

# **Ancestral Call**

**Carl Gibeily**

## Contents

---

### The Cedarman

## I: Saladin's Sword

1. A Game of Marbles
  2. The Assassin
  3. A Good Friday
  4. The Druze Star
  5. Calm as a Rock
- 

### The Cedarman

## II: Castle Perilous

6. The Sectarian Trees
  7. Father of Compassion
  8. A Hunt for Jinn
  9. The Maronite Moon
  10. A Second in Cedartime
-

Let us draw an arrow arbitrarily. If as we follow the arrow we find more and more of the random element in the world, then the arrow is pointing towards the future; if the random element decreases the arrow points towards the past.

Sir Arthur Eddington

# The Cedarman

It is like drowning in the dirtiest sea.

Somewhere, midway between the surface and the ocean floor, he becomes conscious that he is going the wrong way and that, though the light and pure air is above, his roots have remained below. The currents of this strange river sweep him up as the last leaf of the season, driving him ever further from the darkest day of autumn. Thus he soars and sinks through the murky haze looking up and down at the land he has left behind; gazing, as an ephemeral star, upon Mount Lebanon and wondering what it is.

Was I there?

Rooted to the same spot for over 8,000 seasons and yet this seems like the first time he sees the land. Seems like the first time he sees anything. Though from a deeper recollection - deeper than the underground streams that had tickled his deepest roots - he begins to feel that he had once had more than the one sense of touch/taste.

The warm soil even when I have no soil to hold onto.

In spite of the blurred vision, as of jinn before him dancing in cascades, he is so enthralled by the rediscovered sensation of vision that he thinks less of roots: both his own, lost so mysteriously; and the roots of others in the millennial struggle. He cares no more for the 2,000 seasons of joy and as many seasons of hardship. Now that he can discern new shapes and forms as happy isles, all he can think about is the beauty of symmetry.

This is my mother, and the mother of all things.

Stepping off the revolving planet for a moment, he inhales the blue sky and exhales a single white cloud as though he were a timorous wind god. He climbs higher still - now wise to which way is up - and looks at the pine forest that surrounds the cedar copse. Spearpoints versus shields, roundheads and cavaliers: the mountain's two age-old foes. Pines, with their long shafts, gaining territory on the cedar phalanx; the flattened boughs, in desperate formation attempting to repel the invaders. Rivals from a time before the mountain became stooped with age; and yet the swiftest of all wars. In barely one generation within, that is, a

cedar's living memory, the pine trees had won, and all that remained of the Cedar Mountain were the few haggard fighters of the copse.

This is not my war. I am at war with no-one, with nothing.

An ancestral war that no longer affects the metamorphosed cedar. For the first time, he can look on the trees and see them for what they really are: nothing but trees swaying in a gentle breeze.

I was in a cedar, lived with a cedar. But I was born a human.

With this sudden realisation, he drifts down again and turns his attention to the men who stand as statues next to the cedar. From one who was experiencing deep time until so recently, whose weight for an uncertain while had been that of a house, he has been transformed into a microcosmic creature: with no mass to call his own, he can sense the extremes of timelessness. Where previously the men gathered around his trunk had felt like scurrying ants, he now sees them as a forest of leafless sapwood driven into the ground like stakes. The tables have been turned: a second for a man has become three decades for him. Just for a change, men would live immobile for 2,000 years.

To live and die in a single heartbeat.

The blue sky gives way to clouds, to an enveloping mist. Storm clouds, blackish-grey with water, start to form and yet still, from the occasional clearings, the army of men below remain motionless, oblivious to the changing season. Men and pines grow blurred once more, melding into a mass of humantrees as he is suddenly swept up by the storm. The turbulence grows to such intensities that he yearns to be back in the cedar with the comforting sense of touch/taste.

It is like drowning in the dirtiest sea - except that now he knows it to be true. A myriad of rivulets appear, forcing him down, ever downwards in so complete a sinking sensation that he is surprised that he has not yet crashed to ground, drowned in mud.

Instead, an instant of rain, and he regains his opaque sight through the veil of water.

I know this place.

The storm has carried him far and yet only a few kilometres down the mountain. Away from the pine forest, over the town of Baraka, and east to the oldest estate of Mount Lebanon.

I know this palace.

A farmer runs for cover, taken by surprise by the sudden storm. And, sitting in an Abbassid alcove, staring vacantly out of the window, is the lady of the house.

I know this woman.

He stares unseen, and is moved by the sheer sadness on her face. She smokes a narghile pipe, and as she blows smoke through her nostrils, it seems as if

her head is on fire, a smouldering heat which the veil of water between them cannot extinguish.

He reaches out to her and has all but forgotten the cedar's roots of a second ago and how, for that matter, he came to be a cedarman.

# I Saladin's Sword

*Whoso pulleth out this sword of this stone and anvil is  
rightwise King born of all England.*

# 1. A Game of Marbles

She stares sullenly at the grey blanket of rain outside. Tap-tappety-tappety-tap: thousands of elves at the window trying to enter the palace.

*Ach! But you are in a foul mood today.* She inhales the narghile so deeply that it seems even her stomach almost tastes the apple-scented smoke. Yet it brings her less of a buzz than usual. *March. Yes - that must be it. March and cry-babies.* She chuckles with little mirth as smoke escapes from her nostrils. The dark day outside and the water-jinn conspire to reflect her features. *Enough tears for rain, eh Dragon?*

She holds the snaky tube away from her to focus on her face, and the water in the narghile jug stops boiling. The other hand moves to caress a cheek placatingly. Marginally less of a dragon now, she thinks, now that her face is not scrunched up by the effort of smoking. *Shouldn't smoke today.* The sweetness of apple-tambak is all but lost on a rotten day, like the obliterated taste of a single black grape after a bowl of black olives. *Shouldn't smoke the whole of March.*

The hand traces the cheek before cupping the nose. 'You have the nose befitting the Sphinx herself,' Selim had once said to her.

She turns away from the window, abruptly, as though Selim has just spoken these words. She is in the dewan, a regal reception room that has the form of a nave and transepts, and is seated altar-end in the Abbassid annexe. Selim graces the east wing of the dewan and, from the cockpit, she contemplates his portrait.

*What exactly did you mean by that anyway?* She had never thought of asking him. Had he meant that the Egyptians had sculpted her nose on the Sphinx because of its exquisite beauty? Or that the Egyptians, having sculpted her nose on the Sphinx, had changed their minds and had destroyed it for the sake of a fairer world. *That's the thing about you - demure in life, quiet in death.*

Lady Nisrin Salah-ed-Din tolerates her questions remaining unanswered even less than she does cry-babies or the month of March. *It's like those damned pictures.* She forces the snaky tube back into her mouth and the water bubbles more furiously than the rapping jinn.

In 1958, at the peak of March, so to speak, the feudal lord of the Southern

Druzes, Sheikh Selim Salah-ed-Din, and his personal guard were driving on a deserted mountain lane when they were ambushed and gunned to death. Nisrin had received the tragic news with a shocked but stoic expression - a mask that remained plastered on her face for a full week, through the four days of official mourning and some. Journalists were deprived of the image of a wailing woman, the high-pitched ululating of deep grief as characterised by the common Arab widow. But then, Nisrin is anything but common. With Selim's death she gained the reputation of a cold-hearted woman who could not shed a single tear for her husband; but she also proved that true royals the world over know how to grieve in public.

In private, the dam broke on the seventh day. She was clearing Selim's belongings when she came across a box of photographs. Selim had been the photographer and therefore absent from all of them - a visible reminder that was poignant enough. But what drove Nisrin to tears that day was that many of the grinning faces, the poses and portraits, and even some of the locations were unknown to her.

'Who's this?' she had asked, pointing. 'And this? Where was this taken? And who are those two? What's this man doing? Where's this mosque? Tell me, Selim!'

People die. But there should be a way to store all the details of a lifetime. *You have a question? All you do is refer to a file in a cabinet.* Picture X: taken in Rome; Mr A doing the Thinker's pose in St Peter's. And, in another file, subject: My wife's nose; as beautiful as the Sphinx's surely was.

At least that way was civil and orderly. And avoided the messy dilemmas: should she throw away the pictures because she doesn't know the people; or should she keep the pictures because she doesn't know the people on the off chance that someday someone might magically appear to explain them all to her.

In a rare moment of indecision, Nisrin had handed the box to Marina, the youngest maid, with a dismissive, 'Do with them what you will.' And the girl, for want of posters in her room, had found it delightful to cover her walls with grinning strangers. Which, of course, turned out to be the perfect solution - Nisrin had thereby both thrown them away and kept them in the confines of the palace.

*When in doubt, delegate.*

Except that, when it came to her boys, there was no-one to delegate to. And on a day like today, even the downpour is insufficient to fill the well of doubt that she is feeling.

*Ach! Archduke. Come take care of your children and I'll spend March in Australia where it's September.*

Archduke is a term of endearment of sorts. A morbid pet name for it was

assigned posthumously. The police investigation into Selim's murder ultimately uncovered few leads and no culprits. But the political uproar had far more repercussions. In a distinctly Levantine version to the game of pin the tail to the donkey, the Druze and Muslim opposition blamed the Maronite-led government who charged the Palestinians who, in turn, claimed the gory and efficient nature of the crime had the hallmark of a Mossad assassination. The short civil war of '58 was perhaps already in the cards but - as is the case with conspiracy theories left unchecked - many believed that the catalyst for that war was the brutal murder of Selim Salah-ed-Din. The martyr syndrome: almost overnight, a mere sheikh of Druzes was elevated to the status of archduke of an empire.

Marina enters the dewan and waits until her mistress looks her way. The maid informs her that the doctor has arrived.

'Show him to Karim's room,' says Nisrin. 'I'll join him there presently.'

'Yes, Sittna.'

*March it is. Dreadful, tiring March.* She stokes the burning charcoal on the tobacco and inhales quick puffs to get the narghile pipe going again, chugging along like a steam engine. She briefly considers that now is the time to stop smoking until April, but then changes her mind as apple-tambak sparks with renewed life; and the water soon resumes its steady bubbling. The early afternoon narghile in the Abbassid annexe is fast becoming as sacred in the Salah-ed-Din house as vespers in a monastery.

Tradition rests comfortably between the pen and the sword. *Would the English have kept a hold on their empire for quite so long without their 5 o'clock tea?*

The one, almost redeeming feature about March is that April, her favourite month in the year, is soon to follow. April, when the snows have melted and the heat of the summer will not be unleashed for another two months; when flowers invade the mountains progressively from the temperate valleys to the peaks like an unstoppable army on the march. From her vantage in the Abbassid balcony, she looks forward to the seasonal rivulet that cascades down the opposite mountainside like many threads of gossamer. For much of the year, the stream is rocky and dry and lifeless as a lunar sea. In early spring, a tap somewhere deep in the mountain is slowly turned open - tiny elves straining at a giant sluicagate - reaching maximum turbulence in April, only to be closed slowly by end June, and dry again in nature's never-ending cycle.

In stark contrast, March is just a wet blanket.

In Mount Lebanon, March and April do not belong to the same season. Both offspring of the summerless winter, they are miniature seasons, childlike: small but with their own personalities; and banded together not through choice but out

of respect for the Year which is their birthplace. As distinctly different as Nisrin's twins. Karim first followed, 31 minutes later, by Kamal.

She turns once more to the painting in the east wing. *Archduke, what am I to do with your boys?* It should be a law of the land. If a parent goes to all the trouble of preparing a last will and testament, he or she should also have the foresight to include some parental advice. Murdered when they were two, when fatherly advice was the furthest concern on her mind, and potty-training the closest.

Karim, the cry-baby, the sullen weakling with a constant grey mist draped around him.

Kamal, the radiant, the bright eyes that focus on people, sparkling with curiosity, laughter or hatred - but ever sparkling. To the ancients, for whom gods were more important than seasons, Kamal would be March for he is a leader, stubborn, hot-tempered, and belligerent as a god of war with control over his horses, Fear and Terror. But he is April in Mount Lebanon: above all else, he is shimmeringly alive as a conquering carpet of flowers.

How can children, twins no less, born of the same parents and in the same environment be so radically different? *Ach, Archduke. That I could hold the Druze mysteries of reincarnation in my hand.* And become the greatest sheikha of the Druze faith.

Nisrin sucks only air through the narghile pipe. She looks at the ash and the dying embers of charcoal and continues to suck. It is marginally lighter outside and the rain has stopped so that the only sound comes from the bubbles, now that the jinn have packed their drums.

*The doctor's gone up to heaven to comfort the angels.* Nisrin is sure that there isn't anything *actually* wrong with Karim - medically at least. He has done this before. Never this long though, which is why the doctor has been called. The danger is that, as the fables go, someday if he falls seriously ill and starts to cry, all the king's men and all the king's doctors will be unlikely to stop the wolf from feasting on his remains. And Allah can he cry! 48 hours with only brief respites for sleep. *Should stop him from drinking water - the tears must come from somewhere.*

Karim's fit began on Sunday afternoon, the day the storm clouds moved in from the east. It is now Tuesday afternoon and the downpours have been broken by the briefest of rests. Other than a mild migraine - probably brought on by the crying anyway - he has no fever, no aches or pains. His mood is more tiresome than it is mysterious. *Can't be good for the brain cells with this constant flow rushing out of the skull.* She has a vision of fertile alluvium being swept up by a river and irremediably lost.

The boy is always quick to tears but never for this long nor, apparently, for no reason at all - though usually, when the reasons are forthcoming, they are of so banal a nature anyway that Nisrin loses her cool and yells at him which only makes matters worse. *Pipi I can handle. But not this.*

In Cairo, during the last summer holidays, on the day in fact that the boys turned twelve, Karim cried when he saw the Cheops Pyramid. They were standing mother and son, side by side but looking in opposite directions: Nisrin, facing east, was gazing at the Sphinx and mentally trying to extrapolate a nose from the ruined features; and Karim, facing west, was looking up at the pyramid with tears in his eyes. Kamal was elsewhere, haggling with a peddler over an imitation Fatimid dagger.

Nisrin turned to her son and noticed his tears. Feeling morose herself, and ever as baffled by the mystery of the Sphinx, she asked in a conciliatory mood what was bothering him.

'The pyramid.' He pointed at the apex. 'It must be so lonely up there.'

'Good thing you're down here then.' She tried her best to sound encouraging.

'But if I climbed it, I would be very alone.'

She lost her patience. 'Stop snivelling, *ya!* No-one's asking you to climb the pyramid!'

Karim took a few steps away from her with leaden limbs just as Kamal came running to them, grinning like an imp, and brandishing a 2.50-Egyptian-pound souvenir, an imitation dagger of the Fatimid era.

Karim had arrived as an unannounced stranger to the Salah-ed-Din family; but Kamal was a Saladin true and blue.

Nisrin coils the snaky tube around the neck of the narghile and, with a last check on the weather outside, rises from her seat and heads for Karim's bedroom. Two visitors are expected this afternoon. The first, and more welcome of the two, is a Muslim doctor, summoned to examine Karim, who is already at the boy's bedside and who doubtless is peering into the eyes and marvelling at the tear-ducts therein.

The second visitor, expected shortly, is a Maronite friar - or priest, Nisrin is not sure of the distinction - who is the head teacher of the boys' school. He was coming to the palace to explain why, for the last two days, Kamal had been turned back at the school gates.

