darting like a hummingbird on a spring afternoon. He heard the barking and saw the dark shape come leaping at him through the bushes, and his hand immediately reached for the khanjar he wore at his belt. The dog's body knocked him over just as he pulled the curved blade from its sheath. A quick upward thrust and a downward pull were sufficient; the stink of ripped organs and fresh blood poured forth. The dog would protect its master no more.

But in its death the dog had performed its final duty. Even as he wiped the dog's blood from his hands and knife onto the lawn, Hakem Rafi could see lights appearing in the windows of the house as its occupants lit candles and lamps to see what the commotion was about. It would be some minutes yet before they ventured into the garden, Hakem Rafi thought; the old man would probably be afraid an army of thieves had come to steal his hoard, and he and his servants would hesitate to rush out until they knew the truth of the matter.

Unfortunately for Hakem Rafi, the old merchant had a son in the prime of life, as fearless as the dog and far more capable. Without a moment's hesitation the young man came racing out into the garden, not even stopping to arrange his turban, sword drawn and ready for a fight. Hakem Rafi, who preferred his fights less well matched, decided this would be a moment for retreat.

He pushed away the body of the dead dog, rose quickly and leaped for the breach in the wall. The ground of the garden, being softly turned earth, did not give him a solid base and his leap was short. His fingernails scraped at the top surface without catching hold and he fell back awkwardly into the garden.

He could hear the approach of the merchant's son and, behind him, the servants and slaves who were more than willing to let their noble master precede them. With desperation lending strength to his legs, Hakem Rafi leaped again and this time his hands grabbed the crumbling brick. Pulling himself upward he scrambled to the top of the wall and dropped over the other side.

He landed beside the wall in the narrow ditch through which sewage was channeled to the khandaq. His boot slipped in the muck but he regained his balance without further incident and stepped onto the more secure footing of the street. Even as his mind considered the avenues of escape, Hakem Rafi was cursing his luck in this so-called Blessed City.

Behind the wall the entire household was now awake and, with the discovery that there'd been but a single intruder, the bravery of its staff was asserting itself. The cry of alarm was going up throughout the neighborhood, and it would not be long before every house along this street was alerted to the threat. Hakem Rafi saw the advantage of visiting some other quarter of the city as rapidly as possible.

Ironsmith's Road ran east and west, branching off the King's Bazaar in the northwest quarter of Ravan. Even as Hakem Rafi was contemplating his action, the servants of the wine merchant were pouring out the gate on the eastern side of the house, cutting off his escape back to the King's Bazaar. Further west the road curved to the south and came to a dead end. Hakem Rafi saw, in the dim shadows of starlight, a small lane running to the north and quickly dodged into it, hoping to escape his pursuit.

At first the alley seemed another hopeless path, with no cross-streets into which he could turn. Hakem Rafi

ran at his swiftest pace, while behind him the hue and cry of the indignant citizens roused the neighborhood to action. Then, just when he'd abandoned all thought of escape, the alley ended and Hakem Rafi found himself standing before the doors of the Temple of the Faith.

Throughout the centuries many men had turned to the Royal Temple for salvation, but few as desperately as Hakem Rafi the thief did now. The cry was up throughout the quarter, and escape along the streets would prove impossible for a while. The thief hoped he could dodge into the temple and find some dark corner to hide him until the crowds outside died away again and it was safe to leave.

The main gates to the temple were shut and barred at this late hour. Hakem Rafi raced frantically along the outer wall until he came to a smaller gate, less frequently used. This entrance, too, was closed, but because it was less important the priests had not given it too much attention; the iron bolt barely went across the frame, and Hakem Rafi's panicked shaking jiggled it enough to slip it out of the latch. The portal opened for him and the grateful thief slipped inside. He remanded himself to the mercy of Oromasd as he shut the heavy door behind him again and barred it securely this time.

He found himself in the ziyada, the outer courtyard of the temple separating the building proper from the street. He started to relax, but then realized that if the hue and cry of his pursuers awakened any of the priests they'd be able to spot him easily here in the open. After regaining his breath he moved silently and with greater deliberateness to the doors of the temple itself. These were unlocked; barring the outer doors had been deemed sufficient to keep out intruders. Hakem Rafi entered the Temple of the Faith so quietly that no one

heard him. The few priests awake at this hour were absorbed in their own devotional duties.

He was now in the riwaq, the covered arcade with four rows of immense columns dividing the space into areas for teaching and prayers. Past the edges of the riwaq was the enormous open courtyard where the faithful could gather once a week to listen to sermons. The Royal Temple of Ravan was the largest ever built by man, and the courtyard was so vast that, in the darkness of night, Hakem Rafi could barely see all the way across to its far side.

The thief wandered slowly through the riwaq, his feet making no sound on the carefully swept ground. The portico was dimly illuminated by occasional perfumed oil lamps and candles kept burning around the clock as tributes to Oromasd. The floral richness almost disguised the stink of sweat and blood coming from the thief. As he walked, and as his eyes became accustomed to the feeble lighting, Hakem Rafi grew awed by his magnificent surroundings. It was not an overwhelming love of Oromasd that caused this feeling, nor yet an appreciation of the temple's vast size or architectural brilliance. Rather, it was the fact that the Temple of the Faith was more lavishly embellished than any building the thief had ever seen before—and certainly was richer than Hakem Rafi thought any temple ought to be.

Some parts of the walls were mosaics of glazed tiles with calligraphic designs, but most were handpainted with scenes depicting famous battles and legends from the Age of Heroes. Here, the hero Argun battled the twelve lions of the Hajjani Pass; there, Shiratz beheaded Affiz the three-eyed giant; beyond that, the priestess Rida outwitted the demon who'd been sent to seduce her from the ways of righteousness. The paintings, once in vivid colors, had faded over the ages, but the gilded

highlights showed as clearly as ever. More impressively to the mind of Hakem Rafi, every painted figure—be it bird, animal, human, or demon—had eyes that were set with jewels. Demons had eyes of rubies, cats had eyes of opal. Birds had eyes of sapphire, while other beasts had eyes variously of pearls and jet. Men had eyes of emeralds and women eyes of diamonds. The smallest of the stones would purchase a kingdom and a thousand warriors, while the largest were of values beyond even Hakem Rafi's greediest reckonings.

Niches in the walls contained figurines of jade or ivory. Carved wooden screens were inlaid with ivory, turquoise, and mother-of-pearl. Even the sconces and the candelabra set in the walls were silver and gold.

Hakem Rafi marveled at the richness of the Royal Temple, and as he marveled his greedy thoughts bred like mosquitos in the swamps of Nikhrash.

Oromasd created the world and all its riches, thought Hakem Rafi. He created wealth beyond measure. Great was his power, and he could easily create more with but a single thought if he so chose. He would hardly miss a stone or two from the walls of this one temple.

The priests of Oromasd lived simple lives, thought Hakem Rafi. The temples provided them with food and shelter and all their worldly goods. They had no need for such riches. A stone here or there taken from its setting would not impoverish them nor diminish the greatness of Oromasd. There were so many gems here they would not even miss the loss for many years.

So thought Hakem Rafi, the thief. Having thus convinced himself his sacrilegious acts would hurt no one and benefit himself greatly, he set about to steal some of the Royal Temple's treasure for his own gain.

The temple's builders had been well aware of the

temptation they were placing in people's paths, and had designed the temple accordingly. The figures in the niches, the jewels in the walls, even the candelabra—all were placed well above the reach of even a tall man. Hakem Rafi looked for the lowest stone he could find and leaped as high as he could, but still the treasure remained tantalizingly out of his grasp.

Hakem Rafi leaped again and again, growing progressively more angry and progressively more winded. His robe left streaks of filth on the pristine walls, and his feet hit hard enough to echo across the courtyard. As he made his fifth leap and puffed from his exertion, one of the junior priests chanced to walk through the riwaq. Hearing the sounds of the thief's labors, he stopped and called out, "Who's there? Who disturbs the nighttime peace?"

Realizing his night had now been doubly cursed with discovery, Hakem Rafi turned to flee. In doing so he ran straight into a second priest who'd entered the riwaq at his fellow's cries. The priest grabbed at his cloak as Hakem Rafi ran by, preventing the thief's escape. Hakem Rafi reached quickly for his khanjar once again and stabbed the unfortunate priest up under the ribs. The man gasped hoarsely and fell to the ground, still clutching at the thief's black cloak.

Hakem Rafi paused with annoyance to pull the fabric out of the dying man's grasp. The first priest was continuing the alarm with cries of "Help! Murderer!" and he was too far away to silence. His cries were already causing a stir in the upper levels of the temple, and so Hakem Rafi realized that once again he'd have to flee without attaining his goals.

Pulling free of his victim, he raced without thinking to the nearest door, which happened to be at the front end of the temple. He yanked the door open and



stepped inside the enclosed room—but when he saw where he was, his heart froze for an instant.

He had, without realizing it, entered the sanctuary where the flame of Oromasd burned continuously. This was no ordinary blaze, but the sacred Bahram fire that only the holiest of priests could oversee. An enormous brass basin filled with ash stood by the front wall, with a large jewelled crown hanging over it to proclaim it the king of fires. The regal flame burned like a beacon, and the stand on which the basin rested was plated with gold. In front of the flame was a rectangular marble altar on which the priests could place their sacrifices. A rich linen cloth bordered with embroidered lettering in gold thread currently covered the altar top. The walls of the room were tiled in geometric patterns of peacock blue, white, and claret. Except for himself, there was no one else here.

Such is the power of old habits that even an irreligious man like Hakem Rafi was struck with awe at a moment like this. The sanctuary was off limits to all but the noblest priests, who brought the prayers and sacrifices of the people in and offered them personally to Oromasd. Even Hakem Rafi, who professed to respect no one and nothing, felt he had violated some sacred privacy. Reverently he dropped to his knees and bowed his head to avoid looking at or breathing on the Bahram flame that symbolized the might and the majesty of Oromasd the Creator.

After a moment, though, his sense of self-preservation returned. The sounds of the priests gathering outside reminded him he had to be on his way. Hakem Rafi raised his head again preparing to rise—and in that instant, the world was changed.

There was a niche in the wall behind the basin of the Bahram flame. Sitting in the niche was a reliquary urn

little more than half a cubit tall. The urn may have been made of gold, but it was so thickly encrusted with diamonds and emeralds it was hard to tell. There was some writing inscribed around the base of the urn, but Hakem Rafi was illiterate and cared nothing for such things.

The jewels glowed in the light of Oromasd's flame, shining with a gleam that riveted the thief's attention upon it. The beauty spoke to his soul, the gems to his greed. Hakem Rafi ached with all of his being to possess this small urn, to hold its treasure for himself. Not even the burning fire of Oromasd could draw his attention from the golden urn; its light merely enhanced the glory of the dazzling artifact.

The world lost all its perspective, time lost all meaning. The desperation of his plight, the sounds of the priests running in the outer corridors, all vanished from his thoughts. Like a mystic in a trance, Hakem Rafi rose slowly to his feet. The universe was empty save for him and the urn, as though kismet had prepared him all his life for this moment. The thief moved like a sleepwalker as he walked around the altar, past the dancing flame, and to a spot directly under the niche that held the urn.

This niche, too, was placed high on the wall, but Hakem Rafi never once doubted he could reach the desired treasure. He made one mighty leap, and Fate lent strength to his legs. His outstretched fingers brushed the urn, knocking it out of the position it had occupied since the Royal Temple was built. It began its long fall to the floor even as Hakem Rafi himself was on the downward course of his leap. For one brief instant it appeared the urn would smash upon the ground, but the thief's quick hands grabbed it and preserved it from damage. As Hakem Rafi himself fell to the ground, he

gathered the urn in towards his body, protecting it from harm. The touch of that mysterious object was electrifying, making him feel his destiny had finally arrived.

Hakem Rafi stood beside the flame of Oromasd and gazed into the jewels adorning the urn. Their beauty was so deep, their facets so exquisitely cut, a man could lose his soul staring into their glittery interiors. The thief's craggy features and rough-hewn beard took on the beatific expression of a baby at rest as he contemplated the glowing universe within his hand.

Then the trance was shattered and reality returned with a crude rush. The priests were massing outside the door to the sanctuary. With one of their number already murdered they were not going to attack the intruder individually, but they hoped to make a collective charge that would overpower the thief before anyone else could be hurt. Having finally gained a treasure worthy of all his troubles, Hakem Rafi was more eager than ever to escape this trap successfully.

Nothing could be allowed to harm his beautiful urn. Looking quickly around, he grabbed the cloth off the marble altar and wrapped it hastily around the urn to protect it in case it fell from his grasp. Then he tucked the urn deep into the pocket of his kaftan and searched for another way out of the room.

He spied a small door off to one corner, and ran toward it just as an army of priests armed with ceremonial knives and other makeshift weapons burst in through the main entrance. Hakem Rafi dodged through a maze of narrow back hallways within the temple, becoming thoroughly lost in the process, while the priests chased at his heels like hunting dogs in full pursuit. He found a series of steps and climbed up two stories until he found a doorway out onto the roof of the riwaq.

The outer ziyada made escape impossible that way—

but on the side of the temple where the sanctuary was, the building was separated from its neighbors by only a narrow alleyway. Running with the quick stride of the accomplished thief, Hakem Rafi raced to the edge and leaped onto the roof of the building across from the temple. Some of the priests followed him, but most were less daring and less desperate; they returned instead to spread the word of the temple's violation to the Royal Guards.

For the next hour and a half, Hakem Rafi the black-souled, the accursed, led his pursuers a merry chase across the rooftops and down the back streets of Ravan. Where before he'd been spurred by fear and desperation, the acquisition of his precious urn had filled him with a glow of confidence. Though sometimes his pursuers came almost within reach, he never lost his faith in his ability to elude them. After dodging down one winding, narrow street he heard the growing horde of his pursuers—numbering many of the Royal Guards by this time—race off in a different direction, finally chasing a shadow that was not of his making.

Hakem Rafi leaned against the wall and wiped the sweat from his brow with the tattered sleeve of his cloak. Then suddenly he threw his head back and laughed. It was a high-pitched laugh, a harsh laugh, a laugh devoid of mirth or good humor, a laugh deriving from the cheating of the innocent and the misleading of the honest. Hakem Rafi was a man who laughed at cripples when their crutches cracked.

When he'd had his fill of laughter, Hakem Rafi took his prize from his pocket and looked at it by starlight in the early morning darkness. Even though dawn had not yet begun the waning moon had risen and shed some light on the empty street. Unwrapping the urn, he let it glitter mysteriously under the moonlight, its jewels

hypnotizing him once more with their unearthly beauty.

He looked for a moment at the altar cloth in his other hand. It was a fine piece of fabric and intrinsically valuable, but it would be far too recognizable for him to trade safely. There was bound to be a fuss about the thief who'd broken into the temple. The jewels in the urn could be pried loose from their settings and sold individually, and the golden urn itself could be melted down into a safer form. The altar cloth was too distinctive to sell.

Tossing away the cloth, Hakem Rafi tucked the urn once more in his pocket and walked jauntily back to the miserable room he rented in the caravanserai behind the Winding Bazaar.

A reliquary urn and a discarded altar cloth. With such slender threads, then, does kismet weave its intricate tapestry and change the fate both of worlds and of men.

## CHAPTER 2

### The Storyteller

Morning came to Ravan with little outward sign to mark the passing of one era and the dawn of a new. Few citizens were aware of any change at all; even those who'd participated in the chase through the darkness thought of it as nothing more than a thief in the night—an annoyance, to be sure, but scarcely an interruption in the peaceful flow of events that made the calendar of Ravan such a remarkably boring document.

The thoughts of Jafar al-Sharif were not upon such weighty matters as the change of worldly Cycles and the fate of all Parsina. The thoughts of Jafar al-Sharif were centered more on the rumblings in his belly and the lightness of his purse, which he'd emptied yesterday of its last few copper fals so his daughter Selima could buy some food for the day. And the thoughts of Jafar al-Sharif were centered on how he could fill up both belly and purse while yet making an honest living.

Like Hakem Rafi the blackhearted, Jafar al-Sharif was but lately come to the Holy City of Ravan. Like Hakem Rafi, he was finding his new home less than re-

warding to a man of his peculiar talents. But there the similarities ended. Where Hakem Rafi stole men's money, Jafar al-Sharif stole only their attention; where Hakem Rafi killed people, Jafar al-Sharif killed naught but time. Jafar al-Sharif was, by both profession and inclination, a storyteller—and while some have argued that storytellers fulfill no useful purpose in life's plan, the harm he did was likewise minimal.

In his native Durkhash, Jafar al-Sharif had been justly renowned as one of the premier artisans of his craft. His patrons included the noblest families of the city, and more than a few times he'd been called upon to entertain King Ashtor himself. The death of his beloved wife Amineh had so driven Jafar to distraction, though, that he had no choice but to seek his fortune elsewhere. He'd come to Ravan in hopes of improving his lot—yet the only work he'd found here was telling bawdy stories in taverns for meals and drinks, a particularly demeaning occupation. Still, in the daytime, he searched for higher employment with hope ever strong that his true talents would be recognized and rewarded.

Jafar al-Sharif stopped his morning walk before the carved wooden gate of a wealthy home in the northwest quarter of the city, and paused to gather his nerve. Knowing that outward appearance was a vital asset to a storyteller he'd taken great pains to look the part. He was a tall man with a suitably handsome face, old enough to have streaks of gray prominent now in his well-kept beard. He was wearing the best of the three outfits he currently owned: the white sirwaal pants with the gold sash, the white kaftan with the gold sequined sleeves, his good niaal, and the mantle so heavily embroidered with gold thread it was hard to see the color of the original fabric. Only a person looking very closely would see how badly frayed the embroidery around the

hem and the cuffs really was.

Straightening his lemon yellow turban, Jafar al-Sharif took a deep breath, stepped forward, and knocked authoritatively on the gate. After a few moments the door was opened by a crusty old man who, by his outfit, appeared to be one of the household domestics.

Jafar al-Sharif bowed and said in his deepest voice, "Salaam to thee, O worthy servant of a noble house. Please inform thy master that Jafar al-Sharif awaits his pleasure."

The old man gave a slight nod of acknowledgment and closed the door again. Minutes passed interminably. The gate had been opened just enough to allow the aroma of breakfast to escape and tantalize the storyteller's nostrils, and his nose reminded him how empty his belly was. Jafar al-Sharif stood and suffered until the door opened and the old man reappeared.

"My master says he knows no one named Jafar al-Sharif," he said in a thick Chudish accent, and started to close the gate again.

The storyteller moved forward just far enough that his foot rested against the gate near its hinges, not allowing it to close. He waved his arms in broad gestures as he spoke. "Allow me then, O valued servant, to correct the oversight which I'm sure is due solely to my having come but so recently to Ravan. In my native Durkhash I am widely renowned as Jafar the golden-tongued, Jafar the spellbinder, Jafar the spinner of a thousand thousand tales, Jafar the fablemaster...."

"A storyteller," the old man said with insight, and again would have closed the door had Jafar's foot not prevented it.

"More than some mere street-chanter, I assure you," said Jafar, striving still to keep the desperation out of



his voice. "My repertoire is the most complete in all Parsina, suitable for any occasion. I have sagas of history and stories with morals to educate the young men of the household...."

"They already have teachers," the old man interrupted.

"Stories of love to touch the heart, stories of adventure to chill the blood, stories of magic to astound the mind," Jafar continued undaunted, his hands waving with serpentine grace to emphasize his words. "I have stories of manners to charm the ladies and stories of erotic delights to please the most jaded of men. My stories speak to the soul as well as to the ear, lifting it to soar through the air like a hawk on the desert currents...."

"We don't need a storyteller."

"Ah, you only believe that because you've never heard my talents for yourself. Your voice marks you as a native of illustrious Chudistan. Surely you were raised on tales of King Bhered and the Varanhi Knights. What Chudish boy doesn't grow up dreaming of Khanseranno, the Jeweled City, and its beautiful warrior queen, Moranna? Announce me to your master, let me regale his table, and I'll make those tales live again for you."

"My master isn't Chudish and those stories wouldn't interest him," the gatekeeper said stubbornly.

"Then I have others that will. What man does not need to forget the cares of his worldly day, to fly on wings of song and fable to another land beyond his own? What noble table is complete without the entertainment only a fablemaster can provide, to regale household and guests alike with tales of other times and other climes? I ask you, sir...."

"We've already got a poet," the old servant said.

"A poet? A *poet*?" Jafar al-Sharif straightened his

back and drew himself up even taller, towering over the shorter figure of the old man. “Surely a man of your intelligence, of your Chudish discernment, knows better than that. Consider, O illustrious doorkeeper, what is a poet? Merely a rhymers, a juggler of words in clever order. I do not mean to speak ill of poets, far from it; poets have been some of my dearest companions. I myself, from time to time, have been heard to say an occasional rhyme. A man whose table boasts both a storyteller *and* a poet is justly renowned as a learned man indeed, for all knowledge and all beauty are available at his command.

“But to retain a poet in *place* of a storyteller is rankest folly. That is the valuing of style above content, the frame more than the picture. Poetry supports and enhances a story; it does not substitute for it. A man who keeps just a poet would go through the world with one ear and one eye when he could easily have two at his disposal. A poet alone....”

The old servant had heard more than enough. He slammed the gate so hard that Jafar al-Sharif had to pull back his foot lest his ankle be shattered.

“May thy nose grow warts on the inside, O guzzler of camel’s piss.” Jafar spat the Chudish curse at the now-vanished gatekeeper—but not loudly enough, he hoped, to really be heard. He was in no position to alienate anyone in Ravan, no matter how rude or abrupt they were.

Instead he turned his feet northward along the Street of Jewelers and walked along, muttering to himself. “Thus is Jafar, confidant of kings, brought low. Forced to argue with menials about the worthiness of art, forced to justify my own existence to an ignorant Chudistani who knows nothing about talent and cares even less.”

He kicked at a clot of dirt in the road at his feet and, in a voice to mock the servant's, repeated, "*We've already got a poet.* Now all thou needst is a brain, son of a monkey's sputum."

He tried again at other gates and other houses throughout the morning, but his reception was largely the same. Storytellers were not in vogue in Ravan these days. Poets, it seemed, were all the rage. Every rich merchant and noble household sponsored at least one, if not an entire stable of the creatures—yet no one was willing to spend a dirham for a storyteller of substance and art.

Jafar's spirits sank lower with each rejection. To be unwanted is a bad thing, but to know one has a proven talent and to be outcast because it is unpopular is devastating. Jafar's eyes were cast hopelessly downward as he at last gave up his attempts for the day and began making his way through the now-busy streets of Ravan to the caravanserai where he and Selima currently dwelled. Perhaps tonight he could find some other tavern where his stories were fresh and his welcome hadn't been worn out.

With his gaze so low, he could not miss the glint of gold as it shone from the corner of a doorway. Thinking at first it might be a coin, he moved closer and saw that it was merely gold thread along the bottom of a long rectangular piece of good white linen. The gold was stitched in a design he recognized as lettering, but the words meant nothing to him. Reading was not among the talents of Jafar al-Sharif. He could hear any story once and know it forever in all its detail, but the mystery of the written word was still beyond his grasp. It was a trait he shared with most men of his time.

Jafar the storyteller bent over and picked up the discarded cloth. He knew enough of such matters to tell it

was a valuable piece of fabric—too valuable to be simply lying about in the street. Since it had been lying near a doorway his first thought was that the owner of this building must have dropped it—but the building was a large warehouse, currently empty. The words sewn on the bottom of the cloth might be some blessing or invocation, but they would not reveal the name of the owner; no one sewed names onto cloth because a fine piece of fabric could be handed down from generation to generation, reworn and remade in a variety of guises. There simply was no clue to the original owner of the cloth, and so Jafar assumed it was his to find and keep and use as he would.

The cloth was finely done, but ironically enough it was of little use to him because there wasn't enough of it to sell. There was real gold in the thread, but to pull the embroidery apart would devalue the entire piece.

“O great lord Oromasd, mysterious indeed are thy gifts,” Jafar mused. “If I had found food, or money with which to buy food, I would have been eternally grateful for thy bounty. Instead, thou givest me a cloth I can neither eat nor sell. I wonder, sometimes, at thy sense of perversity.”

He was about to discard the cloth once again when an unselfish thought struck him. True, the cloth was useless to him, but his daughter Selima might have some use for it. She'd been wearing her late mother's dresses a year now, and even they were becoming threadbare. It had been so long since she'd had anything new of her own. Jafar had seen her eyeing with envy the beautifully dressed women of Ravan, but Selima had made no complaint, no protest of her lot in life. She deserved at least a token of his parental love for her patience and good spirits.

Jafar al-Sharif looked at the fabric again and smiled,

picturing his beautiful Selima wearing it draped over her head and down her back. He could hear her laughter in the ears of his imagination, and he could picture her smile lighting up an entire room with its glow. This cloth would be a gift for Selima, then, courtesy of her father and the great lord Oromasd. Jafar might be in little demand as a storyteller and unable to earn even their daily food, but he vowed there was no one, king or peasant, on the face of this earth who would surpass him in parental affection.

With his love for his daughter warming his heart, Jafar al-Sharif tenderly folded the newfound fabric and held it to his chest as he walked slowly back home.

Near the central fountain in the maidan of Ravan, behind the King's Bazaar, was the caravanserai where Jafar and his daughter currently made their home. This was a large two-story building with a wide courtyard and a central fountain of its own. Merchants and pilgrims from all corners of Parsina stayed here on their travels through Ravan; merchandise was stored in ground floor rooms around the courtyard while the travelers themselves slept in the upper floor rooms, alone or in dormitories depending on their situation. The landlord of the caravanserai appraised each new guest upon arrival according to the cut of his clothing, the weight of his purse, and the value of his merchandise, and was licensed by the throne to charge each according to his ability to pay. The fees from the richer patrons more than made up for the loss on the poorer ones.

As the poorest among the poor, Jafar al-Sharif and Selima occupied the worst room in the caravanserai, a small enclosure beneath the stairs next to the stables, a room where usually only saddles and horse trappings were stored. The caravanserai landlord, taking some

measure of pity on this pair, allowed them to watch over the stables so they might occasionally receive payment from generous travelers to guard their mounts. This payment, small though it was, had enabled them to live for the past few months since arriving in Ravan; but now, with the coming of summer, there would be fewer visitors to the Holy City and fewer beasts in the caravanserai to care for.

As Jafar al-Sharif entered the caravanserai he could see Selima squatting beside the entrance to the stables, idly tracing pictures in the dust on the ground. She did not see him, and the storyteller stopped to look at the beautiful daughter he had raised while she was thus posed in fragile innocence.

Selima was a blossom entering her fifteenth summer. Though veiled and covered now in public, Jafar knew her long black hair flowed like a midnight river down her back and her black eyes glowed like jet, set off by a complexion as radiant as the moon on its fourteenth night. Her breasts were as ripe pomegranates and her slender hips swayed enticingly when she moved. Dressed as she was now, in one of her mother's old gowns, she made Jafar's heart ache anew at his loss. He recalled the first time he'd seen his lovely Amineh unveiled on their wedding day, when he realized his parents had arranged a marriage even better than he could have hoped for.

The thought of marriage brought a brief cloud over Jafar's face as he realized Selima would soon be ripe for marriage herself. He frowned when he thought of his failure as a father to provide her with a suitable dowry. Beautiful though she was, no decent man would consider her without a good bride price, and Jafar was not going to allow just *anyone* to steal away the treasure of his life. There had to be a way, somehow, to assure Seli-

ma the future happiness his daughter deserved.

As he stood there lost in these dismal thoughts, Selima looked over and spotted him, and jumped up to run to his side. Only as she approached did she notice his drawn expression, and she realized his search today must have been as fruitless as it had been in the days and weeks before.

“Oh Father,” she said sadly. “Still no luck?”

“Poets!” Jafar exclaimed with disgust, waving his arms about. “All they want is poets. Imagine—Ravan, a city out of legend, denying its own heritage for poetry. It’s obscene, a travesty.”

Selima put her arms around her father’s waist and held herself tightly to him. “If they want poets, Father, why not be a poet? It can’t be too hard if so many others can do it. I’ve heard you recite poetry, you’re very good. I’ll bet you’d be the best and certainly the handsomest poet in all Ravan.”

Jafar shook his head. “When Oromasd gives you a specific talent, it’s prostitution to demean it. It’s bad enough I have to spin my tales for drunkards in taverns. I’d sooner spend my life guarding stables than twisting my talents into the wrong channels. Besides, I have serious doubts about any place that would scorn storytellers and revere poets.”

He disentangled himself from Selima and walked across the courtyard to their tiny room, where he sat down disconsolately on the trunk that contained the few worldly possessions they still hadn’t sold. Selima followed him, her eyes filled with sadness for the agonies of her poor father.

“I regret the day I ever let you convince me to leave Durkhash,” he said, burying his face momentarily in his hands. “I was known and respected there. I could have become shaykh of the storytellers if I’d stayed. Here I’m

just a stablehand with unseemly pretensions.”

Selima knelt beside him, removed her milfa so her full face was showing, and put her slender arms around his shoulders. “You knew as well as I did that Durkhash was no longer for you. In the last year, since Mother died, you told no stories. You wandered the streets like one of those old men who sit near the fountains and babble to anyone who’ll listen.”

“I loved Amineh very much,” Jafar said quietly. “I miss her terribly.”

“I loved her too, and I miss her no less than you do,” Selima insisted strongly. “But Oromasd has seen fit to leave us both among the living, so living is what we must do. A month of mourning is fit and proper, but over a year borders on obsession. When I heard they were lacking storytellers in Ravan I knew it would be the place to rejuvenate you.”

“And instead it’s only made me feel more alone, more unwanted,” Jafar said. “Were it not for my love of you, I’d have ended my life long ago.”

“I’ll hear no more of such nonsense,” Selima said. Taking her father’s head in her hands, she turned it forcefully until his face stared directly into her own. “O my father, you are a wonderful man still in the prime of your years. I’ve seen women turn their heads to follow you when you walk through the streets. I’ve watched their eyes admire you even through the modesty of their milfas. If Ravan does not appreciate such a master storyteller, then Ravan is only the poorer for its ignorance. There are plenty of other cities, hundreds of places to go where a man of your talents will be justly appreciated.”

Jafar al-Sharif smiled wanly and returned his daughter’s hug. “How did an old liar like me raise such a practical, levelheaded daughter?”



“With your honest love and your gentle wisdom,” Selima replied affectionately.

Jafar smiled and, digging into his pocket, pulled out the piece of cloth. “I brought you a present.”

“Oh Father, we have no money for such things.”

“Not everything requires money, though that’s less true in Ravan than elsewhere. Oromasd sent this to me specifically for you to wear, to make you even more beautiful than you already are.” He unfolded the cloth to show it to her in its entirety.

Selima stared at the fabric, her expression a curious mixture of amazement and practicality. “It is very pretty,” she said cautiously.

“Stand up, let me try it on you.” Selima rose obediently and her father draped the cloth over the top of her head and down her back and shoulders.

“I thought you might use it for a head scarf of some kind.” Jafar stepped back to examine the effect more fully. In the dim light, with the whiteness of the fabric billowing around her, Selima looked even more like a ghostly reflection of his beloved Amineh.

Unaware of her father’s inspection, Selima was appraising the gift carefully. “It’s the wrong color for an abaaya, and it’s too long for a taraha, and the fabric really isn’t proper. It’s cut in a rectangle, which is awkward, and I can’t recut it without ruining the embroidery....”

She looked up to see her father’s face, crestfallen at her criticism of his present. Selima went over to him and hugged him yet again. “O Father, forgive a silly daughter. I didn’t mean to complain. The fabric is lovely, it truly is, and I’m not used to such richness. I only meant I’d have to study the cloth carefully if I want to use it properly. I didn’t want to ruin it by foolishly cutting it up or adapting it to some minor purpose. This

gift is so beautiful it must be shown off in the best possible manner. I'll have to give the matter great thought so I don't waste the present you've brought me."

Jafar laughed. Looking down into his daughter's beautiful face he said, "Your mother taught you well how to humor an old man's moods. The cloth cost me nothing but the effort to bend down and pick it up from the street. My only hope is that it gives you pleasure. If it does that, then I'm happy; if not, you can throw it back onto the street and we're no worse off than we were before."

"I will keep it, O my loving and generous father," Selima insisted. "It is beautiful, it does please me, and I'll find some use for it that does honor to you, the giver." She took the cloth from her head, folded it with exaggerated reverence, and placed it atop the trunk that was their sole furnishing in the tiny room.

Turning back to her father, her face was bright with hope. "Oh Father, Abdoul the draper gave me ten fals this morning to watch his camels. We can eat again today!"

"Oromasd be praised," Jafar said. "My stomach was complaining of its emptiness so loudly I could barely hear what you were saying. Have we any food left on hand?"

"None. I was waiting for you to come home so you could guard the stables while I went off to shop. Some rice and leeks, I think, and maybe enough left over for some fruit if we're lucky."

Jafar nodded glumly. He was becoming very tired of rice and leeks, but they could afford little else these days. "Don't forget, go to the stall of One-Eyed Habib. The food's of poor quality, but his prices are cheap and he won't cheat you."

Selima nodded as she once more donned her milfa.

“My father’s wisdom guides me in all things,” she said—and then she was gone, her niaal flying across the bricks of the courtyard and out into the street beyond.

Jafar al-Sharif walked slowly from his room to the stable entrance, where he took up his familiar position on the stool by the doorway. The air here reeked of camels, horses, and asses, and all their dung, all their piss, all their sweat. Jafar thanked Oromasd he did not have to clean out the stalls. There were stablehands to do that; they were better paid than he was, but they earned it well. His task was merely to sit here and make sure no thieves absconded with the travelers’ beasts.

The stablehands were gone now, and Jafar was alone in the stable. “Poets,” he said again as he thought of the day’s humiliation. “No good can come of a city that ignores the meat and laps at the gravy. It’s decadence, that’s what it is. Mark my words, the Holy City of Ravan is on the decline if it casts out its storytellers. Nothing but doom and destruction can come from forgetting the past and bathing in the meaningless perfumes of idle rhymers.”

To his right, a camel snorted. Jafar al-Sharif looked over and nodded. “See, even the dumb beasts agree with me.” He turned his eyes heavenward. “O noble lord Oromasd, is it really too much to expect thee to give the people of thy Holy City as much good sense as thou gavest a camel?”

## CHAPTER 3

### The Wizard

The majestic peaks of the Tirghiz Mountains extended to the north and east of Ravan all the way to the edge of the Bitter Sea, that enormous inland lake which spawned the Harrud and Meshkal Rivers. To the north and east of that lay the wastes of the Gobrani Desert, so vast that few men had traveled its full extent. Past the Gobrani were the steppes of Birsk—and along the northernmost edge of those steppes the Himali Mountains jutted up from the earth as though to form a wall to keep men from falling off the rim of the world.

Few were the human eyes who'd seen the Himali Mountains firsthand, and even fewer were those who'd seen its wonders at close range. Steep escarpments and deep ravines, treacherous avalanches and ravenous monsters tended to discourage people from exploring the mountains' secrets too closely. Most of the peaks retained their snow for ten or eleven months out of the year and all but the hardest—or foolhardest—people kept far away from that forbidding range.

At the very top of the highest mountain in the Hi-

mali chain at the edge of the world, on the mountain so high it had no name known to man or djinn, sat a mighty castle looking down on the world with lofty coldness. In point of fact, the castle did not sit on the mountain; the castle was part of the mountain itself, an integral segment of the peak's natural majesty.

No human hand had worked to construct the castle. An army of Marids—those powerful spirits of the second rank of the djinni—working day and night for a year, a month, a week, and a day had carved the castle out of the naked rock. Then, at the bidding of the one who'd summoned and commanded them, they returned to the shadowy realm of their homeland.

Shahdur Castle, as it was known to those select few who even knew of its existence, stood as aloof as a glacier and as majestic as the mountain from which it was carved. No mortal army could conquer it, no human spies could breach its walls. It was a position of power from which its sole human occupant could conduct his affairs, insulated from the passions and the prejudices of the tiny world below.

The wizard Akar was the mightiest sorcerer of his age, perhaps the mightiest the world has ever known. Certainly the only man who could have challenged him was Ali Maimun, wizard to King Shahriyan, and he'd been dust for so many centuries that any attempts to compare the two men's powers were doomed to failure. Akar himself made no comparisons; he knew he had no equals and refused to consider the situation further.

The master of Shahdur Castle lived his life quietly, secure in his niche of knowledge and power. He had few enemies because he touched few lives; those foes he did have could not reach him in his stronghold. Akar had no friends, for similar reasons, and counted himself lucky. Friends brought distraction, friends brought

randomness into the order of one's life. Akar judged himself an independent man and prided himself on his ability to live apart from all that was normal for lesser mortals.

The life of Akar the wizard was as cold and passionless as the rock of his castle's walls. He would wake in the morning to breakfast served by one of the djinni who were his slaves. He would spend most of the day in one or the other of his many testing rooms, experimenting with spells, potions, and the nature of matter and energy. After supper he would retire to the vaulted chamber of his library, said to be the most extensive in all Parsina. There he would conduct his research as one of his magical servants read to him from among the myriad volumes.

Unlike Hakem Rafi the thief and Jafar al-Sharif the storyteller, Akar the wizard knew how to read. In his case, though, it was a useless talent—for Akar had been blind for the past fifteen years. The loss of his sight had come about not by accident, but rather after great deliberation on his part. He had traded his eyes to a Shaitan in exchange for the ability to know the innermost name of any secret object or person.

Knowing the inner name of something gave Akar great power over it, for he could control it and conjure it as he wished. He considered the trade a wise one, and would not exchange the power he'd gained for his eyes again even if the trade were offered. Eyes could be fooled, eyes could be distracted, eyes were useless half the time in the darkness of night, anyway. He now stood in no danger of being diverted from his serious pursuits by the colors of a sunset or the beauty of a woman. He wore black patches over both his empty sockets and walked unerringly around his castle, whose every twist and turn had long ago been memorized.

Akar lived his life for the accumulation of knowledge and power, and dreamed of the day he would bring his rule of peace and justice to all of Parsina. He knew that, for the present, his goal would have to remain just a dream. Even as Parsina's most powerful magician, with armies of djinni to fight for him, he still could not conquer all. The Holy City of Ravan would stand against him, and he did not yet have the key to unlock that final barrier. He was not even sure what that key was, but he knew it had to exist somewhere. So he continued his research and his experiments, confident that someday he would indeed find that one clue that would make him master of all the world.

On the night of Hakem Rafi's burglary of the Royal Temple, Akar sat suddenly up in his large bed. Something had disturbed his normally deep sleep. He listened with ears more sensitive than any normal man's, but the castle was still and no sounds reached him. The senses of touch, taste, and smell likewise failed to identify the source of the disturbance, so Akar reached out with the senses beyond the body's to investigate the cause of his awakening.

All of Parsina was underlain with a magical web of light and energy that bound together time and space. Everything that was and everything that might be existed on the web. The death of a star and the birth of a gnat registered on the web, each event to its own degree. A wizard like Akar worked by tracing the lines of confluence and pulling on the strands of the web. This web of reality was Oromasd's ultimate creation, and by tracing the intricate patterns Akar hoped to control the world.