A doctor and a priest for the twins: could this day be any more perfect? Pausing down the aisle of the dewan, she casts a reproachful glance at the Archduke. She speaks softly to the painting: 'Should be the other way round, dear, don't you think?' *Medication to calm Kamal's temper, and exorcism to rid Karim of*

*the sad spirits.* ‘You know who’s right, don’t you. Now, this very second, you know more than all the priests and imams and sheikhs of the faith. Are the Christians and Muslims right, and are you in heaven or hell? Or is ours the truest of faiths, and are you in the body of a nine year old?’

Nisrin leaves the dewan.

*But if you are a boy again, I hope you’re behaving yourself...*

I am no more Nisrin Salah-ed-Din than I am a cedar tree. But this new taste/touch experience is the richest I have known.

*...Playing with themselves as soon as they know how.* Boys his age do that all the time.

The doctor’s hands move over the boy’s head looking for bumps and bruises. ‘Did you knock your head?’

‘No.’

Sitt Nisrin has just entered the room, sits, crosses her arms and looks on impassively; and so the doctor continues his cursory examination though he is already convinced of his diagnosis. *Not that head you’re knocking in your free time, is it.* ‘You told Sittna that your head was hurting. Is it still hurting now?’

‘Yes. But less.’

His hands move down to feel for swollen glands at the neck and in the armpits. ‘How long has he been in bed, Sittna?’

Nisrin clears her throat. ‘Since Sunday afternoon, hakim. Karim has been too,’ pause, ‘tired to go to school.’

‘Tired. Yes.’ *Natural, when too much blood is forced to pump into just one organ.* ‘Tell me, Karim, when you close your eyes do you see lots of little lights like stars?’

‘No. I see a cloud.’

The hakim frowns. ‘A cloud?’

‘Yes. One cloud.’

*A cloud or stars - what’s the difference.* He packs the stethoscope and blood pressure gauge which he had used on Karim before Sittna’s arrival, before reaching the conclusion that there was absolutely nothing wrong with the boy.

‘Well, hakim?’ enquires Sitt Nisrin.

‘Well, for a start he should be out of bed.’ *He needs true rest which the bed is clearly not providing.* ‘And more sugar in his diet for the next few days.’

‘Is that all?’

‘Yes, Sittna.’

‘Hakim, look at his eyes.’

They both turn to the boy's bloodshot eyes.

'Red with tears since Sunday,' she says.

'Tired eyes, Sittna. Too much, ah, exertion. The boy has come to the age when he thinks a lot.' He asks Karim, 'Are you dreaming a lot?'

'Yes.' The eyes are lowered in shame.

'Yes. Well too much dreaming, Karim, makes you ill. Do you understand?'

The boy nods.

'You must learn to control yourself. For example, dream only once a week.'

Karim looks unhappy. His eyes are still avoiding the doctor's.

'Promise me you'll do that.'

'I can't help it.'

The boy is uncomfortable, so is the doctor. It is hard to talk of these things with the boy's mother in the room. *Will it offend the Sitt if I ask her to leave?*

'Sittna, the boy may speak more freely of his dreams if - ' the voice trails off.

'Yes, hakim. I totally agree with you. When you're through, please join me in the dewan.'

She leaves as though the motion out of the room is spring-loaded. *And not even a word to her son.* One of Sitt Nisrin's farmers lost a child on Sunday. Perhaps that tragedy has added a layer of frost to Sittna's habitual cool. There is nothing like grief to turn her heart to stone. *Love must always come in spurts for this boy.*

'Karim,' he says when they are alone, 'you can think of girls, but not all the time.'

'Girls?' The boy's expression has turned to surprise. 'I never think of girls.'

The doctor frowns, perplexed. 'But your dreams.'

'One dream. Always the same.'

'Just one?'

'Yes.'

'And what is that dream?'

Karim hesitates. 'I don't know.'

The doctor tries again. 'What is it that you see?'

'A single cloud.'

'Yes?'

The boy hesitates again; the expression returns to one of shame. 'And the sun.'

*I am confused.* 'You dream of a cloud and the sun.'

Karim speaks more slowly, and his eyes are becoming redder still. 'Whenever I close my eyes, I see the cloud. And the sun becomes a black behemoth.'

'A black what?'

'Behemoth.'

*That's what I thought he said.* 'And this, ah, behemoth - what exactly does it do?'

'What it's supposed to do.'

'Which is?'

'It just sits.'

'Ah.'

Silence.

The doctor expects the boy to speak. But after a while, he feels forced to prompt, 'Is that all?'

Karim nods. 'Except when I open my eyes, I remember his name.'

'The behemoth's?'

Nod.

'And the name is?'

Barely louder than a whisper: '*Bé-ém.*'

*A behemoth called Bayem: a mere physician can do nothing about that.*

'How old are you, Karim?'

'Twelve and a half.'

'Do you know what masturbating is?'

'Shooting the cannon?'

'Hmm. Do you, ah, shoot your cannon?' The doctor pulls back the bed sheet and asks Karim to pull down his pyjamas. He hopes to find a soreness: a glans rubbed raw to prove his earlier diagnosis. What he finds instead fills him with immediate revulsion. *Bismillah ar-Rahman ar-Raheem!*

'No,' says Karim. 'But I have tried.'

He should hold the penis to take a closer look, but his hand has already recoiled. 'No what?' The doctor's voice betrays only a fraction of the disgust that he is feeling.

'I don't shoot my cannon like Kamal. All he has to do is think of dirty girls doing dirty things - that's how his dick goes hard.'

*Now that the penis is exposed, the mouth becomes as offensive.* 'Call it a penis, boy, a penis.'

'Hakim, by *dirty things*, does he also mean pipi and caca?'

*This is too much.* The doctor rises to his feet, takes his satchel but, against his will, his eyes return to the member. *Like prostitutes: one hears about them but one never sees them.* The boy has down on his upper lip and pubic area, and the genitalia appear formed. *But it's difficult to tell when you've only examined one kind of penis all your life.* 'Get out of bed, and get dressed,' he says as he leaves the room and the impure penis still exposed. 'There is nothing wrong with you.'

*This is a lie. The child is sick to the core.*

❓ ❓ ❓ ❓ ❓

I have a cedar's memory, and I remember some curious numbers: I recall four boys going up to three trees that are really one.

The oldest cedar in Lebanon, and the oldest tree in the world for that matter stands, appropriately enough, in the heart of the copse that was once a forest. He is on a hillock, a king in his citadel, surrounded by his family and guards, as though all the cedars are his ripples. And in that precise fortress has he remained, majestically, for the past 3,200 years.

Karim stood in awe before the great tree. 'This is the oldest cedar,' he said with admiration. '*Emir-Bashir*.'

The other three boys showed no interest. Walid Zeitouni pointed away from the most ancient tree. 'Let's go there. Inside the three trees.'

'That's one tree,' Karim corrected. 'The trunk's been buried and it's three branches growing out of the ground.' Believing it might impress the two Maronite boys in the group, he added, 'He's called *Holy-Trinity*.'

Kamal grinned unkindly and aped his twin's look of wonder. 'Holy-Shit!'

Georges Salibi pushed Kamal playfully. 'Your brother's a right dick, Kamal, but you're a prick.'

'Dick-in-you.' Kamal riposted, punching Georges in the arm.

'Cock-sucker.'

'Dildo-features.'

The slanging match between the two boys remained friendly, each in turn striking the other in the arm.

'Come on, girls,' interceded Walid. 'I've got something to show you.'

The boys headed towards the cedar called *Holy-Trinity*: Walid led, Kamal and Georges followed, now exchanging rude gestures, and Karim picked up the rear with a wistful backward glance at the grand *Emir-Bashir*.

The boys huddled in the triangular area of ground, sitting above the unseen trunk. They were sheltered in this natural hut, the foliage for a roof, and the branches for columns that were wide as walls.

Walid twitched his eyebrows provocatively and untucked his shirt to reveal a brown envelope sticking out of his trousers.

'What's that?' asked Georges.

'What else comes in a brown envelope, stupid.'

'Really?' Kamal said excitedly. 'Where did you get it?'

'What is it?' Karim asked. All he saw was a brown envelope.

'Sfeir's.' Walid replied and the other two chuckled.

One could buy anything in Sfeir's general store at almost any age. With cataracts in his eyes severely affecting the grocer's sense of better judgment, men and boys alike freely purchased cigarettes, arak, and foreign pornography that came packaged in innocent-looking brown envelopes.

'*Hayah!*' whooped Kamal. 'Let's have a look then.'

Like a conjuring trick, Walid drew the magazine from its envelope.

Karim gasped. 'Someone could find us.'

'There's no-one here.' Georges retorted impatiently. He moved an index to a nipple on the front cover, homing in slowly as a bee. 'Bang! Bulls-eye.'

'But the forester. He might see.'

Kamal elbowed him. 'Just shut up.'

A woman with large breasts and a G-string was followed by another in a transparent nightie that did little to hide the pert breasts and black pubic hair.

'Ay! Not so fast,' complained Kamal.

'Yeah,' agreed Georges. 'You've already shot your cannon with them. It's our turn to have a look.' He tried to take the magazine.

Walid held firm. 'It's mine. I decide what we look at.' Walid had reached a picture of a totally naked blonde sitting on the rim of a bathtub, one foot in the water, the other stretched all the way back on a stool. Her back was arched, her nipples erect. 'Now she's my favourite.'

Kamal read the caption: 'Hygienic Sue.'

Georges gave an excited giggle. 'Give me a bath with her any day.'

'*Ya*. My-love, my-life,' moaned Walid.

'Imagine she's your servant,' said Georges.

'Imagine your mouth on those tits.' Walid moved the magazine up to kiss the page.

'I've seen our servant's tits.'

Karim stared at his twin, astonished. 'Fatima?'

Kamal frowned back. '*Yeuch!* She's so fat and old - I'd rather vomit.' He added to the Maronite boys, 'But Marina. You should see her tits. You think those are good. You should see hers. White and big and with nipples that stand out, dark as watermelon pips.'

'Liar,' said Walid. 'You haven't seen real tits.'

'I have.'

'And anyway, they can't be as good as my-love's.'

'*Geelee-geelee-geelee.*' Georges tickled the crack between her legs and giggled.

'And look at her bum in the mirror.' Walid stroked the bathroom mirror and

its erotic reflection with reverence. 'Isn't that the best bum you've ever seen?'

'Yeah,' agreed Kamal.

'*Hoyo*,' said Georges.

Karim was looking at the girl's face. Her mouth formed an O as if the water was too hot.

'Yeah, I could fuck her.' Walid's voice was hoarse with excitement.

'Yeah.'

'*Uhh-uhh*.'

'I could send her to heaven.' Walid brought the magazine to his lips again, licked the image, and then placed it facedown on his crotch. With exaggerated moans, he started to rub his erection against the picture of Hygienic Sue.

Georges, too, was now masturbating, a hand moving swiftly in his trousers.

'I know,' suggested Kamal. 'Let's have a match. The one who shoots furthest wins.'

Both Walid and Georges nodded. 'OK.'

The three boys rose to their knees. 'Well?' Georges turned to Karim. 'Are you in?'

Before Karim could answer, Walid lunged at him, grabbed his penis through his pants. He recoiled in disgust. 'His pigeon's asleep,' he said with contempt. 'Sleep then, stupid pigeon.'

'Yeah.' Kamal joined in. 'Sleep, pigeon.'

'Your brother's a homo,' ridiculed Walid.

The three boys turned their backs on Karim and, between two of the branches of the half-submerged *Trinity*, they pulled their trousers and underpants down to their knees.

Karim looked at the bare buttocks that swayed regularly, then forlornly at the discarded magazine. Hygienic Sue was still preparing for her bath, her mouth still in pained surprise.

He turned the page slowly, dejectedly to Cowboy Jane who, the English text explained, liked to ride truly bareback. Having read the text, Karim then took in the picture of a woman on a horse, naked but for her boots and Stetson.

'Yes,' moaned Georges followed, an instant later by Kamal's jubilant, '*Hayah!*'

Karim looked up, noticed that only Walid's buttocks were still moving. He turned the page to Wild Cathy who was totally naked up a tree. The girl astride the branch appeared so uncomfortable: her expression, in profile, was even more pained than Hygienic Sue's.

'*Ach!*' Walid jerked his hips.

Karim, staring at the picture, said to himself: 'Nice branch. Wonder if it's an

oak.'

The three boys, underpants still at their knees, scrambled on the ground like referees of a long jump, and looked for white distance-marks.

'Thank ye, sires,' said Walid triumphantly after a while.

'Yeah, OK.' Kamal admitted.

But Georges shouted suddenly. 'That's disgusting! *Eugh!*'

He pointed and all three, including Kamal, looked down at Kamal's penis. Erect, it had appeared as the Maronites'; but now limp, the head had returned to its natural sheath.

'That is really disgusting,' repeated Georges and pretended to be sick.

Self-conscious, Kamal hastily pulled up his underpants and trousers. The others followed suit.

'Yeah,' agreed Walid. 'Isn't it against your religion anyway?'

'I'm not a Muslim. I don't see what's wrong with a foreskin.'

'It's unhealthy.'

'Dirty.'

'Your dick'll get diseased.'

'And drop off.'

'Women'll run away from you.'

'Or puke in your face.'

'Gotta be circumcised.'

'Your Mama should've had you circumcised.'

'Ask your Mama now.'

'And if she won't, we will.'

Georges' disgust turned to Walid. '*Eugh!*'

'It was a joke,' said Walid quickly. He walked to Karim and snatched the magazine. 'This isn't for homos.'

'Anyway, it's *my* dick,' Kamal told Georges. 'What's it to you?'

Georges nodded and smiled. 'Yeah, I guess.' He held out his hand. 'OK.'

They shook hands. 'I want to show you something.' Kamal brought out a dagger from his pocket. 'My sword,' he said simply.

'*Yaay!*' exclaimed Georges appreciatively. He took the dagger to have a closer look. They were once more sitting in the *Holy-Trinity*, once more a group of four.

'That's not a sword,' Walid scoffed. 'That's a letter opener.'

'You couldn't cut off a rabbit's head with a letter opener.'

'You never.'

'I swear it's true. One blow to the neck. Wasn't it, Karim?'

They all turned to Karim who nodded, shame-faced.

‘He doesn’t count as a witness.’ Walid remembered a joke: ‘How do you know when a Druze is lying?’ He waited, and then answered, ‘When a Druze puts his hand on the Koran or the Bible.’

‘Dick-in-you, Walid. This is an Egyptian dagger.’

‘I believe him.’ George was scratching initials in one of the branches. ‘It’s a dagger all right.’

Walid was undeterred. ‘Well how come then, in all the movies, the Egyptians and Romans always have straight swords.’

‘You ass. Not those Egyptians. The Egyptians from the time of Salah-ed-Din.’

Georges Salibi looked up from his vandalism. ‘Your grandfather?’

‘My great-great-great-great grandfather. The great Salah-ed-Din who won the jihad against the Christians.’

‘He didn’t win,’ growled Walid.

‘It was a draw,’ said Georges.

Kamal became passionate. ‘Of course he won. The Crusaders were beaten dogs. Everyone knows that.’

‘That’s a lie.’

Georges scrutinized the initials he had just carved. ‘Would you fight Christians?’

‘No.’

‘That’s a lie,’ repeated Walid.

Georges was earnest. ‘Would you fight Christians?’

‘Not unless I had to. Would you fight Druzes?’