The web was trembling violently now, as though hit by a major shock. This was no immediate danger to him—Akar had a multitude of protective spells and devices

that would alert him of any approaching threat—but instead a major disruption in the orderly flow of the universe. Akar, who strove to know all there was, had to investigate this anomaly.

All fatigue was banished by his burning curiosity. Arising from his bed, he quickly donned his loose, flowing kaftan and his zarabil and strode rapidly from the room. Down and down the spiral staircase of stone he walked, each step precise and formal with no wasted motion; Akar descended four flights into the heart of the mountain, and then walked across the corridor into the meditation room. Tiny bumps in the floor guided the blind wizard's steps to the exact center of the room, where he sat crosslegged to contemplate this interruption of the universal harmony.

The floor, walls, and ceiling of this large chamber were covered with symbols and incantations. The power of their magic was so strong Akar could sense the patterns drawn around him. From this point, like a spider in the center of the universe's web, he could feel the flow of events and trace them back to the source of the disturbance.

Carefully, gently, patiently, Akar touched each strand of the web in its turn, tasting it, feeling its resonance. Hours passed while the wizard sat motionless, absorbed in his own personal cosmos. The intricacy of the patterns, at which he normally marveled, was tonight a frustrating distraction. Something important had happened, and it was vital he learn what it was.

The sun was well above the mountainous horizon when Akar finally broke from his trance and stretched his stiffened limbs. Despite his best efforts, all he'd gotten was an answer that was no answer—and the reason for that lay in the nature of the Holy City itself.

Upon completion of Ravan many centuries ago, the



wizard Ali Maimun cast what was probably his greatest spell to protect the city and preserve it from evil. Holy relics were placed in hidden niches within the walls, and the four shards of the Crystal of Oromasd were used to bind one final invocation upon the city. Magical beings who followed the path of Rimahn could not pass its walls without being instantly vaporized. Human practitioners of magic who dealt with spirits loyal to Rimahn would suffer a similar fate. Even those magical beings of neutral persuasion entered Ravan at their peril and dared exercise their talents as little as possible for fear of consequences. Ali Maimun could do nothing to bar people bent on ordinary human mischief, or the city would have lain empty since its conception—but by casting the spell as he did he preserved the magical purity of the city dedicated to the goodness of Oromasd.

Because of Ali Maimun's spell, there was a hollow in the web where Ravan ought to be. Akar could trace all the tremors, all the vibrations he felt, back to the very walls of Ravan, and there all seeing ended. *Something* had happened within the walls of Ravan, something that set the strands of the web twitching to the farthest reaches of Parsina—but the nature of that something remained a mystery. No amount of meditation or contemplation would unravel the puzzle. If Akar wanted to learn more, he would have to take direct action.

The wizard left his meditation room and went upstairs to ponder his next move over a much-belated breakfast. A word of command brought a Jinn to his side to prepare his usual parsimonious meal while he thought.

The only way to learn what had happened in Ravan was to go there in person. At the same time, Akar knew he dared not enter the gates of the city; to do so meant instant death. Akar was not a follower of Rimahn and

by no means considered himself wicked. He took no position in the eternal struggle between what men called good and evil, creation and destruction. He worshiped neither Oromasd nor Rimahn. He considered himself simply a scholar in pursuit of knowledge, and of the power such knowledge brought him.

But Akar knew that rationale would not save him from the spell that surrounded Ravan. In his search for knowledge and power he often dealt with djinni, daevas, and other of Rimahn's less desirable creatures. He did not capitulate to them, did not succumb to their petty temptations. But even such dealings as he'd had were enough to condemn him according to the strictures set forth by the centuries-dead Ali Maimun.

If he could not enter Ravan himself, he would have to send a representative. The agent he sent would have to be one of the enslaved magical beings he controlled by the force of his will and the power of his magic. No human could be relied upon to serve his wishes so completely.

But that path, too, had its complications. His most powerful and most clever servants were all originally creatures of Rimahn, though they now served Akar exclusively. They were candidates for instant vaporization if they passed the walls of the Holy City. Akar's spy would have to be picked with great care to ensure the mission's success.

Having now finished his breakfast, Akar rose from the sofreh and went downstairs into the room of the talismans. He walked purposefully over to one large ivory case resting on a table and lifted the heavy carved lid. Inside, each resting on its own base, were more than a hundred rings. Each was different; some were of gold, some of silver, some of brass, even some of tin; they had stones of differing colors and values, and each

ring had its own unique inscription written around the outside of the band.

Akar's sensitive fingers systematically examined each ring in turn, reading the inscription and contemplating the possibilities. Akar shook his head and replaced one ring after another until, at last, he came to one that gave him pause. It was a brass ring and the stone set in it was a small piece of jasper. It was scarcely the most valuable of his rings, but at the moment it was the one most ideally suited to his purpose.

The ring of Cari. Yes, Cari would be perfect for this task. She was but a minor sprite, a Jann—fifth and lowest order of the djinni race. She was a young spirit, barely two centuries old, and so lacking in experience that she'd almost certainly had no involvement with anything connected with Rimahn. Her line was of the so-called righteous Jann, those who followed the path of Oromasd; it made her far easier to control than the pugnacious and more numerous "lower" Jann who worshipped Rimahn—and, more importantly, it made her more likely to survive the spell of Ravan.

Akar smiled as he slipped Cari's ring on the middle finger of his left hand. His needs were not complex; Cari should be quite adequate to handle the simple tasks he'd require of her in Ravan. And if something should go wrong and the spell of the Holy City destroyed her—for all djinni can die, though they are more powerful and longlived than humans—it would not be a major loss. Jann were easily replaced. Cari would be his tool, nothing more.

With that question decided, Akar set about making preparations for his journey to Ravan.

## CHAPTER 4

### The Regent's Diwan

The palace of Ravan was one of the architectural wonders of its age. It was built of the finest materials available: rare marble from the quarries of Chudistan, delicate alabaster from the far shores of Libayy, sturdy cedar from the coastal forests of Bann. The central courtyard was vast enough to stage parades of the king's mounted troops, and the throne room indoors was nearly as large. The palace housed not only the royal family but also the army of servants, slaves, and scribes needed to run the household and administer the affairs of the kingdom. Behind the palace, against the northern wall of Ravan, were separate barracks for both the Royal Guard and the city police, as well as stables for the guards' horses and for the mounts of the royal princes.

The throne room was so large that a man shouting at one end could scarcely be heard at the other but for the clever design that carried the king's voice to every corner. There was a large fountain sunk into the floor at the center, with the domed ceiling rising four stories

above at this point. Skylights in the dome let in the rays of the sun, which fell in even patterns no matter what time of day. Other domes and squinches around the ceiling at lesser heights added to the open feeling of the room.

The floor of this vast chamber was tiled in an intricate geometric pattern of green and white. The enormous pillars in the center holding up the domed ceiling were of white marble flecked with veins of black and gold. The smaller columns, row upon row of them around the rectangular room, were carved from malachite to the height of a tall man, then alabaster the rest of the way, with the seaming between the two materials covered by gold trim. The walls on all four sides were mosaic—some floral, some geometric. Little niches at regular intervals held jade statuettes, crystal carvings, ivory images, and other examples of fine artistic workmanship. Censers hanging from the walls were constantly burning so the delightful fragrances of incense continually filled this royal chamber.

At the front of the hall was a raised leewan platform, across which were strewn some woven mats. In the center of the leewan was the royal throne, a sturdy oak-  
en chair so covered with gold, diamonds, and emeralds that the wood itself was almost invisible. A green satin pillow graced the seat unused, for the throne of Ravan stood vacant—as it had for the past eight years.

When King Shunnar died those many years ago he left behind him two sons of almost identical age. Prince Ahmad was born to Shunnar's favorite concubine Yasmeen; Prince Haroun was born just one month later to Shammara, one of Shunnar's official wives, though she did not bear the title of queen. That title had belonged to Shunnar's beloved first wife, and he had never bestowed it again after her death.

The two boys were but ten years of age when their father lay dying and so the king, in his last official act, appointed his most trusted wazir, Kateb bin Salih, to act as regent. Ahmad was to be crowned king upon coming of age on his eighteenth birthday; if he did not survive, the throne would pass to Prince Haroun on *his* eighteenth birthday. On the day after Hakem Rafi's theft in the Temple of the Faith, Prince Ahmad lacked but six months of his eighteenth birthday.

Kateb bin Salih was a wise and just man, and ruled Ravan and the surrounding territory in exemplary fashion. But he was also an old man, even when King Shunnar appointed him as regent. His health had begun to fail in recent years, and with it his mind. He lost nothing of his sense of ethics, but he lacked the vigor to carry through on his decisions and his memory began to forsake him.

But Shammara, mother of the younger Prince Haroun, was all too willing to provide her strength to make up for the regent's weakness.

Three times each week the regent would hold a diwan in the manner of the late King Shunnar. At the diwan, with the regent sitting crosslegged on a mat beside the empty throne, Kateb bin Salih would hold forth in open court. At such times he decreed his edicts, received ambassadors, and adjudicated such disputes as came before the throne. Never in all his term as regent had Kateb bin Salih missed a day of presiding over the diwans, even though they now brought a terrible burden onto his failing health. His eyesight was weak and his memory weaker, but still he tried to the best of his ability to dispense justice as King Shunnar would have done it.

In recent months, Shammara had taken to attending the diwans herself, remaining discreetly behind a

carved wooden gallery at the rear of the leewan. As a woman she could take no direct part in the affairs of state—but while the words were spoken to the regent, the eyes of all speakers were focused on the latticework of the gallery. The regent might make the pronouncements, but it was widely known throughout the court that nothing official could happen in Ravan without the approval of its uncrowned queen.

On this, the morning after the burglary, the regent walked to his accustomed position and had a servant ease him down onto the mat, where he arranged his aged bones as comfortably as he could. When at last he was ready he signaled to the chamberlain to begin the day's diwan. Despite this signal, the chamberlain looked discreetly to Shammara's box for an acknowledgment before beginning.

At Shammara's gesture the chamberlain intoned the opening welcome in a deep voice, bidding all those who had business before the regent's diwan to come forward and make their cases known so the justice of the realm might be served. First to appear was Umar bin Ibrahim, high priest of the Temple of the Faith.

Umar was a tall, slender man, nearly as old as the regent though the years had been kinder to him. His beard was pure white, his brown eyes kind and wise. He moved with the graceful dignity befitting the chief cleric in the holiest city of all Parsina. Approaching the leewan, he knelt and made deep salaam, forehead touching the polished tile floor. "O noble regent and dispenser of justice, may Oromasd bring you fine health and continued prosperity," he intoned.

"And to you, O my friend," the regent replied with a smile. "I trust your ward, Prince Ahmad, is in good health."

"That he is, O protector of the realm. I come before

you on another matter of a most horrible and sacrilegious nature.”

A cloud crossed the regent’s face. “Speak, then.”

“Last night, O illustrious regent, a thief broke into the Royal Temple. Not only did he foully murder one of our priests, but he polluted the Bahram fire, desecrated the holy altar of Oromasd, and absconded with a reliquary urn wrapped in the altar cloth itself.”

The regent blinked, trying to comprehend the full situation. “You don’t know who did this?”

“No, Your Eminence, no one recognized him.”

“And he stole an urn and an altar cloth?”

“Yes, Your Eminence. His mere presence before the fire of Oromasd was severe desecration; the theft compounded it.”

“And you say he killed a priest? Nasty business, that. Priests hurt no one. We can’t allow him to get away with that.” The regent closed his eyes and was silent for several minutes. Just when the court was beginning to worry that he’d fallen asleep, he looked up at the high priest again. “Which was more valuable, the urn or the altar cloth?”

“The urn, Your Eminence, by a great deal.”

“What was so special about this urn?”

Umar fidgeted. He’d known Kateb bin Salih for more than three decades and loved him like a dear brother—but dealing with the regent in his present condition required the utmost in patience. “Physically it was made of gold and encrusted with gems and its value is beyond reckoning. More than that, however, is the fact that it stood in the niche behind the Bahram flame, and has stood there for as long as anyone can remember. It must be of enormous importance to occupy that position. I myself don’t know the significance of this urn; I’ve asked the other priests and checked the official



records and can find no clue to its importance—but I do know it was always regarded with crucial meaning. For it to be stolen is most alarming.”

“Yes, yes, quite,” the regent said. “We must make sure it is found and restored immediately.” And he lapsed into silence again.

Umar waited. Only when he was positive the regent was not going to continue did he attempt to prod his old friend into action. “May I ask Your Eminence to instruct the wali of police and the Royal Guard to use all available efforts to recover the urn as quickly as possible and to seal off all the gates, searching all people and packages leaving the city so the urn will not vanish?”

The regent nodded enthusiastically. “Yes, yes, good idea, good idea. I hereby order the Royal Guard and the wali of police to give this matter their foremost attention so the stolen urn can be quickly restored to its former position.”

Umar stole a glance at Shammara behind her carved partition. There was no secret within Ravan that he and the lady had been enemies since the death of the late king. Each of them had an opinion of the way Ravan should be run that the other did not share. Umar thanked Oromasd that Shammara was not a man; only her gender had prevented her from taking over as absolute tyrant of Ravan in the years following her husband’s death.

Umar was half afraid that, despite the regent’s decree, Shammara would veto the order just to spite him personally. If that were the case, the police and the guards would make a perfunctory search and find nothing, and Umar would never be able to claim they’d failed to follow their instructions.

But, to his great relief, Shammara nodded her agreement. Apparently she felt this was a matter that

didn't concern her or her plans for Ravan, and she didn't care whether Umar had his way or not. Umar gave a gracious nod in her direction, said his formal gratitude to the regent for his swift administration of justice, and backed away from the leewan to the side of the room.

Umar was about to leave the hall to search for the captain of the guards and the wali of police when the chamberlain announced the next supplicant to the throne: Tabib abu Saar, special envoy from His Majesty King Basir of Marakh. Important as the urn was, Umar decided it could wait until after the next confrontation. So much would hinge upon this decision. He wished he could be up on the leewan to advise his friend, but he knew Shammara would never permit it—particularly not in a matter regarding either of the princes.

Tabib abu Saar stepped proudly forward, a short, rounded man with a grizzled beard and small, piggy eyes. His robes were of rich gold brocade and his red turban held in its center an enormous canary diamond. He did not kneel or make the full salaam, but he did bow his head respectfully to the regent.

“I bring you greetings, O regent of Ravan, from Basir the Blessed, illustrious king of Marakh, ruler of the two rivers, monarch of Sab, conqueror of Formistan and despoiler of the Shiraz Plains. The peace of Oromasd be upon you.”

“And upon you, O noble...uh, Tabib. The city of Ravan welcomes you and extends its blessings to your revered master. What mission brings you before my diwan?”

Abu Saar looked startled. “Why, to receive the answer to the petition I presented last week, O illustrious regent.”

“Please refresh an old man's memory, O noble am-

bassador from Marakh. What petition was this?”

Scowling with barely restrained frustration, abu Saar replied, “The petition that Prince Ahmad honor the nuptial agreements signed by King Shunnar and King Basir nearly fourteen years ago.”

“Ahmad is scheduled to marry Basir’s daughter, is he not?”

“Yes, Your Eminence, the Princess Oma, a young lady of noble lineage and incalculable beauty, combining all the wit and grace necessary for a future queen of Ravan.”

“Yes, she sounds delightful. I see nothing to stand in the way of such a marriage, particularly since it was contracted, as you say, so many years ago.” The regent leaned back for a moment and closed his eyes. When he opened them, abu Saar was still standing before him. “Are you still here? Is there something more you want?”

“A slight matter of the timing, Your Eminence,” abu Saar said through clenched teeth. “Prince Ahmad is due to ascend the throne in six more months. As I explained to you in my petition *last week*, King Basir requests that the wedding take place before then, so Princess Oma can be crowned queen of Ravan in the same ceremony with her husband’s coronation.”

The regent considered that. “That seems to make some sense,” he admitted. “Very well. I give permission for Prince Ahmad and Princess Oma to be married in the next few months, before the coronation.”

“Will Your Eminence then order Prince Ahmad to begin a journey to Marakh so he may wed his princess in her native land?”

“A prince of Ravan leave the city to get married? Why can’t she simply come here? That’s far more traditional, and we have more beautiful temples. A wedding in the Royal Temple would be spectacular.”

“As I explained in my original petition, King Basir grows impatient with these delays. He wonders whether Prince Ahmad actually intends to wed Princess Oma. My lord paid a high dowry these many years ago and has seen nothing but promises in return. He will not send his oldest and most beloved daughter on a journey of more than eighty parasangs with naught but a promise. Prince Ahmad must show his true intentions by coming to Marakh and marrying the princess there. Once they are legally wed and the contracts fulfilled, they may come back to Ravan for their coronation.”

“He has a point; it is a long journey,” the regent mused aloud. “Still, the journey would be just as long for Prince Ahmad, a tender young man who’s never been beyond the city walls.”

“Nonetheless, King Basir demands your prince show his good faith by traveling to Marakh to wed his bride.”

“He *demands*, does he?” For just an instant a trace of the old Kateb bin Salih flickered in the regent’s eyes. “By what authority does the king of Marakh make *demands* on the king of Ravan? Perhaps we should cancel the contract altogether if it causes this much trouble.”

Abu Saar stood his ground. “If you abrogate the marriage contract, all of Ravan will answer for the consequences.”

The regent had not the resources to continue his bluster and lapsed back into his senile droning. “I see. It’s a terribly complicated situation, isn’t it? I must give the matter more thought. Come back in a week and I’ll have an answer for you then.”

“That’s what you said *last* week, Your Eminence,” abu Saar said, trembling with rage. “That’s why I’m here *today*. Time grows short. If Prince Ahmad is to assemble a suitable caravan and travel to Marakh, and if he and Princess Oma are to have a suitable state wed-

ding, and if they are then to travel back to Ravan in time for their coronation, the decision must be made *now*. It cannot be postponed any longer.”

“Oh dear. I’m not sure.” The regent’s voice became even shakier than usual. “Prince Ahmad was given over to the priests for his education. Perhaps we shouldn’t interfere.”

He stared out into the crowd. “Is the high priest still here?” he called.

“Yes, Your Eminence,” Umar said, stepping forth from the side of the hall. From behind her carved partition, Shammara’s eyes were focused exclusively on him. Umar did not relish this sudden return to the center of controversy.

The regent looked at him through squinting eyes. “Umar, O my friend, you’ve been teacher and guardian to Prince Ahmad since the death of his father. What say you to this proposal?”

Umar knew what he wanted to say, but knew it would be neither wise nor diplomatic. This decision could be more important than anyone in this room realized; Umar was glad to be given some say in it, but wished the circumstances were less public so he could speak his mind plainly to the regent. In open court like this he would have to be very careful what he said—particularly with Shammara watching from her private gallery.

“I’m afraid, O wise and just regent, I do not think it would be prudent for Prince Ahmad to leave Ravan at this time. Plans for his coronation have already begun. To take him to a foreign land now would disrupt...”

“The preparations can easily go on without him, O priest,” abu Saar interrupted rudely. “The wedding is something that cannot be done by proxy.”

The chamberlain—a man widely known to be in

Shammara's pay—stepped forward and leaned over to catch the regent's ear. "He's right, Your Eminence. The preparations for the prince's coronation are elaborate, it's true, but most of them—such as invitations, protocol, entertainments, and so forth—can be done without the prince being present. If the decision is made today and he leaves at once, there'll still be enough time when he returns to smooth out any final difficulties."

"But the prince is still a lad engaged in his studies," Umar protested as he strode to the base of the leewan. "He is very wise and learned now, but he still has so much to master. His whole course of study has been laid out; to interrupt it now would cause hardship and would eventually harm the kingdom."