‘You’re a fucking liar!’ shouted Walid. ‘Christians have never lost. That’s why Lebanon has always been Maronite.’

Walid’s tone ruffled Kamal. ‘The Maronites lost the war of 1860 against the Druzes.’

George’s eyes narrowed on Kamal. ‘1860 wasn’t a war. It was a massacre.’

‘The Druzes won in 1860 and the Christians lost.’

‘Fuck-your-mother! That’s not true.’

Georges silenced Walid. ‘No, it is true. The Christians lost in 1860 because the Druzes massacred men women and children in their sleep.’

‘Now look who’s lying.’

‘Fuck Druzes and Muslims. Lebanon is Maronite.’ Walid jumped to his feet. ‘Are you coming?’ he said to Georges. ‘This cedar stinks of shit.’

‘That’s your shit. Not mine.’

‘Funny coming from an uncircumcised fucking pig.’

Georges Salibi took one last look at the dagger before handing it ruefully back to Kamal. Dejected, he said, ‘If you don’t think 1860 was a massacre, we can

never be friends.'

The Maronites left *Holy-Trinity* and the Druze twins stared at each other, both red-eyed: one with anger, the other with sorrow.

Kamal frowned. 'You're not going to cry, are you?'

Karim shook his head.

'He's wrong about 1860. You agree with me, don't you Karim.'

Karim shook his head again.

'You must agree. Don't you remember what Mama told us? How for centuries, Northern Druzes and Southern Druzes were always at war with each other.'

Karim nodded slowly.

'Yes. And in 1860 the Druze clans were united into one Druze nation because they learnt of the Maronite plan to drive us into the sea.'

'But, Kamal, how do we know that's how it happened? We weren't there.'

'Mama told us.'

'But Mama wasn't there either,' he said sadly.

'You baby. I hate you.' He sheathed his sword and stood up. 'I wish Georges was my twin. He's wrong about 1860, but he's more of a Druze than you'll ever be.' Without another word, Kamal walked out of *Holy-Trinity*, leaving his brother in the one tree.

Alone, Karim gazed up at the foliage, at the snatches of blue sky turning bluish-green in the breeze. He remained so still that a woodcock alighted on a branch just above him and started to sing. It was only as the bird flew away to another tree that Karim moved to see the wound that Georges had inflicted on the cedar.

The letters that he had left behind, will remain there for the duration of the cedar's millennial life. The initials were actually his own and another's. On either side of a large, snaky S, as sentinels to a serpent, is a G for Georges, and a K for Kamal.

Parents and foresters know how important names are: in one word, a single name, do cedars and children carry all the hope for the future generation. But where the forename looks forward, the surname belongs resiliently to the past. Thus, Salah-ed-Din: Goodness-of-the-Faith. And, Salibi: the-Crusader.

❓ ❓ ❓ ❓ ❓

*Dick, foreskin - there is less filth in a dustman's shack.* The doctor hurries down the staircase towards the reception room. *What good is it to be the Sheikha*

*in a palace when you are a sheikha of fire?* He enters the dewan and, following the voices, turns left into the west wing. A Christian cleric in a black habit, whom he recognises as the principal of the town's school, rises out of respect as he approaches. The Christian nods politely and holds out his hand. 'Hakim.'

*Even Maronites are circumcised.* He nods back. 'Friar Souheil.'

Facing the cleric is Sitt Nisrin with her other son. The boy is standing and also holds out his hand. 'Hakim,' says the boy, formal as an adult.

It is inconceivable that only one twin would be clean. He hesitates; the palm stretched out towards him begins to jiggle impatiently in the air. *The sheikha's son - I must shake his hand.* The doctor's palm goes instead to his own chest and he gives a curt bow. 'You are very nearly a sheikh yourself, Master Kamal. Permit me to bow instead.'

'Thank you, hakim.' The boy returns the bow, and throws a defiant glance in the friar's direction.

'Sittna,' says the doctor. 'If I may have a private word.'

Sitt Nisrin excuses herself to the Maronite and leads the doctor to the other side of the dewan, to the east wing that is out of earshot. *And now, do I tell the sheikha that her son's incessant crying is a first and true sign of madness?..*

They have gone; but I remain in the west wing where the sun, after 48 hours of rain, makes a brief appearance before sunset. Lower than the grey blanket of clouds, it infuses the room with an orange glow, that every inch of the palace is quietly roasting.

*... Poise: that is the first and true mark of a sheikh.* Like Mama who commands respect with only a look. Even Friar Souheil, sitting opposite in stony silence, had not so much bowed before Mama, but bent himself double like a priest before a goddess: so hasty and reverent a bow that the brother's black cowl had swung to cover the head, a boulder snapped up by a catapult. *Does he know how much we hate him?* Their eyes meet: he nods once, majestically, to the Maronite. *See? I am a sheikh.* The regal stance to follow the defiant glance after the hakim's gesture - the fact followed by the affirmation.

The principal returns a confused frown.

*Never show your hatred.* A face must remain calm and collected at all times, so that only the details speak of emotions. It is easy for him to know that even Mama dislikes this man. Two dead give-aways signs that only a nobleman would spot. First, the Christian has been received in the west wing which, of the three areas in the dewan, is his mother's least favourite. Visibly less ornate than the Abbassid cockpit where Mama has friends or equals, and the east wing for good

acquaintances, the west wing is reserved for commoners or unfavourable guests or, in the case of Brother Souheil, both.

The furniture in the three reception areas confirms this policy. The cockpit, with the best views of the gardens and mountain, is a closed-off wooden balcony in the Abbassid style, richly adorned with Ummayyad mother-of-pearls and calligraphic Arabic verses engraved in the oak ceiling. The east wing states affluence from a different continent and era: the motif is pre-revolution French, sofas and fauteuils of a Louis XIV salon.

The west wing of the dewan is a pot-pourri of simple styles: chairs for the visitors and a couch for the sheikha. The couch is the only object of interest in this area. It is totally covered to the ground by a multi-coloured Kilim carpet and with a bright selection of cushions arranged haphazardly so that the seat, though European in design, has been camouflaged into a Bedouin lounger. It is from this seat that Kamal gives the man another royal nod.

The friar breaks the silence. 'I hope you have been studying in the last two days, Kamal.'

'How can I study, Brother, if you won't let me come to school.'

The principal turns to the east wing impatiently, where he can see but not hear the doctor and the sheikha. 'How is your brother?'

'He is better, thank you, Brother. And how is the school?'

The silence resumes.

The second reason he knows Mama dislikes this man is that she smoked in his presence. The narghile pipe, temporarily abandoned, is on the ground between man and boy, closer to the couch. A dozing cobra, the water in the jug is still as a lake, but the charcoal on the apple-tambak smoulders and waits only for the smoker. Mama usually smokes only one narghile a day and usually when she is alone, in the Abbassid annexe. Given the drowning noise of the water in the jug, so disruptive to a conversation, out of politeness to a guest, she usually refrains from smoking. The exceptions to this rule are when a visitor she dislikes comes to call on her, or one who bears bad news or, as in the case of Brother Souheil, both.

*She has style.* Even when tragedy strikes, she never forgets that she is the Sheikha of Southern Druzes, that her Yamani Druze subjects will react according to her reactions. On Sunday afternoon, as she received the news of the tragic death of the farmer's son, she closed her eyes for the briefest of instants and, in the supportive voice of a Druze holy-man, she said, 'May the child soon return to the living.'

Her words, her bearing: everything would be all right. *But for that, I'd have cried as long as Karim.* He blinks and turns quickly to the east wing. The hakim is doing all the talking, shaking his head a lot, using his hands to explain the

problem; the sheikha sits and listens to the khamsin desert-winds like a sphinx.

His gaze moves away from them to settle on the portrait in the east wing, the only painting in the dewan.

It is apt that Sheikh Selim Salah-ed-Din should grace the east wing. He stands erect and noble as a European prince, Hapsburg hands clasped behind the back, Romanoff head askant so that the jaw is as prominent as on a Bourbon's face. The painting is lifelike, almost lifesize: the sheikh's dead eyes stare into every angle, impressing the notion on all visitors that the palace's sanctum, the seat of power, is not in the Abbassid altar but hangs on the wall facing the aisle.

The moustache, delicate as a butterfly's wings yet strong enough to sustain flight, has always fascinated Kamal. As he focuses on it now, his confidence returns. *I fight for you.* An Assassin for the honour of the name. It is the first time that he notices that the two strands on his father's upper lip are two miniature scimitars joined at the hilts.

He stares at the man in the black habit. Friar Souheil looks at his watch, taps it with an index, and says unnecessarily, 'Time.'

'Did you bring my sword, Brother?'

'Your sword?'

'Yes.'

The tapping index moves to tap a pocket. 'It's safe with me.'

'May I have it please?'

'No you may not, you impudent child. I'll hand it to your mother. If she has sense, you'll never get it back.'

Kamal tries his best to control his tone, to stop his eyes from betraying the rage. 'My *mother* is the sheikha. When you are in our home, please refer to her as the Sheikha or Sittna. And above all, never call into question the Sheikha's sense. Thank you.'

The principal looks at him with shock.

*I feel good...*

❓ ❓ ❓ ❓ ❓

*Sittna an-Najaat*, Our-Lady of-the-Deliverance, was the best school in Baraka and surrounding towns, and entirely owned and run by the Maronite clergy. This area of Mount Lebanon is almost evenly split between Maronites and Druzes with minorities of other Christians and of Sunni and Shiite Muslims; but there are no good Druze schools to speak of, and only the state schools offer a lay but otherwise academically poor education. Thus, when Nisrin Salah-ed-Din first came to choose a school, the decision had swung easily enough in the favour of

the smaller of two devils: along with the gulf in tuition, *Sittna an-Najaat* was deemed more socially acceptable for a Salah-ed-Din than a public school.

The school was popularly if secretly called *es-Sitt-Najat*: the-Lady-has-Escaped. Or more simply, *Najda*: Help! Secretly, because in the tiny kingdom of the school premises, it was a crime to miscall the college. In his annual pep talk to first-year students, Brother Souheil would explain: 'Imagine that instead of calling our great nation, *Libnan* (Lebanon), you were to belittle it by calling it, *Laban* (Yoghurt). Yes. It is the same, and even more offensive. Our great lady, Holy Mary herself, hides her face in shame every time you belittle the name of her school.'

All the teachers were friars. They all wore the same black habit as a uniform, and patrolled the school premises like policemen, quick to deliver punishments to those caught taking the school's name in vain: 30 Hail Marys and, for repeat offenders, 30 Hail Marys followed by an hour of detention.

Brother Souheil was the History and English teacher as well as the acting principal of the school. It was the Friday after the Sunday of the masturbating contest in *Holy-Trinity* and before the Sunday that the storm clouds would roll in from the east.

The last lesson of the morning was half way through. The class read Julius Caesar to practise the Queen's English. All the pupils but one had their books open and read Shakespeare out loud and monotonously like prayers to be recited in catechism. In this form, the words had no meaning: the boys were just making foreign sounds with their mouths. Given the guttural intonations and stresses, the tongue vibrating around the classroom was anything but English. Aramaic, perhaps, or some other Semitic language. The boys were maybe too young to be reading Julius Caesar, but it was Brother Souheil's favourite play. In his zeal, he did not mind that his students were bludgeoning the words; and considered even less that, as an initiation to English, he had chosen the language of the wrong Elizabeth.

One boy was not reading his text. The friar banged his desk bringing immediate rest to Shakespeare's grave. 'Stand up, Georges,' he ordered. 'Why are you not reading with the rest of the class?'

Georges Salibi rose smartly to his feet. 'I was just thinking of 1860, Brother.' '1860?' said the teacher, perplexed.

'The Massacres of 1860,' qualified Georges.

'I know what happened in 1860,' Brother Souheil dismissed with irritation. 'We are now in an English lesson. Perhaps you think this is already the afternoon's history lesson.'

Half the class sniggered.

'Not at all, Brother,' Georges persisted. 'But someone told me that the

massacres didn't happen.'

The friar roared. 'Didn't happen?'

'That the massacres were just a fair war - is he right?'

Georges Salibi had struck a nerve. He knew this and sat down, casting one smug look at Kamal as Brother Souheil moved to a map of the Lebanon. He took a chalk to circle the southern mountains of the range. '10,000 Maronites lost their lives - God grant them eternal rest. Ten times more lost their homes. This was no war, Georges. This was cold-blooded murder.'

'Thank you, Brother. You have helped me understand more clearly.'

Kamal stood slowly. 'Brother,' he called and scanned the classroom, gauging enemy from foe. Of the 24 students only six were non-Maronites and other than Kamal, there were but two Druzes: a Northern Druze, a *Qaysi*; and a Southern Druze like himself, his own *Yamani* twin. He stood alone.

'Yes, Kamal?'

'Who started the war?'

After a moment's silence, the friar corrected, 'You mean, who started the hostilities - a very good question.' He turned to the other boys. 'Who was responsible for the friction between Maronites and Druzes that led to the shameful massacres?' The friar pointed to the boy sitting beside Georges.

'The Druzes of course, Brother,' said Walid Zeitouni, adding mischievously, 'The Druzes are like Jews - they start all the wars.'

'No, Walid.' The friar looked around the classroom. 'Anyone else? Nazih?' He asked the Northern Druze.

'I don't know, Brother.'

Kamal looked at the *Qaysi* with contempt, a glance that moved on to Karim who seemed hopelessly worried.

The friar answered his own question. 'The Ottoman Sultan caused the friction between the Maronites and Druzes because he was afraid that his troops would lose against a united Lebanese resistance.' He stared at Kamal. 'And that is the correct answer. The common enemy were the Turks and the Druzes played their game.'

The boy next to him blurted out, 'The Druzes started the war because they were jealous of the Maronites.'

'No,' countered Kamal defiantly. 'The Mountain War of 1860 began because the Maronites were jealous of the Druzes.'

'No, Kamal.'

'Yes, Brother Souheil.'

'How dare you, boy? Sit down this instant.'

Kamal continued undeterred. 'The northern Mount Lebanon was Druze

until the Maronites destroyed their towns and villages, until 1711 and the Battle of Ain Dara.'

'Sit down. You're out of order and in the wrong century.'

Several boys laughed openly; Walid Zeitouni called out, 'Ass.'

Kamal's cheeks flushed but he was otherwise calm as he resumed: 'The northern Mount Lebanon is now only Maronite. And in 1860, the Druzes were scared of a repeat of Ain Dara. They didn't want to lose their last homes in southern Mount Lebanon, so they drew their swords and attacked all the Maronites who would drive them away from their mountains.' Kamal's fist sliced the air for effect, then he turned to give Nazih a look that was triumphant yet reproachful: the other Druze should have said the same. For the first time in the history of the Druze movement, Northern and Southern Druzes had fought side by side to repel the Christians.

The friar tried the approach of the carrot and appeared reasonable. 'Kamal, of the 10,000 who died, ninety percent were innocent civilians, massacred in their homes and monasteries.'

'10,000 Maronites died. And how many Druzes?'

'Only a handful. Treachery on a grand scale.'

'Then the Druzes are better warriors.'

The bell for the end of lesson caused some of the boys at the back to miss that comment; but Walid and Georges who heard him exchanged secret nods.

'Kamal,' ordered the friar, 'please stay behind.'

When Kamal finally emerged into the playground after a stern reprimand, Georges, Walid and two other boys stood in a group and watched him hawkishly.

Kamal pretended to ignore them. At the far end of the playground, he squatted and took out his packed lunch and a bag of marbles.

'Can I play with you?'

Kamal looked up and saw his twin. He shook his head.

'Why not?'

'Because you don't know how to play.'

'I can play marbles.'

Kamal hesitated. He needed a friend. But a real friend, someone with a good collection of marbles, someone whose aim was as true as his own. Someone like Georges Salibi. 'You don't know how to play anything,' he said at length, adding sadly, 'You don't know anything.'

Karim moved away, and the twins bit into the same sandwiches, and drank the same home-made *laban* from opposite ends of the playground.

He rolled a first marble and dreamed of a Druze school, with classrooms full

of *Yamanis* like himself. He aimed a second in the crook of his index and imagined them all to be friends, playing Assassins with their scimitars and their marbles for poisoned darts.

The second marble followed a path straight for the target before it was halted, abruptly, by Walid Zeitouni's foot.

'Hey!' Kamal complained.

'Hey yourself!'

'That's my marble.'

'And this is our playground,' said Walid in a low, threatening tone.

Kamal glanced at the other three boys, pausing longest on Georges. 'Give it back.'

'You want your marble? Then go fetch it like a dog.' Walid booted the marble and sent it flying against the end wall.

'You're the dog.' He turned to Georges. 'You were my friend before you became his.'

Wordlessly, Georges gestured, Fuck-off. Before, it had been a game. Now the gesture really meant, Fuck-off.

'Dick-in-you too.'

'At least mine's not dirty.'

'Yeah,' said Walid. 'Shit-for-a-prick. New law - you gotta leave this playground.'

Kamal jumped to his feet but he was still a head shorter than Walid. 'What law? There is no law.'

'The new law. We voted and you gotta beat it.'

'Go play outside the school,' said another.

'*Najda's* a Christian school.'

'The playground's for Christians only.'

'And their allies.'

'Not for prick-stinks like you.'

'Nor traitors who would kill women and children.'

'Piss off to Ain Dara.'

'Go play with your marbles in Ain Dara.'

'And take your homo brother with you.'

Kamal's cheeks turned red in anger.

'Tomato-head,' jeered one of the boys.

'I bet you bugger your twin.'

Georges turned to Walid in disgust. '*Eugh!*'

'He does. I bet you anything.'

Kamal was deceptively calm. 'Fuck your mother the whore.'

‘At least my father didn’t bugger me when I was a baby.’

Kamal folded his arms and as he did so, the fingers of his right hand caressed the hilt of the dagger that was concealed by shirt and trousers.

Walid addressed the other three. ‘Don’t you know the story of this shit’s father?’

Venomously: ‘Leave my father out of this. He’s dead.’

‘That’s right. And you know why he died?’

‘He was murdered.’

‘Yeah. There’s justice in the world.’

Covered by his left arm, Kamal’s right hand moved surreptitiously under the shirt.

Walid was euphoric. ‘He was killed by the father of a boy.’

Georges frowned. ‘The father of a boy? What boy?’

‘Yeah! The boy the sheikh had been found buggering!’ Walid was so absorbed by his story that he failed to notice Kamal’s movement. ‘Like father like twins!’

The Assassin’s dagger was out in a flash. It swished through the air for the briefest of flights before finding its mark on the Maronite’s chest.

A quiet instant before the alarm when a new ice age descended on Mount Lebanon.

It was only as Walid Zeitouni slowly looked down at his bleeding chest that the seconds began to tick again.

He collapsed on the ground and started to cry like an infant. ‘Help!’ he screamed. ‘Help! Help!’

Two of his friends sprinted away while George Salibi and Kamal Salah-ed-Din remained transfixed by the sight of blood.

And, in the school building, Brother Souheil heard the cry and rushed outside in order to punish the miscreant caller with at least 60 Hail Marys and two hours of detention.

❓ ❓ ❓ ❓ ❓

*...I feel uncomfortable, as if I have committed the crime.* Brother Souheil stares at the narghile with irritation. The water in the jug has once more reached boiling point, and the air between his seat and the Kilim-covered couch is thick with apple smoke. ‘We have no choice but to suspend your son, Sittna.’

*Bubble-bubble-bubble.*

‘A decision that was not easy, I can assure you. A decision which took us two days to reach.’

*Bubble-bubble-bubble.*

*Is she listening? She looks dead to the world.* The friar, sitting opposite mother and child, is again forced to break the silence. 'The boy's cuts were deep enough to require stitches.'

*Bubble-bubble-bubble.*

*As if I am on trial, and she the judge.* He removes the confiscated dagger from a pocket in his habit and exhibits the weapon as a prosecutor might a key evidence. 'We've never had to deal with an offence of this nature at *Sittna an-Najaat*.' He unsheathes the culprit blade and, still with its dried red stain, he expects a reaction - shock or shame or, as befitting the sheer brutality of the attack, both. Instead, he is unsettled by the same dispassionate expression as both Salah-ed-Dins fix the blade.

*Bubble-bubble-bubble.*

*Has she no heart? 'Sitt Nisrin, we have explained to the boy's mother that her son is a disruptive influence.' The boy's father has left Baraka. 'She will not take matters any further.'* The sheikha gives a brief nod through the haze of smoke. *Mock gratitude.* 'But I think you will understand why we are nevertheless forced to suspend Kamal until further notice.'

Sheikha Nisrin holds the snaky tube away from her mouth, delicately between thumb and forefingers like a charmer's hold. 'Has the *Maronite* boy been suspended for his disruptive influence?'

*Maronite?* The Zeitouni boy could have been a Druze. 'He didn't have a knife, Sittna.'

*Bubble-bubble-*

'So perhaps,' she says, exhaling, 'if my son had defended himself with his nails and teeth instead to draw blood - perhaps then he would not be suspended.'

*Can she not see the gravity?* He waves the dagger in his hand. 'But Kamal used a knife, Sittna.'

'Yes,' she admits thoughtfully. 'Because perhaps had my son used only his nails and teeth against an older boy and his three friends - perhaps the outcome would have been different. Would you not agree, Brother?'

She waits for the friar to nod, perplexed.

'I think perhaps my son's fingers would have been broken, and his teeth. And perhaps the four bullies would have kicked my son until he bled.' Her tone throughout has been dispassionate; now it betrays a hint of spite. 'Would you then, Brother, have suspended the *Maronite*? Perhaps not.'

'Sitt Nisrin - ' begins the friar, but his complaining tone is drowned by the sound of the narghile.

The sheikha turns to her son. 'Kamal, have you or your brother left anything

in that school?’

‘No, mother. Only my sword that the Brother has brought with him.’

‘Good. Then collect your dagger and show your ex-teacher the way out. Thank you for coming, Brother Souheil.’

Kamal rises and takes a step towards the friar.

‘Sitt Nisrin, Kamal has only been suspended. He hasn’t been expelled. And Karim a good element. One of our best students. I should be sad not to see Karim at school.’

‘Sad, Brother? Sad enough for tears? And tears enough for rain?’ Her tone is contrarily cordial as she adds, ‘I would now refuse to send either of my children to your school even if your patriarch begged me.’

Kamal, standing by the principal, has a palm open for the dagger. There is a look of unbridled jubilation on his face.

He hesitates; the palm stretched out towards him begins to jiggle impatiently in the air. ‘As you wish, Sittna. He is your responsibility.’ *I wash my hands*. The friar rises to his feet and leaves the dagger on his seat so that it is the palm that must move to retrieve it.

Brother Souheil bows stiffly to Sitt Nisrin; his black cowl barely moves. ‘It needn’t be this way.’

‘Indeed, Brother. It shouldn’t be this way.’

Kamal leads the friar out of the dewan, through the central courtyard to the main entrance. As the boy holds the door open, he says smugly, ‘I told you I’d get it back. Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s.’

*No, no, no*. The friar shakes his head sadly.

‘Yes. That’s from the English book,’ insists Kamal. ‘Sheikh es-Peare.’

Brother Souheil quotes: “‘Such men as he be never at heart’s ease. And therefore are they very dangerous.” That is Julius Caesar by *Shakespeare*.’ He pauses at the threshold and fixes the boy. *Very nearly a sheikh yourself, Master Kamal*. He bows formally.

The gesture takes Kamal by complete surprise. He stares wide-eyed and the look of joy has all but vanished.

‘Peace, Kamal, and wisdom be with you. And “render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s.” That is the Bible, St Matthew.’

The friar begins to walk away from the palace; Kamal calls out, ‘So who began the war of 1860?’

‘Two boys.’ He turns, and smiles the saddest of smiles. ‘I swear that’s true. In March of 1860: a Druze boy and a Maronite boy fought over a game of marbles. A fight that spread to their fathers, to their families, to their two communities -

and that ended in that summer's massacres.'

'I thought you said the Turks had caused the war.'

This time, Brother Souheil replies without turning his head. 'No, it was a game of marbles and the Devil hovering above.'

## 2. The Assassin

A wraithlike army of evil jinn lays siege to the town of Baraka and the surrounding area - bleakness from the Maronite monastery in the north next to the forest of pines and cedars, and down to the Salah-ed-Din palace and property in the south. Last week's rains have given way to this week's fog: another fault in March's character. The mist, clinging to every tree and every house, is like tears on the inside. *Sad!*

Nisrin picks up another prospectus and stares blankly at the picture of another school. *The priest should have come for Karim. The priest doesn't find Karim bad.* She stares at the facade of a school in distant Tripoli and, not bothering to read the text, she returns the prospectus to the pile on the table and reaches for another. Beirut, *Ecole des Frères Jésuites*. She immediately crumples that one. *The doctor should have come for Kamal. The doctor doesn't find Kamal mad.*

In the east wing of the dewan, Nisrin feels the Archduke behind her, staring over her shoulder. 'What do you think of this one?' Without turning, she holds up a prospectus so the painting can take in the details. 'Not too bad, nor too mad for our boys. No? Yes?' She imagines a breath on her ear. 'Can you speak up a bit, dear?' She strains to listen. 'No, you don't like that one.' Pauses. 'What? Oh, too *Islamic.*' She chuckles nervously. 'I heard you say *Icelandic.*' *But there's a thought. Are there any good schools in Reykjavik?*

The last prospectus joins the crumpled Maronites on the floor. She reaches for the final three she has yet to glance at, and holds them in both hands. *Sad, empty house.* She needs a king of hearts to fill the palace. 'Yes?' She waits. 'What?' No answer: the Archduke is elsewhere. *Too busy with your own new school to bother with your sons*'. Nisrin turns angrily to Selim. 'Damn your dead tongue!'

She hurls the three in the air and watches their short flight around the Louis XIV salon. For a second, they fly like butterflies before crashing in an unsightly heap as poisoned locusts. She takes the ordered stack on the table, the schools that have passed the first evaluation, and, one by one, she flings the prospectuses,

gaining in skill with every throw so that the last manages the longest flight as it glides almost into the west wing.

April is still a fortnight away; she hopes she will hold out till then. If she survives the two weeks, she will survive the year. *March will be the death of me.* More have died in March - family members and people linked to the Salah-ed-Dins - than during any other month of the year. *Why should my fate be any different?*

Nisrin scans the mess that she has caused and wonders what had possessed her. *Blood, tears and death.* The prospectuses lie scattered around as skeletons in a cave with the one almost in the west wing that nearly got away. *There is no hiding from fate. I will die on a Sunday in March.* Nine days ago, Sunday before last: the farmer's three year old son died tragically in a hit and run accident. Two days ago, the Sunday that marked the end of the rains and the beginning of the mist, a salesman from Baraka was found murdered in Beirut, in the city's park of coastal pines. The news of the assassination of one of its own was sensational enough in Baraka. But the case gained nationwide notoriety, with details and analysis in every news broadcast since the discovery of the cadaver. Of the heart, actually. For it was the heart of the victim, left on a path like carrion, that had attracted the attention of an early morning jogger. The heartless body was found later, still tied to a pine, a gory cavity where once there'd been a chest.

The butchery shocked a nation, and brought an evil fog to Baraka.

*On Mother's day in mid-March.* In the early hours of Monday morning, Nisrin woke up with a start, shivering from a nightmare. Try as she might to dispel the image, the salesman returns to her and prevents her from choosing a new school. He stands in a forest, not as a man but as an uncomplaining child, his hands free to defend himself, but standing motionless as another boy carves open his chest with a Fatimid dagger. In each hand, the assassin holds the organ and the dagger still stained with blood. And, as one twin loses his heart to the other, both Kamal and Karim turn slowly to smile at her.

The nightmare, though shocking, is not what unsettles her the most. With daylight, she sees how her mind made the subconscious links and leaps. Kamal has been an Assassin since the age of nine. He chose his dagger in Cairo just as an English boy might choose to buy a toy truncheon to use on imaginary robbers; or an imitation gun and holster to a budding American cowboy. A make-believe game of Assassins and Frankish knights. Added to that, of course, was the fight with the Maronite boy, and the wound, the mere scratch, to the chest. *It makes sense and yet...* In the early hours of Monday morning, still shivering from panicked fright, her first conscious thought had been: Where's Kamal? Was he in Beirut yesterday?

The Archduke's haughty expression changes to disbelief. Nisrin's hands go

to her face. *How could I, his own mother think the worse even for a second?* She blames the uncanny coincidence. *It was the dream.* But the reality is just as unnerving. The salesman from Baraka who lost his heart in so barbaric a manner was none other than Zeitouni, Walid's father. So savagely mutilated that not the world's supply of catgut could sew him back together again.

*Like father like son.* Nisrin shakes her head at the dark irony. *Like father of son, like father of bully.* She is willing to wager that Zeitouni's assassin will prove as elusive as the Archduke's.

Marina enters the dewan and draws her mistress' attention by clearing her throat.

'Yes, what is it?'

Marina stoops to pick up the prospectus in the aisle. 'A visitor, Sittna.'

'Who?' *Whoever it is can come another time. She is busy.*

'Sheikha Noor, Sittna,' replies the maid. 'Shall I show her in?'

*Of course she would come. Keen to catch up on the gossip.* A murder of a Baraka citizen worthy of the national press happens only once a decade. Nisrin would rather be on her own, but Noor Khanbat is no ordinary busybody. 'Yes,' she tells Marina rising. 'Have Fatima prepare the coffee, and come clear this mess.'

'Yes, Sittna.' The young maid hesitates with the prospectus in her hand. 'What shall I do with them, Sittna?'

'Whatever you want.'

Marina leaves, looking doubtfully at the cover picture of a school.

Noor is Nisrin's equal and opposite in every respect. She is the sheikha of the Northern Druzes, the *Qaysi* clans to Nisrin's *Yamanis*. North versus South: Noor is active politically, dresses in the latest European fashion, smokes cigarettes, sends her children to foreign schools, and has a husband who is still very much alive. Nisrin despises her.

'I am so surprised and pleased by your visit,' she says warmly after the two queens have kissed a requisite three times on the cheeks. *Not pleased and even less surprised.* 'I was just thinking that I hadn't seen you in such a long time.' Nisrin leads her to the Abbassid annexe, hoping her guest will not notice the mess in the east wing.

Sitt Noor smiles. 'Yes, me too. Of course you may have seen us on the news last week. But that's not the same is it.'