"You're his principal teacher, are you not?" the chamberlain said, standing straighter and looking boldly at Umar. "You can accompany him if you like, to continue the studies and watch over him as you've done so ably for the past eight years. A boy can learn on horseback as easily as he can sitting crosslegged on a mat in the madrasa."

"It's not right for the future king of Ravan to travel so far to marry his queen," Umar argued, drawing on the dignity of his years and position. "By all traditions she should come to him." Umar's back was as straight as the hall's columns and, as his face lifted to the opponent behind the screen, his voice rang with the trained power of a priest. In his fine robes he looked the embodiment of Oromasd.

"The ambassador has already explained why King Basir is opposed to that," the chamberlain said, standing firm. His fear of Shammara was greater than his awe of any man. "I agree it might set an unfortunate precedent, but the alternative is also unappealing. King Basir might consider this breach of the treaty to be

worth a show of force against us.”

“He wouldn’t dare make war against Ravan!” the regent exclaimed, his hands and voice showing the tremors of age.

“Of course not,” the chamberlain said, bending and speaking quietly into the regent’s ear. “But if I may point out to Your Eminence, there are considerable lands around the city itself that we depend on for food and taxes. While King Basir would not attack our city his soldiers could raid the villages and farms across the countryside, making life most uncomfortable for us.”

The regent looked at Umar with rheumy eyes. “There seem to be many good and compelling reasons why we should accede to the ambassador’s petition. Your reasons for denial, O Umar, are no less good, but far from compelling. If you have some convincing argument why I should not order Prince Ahmad to go to Marakh and wed his intended bride, I pray you let me know now.”

Umar went cold inside. To state his real reason in open court might easily defeat his whole purpose. He was convinced beyond any doubt that Shammara had orchestrated this entire plan to get Prince Ahmad away from Ravan before his coronation, but she had planned her moves well and he had no countermoves of sufficient strength to play against her.

Bowing his head, he said softly, “I have no other arguments, Your Eminence, other than those I have already voiced and my firm conviction that sending the prince away now would be bad for the boy and bad for Ravan. I urge you with all my heart to deny the petition.”

The regent looked at him a long time, and Umar could see great sadness in his eyes. “You are very wise, O my friend, and often have I listened to your counsel. I

don't doubt that you have in your heart nothing but the purest of thoughts for the safety of Ravan and Prince Ahmad. But today the argument goes against you. I agree it's unfortunate our prince should have to make such a long journey so soon before his ascension to the throne, but at the same time I see no great and lasting harm in it."

He turned to address the waiting ambassador from Marakh and the assembly in general. "I hereby grant your petition, O noble, uh, noble ambassador. As regent of Ravan, I decree that Prince Ahmad shall gather together a suitable entourage for visiting the great King Basir and marrying the lovely Princess Oma, and that such entourage shall leave for Marakh no later than... oh, the day after tomorrow. That should give them enough time, don't you think?"

"It can be arranged, Your Eminence," the chamberlain bowed.

"In that case, O mighty regent, may I ask a favor?" Umar said, kneeling once again and bowing his salaam.

"My ears are always open to your words, O worthy servant of Oromasd," the regent replied.

"Since you remanded the prince to my care these many years ago, and since I am his teacher in matters temporal and spiritual, I beg to accompany him on his forthcoming journey, that I may guide him and continue his instruction."

The regent paused. "The prince is a healthy young man, but you, O Umar—are you sure your health is up to such an arduous trek?"

"Oromasd has preserved me well, O gracious Kateb, and I'd be honored to serve His Highness in such a way. There are plenty of other priests to assume my duties in the temple."

"Very well," the regent said. "I order you to accom-



pany our prince, to give him counsel as wise as you've given me, to continue his education, and to see that his spiritual needs are not neglected."

Umar bowed again. If he had not prevented the disaster he was sure would come, at least he could be at Ahmad's side to mitigate some of its worst effects.

As he backed away from the leewan into the crowd once more, he stole another glance into the private gallery at the rear of the room. Through the wooden screen he could see Shammara smiling—and Umar liked that not at all.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **The High Priest**

Umar bin Ibrahim was a deeply worried man. Too many monumental things were happening too quickly, and he was concerned for the future of Ravan. After leaving the regent's diwan he went to visit the chief of the Royal Guard and the wali of police. He gave both men a description of the stolen items and was assured by both that a thorough search of the entire city would be made until the articles were found. All persons leaving the city would be searched and their baggage examined, so there would be no chance of the urn getting out of the city. A truly clever thief might have already left the city as soon as the gates opened this morning—but if the urn was still in Ravan, it would stay here. Umar was confident the guards and police would do a thorough job in their search for the missing items.

He was far less confident about the matter of the prince's upcoming journey to Marakh. The thoughts weighed heavily upon him as he trudged back to his house beside the Temple of the Faith.

His wife Alhena greeted him as he entered. Alhena was nearly as tall as her husband, with graying hair and

a face that Time had touched without badly aging. After thirty-three years of marriage she could read her husband's moods well and knew he was deeply troubled. She bade him sit and made him comfortable, then asked to hear what the matter was, refusing to accept his simple assurances.

At last Umar sighed. "As if the theft last night wasn't bad enough, the regent has ordered Prince Ahmad to travel to Marakh to marry Princess Oma." He explained to her all that had transpired at the diwan.

Alhena knit her brow. "I don't understand your concern. We've known for years Prince Ahmad would marry her; you helped negotiate the contract yourself. I admit the timing is awkward, but it should not press so heavily on your thoughts."

"The timing is damnable!" Umar shouted, pounding his fist on the mat in frustration. Then, realizing he was taking his rage out on the wrong person, he said in a gentler voice, "Forgive me, my love. You've done nothing to merit my anger. I yell merely at my own impotence for being unable to explain the true reason behind my opposition to the trip."

"After all these years, O my husband, can't you at least trust me?" Alhena said softly.

Umar looked at her and sighed again. "You must remember, shortly after the death of King Shunnar I made a journey of my own. I traveled across the Kholaj Desert to the shrine of Sarafiq so I might speak once more to my teacher, Muhmad. Every traveler to that oasis may ask one truth in his lifetime. I was concerned about the future of Ravan and of young Prince Ahmad, and so I asked Muhmad to enlighten me whether there would be any pitfalls in the prince's path."

The question had not been an idle one, both Umar and Alhena knew that. Within days after King Shun-

nar's death, Ahmad's mother, the concubine Yasmeen, was found dead in her own bed. Poison was suspected, with Shammara the most likely culprit, but nothing could ever be proved. Shammara had always felt Haroun, son of a legal wife, should take precedence over Ahmad, son of a mere concubine. But Ahmad was the elder and the king's favorite, and it was Ahmad the king named as his successor with his dying breath.

Yasmeen's death served as a warning. Umar had conferred with Kateb bin Salih about the boy's safety, and it was decided the young Prince Ahmad would be handed over to the Royal Temple until his coronation, with Umar being his tutor and the priests of the madrasa beside the temple serving as his protectors. Over the past eight years, four assassination attempts had come to naught and Prince Ahmad never even knew his life had been threatened. Nonetheless, the prince's life had ever been a delicate subject much on Umar's mind.

"Muhmad looked at me," Umar continued, "and said only one thing could prevent Ahmad's reign: If Prince Ahmad ever went beyond the city walls before his coronation, he would never return to rule in Ravan. Those were his exact words.

"I came home and never told another soul about the prophecy until now. I've kept a careful eye on Ahmad, making sure he stayed within the city for his own safety. But now, in just two days, he's been ordered by the regent to leave the city and I greatly fear Muhmad's prophecy will come to pass. The theft of the urn may only have been a bad omen of this more horrible event to come."

Alhena was silent for a moment. Then she said, "Why couldn't you have told this to someone? Why couldn't you have told Kateb bin Salih? He would have

listened.”

“At first I was afraid to tell anybody. You remember how uncertain everyone was at first about Ahmad succeeding his father. With Shammara stirring up the nobles, all it would have taken was a single ill-omen like this to convince them Haroun deserved to be king in place of Ahmad.

“As years went by it was relatively easy to keep Ahmad within the city walls—until now. If I'd stood up this morning in the diwan and related Muhmad's prophecy, one of two things would have happened. Either the court would scoff at the prophecy, in which case they'd send Ahmad off anyway; or else they'd believe it, and I'd be handing Shammara a stick for stirring up trouble. Even though his succession is accepted now by most people, I don't want to give Shammara any ideas. Knowing how the court would react, I decided to remain silent and pray to Oromasd that Muhmad was wrong in his prophecy.”

Alhena stood beside him and rested a comforting hand upon his shoulder. “I have faith in the goodness of Oromasd. He wouldn't unjustly deprive his holy city of its rightful king. Prince Ahmad is a good and righteous boy, and Oromasd would let nothing bad happen to him.”

Umar gave his wife a wan smile. “But Oromasd is not the only power in the universe. Outside these walls, Rimahn holds equal power, holding the cosmos in a delicate balance between good and evil. Sometimes that balance requires a sacrifice of the good. I'm terribly afraid our young prince will find himself caught in some pivot point in the eternal war of light and darkness.”

“He'll have his loyal guards to protect him, won't he? And you'll be with him too, to counsel and advise

him. I have faith in you, my love, as well as in Oromasd.” She gave his shoulder a squeeze of reassurance.

Umar looked into his wife's face. He had long ago memorized every line and curve, but each time he saw it there was a new vitality that made it as fresh as a new acquaintance. Today he saw in her eyes such love and strength that his spirits rose once more and he could face the future with renewed courage. He tenderly took her hands into his and marveled at the ever-fresh thrill he felt when touching her.

“Thank you, my beloved,” Umar said. “You are ever the gentle breeze in the desert of my life, the oasis of hope in the barren wastes of my despair. I think my greatest fear of all about this journey is that I, too, will never return to Ravan and never see you again. That would be the worst tragedy of all.”

He sighed and stood up again. “Ah well, kismet cannot be denied. I shall go to Prince Ahmad and tell him the news. Perhaps it will please him more than it does me.” Kissing Alhena tenderly, he left their house for the quarters of the prince.

Half of one wing of the madrasa beside the Royal Temple had been made over into chambers for His Highness, Prince Ahmad. While spartan in comparison with what his rooms would have been like in the palace, the royal chambers were luxurious compared with the standard accommodations for other students. The normally bare stone walls had been hung with layered silk and satin draperies to make them seem less sterile; the normally bare stone floors were covered with layers of thick woven rugs in geometric patterns of red, gold, and blue. Silk-covered pillows were scattered about the floor, while couches, chairs, coffee table and service, and even the prince's bed had been brought in from the palace itself. A delicate compromise had been struck

between the rigorous discipline of the madrasa and the honors due a prince.

No efforts had been spared in Prince Ahmad's education. He could read fluently and write with a fine calligraphic style. He'd thoroughly studied the sciences of astronomy, medicine, anatomy, biology, mathematics, and alchemy. He'd been trained in the arts of philosophy and rhetoric. Most importantly he'd been well grounded in theology and religious thought. Umar knew the boy's soul, and knew young Prince Ahmad had a deeply ingrained sense of honor and righteousness. He would make a splendid monarch of the city of Oromasd—if kismet gave him the opportunity.

Nor had the physical skills been ignored. Prince Ahmad was an accomplished horseman and played polo with grace and dexterity. He was an unerring archer, a crafty wrestler, and a demon swordsman. He'd studied military history to complement his native intelligence and bravery; he could, if he had to, lead his nation into war while hoping to govern it in peace.

As Umar bin Ibrahim approached him now, the prince was seated crosslegged on a pillow, studying his current lesson in political philosophy. "I bring you greetings, O most excellent of princes, and news from the regent's diwan," Umar said.

Prince Ahmad looked up. He had a darkly handsome face with clear complexion and a single bushy line of eyebrow across his forehead. His beard, which had just started growing in, was short and kept immaculately trimmed. His turban was of spotless white silk in which diamonds and sapphires had been sewn, and he wore a jacket of heavy gold brocade over his white linen kaftan. Velvet zarabil embroidered with gold adorned his feet and gold rings with various gemstones circled his fingers. He smiled as he saw the high priest, reveal-

ing a set of perfect white teeth.

“The news has preceded you, O revered teacher,” the prince beamed. “I am to leave for Marakh the day after tomorrow to marry Princess Oma and bring her back here for our coronation. Isn't it exciting?”

“Perhaps a little too exciting, Your Highness,” Umar said cautiously.

But Prince Ahmad was so delighted at the prospect he failed to notice his tutor's tone. “Just imagine. I've never been outside Ravan before. There's a whole world of things to see and touch and taste. I've never seen a farm or a desert. I've only seen the Zaind River from windows in the top of the palace. There's so much I've yet to experience. Didn't you yourself teach me that the best way to learn was to live life firsthand?”

“Indeed I did, O my prince. I just wish this were all happening a little later.”

Finally catching something of his mentor's mood, Prince Ahmad stopped his bubbling and stared into Umar's face. “Why?”

Umar looked back at the handsome youth bursting with joy and vitality. He wondered whether he should tell the prince about the prophecy, then decided against it. Ahmad was too happy right now to be bothered with such weighty matters. Telling Ahmad about the prophecy would not change its truth or falsity. The prince had to make this journey, by the regent's order; he might as well make it in this happy state.

Shaking his head, the high priest said, “Merely an old man's superstitions. Pay them no heed. For a lad like you, a journey like this is exciting; for a man my age, it becomes fatiguing very quickly. There is so much to arrange and so little time before we have to leave.”

Prince Ahmad continued to look thoughtful. “Umar, you are the wisest of my teachers, a father in all but fact



for the past eight years. May I confide in you?”

Umar bin Ibrahim blushed modestly. “I would hope Your Highness has learned I will always respect his confidences and give him the best counsel my tired old mind can devise.”

The boy looked around to make certain there was no one else within earshot. “I’m...I’m worried about Princess Oma. I’ve never met her, never seen her—I’ve never even met anyone who has. How do I know I’ll like her?”

“They say she’s very beautiful and intelligent,” Umar said slowly.

“‘They’ repeat a lot of flattery about royalty we both know is not true. She could be fat and stupid, sallow and pockmarked, with only one eye and half her teeth missing. She could have the voice of a raven and the disposition of a tigress. I don’t want to marry someone like that.”

“She might be having the same fears about you, Your Highness,” Umar pointed out.

“That’s different. Plenty of people have seen what I look like and the reports could easily have reached her. She, on the other hand, lives closed up in King Basir’s harem and only goes out in public heavily veiled. How can I possibly find out anything about her?”

“We know for a fact she’s a year younger than you and has been brought up in a royal court knowing all the graces your future queen must be able to command. There’s little doubt she’ll make you a fitting queen.”

“But what if I don’t fall in *love* with her?” Ahmad persisted.

Umar smiled broadly. “You’ll probably end up marrying several women, O prince, with dozens of concubines as well. I’m sure, within that number, you’ll find *someone* to love. The qualities you want in your queen

may not be exactly the same ones you want in your lover. Princess Oma, I'm sure, will be fine."

"If she turns out to be ugly and decrepit I'll have *you* spend the wedding night with her."

"Leaving all three of us disappointed? That's hardly a tribute to your generous nature." Umar's attempt to swallow his smile only turned it into a smirk. He reflected that only the young could be so earnest about love.

"Well, perhaps," Ahmad said. "And then again, perhaps she'll be as beautiful and charming as 'they' say and none of these problems need arise."

"My prayers go with you, Your Highness. In the meantime, there is much to be done." The two spent nearly an hour discussing the nature of the wedding ceremony, the composition of the entourage, the gifts that would be taken to King Basir, and scores of other formal details. Prince Ahmad finally called in his servants to help him pack while Umar went off to inform the chamberlain of His Highness's wishes.

When Umar left, the prince was still burbling happily about his upcoming trip to the far lands of Marakh. Umar himself had far more important things to do. There would be at least fifty men in the entourage, and if Shammara's chamberlain had his way at least half of them would readily slit the prince's throat the instant his back was turned. Umar had to be sure the escort contained no one but men he personally knew were loyal to Prince Ahmad. If the prophecy came true, Umar would at least make certain it was not through his carelessness.

## CHAPTER 6

### The Plot

A eunuch met Tabib abu Saar in one of the palace's anterooms after the ambassador from Marakh had left the diwan. The servant caught his eye and nodded, but said not a word as he motioned for abu Saar to follow him. Checking to make sure he was not being observed, the ambassador walked after the eunuch.

They proceeded through unused back rooms and corridors to a small pantry near the kitchen. There the eunuch pulled up on a ring in the floor, revealing a trap door. Abu Saar climbed down the stairs inside the door and the eunuch followed, closing the door behind them. They were now within the maze of secret passages that honeycombed the palace of Ravan—narrow corridors of stone, bare of furnishing or decoration, cold and dimly lit by torches set at long intervals. The eunuch took the lead again and walked quickly through the dusty hallways, up spiraling staircases, and through so many twists and turns that abu Saar quickly became disoriented. The eunuch passed many doorways that seemed to look all alike, and finally stopped before one wooden

door and rapped softly three times. After a moment there was the sound of a bolt being thrown back, and the door opened to admit abu Saar and his guide.

They were in one of the upper rooms of the palace, in a room of the harem where normally only maidservants and eunuchs were allowed to go. Abu Saar felt slightly uncomfortable here, but only slightly; the business he had to transact could scarcely be conducted in more open, more accessible quarters.

The room had a light, airy feel to it. Carved wooden tables around the room held silver candelabra that were all lit and glowing brightly, adding to the sunlight that streamed in through the window. Gauzy silk curtains of a pastel blue covered the walls while a blue and white rug with the design of entwined dragons covered most of the floor. A brazier burned inconspicuously in one corner, filling the room with the scent of clove incense.

Across the room, watching him intently, sat Shammara, the uncrowned queen of Ravan. She sat, not on the floor as was customary, but in a chair of blackest ebony, carved with the likenesses of many animals on the sides, arms and legs, with little diamonds of ivory inlaid at intervals. It was not the chair, though, but the woman herself who commanded abu Saar's attention.

Shammara was a tall woman and slender, dressed in a silken thawb of the deepest blue with heavy embroidery of real gold thread around the edges of the long hanging sleeves and down the center front placket. The milfa she wore was of a slightly lighter shade of blue and so sheer it barely concealed her features. She had a gaunt, unlined face with prominent cheekbones and a small mouth. Her eyes were black as ink and piercing as daggers, and her face was topped by jet black hair that was all but completely covered by her blue headscarf. She sat with a preternatural stillness. Straight-

backed as any general, she seemed to be carved from ivory.

So imposing was the figure of Shammara that it took abu Saar a moment to realize there was another person seated beside her—a young man who could only be her son, Prince Haroun. He was not quite as tall as his mother and, while still young, had already developed a substantial paunch. He wore a pale yellow kaf-tan and sirwaal, silver niaal, and a gold brocade saaya; the fabrics were rich and well-tailored, but the prince's posture was so bad it made the clothes hang awkwardly on his body. His pale yellow turban was poorly wrapped and seemed perpetually ready to slide off his head, though it never quite did. The prince had an oily complexion and his beard was little more than an occasional patch of stubble. His jaw was slack and his mouth seemed unable to completely close by itself. His eyes darted continually about the room, unable to meet an honest gaze.

Abu Saar approached to within a few cubits and gave his most courtly salaam. "O noble lady and magnificent prince, may you live forever," he intoned. "I bring you greetings and the warmest regards of my master, King Basir, and convey his wishes for your long lives and continued good health."

"Yes," Shammara drawled. "Your master is much in my thoughts these days. I presume the success of your petition means King Basir is prepared to go through with the rest of our plan as agreed upon."

Abu Saar looked suspiciously at the eunuch who'd opened the door for him and the eunuch who'd guided him here. Both men had taken a stance on either side of the hidden door.

Sensing the ambassador's caution, Shammara added, "Pay them no attention. They're both mute, and

totally loyal to me.”

“Very well, Your Ladyship,” abu Saar nodded and half bowed. “Your assumption is correct. King Basir has stationed a battalion of his finest soldiers along the forest route between Ravan and Marakh, all disguised as common brigands. When Prince Ahmad’s caravan comes past, two days out from Ravan, our men will set upon him and wipe out his party to the last defender. There will be no one left to challenge Prince Haroun’s right to rule in Ravan.”

Shammara gave the ambassador a cold nod, the slow movement filled with a sense of barely restrained energy. “And the second part of the plan?”

Abu Saar hesitated for just a fraction of a second, watching with distaste as Haroun picked at his face. “King Basir expresses his willingness to marry his daughter, the Princess Oma, to Prince Haroun and thereby unite our two lands in peace. He does, however, require me to deliver to him some token to prove your good faith in this matter. After all, he will be killing the princess’s current betrothed purely on the basis of your word of honor. He wants assurance that Princess Oma will not be left without a husband when this matter is over with.”

“Fair enough,” Shammara said. She snapped her fingers and one of the eunuchs moved from his stance by the door to one of the wooden tables. Reaching behind it, he pulled out two leather pouches, one large and one somewhat smaller. With obvious exertion he brought the pouches forward and set them at abu Saar’s feet.

“The larger pouch, which has been fastened shut with my personal seal, contains thirty thousand dinars as earnest money, to be forfeit if Haroun does not wed Princess Oma. I shall expect it back intact after the

marriage takes place.”

“And the smaller pouch?” abu Saar asked.

“That is an additional ten thousand dinars as a gift for you, in gratitude for your generous service on behalf of King Basir and myself.”

Shammara’s arm moved just far enough to let her pick up a small sandalwood fan. Without turning her head, she brought this sharply but silently against Haroun’s hand as he picked at his face. The prince jumped as if burned and hunched forward, his hands in his lap. Shammara’s hand had already returned to her own lap.

The ambassador bowed again. “You are too kind, O generous lady.”

“Probably,” Shammara agreed, “but at least it’s money well spent. As soon as I receive word of Ahmad’s death I will have the regent announce the engagement of Haroun to Princess Oma and all details will be arranged. Prince Haroun, however, will on no account leave Ravan; Princess Oma will come here for her wedding. After all, what maiden would not wish to celebrate her marriage in the world’s holiest city?”

“It shall be even as you say,” abu Saar replied, eyeing the money sacks with evident relish. “Was there anything else you required of me at this time?”

Shammara started to shake her head, but Prince Haroun straightened up and appeared to awaken. “Tell me about the Princess Oma,” he said. “Is she really as beautiful as they claim?”

“Princess Oma is the incarnation of all the graces, Your Highness,” abu Saar said. “Her face is as the moon on its fourteenth night, and her dainty hips sway like stalks of wheat in a summer breeze. Her eyes are as twin pools, clear and calm, and her voice rivals the turtledove. She is a skilled dancer and plays the lute, flute,

and drums. She comes from a fertile line and will, I'm sure, provide you with many sons."

"That's fine, I'm sure," Shammara said, cutting off the recitation before abu Saar could bore them any further. "Don't worry, Haroun, I've already established she'll make you a good wife. You just leave these details to me."

"As you say, Mother," Haroun pouted, and returned to picking at his face.

Shammara turned to the ambassador. "You may leave us now, O worthy intermediary, with our gratitude for performing your offices so well. Please send our highest respects to your esteemed master."

Tabib abu Saar bowed once more and, as his eunuch guide gathered up the money pouches, left the room through the door to the secret passages. The eunuch went with him to show him the way back to the more public parts of the palace.

When abu Saar was gone, Shammara turned to her son. "Are you pleased, Haroun?" she asked.

"Yes, Mother." The boy's whining voice was something less than enthusiastic.

"I'm doing all of this for your benefit, you know. You should rightfully be king. My family is one of the noblest in Ravan; you're not the offspring of some base-born snippet like that usurper Ahmad. You should show the proper gratitude for all I've done."

"You're right, Mother," Prince Haroun said, trembling slightly as he looked at her. "I'm sorry I pouted. I just wanted everything with Princess Oma to be perfect."

"It will be, my darling, it will be. Have I not guaranteed it? Have I not made everything come true for you exactly as I said I would?"

"Yes, Mother."



“Now, in honor of our victory today I’ve bought a surprise for you: a new slavegirl.”

Haroun’s normally sleepy eyes widened with delight. “Really? Oh thank you, dearest of all mothers. Where is she?”

“I had her brought down to your special room. She should be waiting for you now.”

Haroun jumped up with excitement from his chair, kissed his mother on the cheek and started to race from the room.

“Haroun!” Shammara called after him.

The boy froze and turned to face her. “Yes, Mother?”

“Do be more careful, dear, and try to make her last a little bit longer. The slave merchants are becoming more reluctant to deal with me, and their price keeps going up.”

“Yes, Mother. As you wish.” And then Haroun was gone from the room, his footsteps echoing loudly as he raced down the hall outside.

Shammara sighed as she watched him leave, and rose with a liquid movement. Haroun was far from all she could have wished for as her son—but he *was* her son, and she *would* see him seated on the throne of Ravan. It was his destiny and hers, and no more needed to be said.

## CHAPTER 7

### The Police

As ordered by the regent, the police of Ravan began an immediate search for the stolen reliquary urn. Their commission was to search every house, every building, and every person until the urn was found—but the diligence of their search depended very much upon the person and place.

The early stages of the search totally ignored the homes of the nobles and the wealthy on the northern side of Ravan. These were people of substance, after all; they would never stoop to such a wicked and blasphemous deed. If the urn were not found elsewhere the elite members of Ravan's society would be politely requested to allow a search of their premises—but everyone doubted that would be necessary.

At the middle class houses, the police knocked and explained the nature of their business, that the regent had ordered this search to rid Ravan of the heretical taint. Police would wander through the homes and stores looking in all rooms, opening all doors, checking all cupboards and containers large enough to hold the

missing urn. The police were efficient but civil. If any of the officers were impolite, no one complained.

Of course, no one ever complained about anything the police did. The wali considered complaints tantamount to admissions of guilt in some matter or another, and it usually didn't take him long to extract from the complainer a confession to some unsolved crime. If nothing else, this policy led to a low rate of unsolved crimes within Ravan.

In the poorer districts of the Holy City the police seldom bothered with such niceties. Homes would be entered without warning, wardrobes would be emptied upon the floor, boxes and chests would be broken open and their contents scattered to make certain the urn was not there. It was the poor, after all, who were most likely to spawn a thief and murderer such as the man who broke into the Royal Temple, so it stood to reason they were all guilty—if not of this crime, then of some other one equally sinful if not as notorious. Indeed, police did recover some stolen merchandise from the homes of small-time thieves, half of which was kept as their discovery fee. But the precious urn itself eluded their grasp.

The search continued throughout the day and well into the evening. Rumors spread among the residents that a major hurricane in police garb was sweeping through the city, and these rumors caused a panic even in those people who knew they were innocent of any wrongdoing. The mere sight of officers approaching was sufficient to make people flee their homes. This meant less resistance and the police could search the houses far more thoroughly, seldom leaving anything untouched or whole. But still the urn was not found.

It was well after sunset when a squadron of police reached the caravanserai behind the King's Bazaar.

This was a place where some of the wealthier traders stayed, and normally might have been exempt from the worst of the searching—but the police were now feeling frustrated by their lack of success and were willing to vent that frustration on others. The guests in the caravanserai were all foreigners, strangers to Ravan, and that in itself made them suspects no matter how wealthy they were.

Jafar al-Sharif was sitting on a bench by the fountain in the central courtyard, practicing his art. The dust of the day's traffic had settled and the fountain murmured softly, adding welcome moisture to the cooling air. As the sun set, the torches began to provide more of the light, and the intimacy of the flickering glow aided Jafar's task. People had come to splash water on their dust-lined faces and stayed, captured by the artistry of a master storyteller. Gradually they crouched, sat, or leaned on walls around the courtyard, turning from traveling strangers into an audience. Street urchins also came to be hypnotized by the tales. It was a small audience, to be sure, but Jafar was hoping one of the merchants from the less "sophisticated" cities where storytelling was still revered might give him a few coins in appreciation or, better yet, know of some household opening where a storyteller might be welcome. Jafar and Selima were quite prepared to leave Ravan if they could find steady employment elsewhere.

Jafar was telling one of his favorite tales, the story of King Khaled and the warrior maid of the Altai, and had just reached the scene where the king sees his opponent without armor for the first time and realizes she's a woman. At that moment the police came storming through the caravanserai gate and started going to the doors of the lower floor rooms to check their contents. The urchins screamed and fled at their first sight

of the police, knowing just how much trouble those officers could cause. One of the merchants went up to the captain of police indignantly and said, "What are you doing, O disturber of an innocent evening?"

The captain gave him a hard look. "My men and I are searching for a thief and a murderer, a man who stole a relic from the Temple of the Faith last night. Those who are innocent have nothing to fear from us."

Some of the police had opened the door to the storeroom containing this merchant's wares, large bales of cotton fabrics, and were laughing as they pulled the bolts of fabric apart in their search. The merchant started to protest, but the police captain gave him a hard jab in the midsection with his truncheon and the unfortunate trader fell to the ground, gasping.

Selima sat down on the bench next to her father. "I'm frightened," she whispered, taking care that the police not hear her. She believed, with some justification, that their knowledge of her fear would only make them more overbearing and destructive. No one could live on the streets of Parsina without seeing the violence and cruelty of the police.

"Be of good spirits, Selima," Jafar comforted her with a broad sweep of his hand. "You heard what he said. We're innocent, we have nothing to fear. Even if they toss all our worldly possessions around the courtyard, it will take but a few minutes to pick them up again. The one advantage of being poor is you have so little to lose."

One of the policemen did indeed enter the tiny room under the stairs where Jafar and his daughter currently lived. After just a moment he came out and conferred quietly with the captain, who went into the small room with him to see something for himself. The two men emerged again and the police captain called out, "Who

lives in this room by the stables?”

Still trusting in his innocence to protect him, Jafar al-Sharif stood up and approached the officer. “I do, O most noble of police captains. How may I, a humble storyteller, help...?”

The police captain looked to his men. “Seize this man at once! He is the thief we seek.”

Two large, well-muscled men grabbed Jafar’s arms. At first the storyteller was too stunned even to struggle. “Me? Surely there must be some mistake. I’ve never even been to the Temple of the Faith. I’ve stolen nothing in my life but kisses and glances.”

“Liar. I have the proof right in my hand.” He held up the piece of fabric Jafar had found in the street. “This is the very altar cloth the thief used to wrap the relic when he escaped from the temple. It even has a holy inscription stitched around the bottom. Do you still protest your innocence?” The captain was positively sneering with superiority.

“Let him go,” Selima cried, beating her tiny fists at one of the officers holding her father. “He *is* innocent. He but found that cloth this morning and brought it home as a present to me.”

“And who is this vixen?” the captain smiled, turning to admire what he could see of Selima’s beauty.

As the truth of what must have happened began to dawn in Jafar’s mind, his heart fell like a rock in a garden pool. With the stolen property undeniably in his possession, he had little chance of convincing the captain of his innocence. His only hope would be to stand before a *cadi* and plead the facts in the case, hoping Oromasd would grant him justice in this holy city.

In the meantime there was further peril as his beloved Selima risked being taken herself merely for being his daughter. Jafar had heard too many stories of

prisons and dungeons, and knew that must not happen to her.

“Run, Selima, run while you can!” he called. “I’m lost, they’ll never believe me. Save yourself, whatever you do.”

Selima stood frozen with indecision. She wanted to help her father, yet she knew his advice was good. The conflicting emotions threatened to tear her soul in two.

While she stood immobile, another policeman grabbed her tiny wrist and held it in a tight grip. Selima shrieked and tried to pull free, but found she could not. All her struggles managed to accomplish was to tear her milfa away, leaving her bare-faced in public.

The sound of his daughter’s cries moved Jafar to action. With a strong, sudden wrenching motion he pulled himself away from the policeman holding his left arm. Twisting slightly, he kicked at the groin of the man who’d grabbed Selima. That man, by quick movement, warded off the kick without receiving its ill effects, but in doing so let go his grip on Selima.

Free again, the girl did not hesitate, but ran as fast as she could toward the gate of the caravanserai. Other policemen in the courtyard tried to catch her, but desperation lent speed to her feet and she dodged around and between them. Before anyone else could touch her she was out the gate and fleeing down the street. Several officers gave chase, but soon lost her in the growing gloom of night and the twisting back streets of the city.

Jafar al-Sharif received a severe cudgeling from the truncheons of several officers for his interference in their work. But even through the pain that clouded his eyes, his soul felt at peace. “Selima escaped,” his thoughts repeated within the cradle of his mind, and that phrase was like a blanket to his troubled spirit. No matter what might happen to him—and in police

hands, much could happen—Selima was still free. She was a clever girl, she would not let herself be captured.

His only concern was that she'd make some foolish attempt to help him, thereby jeopardizing her own liberty. Jafar al-Sharif knew that his only hope would be to find a righteous *cadi* and argue his case convincingly—and, to judge from his experience so far, he was growing increasingly doubtful of finding any righteous men within the Holy City.

Hakem Rafi the thief had spent most of the day asleep. He'd returned from his adventure of the night before to the tumbledown caravanserai near the city's southern wall where he lodged. As the proprietor was asleep, Hakem Rafi slipped in and stole a bottle of wine, which he took to his dingy room and proceeded to empty in celebration of his marvelous prize. The thief drank himself into a stupor lying on the straw pallet that served as his bed, clutching the jeweled urn to his bosom as though it were a beloved concubine, its radiance in harsh contrast to the grimy surroundings.

He awoke, if such it could be called, in late afternoon as the sun's rays were tinged with that peculiar saffron glow that occurs each day at one specific moment of time. His head ached from the wine and his body ached from his stiff posture. His tongue was fuzzed and his eyes smarted as though a swarm of flies had crawled over them. But even as he woke, he knew he still held his precious urn.

Slowly he tilted his neck to look at it as it rested against his chest. Even taken from its glamorous home and beautiful surroundings, it was a breathtaking sight. He could see the gold showing a little more now between the stones, the smooth polished yellow of it, gleaming as though from the inner recesses of his deep-



est dreams.

And there were the jewels themselves, diamonds and emeralds each big enough to choke one of those fat jewelers down in the King's Bazaar. The sharp edges and smooth planes of each facet reflected hidden worlds of barbaric splendor, promising sensual delights to last a thousand thousand days and nights. Each gem was a separate pool in which Hakem Rafi bathed his dirty soul, pools of green and white that grabbed any light available and seemed to throw it back magnified a thousandfold.

Hakem Rafi placed the urn gently down beside his pallet and rolled over onto his stomach so he was staring straight into it. The beauty dazzled him, hypnotized him, caught him in a nameless whirl of fantasy. A chuckle came from the thief's throat, deep and raspy, and echoed to the very corners of the room and back again. The urn belonged to him, to Hakem Rafi, and with it came the power of....

Of what? His mind stopped suddenly at that point like a man tripping over a doorsill while entering a house. The power of what?

Wealth, that was what he meant. The urn represented untold riches, and with wealth came power. That was what he must have been thinking. Wealth and power were his. He would be Hakem Rafi the thief no longer. From this day forth he would be Hakem Rafi the gentleman, the lord, the nobleman. Perhaps he could find some small realm and buy an army to conquer it. Then he could be Hakem Rafi the king.

Or why stop there? Why not Hakem Rafi the emperor? The world was his for the taking, now that he held the urn.

The sound of breaking dishes downstairs brought him back to reality. Despite his physical condition, the

reflexes he'd developed over many years as a thief stood him in good stead. He leaped quickly from his pallet on the floor to the door of the room and peered out to see what was happening.

Police had invaded the courtyard downstairs and were rifling through the lower rooms first, showing no great concern for decorum or personal property. As the caravanserai's landlord and tenants looked on, the officers tore the place apart looking for something—and Hakem Rafi had a good idea what they were after.

He was not Hakem Rafi the emperor yet, and if he ever hoped to be he would have to get away from here very quickly. He couldn't leave by the door, but Hakem Rafi had long ago learned to plan for just such contingencies.

He had to wrap the urn again for its protection. He was sorry now he'd discarded the altar cloth, but there was other fabric available. Tearing strips of cloth from the bottom of his kaftan, he wrapped his treasure carefully and tucked it once more into his capacious pocket. That done, he set out to make his escape.

He'd chosen this room specifically for its window that overlooked the roof of the one-story house next door. It was but a short drop from the sill to the roof, and from there he moved across the flattened surface hoping the gathering twilight would hide him until he could be well away.

There were more police out on the street, however, and one of them spotted Hakem Rafi as the thief darted across the rooftop. While many people fled at the approach of the police, few did it across the roofs in so experienced a fashion. Giving a cry to alert his fellows, the policeman began to follow Hakem Rafi's path along the street. From this point, the chase was on once again.

Some policemen poured out onto the street to cover

the ground level of the neighborhood. Others rushed out from the caravanseraï's windows onto the roof where Hakem Rafi had gone. Their hope was to cut off his escape along the roofs as well as on the ground.

Hakem Rafi ran as though possessed by a demon, his hangover forgotten in his fear. He leaped from rooftop to rooftop with great agility. Each leap was hard enough for the chronically underfed thief, but agonizing for the police grown fat on bribes and wine. One very fat old captain followed gamely roof after roof. Hakem Rafi nearly fell after hearing the crash he made on a roof behind him.

He turned to see how close his pursuers were, then led them toward a stable he'd visited a few days before while stealing a saddlebag. The ground-level pursuers cursed all thieving servants of Rimahn as they had to struggle through the angry camels and horses. The thief was thrilled with his strategy and spurred across the center rib of the roof.

He had just reached the long wall beside the place when the fat captain jumped onto the very rotten roof. He crashed through and landed on a pregnant camel who proceeded to bite him and complain loudly enough to be heard over the rest of the chaos. The pursuers split as some stayed to rescue their captain and, as Hakem Rafi had hoped, he gained even more ground in the confusion.

He ran today as he had never run before, for now he was not merely running away from something; there was a vast reward at the end of this trail, if he could keep his freedom, and Hakem Rafi was determined the treasure would be his. No force in all of Parsina would deny it to him, he vowed, and on he ran.

At last he came to the end of the row of houses, and the gap across the street to the next row was too wide

for any man to leap. With the pack of policemen approaching across the rooftops behind him, Hakem Rafi had no choice but to drop to the ground and take his chances once more on the open streets.

He landed almost on top of one officer racing along the buildings to capture him. The man grabbed him as he landed, but Hakem Rafi delivered him a massive punch that sent the officer reeling backward against the wall, and the thief regained his balance and ran on. The gathering darkness would be his friend, as it ever was for thieves and murderers.

There were some few people still about in the streets at this hour, but Hakem Rafi pushed them rudely aside as he ran and no one seriously impeded his path. The byways of Ravan were still largely a mystery to him; he wished briefly he were back in Yazed, where he knew the twist and turn of every street and alleyway, and where he knew the houses of people who would shelter him for a price. But in Yazed, he reminded himself, there were no treasures such as the urn that weighed in his pocket. If one wanted high rewards, one had to risk great dangers.

His already dirty kaftan became streaked with his sweat and the dirt thrown up by his feet. The urn banged against his leg and he felt the gems starting to cut through the cheap fabric. Even though it made him more noticeable, he gathered that part of his robe into a pouch and held it up by his waist. His bare legs were cooler and could move even faster. His throat felt as though one of Rimahn's daevas had blasted it with red-hot sand, and his breath came in torturous gasps as he ran for his life and his dreams.