'Yes, not at all the same.' *Mentioned as if being on Lebanese TV was a Roman triumph.* Noor's husband, Sheikh Wassif Khanbat, is the founder and leader of the Socialist Party who has delivered his most vitriolic attack yet against the Maronite-led government; his speech has since been dubbed *Khanbat's Not* for the sheer number of repudiating statements that it contains - "A constitution

that keeps one faction in government is *not* democratic ... the voice of the majority will *not* be silenced ... Palestinians are *not* our enemy ..." Ad nauseam. *Selim was a better orator.* 'I was shocked by that awful caricature.'

'Caricature? Which caricature?' enquires Sitt Noor.

'In that English weekly, didn't you see it? Extreme poor taste. They printed a caricature of Sheikh Wassif fumbling with an intricately knotted rope, and the caption read: A Lebanese Gordian *Not*.'

'Well they do print rubbish these days.'

'Yes, I do agree.' *And some politicians say even worse.* Nisrin had listened to the Khanbat's speech, had seen Noor standing behind her husband, and had thought it absurd that the king and queen of the Northern Druzes had spoken of socialist values.

'Speaking of breaking news,' says Sitt Noor. 'That poor man. What a horrible way to die.'

*Well that didn't take her long.* 'Yes.'

'I'm so sorry for your loss. Please accept my condolences.'

Nisrin is surprised. 'He was a Maronite, not a Druze.'

'Yes. But still from Baraka surely. Everyone here must be so upset.'

'The entire nation grieves.' *Everyone but the family has crocodile tears.* 'It is the only topic that people can talk about.'

'What's the story,' persists Noor. 'What do the people here think? What beast could have done this?'

'Who but Allah can say for sure? But he was a travelling salesman.'

'Yes?'

'Salesmen have as many ports of call as sailors. Is that not their reputation?'

Sitt Noor looks across at Marina who is busy picking up sheets of paper in the east wing. 'A jealous husband then?' she says doubtfully.

'Perhaps. It has the violence of a crime of honour.'

Fatima enters, carrying a tray of Turkish coffee. Sitt Noor slots a cigarette into a long cigarette holder, like a bayonet attached to a rifle. 'Yes. A crime of honour,' repeats Sitt Noor unnecessarily. But there is feeling in that voice. She lights her cigarette and inhales deeply before saying, 'Zeitouni, that's his name isn't it. Do you know the family?'

'No.'

A short silence as Fatima places the coffee on the table. There is a pained look on her face that Nisrin fails to notice. 'Will that be all, Sittna?'

'Yes.' Nisrin changes her mind. 'No, Fatima. Prepare me a narghile.'

'Yes, Sittna.'

*I smoke more in March than all the other months united...*

I turn and leave with Fatima.

...*She smokes like a Sheikha of Fire.* As she walks away from the Abbassid annexe, she hears Sitt Noor ask, 'Didn't one of your boys have a fight recently with a Zeitouni?'

Fatima's pace slackens, waiting for Sittna's reply. She is in the aisle and pretends to be concerned with Marina's task of collecting the prospectuses.

'Yes,' answers Sitt Nisrin. 'How did you know?'

'When a Druze lord is expelled from his school, I ask around to know the reason.'

'I decided to stop sending them to the Maronite school. No more Christian schools for them even if the patriarch begs me on his knees.'

Marina hears the mention of her patriarch and looks up. The maids exchange knowing glances; and Fatima stoops down to help with the last papers.

'Would that Zeitouni have been of the same family?' insists Noor.

'I believe so.'

*Sheikha of Fire! She knows so!* The two maids turn away from the dewan and head for the kitchen.

'Did you hear that?' Marina says in a hushed voice. 'The patriarch on *his* knees. Sweet-Jesus-forgive-me but who the *hell* does she think she is?'

*A queen of jinn.* 'It is written in the Holy-Koran that men and jinn will share the same judgement.' As the more senior of the two maids, Fatima has delegated the task of preparing Sittna's narghile. She stands by the cooker, waiting for the charcoal to burn as Marina rolls some apple-tambak between her palms. 'The devils among jinn and men will thrash out with their limbs and sink ever more in the bottomless pit.' She taps the charcoal with the stoker sending sparks flying.

As the only non-Druzes in the household, the two are complicit in their tirades against the Salah-ed-Dins and the Druzes in general. Like amateur lexicographers playing with their own expressions, perfidy is "with Druze faith", irreverence is "a Druze holy-man", and a curse is "Sittna's blessing".

Marina has finished packing the tobacco on the pipe and makes holes with a skewer. 'That poor, poor man. Allah and the Holy Trinity have mercy on his poor soul.'

'That Brother Souheil shouldn't have come.' *The friar's visit fanned the flames.*

'He came in peace.'

'And left with Sittna's blessing.'

'Yes. But you don't think - ' Marina dares not speak the unmentionable.

‘Evil is in the eye.’ The charcoal on the stove begins to smoulder. ‘No man, however much he is evil, can reach into another man and pick out the heart like he is picking a fruit.’

‘Allah deliver us,’ breathes Marina and stares at Fatima with dread.

Fatima uses tongs to place the charcoal on the tobacco and, unfurling the snaky tube, inhales with short gulps to get the pipe going. She is careful to curl an index around the flue so that at no instant do her lips come in contact with the mouthpiece. *Jinniee queens use saliva in their spells.*

‘You don’t think Sittna -’ Marina has been able to add only one word before her voice trails off again.

‘No. Not this time. Not with that Zeitouni. But it is the boy.’ *The Sheikha of Fire has a son who has inherited her powers.*

‘Kamal!’ Marina exclaims with hushed fear.

‘Of course Kamal. Who then, Karim?’ *Not the twin who is too scared to leave his own bedroom.* Apple-scented smoke begins to fill the kitchen; Fatima stops inhaling and carries the narghile. ‘Did you know that Kamal eats the tambak?’

Marina winces and looks at the burning tobacco.

‘I caught him twice. He eats the raw tambak like normal children eat chocolate.’

Marina takes the prospectuses to the bin, hesitates for a second with the crumpled picture of the *Ecole des Frères Jésuites*, before throwing them all away. ‘But Kamal was here on Saturday and Sunday.’

‘And were his jinn with him as well?’ *God-fearing as a Druze jinniee.* She adds resolutely, ‘He was in Baraka. But the jinn followed the scent of Abou-Walid, the Zeitouni who had him expelled from school.’

Fatima returns to the dewan with the narghile. She could have asked Marina, but she wants to listen to some more of Sittna’s lies. *Her son has her magic, and she is scared for her life.* In the aisle, Fatima turns to the lofty Sheikh Selim without missing a step. *The same spell that killed you has also killed the Maronite.* She moves on to the Abbassid annexe.

*The assassin is a prince of fire...*

There is a spy in the dewan, curled up like a viper among cedar roots.

*...I am the Assassin.* His face is darkened with boot polish and tucked in his belt is a curved dagger - his scimitar. The sphinx’s head at the end of the hilt is all but faded by frequent handling, as an old copper coin losing its features through constant trading. Only the lack of a nose in the otherwise indistinct profile still

serves to trace the dagger's origin. A summer ago, it had been a cheap souvenir in a stand, attempting to lure the tourists into parting with 2.50 Egyptian pounds for a tasteless gift: proof to friends or relatives back home of a journey to the land of the pyramids. But in Kamal's hands the dagger is a full-length scimitar. It is a warrior's weapon, worthy of a Salah-ed-Din. It is Saladin's sword.

*I am the greatest Assassin.* He is the hero on murder missions against the Crusaders and their allies. He is a nimble creature, his face darkened as the night, travelling like a shadow to materialise before the enemy with drawn scimitar or poisoned dart. He is invisible, invincible. His body stretches like rubber to pass through the narrow ottoman windows of the palace. He can lie uncomfortably in his hiding places for hours eavesdropping on his foe.

True Assassins had chewed hashish before and during their missions: their predilection for the weed of Mount Lebanon had given rise to the term *hashishin* among their fellow Arabs, and *assassin* to the Frankish knights who had striven to eradicate them.

Before his own missions, Kamal prepares a ball of apple-tambak which, moist to the touch, smells considerably more appetizing than it tastes. Rolling the humid tobacco between his palms, which leaves two tell-tale streaks of red, he pops the ball in his mouth, chews and squints as the faint apple scent soon dissipates, like the deceptively sweet first-taste of an Aleppan chilli. Narghile tobacco is so acrid that the only palliative way of consuming it is burned and inhaled through a couple of metres of snaky tubing and bubbled through water to further filter the pungency. But an Assassin is a hardened fighter; immune to the burning tongue and throat as the saliva mingles with the raw tobacco, unsensitised to the tingles sent through the brain as of smoke forcing a vent from an enclosed furnace.

The tobacco has by now lost all its sting and Kamal moves the tasteless bolus mechanically from one side of the mouth to the other as he eavesdrops the private conversation between the sheikhas.

The Assassin has many hiding places within the palace. There is *the-Basket*, in the large kitchen, one of four child-sized wicker baskets below the window that always seemed to be two-thirds empty of lentils. It was large enough for an uncomfortable Assassin to spy through cracks in the plaited twigs. There is more room in *the-Cauldron*, in the laundry room, which is a giant copper pot standing anachronistically next to two modern washing machines. It was in the cauldron that, in ages past, garments had been boiled clean; and that, more recently, Kamal spied his first breasts. With the heavy lid all but covering the rim, the boy watched from the thinnest of gaps as Marina entered with the dirty laundry and closed the door behind her. Then, unexpectedly, her front to the washing machines and the

cauldron, she hurried to unfasten her tunic, and unhook her bra which she added to the dirty pile. Later, in the comfort of his bedroom, Marina would expose her breasts to him many times albeit in a more leisurely and seductive fashion. Marina is not pretty as, say, Hygienic Sue; nor is she a person he can remotely like. But she has breasts, white and buxom, with dark nipples that stand out boldly like two prepuces.

But the Assassin's favourite hiding-place is *the-Sofa*, the Kilim-covered lounge in the west wing of the dewan which is easily accessible from the ottoman window. Hidden from view by the brightly-coloured rug, he can eavesdrop on Mama and guests when they sit in the Abbassid annexe.

*What's she doing here?* The Salah-ed-Dins migrated from southern Arabia a millennium ago to the safety of Mount Lebanon, fleeing from persecution at the hands of Muslims. Salah-ed-Din...Abd-as-Salaam...Kamal knows all the *Yamani* clans by heart...Taqi-ed-Din...Abou-Shaqra... The Northern Druze clans, led by the Khanbats, arrived in Mount Lebanon after the *Yamanis*, from Mesopotamia and from Persia where they had worshipped the sun as a god before turning to the true Allah. *She is the true enemy*. For centuries, North and South fought inconclusively to control Mount Lebanon until 1711, and the humiliating Battle of Ain Dara. The *Qaysi* Northerners under the Khanbats, and with significant support from Maronite mercenaries, massacred the *good* Druzes. Of the original twelve *Yamani* clans, only three would remain thereafter.

It is Mama who has explained all these events in Druze history. *How can she now talk to the Khanbat like a friend?*

Now, as Mama smokes her narghile, the water in the vase makes a soft rustling sound like water trickling gently from a mountain spring. Kamal's hand moves the hem of the Kilim rug. He cannot see his mother, but he has a clear view of the archenemy's legs crossed one over the other and, as the Khanbat's hand comes to rest on the knee, of the long and slender cigarette holder held between almost as long and slender fingers.

The boy's gaze moves down to take in the lower third of a sky-blue dress with large white circles like unnaturally round clouds. He looks at the legs in neutral-coloured stockings, and down to the matching blue stiletto shoes before returning to fix the legs. *Geelee-geelee-geelee*. The whiteness of the calves filters through the stockings, not the anaemia of snow as Mama's legs, but rather a fleshy hue like the first layer of a watermelon: white with the promise of a deeper red. They are thin but muscular, so that when she hooks the foot that was dangling in the air behind the ankle of the other, the muscle in the twisted calf swells out like a compact breast. *A nipple here and they'd be perfect*. He realises with surprise that they are the most beautiful legs he has ever seen.

The last time Kamal saw the Khanbat sheikha was two years ago when breasts had seemed inconvenient bumps in the chest, and legs only good for walking with. But now, he tries to remember what her face was like, and wonders about her breasts in the polka dot dress. He stares at the twisted calf and his penis grows harder.

'Kamal knows what he wants,' Mama is saying. 'And what he doesn't want is to become a good little Maronite.'

*Don't talk to her about me!*

'Maronite schools will do that,' says the Khanbat. 'So what will you do now?'

'Open a good Druze school where Maronites will turn into good little Druzes.'

*Yes!* The boy doesn't realise his mother is being sarcastic.

'The Socialist Party would abolish all sectarian schools.'

Kamal switches off as the ladies talk about the education system, and about how Muslim schools and Maronite ones go hand in hand. He imagines the Druze school, with its bright playground full of *Yamani* Assassins like him. Laughing and playing and training as one to become the most efficient army of warriors since the Roman legions. He lies on his front and his pelvis begins to thrust against the floor. Scimitars banging against shields, they march against Maronites and Northern Druzes. *Bang-dang-dang. Bang-dang-dang.* And then they sweep down from the mountains like a cloud of eagles to take the coastal plains. *Bang-dang-dang.* And the army splits in two: half goes north into Syria and Turkey, and half to Israel and Egypt. *Bang-dang-dang.* Conquering all before them until they meet up again in Gabal-al-Tareq in Spain, at the entrance to the Mediterranean. From east to west the sea would be renamed the Druze-Sea. *Bahr-ad-Drooz. Bang-dang-dang.*

What the Khanbat says next propels him back into the conversation. Abruptly, he loses both the glorious image and his erection.

'I can recommend the Circumciser for your sons.'

*What?!*

'I don't know. I'm not sure. I should find a school.'

'He's very good.'

'So you've said on past occasions.' After a moment's quiet reflection, Mama adds, 'It's a thought. And certainly better than some of the other thoughts I've had today.'

*Don't listen to her Mama! She's the Khanbat witch.* Kamal is no longer sure that he heard correctly; his hand moves into his trousers down to the limp penis to caress the foreskin soothingly.

Mama gives a short chuckle. 'A Muslim hakim came to the palace last week. I think he was shocked by Karim's thing. Uncircumcised, you see, both of them.'

'Really?'

'Sinful, he says.'

'It is considered healthier to be without.'

*Shut up!*

'There can be a medical reason for circumcision. If - now how did the hakim put it - "the skin at birth will not yield to an excited member".'

The Khanbat's laughter sounds like a raven's cry.

'But anyway, that's another matter.' Mama sounds decisive when she says, 'I should like to meet the Circumciser. The boys could do with a snip here and there.'

'I think you'll see he is very good. He did a wonderful job with my Rashid.'

*Had she watched?!*

Kamal has heard enough.

He crawls backwards, leaves *the-Sofa*, squeezes through the ottoman window of the west wing and, instead of reaching to the second floor balcony to return to his bedroom, he climbs over the wrought-iron railing and jumps to the ground a storey below, landing smartly on his feet. *Must go, but where?* He runs around the palace to the main entrance as the sky, hinting through the mist, turns a shade sanguine with a closing day. Spotting a white Land Rover parked by the entrance, he hesitates, unsure as to his next move.

*The Khanbat's car.* He touches the gleaming hood, almost reverently. Kamal knows his cars, buys magazines about the latest models. He knows them from headlamps to tail bumpers and, having spent many an idle afternoon in a mechanic's garage, he can tell a knocking engine from a healthy one, knows where the carburettor is and its function. He has helped to check for wheel balance, brake fluid and oil. *Land Rover: English, latest model '67 or even '68.* If his passion for cars is anything to go by, he might well have been a mechanic himself in a previous life. *Split differentials, power steering.* He can tell a happy car from a sad one from the blending of body and hood, and the chrome plate work that brightly satisfies the eye. With strangers, he looks at their cars before turning to their clothes. And as a rule, depressing general, Druzes favour Datsuns while Maronites go for the more showy BMW's. *I hate both Dats and Bé-éMs.* The Land Rover is a beautiful car; that it belongs to the Khanbat unsettles him.

*Mama has forgotten Ain Dara. How could she!* Tucked in his trousers is his scimitar that has already drawn blood twice to protect Salah-ed-Din honour. Kamal moves to a back door and, finding it unlocked, he opens it. *I will wait for the witch.*

Wait, little boy, and dream your dreams of the 2,000 year war.

When the engine is switched on he stirs only to curl up even more on the carpeted interior of the high, roomy boot of the Land Rover. The engine purrs contently and the Assassin returns to a deeper sleep. But the hand wishes to remind him of his mission, and grips his dagger so that he is transported to another time and another place. He cuts the brake cable and a subconscious thought screams: *Druzes are immortal! We die and live again.*

It is already pitch dark outside and Sitt Noor Khanbat drives home.

*Noor*: light. Her name is as her hair that reflects the light from the street lamps with the regularity of a lighthouse beam. It is a light that warns of the rocky shore ahead.

Kamal wakes up and shivers. *An Assassin feels no pain, knows neither cold nor hunger.*

He looks out of the Land Rover to try and find his bearings. The car is parked in a closed garage alongside two other expensive cars: a Jaguar and a Rolls Royce. *Both English as the Land Rover.* He climbs over the back seat and exits through the back door. His hand trails behind as he walks past, feeling the Jaguar's flank. He turns and repeats the caress on the Rolls Royce so the lion will not be jealous of the panther. *Must be the Khanbat palace.* He spots a door out of the garage and, with a backward glance at the three English jewels, he moves into the heated palace.

The residence of the ruling Khanbats is at a high altitude, erected on a protruding lip, a vantage point that is similar to the most popular restaurant of Baraka a mountain and a valley away. There is a sheer drop down a ravine on three sides which, in summer, makes for a breathtaking view of the mountainside and the blue Mediterranean beyond. During the winter nights, though, convection currents cause a freezing rime to scale the heights from the valley floor, and here too, jinn have besieged the castle with a cloud of fog.

The boy finds himself in a wide hallway that coasts around a central courtyard. It is dark inside; but outside, spotlights as tired defenders shine feebly on the invading mist. He tiptoes down the corridor, yet still his steps make a deafening noise in the marble, graveside silence. He pauses by a window overlooking the courtyard and wipes the condensation off the glass.

*Hayah!* He allows himself to be drawn to the comforting glow of a spotlight. It seems a distant beacon and he aboard a ship while in between, waves froth to

cloud the sight. Kamal shades his eyes as if from a midday sun. *Gabal-al-Tarek*. He is the captain who has just seen the rock at the entrance to the Mediterranean.

Then, suddenly, officers in a trench order their men over the top: a strong gust of wind causes all the windows in the cloister to whistle as one. The mist breaks up into isolated clouds, swirling to form shapes; picked up by the wind, a thousand and one hooded wraiths come charging towards Kamal's window. *No! Leave me alone!*

Without daring a second look, he turns and sprints down the corridor no longer caring how much noise he is making. He rushes into the first room off the hall and flicks the light on.

At first, he thinks the murdering ghosts have followed him inside, have come for his blood. He hears a haunting: 'Ooh Karim. Ooh Karim.'

Kamal jumps back in terror, trips, and lands heavily on the ground. 'Leave me alone! *I didn't mean to do it.* The boy covers his eyes only partly because of the blinding light. *It was an accident I swear!*

'Ooh Karim,' repeats the ghost accusingly. 'Ooh Karim.'

*Karim?* He opens his eyes and squints to see the phantom.

The small room is completely empty but for a mirror on one wall and a birdcage on the opposite wall.

'Ooh Karim. Ooh Karim.'

Kamal locates the sound; his look of fright changes slowly into a frown, into a tentative grin, to end in a broad smile.

In the birdcage is a species of dove, white with a bright blue crown, that bobs its head up and down as if in prayer or admiration. This species has a unique song to greet the day which sounds like *yaa-karim*, and which, to Arabic ears, is quite intelligible and completely enchanting. As if praising Allah for every dawn, those doves sing out *Yaa-Karim: O Noble-One*.

Kamal reaches for the switch and, as abruptly as day had appeared, it now disappears causing the bird to fall silent. He waits half a minute, then turns night back into day.

The dove again bobs its head up and down, and calls, 'O Noble-One! O Noble-One!'

Kamal laughs, delighted.

The bird, paying no attention to the child, continues to bow before its twin image on the wall opposite.

He allows the bird to return to sleep and moves through the chamber into a large study.

*An Assassin is a creature of the night.* His finger, poised on the light switch, moves away. *I'm not afraid of the dark.* He thinks this especially as the wind has

swept away the mist of jinn; and the room is bathed in the light of a full moon. In any case, the furniture is so dark and appears so old that no amount of light seems capable of brightening the room.

There is a small desk at one end and, at the other end, a two-seater sofa with two matching fauteuils around a fireplace. The gold paint on the seats is flaking off in various places revealing a chestnut wood underneath, while the upholstery is a burgundy so dark as to be almost indistinguishable from black. From the floor to the ceiling, running the entire length of the facing wall is an immense bookcase. He glances at the books curiously. *Must be the largest collection in the world of black books.* His eyes move on.

And fall upon *him* immediately.

'Allah,' he breathes. He has never used that name with such feeling before. But then, he has never before seen so wondrous a gem. He remains riveted for a long, respectful minute. Then, slowly, he bows his head as if before a king.

Hanging above the mantelpiece is a sword whose silver scabbard is the only object in the room to reflect the moonlight. Kamal moves deliberately towards it. *You are the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.* Again he waits a full minute, staring at the sword in awe. *You are a true warrior.*

He reaches up, timidly to touch the scabbard as if expecting it to turn its head, to slither away. But it feels warm, inviting, encouraging the boy to carefully lift it off its hanging nails.

*I am Kamal Salah-ed-Din.* The sword allows its hilt to be kissed, and the boy's fingers to run along the length of its scabbard.

It is neither curved as a scimitar, nor straight as a rapier. Instead, it is equally curved and straight, straight and curved, allowing a fencer to both cut and thrust with equal ease. He fingers the calligraphic writing on the sheath that is too florid for him to read, and then closes his hand around the hilt. *I feel good. This feels right.* This was a real assassin's weapon, not the dagger tucked in the trousers of a make-believe Assassin.

Kamal unsheathes the sword gently and inhales deeply through the nose to take in even the scent of his newfound friend. He holds the blade out and the moonlight, thus properly reflected, causes fires of a millennium to burst out of the iron.

'*Hayah! Hayah!*' In his exhilaration, he doesn't care about the noise. He spins around the room, the sword high above his head. '*Hayah!*' Around the fauteuils, dancing to jinnee music. '*Hayah!*' He skips to the bookcase and his scabbard hand brushes along the black and brown books. And to the desk where he slows down to admire the shadow, flitting over the desktop, of his sword in his hand. *Yes! You are mine!*

Kamal places the scabbard on the desk and, gripping the sword in both hands, he lowers it so he can look along the spine. From hilt to tip, back and forth. His eyes, at the tip, move slightly beyond to a faded black and white photograph on the desktop. His attention is drawn by the image of the sword, *his* sword.

It is an old picture of a group of four men and a woman. He stares at one of the men in particular before turning to the woman. Despite the yellowing image, the man wears an attractive uniform with a large, egg-shell of a helmet that marks him out as a foreign soldier. The officer has an odd baton protruding from under his right arm, and his hands are behind his back, which is the first similarity with the painting of Kamal's father. The other resemblance is in the moustache: butterfly wings whose tips almost join the helmet's strap, miniature scimitars on a face other than his father's. Perhaps because of these similarities, the foreigner has the allure of a strong but just man, proud and regal compared to the other men in the photograph.

The woman standing beside him is a queen. She wears a flowing gown that suits her long, black hair. The woman both smiles and scowls at the camera. But he focuses the longest on *his* sword, clasped incongruously in her hands.

It is as he returns the blade to its scabbard that he hears the bird calling his twin.

Hide, boy, before the phantom of the queen whose rest you have disturbed.

This room is as ancient and void of colour as a true shadow of the night.

A gun in a hand and a white face are the first to enter the room. The other hand enters next to reach for the light switch. The light - a dozen bulbs shining from a chandelier suspended high - is strongly weak like the spotlights during the earlier siege. Her hands and face reflect the light from the chandelier while, a second later, the long black hair and black abbaya dressing gown are as matt as the books on the shelves.

*I heard a voice.* Noor Khanbat scans the room with a revolver held high which she gradually lowers.

Behind her, a servant enters warily, armed with a broom. And behind him, the light is still on in the antechamber and the dove, confused by the ever shorter days and nights, nonetheless sings the praises of the Noble-One.

'You heard it didn't you,' states Noor without turning to her servant.

He nods, frightened. 'Screams, Sittna.'

'Yes.' She scans the empty room. *A blood-curdling cry.*

'First I hear the bird,' says the servant with dread. 'Then I hear *her*.'

*Her?* Noor moves to the desk and takes a look at *her*. They are in the

Khanbatta Room, and the servant is referring to al-Khanbatta, the dead sheikha of the Northern Druzes. 'And how do you know it was her?'

'I know, Sittna. I can feel her now.' He looks anxiously around the room. 'Sweet mother of Allah, she's still here.'

Noor leans on the desk as she stares at the old picture of al-Khanbatta. *There's something wrong - what is it?*

'Her spirit has returned.'

'No!' she scolds the Christian with irritation. 'She has returned but not like this.' *She has returned in a mother's womb.* Her tone is marginally softer as she repeats, 'Not like this. There are no ghosts.'

The man appears unconvinced. 'And what about the screams, Sittna?'

*Something is missing - what is it?*

'Sittna?' insists the servant. 'If those screams were not from beyond the grave, then I am nothing but a deaf fool.'

'The wind,' she says turning away from the Khanbatta Room. 'It was just the wind with a higher ambition.'

The servant switches the light out and hurries behind his mistress.

*What is it that's troubling her? Surely not doubt or guilt.* Druzes do not believe in ghosts. Al-Khanbatta, like all dead souls, is reborn. 67 years after her death, she has again returned and is now not a spirit screaming in the middle of the night but a twelve year old boy who lives a mountain and a valley away.

She puts the revolver in the bedside drawer and returns wearily to bed. *Must be something else.* She needs a good thought to doze off, and forces her mind to think of her afternoon's successful meeting with the boy's mother. *You were great, Noor - so very sympathetic to Nisrin.* She congratulates herself for a successful mission. The purpose of her visit to the Salah-ed-Din palace was to introduce the-Circumciser; and Noor was surprised at how easy it had been to persuade Nisrin. *She begged me to talk to him.* Noor smiles at the irony. *She begged me.*

The-Circumciser is not just a tutor but Noor's most loyal subject, willing to carry out the most ruthless of orders. Thus, the grain for the plot was masterfully sown that afternoon. The boy's death had to appear like an accident for the Druzes, her own Northern subjects as well as the *Yamanis*, would condemn an outright act of aggression on the boy.

*A tamer for a lion-cub.* Unwittingly, Noor has made a mental link with the most illustrious of her ancestors.

She lies alone in bed. Her husband and cousin, Sheikh Wassif, spends most of the year in Beirut. He is a member of parliament, besides his role as leader of the Socialist Party, and cannot therefore afford to remain away too long from the

political hub of the capital. But even when the sheikh is at home, in the ancestral manor, the couple sleep apart, in royal chambers separated by a long corridor. Their marital life, as indeed their politicking, is unattached. He looks after Druze interests nationally, in the opposition ranks against the Maronite-led government, while she consolidates Khanbat power among the Druze community. She is ignorant of the Socialist plans to destabilize the government, and he is equally unaware of his wife's plan to kill Kamal Salah-ed-Din.

Noor was born a Khanbat. Her grandfather was one of al-Khanbatta's nephews who lived to old age - exceptionally in a family where so many have died young. Small, impressionable Noor on his lap, he had related the story of their family: from the roots in Persia, the Zoroastrian Khambattas; to the Crusades and the family's secret alliance with King Richard the Lionheart against the Muslims and the Druze Arabs, and King Richard's secret liaison with the Khambatta princess; to the Ottoman times, when the family dropped the *ta* and changed the *m* to remind the Sultan that they too were Khans; to the glorious 1711, and the victory at Ain Dara; to 1860 and the great al-Khanbatta. From earliest childhood, her heart has been for the Khanbats. She has loved no one man as completely as she adores her family.

Longing to remain a Khanbat, in her early teens she used all her youthful charms to attract Wassif Khanbat, her first cousin twenty years her senior and the heir apparent to the fiefdom. She had conceived a son, not out of love for her husband, but driven by a deeper need to perpetuate the family. The birth of Rashid had not put an end to her fight for the Khanbats. Only the fittest survive. Mount Lebanon harbours many snakes concealed in bushes, dangers to her son who would remain vulnerable until his accession to the throne. Thus, she had sent him abroad to complete his education in beloved England.

And she has contrived to introduce the-Circumciser to the Salah-ed-Din palace.

*Sleep, Kamal Salah-ed-Din.* Noor knows enough about al-Khanbatta's dangerous spirit to fear for Rashid. Her great-great aunt massacred all her rivals among the Southern Druzes in order to become the uncontested ruler of all Druzes. She used her own sword to slay her victims, a unique sword, among the Khanbat possessions, in a silver scabbard with calligraphic writing engraved to the tip, a simple sentence composed by the warrior-sheikha herself. From end to end, the phrase reads: *Sleep in thy mother's womb tonight.*

Noor cannot sleep. The feeling that something is amiss returns to her. *It can't be guilt.* Al-Khanbatta believed she was liberating her victims, slaying them so their souls would seek rebirth elsewhere. And al-Khanbatta herself has been reborn. *Can it be doubt, then?* A Druze holy-man broke his oath of secrecy to

inform Noor that the soul had transmigrated to the Salah-ed-Din palace. Had it been to any other clan, North or South, she might not have intrigued a way to kill a boy. But the Salah-ed-Dins command as much support as her Khanbats and represent a serious threat. It is a matter of survival. *No, it is not doubt.*

Her eyes are wide open, fixing a spot on the ceiling when a familiar sound causes her to sit up in bed. *Not again!* She waits, but this time she hears no screams. *Druzes are right: there are no ghosts.* She glances at the sky outside a window and lies down once more.

From deep within the palace, from the antechamber leading to the Khanbatta Room, drifts a voice, chilling as a phantom's, that screeches, 'O Noble-One! O Noble-One!'

The wind has swept away the fog and dawn is breaking over Mount Lebanon, the most beautiful sunrise since the Sunday that the clouds rolled in from the east.

There are more ghosts than there are leaves in all the forests of the world. For every living creature has its shadow. In life, the shadow is fixed to the body...