He dodged through the streets in the southeast quarter of Ravan for an hour, with the sounds of pursuit falling farther behind. Fate seemed to guide his

steps and took him safely at every turn, until at last he came to a dead end. His nose told him where he was even without light. He had reached a *khandaq*, a sewage sump for this neighborhood where the ditches at the sides of the streets carried the local wastes.

Hakem Rafi was breathing through his mouth, and even so the atmosphere of the *khandaq* made him gag and threatened to overwhelm him. The thief moved cautiously forward, nearly stumbling from exhaustion but mindful of the treacherous footing and not wanting to fall into the sump in the darkness. There was no thought at all of returning the way he'd come; though he'd put some distance between himself and his followers, any retracing of his steps would place him in immediate jeopardy. It would be better to put his faith in the powers of the *khandaq*; the air would be equally noxious for the police here as it was for him and they'd be unlikely to stay to give the area a thorough scrutiny. Hakem Rafi eased his way around the lip of the sump pressing tight against the retaining wall. He found a spot out of immediate sight of the street leading in here and held still. He muffled his mouth with the edge of his robe to stifle the echoes of his gasping.

In the distance he could hear the footsteps and voices of policemen coming closer. He had gotten so far ahead of them that they were unsure which way he'd gone and their search had become more random—but nonetheless their steps were taking them down the street that led to the *khandaq*.

They, too, could sense the pit before it came within their sight. One officer began to cough and said, "He must have gone some other way. No one could stand it in there."

His partner, though, was more determined. "I don't like it either," he said, "but we have our orders. That

urn must be found and returned to the temple. You don't want to get the priests mad at you, do you?"

"Better the priests than my wife, if I go in there and stink up my clothes."

"You wait here then, coward, in case he comes running out. I'm going down there to have a look around."

At that moment, though, a third set of footsteps came running up to the pair. "Good news," the latecomer exclaimed. "They say they've caught the thief in a caravanseraï over behind the King's Bazaar."

"Praise be to Oromasd," said the officer who'd been about to explore the khandaq. "Our blessed lord has spared me the task of descending into that wretched pit."

The footsteps walked off away from the pit, the officers chatting casually among themselves. Hakem Rafi waited until he could no longer hear them, then waited another few minutes as well for safety's sake. When at last he was convinced there was no one around, he relaxed and his fear fled him once more. Gagging and retching from the noxious stench of the khandaq, he moved around to the street again and walked well away from the sump until he could breath clean air once more.

## CHAPTER 8

### The Talking Urn

When at last the fumes had cleared from his brain and he could think plainly again, Hakem Rafi the thief gave careful consideration to his plight. Fate had spared him twice now after his theft of the urn, but he could not expect kismet's favoritism to continue. The police had arrested someone else they suspected of being the thief; but when he turned out not to be the culprit, they would continue their search. Hakem Rafi could not dodge them forever.

He went into a darkened alley, sat down against the wall, and removed the urn from his pocket once more. Even in the dim light, the beauty of his treasure was dazzling and Hakem Rafi stared at it fixedly for several minutes.

But beautiful as it was, he knew he could not keep it in its present condition. As an urn it was too readily identifiable as stolen property and too difficult to conceal. Broken down into its components, no one could ever trace the theft to him. The stones were enormous but not unique, and he could sell just the smallest of

them for a fortune worthy of kings; once the gems were taken out of their mountings, the golden urn itself could be smelted down and made into any of a thousand other forms. It was a shame, he knew, to spoil such dazzling beauty, but Hakem Rafi was ever the realist. It was money, not beauty, that fed his stomach and bought both the necessities and the luxuries of life.

For the first time he examined the urn analytically. He wondered what was in it. It had made no sound when he'd shaken it—not a rattling of solid objects, not a sighing of ashes, not a swishing of water. The lid seemed welded in place, and at the moment he was not inclined to try opening it.

Instead he concentrated on the jewels. He could pry them out of their casings and sew them into the lining of his clothing, then take the golden urn itself to some goldsmith who could be bribed not to ask questions. With those thoughts in mind, he pulled out his khanjar and began prying at the setting of one large emerald.

“O foolish mortal, do not tamper with what you do not understand!”

Hakem Rafi started backward, dropping the urn into his lap. The deep, powerful voice had unquestionably been speaking to him, and it had seemed to come from the urn itself. But that was not possible!

“Who...who speaks to me?” he asked in a shaky tone.

There was a pause, and then the urn replied, “It is I, Aeshma, chosen of Rimahn, king of all daevas and satrap of the demons of the Pits of Torment.”

Hakem Rafi jumped again and spread his legs, and the urn fell softly to the ground between them. He looked around to be certain he was alone and there was no one playing tricks on him. But the alley was deserted save for himself and the urn.



He picked up the urn gingerly and shook it, but still there was no sound. "What do you want?" he asked hesitantly.

"My freedom," the voice intoned.

"Are you in the urn?" he asked, knowing it was a foolish question but unable to think of anything else to say.

"Yes," the demon answered.

"What are you doing in there?"

"I was imprisoned here at the time of the Great Battle by the wizard Ali Maimun. It is my curse to remain here, alone and impotent, until freed by some lucky mortal to whom all the riches of Parsina shall be the reward."

The mention of reward caught the thief's attention, but he did not act rashly. The voice could well be lying, but there was no question that something magical was happening here. "Exactly how would you reward this mortal who set you free?" he asked warily.

"I would serve him to the end of his days as his slave, doing everything within my power to fulfill his slightest wish."

"What are your powers?"

"My powers are beyond numbering, like the stars in the sky. I can fly through the air across all of Parsina faster than the eye can blink. I know the secret locations of every buried treasure, the hidden spot where the jewels of the earth lie waiting for discovery. I can build a sturdy castle from the sands of the desert and create life from the ashes of old fires. At a mere thought I can provide food, wealth, women, and any material comforts a human being could possibly desire.

"But far beyond my personal powers, I am king of all daevas. At my command the Shaitans bow and the Marids cower. My captains number ninety-nine, and

each of them has nine hundred and ninety-nine lieutenants, and each of them commands an army of ninety-nine thousand demons, so that my host can cover the earth and all of Parsina will tremble as it did in the days before the Great Battle so many thousands of years ago. All this do I offer to he who sets me free from my imprisonment.”

All of Hakem Rafi’s greediest dreams swam before his eyes. Untold wealth, untold power, untold revenge on those who’d mistreated him throughout his long and sorrowful life. Aeshma could give him palaces of his own, rich food and potent wine, beautiful women to surround him and love him, armies of soldiers to enforce the respect people never gave him voluntarily. All this and more would be his if he could bend Aeshma to his will. The power of the world, limited only by his own imagination, would be within his grasp. There would be no more running, no more hungry nights, no more fights—and no more hiding in khandaq from the police. He would have every luxury he’d ever dreamed of, and more besides.

And yet, Hakem Rafi was ever the practical man, as a clever thief had to be. He would not fall off a cliff while chasing a star. “If you have all these wonderful powers,” he said cagily, “why are you imprisoned in this urn?”

“Because I ruled in the Age of Heroes,” Aeshma said without a scrap of apology. “I was opposed by King Shahriyan and his army of the thousand and one knights, by Argun, by Shiratz, by King Khaled and his enchanted metal horse, by Calut and his nomadic legions, and by Ali Maimun, the greatest wizard who ever lived. And even so, against all these powerful foes, I still would have triumphed but for the Crystal of Oromasd that focused the supreme power of creation and hum-

bled my armies. It was that power, and that power alone, that entrapped me within my present cage.

“But if I were freed now, my power would know no bounds. The great heroes are all dead and dust, the kings of Parsina plot and war against one another. There is no King Shahriyan to unite Parsina against me. There is no great wizard like Ali Maimun to work the world’s magic. Most important of all, the Crystal of Oromasd is no more. That fool Ali Maimun deemed it too powerful a weapon for use by mortal men, and so he shattered it in four pieces and scattered it to the four elements. With that Crystal gone, there is nothing in all Parsina I fear once I am free and in my power again.”

Hakem Rafi considered all this. The events of the Great Battle were known by everyone, as were the names of the heroes who courageously stood against the legions of demons. They were prodigious men, stalwart and strong, blessed by Oromasd and the Bounteous Immortals. The Age of Heroes was a golden age when every act was larger than life and all Parsina trembled when the forces of Oromasd and Rimahn did battle.

But the Age of Heroes had passed. Warriors like Argun and Shiratz, noble kings like Shahriyan, Khaled and Calut were gone, and their like had never been seen again. Wars were still waged, demons still plagued mankind, but the glorious battles on such a grand scale no longer occurred. Mankind lived in a muted era where personal problems often transcended the universal ones.

If what Aeshma said was true, he would be the last great remnant of an incredible age. His power would thrive unchecked, because there was no one in all of Parsina today who could rival him. With Aeshma as his slave, Hakem Rafi could easily become master of the

world, with no one to deny him his slightest whim.

And still the thief was cautious. "This urn is sealed tight," he said. "If I was to open it—and I'm not saying I will—how would I go about it?"

"Do *not* open this urn within the walls of Ravan!" Aeshma's reaction was swift and stern. "The city walls still reverberate with the charms and spells of old Ali Maimun, though he is dead lo these many centuries. If the lid were opened in Ravan, all my powers would drain out and I would become as helpless as a kitten; though I cannot die, I would become as weak as one unto death, and I would be instantly recaptured. If you open the urn inside the walls of Ravan it will do no good for either you or me.

"It is the spells on the city, as well as on the urn itself, that bind me as prisoner within this tiny vessel. Once I am beyond their influence, it will be but a simple matter for you to open the seals and free me, and earn yourself a devoted slave for the rest of your life. The wealth and wonder of the world are yours to command if you liberate me outside Ravan's boundaries."

Hakem Rafi's mouth was suddenly dry, and he licked his lips to moisten them. "I shall think more on this matter and speak with you later," he told the urn.

"Ever as my master wishes," Aeshma replied with silken tones and honeyed words.

Hakem Rafi stood up and carefully placed the urn back in his pocket. The prospects before him were so exciting he could barely keep his hands from trembling. He, Hakem Rafi the thief, the outcast, the scorned and debased, would possess the bearer of ultimate power as his abject slave. It was every man's dream come true—but Hakem Rafi had long ago learned not to trust in dreams.

Hakem Rafi had lived all his life among cheats, liars,

and cutthroats. He knew their habits and their inclinations far too well to be easily fooled by pretty words. Such men were prone to bragging, to exaggerating their abilities far beyond the limits of mere reality. Aeshma might very well be engaging in similar activity, inflating his powers to greater proportions than they actually were to entice a foolish mortal to open the urn and free him.

Even if that were so, however, Hakem Rafi still could not lose. If Aeshma possessed even one-hundredth of the power he claimed, Hakem Rafi would still become a wealthy and powerful man. He could scarcely be in a more desperate situation than he already was; the risk would be worth the taking.

Of far more concern to the thief was the problem of controlling Aeshma once he'd been freed. Pent up as he was now within his tiny urn, the demon was all honey and rosepetals, soft and promising. Hakem Rafi had heard other prisoners make exaggerated promises to their jailors in exchange for freedom, promises they had no intention of keeping. Hakem Rafi would have to find some way of forcing Aeshma to keep his word after he'd been released.

In all the stories and songs he'd ever heard, there were strict rules that governed the practice of magic, even by the druj who followed the way of destruction and the lie. Supposedly not even they, superb liars though they were, could swear falsely in the name of their lord. Before Hakem Rafi opened the urn, he would have to make Aeshma swear in the name of Rimahn, the power of darkness, purveyor of the lie, that he would act as slave to Hakem Rafi and obey him in all matters.

The wording of that oath would have to be thought out most carefully, as well. Demons were notorious for

finding ways to circumvent their agreements while holding to the letter of their oaths. Hakem Rafi would have to take steps to ensure that Aeshma would not simply kill him the instant he was free, before the thief gave him any orders to obey.

These were matters of serious thought, and Hakem Rafi knew he would have to consider them well before doing anything. Right now there were more immediate problems requiring his attention. The urn could not be opened within the walls of Ravan, meaning Hakem Rafi would have to find some method of getting his treasure past the city gates. As it was now well past sunset all five gates would be locked tight for the night. There were undoubtedly other, secret, paths in and out of the city but Hakem Rafi, a stranger to this town, knew them not. He would have to wait for daybreak and try the official routes then.

Meanwhile he had the night to pass as safely as he could. The police search had been called off for now, but there were still too many officers in the streets to make him comfortable, and he had no money to stay at a caravanserai or tavern for the night. If he could only get some sleep and avoid being captured, he could be the most powerful man in all of Parsina by this time tomorrow night.

Roaming through the now-quiet streets, he found an old house that was boarded up and empty. Hakem Rafi broke through the window and curled up to sleep on the bare floor in one corner. Hunger, cold, and loneliness were no strangers to him. Tomorrow they would be banished forever, but he decided he could endure them for one night more.

The problem of leaving Ravan proved much more difficult than Hakem Rafi had imagined. Shortly after

dawn he woke and walked down to Peasant's Gate to be there as it opened—but to his dismay he saw that a thorough search still was going on. Though the police thought they'd caught the thief last night, they knew the urn was still at large. The thief could have had one or more accomplices who might spirit the urn out of the city. Now that Hakem Rafi knew the urn's importance, he knew why the police were making such a major effort to reclaim it.

Every person attempting to leave the city through Peasant's Gate was stopped and subjected to a thorough search of his person. If he had any belongings with him, they were summarily opened and pawed through to make certain the missing urn was not there. One angry merchant, with a whole train of camels and many bales of merchandise, was being delayed while every item of his cargo big enough to contain the urn was systematically inspected by the callous guards. The merchant railed furiously at the officers, cursing them and their families for six generations in ways that even impressed someone as accomplished in the art as Hakem Rafi, but the police stubbornly went about their task with grim determination.

Hakem Rafi turned away from the southern gate without bothering to approach it. He could think of no way to hide the urn that would pass the inspection being given by the police and enable him to take it out of the city. And if he couldn't take it out of the city, all the promises Aeshma gave him were as empty as the desert wind.

He traveled around the city, stopping at Beggar's Gate, Merchant's Gate, and River Gate, all with the same result. The police everywhere were being extraordinarily diligent in their search for the missing urn, checking the baggage of everyone—rich or poor, great

or small—who left the city. Hakem Rafi knew that if he waited too long the police would find out that the culprit they apprehended yesterday was not the one with the urn, and they would start looking for him again. He had to be out of the city before then, but he despaired of ever leaving while the gate inspections were as thorough as he'd seen them.

With a sense of deepening gloom he approached Palace Gate, which he assumed would be the most tightly controlled of all. But as he traveled up along the King's Bazaar he encountered a growing climate of confusion and anarchy. There was an unusual percentage of soldiers, even for this quarter of the city; men, horses, camels, and asses were moving here and there with no sense of order. Hakem Rafi could barely fight his way through the mob to draw near the gate which, he saw, was being as closely guarded as the others.

The confusion, though, intrigued him. Wherever there is chaos, there the skillful thief finds his opportunity. Something important was going to happen here, and Hakem Rafi was curious to find out what it was.

A young man in the livery of a royal servant dashed past, and Hakem Rafi reached out and grabbed his arm. "Forgive me, O servant of royalty, but may a humble citizen ask what is the cause of all this commotion?"

The young man tried to shake the grip, but Hakem Rafi held him tightly. "Prince Ahmad is preparing to make a journey," he said, hoping that answer would satisfy his captor.

The thief's appetite for information was only whetted by this tidbit. "Where is he going?"

"He leaves at first light tomorrow for Marakh with his entourage, to marry his fiancée Princess Oma, O detainer of busy people." The young man gathered his strength and yanked his arm free of the other man's



grasp. With an indignant snort he continued on his intended errand, leaving a thoughtful Hakem Rafi behind him.

This coincidence could be the answer to his prayers. Tomorrow morning, Prince Ahmad would leave with his caravan. There would be aides and guards and servants and slaves, and all their baggage and supplies, plus gifts for the king of Marakh and assorted other trappings of a royal entourage. The guards at the gate would not dare stop the procession to search it for the missing urn; and even if, by some mischance, they did look, they would not be able to tell this urn from the other treasures the prince and his party would carry with them.

Hakem Rafi laughed. Prince Ahmad himself would provide the means for his departure from Ravan and would give Hakem Rafi the chance to open the urn and sample the riches Aeshma had promised him.

As the day wore on, Hakem Rafi watched closely the progress of the entourage, observing how it was assembled and who would be part of it. A number of the palace guards were apparently scheduled to accompany the prince. Most of the guards knew one another and talked among themselves, but there was one guard who held himself aloof and did not join in the camaraderie of his fellows. This was a man only slightly bigger than Hakem Rafi himself. The thief estimated he could easily fit within the guard's clothing and armor—and with the guard as distant as he was from his fellows, they would not likely see through his impersonation.

Thus, as the afternoon drew to a close, did Hakem Rafi devise his plan to kill the guard and take his place. He watched his quarry carefully as the man busied himself with loading trunks into carts and saddlebags onto the pack animals, but never did the guard stray far from

the public street until just after the sun set. Then, as a new shift started working, the soldier nodded to his relief and walked away down the bazaar. Hakem Rafi followed stealthily after him like a shadow of the night.

The soldier walked along the main street for a while, then turned off into a side street. Hakem Rafi's hand went to the hilt of the blade at his belt, but before he could make his move the soldier entered the door of a well-lighted tavern. Hakem Rafi cursed under his breath, but resolved not to let his target escape. Gathering his courage, he too entered the tavern.

The common room was bright and cheerful, lit by a heavy wrought-iron chandelier with dozens of blazing candles suspended from the center of the ceiling. The walls were neatly plastered with painted frescoes along the edges. Low circular tables were spaced about the floor, each circled by solid wooden benches. A roasting pig was turning on a spit over a flame in one corner of the room. The air smelled richly of cooked meat, unfortunately reminding Hakem Rafi that he had not eaten in two days. He'd been able to quell the pangs of hunger until now, but the precious aroma of the meat made his hunger burn anew, rekindling his resolve to accomplish his goals.

The tavern was moderately crowded. There were a number of soldiers seated at the various tables, and even more ordinary citizens—mostly respectable looking merchants and tradesmen of the middle classes. The particular soldier Hakem Rafi was interested in took a seat to one side of the room, near the roasting pig. Again he stayed to himself and ordered a glass of wine.

Hakem Rafi took a seat by himself at the other end of the tavern, a position from which he could watch the actions of his quarry without being particularly notice-

able himself. When the waiter came by to ask for his order Hakem Rafi explained that he was waiting for a friend and they would order together when he came. Meanwhile his stomach was grumbling at the ill treatment he'd given it and the promised food his nostrils had foretasted.

There was a balustrade along the corridor to the second floor, and from time to time a young woman—possibly the innkeeper's wife or daughter—came out and looked across the crowd below. She wore but the sheerest of milfas for modesty's sake, and her face was quite lovely. As her eyes scanned the room, Hakem Rafi noticed that she looked particularly at the guard he was chasing—and that the guard returned the gaze. After a while the woman disappeared again, but not before Hakem Rafi had developed a plan to win his wish.

Sidling over to the soldier, he sat down on the bench next to him and said, "My mistress is lovely, is she not?"

The guard, startled, looked at him cautiously. "Who are you?" he asked.

"I am but a servant of she who waits upstairs. She saw you gazing at her and signaled me silently to speak to you."

"I've done nothing wrong," the soldier insisted defensively.

"Of course not," Hakem Rafi soothed. "There is no sin in looking at beauty. My mistress herself has done it, when she looked down at you. She has charged me with asking you, O noble soldier of our illustrious prince, if you would be so kind as to honor her with a more private meeting upstairs."

"Now?" The soldier seemed stunned by his unexpected success.

"It is at your wish," the thief said with a shrug.

After a moment's thought the soldier stood up from the table. Hakem Rafi grabbed at his sleeve. "My mistress does request that you exercise discretion," he whispered. "For you to go straight up those stairs would be a grievous offense against her modesty."

"Then how...?"

"There is another set of stairs outside behind the tavern. There, under the darkness of night, you can go to her unobserved." Hakem Rafi stood up and led the officer by the arm, keeping a firm grip so the man would not squirm away or change his mind. "Come, I will show you where it is."

And Hakem Rafi led his victim out of the tavern once more and around the side of the building. There they were away from the main street and the prying eyes of evening travelers, covered by the darkness that was the gift of Rimahn to all evildoers.

"I don't see any stairs," the soldier said. Those were the last words of his life.

Hakem Rafi reached his left forearm around from behind the soldier, clasping it under the chin and lifting the poor man's head backward. With his right hand, the thief whipped out his khanjar. He tried stabbing the soldier, but the armor breastplate repelled the dagger, so Hakem Rafi quickly changed his attack and slid his sharp blade in an arc across the man's throat. Blood spurted forward and down. The soldier tried to scream, but Hakem Rafi's stroke had broken his larynx and the air hissed and bubbled out of his throat as his mouth moved impotently. The victim struggled but Hakem Rafi, driven by desperation and the promise of mastery over Aeshma, was stronger than he.

In a few moments it was all over. The soldier's body went limp in Hakem Rafi's arms, and the thief let his victim slip to the ground amid a growing pool of blood.

Looking around to make sure he was still unseen, Hakem Rafi dragged the body into the darkest corner of the alley and began stripping the armor and clothing from it. He wiped the worst of the blood off, though he could not get it all, and dressed himself in the dead man's garments. As he'd guessed, the clothes were a trifle large for him, but fit adequately enough for his purposes. It was better, he reckoned, to have armor that was a little loose than a little tight.

He took the precious urn from the pocket of his kaffan and used his old robes to cover up the body. By the time the corpse was discovered, the caravan should be well beyond the city walls and Hakem Rafi would be beyond all mortal punishment.

Taking the urn wrapped in its plain rags, he went back to the commotion by the Palace Gate. Torches had been set up so the packers and the handlers could work through the night to make sure the prince left as scheduled in the morning. With so much bustle and disturbance, no one noticed Hakem Rafi dressed as one of the palace guards walking calmly through the chaos. He went up to one of the asses and tucked his treasure securely into a basket it was carrying. He hated to be parted from the urn for even a single minute, but he knew he could not be seen carrying it about with him. He took great care to memorize exactly where the urn had been stashed, then walked reluctantly away. Once the caravan was outside the city walls, he would find some excuse to approach this ass and remove his treasure again.

In the meantime, the purse he'd taken from his victim contained a few silver dirhams. That was more than enough to buy him a good meal and a decent bed for the night, and even a woman to share it with him. After today, the money would be meaningless—but one last

time he would spend it and enjoy himself.

## CHAPTER 9

### The Jann

The Jann known only as Cari—for she was neither old enough nor experienced enough to have gained any other names—flew from her master’s tents to the walls of Ravan with great fear in her heart. Many were the stories and legends she’d heard about the power and the magic of the Holy City, and how magical beings were treated by the spells laid upon it centuries ago by the great wizard Ali Maimun. Even her people, the righteous Jann who worshiped Oromasd rather than Rimahn and tried to live their lives in good and ordered ways—even they avoided all contact with Ravan lest they be deemed too impure by the definitions of the spell and burned to ashes. Even though they did not age the way humans did and could live for many thousands of years, all djinni could die. The Jann, as the lowest order of the djinni, were the easiest to kill—and Cari, as one of the youngest in her line, would be easier yet.

Cari did not want to die. She’d lived a mere two hundred years and had barely begun to taste the richness of the world. She feared the spells of Ravan as

she'd feared nothing else in her short existence, and she feared the vengeful flame she was certain would envelop and consume her the instant she passed beyond those forbidding walls.

And yet, as slave of the ring her master Akar wore on his finger, she had no choice. Akar had forged the ring under a powerful spell and engraved it with her name, thus slipping a noose tightly about her soul. She was his slave, his tool. Today he'd commanded her to enter Ravan and discover the source of the disturbance in the world's magical network. She must do so, even though she was convinced she would die because of it.

Cari slowed as she neared the walls. She was constrained by her master's orders to fulfill her task as quickly as possible, but that still left her some discretionary leeway. She took a little extra time now to recite a long, silent prayer to Oromasd and to ask the blessings of the Bounteous Immortals. She confessed all her sins—including a couple she'd never committed, just to be on the safe side—and begged forgiveness from the lord of creation and light. She prayed that if she died in Ravan, her soul would reach the Bridge of Shinvar and be worthy to enter the House of Song.

She had a particular stake in that matter. Humans would all be resurrected after the Final Battle; even those wicked people who'd been damned to the Pits of Torment would be rehabilitated and would share in the glorious Paradise of Oromasd. But the soul of a djinn was a fragile thing; if it was not sustained by being accepted into the House of Song, it would simply cease to exist. There would be no rehabilitation, no Paradise—nothing. That which the world had known for a brief time as Cari would never be again.

When her prayers were finished she had no more excuse to linger outside the city. Braced for certain



death, Cari flew over the walls and into the streets of Ravan.

To her own astonishment and great relief, the threatened fires of vengeance did not consume her. She offered up another prayer to Oromasd, this one of gratitude for his mercy and compassion for a poor Jann, and she promised that, subject only to the whims of her master which she could not refuse, she would lead a good and blameless life.

With those obligations out of the way, she set about her assigned task. Akar had sent her into Ravan to discover what had disturbed the magical web that underlay the world. Had she been more experienced she might have deduced it immediately from the atmosphere. As it was, she had to resort to trial and error.

It was early in the evening when Cari began her search; the sun had just set and the dim dusk light cast odd shadows through the streets of Ravan. Cari did not worry about being seen as she swooped over the Holy City; it was a basic property of djinni that they could make themselves invisible and insubstantial at will. Cari could fly through the air like a hawk and float through walls as though they didn't exist. No one in Ravan would know she was there if she wanted to remain unnoticed.

Even untrained as she was, she could sense the disturbance in the air. She'd flown over the walls near Merchant's Gate, but this feeling of panic was not in the east quarter alone. The entire city was in an uproar. Floating closer to the ground, Cari could see some people running in fear, but she had no idea what they were running from. This would require more investigation.

She descended to ground level in a back alley where no one would notice and materialized into corporeal form. The shape she took was the one most natural for

her, that of a young woman, slender, almost boyish of figure. She had an attractive, very oval face with wide brown eyes flecked with gold, and long black hair that fell down her back to her shoulderblades. She could have materialized in other guises, such as various animals, but she'd acquired that skill so recently that she still was not comfortable with it and was afraid she'd do it wrong. This was her natural form and she liked it best; besides, she could get more answers as a person than she could as a beast.

Stepping out of the alley, she grabbed the arm of one woman running past. "Your pardon, O my lady," she said, "but why is everyone running? What's happening?"

"It's the police. They're looking for something. You'd better run too, if you know what's good for you."

"But what are they looking for?"

The woman shrugged. "Who knows? Who cares? They're the police—that's reason enough for them. If they're looking for something, it's best not to be around. They might find it, and then you're in trouble."

She looked sympathetically at Cari's young, innocent, unveiled face. "You'd better run, little one. The police have no more respect for a maid's virtue than for anything else. Come with me, I know places to hide until they're gone and the furor dies down again."

Cari shook her head. "I thank you for the offer, O gracious lady, but I have things I must do. I will be careful, and I guarantee the police won't catch me."

The woman shrugged again and hurried on her way.

Cari was thoughtful as she walked back into the alleyway and dematerialized once more. Could it be just a coincidence that the police were conducting a massive hunt for something at the same time the magical web was disturbed? Far more likely, she thought, that the

two events were connected in some way. Quite possibly the police were looking for the source of the disturbance just as she was.

If such were the case, it would make her task much simpler. Flying off again, she headed straight for the palace; that was the place, she guessed, where the wali of police would have his headquarters. By hanging around there, she was sure to overhear some talk that would explain all this commotion.

The palace was huge, bigger than any human building she had ever seen—with the possible exception of Akar's mountain castle, which sometimes seemed to extend forever into the bowels of the earth. Cari quickly realized she could roam these corridors for days without finding the place she wanted, so she materialized again near the front entrance and asked a servant where she might find the offices of the wali.

The servant was dumbfounded. “You *want* to go to the police?” he asked.

“Yes, I have important information about the object they seek, and I can only speak to the wali himself.”

The man raised an eyebrow but accepted her explanation. “The wali's audience chamber is around on the west side of the palace,” he said, “next to the barracks and just above the dungeon. It's said he likes to hear the screams of the prisoners as they're interrogated.”

Cari ignored the chilling warning and thanked the servant for his helpfulness. She ran off until she was once again out of sight, then dematerialized and flew to the indicated portion of the palace.

Cari arrived at the audience chamber, which was empty except for one old clerk. There was no sign of the wali himself. Cari was prepared to materialize again and ask information of the clerk when an officer raced in breathlessly. “Urgent news for the wali,” he said.

“He’s not here,” the clerk replied in a high, wavering voice.

“Where is he, then?”

“He asked not to be disturbed.”

“We’ve caught the thief he seeks, and we bring him to the wali for interrogation,” the policeman stressed.

The clerk looked at him with narrowed eyes. “You have, have you? Well, well, perhaps he’d want to hear about that personally. Bring your prisoner to the third floor audience chamber in the north tower. The wali is in conference with Lady Shammara, so mind your manners.”

Confident she would soon receive some of the answers she needed, Cari flew up to the indicated room. She arrived well ahead of the policeman and his prisoner, and floated invisibly in an upper corner to await results.

The audience chamber would have seemed large in any ordinary house, but here in this magnificent palace it appeared small and intimate. The red-tiled floor was covered with luxurious carpets from far Sinjin, and the calligraphed designs on the walls were a mosaic of red, white, and black. Ebony pillars with inlays of coral supported the arched ceiling, and onyx candelabra standing on pieces of furniture about the room gave off their bright light. Braziers at the corners burned their incense, scenting the room with the refreshing fragrance of sandalwood.

With the exception of a eunuch who stood well to the back and out of sight, there were only two people in the room, a man and a woman. Cari inferred they must be the wali and Lady Shammara of whom the clerk had spoken. Shammara nibbled a piece of rahat lakhoum as she lounged comfortably on a diwan with lion-clawed feet; to Cari’s surprise, the woman had not bothered to

wear her milfa, indicating this meeting might be more intimate than the clerk had hinted. She was dressed in lush, deep blue robes, perfectly arranged despite her deceptively casual pose.

The wali of police was a large, heavysset man who wore a silk embroidered vest trimmed with white fur over his richly brocaded kaftan. He had a thin mustache and a tiny, sharply pointed beard, and eyebrows that were thick black smudges against his forehead. He sat crosslegged on the carpet a few cubits in front of Shammara's diwan.

"I only wish this search weren't occupying so much of my time and manpower," the wali was saying as Cari invisibly entered the room. "I was hoping to have some of my men available to help with the transition."

"Still, it could very well be important," Shammara said. "I've seldom seen that old bore of a priest so agitated. It won't hurt us to be on the side of the priesthood now and then, particularly when it doesn't cost us much. It would be nice to have their backing when we make our move, to help calm some of the inevitable complaints. If we do this favor for them, they'll help us when the time comes."

"But *does* it cost us so little?" the wali continued to worry. "With so many of my men out combing the city for this damned urn...."

Shammara languidly held up a many-ringed hand to brush aside his fears. "The transition has been meticulously planned for months. We know exactly who among the guard are supporters of Ahmad and who we ourselves can count on. Most of Ahmad's men will probably go with him, making our job even easier. Even that fool Umar is going along; I've been trying to get rid of him for years. Within a few hours after the prince leaves the gates, his supporters in Ravan will have been

neutralized. All will be done with such quiet and grace that no one will ever know. If by some miracle the prince escapes his forest ambush, he'll never be allowed back in the city. Let him wander homeless as Prince of Nothing; it's no more than the baseborn bastard deserves."

Cari was growing bored with this discussion. Human politics interested her not at all, and she was sure it was of no concern to her master, either. She wished they would return to the matter of the lost article, which seemed to be an urn of some kind; that was a more promising avenue of information. Fortunately at that moment the police captain knocked at the door to the audience chamber. The eunuch who'd been standing behind Shammara walked quickly to the door and, after a moment's interrogation, allowed the newcomers to enter.

The police captain strode proudly into the room, leading on a chain a tall, handsome man of middle years. The prisoner's clothes were worn and frayed, but showed faded evidence of having once been respectable. His face was cut and bruised as though from a beating, but his bearing was nonetheless erect and proud.

The wali turned to his captain. "What is the meaning of this interruption?" he asked, and his tone made it clear he expected a very good explanation or the captain was not long for his position.

"O noble wali," the captain said, kneeling on one knee, "I have brought before you the thief we have sought all this day."

Shammara sat up a little straighter at this. Before she restored her face to its relaxed mask, Cari seemed to see a predatory flash in her eyes.

"Indeed?" The wali looked the prisoner over from

top to bottom. “Well, thief, what have you to say for yourself?”

The man gave a deep salaam. “I send a prayer of thanks to Oromasd and the Bounteous Immortals for having brought me before the wali of police, a man noted throughout all Parsina for his fairness and generosity, for his mercy and his inborn sense of justice. With the wali himself hearing my case, I have no doubt...”

“Silence!” the wali bellowed. His eyes narrowed as he peered more intently at the prisoner. “I have a whole staff of fawners and flatterers; I don’t need it from a stranger. What is your name, thief?”

“I am called Jafar al-Sharif, the storyteller, the recounter of legends....”

“The liar,” suggested the wali.

“That’s being a little harsh,” Jafar said. “My stories are meant to amuse and instruct, never to harm. Lies are the province of Rimahn and his daevas...”

“Why did you steal the urn?” the wali interrupted.

“Ah, now we get to the crucial point, O merciful and clement wali,” said Jafar. “I did not steal anything. Until this moment I didn’t even know what it was I’d supposedly stolen.”

“My captain says you did steal it.”

“Hard as it is to believe of such a noble officer, I’m afraid he’s mistaken.”

The wali looked to his captain, who spoke up immediately. “The man lies, Your Eminence. We found the evidence in his room and he admitted ownership.”

“You recovered the urn, then?”

The captain hesitated. “No, Your Eminence; though we searched the entire caravanserai where the thief was staying we could not find it. We did, however, find the altar cloth that was stolen at the same time, and the thief admitted it was his.”

“I but found it in the street this morning, Your Eminence. Had I known it was stolen, I would have returned it immediately.”

Shammara deigned to comment for the first time. “Catching the thief is not nearly as important as recovering the urn,” she pointed out to the wali.

The captain spoke up again. “O noble wali, there was a young girl living in the caravanserai with him, and she escaped before we could question her. Perhaps she has the urn.”

The wali nodded as he considered this, his little beard seeming to point at his wobbling chins which multiplied as he nodded. “Very possibly,” he mused aloud. “I authorize a search for her, too, captain. When you find her, cut off one finger or toe a minute until she tells you where the urn is.”

Jafar’s whole expression changed suddenly. His eyes widened with fear and his lips trembled. He prostrated himself full length upon the ground and began pleading with the wali.

“O noble wali, the girl had nothing to do with it. She is guilty only of being my daughter, a grievous fault she’s borne nobly. I confess: I and I alone committed the robbery of which you speak. She was asleep the whole time and knew nothing of it. I didn’t even tell her about it afterward, for fear she’d want me to share the loot with her. She knows nothing of any of this, I swear it by Oromasd himself.”

The wali smiled—a greasy smile of triumph. “That’s more like it. Tell me the details of your crime.”

Jafar hesitated. “That may be a little difficult, Your Eminence.”

“Why should it be difficult, rascal? You were there, you just admitted it.”

Jafar got back up to his knees and looked plaintively



at the wali. “Yes, but—uh, but you see, I have no idea *which* crime you’re alluding to.”

The wali drew back and looked at him. “Then you admit to committing several crimes?”

Jafar al-Sharif gulped loudly. “I seem to be slicing my veins deeper with each word I utter, but—well, who among us is perfect, O merciful wali? We all commit many minor transgressions every day against the laws of Oromasd, and it’s only through his divine forgiveness that any of us achieve the House of Song....”

“Quiet! You make my head ache,” the wali said. “I refer to the theft of the urn.”

“Ah, but which urn? I steal so many urns—big urns, small urns, tall, narrow, urns of glass and urns of pottery. They all blend together in my mind.”

“The reliquary urn that stood in the Royal Temple behind the Bahram fire,” the wali raged. “The golden urn half a cubit tall encrusted with diamonds and emeralds.”

“Oh, *that* urn,” Jafar said. He wanted to use his hands to gesticulate but, chained as he was, he could not. “Well, it’s funny you should mention it, there’s a very interesting story that goes along with it. I was walking down the street yesterday, feeling very hungry and thinking back to how much better things were before I came to this city. You see, I come from Durkhash originally, and I was known there as an expert storyteller. All the nobles would pay me a princely salary to entertain at their tables....”

“Enough!” bellowed the wali. “If you tell me this instant where the urn is I shall spare your life and send you away with merely the loss of both your hands.”

Jafar took a deep breath. “A very generous offer, I’m sure, Your Eminence, and well in keeping with your reputation—but I’m still afraid I can’t help you.”

“Why not?”

“Because I can’t remember where I put it.”

Shammara smiled with wry amusement. “You can’t remember where you put a golden urn covered with jewels?”

Jafar turned to her. “That’s right, O beautiful princess. You see, I have this peculiar habit of burying all the urns I steal, each in a different place around the city. I never make any money from my thefts, it’s just sort of this peculiar thing I do. I like to steal urns and bury them. At this very moment Ravan is probably filled with buried urns. If you’ll give me time, I could try to find where I put this one. It’s probably in one of about a dozen places....”

“I have more efficient methods of refreshing stubborn memories,” the wali said. Turning to his captain, he continued, “Take this rogue down to the dungeon and have him questioned in depth. Tell Aswad to give the matter his *personal* attention. Just make sure the thief stays alive until we’ve confirmed the location of the urn; if he dies prematurely, we may never find it.”

“I hear and obey,” the captain said. He stood up and began dragging the protesting Jafar out of the room by his chain.

“Oh, and captain,” the wali added. “My order about the girl still stands. Spread her description throughout the city, and when she’s found her fingers and toes are to be cut off until we find the urn. And order the searches at the gates stepped up. That urn must not be allowed to escape.”

Jafar was shrieking and wailing as he was dragged from the room and down the corridor. The eunuch shut the door, cutting off the worst of the noise.

“He may very well be innocent,” Shammara said casually of the departed prisoner as she relaxed into her

diwan.

“Anyone who lies that fluently must be guilty of something,” the wali reasoned.

Cari, meanwhile, decided she’d heard enough. This reliquary urn seemed to be the focus of all the activity she’d seen in Ravan this night—and the fact that it had been taken from behind the Bahram fire at the Temple of the Faith meant that it must have some powerful religious significance. It could well be that this theft was what caused the disturbance in the magical web. Her duty now was to tell her master what she’d heard and let him judge what should be done next.

Feeling proud to have accomplished her task so quickly, she whisked out of the palace and soared at top speed over the darkened city. She passed the dreaded walls without fear this time and flew to her master’s pavilion, half a parasang away from the city in open countryside, away from the well-traveled road.