A Druze maid wearing a white foulard enters the bedroom. 'Sittna,' she says urgently.

Noor groans.

'Sittna,' repeats the maid. 'The *Jawad* is here!'

Sleepily: 'Who?'

The maid stresses again, 'The *Jawad*, Sittna. Lord-jawad Fawzi has come to see you.'

Noor opens her eyes. 'A cigarette.' She sits up. 'Bring me a cigarette.'

'Yes, Sittna.'

*Need a coffee as well, but there's no time.* 'What time is it?'

'Eight o'clock, Sittna,' she replies handing her a pack.

*Do holy-men never sleep in?* Besides enforced celibacy, all Druze sheikhs-of-the-faith are not permitted any form of intoxicant so that, out of respect for her guest, Noor will have to refrain from smoking and from ordering a coffee though she craves both. Leaving the lit cigarette in an ashtray, Noor heads for the bathroom. 'Tell the *Jawad* I'll be with him in two minutes.'

'Yes, Sittna.' The maid hurries out. *The Jawad is here!* To a Druze, the *Jawad* is as the Patriarch to a Maronite, as a cardinal to a Catholic. *He is here!* The holiest of holy-men has come to the palace unexpected.

...And in death, the shadow is free to roam.

The maid, her white foulard now covering her mouth, retreats out of the dewan backwards. He watches her leave and then turns to Ziad, the Initiated who has accompanied him. Ziad is young; he is only forty. *But he has the makings of a jawad.* He is wise to the complexities of the spirit.

Ziad stands by an armchair wishing to sit but waits respectfully for his lord-jawad to sit first. 'Sit,' Fawzi tells him. Ziad complies while he paces the room and moves to the window.

It is a fine day outside. Sunny but cool. His gaze takes in an attractive lawn and garden. *Foreign grass: Lebanese grass is more reserved with its green.* His eyes settle on an untrimmed shrub, two branches growing out. *Looks like a boy begging for mercy.* But then Fawzi is seeing boys everywhere. His thoughts are filled with boys or, to be precise, with one boy: Kamal Salah-ed-Din. Since Fawzi has never met the child, the boy's face comes to him in various masks, even arboreal.

The Khanbats are plotting to assassinate the Salah-ed-Din child, that much he knows. What his own role should be he has yet to decide.

Fawzi is a jawad among the Druze holy-men, a Righteous among the Initiated. He is an enlightened sage who is supposed to have all the answers. *But I'm an undecided fool like an Ignorant.* And this indecision makes him see the boy even in his dreams, as though he suffers from paedophobia, the rarest of all fears.

In Druze society, the holy-men are also addressed as sheikhs for they, like the Salah-ed-Dins and the Khanbats, are leaders of men. They are sheikhs-of-the-faith to the lay chiefs, the sheikhs-of-the-moment; the connotation being that a political sheikh is a leader for the duration of his life, whereas a sheikh-ed-din is a guide for all eternity. The vast majority of Druzes are *Ignorants*, who are told only the very basics of their esoteric religion. Only the *Initiated* have access to the Noble Knowledge that contains the secret interpretations of all the prophets united. God was the Creator who had sent periodic manifestations of the Universal Intelligence to seven prophets: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, and Muhammad ibn Ismail. But it was the *companions* of the prophets who were the incarnations of the Divine Will.

Fawzi turns from the window momentarily to glance at Ziad. *Composed and wise for his age.* The hidden companions, such as Jethro with Moses, James with Jesus and Salman the Persian with Muhammad, were not God but the incarnation of his Will. These companions, pretending to be disciples, were the true masters taking notes, as angels, of the reactions of men to the words of the prophets. The prophets had spoken in parables and of rituals so that men would begin to understand God, would start to see his exoteric face. But true religion required

neither ritual nor symbol.

The early morning rays filter through the window and Lord-jawad Fawzi, eyes closing for a moment, turns his thought to time. Time so deep that he could not fathom its structure; and time so murderous that it plotted to assassinate the Salah-ed-Din boy. *Time is why I'm here.* Creation occurred in a burning instant, not a week. The universe came into being on the first second of the first Friday, and would end on the Day of Judgement - not a day but also a fleeting instant - on the last second of the last Thursday. Precise dates of birth and death are fundamental to the Druze sheikhs-of-the-faith.

Al-Khanbatta was born on Wednesday, 8 October 1835, into the Khanbat clan. In 1860, after the brutal murders of her two brothers, the young sheikha led first the Northern Druzes and then, for the first time in the history of the movement, rallied all the Druzes under one banner. In the course of that year, during the Mountain War, she marched ahead of her Druze army against the Maronites who were captained by a foreigner, Georges Olivier. The victories for the Druzes during that short but violent war were as incredibly spectacular as they were heinous to a modern society. *Time.* Had al-Khanbatta lived in an earlier century, when the sacking of towns was the usual result to a military triumph, she would have been remembered as a great general - lower but in the same list that includes the Salah-ed-Din who defeated the Crusaders. Had she lived a century later, she might have been brought to trial and hanged for crimes against humanity. But in her time, an epoch of grey morals, she was reviled for all the gutters that had to be dredged of Maronite blood but otherwise allowed to die of natural causes. Her body was discovered by an old cedar tree, north of Baraka; found, ironically, by Maronite monks whom she had persecuted in her wild youth.

'Time?'

Holy-man Ziad looks at his watch and tells the jawad, 'Half past eight, Sidna.'

'Is it exactly half past eight?'

'Yes, Sidna. According to my watch.'

*Only Allah's watch never misses a second.* It is precisely because no-one knows the exact day of al-Khanbatta's death that there is the present indecision, and the plan to assassinate the boy. Lord-jawad Fawzi cups his hands together to form a sphere, as though in an odd gesture of prayer. *Spherical yet spiral time and souls.* In the transmigration of the soul, the very instant a man dies, his soul moves into the nearest womb where the magic of conception is waiting to occur. Al-Khanbatta had returned, as every human being before her and since who has not attained sublimity. The problem is that she died either on a Monday or a Tuesday: drawing her last breath near the cedar either on the 13 or 14 September, 1901.

If Monday 13, then al-Khanbatta had become Amin Khairallah, an Ignorant born on June 10, 1902. He is a sixty six year old farmer who has shown no outward signs of al-Khanbatta's soul. That, on its own, is not proof. As a runner must rest after a strenuous race, a soul sometimes *sleeps* for a lifetime or more, particularly after an eventful life like the sheikha's. If Tuesday 14, then al-Khanbatta would have returned as a woman born prematurely on 17 May 1901 who died on 30 November 1955. She, too, had shown no signs of al-Khanbatta. She had died and become one of the Salah-ed-Din twins born on 28 July of the following year. Of the last transmigration there is no dispute. Where the Druze holy-men are at odds is whether al-Khanbatta's soul has travelled down the first or second path.

He fixes the shrub. *If only trees could speak. The older the tree, the more it would have to say.* A Druze is his calmest self when he is the most enraged.

*Shame!* The situation has been worsened by a leak. An unknown Initiated, sworn to secrecy, has broken his oath to inform the Khanbats of Kamal's possible lineage. And the Khanbats, fearing that the boy is indeed a reincarnation of their ancestor, are taking no chances.

As for the boy, Kamal, others have their doubts; he has none. The child is the reincarnation of al-Khanbatta. A true jawad must read the exoteric signs, understands history as spherically spiral, repeating itself imperfectly. An enlightened sage must accept the fact that the warrior-sheikha's spirit has already made itself known. Of the twins, it is Kamal who has the fighting spirit. The Saladin who captured Jerusalem from the Crusaders had been a Muslim not a Druze. But all the Salah-ed-Dins - both the Druzes of Lebanon and the Sunnis of Egypt - had begun the same migratory route from Yemen. There is the same warrior's blood coursing through the boy's veins. Coupled to that, now, is the spirit of another great fighter. *A cheetah's head on an eagle's body.* As the child in a thousand and one masks appears before him Fawzi dreads to think what this particular fusion of body and soul can yield. *The power and evil of a flying dragon.* This is the root of his indecision. Ordinarily, he would have judged that the Khanbats should react as though they were ignorant of the reincarnation, and allow events to take their natural course. But now, he sees another threat of war looming, another long string of heinous crimes committed by Druzes against themselves and against non-Druzes. He wonders if it is not in everyone's best interest to sanction the Khanbat plot before the boy grows into a man.

As for the exoteric signs, most revealingly had been Kamal's fight with the boy called Walid Zeitouni, and of the recent brutal slaying of the Maronite's father. Gory violence worthy of al-Khanbatta. A sign that the Ignorants would miss, and the Initiated may think a coincidence: only a jawad listens to trees and hears the subtle repeats of history.

In the 1860 Mountain War, al-Khanbatta had fought against the foreigner Georges Olivier. Olivier, an olive tree, is French for *Zeitouni*.

At first, Fawzi believes he is in the grips of another fit of paedophobia. A small figure has appeared by the shrub, limping away from the palace. The figure pauses and turns to look back as if aware that he is being watched; then he resumes his hobbled retreat. *It is a boy*. Not Salah-ed-Din, of course. He lives on the other side of the mountain, and besides this boy's face is too dark with grime to be a young sheikh's.

Ziad rises as Sitt Noor enters, made up and fully-dressed.

'Lord-jawad,' she says apologetically. 'Forgive our appearance and lateness in receiving you. We slept very little last night.'

Fawzi has not turned, and still fixes the child. 'I have not slept at all and nor am I unsettled by your appearance, Sittna.'

It is only once the figure leaves his line of vision that he turns to nod a perfunctory salaam. *Now I must beg the queen of the Northern Druzes to stay the execution until my decision...*

A glance through space, a thought through time, and the arrow moves on.

*...I could've stayed*. Even a kilometre away from the Khanbat palace, he can look back and see it clearly, perched so precariously over a ravine like the restaurant in Baraka. Hiding in that room, Ala-ed-Din in a cave, under the desk as the thieves entered and left. Excited by the thought that no-one in the world knew where he was. A night with the Sword which the lady of the moon-jinn had given him, and then, as the voices in the palace woke him up, out through the Ottoman window as if on a mission from his own bedroom.

He has been walking for hours it seems to him; he is already starting to get tired and still the Khanbat palace is visible. His pace is significantly hampered by a limp: another difference between a dagger and a sword. Kamal's left arm moves in every so often to check unnecessarily that *he* is still there, almost from armpit to calf, concealed from jealous eyes.

During the long walk, Kamal has moments of misgivings as tiny isles in an ocean of happy certainty. *I am a thief*. Followed a second later by the flood of joy: *I am an Assassin who needs a sword. And no-one will take care of him like I will*.

And then: *I am an assassin*. This one with its cliffs of thorn bushes is a trickier island to overcome. But even this, after more thought, is rationalised: *It was an accident. And Druzes return anyway*.

That was the net advantage with his religion. *We return*. The major drawback though was that only the sheikhs-of-the-faith knew anything about

Allah; whereas even Maronite boys knew not only Allah but the Devil too.

*I'm an Ignorant.* The term itself is offensive to him. *How can a Salah-ed-Din royal be an Ignorant?* Kamal hears a car behind him and again wonders what has happened to the little boy who was killed by a black BMW. *Will he really return?*

Kamal wants to return home and thinks: *If he wants to return to his father, but his father doesn't have another child - what happens then?*

The car pulls up alongside the boy. Kamal looks at the car first and then at the faces and clothes. *A white Datsun.*

The two men in the car are Initiated Druzes, sheikhs-of-the-faith. The older of the two looks at the boy quizzically and asks, 'Where are you going, boy? We can give you a lift.'

Kamal frowns at them and, without a moment's hesitation says, 'What happens when you die? And who is the devil?'

The thinnest of smiles forms on the old man's face. 'Such direct questions from so small a mouth,' says Fawzi, turning to the driver.

Ziad nods but remains silent.

'Come.' Fawzi indicates the back seat. 'We shall talk of death and evil if you wish.'

Sheikhs-of-the-faith are easy to spot because, like monks, they all wear the same clothes as a badge of office: a white-turbaned fez, a white shirt usually covered by a black waistcoat, and black *shirwal* trousers that are slacks with a crotch that dangles between the legs to the knees as if - as Kamal had thought many years ago - in order to hold excrement like a giant diaper.

Kamal holds the door open and hesitates. He is tired but he will also have to remove the Sword to sit.

'Well, boy?' Fawzi says impatiently. 'It is old men who fear young boys. Don't be frightened of me.'

'I'm not frightened.' *I'm never frightened.* He looks back at the Khanbat palace, still too close for comfort and, covered slightly by the door, he untucks shirt and sweater, and pulls the sword and scabbard from his trousers before climbing in. *He* is again in an armpit but on the outside, surrounded by wool instead of flesh, so that Kamal can sit.

Ziad has seen the sword, stares at the boy in the rear view mirror, and drives off wordlessly.

'Do you have a name, boy?'

*Never give your name.* 'Karim.'

'A fine name. And where are you going, Karim?'

He points vaguely ahead.

'We can take you as far as you like,' Fawzi says, turning in his seat. 'Where

are your parents?’

Kamal tries to change the subject. ‘What about the devil?’

‘The devil?’ Fawzi fixes the boy for a long, silent while.

The two men wear the same white-turbaned fez; but on the old man, Kamal believes it must cover a completely bald head. From above the ears to the edge of the fez, the skin is smooth but wrinkled, like an antique marble. What is lost on the top of the head is compensated for on the face. The man’s moustache, totally white with age yet densely bushy with youth, curves away from a concealed upper lip and has grown to such a length that, with the split ends, it looks like a big cat’s whiskers that could be relied upon to test for leeway in confined spaces. And the face itself, when he looks head-on, is such a mass of wrinkles - concentric lines emanating from the centre - that one can easily believe that eons ago the man was born with but a nose for a face.

Fawzi closes his eyes for an instant, and when he opens them again he seems to stare slightly away from the boy’s face, fixing a point above Kamal’s left shoulder as though a little demon is now hovering there. ‘There is no devil to fear, only *Ghayba*.

‘*Ghayba*?’

‘You are still young to understand these things.’

*He means Ignorant.* ‘What is *ghayba*?’

‘Lack of unity with the-One.’

Kamal frowns, feeling very ignorant. ‘But what if a child dies?’ he asks specifically, ‘What happens to him? Does he go to the one, or to the *ghayba*?’

‘He doesn’t *go* anywhere.’

‘He returns.’

‘A short winter in one life will be compensated for by a long summer in another.

Everyone has the chance to grow towards Allah, for to grow away from the One is to live the *ghayba*.’ The jawad is returning the boy’s stare and states abruptly, ‘You were in the Khanbat palace.’

*He’s seen the Sword.* ‘No.’ *He must have recognised him.*

‘I saw you. Once I see a face, I never forget it.’

*He’ll tell the Khanbat witch about him.* ‘No.’ *They’ll call him a thief.* ‘I was never there. And I don’t even know where you mean. Stop the car.’

‘Now don’t cry, Karim.’

*I’m not Karim!* ‘I’m not crying!’

‘I’ve never met such an excitable little boy.’

‘Stop the car. Please stop the car, I want to go.’

The driver looks at the lord-jawad unsure and then, glancing in the rear

view mirror, he says calmly, 'Why don't you tell us about the sword?'

'What sword?' asks Fawzi.

'A sheikh's sword of silver that our young friend hides.'

'It's mine! You can't take it away from me.' This time Kamal does cry. Tears mingle with dirt and dry boot polish to leave pale streaks down his cheeks.

'Let me see it,' orders Fawzi.

'It's mine,' he repeats between sobs but, thus discovered, he obeys, lifting his arm and moving a leg to show the sword.

'You were right, Brother Ziad. It is a fine sword fit for a sheikh.' After a moment he adds, 'Where did you get it, Karim?'

Kamal stops crying as abruptly as he had started. He says a third time, with renewed confidence, 'It's mine.'

'Yours? You would have a sheikh's sword? Don't lie to me, boy. I'm old but I'm not blind enough to see that you are no sheikh - '

'Yes I am.'

'- with your dirty clothes, your dirty face, your ill manners - '

'I am a sheikh.'

'- you are the dustman's son.'

'I'm the son of Sheikh Selim Salah-ed-Din.'

'Ha! And I am the lowliest of Ignorants. Tell me the truth, boy, or we shall drop you off at the first gendarmerie.'

'I am Salah-ed-Din, son of Sheikh Selim and Sheikha Nisrin.'

'Karim Salah-ed-Din?'

He hesitates. 'Yes.'

Fawzi hesitates even longer. '*Karim* Salah-ed-Din?'

'Yes.'

The men exchange glances of surprise.

At length, Fawzi says, 'And do you have any brothers or sisters?'

'One.'

'Yes?'

'Brother.'

'Yes?'

'A twin.'

'No.'

'Yes.'

The old man closes his eyes; he dares not ask, 'His name?'

Again he hesitates. 'Kamal.'

'Stop the car!'

Ziad brakes bringing the Datsun to an immediate stop.

'When were you born?' demands Fawzi.

'Twenty-eight July, 1956.'

'In the name of the Will!' exclaims Fawzi and orders Ziad, 'Drive back to the palace!'

When the car stopped, Kamal's free hand was already on the door handle. He jumps out of the car and sprints away from the road, the silver scabbard burning in the sunshine, leaving a trail like a wake behind a liner.

'Come back!' shouts Fawzi. He watches the boy leave his line of vision as he had from the Khanbat's ottoman window. 'Come back.' *He'll never come back.*

Exoteric signs, esoteric interpretations. *The boy with the sword or the boy without the sword?* Fawzi shakes his head, confused. *Twins.*

At least now, when he dreams, the face of only one boy will come to mind; a face he will never forget, doubled as a reflection in a mirror. *Dark, dirty - but fleshy unlike an eagle's or a dragon's.*

And at least now, he has reached a firm decision.

'Do we return to the palace?' asks Ziad.

'Of course we return to the palace.' One thing has become certain to Fawzi: that the Khanbats are on no account to touch a hair on the boy's head until the council's ruling. He decides to make that point crystal clear to the Khanbats. *Now I must command the queen of the Northern Druzes to stay the execution.* 'And then we call a council meeting.' He shakes his head again, this time in wonder. 'Twins.'

'Yes, jawad.'

'We need more signs.' *But it may be that al-Khanbatta has returned in two bodies.*

❓ ❓ ❓ ❓ ❓

I am doomed to remember the Assassin's first mission.

Kamal became a true assassin on Sunday, 7 March, 1968.

He drew his dagger and moved to the mirror in his bedroom. He held the Assassin's sword aloft in his right hand and contemplated the left-handed image before turning to his twin.

Not identical, and yet physically so alike. Their hair was chestnut and curly, so curly in fact that after a bath or out of a swimming pool their hair immediately returned to the crimped appearance, the exact reverse process of a plastic wrapper that refuses to be crumpled. Their eyes, dark brown, seemed too closely-set so that when they stared intently - which Kamal did more often than Karim - they appeared slightly cross-eyed. Their noses, long and narrow, were like

opposite sand dunes sloping gently towards a wadi. Their complexion, the ashen brown of olives at harvest in summer, was plain olive in winter.

The morning sun filtered through the window and cast a beam on Kamal's blade which he reflected off the mirror to direct towards Karim's eye before turning it on one of his own. He moved the dagger away and the glowing image of a fang remained a little while longer on his retina. 'May my eye be plucked out if I tell anyone,' said Kamal. He prodded his brother. 'Go on, your turn.'

'May my eye be plucked out if I tell anyone.'

'Now you're ready.' He returned the dagger to his belt and opened a tin of boot polish.

'Do I have to?'

'What?' said Kamal impatiently.

Karim pointed at the tin. 'That.'

'How do you expect to be an Assassin if you don't hide your face?'

'Do I have to,' he repeated slowly, 'be an Assassin?'

'You're no fun, you know that?' Kamal said as he applied some polish on a cloth and began to add a coat to his twin's brow. 'You don't know how to play, that's your problem.'

'Is this a game?'

'Kind of.' Kamal moved down to the cheeks. 'Yeah, it's a game.'

'But what if - '

'Will you stop asking questions. Assassins don't ask questions.'

'I don't want to be an Assassin, Kamal.'

'Well you remember the last time you were the Crusader?' He finishes his twin's face with a dab at the chin. 'Do you want to be a Crusader?'

'No.'

'There you go. You cried when you were the Crusader.'

'You hit me hard.'

'Of course I hit you, you ass. What do you think Assassins and Crusaders do together? Dance?' He started to mask his own face. 'Now if we're both Assassins, I won't have to fight you, because we're brothers, see?'

'We're already brothers.'

Kamal ignored that. 'And anyway, I need another man for this mission.' He looked at his twin doubtfully.

It was the Sunday after *Holy-Trinity*, two days after Kamal's fight with Walid Zeitouni; and late morning when it was still sunny. 'You hurt people when you're an Assassin,' said Karim. 'You hurt Walid.'

'He shouldn't have said what he did about Papa.' Kamal's reflection nodded gravely in agreement as he finished the final touches to his face.

'And did you see Brother Souheil's expression?'

'So?'

'And Walid's father?'

'*Lebanon 453040.*' Kamal reached for some apple-tambak and added, 'Black BMW. '64 or '65.'

The two Assassins hid below the terrace of one of the best restaurants of Baraka. His back against one of the pillars supporting the terrace, Kamal chewed tobacco as he overheard the conversations of the arak-swilling, mezze-eating clientele; and Karim looked nervously away, at the facing mountainside.

The tobacco had by now lost all its sting and Kamal moved the tasteless bolus mechanically from one side of the mouth to the other as he heard four conversations but listened attentively to one.

The restaurant was built off a minor road out of town, on a natural ledge in the mountain so that customers seated outside on the terrace could, according to their dispositions, either enjoy the rich panorama with their food, or imagine that the terrace, seemingly projecting into empty space, was about to plummet 600 metres to the valley below. Behind the restaurant was a parking lot and the road, a tortuous lane that led back to Baraka. This country lane, which essentially was only a route to the restaurant, snaked along the southern extent of the Salah-ed-Din estate. Beyond a thin, rocky ridge, skirting the mountain as an elastic to an undergarment, lay the palace.

Kamal broke away from his eavesdropping to whisper to his twin. 'I told you he'd come. He's always here on Sunday getting pissed.' He nodded towards one of the cars in the lot. 'It's always here on Sunday. The blackest car in Baraka.'

On Friday, when Walid's father went to the school to see the principal after a trip to the hospital, Karim had simply noticed that the car had been black; but Kamal had recognised the black BMW and memorised the plates.

'I didn't think he'd come,' said Karim. 'You know, not with his son injured and all.'

'I told you he would.' He silenced his twin as the conversation on the terrace became more heated.

'May all the clans go to hell!'

Kamal looked up but could see only a line of green leaves, overhanging from the potted plants along the edge of the terrace.

'That's why the country's in such a mess,' continued the voice. 'There are more sheikhs than there are dustmen.'

Of the four conversations the boys could hear, this was both the loudest and the most interesting as it was the voice of Walid Zeitouni's father.

'Ach! If tomorrow, by magic, all our sheikhs were to vanish in one mighty black hole, then the day after all our problems would disappear.'

Kamal, listening to the speech slurred and impassioned by drink, moved a hand instinctively to the hilt of his dagger.

Zeitouni's companion said sympathetically, 'I heard about the fight between your boy and the Salah-ed-Din.'

'Fight? That was no fight! My-dick, no!'

Kamal heard a clinking of glasses and pictured the man pouring himself another arak.

'Boys fight,' continued Zeitouni. 'But that was no fight. That boy attacked Walid with a knife like a coward, too scared to use his fists.'

'Incredible.'

'I don't see why Druzes should be allowed in our Maronite schools anyway. Let them be criminals in their own schools.'

'Not all Druzes.'

'All Druzes!' He paused. 'How many Druzes does it take to massacre Maronites? One? Two? Hell no! All of them. It's in their blood. At least Muslims are open about their jihads against Christians. The Druzes, they say they're your friends and then, when your guard is down, they stab you in the back.'

'Walid was stabbed in the back?'

'Of course. You know Walid. You know how big he is. You don't think he could've defended himself?'

'That's disgusting.'

'Of course it is. And when he turned around in surprise, that snake of a Salah-ed-Din stabbed him in the chest as well.'

'That's sick.'

Another pause as the glasses were refilled.

'You know who I blame don't you. The whole Druze society. The feudal system they swear by. The way they follow their sheikhs like they're bloody messiahs. Upbringing, I tell you.'

'Yes.'

'I blame the boy's mother. Thinks she lives in another century. Thinks she's an emira. She's nothing. I've met maids who are more noble, and village idiots who are wiser. Follow three dung beetles and you'll find the sheikha and her children sitting in that stinking palace of theirs.'

Before heading for the parking lot and the BMW with the registration of *Lebanon* 453040, Kamal whispered to his twin, 'See? Do you see now why he deserves a lesson? Don't forget to whistle like a woodcock if you see someone leaving the restaurant.'

Karim nodded slowly and heard Walid's father say: 'Ach! There will be wars in Lebanon until either all the leaders are killed, or all their followers are dead.'

The twins had to wait over two hours for Walid's father to emerge from the restaurant. They had climbed the rocky ridge that hugged the mountain, overlooking the lane. The view from this position was better than that on the terrace: not only could they see the same panorama of the valley and mountain as the customers in the restaurant, they could also look left, following the lane's tortuous descent into Baraka, past a solitary squat house. And they could also look behind, which Karim did regularly, to glance at the palace in the distance, whose ottoman windows were reflecting the rays of a late afternoon sun, so that the whole structure from the foundations to the sloping roof appeared to shimmer like a mirage.

'This is blood revenge for Mama and Papa,' Kamal had said, explaining how he had found and cut the brake cable on the BMW. 'He won't die,' he had added quickly. 'Just an accident. Bruises and a crashed car so he'll remember to treat us with respect.'

'But your fight was with Walid, not his father.'

'Yeah? You're so stupid. Who do you think told Walid and is telling the world that Papa buggered boys? Didn't you hear him now? Our fight is with the Zeitounis.'

Walid's father and his luncheon partner were the last to leave the restaurant. Even from the ridge, they could see the men swaying unsteadily on their feet; and when they came to part company, it was on a second attempt and after embarrassed laughter that their hands met in a handshake. The companion set off first, down the lane towards Baraka in a grey Renault. The car braked sharply at the first bend and, as it accelerated away, Karim noticed a farmer tilling his land opposite the squat house on the other side of the lane.

The black BMW followed a good ten minutes later.

Time enough for Kamal to wonder, 'He's fallen asleep.' And then, anxiously, 'He knows someone's been at his car.'

Finally it moved, slowly; then picked up speed down the lane before the hairpin bend.

The Assassin spat the weed out of his mouth as far as it would go, and raising his scimitar high, he shouted in excitement: 'By the power of the sword and by the grace of the faith, I command you to crash.'

But with skillful driving even for one more sober, the driver succeeded in staying on the road by rapid turns of the steering wheel and by accelerating away from the bend. The tyres screeched.

Karim saw the farmer in the field look up.

Kamal's dagger was still pointing exuberantly at the sky as the BMW sped on and slammed into a toddler who had run out of the squat house.

The dagger was dropped.

The child, dragged a few metres by the bumper, lay as an inert and round pebble on a seashore.

The driver could not have avoided the child who had sprinted out so suddenly. But after the accident he could have stopped, or at least have attempted to. But he never tried to stop.

The farmer was already sprinting; and the BMW accelerated instead, away from the gory scene.

Kamal's gaze moved to the sky: there was a single white cloud in the navy sky, and in the eastern horizon, a mass of storm clouds marched progressively towards Mountain Lebanon.

For the moment, the little white cloud was still alone, a cloud that looked uncannily like a young child.

Kamal turned to his twin and saw that Karim had started to cry.

I am doomed to remember the Assassin's first mission.

❓ ❓ ❓ ❓ ❓

*Now I remember!* She remembers as soon as Lord-jawad Fawzi mentions a sword. 'I see,' she says when he tells her to wait for the council's decision. But Sitt Noor is no longer listening. *That's what it was!* The feeling of loss is overwhelming. She hasn't yet checked in the Khanbatta Room, but she already knows that it is missing, that its absence from the wall had been noticed by her subconscious mind. *That's why I couldn't sleep.* She nods to the jawad. 'I see.' Salah-ed-Din was here. Not Kamal, Karim. 'Yes. I see. And Allah be with you too,' she says as the two sheikhs-of-the-faith again leave the palace.

Had she discovered the boy, she would have been entitled to shoot him as a trespasser. She would have shot him. It would have been so much simpler. No need for the intricate plot involving the-Circumciser. No time for the jawad to deliver his warning.

*'Ya-Karim! Ya-Karim!'*

In the Khanbatta Room, Noor sits in one of the fauteuils by the fireplace, listens to the dove's accusing testimony and looks up, once more, at the wall above the mantelpiece.

Al-Khanbatta had returned for her sword.

The warrior-sheikha had returned not a ghost, as Christians would maintain, but in flesh and blood. The proof is simple: where a sword had remained undisturbed for a century, there is now a dagger which any tourist could buy in Cairo.

Al-Khanbatta had asked a silversmith to forge the scabbard. But the blade itself was many centuries older and yet, by the eeriest of coincidences, from Cairo as well.

During an armistice in the Third Crusade, the two greatest generals of all the holy wars met outside Acre as noble rivals to discuss the truce and the differences in military tactics that each adopted. King Richard the Lionheart expounded the virtues of the European horse which could withstand the considerable weight of a fully-armoured knight; while Saladin praised the sleek Arabian horse which, though less resilient, could outrun and therefore outflank the European breed. Christian knights on their steeds were as unstoppable as Saracen horsemen were uncatchable.

Then they discussed weapons and moving outside the tent, King Richard drew his broadsword and, in one mighty blow, he split a log of cedarwood. Defying the Arab general to perform a similar feat with his own sword, King Richard stood back as Saladin threw a silk napkin in the air and sliced it in two with a clean sweep of his light blade.

The two men had met as sworn enemies; they parted company as rivals with strong mutual admiration. As a token of the shared respect, and as a pledge of good faith for the armistice, each offered his sword to the other. Saladin kept the Crusader's broadsword; and Richard kept the Saracen's sword until his departure from the Holy Land when he offered it to the Persian Khambatta princess as a farewell gift.

It was with the same blade that Noor's great-great-aunt, al-Khanbatta, had rallied the Druzes and led them in the war against the Maronites.

*Sleep in thy mother's womb tonight.* Sitt Noor shivers as she suddenly realises that it is Saladin as well who has just recovered his sword.