The magical pavilion Akar had brought with him was like a palace in miniature. The silk top rose to onion-dome spires without the need for poles to hold them up. The fabric draped gracefully, billowing softly in the gentle evening breeze. The most unusual feature of the tent, though, was its color—pure black, like the darkness of the night sky at new moon, without benefit of starlight. The wizard Akar had no need of brilliant colors or flashy designs. His was the elegance of pure power, and black was his natural element.

Akar was dressed in black robes as Cari entered the pavilion, and the black turban on his head held an enormous black pearl in the center. He was seated in the middle of his magical carpet, ten cubits by fifteen, smoking on his hookah and waiting for Cari to report.

“O master, your humble slave has returned,” Cari said. She did not bother to materialize or make the

deep salaam that would normally be required, since she knew Akar could not see them. She was careful, though, to keep the proper tone of deference in her voice, for he would surely notice that.

“What are thy findings?” Akar asked without prelude.

Cari informed him that all of Ravan was searching for a gold and jeweled reliquary urn that had been stolen from behind the Bahram fire in the Temple of the Faith. Akar stroked his beard with his right hand as she spoke, while his left hand was clenching into a powerful fist.

“The urn of Aeshma,” he whispered, so softly Cari could barely hear him. “It could be no other.”

Cari had heard the name of Aeshma before, and it filled her with as much dread as the city walls had done earlier. Had she been in corporeal form, she would have shivered.

Akar, though, paid no attention to his slave’s discomfort. If Aeshma were set free from his imprisonment Parsina would shake to its very foundations. It would be a time of fire and fury the likes of which mankind had never seen—not even in the Age of Heroes, when there were at least stalwart men who could combat the evil loosed by Rimahn upon the world.

But strangely, Akar did not fear the liberation of Aeshma. Every great tragedy brought with it an equally great opportunity. He was suddenly struck with the realization that *this* was what he’d been training himself for all his life. Without knowing it, he had put himself along a course that would bring him to this position with exactly the right mastery of his craft to handle the situation. He alone of humankind could duplicate Ali Maimun’s legendary feat and tame the power of evil incarnate. He, Akar, would harness the king of daevas to

bring the world under his rule of perfect justice, perfect peace.

“Do they know who committed the theft?” he asked Cari abruptly.

“The police caught a man who may or may not be guilty, but he didn’t tell them where the urn was,” the Jann said, and she related the strange interrogation of Jafar al-Sharif. Akar listened to the tale, deep in thought.

“The man who would steal the urn of Aeshma must be either a total fool or a mighty wizard,” he mused aloud when Cari had finished speaking. “I’ve never heard of this Jafar al-Sharif before, and it’s unlikely any powerful wizard could have kept himself so pure he could have passed through Ravan’s gates. On the other hand from the wit of his replies he cannot be such a fool as I would imagine. An interesting dilemma.”

Akar was silent for long minutes as he contemplated the puzzle. At last he said, “Cari, I have another task for thee.”

“Always at your will, O master.”

“Return to Ravan and find out whether this Jafar al-Sharif really is the thief who took Aeshma’s urn. If he is, bring him and the urn, unopened, to me. If he isn’t, find the true thief and do likewise.”

“Harkening and obedience,” Cari said and, without a moment’s hesitation, flew back to the Holy City of Ravan. Her heart was heavy with foreboding, though, for she knew that this time she might well be forced to commit an evil act—rescuing the thief of Aeshma’s urn. Such a deed could have only one result: her instant vaporization. An order was an order, though, and Cari—slave to the ring her master wore—could not help but obey.

## CHAPTER 10

### The Dungeon

The night passed slowly and painfully for Jafar al-Sharif. He was taken directly from his audience with the wali down to the palace dungeon, a labyrinth of dark corridors with cold stone walls that dripped moisture and were covered with scum. The air was rotten with the smell of human wastes and stale blood. Flickering torches provided the only light, as well as an oily black smoke that pervaded everything.

Aswad the dungeonmaster, also known as Aswad the stonehearted, received his new charge with a wide grin that revealed more blackened teeth than white ones. He gave a silly, highpitched giggle as he received the wali's instructions, then told his guards to strip Jafar and bring him down to the interrogation chamber.

Aswad began with a simple torture. Taking a slim piece of wooden doweling he pressed it hard into his victim's lower abdomen, then slowly began twisting it. The skin of Jafar's belly began twisting with it, and the more he turned, the harder Aswad pressed until the pain in Jafar's intestines and bladder became excruciat-

ing. Jafar confessed to the crime many times over, but that did not satisfy Aswad; he wanted to know where the urn was.

To gain a respite, Jafar told them the urn was at a given site, specifying the doorway where he'd found the altar cloth; perhaps the real thief had left the urn near there as well. A policeman was immediately dispatched to investigate, but returned shortly with word that the urn was not there. Aswad grinned, for this meant more interrogation. Aswad enjoyed interrogation.

Using his sharpest knife, Aswad made deep cuts in the webbing of skin between the fingers of Jafar's left hand and then poured boiling oil on the open wounds. Jafar screamed and pleaded for mercy, pleas that only increased Aswad's enjoyment. In desperation Jafar described a second place, if only to gain himself another respite—but Aswad would not allow that to happen. While the police were out checking this latest spot, Aswad applied torches to the soles of Jafar's feet, charring the flesh and bringing more screams from the victim. Aswad explained calmly that if this answer wasn't correct, the next step would be to dip Jafar's testicles in honey and let the ants eat at them.

Jafar had passed out from the pain, though, by the time the police returned emptyhanded. Aswad, clucking sadly at how soft this new generation of criminals was, told his guards to carry the prisoner to a cell and let him recover for a few hours until he was sufficiently revived to undergo more interrogation.

Accordingly, the guards picked up the storyteller's unconscious body and dumped him in one of the small holding cells. The room, barely three cubits by five, had solid stone walls and a heavy iron door. A tiny grill in the door at eye level let in the room's only light. A foul-smelling bucket in the corner served as toilet; a pallet of

moldy straw was the only other furnishing. On this pallet the guards unceremoniously dropped Jafar's abused body, naked save for his loincloth, and left him there to contemplate the folly of resistance.

Jafar al-Sharif remained unconscious for two hours, a period of blessed relief from his agonies. Then his body betrayed him and the pain insinuated itself into his mind once more. His breathing grew ragged as he sobbed uncontrollably, curling up into a ball and cursing the fate that had brought him to this sorry position. He knew that more of this pain lay ahead. More than anything he wished to die to avoid suffering it, but knew not how to accomplish that end.

As his mind came more and more awake he grew slowly aware of another presence within his darkened cell. At first he didn't care; all that mattered in his mind was the burning pain in his left hand and both his feet. But the presence was patient and persistent, and eventually Jafar al-Sharif stopped his sobbing and turned his head to look at it.

The person standing in the cell with him was short and slender, but barely more than a silhouette in the dim light. Through the stench of the small room wafted the delicate scent of ylang-ylang. "I'll tell Aswad no more, no matter how much I suffer," Jafar rasped in a voice that hurt his throat, still sore from screaming.

"I do not come from Aswad," said a female voice.

Even to a mind confused by pain, this seemed odd. Women were not allowed in dungeons unless they were prisoners—and even then there was a separate dungeon for them. "Go away, then, and let me suffer alone," Jafar said. His mind was not ready for riddles now.

But the figure did not go; it stood there, peering down at him. "I cannot go yet," she said. "Not until I have accomplished my mission."



The pain came in waves over his body, and Jafar had to gasp for several moments before it eased enough to let him think again. The woman was still there, waiting.

“Who are you?” he asked hoarsely. “What do you want?”

“I am a Jann, sent by my master Akar, the world’s mightiest wizard. I must find out if you stole the urn and where it is.”

A Jann? A wizard? Jafar al-Sharif had told many stories about Janns and wizards, but never expected to meet any. And now here was one, all because of that thrice-damned urn. “No,” he said aloud, “it’s a trick. But it won’t work. I won’t tell you any more than I told Aswad.”

“It’s no trick,” the woman said, “and I must know.”

“A Jann couldn’t enter the Holy City,” Jafar coughed. “Even I know that.”

“I am of the righteous Jann, and Oromasd has judged me blameless and worthy of entering Ravan.”

A righteous Jann? Jafar knew there were some such, but...No, it couldn’t be. Djinni simply did not come visiting ordinary mortals like him. He might tell stories about them, but those were only tales to entertain and instruct. They weren’t meant to be taken literally.

“Prove to me you’re a Jann,” he said.

The figure did not reply immediately. Instead, she merely faded from view until she was totally gone, then gradually materialized in front of him once more. “Is that sufficient?” she asked.

Jafar al-Sharif began coughing both from his amazement and his pain. When at last he could control his breath again he said, “All right, I believe you’re some kind of magical being. But why have you come to

me?”

“My master commanded that if you are the true thief of the urn I must bring you to him.”

That put matters in an entirely new light. If this Jann was willing to take him from this place of torture, Jafar would cooperate as much as possible.

“Of course I’m the true thief,” Jafar said. “Do you think I’d be here if I weren’t? Now take me to your master at once.”

“Where is the urn?” the Jann asked.

Jafar coughed again. “It’s hard to think, my mind is in so much pain. They tortured me, you know.” He didn’t have to act to convey the agony he was suffering.

“Yes, I was there in the room, invisible, when they did it.”

“Why didn’t you stop them?” Jafar wailed.

“It wasn’t my duty,” the Jann replied, “and interfering at that point might have compromised my mission.”

“Well, I’ll forgive you if you get me out of here now.”

“First tell me where the urn is.”

“I’ve told you, I can’t think when I’m in this much pain. Get me out, give me a chance to heal, and I’ll do much better.”

The figure was silent for a moment, then knelt beside Jafar. She passed her left hand over his feet, his face, and his own throbbing left hand, muttering some words under her breath. Suddenly the pain was gone and the skin was whole again, as though there’d been no torture or beatings at all.

Jafar al-Sharif shivered with the sudden shock of wellness. Looking up at the Jann he said, “How did you...oh, magic, of course. Forgive me for doubting you, O mighty Jann. You are righteous indeed.”

The figure straightened up again. “Now, tell me where the urn is.”

“No,” Jafar said simply.

The woman looked at him, amazed. “Are you so ungrateful, then, after I have healed your wounds to deny me what I ask?”

“I’ll always be grateful for that,” Jafar told her. “But the urn is another matter entirely. It’s very valuable, isn’t it?”

The Jann was cautious with her reply. “People have said it is.”

“Of course it is,” Jafar said, “or the wali and your master, the wizard, wouldn’t go to so much trouble to get it. If I tell you where the urn is, you could go off and get it for yourself, leaving me here to face Aswad the pig-livered once more.”

“My orders are to bring you *and* the urn to my master.”

“How can I be sure of that? The only guarantee I have is the knowledge of where that urn is. In a matter this important I cannot trust to servants. Take me before your master. I will tell the secret to no one but him.” Jafar pulled himself up into a sitting position, crosslegged with his arms folded defiantly across his chest.

“How do I know you even have the urn? My master said that only a mighty wizard or a total fool would steal the urn. I know you’re not a fool; your trying to protect your daughter from the wali was too noble and kind for that.”

Jafar hesitated only a second. “Then it follows I must be a mighty wizard, doesn’t it?”

“If you’re a mighty wizard, what are you doing here? And how did you get into Ravan in the first place?”

“I’ve had enough of questions for now. Take me to your master. He and I will converse as equals. Our talk is not fit for servants.”

Now that he was no longer in pain and his eyes were adjusting to the gloom of the cell, Jafar could watch the Jann's reaction. Although he knew djinni could assume many shapes, he was still startled by how human she looked. She was barefoot, wearing white sirwaal trousers and a lemon-yellow sidaireeya with no shirt under it and no milfa. By Ravan's standards, the exposed face and cleavage were totally indecent. He wondered briefly what a djinn's standards of decency were.

Cari, meanwhile, faced a quandary. She had very specific orders and no way to carry them out. She could not prove whether Jafar was the true thief and she could not get him to say where the urn was. Perhaps some compromise could be arranged. "If I get you out of here, will you take me to where the urn is?"

"You will take me to your master and I'll discuss it with him. How else can I determine whether he's *worthy* to know where the urn is?"

This problem was becoming too complex for Cari. She was but a minor Jann, and young at that. Her master would have to make allowances. She would bring Jafar al-Sharif to him and let him make his own decisions. If Jafar was lying, Akar would make him pay for it in ways that would make Aswad the torturer seem merciful.

"Very well, I'll take you to my master and let him...."

"Is your master within Ravan or outside it?"

"Outside. He dares not enter the gates for fear of Ali Maimun's protection spells."

"Then I insist you take my daughter along, too. She and I will visit your master together."

Cari became even more confused. "I have no orders regarding your daughter. I am only supposed to bring you and the urn."

"If you have no orders about her, then you won't be

violating them if you bring her, will you?" Jafar reasoned.

"I don't know...."

"The police are hunting her. They may torture and kill her. If she dies, the secret of the urn's location may be lost forever."

The problem grew more complex with each passing minute. This Jafar either was a powerful wizard, as he claimed, or else he was the boldest liar she'd ever encountered. She considered trying to take Jafar with her by force, but there were problems with that. While she could make herself insubstantial, she didn't know how to do it for him. She was strong enough to carry him, but she'd have to open all the doors between here and the street, with him struggling every step of the way. Once in the open she could simply fly away with him—but getting him up to the surface without his cooperation might well be impossible.

"It may not be easy to find your daughter," Cari said aloud.

"Can't you just snap your fingers, or whatever you djinni do, to bring us to her?" Jafar asked.

Cari shook her head. "I am but a minor Jann with very limited powers."

"But you healed my wounds instantly."

"Just a minor healing spell," Cari said apologetically. "I've known that since I was fifty."

Jafar was startled. "Fifty? You look scarcely older than my daughter."

"Djinni age more slowly than humans. This summer will be my two hundred and eighteenth."

Jafar paused and took a couple of deep breaths. "Well, whatever your age, you must help my daughter escape this city with me or I will not go."

"Very well," Cari said. "I'll take you both to Akar."

But I warn you, my master has a fierce temper, and if you deceive him you'll end up regretting it."

"Give me your oath, then, by almighty Oromasd, that you will take both of us to your master," Jafar insisted, for he knew well from many stories that djinni were seldom to be trusted unless bound by oath.

"I swear by Lord Oromasd himself, and by the Bounteous Immortals he created to serve him, that I will do my utmost to deliver both you and your daughter safely to the pavilion of my master, Akar the wizard," Cari said solemnly. "After that, I'm afraid, you're on your own."

Jafar clapped his hands. "Fair enough. Now, how do we get out of here?"

"Be patient but a few moments longer," Cari said. She dematerialized and floated through the solid iron door into the corridors of the dungeon once more. There she searched until she found the jailor, who was currently asleep on his own private cot in a small alcove near the top of the dungeon steps. Slipping his ring of keys quietly from his belt so as not to wake him, she flew back down to Jafar's cell.

When he heard the key turning in the lock, Jafar thought at first it must be the torturers returning for him before the Jann could help him escape. He braced himself to fight and die, if necessary, rather than be taken back to that chamber of pain and death. He was quite relieved, though, to catch the scent of ylang-ylang and hear the voice of the invisible Jann say, "Come out and follow me. Be quick and quiet. Many are still asleep at this hour, and we may slip out without being caught."

Jafar looked down at his nearly naked body. "I can't go out on the streets like this; I'll be spotted for certain."

Cari considered the problem. "I'll find you some-

thing suitable along the way. Let us be out of here first, before anyone else comes looking for you.”

Jafar al-Sharif needed no further encouragement. He walked out of his foul-smelling cell into the cold and scarcely better-smelling air of the dungeon labyrinth. “Which way from here?” he asked his invisible guide.

“To the left, then turn to the right at the first cross corridor. There’s a set of stairs at the end of that, leading up to another door which I’ll unlock.”

Jafar started in the indicated direction. As he moved, he passed more doors like the one to his own cell, and from behind them he could hear the moaning of misery as each prisoner bewailed his hopeless condition. Jafar’s heart went out to these poor wretches. Some of them may indeed have been guilty of the most heinous crimes, but no one, he felt, deserved the treatment accorded to the dungeon’s honored guests by Aswad the stonehearted.

“Stop a minute, O beneficent Jann,” he called in a harsh whisper.

“What’s the matter now?” Cari replied impatiently.

“I want you to set all the prisoners free,” Jafar told her.

Though the Jann was invisible, her voice adequately expressed her shock. “I have no orders to set them free. That will only delay things.”

“But think,” Jafar argued. “If I alone escape the police will start another manhunt and concentrate on me. If *all* the prisoners escape, the police will be so busy they’ll have less time to worry about me.”

Cari hesitated. “I cannot take the responsibility....”

“Then give me the keys and let me do it.” Jafar al-Sharif held out his hand and, after a moment, the key ring was placed lightly in his palm.

“But be quick about it,” the Jann advised.

Jafar stepped up to the nearest door, unlocked it and threw it open. "I am a friend," he said to the shape in the darkness beyond the doorway. "Freedom is yours, if you will but take it." Then, without waiting for a reply, he went to the next door and repeated his actions.

All up and down the corridor Jafar moved quickly, unlocking each door and repeating his message of freedom. At first the prisoners were wary, fearing this was some new torture devised by the ingenious Aswad. But as the doors remained open and no evil befell them, small seedlings of hope began to blossom in minds where only despair had flowered until now. Some of the prisoners had been too badly tortured and mutilated to take advantage of their sudden good fortune, but many of them still had the strength to regain their basic human dignity. Weak and hungry though they were, they staggered out of their cells and milled about in the corridor, awaiting further directions.

"Follow me," Jafar gave the battle cry when all the doors along this passage had been opened. Returning to the cross corridor the Jann had mentioned, he led his growing army toward the stairs, opening more cell doors along the way. By the time they reached the top of the stairs, Jafar had a following of some thirty men, all driven beyond the point of desperation by the pain and the evils they had suffered in this place of horror.

As Jafar unlocked the door at the top of the stairs, the mob surged past him to the freedom of the upper chambers. They began yelling hoarsely in triumph, uncaring who heard them.

No escape of this magnitude had ever been attempted in the dungeon, and there were few guards on duty. All of them were sleeping, but they awoke at the sound of the prisoners' yells and grabbed their scimitars. A



few of the prisoners died from the sweeps of the guards' blades, but they fought with an inhuman ferocity and the weight of numbers on their side. The guards fell quickly and the prisoners grabbed their weapons. The battle soon turned into a rout.

Roaring their defiance, now, the mob seethed through the prison's upper corridors and quickly encountered Aswad as he tried to flee for help. Hour upon painful hour subjected to his cruel tortures had turned the prisoners into less than human beings, craving blood vengeance at any price. Aswad the torturer did not last long. His hands and feet were cut off, his eyes were gouged out, his tongue was sliced horizontally and his bowels were cut open; the body of the dungeonmaster was left in a pool of its own blood to die slowly and painfully as Aswad's one-time victims surged past on their path to freedom.

Jafar's escape was a little more reasoned. He let the howling mob precede him, doing the maximum amount of damage on their way out. He stopped thoughtfully beside the body of one of the guards who'd been dispatched most neatly and, bending down, stripped the body of its Sadre, Kushti, kaftan, and niaal. There were a few rips and bloodstains, but they would not be noticeable to a casual observer; at least with these clothes Jafar would be less conspicuous than if he were wearing just the prison loincloth. Thus accoutered, he was ready to face the world once more.

In such manner did Jafar al-Sharif escape from the dungeons of Ravan and begin his marvelous journey. But his mind at that moment was far from lofty thoughts or ultimate destinies. His main concern was to find his daughter Selima and help her escape the city with him before the wali of police could capture her and cut off her fingers.